

Judgment and Affection

by Hanagasume

Seven long years have passed since the Final Battle. Hermione Granger however, feels that her life is lacking something very important. With Harry gone, how can those who were left behind be expected to move on?

Chapter One: A Long Absence

Chapter 1 of 16

Seven long years have passed since the Final Battle. Hermione Granger however, feels that her life is lacking something very important. With Harry gone, how can those who were left behind be expected to move on?

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Many thanks to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta and all of her input into improving this story.

Christmas was consistent. Every year, everyone in the old Order was expected to turn up at either Grimmauld Place or the Burrow for the annual celebratory Christmas party. It became somewhat of a tradition ever since the fall of the Dark Lord almost seven years before. The house would be decorated and alive with trees, tinsel, baubles and the ever-present mistletoe.

Another tradition, though this one was not so pleasant, was the continued absence of two particular members. Although they had received an invitation to the party every year, neither ever appeared.

Usually a short, polite note stating their work was currently too much to allow a break was accompanied by various presents. Ron was always sorely disappointed Hermione never went to the parties, save for the first year. He supposed it had something to do with Harry's death. She hadn't quite been the same since that happened.

Ron and the rest of her friends weren't actually sure what happened to her after she finished her graduate studies in Italy, but they sure didn't know where she lived. Occasionally they would receive a letter giving very few details, and then there was the odd visit every now and then. Ron knew for a fact she had only seen his two girls, Harriet and Lesley, three times in the last two years.

Staring out the window, Ron sighed. Snape didn't seem to show up to the Order parties either. He didn't mind so much about that, but he often wondered exactly what he did, being all alone like that. Surely the Order would be better company than his books? At least they would talk and respond.

'Ronnie love, are you going to come show Remus those notes now? He's been asking after them,' Luna, his sprite of a wife, said from beside him.

Ron turned up to look into pretty green eyes framed by silky-straight blonde hair. He smiled softly at her. She had been there for him after the war when he had been mourning the loss of Harry. He hadn't realized before then what a kind, supportive woman she was and had been glad to know her better. Right then, he loved her more than anything edible in the world and rest assured, he loved his food.

'I'll be there in just a moment; I just needed some fresh air for a bit,' he answered dutifully, hugging his wife before releasing her and giving her a proprietary pat on the bottom to get her moving back into the other room.

'Are you going to be alright?' she asked warily.

'I'm fine, Luna love,' he replied, giving her a wide smile as she pattered back towards the dining room.

Shaking all thoughts of their missing friends from his head, Ron stood and took a deep, steadying breath. He would just have to try again the next year. Better still, Christmas day was still three days away. He would surely be able to convince Hermione to take a day off work to join them then. Perhaps he would invite Snape also, but Ron somehow knew that no matter the reason, it would be rejected.

Walking back to the rest of the party, Ron groaned in frustration. If only they would just turn up. He really did miss Hermione, and he didn't want to leave anyone out; even the snarky Potions master was included in that sentiment.

'Ron, your girls are becoming quite the attractive young ladies,' said Remus Lupin as he approached the gentlemen's table.

Ron grinned sheepishly. 'With Luna for a wife, it would be hard to imagine not having children as beautiful as their mother,' he said sweetly, earning himself a kiss on the cheek from his wife as she walked by him on her way to talk with Minerva.

The rest of the party was generally pleasant even without Hermione there to spout tales of what she had accomplished. Ron knew that it saddened Luna also that she wasn't there.

He looked over to the corner where his younger sister sat chatting with Tonks and Septima Vector, looking a little lost and forlorn despite her smile. Ron knew his sister well enough to know whether the smile reached her eyes or not. She too had been affected by the loss of Harry, but at least she didn't shut herself away. Ginny had always been a bright, outspoken girl and teenager. But passionate as she was, when she lost Harry, her eyes lost that spark about them that had always been there until the final battle. Ron understood how she felt, though. If it hadn't been for Luna, he would have sunk even further than the cool, levelheaded Hermione. Ginny, like him, just needed to find a little love.

'That's a lovely wife you have there, Ronald,' Charlie said with a broad Weasley grin as he walked past his brother on the way to the other side of the room. 'I wish that I could be as lucky.'

'Who knows, maybe Bill will know if Fleur has an older sister or cousin?' Ron suggested jokingly with a smirk.

'Ah, if only there were such a lady,' Charlie replied wistfully before he walked off to join Bill, his wife and Tonks, who had drifted over to that conversation.

Remus watched him move across the room with vague interest before returning his attention back to Ginny and Septima. He watched as Septima drank from her glass of wine, smiling at Ginny over its rim. She took another sip, licking the excess wine from her lower lip in a way that sent his arousal into overdrive. He shifted uncomfortably and sighed. Septima had once been his colleague and had always been quite attractive. Perhaps it was time for him to move on also. She was only a few years younger than him, and he could certainly get used to waking up to her face.

Ron looked back at Ginny. She was laughing about something Septima had said. Remus was sitting with him, staring intently at Septima. As she took a drink from her glass, he noticed Remus stiffen and shift in his seat. He smiled to himself; this was an interesting development.

Ginny happened to look up at that moment and caught Ron's eye. He angled his head at Remus, and from there she followed his line of sight to the woman across from her. He was entranced, or so it seemed. She grinned and winked at Ron before bending her attention to Septima.

'What if I told you that another one of the Order members was interested in getting to know you better?' Ginny asked her companion.

'I would say you were daft,' Septima answered. She looked around the room. 'I know most of the Order members quite well already, so there would be no need.'

'Remus has been staring at you for the better part of the evening, Septima. Don't try to deny that's not something,' Ginny whispered through a giggle. 'He's really a nice bloke. I think you two would be right for each other.'

Septima looked over at Ron and Remus, who appeared to be deep in discussion. Remus noticed her looking at them and quickly averted his eyes, staring intently at Ron as he spoke. Septima smiled contemplatively. 'I never really thought about a possible relationship with anyone, to be quite frank, but I wouldn't be opposed if Remus asked,' she said softly.

'I see,' Ginny said, her eyes sparkling.

'But don't go telling him any of this,' the older woman warned.

Ginny just shrugged and flashed a smile at her before nodding at Ron discreetly. She would never get sick of pairing up good matches within her group of friends, and she loved to see just how much people loved one another, even if she did envy it a little herself.

Ron saw Ginny give the okay and immediately began plotting just how he would get Remus to ask Vector out. It might take a little encouragement and perhaps a little bit of whiskey, knowing what a modest and shy person Remus was, but he would have them set up on a date by the end of the night.

'I saw you talking to Septima earlier,' Ron said to Remus, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

'Way to play it subtle, Ron,' Remus said, chuckling.

'Hey, it can't hurt a guy to give it a try, can it?' he asked with a sheepish grin. 'But in all seriousness, mate, she's been looking at you all night, and I can tell she's interested in more than your friendship.'

'I suppose you're right,' Remus sighed. 'But, I am getting a little old for the whole courting deal,' he said, glancing at Septima.

'No one is ever too old,' Ron said, looking pointedly at Minerva McGonagall staring coquettishly at Albus Dumbledore. Ron and Remus ended up in a fit of laughter, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

The Christmas party was generally high-spirited for the rest of the night before the guests began to slowly ebb away back to their own lives. It would be New Year's Eve before they had another gathering like this one, and it was only one week until Christmas. Ron left Grimmauld Place with his glowing wife on his arm, and Remus Lupin left the house with the guarantee of a date with Septima Vector the very next evening.

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A/N This story is complete and shall be posted as it is beta'd. Please leave a review and let me know what you think.

Chapter Two: Making Adjustments

Chapter 2 of 16

Bored with work and sick to death of putting up with Molly fussing over her, Ginny decides to move her holiday plans ahead a few weeks.

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I would like to give a big hug of thanks to my beta, VIVAvivacious, for all of her help with making this story worth reading.

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It was truer than anything, though. It was hard to live and grow up one way, and then when a person just gets used to that one, everything changes, bad things happen, and adjustments must be made for the good of themselves and everyone else. Some people left adjustments to those who were confident in doing so while others ran away from their lives. The last small portion simply forgot themselves and lived through others for a short time before they lost their will to live altogether.

Ginny was one of those last people who were content to live through others while her life went to the dogs. She was comfortable with her job at the Ministry's Department of Games and Sports. She had her own sports commentary column in the *Daily Prophet* once a week, and she had earned her position with hard work. But once she had managed to get to the top, she didn't have to work so hard and, therefore, did not have to waste any more effort in a struggle to go higher.

This meant that she didn't have a distraction from her dismal life for that little while, and she remained miserable. She didn't go out with her friends much on weekends; the best anyone could hope for her getting social interaction was when Luna, Tonks or either of the Patil twins decided to drop in to say hi.

'Ginny, dear,' Molly Weasley would always say to her. 'You really need to take a holiday, go with some friends somewhere. Don't lock your pretty self up like you have been. Do something lovely for yourself.'

Although Ginny had never actually gotten around to the actual doing of anything, she had given it some thought and applied for a three-week holiday starting on Christmas Eve. She planned to spend Christmas day with her family before going to the States for a little while to do a tour of North America places like Alaska, New York, and even going as far as Canada. She hadn't actually told anyone that she was planning this and was saving it as a surprise for when she saw everyone next.

Of course, because Hermione lived god only knew where, she sent an owl to tell her, only because she knew that Hermione would not tell and would most likely not reply and make her feel guilty about leaving like that. A knock on the door of her apartment startled her out of her reverie.

'I'm coming!' Ginny called, heaving herself out of her comfortable chair and going to peek through the peep-hole.

When she saw her mother's face, she was hardly surprised at all. Molly Weasley, protective as ever, always came to visit her in the morning when she had a day off before returning to the Burrow. Sighing, she unlatched all the Muggle locking mechanisms and opened the door to allow passage to the bustling, red-haired woman.

'Hi, mum, I wasn't expecting you.' Ginny lied through her teeth easily. 'What are you carrying?'

Ginny warily eyed the basket of clean something on her mother's hip and almost jumped out of her skin when she realized it was her own laundry from the evening before. 'What are you doing with my clothes?' Ginny exclaimed, rushing over to take the burden from her mother. She gave her mother an exasperated expression as she set the basket on her own hip. 'All of them were clean; I could have washed them myself, mum!'

'Ginevra, dear, that's no way to talk to your mother,' Molly tutted as she walked into the kitchen. 'Now have you eaten breakfast this morning? If you have, what was it?'

'I had toast and tea, thanks,' Ginny replied haughtily. 'And I don't need you to come here and pick at my eating or cleaning habits. Your house can be as spotless as you like it, but this is mine, and I will not make it into an artwork.'

'Oh goodness, Ginny,' she scolded. 'I don't make your life that hard.'

Ginny raised an eyebrow at her mother's back before turning down the hall to place the basket in the other room. She took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face before following her mother into the kitchen. 'Would you like some tea or a drink while you're here?' she offered politely.

'No thanks, dear,' Molly replied. 'I was just coming to leave your things and make sure you had something to eat on the way to see your father at work.'

'Alright,' Ginny said, releasing a breath she hadn't even realized she'd held.

Once her mother had left, Ginny returned to her sitting room with a mug of hot tea and the book from her nightstand. She was beginning to think perhaps she would leave before Christmas. After all, she was really tired and just needed a break away from her family and friends. Hermione was about the only friend she wouldn't be opposed to seeing, but she was nowhere that anyone knew. If only she would come back, it would be so much easier.

Sighing deeply, she set her cup aside and opened the book, beginning to read it from where she had left off the night before. Recently, Pavarti Patil and Lavender Brown had gotten her interested in reading saucy romance novels. Her favourites involved main characters that were blond, tall and dashing. She imagined she would have been more interested in the tall, dark types, but lately, she found blond hair quite an attractive description.

By midday she was almost finished reading the rest of her book and decided to go to the Three Broomsticks for lunch; she was desperate for a butterbeer. Perhaps she would visit Septima at the castle afterwards; she really needed to catch up on how she and Remus were doing anyway. Going to her wardrobe, she found a suitable pair of jeans and an old Gryffindor-red sweater her mother had made for her and threw them on.

She Apparated to Hogsmeade and stopped at Honeydukes to buy some Fizzing Whizbees for Ron and some white chocolate for herself and Luna. When she paid for her purchases, she went to the pub and ate a bowl of hot pumpkin soup and drank a butterbeer before heading to the castle.

'Ginny, what are you doing here?' asked a feminine voice from behind her as she walked along the path to Hogwarts.

She spun around and saw Luna standing on the path, holding the hand of her youngest daughter, Lesley. Smiling, she turned back and gave Luna a hug before lifting her niece into her arms and spinning her around, giggling and hugging her fiercely. She loved seeing Luna and her nieces.

'I was in Hogsmeade for lunch and just on my way to Hogwarts to visit Septima,' she replied, shifting Lesley to her hip. 'I didn't expect to run into you two today.'

'We were shopping for Christmas chocolate for Daddy,' Lesley said in her adorably squeaky voice.

Ginny had to admit that for a girl of only three-and-a-half, Lesley was remarkably intelligent in comparison to how clever Ron had been at that age. Make no mistake, Ron had been smart, but in a different way. He had been the biggest troublemaker and always made mischief, and he picked on Ginny constantly from what she had been told by her other brothers.

'Well, I hope you find what you're looking for,' Ginny said, not wanting to keep them. 'I had better get to the castle before it's too late for visitors.'

'Alright, we'll see you soon,' Luna replied, taking Lesley off her hands and waving before they parted ways.

Ginny arrived at the castle not long after and eventually found her way to Septima's office after the stairs had moved on her twice. It really hadn't been her morning, but she had enjoyed the remainder of her day anyway. She knocked on the door and waited for Septima's soft greeting before she opened it.

'Ginny! What on earth are you doing here? I thought you'd have work today,' Septima exclaimed. 'Come in and make yourself comfortable.'

Ginny sat on the couch in front of the fire across from the older, sandy-haired witch. 'I wasn't doing anything today because I got the day off, and I was in Hogsmeade for lunch anyway, so I decided to drop in for a bit,' she replied with a small smile.

'Well, I'm glad you came.'

'How is Remus going?' Ginny asked with a raised eyebrow.

'Ginny, really, we've only been on two dates,' Septima chastened lightly. 'But I think he's going all right. I mean, we know each other a little better, and I think I like him.'

'That's great!'

'Yes, it is good, isn't it?' she replied distantly. 'Anyway, what are you doing for your holidays, and don't lie to me, I know you applied for the time off.'

Ginny smiled weakly. 'Well, I know I can trust you with this, but I'm not going to be home for the holiday. I was going to wait until after Christmas, but I'm moving my trip to the States ahead. I might leave tomorrow or the day after,' Ginny replied.

'That sounds lovely,' Septima offered. 'But, aren't you going to tell your family?'

Ginny shook her head. 'Not this time.'

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A/N Hermione is up next finally. Sorry for the introductory chapters, but this story is a little bit about Ginny also.

Chapter Three: Lost in Shadows

Chapter 3 of 16

In her self-imposed exile from the rest of the wizarding world, Hermione contemplates her past and the most recent project that she is working on.

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Ink-stained fingers, thoroughly-chewed bottom lip, and quills used to hold hair up in a loose bun. These were all once traits of a very bright and enthusiastic Gryffindor, now the traits of a woman who had suffered many losses and survived a war. She was a shell, dirty and broken. She had once been a girl called Hermione Granger, but now she was only that girl in name and an entirely different woman. It was a pity, but all the same, she refused to let her friends see her like she was.

There were deep, dark circles around her eyes. They were once wide, brown, and inquisitive, but they are now dull and listless. She had to use quite a lot of the limited energy she had to hold up her glamour charms whenever she visited. She loved Ron and Ginny as if they were family, make no mistake, but to see them hurt her so much, making her heart lurch and ache. They reminded her so much of Harry and the good times.

She had tucked herself away in the French countryside for the last few years, only ever venturing to the cities when she desperately needed a book she did not already have in her own huge collection. When she did that, she always went under the guise of a totally different glamour. The only one of her friends who even had the slightest clue of where she was had been Albus Dumbledore.

The wards on her house made her completely undetectable. And she liked it that way because they didn't need to know what had happened to her. She was unbearably thin and gaunt, her ribs were visible and her collarbone stood out sharp. The flesh on her was sparse indeed, and her hair, although not the bushy and unmanageable mane it had once been, had grown quite a lot longer without a haircut, and she most likely had the worst split ends.

She felt something nuzzle her leg and looked down from her parchment, smiling slightly at the sight of her silky black cat, Jupiter, pawing at her pants insistently. 'What is it boy?' she asked softly.

'Mrrroow!' the small cat replied, rubbing his head against her.

Hermione checked the time with the clock on the mantelpiece of the fireplace, noting it was around midday. 'Oh, alright, you're hungry then, I suppose?' she asked, heading out of that room and being followed closely to the kitchen. Opening the bottom cupboard, she pulled out a small tin of cat food, she spelled it open, and up-ended the contents into the cat bowl.

'There you go, my precious one,' she said, scratching his head lightly as he bowed over the bowl to nibble up his lunch.

She left him there and returned to her work. She had spent the better part of the last six months trying to develop a cure for lycanthropy but had been unsuccessful thus far. She had been thorough with her research and notes and everything else, but nothing seemed to end with the desired results. She wouldn't be happy until she had a little to work from, but it all seemed to be fruitless. She was a certified Potions master and had been researching for three years since her graduation, but it hadn't made any huge difference to the Wizarding community.

'Don't worry, Remus,' she muttered to herself. 'I'm trying, and I will find something soon very soon.'

Reaching up to her hair, she tugged out one of the quills, as the point of her last one had broken, and dipped it into the inkpot. She began taking down notes on the

inaccuracies in her theory. There were plenty of those, but she needed to make mistakes to learn from them better later.

While she wrote, a bit of parchment on her table caught her eye again, and she read over the letter that Ginny had written her. She had received it the day before and was still extremely confused about why the redhead would write to tell her she was going on a trip when she wasn't even in the country. Perhaps she had just needed someone to vent to.

In any case, she pulled out a bit of parchment and began to write a short reply to Ginny, who obviously needed the advice.

Ginny,

Thank you for your letter. I do miss you all very much, you know that, but I have my reasons for being where I am. I'm sorry I won't be seeing you this Christmas when I visit the Burrow, but I am sure your trip will be very nice. I just wanted to let you know it's perfectly alright to get sick of your family and friends. Not to be rude, but that is one of the reasons I left.

If you ever need to tell anyone anything, feel free to write me, and I will try to be a good friend and reply no matter what. Until next time!

Love Always,

Hermione

Signing with a flourish, Hermione folded the parchment up neatly and sealed it with her midnight blue wax. She pressed her seal into it and, without giving much thought to it, she reached into a bowl and plucked an owl treat from it, handing it to the chocolate-brown eagle owl on the perch beside her, patting his head.

'Good boy, Helios,' she crooned softly, tying the letter to his leg as he nibbled at the treat. 'Take that to Ginny Weasley now.'

The owl swooped out the window when Hermione opened it, and she closed it as soon as he was gone to keep the cold out. It had been snowing quite a bit lately, and she found it was too cold to keep the window open any more than she had to. Slumping back into the chair at her desk, she sighed wearily. She really needed to get more sleep than she did.

Hermione picked up her quill and began at her notes again.

An hour later, she put down her work and left the study, heading back downstairs to the kitchen to get some coffee. While she was there, she pulled down the jar of biscuits from the top of the refrigerator and took two choc-chip cookies out. Thanks to a huge growth spurt at the end of seventh year, she was able to reach the heights easily; she was about the same height Harry had been. At first, she had not liked being so tall because the rest of the girls in their year had been shorter than her. But, she had eventually grown used to being one of the taller girls to go through Hogwarts. It did have its perks, after all.

She sat at the kitchen table and sighed, biting into one of her biscuits absently. How long had it been since she visited Ron? Six months, perhaps? She shook her head. It couldn't have been that long since her last visit. She loved to see his girls and Luna. She did miss them quite a lot, but she couldn't go back there for long periods of time. That place, wherever her friends went in London or anywhere else, had always reminded her of Harry. It depressed her.

'Mrrroooow?' said a soft sound from beside her.

Hermione peeped beside her and looked down to see Jupiter peering up at her expectantly. She smiled and pulled him up into her lap as she sipped at her hot cup of coffee. She liked being here with her cat and owl. She could still contact her friends when she wanted to. She was free here.

'What do you want then, my little dear?' she asked softly, kissing his little nose and allowing him to rub his head along her cheek and purr. 'Did you just come for a cuddle, or do you want something else?'

'Meow,' he replied to her, crooning.

'Both then, I suppose,' she said when she saw him paw at her biscuit.

Deciding she didn't really need to eat the cookie anyway, and considering Jupiter had put his little paws all over it anyway, she gave it to him and set him back on the ground. He carried it away to his bowl, where he gnawed at it for a while until he had it broken up into pieces small enough to fit in his mouth.

Hermione had to admit he was remarkably smart for a cat. He was a lot smarter than Crookshanks had been, but then again, she had gotten Jupiter when he was only a new kitten; Crooks had been a lot older.

'You won't be getting my biscuit next time, little one,' she threatened as she stood and placed her mug in the sink. 'And that is a promise too.'

She walked out of the kitchen and towards her room upstairs. She would leave her notes for the time being and go for a long, hot bath. It was only four days until Christmas, and Hermione still had to make plans so she would not be forced to stay at the Burrow for longer than she had to. And she still had quite a few Christmas gifts to buy and wrap. Perhaps she would do that tomorrow...?

She slipped off her clothes that hung loosely from her thin frame. She really needed to put on some weight, too. She had surpassed thin and had gone straight to gaunt so quickly. She might make herself some dinner that night and eat the whole lot. Maybe she could keep that consistent.

For the time being, she was going to have to make herself more naturally thin and not starved. When had she begun neglecting her appearance so badly? She combed a hand through her limp, brown hair and decided it needed a good wash while she was in the shower. She didn't want to go out the next day looking grubby. Perhaps she would get a haircut while she was there?

Sighing, she closed her eyes. She would make up her mind in the morning. She just needed to rest peacefully then.

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A/N This story has just been newly edited so that it is actually fit for reading.

Chapter Four: Preperation Time

Hermione spends the day in Paris doing a little last-minute Christmas shopping in preparation for her visit with the Weasleys.

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Two days before Christmas really was an inconvenient day to go shopping. The streets were packed and people were shouting, swearing, and bustling around in a hurry, trying to ensure they secured their gifts before someone else did. It was a dirty business to be out and about this time of year. It was freezing cold, the streets were full of loud, rude shoppers, and nearly everything had already been sold.

Hermione did her shopping earlier on, glad to beat the rush of people who forgot to get things and did last minute shopping. But this year, she had managed to forget a few little gifts somehow and was left to face the streets. As much as she hated it, she would have to do it for being so damn forgetful.

She got out of bed early that morning and showered before dressing in a comfortable white blouse and a navy v-neck sweater with a pair of long grey slacks. She had a bowl of porridge for breakfast, and before leaving through the front door to Apparate to Paris, she pulled on a knee-length, Muggle-style black winter coat, long, black leather boots under her pants, and a soft cream scarf.

As she predicted, it was rather cold out, and with her sparse flesh, it felt even colder. She left from the bare apple orchard behind her house and soon found herself in an alleyway of the bustling French city. She stepped out on the cobbled sidewalk and immediately ran into someone who was running past.

'Sorry,' she mumbled softly when the person turned back and shot a glare at her.

She realized then she had forgotten to use the more elaborate glamour she usually used and had only covered up the evidence of her sleeplessness and her starvation. Ducking back into an alley and Disillusioning herself, she fixed the charm. She was no longer Hermione Granger but a woman with similar facial features and long, black hair rather than her signature brown curls.

She supposed she would have to use the altered glamour later when she got her hair cut, but she decided she'd leave that for last. With renewed vigor, she headed onto the streets, not really caring if she bumped into anyone on her way. She marched toward the place where she knew she would find little Lesley a gift, as well as something Harriet would enjoy.

The girls had always wanted pets, but they were still too young for that. Hermione had an idea of the next best thing. Paris, because of the shopping district, had managed to attract one of the finest toy shops in the whole of Europe, and that was exactly where Hermione was heading. She arrived at the Paris branch of *Harrods* and sought out the section where the stuffed animals were.

When she found them, she felt a small stir in her chest reminders of her childhood and the collection she had accumulated in the bedroom of her family home came unbidden to her mind. She found a soft, chocolate-brown bear perfect for Lesley, who like Hermione as a child, adored the soft creatures. It had a velvet nose and glassy eyes with a white silky bow wrapped around its neck.

After looking around a little, she didn't think Harriet would appreciate being given a toy for Christmas. Hermione decided to seek out a bookshop and buy her something to read. Harriet was a very sharp girl, something Hermione had known from the day she was born, not to mention the girl was her goddaughter. She eventually stumbled upon a less-crowded bookshop and went in, pleased to see that at least this place had well-stocked shelves.

In the end, Hermione did not buy a book there and instead headed for Wizarding Paris. She found a bookshop similar to Flourish and Blotts and entered, glad most witches and wizards were out buying other useless inventions people came up with to make their miserable lives better. She found a small tome on Magical beasts with animated illustrations for every animal.

It was perfect. She paid and had it gift-wrapped to avoid having to complete the tedious task later. Dear Harriet would be enthralled when she unwrapped her book of magical creatures, especially with all the animated pictures.

'Is that all for today, ma'am?' the boyishly handsome shop clerk asked with a dashing smile.

Hermione noted his badge displayed his position as manager, and she was fairly certain that he was flirting with her. Alarmed, Hermione pulled out some Galleons and put the payment on the counter. 'Yes, thank you, this will be all,' she said immediately, waiting for her change before grabbing the book and fleeing.

She had never gotten used to the arrogant men who flirted with her glamoured self. It irked her to think they liked her better that way than when she was brunette. Then again, that image of her had gone to the dogs.

After stopping for a small lunch of sandwiches and coffee at a café in Muggle Paris, she went to a small, out-of-the-way alley and altered her glamour so it displayed her true appearance, although changed so she didn't look so frail or tired. She went to a hairdresser nearby and walked in. She was immediately seated, and the hair stylist bustled about, getting equipment while Hermione prepared to listen to the women go over how she had such terrible split ends and a horrid hair style.

'My dear, your 'air style is lacking and ze split ends are bad,' the French woman gushed through her accent. 'What do you want me to do with zis?'

'Just get rid of the split ends and layer it, please,' Hermione answered politely. 'And perhaps you could suggest a new conditioner to help prevent split ends?'

The voluptuous blonde didn't have to be asked twice. 'Of course I can do zat for you. In fact, we stock a formula zat would be perfect for your 'air. I believe it would tame ze bushiness away also,' she replied.

Hermione nodded as a nylon towel was wrapped around her neck and secured in place with the clasps. 'Thank you, that would be most appreciated,' Hermione said with a small, wary smile.

One hour later, her hair was a good two inches shorter, only falling to her waist in gentle and silky waves. She paid for the cut and dry and bought some of the product they had used in her hair, noting gladly after reading the ingredients it was an organic formula. She waved and thanked the woman as she left. She found the alley she came from and Apparated back to the orchard.

When she first unlocked the door to her house, she hurried inside and closed the door to shut out the cold. Suddenly, a black fur-ball flew at her from out of nowhere, and she opened her arms up just in time to catch Jupiter. 'Hello, boy,' she said with a chuckle, patting his head lightly. 'Did you miss me?'

The small cat mewed in response, and she smiled and carried him to the kitchen along with her recently-acquired gifts. Setting the presents on the table, she carried the cat with her to the cupboard and held him up to a line of cat food tins. 'What would you like for dinner, my boy?'

He began pawing at the gourmet chicken and vegetable, and she laughed softly at his choice. 'Poulet it is, then,' she said, taking down the tin and opening it with a wandless charm. She tipped it into his bowl. 'Enjoy your meal, J.'

After she was satisfied that she hadn't forgotten anything, she took the presents with her up to the study and put them with the rest of the gifts she had already bought earlier that month. She spotted her owl and went over to stroke his feathers lovingly, feeding him some of the bacon she summoned up a moment before. 'Hello there,

Helios,' she greeted. 'Did you miss me too?'

The owl hooted a response and she shook her head with a smile. 'No, I suppose you didn't. I only feed you, after all,' she said with a heavy sigh. 'What do you think? Should I spend Christmas back home? Will it hurt like it always does?'

Helios ruffled his wing feathers in a bit of something that resembled a shrug. 'It's been seven years, hasn't it? Shouldn't I be over this by now?' she asked him softly. 'Well, I suppose you can't answer that either.'

When she got an affirmative answer to her last comment, she got up and walked to her room, shrugging out of her coats and removing her clothes. Once she had stripped down, she took a long, hot shower to melt away the chill she had gotten from being outdoors so much that day. She climbed out and turned the water off twenty minutes later and wrapped herself in the warmth of her flannelette pajamas and woolen bed socks. Finding it was still a little too cold for her liking, she pulled on her warm winter nightgown and slippers and returned to the kitchen.

Finding she was just too tired to do any more research for the day, she made a mug of hot chocolate, took it with her to the sitting room, ignited a fire, and curled up in an armchair with a thick book. She read for a while before she got drowsy and set it aside. Slowly sipping her drink, she gazed at the flames as they flickered and burned the wood in the fireplace. She would have to replenish her stock of firewood, she noted hazily.

Closing her eyes and summoning a blanket to her, she stretched out on her soft lounge chair and started drifting to sleep. Perhaps she needed a break from this life. Maybe staying just a little while with the Weasleys and her old friends at Christmas would do her some good.

With that final thought, she fell asleep, not to open her eyes for a few hours...

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A/N Thank you for your patience and please review if you have time.

Chapter Five: A Temporary Truce

Chapter 5 of 16

While on her vacation in the United States, Ginny is surprised when she bumps into the last person she ever expected to meet while on holiday.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

Many thanks to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta and all of her input into improving this story.

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New York was bustling that time of year. With Christmas the very next day, it didn't come as a surprise, and with it being the afternoon, Christmas Eve was only a few short hours away. Ginny had arrived in New York that morning with the rest of the tour group she was traveling with. True to her word, she had left without telling anyone in her immediate or extended family. The only two who knew where she had gone was Hermione and Septima, both of whom she trusted implicitly to keep it secret.

She knew both women would be at the Burrow on Christmas day, and she had instructed Septima to give her parents a small note she had written for them. They would only be able to know that she had taken a trip and that she would appreciate if they did not send a search party or even attempt to find her.

Ginny had spent most of the morning sightseeing and exploring New York City in its Christmas splendour. Everyone had been out and about in the morning, rushing to get last-minute presents for people they had overlooked when they pulled out the annual Christmas list. It had been amusing to see how much Muggles had in comparison to magical folk. For the time being she was seated at a café in Muggle Manhattan, waiting until it was time to meet up with the rest of her group to discuss dinner arrangements with their guide.

She had become quasi-friends with one of the younger, single females of the group named Sarah, and both had been surprised at the amount of young British wizards there were on the trip, all of whom seemed to think that it was necessary to flirt outrageously with them.

'Hi, are you there?' asked a voice from outside Ginny's thoughts.

Ginny nodded sort of absently before looking up to see Sarah's deep purple eyes gazing back at her. The woman in question had startling violet hair, and oddly enough shared Tonks's unique gift of being a Metamorphmagus. Smiling, Ginny put down her cup of coffee and stood.

'Is it time to meet up with the rest of the group already?' Ginny asked with a sheepish grin.

'Yes,' Sarah answered. 'I was just talking to Paige, and she told me there was still another man that has yet to arrive. Apparently he was busy this morning, so he is meeting up tonight at dinner and spending the rest of the trip with us.'

'Oh, really? Do you know his name?'

Sarah shook her head. 'Sorry, but she didn't really say. All I know is he's from a rich pureblood family,' she answered.

Ginny nodded. 'I will probably know him then. I know most of those families because they're friends of ours. Purebloods are usually a tightly-knit community,' Ginny explained.

'Right, I heard that, too,' the woman replied, grinning impishly.

The two women set off with each other and arrived at the meeting point in a disillusioned alleyway with all the men waiting with their guide, the voluptuous, burgundy-haired Paige. She beckoned them over and waited until they had all quieted to begin talking.

'All right you lot, we'll be heading to our accommodation shortly where you will have time to get ready for dinner. We have a group booking at a restaurant in Flanders's Alley; attire should be slightly formal. Afterwards, you can do whatever you like as long as you make it to the lobby by eight tomorrow morning,' she instructed.

'Now, I think it's only appropriate for the ladies to choose partners amongst themselves, and the gentlemen will share rooms for now,' she added seriously. 'I will hear nothing against this.'

Some of the men boys really, Ginny thought actually grumbled at her words and leered at the women as if they were pieces of meat. Ginny had the decency to look appalled and disgusted, deciding then and there she would never take up with one of them. They were attractive men, but that wasn't enough to tickle Ginny's fancy these days.

'All right, let's Apparate to the Hilton,' Paige announced.

Ginny did as she was told and soon found herself in the lobby at the Hilton in the upper-east section of Manhattan. They were forced to wait a whole hour while the final arrangements were made, then Paige distributed the keys, and they took lifts up to their rooms. Ginny and Sarah had decided to room together and had even decided they would be dressing up to go to a night club after dinner.

Excited, they ran through the shower and dried their hair with charms before they went through their wardrobe. Sarah slipped into a knee-length, midnight blue dress that shimmered from the unusual and soft, satiny material it was made from. It didn't really flare or swirl as much as it hugged her generous curves and slim waist, but it suited her. She closed her eyes and had her hair change to a silvery-blond, falling an inch past her shoulders in loose layers straight down her back.

Ginny thought she looked extremely pretty like that and helped her apply a light dusting of makeup, heavy eyeliner, and mascara to make her bright purple eyes stand out even more.

Ginny had opted for a wine-colored dress made of silk that flowed around her legs and clung to her shapely body, accentuating her curves in all the right places. It was held up with thin straps on her slender shoulders, and her long hair was twisted into a silky knot. After applying liberal makeup, she slipped on a pair of chocolate brown heels and donned her similarly-colored brown winter coat, then tucked her wand into the wand garter at her thigh.

'You look amazing, Ginny!' Sarah exclaimed excitedly while pulling on her black coat and slipping into her shoes.

'Thank you, Sarah, you look really stunning,' Ginny replied, blushing at the compliment and opening the door to leave for the lobby.

They made it down before the rest of the women on the trip, and when everyone had gotten there, they Apparated to the place indicated by Paige, who had on a daring red dress that clashed with her fair skin, burgundy hair and bright green eyes. Ginny wanted to point it out but decided to let it be. Seeing as she didn't like her much, she decided to let her color coordination act as a deterrent.

They arrived at the restaurant and were led to the private dining hall before being served drinks and entrees. Ginny had to admit it was a fairly elaborate place. Then, a man with silver-blond hair stalked inside and greeted Paige with a false smile and a handshake.

He was a bit on the taller side with a trendy haircut, a slightly pointed face, and what appeared to be a strong body beneath all of the cumbersome formal clothes. He smirked around the room until he caught her eye, and then he smiled oddly. What was all that about?

'Wow, that guy is dreamy,' Sarah said breathlessly.

'Forget it,' Ginny said resolutely. 'He's only interested in pure-blood witches, not blood traitors, Muggles, or half-bloods.'

'How do you know?' she asked in surprise.

'That is Draco Malfoy, and I attended school with him at Hogwarts in Scotland. He hates me, and I hate him,' she answered evenly.

'Is that so?'

'Yes, and don't get any funny ideas like the rest of the girls who will most likely fawn and pamper the arrogant brat's every need,' Ginny bit out.

Sarah sighed and shrugged. 'We still don't have to be rude,' she said simply. 'We should go welcome him and say hi. He looks really uncomfortable.'

Ginny, after some deliberation, concluded it wouldn't be so bad if she said hello and didn't panic and tense up when she talked to him. Sarah pulled her along and pushed themselves through a crowd of girls and straight to Malfoy, who smirked, but his expression changed when he caught sight of Ginny behind the other girl.

'Weasley, is that you?' he asked when they finally stood before him.

Ginny's lips thinned at his address of her, realizing perhaps he might be treating her like dirt again. Crossing her arms over her chest defensively, she raised an eyebrow. 'Malfoy, as charming as ever I see,' she replied sharply.

He flinched at her tone and pulled her aside with him, startling Sarah. Once they were out of earshot, he glanced at her nervously. 'Look, I know you probably still hate me, but for the sake of our holidays, could you at least pretend to tolerate me?' he asked hastily.

Ginny looked at him confused, but when she saw he was earnest, she nodded reluctantly and stuck out her hand to him, shaking his. 'Well, if we're going to pretend we get along, you might as well call me Ginny or something,' she said as she released his hand, feeling a tingle shoot up the length of her arm and a shiver down her spine.

'All right Ginny, you might as well call me Draco, unless Malfoy holds some strange appeal to you,' he answered with a smirk.

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A/N Ginny/Draco, yes I know, I am not a fan anymore either, but this story was written before I acquired any taste.

Chapter Six: Christmas Surprises

Chapter 6 of 16

Hermione arrives at the Burrow and is surprised by the arrival of another guest whom she didn't expect.

Many thanks to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta and all of her input into improving this story.

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The Burrow was teeming with people bustling about, struggling to get everything ready for Christmas lunch for a house full of guests, all of who were staying in the rooms that had been added as an extension to the house after Mr. Weasley's promotion in the Ministry. Fred and George had been assigned the task of decorating the arch- and doorways with mistletoe. Luna was trying to keep her, Percy and Penelope's, and Bill's children under control and out of the way, while Ron was putting up the tree with Arthur.

Molly, as predicted, was in the kitchen cooking like mad with Fleur and Penny to help, as well as Septima, who had arrived early. The only one who seemed to be missing was Ginny, when Hermione arrived half an hour before the rest of the guests were due for their fortnight stay. The whole twelve days of Christmas, as an Order tradition, would be spent at the Burrow this year; they alternated the years between there and Grimmauld Place.

Hermione Apparated in the back way and had managed to walk unnoticed to the back door before she was bombarded by the many redheads. The first to get to her when she entered the kitchen were Harriet and Lesley, who both decided to launch themselves into Hermione's arms.

'Hello girls, Happy Christmas to you, too,' she choked out through a relieved laugh.

'Aunty 'Mione, we missed you a lot!' Lesley piped.

'I know, and I'm sorry. My research keeps me abroad though, and it can't be helped, I'm afraid,' she lied easily. She had been using that excuse for years, and it had not failed her once.

'Well, you will have to travel here some time so you can come see me and Daddy,' Lesley said sadly with Harriet quietly nodding in agreement.

Harriet had always been quiet and dreamy like her mother had been when she was younger, but she would grow out of that and into a beautiful, confident young lady soon enough. She put Lesley down and took both the girls' hands as they led her through the hall towards the front sitting room to their father. Hermione braced herself for the hardest and loudest part of the day.

'Hermione!' exclaimed a redhead from the other side of the room.

In an instant, her hands had let go of the girls' and she was being enveloped in the tightest of hugs from Ron. She smiled and reciprocated, hugging him tightly while he breathed a sigh of joy. 'I didn't think you'd come this year,' he said against her hair.

Those words made her chest ache numbly. 'You always say that, and I always come back the next year,' she replied sheepishly, trying very hard to keep the tears back, only hiccupping slightly in her efforts.

Ron heard her but decided to let it pass and released her from his iron grip. She felt a little thin, but her face showed no signs of distress, so he assumed that she was eating all right and wasn't neglecting herself too much. 'So, you're still working hard?' he asked with a grin from ear-to-ear.

She nodded. 'Naturally,' she answered. 'Oh, but is Septima here? There's something important we need to tell the family before the rest of the Order gets here.'

Ron took her by the hand, sending the girls off to play with their cousins, and led her towards the kitchen, where Hermione expected to be harassed for her weight by Molly Weasley. It was a good thing her glamour disguised exactly how thin she had become. 'Everyone is in the kitchen with mum, getting ready for today,' he said as they walked along.

'All right, that makes it slightly easier, then,' she said quietly.

'What is this, 'Mione? And how does Septima know anything about it? Do you even keep contact with her?' Ron questioned.

'No, I don't usually owl her much, but it is important, and only she and I have any knowledge of it,' Hermione said, trying not to say anything until she found the woman.

They arrived in the kitchen, and just as Hermione had imagined, the rest of the Weasley clan pounced on her immediately, save for the absent Ginny. Hadn't anyone actually wondered where she was? After all, she'd been away since the day before, hadn't she?

'Hermione dear, it's so good to see you again,' Molly welcomed warmly. 'But, what have you been eating? You're so thin.'

'I'm eating fine, Molly,' she replied defensively, looking around for Septima. She caught her eye across the kitchen. 'But, there is something that Septima and I have to tell you. It's about Ginny.'

'Oh yes, have you heard from her? She's a bit late today,' Molly said as she busied herself with some cooking.

'I think you'd better take a seat, Molly,' Septima said, coming over to the short redhead and taking the wooden spoon from her.

'Why?'

'You're not going to like what we have to tell you,' Hermione answered for her. 'It's not bad, but you won't like it much anyway.'

Molly sat down next to Arthur at the table and took his hand, a worried expression on her face. 'All right, now tell us what you know, dear,' the head of the clan said confidently. 'I promise not to blame you for any of it.'

'Well, Ginny wrote to me not long ago,' Hermione began.

'And she visited me just the other day,' Septima added helpfully. 'And she told us of her plans for the holidays, and that she would not be in the country for Christmas.'

Luna gasped but covered her mouth just as quickly. Molly's hand tightened around her husband's, but she remained quiet all the while.

'Go on, Hermione, tell us the rest,' Charlie Weasley insisted on the behalf of the rest of the Weasleys.

'She made us both promise not to speak a word of it to you until this morning, when it was too late for you to stop her from going, but from what she told me, I gathered she just needed a break from her normal life to try and get her head clear and over everything,' Hermione said guardedly. 'I didn't discourage her. It was her own decision, and she is just doing what she needs to do.'

'Don't take this the wrong way, you all know Ginny adores you, but sometimes people crack, and they can only handle so much pity and babying,' Septima added, glancing pointedly at Molly, who paled slightly.

The whole kitchen was silent until the children burst in from the sitting room and began seeking out their parents, telling them the rest of the guests were beginning to arrive. Hermione took that as the cue to exit and went to place her presents under the tree with the rest as Lesley skipped behind her, helping her place them correctly. Luna went with them, and Hermione found she wondered about the Weasleys lack of reaction, save for Luna's initial gasp.

It was not that they weren't disappointed; they were. And it wasn't as if they weren't sad a member of their family felt smothered and distracted; they would always be. But they were too shocked to come up with something solid to speak. Hermione took that as an apology from them to Ginny and left the room satisfied.

A few moments later, the whole of the Burrow was filled with many bodies. Albus and Minerva arrived together, and the biggest surprise for her had been seeing Remus and Septima together. Apparently something had started up between them as well, and that was a warming sight to see. Dumbledore had always commented there had been too little love in the world.

When lunch was beginning to be served, Hermione went to the kitchen and helped to bring out the food with the rest of the ladies as the men sat around, looking smug and waiting for their food to be brought to them. She was on her way back to the dining room with a large bowl of potato salad when the front door opened again while she was crossing through the entry hall, and a dark figure walked inside and began brushing off the snow off his long, black winter coat.

Hermione did a double take and stood in numb shock, watching as the familiar pale, tall man removed the coat, revealing black trousers, a white shirt with the top couple of buttons undone, and a black cashmere sweater over it. He didn't look at all like the man she had known at Hogwarts.

He glanced at her with his dark eyes, a glimmer of silver shooting through his long hair, which had been secured at his neck with simple black hair elastic. His lips pinched together thinly. 'Miss Granger,' he acknowledged with a nod.

'Professor Snape,' she replied quietly before closing her gaping mouth and hurrying down the hall to the dining room. Since when did Snape attend the Weasley Christmas parties?

Hermione left the salad there and returned to the kitchen to find Snape there, talking amiably to Molly and holding a bowl of greens with one hand carefully. She approached hesitantly, only to catch the end of their conversation. 'And I am so glad you could come this year, Severus. Whatever do you do every other year alone?' Molly asked.

'I research,' he said simply when he saw Hermione approach.

'Would you like me to take that, Professor?' she asked softly, trying to avoid his gaze. She had always felt like his eyes could pierce straight through to her soul and know when she was hiding something. She couldn't feel strong around him.

He shook his head, which she saw in her peripheral vision. 'No, I shall help take everything out,' he said quietly with his low, reverberating voice.

'All right,' Hermione answered, picking up another plate of roast vegetables. She fled to the dining room, desperate to remove herself from his gaze.

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A/N So now Snape is in the picture. I know I took a while to get there, but it does get more interesting from here.

Chapter Seven: Silent Camaraderie

Chapter 7 of 16

Despite the hustle and bustle of activity that permeates the Burrow, Severus and Hermione manage to find some quiet to share with one another.

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A big hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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Silence. It was quiet for the first time in the Burrow since the arrival of all the guests the afternoon before. It was early in the morning on the second day of Christmas, and the house was still and silent; not even a creature or bird outside disturbed the air. All that could be heard was a rather obnoxious snoring from down the hall. That was Ron, Hermione thought with an internal laugh.

She had decided she would stay at the Burrow as long as she could handle it, and if she made it through the entire fortnight, she would consider visiting more often and staying at her house in London while researching to visit Lesley and Harriet as they had requested or demanded, rather. Shifting in her bed, she sat up and looked around her own room. It was small but still lovely, with a dresser, cupboard, fireplace, a soft couch, a coffee table, and of course her bed and a nightstand.

It was the first time she had ever had her own room at the Burrow. It was the first time she had slept so peacefully in years, too. Checking the time, she saw it was only four-thirty, and no one would be getting up for another hour and a half, at least. Decidedly, she got out of bed and slipped her feet into her soft navy slippers and shrugged into a warm robe before tip-toeing to the bathroom down the hall and relieving herself.

Afterwards, she slipped outside onto the porch and sat in one of the more comfortable outside chairs, wrapping her arms around herself before relaxing into the seat. She had neglected to cast her glamour just yet; she would when she heard the house begin to rouse from sleep. She was glad to be able to save her magic; she wasn't short of it by any means, but she did get tired by the end of the day.

'It's too cold to be out here this early, especially for you,' said a deep, familiar voice from the front doorway.

Hermione almost spun around and looked at him when she heard him speak, but she remembered her glamour and quickly cast it wordlessly before looking over at him. 'I never believed my health or welfare would be a concern of yours, Professor Snape,' she replied.

He smirked at her. The girl had never been one to shy away from conflict; he would give her that much. 'You speak your opinion so readily for a woman,' he joked, closing the door to keep the cool outside and moving to the seat next to her. 'May I?' he asked before he sat.

'Do as you please,' Hermione answered before he sighed and seated himself anyway. 'And I'm sure you noticed I am not just any woman.'

'Indeed,' he mumbled.

'You never came here for Christmas before,' Hermione commented as she watched the sun begin to peak at the horizon.

'No.'

'Why not? Why did you come this year?' she asked quietly before she realized it might have been impertinent of her. 'Forgive me; you don't have to answer that.'

'I believe parties and other such frivolities have been too distracting for me, and I don't care to indulge in inane prattle,' he replied simply. 'I usually research and am therefore too busy as a result.'

Hermione nodded and turned to look at him. He was dressed in what appeared to be long pajama pants and a long-sleeved cotton nightshirt beneath his thick black dressing gown. She was surprised to see him wearing slippers also, but then he had not disappointed her and wore all black. It was typical of the former Hogwarts professor.

'And why, might I ask, were Molly and the Weasleys so surprised when you announced you would be staying?' he asked, practiced disinterest thickly belying his tone.

'I only ever stay Christmas lunch and then leave,' she answered. 'I don't come here often... about three times in the last two years, I think.'

He didn't say anything after that, thinking it would be wiser to just shut his mouth than to unwittingly tread dangerous waters and run the risk of having her blubbing all over him. Then again, he had never known this girl no, woman to be much of a crier, so he didn't worry himself too much about that. The only topic he knew to avoid with everyone in the Order was Potter, and especially so with the dead boy's two best friends.

It was, disturbingly, quite a sensitive topic for him, also. He wasn't able to save him. He had never lost a life before, never when he had tried to save it. But he had made up for that by taking down Voldemort in memory of the boy he had failed to save. It still irked him, though.

'Professor Snape, what do you do?' he heard Hermione ask him.

'What do you mean?' he asked back in confusion.

'Well I mean, what do you do now that you don't work at Hogwarts anymore? As you can tell, I haven't kept a very thorough track of what happened to people after the, umm, war, that is,' she said hesitantly.

'I research and publish books every now and then,' he answered. 'I enhance and create potions. It is my field, after all.'

He watched as her expression changed, and she furrowed her brow in concentration. 'You publish all your books with a pseudonym, don't you?' she asked, her eyes puzzled.

He nodded. 'Yes, I imagine you know my pseudonym to be something along the lines of L. Machiavellian,' he answered silkily. 'I write books for Defense against the Dark Arts and Arithmancy, also.'

'Yes, I have all of them in my library,' she announced to his surprise.

Snape mused about how she had been quite open to him in the short time they had been there, and that she had not even spoken so much to the youngest Weasley boy or any of her closest friends. It was odd because he had always known her to be quite steadfast in conversation with them, but then again, he had never really known her at all, and he had not seen her for seven years.

'What is it that you do, Miss Granger? I apologize, but I overheard Arthur mentioning that nobody even knew where you lived, let alone what you did with your time,' he asked carefully.

Hermione smiled at him then. 'I am a Potions researcher, too,' she replied. 'I use some formulas from Arithmancy to improve my research and potions, and I have published my work.'

'Jane McLaughlin,' he noted. It was a pseudonym her pseudonym.

'Yes,' she said with a traceable amount of surprise. 'How ever did you guess that?'

'Your style, now that I think on it, is unmistakable it reminds me of the novels for school essays you wrote,' he answered, noting she colored at the mention of her scholarly habits. 'I have all your written works in my library, as well. You are very thorough.'

'I know,' she said in her own roundabout way of accepting a compliment.

But it wasn't as if her had complimented her outright, so saying 'thank you' would have seemed a bit presumptuous. Snape looked out along the line of trees, noticing the sun had risen quite a bit more during their quasi-conversation. She wasn't like he had remembered, all attitude and questions, ever the inquisitive and irritating know-it-all of a girl. She was more subdued, quiet and solemn, not unlike himself. Although her books were thorough and solely intellectual pieces, they did not have the excitement of her essays and were not as hectic as her schoolwork had been.

She was truly a changed woman, and he hated to see her looking so forlorn. She had always been more mature than anyone her age, and she was bearing the brunt of over twenty years of war on her shoulders when she herself had only been involved for seven of those years. He understood her predicament and silently applauded how well she seemed to handle it all.

But, he would never admit that aloud. 'I think the rest of the house might be stirring, Professor,' she announced from outside his thoughts. 'We should probably get in out of the cold before Molly scolds us.'

He looked over at her, puzzled at how she did not seem to despise him, despite that he had been unable to save her best friend. 'Yes, I suppose that might be wise,' he answered, keeping his thoughts to himself.

She got up from the chair and, wrapping her arms around herself tighter, moved into the house, pausing at the door to look back at him and smile faintly. 'Thank you for this conversation, Professor,' she said politely. 'It is the most intelligent one I have had in ages where I have been responded to with something other than an animal's noise.'

'You're welcome, Miss Granger,' he replied honestly, watching as she silently slipped inside, closing the door behind her.

He listened as her soft footfalls slowly faded away on the floor inside until she reached the carpeted hall and could be heard no longer. This woman was a mystery to him, one he intended to figure out or, at the very least, understand. Standing from the chair, he moved to the door and opened it, pausing once more to glance at the beautiful orange sunrise before closing it on the morning.

It was entirely too cheerful for him to bear. Christmas would always just be as any other day to him.

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A/N Thanks to all of those who have been reading and reviewing so far.

Chapter Eight: Unusual Behaviour

Chapter 8 of 16

Stuck on her holiday with Draco Malfoy, Ginny is both stunned and pleasantly surprised by his unusual behaviour.

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Many thanks to VIVAvivacious for all of her help with the beta of this chapter.

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Requirements were essential. Things had to be just so, or it just wasn't worth the effort people put into things. Some people were happy with average or as good as they could get, but not everyone would be satisfied with 'giving it a go.' Ginny was one of those people who had to have everything just so when it came to building friendships with people which was one of the reasons why Draco Malfoy riled her up so much.

She couldn't understand the nature of their relationship. They had gone from being enemies and old school foes one moment to being two people on holiday who were on speaking terms the next. When he had taken her to that private corner on the first night, she had not expected to be spoken to almost politely. He had asked her to pretend she could tolerate him. Did that mean that he could actually tolerate her?

She had no idea what the answer to that was, but she was determined to find out just how much he could tolerate. It was only the third day of Christmas, and that morning she had been delighted to find a small porcelain figurine of a French hen sitting on her nightstand when she woke up. The morning before that she had received a turtledove, and on Christmas morning, a partridge with a small note saying 'Merry Christmas' sat there, surprising her.

She had thought it was Sarah at first, but when her roommate had looked at her in confusion when she asked, she tried to figure out who it was. She gave up in the end and just accepted the small gifts. It was very sweet, and she was starting to think that there would be a figurine for each day of the song, 'Twelve Days of Christmas'.

'Hi there, Ginny,' called a cheerful voice from outside on the open-air balcony. 'It's lovely out here, come see!'

Ginny smiled and went outside to Sarah and stood next to her. The witch had decided to turn her hair pink that faded into magenta and then blue at the ends for that day. 'Your hair looks very exciting today,' Ginny commented.

'Hmmm, I thought I'd do something exciting with it for our last day in Manhattan,' she answered with a lazy smile.

Ginny found herself grinning back. The longer she stayed with this vibrant witch who reminded her so much of Tonks, the more she appreciated and liked her; the added bonus was that Sarah was not nearly as clumsy or prone to disaster as Tonks always had been and still was. 'I will miss this city, I suppose,' she said quietly, contemplating how she would spend her day.

'Yes, but I am looking forward to the Niagara Falls a lot too, so it won't be a huge loss for me,' Sarah answered noncommittally.

'Yes, that will be nice,' Ginny replied.

They were scheduled to Apparate there the next morning and spend two days on the American side before spending two days on the Canadian side in Ontario. The lake would be a little frozen, but it was unlikely the largest falls in the world would ever freeze up, especially when there were Magical folk maintaining it. Ginny was actually more excited to be moving their trip there after being in the city for so many days.

There was a knock on their door, and Ginny immediately pushed off the balcony to go and answer the call while Sarah remained where she was, distracted by the early sunrise that morning. She straightened out a little before she opened the door to Draco Malfoy, who smirked at her surprised look and stepped inside when she moved to allow him entry.

'Good morning,' he said politely.

'Good morning to you, too,' Ginny managed, somewhat belatedly.

'I hope you don't mind, but Sarah invited me up to view the sunrise from your balcony this morning. I was told that the view from this window was quite incomparable,' he said with a smile.

'Yes, it is quite lovely from here,' Ginny answered, feeling a little suspicious of his intentions towards Sarah.

'May I go out?' he asked.

'By all means,' Ginny said, gesturing towards the open door to the balcony and following him out. He stood next to Sarah at a comfortable distance and tucked his hands into his pockets as he looked out at the horizon that shone all pink and yellow with orange and red tints. There would be clouds later in the day.

'Hi, Draco, I expected you a little earlier,' Sarah said, tucking her arm around his and smiling up at him.

Even though Ginny had discussed Draco with Sarah and knew the other woman had no romantic feelings for him, Ginny felt jealousy run through her for a moment. She didn't feel romantically for him either, but she was jealous for some inexplicable reason. It didn't make sense, but it was the way things were.

She stood back, leaning her back against the opposite side of the balcony, and watched as the two talked companionably with each other as they enjoyed the sunrise together. Ginny used to like doing that with Harry; she still liked the sunrise, but she missed being able to watch with him even if she knew that he was watching it rise from somewhere.

'Ginny? Are you all right?' asked a female voice from beyond her thoughts.

Ginny looked up at both Sarah and Draco staring at her with worried looks on their faces and nodded. 'Why would you think otherwise?' she asked simply.

'Well, you're crying,' Sarah answered simply.

Gasping, she reached a hand to her face and felt the wetness on her cheeks. She blushed, as she had not even realized her sorrow was flowing down them. 'Oh gods, you're right, I didn't even realize,' she said hurriedly.

'So, you're not sad?'

'Well, not really enough to cry. I guess I did it subconsciously,' Ginny replied, brushing away the tears and shrugging.

She left the balcony, going into the bathroom to discover her cheeks had become quite pink and her eyes puffy from the amount she had cried. Has she sniffed loudly? Was she blubbering away like an idiot in front of these two people she hardly knew? Did they think she was crazy or depressed? Seriously considering the answer was probably all of the above, she washed her face, dried it with a towel, and blew her nose before she returned to the balcony, only looking half as bad as she had when she had left.

The both looked at her pointedly when she returned. 'Don't look at me like that; I feel like a crazy person,' she said with as much control as she could.

'All right, but you were the one who said it,' Draco said, turning away while Sarah shot her a curious look before letting go of his arm and returning to the bedroom to change; she was still wearing her pajamas.

Ginny felt awkward, being thrown into the deep end like that. She was treading a fine and very dangerous line here, standing alone on the balcony with Draco Malfoy. She knew he was staring at her by then and realized the look in his eye would only lead them to disaster. His eyes held understanding, acceptance, and something else that could have been longing or wistfulness.

His next words confirmed which of the two it was.

'Would you see a movie with me today?' he asked with a small smile.

'What kind of movie?' she found herself asking back curiously, despite her good sense protesting. Her romantic sensibilities always won out when it came to a battle between curiosity and her common sense.

'Any movie you would like, I 'spose. It would easily pass a few hours of today, and then we will be closer to being at the Falls,' he replied, grinning.

Ginny thought about it for a moment, wondering whether or not she should accept his suggestion to kill time. It sounded reasonable, not like an attempt to get into her pants for one night, just innocent and friendly. He appeared sincere, and in the past few days he had acted considerably nicer than he ever had and proved his sincerity in his actions and words. Failing to see any negatives in this, she looked at him and nodded.

'We should go see a movie, and then we could go to the Statue of Liberty,' Ginny answered, giving her own suggestion too.

'That sounds like a good plan,' Draco said, nodding in approval.

To her surprise, Ginny enjoyed the time she spent with Malfoy that day, just as Draco had found her company more than pleasant himself. He liked the fiery redhead, although she seemed very subdued for some reason he didn't understand. There was just something about her he found irresistible, not to mention she was quite attractive and had a lovely and natural glow to her skin.

He had never liked freckles on women all that much, but hers suited and complimented her very nicely. He intended to spend as much time as he could getting to know her like he should have years before. But he had let his arrogant childhood prejudices get in the mix, and it compensated his judgment quite unforgivably. It was no wonder she had trouble accepting and opening up to him like he so longed for her to.

However, he would simply remain content taking pleasure in her company and waiting for her to allow herself a chance to get to know the nicer side of him better. He knew he could show her the truth somehow.

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A/N Another necessary break chapter from Hermione and Snape's tale. The next chapter will be along soon.

Chapter Nine: Falling at the Falls

Chapter 9 of 16

At Niagara Falls, Ginny continues to be amazed by the changes in Draco Malfoy and begins to realise that he just might be her fresh start.

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Thanks again to VIVAvivacious for beta-ing this chapter.

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Oddly enough, with Christmas came a lot of inexplicable revelations and accidental circumstances and coincidences. Nobody would ever be able to understand why things happened the way they did, but they were constant in the way that they were strange and unpredictable. Ginny knew exactly what that meant as she contemplated it while sitting in a horse-drawn carriage next to Draco Malfoy. He was the last person she had expected to run into on holiday, but there they were.

She glanced out and saw the falls not far away. They had decided to take the scenic route in said carriage and were going to meet up with Sarah, who had stayed behind at the shopping village to buy some Niagara Falls t-shirts to take home. What bothered Ginny about that was Sarah had purposely stayed to leave her alone with Malfoy no, Draco, she reminded herself.

For some odd reason, the prospect of being alone with him was not so daunting but that it had been borne of Sarah's initiative was annoying. She felt his warm hand brush hers momentarily, and she looked up at him. He smiled and pointed across the falls to where they saw the people on the Canadian side making trips over the Whirlpool in carriage-like cabins strung over the water on cables.

'We could do that, when we go over there, that is,' he suggested lightly.

Ginny nodded hesitantly and then decided to blow it all. She was going to have to spend another eight days with him after that one anyway. 'All right, I'll think about it, but I'm warning you now, I am rather wary when it comes to Muggle transportation,' she said with warning in her tone.

'I'll take your word for that,' he said politely.

Ginny was amazed by just how kind and polite he had been sometimes most times on the trip so far. The rudest thing he had done was on the first night of the tour, when

he had half-dragged her across the restaurant. She had been annoyed with him that night but had found it hard to continue to dislike him for the entire time.

'Where is dinner tonight? What did Paige say again?' Ginny asked.

'She didn't say anything. She just said do what you like for the day,' he said with a shrug before resting his arm on the chair behind her. 'I, however, have plans for dinner, and you are included in them.'

Ginny screwed her eyes as she turned away from him. What on earth? What was he trying to do to her? 'Draco, I have an important question to ask you before I accept your dinner offer,' Ginny said hurriedly.

'What might that be Ginny?' he asked curiously, a lazy smile curving his lips.

Ginny found it hard to pull her words together when she first saw the smile and almost considered taking them back and staring at his smile all day, but she closed her eyes to get a grip. 'I need to know exactly what it is you want with me,' she said quietly through clenched teeth. 'I don't understand what this is.'

'I would have thought it was obvious, Ginny. I am trying to date you because I like you,' he replied honestly and confidently, which she found very sexy of him.

She opened her eyes and saw he was earnest, which was also another endearing trait. 'You're being serious, aren't you?' she asked faintly.

'Would I joke about something like this?'

Ginny shook her head numbly as her mind began filling with excuses, and she couldn't keep her thoughts to herself any longer. 'But you hated me, and all my friends. You hate my family, and you hated Harry!' she hissed acidly. 'How I could I possibly believe you and trust you after all of that, and this?'

'Ginny, I know you have very few reasons to trust me, but believe that I am serious. I want to know you better, I want to court you properly, and I beg to be given a chance,' he pleaded softly. It was the weakest Ginny had ever seen him look before. She hadn't even known Harry to plead or beg with her.

Ginny sighed heavily. Perhaps one chance wouldn't hurt, but if he screwed it up, she would make sure that he never forgot it. 'Draco, I am going to give you one chance. Prove to me by the end of this trip you are worth my time and all of the trouble, and I will gladly give it a go afterwards,' she said in a no-nonsense tone.

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles lightly. 'Thank you, Ginny,' he said with a silly grin plastered to his handsome features.

'All right, so what will I be required to wear to this silly restaurant of yours?' she asked bluntly.

'It is by no means silly in any way, Ginny, and I would expect you to wear something elegant, but sexy too,' he replied, lacing his fingers with hers.

Ginny allowed the small gesture, only because it had been so long since she had even attempted a relationship with anyone after Harry. None of the men she had dated were right. They were not "just so," and she couldn't wouldn't settle for anything less. In any case, dinner had been lovely as promised, and she had felt like a goddess in the dress she had worn. The way he looked at her made her feel beautiful.

She went to bed in her room that night a very happy young lady and woke the next morning when she was pounced on by her roommate, who had been asleep already by the time Ginny had returned the night before. 'So... how was your date with Draco?' Sarah asked excitedly.

'It was wonderful, thanks,' Ginny replied, covering her mouth, as she was wary of her slight case of morning breath, especially after the amount of alcohol she had consumed the night before.

'Then I suppose you do like him more than you let on, hmmm?' she asked teasingly, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

'So what if I do?' Ginny asked, throwing a pillow at her head.

Sarah ducked and grinned foolishly, getting off the bed and twirling about the room excitedly. 'Oh! I just love it when people realize they have feelings for one another!' she exclaimed dramatically. 'You two are so cute together!'

Ginny chuckled softly at that. 'I was never cute.' Ginny scoffed at the word. 'I have always been volatile and sure of myself and my appearance,' she added just for good measure, smiling when Sarah frowned slightly in confusion.

They spent the rest of the day lounging around the hotel room, watching Muggle movies and eating lots of the room service desserts. They were delicious, so they had ordered some of everything, and it had tasted absolutely divine. Just as promised, they were getting pretty much first class treatment. Ginny had not expected much, but she enjoyed every single luxury offered.

Around eight that night, Draco knocked on the door, and Ginny presented herself to him wearing a strapless cerulean dress that went to her knees and a pair of matching deep-black heels that shone like new. Her hair flowed down her back, and she had a lovely sparkle in her eyes that he found utterly irresistible. He leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek before pulling back to gauge her reaction. She simply smiled.

He held out a hand to her, and she took it. They walked hand-in-hand down to the lobby and found a small hidden corner to Apparate from, ending up in a dark alleyway. He held her hand tightly in his and revealed that this witch actually didn't mind his touch, didn't flinch or seem disgusted by his kisses, and was accepting and loving and kind. All the things he had missed out on in life were presented to him in the form of this remarkable redhead.

He could not understand why he had never realized this before. Perhaps it had something to do with his father's decision to make him date only Slytherin and Ravenclaw girls. She was perfect to him, and he would strive to prove to her that he cared for her and that his struggle was not in vain.

'You look positively angelic tonight, Ginny,' he commented smoothly, running his hands up her arms in a warming motion as he applied a temperature-controlling spell on her skin.

'You look rather dashing yourself,' she murmured. 'People would think you had a hot date or something.'

'You have no idea.'

They walked into the restaurant and were taken to the table he had reserved ahead of time. It sat next to a window that had a lovely view of the falls. He pulled out her chair for her and only sat down when she was settled and comfortable in her seat, then poured wine for them both from a selection that he had pre-ordered. He raised his glass in a toast to her brightly.

'To second chances,' he announced, eyes never leaving hers and burning holes into her soul with his intensity.

She tapped her glass to his lightly and nodded in agreement. He was more right than even she knew. 'To second chances, may they be happy and fulfilled,' she said, adding the next bit while pouring out a truth onto him.

It was the fifth day of Christmas, and she was falling for a Malfoy. Merlin help her.

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A/N I will agree that a double hit of Ginny/Draco was unfair, but Hermione and Snape are on the way.

Chapter 10: Blossoming Affection

Chapter 10 of 16

Hermione is surprised when Snape shows up at her bedroom door in the morning with a breakfast tray.

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Thanks to VIVAvivacious for beta-ing this chapter for me.

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On the sixth day of Christmas, as tradition stated, a lady was supposed to receive the gift of an egg, or something representing rebirth. Not many knew the tradition, but on that morning in the Weasley household, every woman received an egg of new life that morning. Hermione neglected to go to the breakfast table, and instead stayed in bed for a lie-in; she had been up late the night before, going over her notes and adding things she remembered that might help her progress.

She stretched out over her bed and yawned softly, looking out the window at the white light of the sun shining through the full white clouds beyond the walls of the house. She had thoroughly enjoyed the night before in front of the fire in the sitting room, alone late into the night, until Snape came in wearing the warm black dressing gown over his pajamas that Hermione had yet to get used to seeing him in.

He had been her constant accidental companion during the time she had been there. She liked talking to him because he was intelligent and surprisingly easy to converse with, despite how little they would talk as opposed to just absorbing each others' presence. It was as if that was enough for both of them; then again, Hermione had never known him to be an overly-verbose person in the past.

She was startled from her thoughts when a knock sounded softly on the door, making her turn to look at her clock on the nightstand. It was nine in the morning, and she still hadn't gotten out of bed. That was a new record for her. She clambered out of bed, reaching for her wand to murmur a spell to put her hair to rights and cast the glamour before she pronounced herself finally ready to greet anyone.

She had been expecting Molly Weasley or someone of a similar ilk to be standing there, but instead she found herself momentarily speechless at what greeted her: Severus Snape in black trousers with a crisp white shirt tucked neatly into the band at his hips, the top couple buttons undone and sleeves rolled to his elbows.

'Professor Snape, good morning,' she squeaked, a blush diffusing through her cheeks at being seen by him in her pajamas still.

'Miss Granger, you weren't at breakfast,' he stated obviously.

'I know, I slept in because I was up late with my research last night,' she answered sheepishly. 'Is there something you wanted?'

He shook his head and instead turned and summoned something with a crook of his long finger. A tray of breakfast floated gently into his waiting hands. 'I thought you might be interested in consuming something,' he said simply.

Hermione smiled appreciatively. 'Thank you for that, sir,' she said, indicating the coffee table in the room when he carried the tray in.

'Think nothing of it,' he replied, oblivious to the fact she was checking out his arse as he walked by.

It wasn't really that bad, actually firm looking and scrawny, but she had never been attracted to a man with an arse the size of a barge before. Hang on did she just even think the word attraction? She was not attracted to Severus Snape, or at least that was what she was going to tell herself. She was startled from her thoughts when she saw an intricately-decorated egg floating in her line of vision.

'What is that?' she asked, looking into his obsidian eyes.

His mouth twitched for a moment, and she thought he was going to smile at her, but no such luck. His expression remained nearly neutral, save for the slight amusement at her question lingering in his eyes. 'I should think it is obvious this is your Christmas egg, Miss Granger,' he replied bluntly.

She almost laughed at herself for asking such an obvious question. She took it from his hand with questioning fingers and examined the lovely pattern and the colors. It was all silver and white with the traces of bronze, red, and green. The work was so unmistakably thorough that Hermione knew no other could have constructed it for her than the very man standing in her room.

'You made this,' she stated, not asking just pointing out that she knew.

'Believe what you will,' he answered.

She placed it on the pillow on her bed to cradle and protect it, and then turned around to lean up and kiss Snape on the cheek, to both of their surprise. She pulled back, blushing slightly and fidgeting with her hands behind her back. 'Thank you, Professor,' she said quietly, suddenly overcome with the need to avert her gaze.

He stood rigid and still in the middle of her room, shocked at what had just passed between them, his cheek boiling where she had kissed him. He knew that jolt of something that had surged through him. He had been feeling it increasingly more often with each passing day, any time their skin brushed or hands clashed when reaching for the same object. His feelings for her had been entirely non-existent when he had first decided to attend the Christmas gathering, but when he had first arrived, and he had seen her carrying that dish of food, she just looked so... well he couldn't even explain it, so it was obviously nothing.

He realized that he had been standing there silently for entirely too long, and without another word, he went to the door, opened it, and strode out of the room. He had to get some air, he needed to breathe and get that feeling out of his system. He couldn't feel like this, not there or with Hermione. But wait when had he begun thinking of her as Hermione?

Growling, he walked outside into the fresh air, breathing for the first time since he had left her room and closing his eyes, surrendering to the peace and clear mind he got from being away from the predicament. Think. It was New Years Eve in just twelve hours time. What could he do with the rest of his day? Then a gust of cold wind blew across the porch and he shivered. Fuck! It was freezing out there!

He turned to go back inside, only to find the door standing open slightly and being blocked by Hermione, who had changed into a pair of jeans and a burgundy round-necked sweater. 'Professor, I'm really sorry about that before,' she apologized earnestly. 'If I offended you in any way... I really didn't mean to. I was expressing my

gratitude, but I I wasn't thinking. Forgive me, I'm rambling.'

He listened to her speech and sighed heavily. How could he refuse such an adequate apology? Especially when it was an unnecessary one. 'Miss Granger, you have not offended me, and there is nothing to forgive,' he answered formally. 'I will admit it just surprised me.'

She smiled slightly at that, and he swore for a moment he saw a glimmer of dark shadows around her eyes, skin almost as pale as his, and gaunt facial features. But as soon as he saw it, it was gone again, and the flushed pink cheeks, not so pale skin, and fuller face returned. He must have been seeing things.

'Will you come and have tea with me in my room? I have to eat my breakfast after all, and I could use the company,' she said carefully, afraid of rejection.

And so their dance had begun. He had not been imagining the feelings he had for her earlier or any other day, and there was most certainly some tension buzzing in the air around them. He couldn't deny it, but hell would freeze over before he even dreamed of acting on it. He should have said no to her but instead found himself following her back to the room he had emerged from.

'Would you have sugar and milk in your tea?' she asked when he was seated comfortably in the armchair by her warm fire.

'Two sugars and no milk, please,' he answered politely.

He watched as she poured tea into a china cup with a saucer for him, adding the sugar lumps and stirring clockwise exactly six times before carrying it over to him. He saw a strange glimmer in her eyes and paused for a moment to examine the situation they were in. Could she feel it too? What did she think? He considered Legilimency, but dismissed it quickly. Without her consent it would be just rude, and he had no wish to have a conversation concerning that just yet if ever.

They spent the rest of the day talking and looking over her Potions notes, she asking him for advice and input at odd intervals while he read a book. They moved to the sitting room at around noon, where the adults had retired to, and they continued, as they had been the entire day, in the armchairs by the fire there again. Dinner was a spectacular event, and the dining room was noisy and talkative. Even Hermione and Snape had a hard time keeping out of the conversations.

After the meal, the children raced around with Christmas crackers for the evening, and everyone got partnered up to pull them open. Hermione pulled hers with Snape, and his also, and then the entire room was filled with people drinking, talking, and wearing absurd-looking party hats. The jokes that came in the bon-bon were ridiculous, and Hermione found herself laughing at Snape heartily as he tried to tell his with a straight face.

He failed miserably in the end and chuckled softly with her.

Just before midnight, the children were sent up to bed, grumbling as Molly hustled them out, and only the adults were left. Snape sat next to Hermione on the couch by the fire, silently enjoying her company, while the rest of them stayed at the table in the dining room and drank to the countdown to the New Year.

Snape himself gazed at his pocket-watch and counted down mentally along with the sound of the gathering next door, and when the clock struck twelve, he looked towards Hermione, who was oblivious and in a daze, gazing at the flames of the fire. Taking the opportunity, he leaned over and gave her a small kiss on the cheek. She turned and looked at him sharply, surprised and confused at the same time.

'Happy New Year, Hermione,' he said silkily. Her smile then was worth every nerve he had summoned to actually kiss her.

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A/N Yes, this chapter is supposed to be sickly sweet.

Chapter 11: The Eighth Day

Chapter 11 of 16

Snape begins to question the friendship that has begun to form between himself and Hermione and comes to the conclusion that he is unworthy of her.

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A big hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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On the eighth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, eight maids a milking or so the rhyme goes. It was a ridiculous children's song that was written at least a century before when folk songs were popular. Severus Snape thought they were a waste of time, and quite frankly, spending two weeks at one house with the same people could become irksome, especially to him. The only one who had done nothing to annoy him thus far had been Hermione Granger, the girl who tormented him in his classroom as a know-it-all, overly-eager student.

He was surprised by how subdued she was presently compared to her old, over-confident persona. He found he liked this Hermione slightly more. She was sitting by the closed window on a settee near the fire, a quill stuck in her hair to hold the silky curls piled on her head and another in her hand as she twirled the feather back and forth over her bottom lip. He could see the ink stains on her fingers and thick reference book on her lap.

She was really something, all right.

'Miss Granger, it is past noon. Do you not think perhaps you should eat something? You hardly touched your breakfast, and you would be better off eating something more substantial for lunch,' he said seriously.

He watched her look up at him from her notes and flashed him a brief half-smile. 'I'm sorry I guess I am just so used to forgetting to eat,' she said sheepishly. 'I get so wrapped up in my work, I lose track of things.'

'I can tell.'

She blushed at that, and Snape felt himself liking it a lot more than he rightly should, with her being his former student and all. He simply smirked at the reaction and waved off her apology. She had no reason to apologize to him, and he said as much before going to the window seat and holding out his hand. He knew if he didn't take the

initiative to get her to eat, she would simply forget about it again as she became consumed by her research.

'Thank you,' she said softly, accepting his hand and putting aside her work before standing.

Snape felt a strange feeling shoot up his arm, boiling his blood as her skin touched his, and he didn't know what to think. 'You are most welcome, Miss Granger,' he replied. 'Now off to the kitchen with you, and make sure you eat something. I will know if you have not, and I will punish you if you don't.'

'What will you do? Chain me up in the dining room?' she challenged.

'I might at that,' he said threateningly.

She laughed quietly and let go of his hand slowly. 'Now that is something I would like to see,' she said with a silly grin. 'And I thought you never made an empty threat.'

'I never would,' he purred silkily into her ear, delighted to see the hairs on the back of her neck rise a little.

She cleared her throat a little uncomfortably and took half a step away from him to put some distance between them. He watched as she edged out of the room carefully, not understanding why he had an interest in her at all. She was just another girl no, woman. But that was it; she was unlike any woman he had ever met. Sure she had her feminine qualities, but he had never known a woman to have her scholarly nature overshadow her feminine side so much. She was more like a mystery than anything.

He sighed heavily and resumed his seat. He really needed to end this ridiculous charade before it was too late. He had no illusions about what people thought of him, and Hermione deserved better than to become entangled in them. Imagine how her reputation would be affected if anyone were to discover she had become friends with Severus "Greasy Git" Snape. No, he couldn't do that to her.

'Are you going to come for lunch, Professor?' piped a small voice from the doorway. 'I know for a fact you haven't eaten yet either.'

He looked up at Hermione and cocked an eyebrow at her in challenge. 'Since when has my health or hunger become a concern of yours?' he asked a little too harshly, as he saw her flinch slightly.

'Since when has mine been yours?' she retorted.

'Touché,' he returned easily.

She sighed and went to him. 'Will you please come down for lunch anyway? I don't fancy spending Merlin only knows how long in a kitchen of Weasleys who think I am too thin,' she pleaded.

He smiled inwardly at the thought that she did not want to go in there alone, that she needed him on some level. Pushing away the treacherous thoughts, he stood from his chair gracefully and looked at her down his long and slightly-hooked nose with his lips twisted into a small sneer. 'Well then, Miss Granger, perhaps you should ask Vector or Lupin to accompany you to the sharks,' he said coldly.

His chest ached as he said those awful, cold words, but he managed to brush past her briskly and stride out of the room without looking back. He knew she would be standing there with a hurt expression, and it made him hurt even more. But he was wrong; she had followed him, and when he felt her hand on his forearm, he whipped around sharply to glare at her.

'What is it, Miss Granger?' he snapped.

She frowned at him then, and he felt his resolve fleeing, but he schooled himself to look stern, despite his distaste at doing so. She put her hands on her hips indignantly and glared straight back at him.

'What the hell is your problem?' she demanded. 'One moment you're being nice to me, and the next you turn around and bite my head off. What did I do?'

He straightened and looked down at her as if her were a student, folding his arms over his chest. He gazed at her, feeling his resolve shatter further, but that wouldn't do. He could not let her become that former war hero that became associated with the wrong people, no matter that she wouldn't even be in the country by the end of the holiday. There were only four more days until they left; surely he could remain cold and detached for that long?

'What did you think, Miss Granger? A few kind words might make us friends? I can assure you that is most certainly not the case,' he spat as nastily as he could, watching as her face became red with anger. 'I am no one's friend.'

Hermione could feel the tears beginning to well up in her eyes, but she took a steadying breath to force them back. She balled her fists and held her arms rigid at her side, both hurt and furious. He would never be able to take that one back. What kind of bullshit was this? He was the one who had kissed her on the cheek!

'You bastard,' she hissed before relaxing her hand just enough to bring it to his face with as much force as she could muster.

She slapped him hard then, enjoying the way he stumbled back slightly at the force of her furious, stinging blow. She stormed away, leaving a stunned Snape standing alone in the hall, clutching his cheek with the imprint of her small hand on it, bewildered that she had actually hit him. He had not expected her to lose her temper so easily, but at least he was sure now she would have no trouble being mad at him and avoiding him for four more days.

He watched as she fled with his heart aching more painfully than ever before. He had no idea he could even feel like that, or at all sometimes. He wanted to call her back and apologize, bow down at her dainty feet and beg for forgiveness, kiss her until she was breathless if she ever relented. But he didn't. For her sake and for his own, he would let her go to her room, ignore him, pretend she never knew he existed, and lapse back into her life before this Christmas.

Turning on his heel, not quite as sharply as usual, he fled to his room, seeking the quiet solace it offered him. The only place the Weasleys had silently agreed not to go to for the holiday, and he was never more grateful. Stopping in the bathroom, he cast a charm over the red handprint on his right cheek, making the color change back to normal but still allowing himself to feel the sting and force of the blow. He deserved every bit of pain she wanted to inflict on him.

Finally, he made it to his room and dropped into the armchair in front of his own fire, burying his head in his hands. The door locked as he murmured a wandless charm, and he closed his eyes to ward off the impending headache. He would have a migraine by dinnertime at this rate. But what did it matter anyway? Leaning back, he fell asleep after only a little while staring at the ceiling.

When he woke, it was dark, and someone was knocking on his door. He looked at his watch and saw it was dinnertime, and he jumped up, feeling a little hungry after neglecting to eat all day. When he went to the dining room and sat down in his seat, he noticed one of the chairs was empty while everyone else was gathered. Hermione. 'Where is Miss Granger?' he asked in a voice schooled to disguise his concern.

'She has left us, Severus,' Molly said softly, sniffing back a small sob.

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A/N Yes, it is sad to have Hermione leave, but necessary. More will be along soon.

Chapter 12: Winter Wonderland

Chapter 12 of 16

Draco thinks about Ginny and makes a very important decision.

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Many thanks and hugs go to VIVAvivacious for beta-ing this chapter.

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Canada was a winter wonderland. The snow fell thick, and even with the frosted white everywhere, the Niagara Falls continued to flow over into the abyss. The water was one of the most constant things ever. Ginny liked things that were constant, but the last three days had been the opposite to the definition of the word. The only thing that had remained constant besides the water was that she had been having a wonderful time with Draco, Sarah, and the tall, brunette New Yorker man, Jake. She thought he was nice, and he seemed to be rather taken with the bubbly, silver-haired Sarah.

The falls had been amazing, and it was the last day there before they moved on to Alaska for the last three days of the tour. Ginny had never felt better about taking a holiday before, and this had definitely been the best one ever. She was ready to move on and let go. She was ready to take a chance with Draco; as long as he wanted her, she was his.

Besides, the silvery-blond hair was dead sexy.

She watched him from across the dinner hall with the other boys who had decided to go on the little excursion with them and smiled when she caught his eye. Draco felt his heart do a back flip when she smiled at him that way. She was an angel. He had been walking a long, hard road of guilt until that fateful night when they had first arrived in New York. That was almost two weeks ago. It was the ninth day of Christmas, and he had yet to see that she got her figurine of the lady dancing.

It was just like the rhyme said: nine ladies dancing. If only he knew whether she liked them or not. He watched as she stood from her place at the bar and made her way over to where Sarah and the other ladies were sitting. They only had the night left in Canada, as it was already lunchtime.

He was almost glad to have the company of Sarah's new beau, Jake, just so he would get bored when Ginny was not with him.

'Are you all there, man?' Jake asked from beside him.

'Yes, right. I just got distracted for a little while,' he replied as neutrally as he could, but if anyone were to see what he stared at, it wouldn't take long for them to figure out just what had captured his fancy.

Jake chanced a look over to where his eyes were focused, and he laughed a little. 'You're really into that girl, aren't you?' he asked jovially.

'Damned straight,' he returned intensely.

'Hey man, I don't blame you. She's a nice girl, but I think I am just as happy,' he said with a smile, looking pointedly at Sarah. 'I've always had a thing for British girls.'

Draco smirked. 'Sarah's lovely, too. I can tell that, and I only just met her on this trip,' he said appraisingly. 'You'll be good for her. I hated letting her feel like a third wheel with Ginny and me. Sometimes I got the feeling she was a bit uncomfortable.'

'Do you think it might be too early to convince her to move here and live with me?' Jake asked seriously.

Draco looked over at the eccentric, bubbly woman and shook his head. 'Nothing would be too early for that girl. She said herself if she had a good reason to live here, she would. I think she would do it for you in a heartbeat,' Draco replied honestly. 'Just treat her right, and be yourself.'

'She's one of those girls, huh? Well, I think I might ask her tomorrow. I'll be going with you guys to Alaska, so I might give it some thought,' Jake said, smiling. 'Thanks for your advice, man.'

'Hey, no problem.'

Draco smiled inwardly when he thought what it might be like to live with Ginny, to settle down with her, to be married to her, and to have a family with her. The thought made him grow warm, so he got up and went to the bar door, throwing on his coat before he went out into the winter cold. The gust of freezing air hit him hard as he walked out, and he soon found himself walking toward an old bridge with a footpath crossing reaching over a smaller river linked to the one fuelling the falls.

He leaned against it and wrapped his arms around himself for warmth before staring out absently, trying to clear his mind. What if he did want to live with Ginny, and marry her, and father her children? He had never wanted that kind of relationship with a woman before, but with Ginny, the prospect seemed deliciously tempting. She definitely had the kind of face he would love to wake up to.

Sighing, he closed his eyes against the wind so he could listen to the distant slap of the waterfall. Ginny would never want that with him, if she even wanted that sort of thing at all. She was too independent and liked the freedom she had. He had known that about her when they got to know each other in New York. But maybe, just maybe, it was worth a try anyway.

He could start off slow and ask her to come live with him, beg her, tell her she needed to, tell her he wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning if he couldn't wake up to her radiant, glowing face. And it would be true. If he couldn't do that when they returned, he would crumble back into the mess he was before this trip had straightened him out. And it was all because of her.

'Draco?' asked an inquisitive female voice from nearby.

Draco opened his eyes and turned quickly to see a shock of fiery red hair and the smiling face he found beautiful beyond that of the woman of his dreams. He held a hand out to Ginny, and she went to him, stepping into the warm circle of his arms and snuggling into his chest. Her hands found their way inside his jacket, and he gasped when the coldness of her hands seeped through the thick fabric of his long-sleeved shirt inside.

'Gods, Ginny, your hands are freezing,' he said, hugging around her and pulling her flush against him.

She giggled a little and smiled into his chest, breathing in deeply the scent of his cologne, letting it fill her senses. She could definitely wake up to that scent any day of the week. Ginny knew it was early, but she would willingly wake up in his arms every morning then and could fall asleep like that every night. A shiver ran down her back at the thought, which led to others. Oddly enough, she could imagine a life with him, even after they left this fantasy holiday they were on.

She could see herself as his wife, a Malfoy, the mother of his children, the woman he woke up next to and shared his innermost thoughts and desires with. But, she knew she shouldn't be so wistful. This was just a holiday fling, and he would most likely get over this stage he was going through and head back to England with a clean slate and a million other witches to date.

'Ginny, I have something important to ask you, and I know it is early, but I need to do it soon,' he said from outside of her mind's ramblings.

She pulled back slightly with a confused expression but still kept her hands inside his coat, wrapped firmly around his waist. That was a good start, he supposed. 'What is it, Draco?' she asked, anxious for him to make her or break her.

He looked down at her face, nervous as to whether this wonderful, exciting witch would make him or break him, and took a deep breath to start. 'I that is, we haven't known each other as we do now for very long, but I do believe in love at first sight,' he started honestly. 'I knew from the moment I saw you in New York I loved you, and I couldn't live another day without you in my life. I want you to come and live with me, in Malfoy Manor.'

She sucked in a breath of relief and almost sighed before smiling. 'Are you asking me to just live with you, or to marry you?' she asked hesitantly.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear and kissed her neck gently. 'Both, if you'd like, but if you don't want to get married, I'd understand,' he replied smoothly.

She rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. 'I don't think my family would approve of me living with a man I'm not married to,' she said.

He felt his heart sink. 'Oh...'

'but I'm pretty sure they wouldn't object if I were to marry you,' she continued. 'I think it could be an interesting conversation when we get home, don't you?'

He smiled at that. 'Yes, very interesting, love.'

'Just imagine what Ron will say. And you'll have to come with me to see my parents when I tell them the news,' she joked playfully, looking up and gazing at his face adoringly. Leaning forwards, she brushed her lips over his in a chaste kiss. 'I love you too, Draco Malfoy.'

He smiled broadly at that and hugged her tight, picking her up and twirling her around a few times as he did. 'I love you, Ginny Weasley. And I will prove it to you any way you like,' he declared earnestly.

Ginny quirked an eyebrow at him questioningly and asked, 'Anything?'

'Anything,' he vowed.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his neck just below his ear. 'Take me to bed, then,' she whispered in a low, seductive voice.

Draco didn't need to be told twice, and he hefted her easily into his arms before carrying her off towards their rooms, patient but still in a hurry to make her his own.

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A/N Yes, I realize you probably weren't expecting another Ginny/Draco chapter, but you will be glad to know that the remaining chapters are all about Hermione and Snape.

Chapter 13: Bookish Tendencies

Chapter 13 of 16

A few days after Hermione has fled the Burrow, the remaining Order members discuss Snape and the potential reasons for his sudden change in mood.

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A big hug of thanks must go to VIVAvivacious for all of her help with this chapter.

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Early January saw a fresh layer of snow on the ground that continued to fall steadily, each of the flakes with their own unique pattern. Generally people would stay indoors on cooler days like those, but the Weasley boys had very different ideas on that score. Instead, they collected together their brooms and Quidditch gear and headed to the snowy orchard near the Burrow to have a game. Snape had been invited but waved off their invitation irritably and remained in his chair before the fire in the sitting room.

It was the twelfth and final day of Christmas. Hermione had left almost four days prior, to the surprise and sadness of her friends. Snape had been moody ever since. Even Molly recognized he had not been himself rather, he had reverted back to the Severus Snape that had appeared at the Burrow almost twelve days earlier. Even more snappish and reclusive than before, if that were even possible. Albus pointed it out once in a conversation with Molly, Remus, and Septima when they had been out of earshot of the man.

And so while the young men were playing their sport, and Snape was brooding over his Potions research moodily, Albus, Minerva, Molly, Remus, and Septima came together once more to speculate over what had happened to Snape in the last few days that made him act that way. Oddly enough, not one of them had attributed it to Hermione's departure. They had grown used to those abrupt departures and no longer questioned them. Molly had been quite relieved she had stayed as long as she had.

'Albus, something must be done about that boy,' Minerva insisted through her thick Scottish burr. 'He's hardly eating, not speaking to anyone unless spoken to first, and usually it's only in monosyllables.'

The older wizard considered his company over the rim of his half-moon spectacles. 'I am afraid that for now the only thing we can do for Severus is offer him silent support and hope one day he might decide to trust us with whatever is troubling him,' he said wisely. 'He has had a hard a life for someone who still has a long while yet to live. Severus shares his thoughts infrequently and sparingly to avoid any more hurt the kind he was subject to as a young man growing up.'

'Well, someone has to say something to him,' Molly said simply, pouring tea into their individual cups on the table. 'He's not eating. My nerves are delicate as it is, and watching Severus neglect himself only makes it worse.'

'The only influence I have over Severus is that of a friend,' Albus said sadly. 'He had fulfilled his vow to me.'

'I don't understand that,' Remus piped, giving Septima's hand a gentle squeeze. 'He is under no vow, yet he comes here at Albus's insistence.'

'Oh, Remus, I did not force Severus to come here this Christmas. The choice was his own to make,' the older wizard replied.

'This is something deeper than what you all think,' Septima intoned softly.

Having not said anything the entire conversation, everyone was surprised by her sudden input. Molly resumed her seat and spooned sugar into her tea, stirring it before setting the spoon aside. 'What do you think, my dear?' Molly asked curiously.

'Is it possible the last thing we would expect for Severus might happen to be the answer?' she asked. 'What is the last thing that you think would ever expect happen to him?'

'For him to fall in love,' Albus stated, starting to catch on.

'Exactly,' she said with a satisfied smile.

'But who could Severus possibly be in love with? Who would ever be good enough or right for that man?' Molly questioned. 'I certainly know of no such person...'

She trailed off, gasping and slapping a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with the sudden realization. She looked at Dumbledore and then Septima with a question in her eyes, receiving a nod from both. She removed her hand and closed her mouth, still bewildered that no one had guessed earlier.

'How could we not have noticed?' Remus asked.

'It's simple,' Septima explained. 'We spent all this time wondering whether he was contemplating his past when it was so blatantly obvious we were blind to it. Hermione left on the day he began acting moody again, and he hasn't improved since.'

'While the rest of us are accustomed to Hermione's brief and wordless departures, he is not, and it has upset him more than I could have thought possible,' Dumbledore added helpfully, a simple nod from Septima confirming it.

The group lapsed into silence at this revelation, all pondering what could be done to remedy this situation. Should they discourage his affection for her? Should they encourage him to seek her out, knowing that if he found her, he could very well come back heartbroken? Or, should they leave him be and allow him to decide on his own path without any outside influence? The Severus Snape they knew and cared for would not appreciate interference and had never been known to openly express his feelings.

'We shall leave him alone,' Dumbledore announced. 'He needs to figure this out on his own. Let him know you are here for him to talk to if he ever needs it, but other than that, he must make this decision alone.'

Molly nodded in agreement, her experiences with her sons having taught her a few things over time. 'My sons never liked me to interfere much either,' she said.

The group chuckled at this, and they soon dispersed from the kitchen in different directions. Albus and Minerva headed outside to watch the game while Molly remained in the kitchen to prepare the next meal. Remus took Septima by the hand and led her up the stairs, eager to spend some time alone with his ladylove.

Snape, however, remained in his chair, pondering how his life had taken such a turn for the worst after a few days of peace. Hadn't he made the right decision saving Hermione from himself? He wasn't so sure anymore. He felt his heart clench painfully in his chest every time he so much as thought about anything that reminded him of her. Even the cereal she had favoured during breakfast had thrown him for a loop when he had reached for it that morning. Sighing, he rubbed a hand over his sleepy eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose to prevent the headache that was flaring at the edge of his consciousness.

Decidedly, he stood from his chair and made to venture outside for a walk to clear his head. The cold and snow might freeze some sense into him. He put on his winter coat and scarf over his trousers and sweater and stepped through the front door, immediately heading in the direction of the orchard. Perhaps watching the game would further distract him from his increasingly maudlin thoughts. He stood by the edge where others were also standing to watch the game. He saw all the Weasley boys' spouses and children, Albus, Minerva, and Tonks, who was in the process of sweeping Charlie Weasley off his feet, quite literally in some cases.

He saw Arthur had taken up the role of Keeper for this game, and his youngest son, Ronald, was sitting this match out. Snape found this behaviour unusual for this particular Weasley especially and began to approach him. His curiosity got the better of him.

'Mr. Weasley, it's unlike you to miss a game of Quidditch,' Snape murmured.

Ron looked at him for a moment before turning his eyes back to the match. 'I don't usually,' he said simply. 'I'm just not in the right mood at the moment. It seems to be going around a lot these past few days.'

'A man who has a passion for sport would never let something as trivial as a mood stand in the way of him and his game,' Snape said smoothly. 'What seems to be the problem?'

'Hermione's gone again,' he huffed. 'I always get like this when my best friend leaves. I don't know what it is that she sees in you, but I'll be damned if I can see what's so great about an antisocial git.'

'Whatever are you blathering on about, boy?' Snape demanded, torn between curiosity and being offended.

'Hermione is practically in love with you. She hasn't said it in so many words; she probably doesn't even know it. But I know this time her leaving like that had something to do with you,' he answered quietly. 'Even though she barely comes around to visit and keeps to herself, I know Hermione. She is fragile. She can be hurt so much more easily than you would think.'

Snape listened as the younger man spoke, taking it all in and storing it for future use. Hermione's reaction to his horrible behaviour had been unexpected, and he now realized he had made a terrible mistake. How could a rare gem like her ever care for a man like him? He could understand how easy it would be to fall in love with her, but he had nothing to offer her. All that was left was an old, unused heart, a name that had been sullied countless times, and although he was well off financially, it was not something he ever wanted to build a relationship with another person on.

'Do you know where she lives?' Snape asked suddenly, surprising himself.

'She's never told us where she lives,' Ron answered, his eyes speaking volumes. 'Bill and Charlie have tried everything they could think of to try and track her, but even our owls can't be followed to where she lives.'

'I'm going to try and find her,' Snape said quietly. And he would.

Setting his mind to work immediately, he muttered a quick thanks to the Weasley boy and strode back towards the house, ignoring Albus and Minerva as they called after him. He went straight to the room Hermione had been staying in when she was there and began rifling through all the drawers until he came across a locked one. It took him mere moments before he managed to remove the wards on it. He slowly opened it and found Hermione appeared to have forgotten one of her books in her haste to leave the Burrow. Flipping open to the first page, he read an inscription that was written on the inside of the front cover.

Hermione,

It is your 16th Birthday, and your father and I are so very proud of you. You're no longer our little girl any more. We're going to miss thinking of you as our baby, but you are going to be such a wonderful woman, how could we possibly hold you back? This book is special to all of the women in our family, and I pass that legacy on to you.

Use the knowledge it imparts well.

Love, Mum and Dad

Snape closed the book and stared at the front cover. *Pride and Prejudice*. A small smile curved his mouth. He knew exactly what he had to do to find her.

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A/N It's nice to be focussing on the primary pairing now. Thanks for reading.

Chapter 14: Learning Curve

Chapter 14 of 16

Snape travels to France and discovers just why it is that Hermione has stayed away from her friends for so long.

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Thanks to VIVAvivacious for the beta of this chapter.

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Grenoble, France

The snow lay thick, blanketing the ground around the cottage-style house. In the spring, it would have been even lovelier, with the gardens and vines that would creep up the outer walls, while the roses were in bloom. The spring was still around two months away. The cobbled stone path that led to the front door through the wrought-iron fence and gate was invisible beneath all the frosty white. Snape stalked through the vicious winter chill, heading just up the road from the small Wizarding village nearby. He could see the house and a plume of light grey smoke spiralling up from the chimney, indicating the occupant was clearly home.

Severus couldn't help but feel anticipation, guilt, and curiosity knotting his stomach as he approached the house. Just inside was the woman he had come to care for a great deal, and he was almost certain he might even be falling in love with her. Granted, it was still a little too soon to know for sure, but he had never experienced such intense, positive emotion before. The little bit of care and friendship she had shown him was slowly guiding him along the way.

He reached the gate and opened it. There were no footprints in the snow, so he assumed she hadn't left the house since her return. When he reached the front door, he was about to knock when he saw her silhouette through the gauzy part of the curtain in her living room windows. From what he could tell, she appeared to be curled up snugly in an armchair before the fireplace. Silently pleased, he allowed himself to knock.

He heard shuffling and footsteps from within. Mere seconds later, Hermione opened the door, revealing herself to him wearing a ruby sweater and a pair of long, comfy jeans. Her sunken eyes exaggerated the shock on her face. He paused for a moment, allowing himself to take in her scant appearance. Her skin was stretched quite painfully taut over her bones, and the dark circles under her eyes had not been an illusion. She had been using a very good, very intricate glamour charm during her visit at the Burrow.

'Miss... Hermione,' he began, stepping up to her. 'What happened to you? You're all skin and bones.'

She opened the door a little wider to allow him entry and closed it wordlessly behind him when he accepted her invitation to go inside. He took off his long winter coat and draped it over one of the couches in her immaculate sitting room before following her deeper into the large house to her kitchen.

'Tea, Severus?' she asked softly.

He walked up to her and wrapped his hand over hers, causing her to pause in her actions and look down at the bench. He drew her hand away from the kettle she had pulled out and gently tugged her towards the table only a few feet away.

'You sit, I'll make the tea,' he said in a firm tone.

Snape wanted to kiss her eyes to heal the tiredness they bore, but he feared they would need to talk beforehand.

'I have two sugars and milk,' she reminded him.

His melodious chuckle sounded briefly with her quiet one, and they settled into a comfortable silence as he joined her at the table and they each took a sip of their tea. He looked across to her small, frail hands gripping the china teacup, her knuckles a little white from how hard she held it. He allowed his eyes to continue their journey up her thin arms, bony wrists and elbows, all the way to her frail shoulders. He could see her collarbones sticking out more than they should have. She had lost a lot of weight.

'How did you manage to find me?' she asked quietly.

Snape held out a hand in the direction of the sitting room, summoning something to him. He enlarged her copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and pushed it across the table towards her. 'I tracked you using this. Apparently you had forgotten to include this novel in your wards.'

Her eyes widened in realisation before she frowned. It appeared as though she was berating herself internally for her oversight. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

Snape shook his head and took another sip of his tea before he looked at her again, barely containing his cringe at her physical state. It was clear to him she was severely ill, and he longed to be able to ease her pain.

'This isn't just a recent thing, you know,' she said out of nowhere, causing him jump slightly and look up at her gaunt, little face. 'It has been seven years in the making, but entirely my fault. I just started neglecting myself. What you see here today is an improvement from two weeks ago.'

His lips parted slightly in shock, and he took a slow, shallow breath. 'I had no idea,' he said softly. 'I should have known.'

She shook her head and reached across to grasp one of his large hands with hers. 'I hid it very well. I couldn't let them see this or rather, myself like this,' she said faintly, her expression pained as she spoke of her friends.

'Why?' he began, choking on his words. 'Why did you choose me? Not even your closest friends have been entrusted with this.'

'I love my friends, but I know they wouldn't understand me. Not like you do, at any rate,' she answered quietly. 'I knew you would always be able to understand everything and even when you said those things, I knew it was only out of old habit. You didn't really mean any of it, did you?'

He turned his hand so his palm was up and took hold of her hand carefully, rubbing circles over the back of it with his thumb. 'No, I did not mean any of those terrible things. How could I?' he asked ruefully, feeling a wave of guilt wash over him. He would never understand how she could still talk to him after his nastiness.

They sat together in blissful silence as they sipped their tea. As soon as Hermione had finished her cup, she stood and eased her hand out of his loose hold, wondering what she should say or do. He had come for her. That had to mean something, didn't it? She gave herself a mental shake and sighed as she deposited her cup and saucer in the sink. He didn't have romantic feelings for her. He was only there as a concerned friend.

She turned on the tap and watched as the warm water flowed into the sink, making bubbles as the detergent swirled around. Placing the dishes from her lunch and the teapot and cup she had used then into the water, she turned off the faucet and looked back to see if Snape had finished, only to find that he was no longer at the table. Perhaps she had been imagining this whole thing? Her heart pounded hard in her chest, hurting her in a way that made her vision foggy, until she managed to calm herself and think coherently enough to call his name out.

'Severus?' she asked hesitantly, moving across the kitchen to the doorway to search in her sitting room next door.

She didn't even make it past the doorframe before colliding into his firm chest, almost toppling backwards. She would have if he had not been there to catch her. His arms slid around her scrawny waist, and he held her suspended above the ground, practically bent over his arm. He righted them both quickly and brushed a lock of hair that had fallen loose from her messy braid out of her tired, cinnamon eyes.

'You called, my lady?' he asked chivalrously.

Not being able to concentrate on anything other than the feeling of his hands on her, she nodded numbly. 'I did,' she answered softly. 'Actually, I was wondering if you were finished with your tea?'

He nodded. 'The cup was empty, Hermione. Would you like some help with the dishes? I could dry up?' he offered.

As much as she dearly wanted to spend time with Snape, she knew that if he were there, she would be distracted beyond reason and would end up washing something stupid to embarrass herself. So to spare them both the mental picture of her ungainliness, she shook her head to decline.

'No, I will manage just fine. Besides, you are the guest here,' she answered politely. 'Go back to the sitting room if you like and make yourself at home.'

As soon as those words left her mouth, images flooded his mind at the mere thought of making himself at home with Hermione. He could see them making a home together in his Manor back in England, where she would no longer seclude herself from everyone she knew and loved, and he would be able to cater to her every whim. He knew it was fanciful thinking and that it was too early to even consider living together especially as there had been no mention of relationships or agreements.

Just as he had managed to put a lid on those thoughts, he looked up to see Hermione in the doorway, leaning against the frame lazily with her head cocked to one side, simply staring at him with something unfamiliar in her eyes.

'You look like you're contemplating or plotting something,' she said with a wry smile.

'What if I am?' he asked back devilishly.

'Then I hope it doesn't involve me, unless it is something nice,' she teased, walking over to him to perch herself on the arm of the chair he was seated in.

He wisely chose not to comment, as he had no idea what her regard for him was or if her feelings could become more. All he knew was he was nervous as all hell with this brilliant, beautiful, and mysterious little witch sitting beside him in her house. He cared for her more than he had loved his own parents when they had still been alive and although that could be counted as something totally different, his feelings for her were more intense than anything they had ever taught or showered him with.

He took her hand gently in his, and they entwined fingers, resting their hands on her lap. He waited with her like this in silence for a while, until the awkwardness in the air became stifling. Snape knew he would have to put an end to it while he still had some nerve and have that talk with her. Sighing, he turned and looked up at her, regarding her silently before he couldn't take it any longer.

Using her hand, he tugged her sideways onto his lap and gazed into her eyes to gauge her reaction to this move. She was rigid with surprise at first before relaxing into him, her head resting against the back of the chair beside his. He opened the book he had been perusing earlier to read it.

'Are you comfortable?' he asked.

'Never more,' she replied with a smile before leaning in and kissing his cheek chastely, settling against his chest and into the circle of his arms.

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A/N Well, we are getting towards the end now. Bet that must be a relief.

Chapter 15: Sweet Realisations

Chapter 15 of 16

After accidentally spending the night in France, Severus and Hermione come to an agreement.

A huge hug of thanks goes out to VIVAvivacious for all of her help.

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The sound of birds chirruping outside and the white-grey light filtering through a gap in the curtains was the strongest indicator it was no longer night. The warmth of the fireplace had diminished along with the logs that had burned there throughout the night, leaving the room uncomfortably chilly. It was this Hermione awoke to, opening her eyes slowly to the realisation she was, in fact, in her sitting room. She tried to sit up until she realized two long arms were wrapped around her form and that she was seated sideways on something a lot firmer than the chair.

'Good morning, Hermione,' a deep voice purred into her ear softly.

Hermione lifted her head from Snape's chest and looked up into his face, noting her hands were resting lightly on his chest and that arms were wound around her tightly. It was then, too, she noticed that they were sitting together, with her on his lap, in the armchair in her sitting room. She felt the urge to blush, get up, and flee the room in short order after apologizing profusely for falling asleep on him.

But she stayed put and shifted a little to sit upright on his lap. 'Good morning,' she mumbled, still embarrassed. 'I'm sorry about falling asleep on you.'

'It's not a problem,' he dismissed kindly.

She smiled weakly. 'You're surprisingly amiable for so early in the morning,' she commented softly, brushing a lock of hair out of her own eyes and tucking it behind her ear so she could see him better. He was smiling at her warmly.

She was then thoroughly surprised by his next move, when he leaned forward slightly and kissed her lips chastely before pulling back just enough to see her response. Snape knew he had simply done so on a whim but couldn't help wondering exactly what she would think if he were to do it again. He wanted to kiss her over and over until they were breathless, but if she didn't want it, he would not push her, and they could sweep this incident under the proverbial rug.

She gazed at him as if she were in a daze, eyes misted over and lips still parted slightly in surprise. Of course she had not been expecting that. She blinked a few times before focusing on his face again, her eyes dropping to his mouth. She noted the thinner upper lip and the slightly fleshier bottom lip. So many times she had seen those lips sneer at her and seem cruel and harsh. She had seen seven years of that, in fact. She had also seen them smirk at her smugly when he got his way, when he was right, and when he had caught her staring at him. Then, he would smile sometimes, just like he had before, making her go weak at the knees.

'Oh,' she said softly.

'Indeed,' he murmured provocatively.

She searched his eyes, wondering exactly what they held, wanting to understand what had just passed between them when he had willingly touched his lips to hers.

'You just kissed me,' she said, sounding a little breathless.

'May I do it again?' he asked, sufficiently reassured she had not been disgusted or repulsed by his attentions.

She nodded, and he brought his hand up to her face from where they had been resting lightly on her waist to cup her jaw and stroke her cheek. He leaned up and pressed his lips to hers gently, not deepening it, but kissing her tenderly so he did not make her feel too uncomfortable. She smiled and pressed back against his mouth a little more firmly, closing her eyes and letting her feelings guide her. She reached a hand tentatively to his cheek, tracing the sharp angle of his jaw, along his prominent cheekbones, and across the strong ridge of his brow.

Eventually they pulled apart, and he stroked her cheek tenderly, catching a tear that had escaped her eye with his thumb as it made the trek downwards. He leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

'By this point, I believe it is safe to assume you know I have feelings for you,' he mumbled quietly.

She chuckled softly. 'I suppose you can safely assume the same of me,' she said, still a tad breathless from their kisses.

'Dear girl,' he murmured. 'I am not one for speaking of matters of the heart, but I can do this once for you. I care for you deeply, and I would be honoured to continue doing so for as long as you are happy to accept my feelings.'

Pulling back, he gazed at her and swore he could see the beauty of her soul through her sparkling, cinnamon eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat when he said that, and her lips parted in disbelief. He cared for her? What should she do? Reply in kind? It was true, she too had very deep feelings for him she supposed were similar to love, but she was unwilling to put a label on the emotion so early. She appreciated everything about him, for he had understood her when no one else could and had held her tight with arms that made her feel safe.

It struck her then that being honest, just as he had with her, was the best option. He was as fragile as she, after all. Severus Snape had been dealt a fair number of emotional blows, so he was guarded, too. She leaned forwards and kissed the tip of his nose then.

'I care for you a lot, too,' she said softly, her nerves making her stomach roil.

He let out a breath of relief that she was not appalled by his feelings for her, and more so that she reciprocated those very same feelings. He felt his heart throb tirelessly in excitement and closed his arms around her tightly, hugging her more fiercely than she had ever imagined was possible. Despite his firm hold leaving her feeling a tad breathless, she hugged him back, cradling the back of his head with a hand fisted in his silky hair.

Ever-so-gently, she tilted his head back so her face hovered just above his.

She kissed him then, with all of the restrained passions of what had felt like a lifetime for her, even though they had only truly known each other for two weeks. Tongues tasted and stroked, teeth nipped, and lips pressed and parted as they welcomed each other's frantic kisses. They snogged each other until they were both breathless and senseless, although Hermione felt like nothing else could have made more sense in the world.

His breathing was deep and shaky when their lips parted once more, and they simply rested in one another's embrace silently, trying to gain some sense of composure. Her breathing slowed first, and she pulled back to survey her handiwork, delighted to see his cheeks flushed, lips glistening and parted, and eyes dilated with mild desire, not to mention affection. She felt then that if she could spend an eternity with this man, it still wouldn't be long enough for her.

It was only when he shifted she realized she was still sitting on his lap, as she had been for almost the entire afternoon before and the whole night as they slept. She detangled herself from him and jumped up instantly, apologizing for falling asleep there and not getting up sooner.

'Well, my legs were sore when I woke, but now I can't feel a thing because they're numb,' he teased, smirking at the pretty blush that stole over her pale cheeks.

She poked out her tongue at him and walked to the doorway between the sitting room and the kitchen. 'Is there anything in particular that you would care to eat this morning?' she asked politely, smiling and leaning casually against the doorframe.

He flashed a grin at her. 'You, but toast and tea would do in a pinch,' he replied saucily. 'However, whatever you want to make will be fine.'

She grinned, resting a hand on her jutting hip. 'All right, but I plan to make omelettes for breakfast, with toast and tea. I haven't had an omelette in years,' she said, turning

on her heel and fleeing to her kitchen.

She was still trying to get over just how awkward it was to fall asleep on Snape's lap only to end up snogging with him on a chair for half the morning.

Snape stood up from his seat and followed her into the kitchen just a few moments after, standing behind her and reaching his arms around her. He took hold of her hand with the knife, and with her wrapped up in his embrace, he began to help her by deftly chopping the ingredients as if they were for a potion. Not that it actually mattered, as they were going into the frying pan, anyway.

'Thank you,' she piped once he had finished and moved aside, allowing her to place the ingredients into the hot pan.

'Not a problem, dear,' he answered softly.

He was surprised to find being with her compelled him to call her by endearing names a practice no Snape was ever known to partake. If being able to work and play side-by-side with her resulted in such things, who was he to complain?

Boldly, she surprised him by turning in his arms and wrapping hers around his neck, pulling him down for a long and gentle kiss. He growled in approval and kissed her back fiercely, grateful he had been presented with yet another opportunity to kiss her sweet lips. He was desperate to accept everything she had to offer him. Eventually, the need to take a breath became paramount, and she turned back to the cooking of their meal.

'What was that for?' he asked with a satisfied smirk.

She smiled impishly, and without turning to look at him, answered with a simple, contrite, 'Because I wanted to.'

He chuckled and leaned against the kitchen counter to watch her as she worked. She was so graceful that even he was amazed. Whatever happened to that bushy-haired know-it-all Gryffindor? Sighing, he contented himself with knowing that she was not just any Gryffindor she was his little lioness.

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A/N Thanks for following so far. Only one chapter left after this.

Chapter 16: Thawing the Frost

Chapter 16 of 16

A year has passed, and once again the old Order have gathered at Grimmauld Place for another Christmas celebration.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author.

Many thanks to VIVAvivacious for her help as my beta and all of her input into improving this story.

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Grimmauld Place was filled with chattering and noise as the Weasley family readied to welcome home their missing family member. The whole of the Order had been invited to celebrate the event, including the two antisocial members who had previously avoided attending such events. What most of them were not aware of, including the unbelievably oblivious Weasley boys, was that the two of them had been seeing each other romantically for the past year since just after Christmas the year before. Hermione had been reluctant to visit until she was fully recovered physically, and Severus Snape, naturally, had conceded to her wish.

To everyone's immense disappointment, Ginny had not returned immediately from her trip in America after her holiday. She had instead chosen to live there for a while, not returning for any visits, and insisting she just needed the space. It wasn't until finally, on Christmas Eve night, Molly Weasley had received news Ginny would be returning on Christmas day.

Hermione had been in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner that night when the owl came in and delivered the message. There were a few vague details, and she had mentioned everything would be explained in more detail when she arrived. Molly Weasley had been overcome with joy and burst into tears, leaving Hermione to finish washing dishes while the other Weasley boys' wives attended to the comforting of the emotional Molly. When she had described the situation to Severus later, he had been vaguely amused, even when Hermione had smacked him on the arm for his teasing.

Hermione herself had put on more weight and was no longer so thin that she would be carried away in the next wind. She was still quite thin, with a flat stomach and bony shoulders, but her face was no longer gaunt and was coloured with a natural flush. She no longer needed the glamour. Snape had been there for most of her recovery, and it had been he who had encouraged her to stop neglecting herself and move on from past hurts.

It also seemed as though she had taught him a lesson during the time they had been together. He had learnt to let go of his past and love with his whole heart, and she was grateful to have been the recipient. He was happy to know she loved him.

'Hermione, is everyone inside?' asked a voice softly from the back doorway where she had been standing for some fresh air for a few minutes.

Hermione whipped her head around to where the voice had come from and felt her eyes grow wide when she saw the shock of bright red hair and a pregnant belly where a flat one once was. 'Ginny?' she exclaimed before running at her and hugging her fiercely.

'Yes, I'm so glad to see you here!' Ginny said gleefully. 'I thought you never stayed after the first lunch.'

Hermione smiled ruefully. 'I stayed for nearly the whole of Christmas last year, and I intend to stay the entire holiday this year,' she replied with a grin. 'Happy Christmas, Ginny.'

The redhead smiled and turned to the corner of the house. 'Yes, and to you, 'Mione. But there is someone you need to meet, and please don't think badly of me, but there is so much for me to explain,' she answered hastily.

'Yes, I can see that,' Hermione answered, eyeing her stomach particularly.

Ginny blushed and went to the other side to grab someone, bringing him around so Hermione could see. She felt her mouth fall open unattractively when the startling silver-

blond hair came into view along with the pale hand of Draco Malfoy clutched in Ginny's freckled one.

'Mione, I would like to introduce you to my husband, Draco Malfoy,' Ginny announced, blushing a little.

Hermione recovered from her shock slowly but only truly came out of her trance when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked at the hand, pale and long-fingered, recognizing them instantly. She turned in the snow and faced Severus, who was looking in just as equal shock at the unexpected couple before them. Who would have thought, a Weasley and a Malfoy?

'Draco, is that you?' Snape asked, staring at the embracing two.

The blond smirked at that. 'How are you, old man?' he asked teasingly, stepping forwards from his wife and extending a hand.

Accepting his hand and shaking it, Severus was in shock. It was the look on Hermione's face when he had first seen her standing out in the snow from the hallway that made him decide to investigate. He looked over to Hermione for an explanation, but she merely shrugged and smiled ruefully. Next he looked to Ginny Malfoy for an explanation, but she merely gazed back at him, apparently amazed by his friendliness and that he had actually touched Hermione willingly. Or perhaps it was the fact he was only wearing a black sweater with a pair of slacks that had her surprised.

It was Draco who had the answer, though. 'Severus, Ginny and I are married and expecting,' he clarified. 'Actually, seeing as you are both here, would you do us the honour of being our child's godparents?'

Hermione was the first to answer. Beaming, she hugged Ginny and grinned at Snape. 'I would love to be your child's godmother,' she replied immediately.

Snape sighed then and felt resigned. 'All right, I might consent to such a thing also,' he said in a reluctant voice, but Hermione could tell that he was glad.

Ginny and Draco went inside first, leaving Hermione and Severus outside alone. He closed the door and went to her in the snow, a curious expression on his face. She smiled at him, and he put his arms around her tightly.

'So, what exactly was that back there? Did I just agree to what I think I did?' he asked into her hair, breathing in the cinnamon aroma of it.

She grinned into his shirt, hugging him back just as fiercely. Eventually, he led her over to the stairs leading back up to the house, but instead of walking up them, he waved his hand and wandlessly cleared the snow from the steps. He sat her down on the top step and crouched down before her, kneeling gracefully on one knee and holding her hands gently. Wordlessly, he brought her hands to his lips and kissed each palm reverently, nuzzling the ticklish flesh with his nose.

She smiled, fighting the urge to giggle. He stopped and wrapped one arm around her, resting the hand over the small of her back, surrounding her with his warmth and the delicious spicy smell of him. The other hand still held her hand, and he leaned forwards and kissed her lips chastely, pulling away before she could seek to deepen it. He needed to keep all of his wits about him for this.

'Hermione, we have been running around in circles all year now, and I think we need to do something about that,' he began quietly, sensing the fear in her eyes, and changing tactic swiftly. 'Don't worry, love, I'm not leaving you.'

She sighed in relief. 'If that's not the case, then what is it you wanted to say?' she asked softly, resting her forehead against his.

He smiled then and scooted a little closer until he was wedged slightly between her knees. 'Hermione, I don't want to spend the rest of our lives running around and getting nowhere. I don't want to be alone anymore. I never have, but I had never found the right witch before you,' he said, feeling her tears slide hot across his cheek. 'I want us this to be permanent.'

She hiccupped then and bit back a sob. 'Do you mean you want us to...?' she trailed off, unable to finish her sentence.

He pulled back and tilted her chin up so that they were eye-to-eye. 'Yes, my love, that is exactly what I am asking. You would make me the happiest man alive if you would consent to becoming my wife.'

She snapped then, and tears flowed from her eyes freely as she clutched him tightly and hugged him as fiercely as she could, showering his face with small, teary kisses. When she had stopped crying, she fisted her hand in his hair, and before kissing him with every ounce of love in her body, she whispered a soft, 'Yes, I will marry you.'

When they broke apart, he lifted her up into his arms and retrieved the ring that was in his pocket. It was a lovely white-gold band, twisted around and framing a glittering diamond, with part of the shimmering metal weaving into a small, but elaborate 'S'. He slid it gently onto her finger, and lifting the hand to his mouth, he kissed her skin just below it lovingly. She smiled and opened the door, slipping in. Severus followed his fiancée closely, not wanting to let her out of his sight again.

She led the way to the loudest room in the house, which she assumed Ginny and Draco were in, and since they had arrived twenty minutes earlier, she assumed the explanations had been sorted through already. Snape walked hand-in-hand with her into the room, which made most of the Weasley boys stop and gawk, save for Ron and Arthur. And then finally, Ron stepped forward, holding a hand out to Snape and eyeing the ring on Hermione's finger.

'It's about bloody time,' he exclaimed, shaking the older man's hand.

Hermione sighed with relief and was not at all surprised to be immediately crowded by those in the room offering congratulations. Eventually it died down, and Hermione was left sitting across the lap of her husband-to-be with her arms around his neck and his arms surrounding her. He leaned forwards and kissed her cheek softly then.

'I love you, Hermione,' he whispered into her hair.

She smiled, never feeling so elated in all of her life. 'I love you, too...'

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A/N Well that's the end of that story now. I hope you all enjoyed it. I know this last chapter had been pure corny fluff. It has been good, bad, long, and boring, and it is finally over.