

A Well-Made Match

by Southern_Witch_69

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

One

Chapter 1 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Disclaimer: The usual apply. No money being made. That kind of thing.

Thanks go to fizzabella for the beta read!

And thanks go to ladyofthemasque for thinking up this plot and allowing us to play with it.

Chapter One

Hermione Granger slowly walked up the path to her lover's home, the old house standing several stories high and definitely only held together by magic. Emotion raged through her body as she thought of the day's events. The Ministry was well within its rights to protect Wizarding Britain in any way they saw fit, but she wasn't certain she agreed with their current plan. When she'd returned to Hogwarts for her final year, three years before, she'd never imagined that she would be offered a job by the Ministry's Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures the moment she'd received her N.E.W.T.s...all Outstandings.

It had been a surprise, but she truly wanted to make a difference in the world, for magical creatures and wizarding kind alike, and the best place to do that was at the Ministry. In the two short years since she'd joined the team, the quality of life for house-elves had already greatly improved, and she'd even grown to understand more about the little beings and their desire to please wizards. While she'd vowed to never push anything on them again, she'd also vowed that anyone humiliating, beating, or simply mistreating the elves would have to answer to the Ministry. Slowly but surely, things were turning around.

One house-elf had been given clothes by his family, who preferred to lose their servant than to abide by the Ministry's new rules. "Their loss," she muttered darkly as she saw said little creature bounding her way.

"Mistress is not coming home? Shorty is looking for you! I isn't finding you, until now!"

"I told you I would be home late this evening, Shorty. What are you doing here at the Burrow?"

"Mistress is needing to eat. She isn't taking the lunch Shorty made to work with her. Mistress needs Shorty."

"I hope you didn't go through much trouble, Shorty. I already have plans with Ron tonight." She smiled and kindly patted the elf on the head as she would a child, grinning as one of his bat-like ears flapped in the breeze.

When she'd seen how distraught the house-elf had been at losing his job at the Parkinsons' home, she'd impulsively offered to take him in, and she was quite sure that he'd taught her much more than she ever could dream of teaching him. However, Shorty was one of the many reasons she and Ron hadn't been seeing eye to eye lately. Having never had a house-elf before, Ron always tried to take advantage of the elf, much to her chagrin. They'd had more rows than she could count over the requests he'd make of Shorty and the way he'd dismiss him, much like he'd done with Kreacher when they'd first met him.

"Shorty is leaving food for his mistress and is having food at home waiting. Shorty doesn't want the red-headed master to eat all the food and be leaving his mistress none."

"I promise I won't allow it," she said reassuringly. "Please go back home. I will see you when I get there this evening."

With a nod and a loud pop, the house-elf Disapparated, leaving Hermione alone to gaze at the house. She could now hear the bustling of Molly and the others in the kitchen: laughter, voices, dishes clinking, and even the squeal of little Victoire. Even as she watched, Ron approached the back door and spotted her. The door opened and he waved her forward.

"Been waiting for you, love. Come on!" he called out.

She placed a smile on her lips and tried to look happy. "I was just talking with Shorty."

"Yeah, poor sod's been wringing his hands." Ron wriggled his eyebrows up and down. "Had some pasties for you...er, us. I had a few. Still have a couple left, though, if you're hungry."

"I thought we were going out to eat tonight?" Her smile faded. It would be another letdown, wouldn't it? She loved his family and considered them as her own, but she sometimes wanted a little privacy, which was hard to get at the Weasley household.

"Well, Mum's made me favorite dish, and I thought..." His voice faded as he took in her expression. "Please. We'll go out tomorrow night. I really want... I need you to be here with me tonight. I've got an announcement to make."

Hermione's gut clenched. He was going to do it. He'd been hinting about it, and now the time seemed to be here. He was going to propose. Ginny had even told her she'd overheard Ron talking to Harry about it. As if her day hadn't been trying enough already. "What's this about?" she asked, feigning curiosity.

"You'll see." He kissed her on the lips lightly, smelling of strawberry, and then pulled her into an embrace. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she said without hesitation. She did love Ron, and she did want to spend her life with him. However, she wasn't ready to commit to marriage until some things changed. He wanted many things that she didn't want...at least at the moment anyway. There was no need to rush, and she refused to be forced into doing so. What she wanted least of all was a very public proposal in front of her family.

"Wait," she said, stopping and placing a hand on his arm. "We need to talk first, Ron."

"You sound so serious? What's wrong?" His mirth fled and worry flitted across his face.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but I..."

"You're pregnant!" he yelled, scooping her up and spinning her around. "I thought it might happen, but I wasn't sure. Hermione, this is great! Bloody hell, me a dad!"

"No, no, put me down! I'm not pregnant," she said, horrified at the mistake he'd made. "I just don't want you to propose to me!" This was blurted when his eyes flashed disappointment, and she was certain it was the wrong thing to say at that moment. "I'm sorry. That's not how it sounds. I do want you to propose, just not now, definitely not in front of them." She nodded towards his house.

"Who said anything about me proposing?" he snapped, stepping away from her.

"I just thought... You've been hinting, and well, Ginny heard something you said to Harry." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I feel horrible about this."

"I'm not proposing," he said, sticking his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Come on. Food's getting cold." He turned around and stalked back towards the house, nearly tripping on one of the many pairs of boots lined up near the door.

Feeling like a jackass, she followed him inside and warmly greeted the Weasleys. Molly enveloped her in a hug as though she'd not seen her in weeks, Arthur pulled out a chair for her at the table and rattled on about work as though she didn't work in the same building, Fleur spooned small servings of soft foods into Victoire's waiting mouth, and Ron sat down next to her, trying his best not to look upset.

But she knew him well enough to know that he wasn't happy. Reaching over, she clasped his hand and squeezed it before leaning closer to whisper, "I didn't mean it to sound that way. I'm really sorry, Ron."

He grinned. "It's okay." Squeezing her hand in return, he added, "But I do want to talk about that later, all right? There's something you're not saying."

"We'll talk after dinner."

"Come on, you lot. Tuck in," Molly said as she sat next to her husband. "George's got a date tonight... with Angelina." She beamed happily. "And Bill told us to start without him, has a big job he's working on for Gringotts." Pride was evident in her voice as she spoke about her eldest son.

Hermione hoped that when she and Ron had children, she would be a mixture of Mrs. Weasley and her own mum. Mixing the two women's personalities would make the perfect mother...some of Molly's passion to be completely involved in her children's lives and some of her mother's ability to juggle family duties and a career.

"Perfect," she said softly.

"What did you say, dear?" Molly asked.

"It all looks perfect," she lied, reaching over Ron's hands for the plate of dinner rolls.

After dinner was nearly done, Arthur said, "Time for pudding, I think." He flicked his wand to Summon a plate of sweets to the table.

Ron stood up and said, "I've got something to say."

Immediately, Molly's eyes began to tear up, and she brought a trembling hand to her lips. "It sounds so important." Her eyes flitted from her youngest son to Hermione. "Is it what I think?"

Hermione lowered her head, cheeks burning. His mother either thought that Ron was proposing or that she was pregnant. She silently wished that Ron would get on with it.

"I've put some money down on my own place."

Her head snapped up, and a genuine smile graced her lips. "Really? When?"

Molly frowned. "But you can stay here as long as you'd like. We've got the room."

"There's a time when a man has to start doing for himself, Mum... take care of what's his." His eyes found Hermione's. "I can't wait to show you."

"Shall we go now?" she asked excitedly, forgetting about her exhausting and disappointing day, forgetting about the little things in her relationship that gave her pause. His own house! One day it would be theirs...when they were ready.

"And miss pudding?" He snorted. "Just kidding. I'm actually a bit full."

It was Hermione's turn to snort. "Impossible." She smiled reassuringly at Mrs. Weasley. "Don't worry, Molly. I'm sure he'll be round all the time raiding your fridge and cupboards."

"I expect so," she said softly.

"Mollywobbles," Arthur said gently, taking her hand in his. "We can't keep them all here."

"Oh, I know," she replied with a sigh. Then she smiled. "I'm happy for you, Ronald. I just wish you'd talked to us first, got some advice."

"Advice for what?" Ron asked. "I think I did a pretty good job of it. Harry helped." He looked down at Hermione again before he added, "So did Ginny."

This was a surprise to Hermione. Ginny had never mentioned it once, and it became clear that Ginny had been hinting things to her...like about the possible proposal or relationship chatter in general. Maybe his sister had been trying to see if this might be something Hermione wanted.

Privacy. Nights away from her small flat at a home not packed with several family members. She wasn't sure why Molly looked so glum. All of her children were always over for meals and visits. Surely Ron would do the same.

"She ees just trying to keep 'er leettle Ron at 'ome," Fleur said with a smile. "Just like weeth Bill."

Molly huffed a little and then said, "Go on, you two. Go see your future home." She stood and quickly went about packing up treats for Ron. "Take these with you."

"Thanks, Mum," Ron said. He took the container from his mother and extended a hand towards Hermione. "Ready?"

"Yes," she replied, letting him lead her out the door as she said her good-byes to the others.

Without a word, they walked out to the Apparition site just on the other side of the broom shed in their yard. He pulled her close and Side-Along Apparated with her to Grimmauld Place.

She blinked in confusion and looked around. "Are we coming to ask Harry and Ginny to join us?"

Ron pointed to number ten. "That's it. Harry helped me, told Gringotts he'd back me if I couldn't make the payments, but I can afford it. George and I are raking in Galleons at the shop."

"I... Wow, so close to Harry and Ginny."

"Is, uh, that all right? I thought the location was all right. We're right near everything and our family, part of it, will still be close by."

"No, I don't mind that at all." She smiled and bounded up towards the doorway. When she flicked her wand to open the door, she found a home not much dissimilar to Harry's. The rooms were all positioned basically the same; however, the place was brightly decorated in pastel colors and smelled of an old woman's perfume and too sweetly scented flowers.

"Er... the lady died a few days ago. Her son told Harry that he was going to sell it, and Harry told him about me." He walked forward. "There's just one thing that you might not like."

The barking of a small dog sounded as if on cue.

"Whose dog?"

"Um... well, see," he nervously scratched at the back of his neck, "that's the catch. The bloke knocked off a big amount if I promised to take care of his mum's dog for the rest of its life."

"A dog..." Hermione frowned as the small white ball of fluff entered the room, its claws clicking against the floor.

"She's nice. Maybe Crooks will like her."

"Maybe."

"Maybe you'll like her."

"Maybe."

"Oh, come on! You like animals."

"I do, but I want Crookshanks to have peaceful years in what little time he's got left. This..." She grimaced at the dog as it tried to nip at her shoes. "We'll have to see what we can do."

"We're wizards, right? We can just use a containment spell, make her stay in particular parts of the house. That'll separate them."

"Yes, it would."

"But you're still not happy."

"I'm sorry for spoiling this for you. Of course, I'm happy." She slid into his embrace. "What's her name?"

His ears turned as red as his hair. "Muffin."

Laughing, Hermione said, "I think Muffin is jealous of me. Look how she's looking at me."

They laughed as they glanced down at the glaring dog. "I didn't know dogs could glare."

"Is that right? Do you not remember Fluffy?" she asked archly.

"Oi, that was no dog. That was a bloody beast!" He kissed her on the lips chastely before deepening their kiss. "Hermione... there was something that I wanted to ask you."

"We can keep Muffin," she said lightly, her heart tugging at the worry on his face. "Besides, it will be a while before I move Crooks in here anyway, won't it?"

He dropped down on bended knee and produced a small black box, much like the ones she'd imagined in many of her proposal fantasies. "I would be happy if you'd become my wife, Hermione. I did want to ask you... but not there at the Burrow. Here. This can be the start of a good life, just you and me. Er... and our familiars."

AN: I'll put more up in a couple of days. I wrote most of this back in November 2009 during NaNo Month, but I only got to about 35,000 words. Hope you enjoy the ride.

Two

Chapter 2 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Disclaimer: See chapter one.

Thanks, again, go to fizzabella! Thanks for the beta read, doll!

Chapter Two

Muffin barked in agreement with her new master's plans and possessively nuzzled Ron's leg.

Hermione swallowed thickly, tears welling in her eyes. The ring itself was beautiful. She wondered what he'd paid for it and how he could have afforded it, but she dared not ask him. "I don't know what to say," she said, feeling numb, her words coming out in choked sobs.

"Say yes."

"Before I give you my answer," she reached down with shaky fingers to extract the diamond from its box, "we need to have that talk. Please."

Ron nodded and stood. "Fair enough." He pushed the ring down her slender, shaking digit. "I was right. It fits perfectly."

There was that word again: perfect. Things could be perfect if she could get past her insecurities and doubts. "It's beautiful, Ron."

He smiled and led her down the narrow hallway and through the door of the kitchen. He gestured to the oval table and asked, "Tea?"

"I don't see why not." She sat down and watched as he went about getting their tea. It wasn't very often that he took the initiative and "waited" on her, so she chose to enjoy it. What would life be like with Ron as her husband? Would he learn to be a little more considerate over the years? Would he share in domestic responsibilities? Would he learn to not use Shorty?

"You look like you've a lot on your mind."

The day came rushing back to her. "I have. The whole Ministry was in an uproar today!"

"That matching service rubbish?"

"You know about it?"

"Dad was mentioning it to Mum. I heard them in the kitchen."

"He didn't look very upset to me. Nor did your mum."

"What's to be upset about?" Ron asked, shrugging as he flicked his wand to summon two cups and saucers. "Sounds like a solid plan."

"They're going to force people to use this service, Ron! It's an injustice if you ask me. I don't think anyone should be forced to..."

"Nobody's getting forced. It's just a new department that the Ministry is opening up in hopes of making good matches for those who want to find someone but can't by conven... er... oh, conventional means. Yeah," he nodded, "that's the word Dad used."

"Well, there's that," she said impatiently, "but there's more. Some people are going to be forced to use this."

"Who?"

"People like Professor Snape!"

Ron shook his head. "What would they want that arse helping to repopulate the Wizarding world for?"

"I expect it's more like a form of probation!"

"He never got charged with any of his crimes."

"No, but this way, they can keep tabs on him, can't they? Choose him a bride and force him to play the part of the docile husband." Her lips curled. "Imagine!"

"Not something I want to think about, thanks," Ron quipped, handing her a cup full of hot tea before sitting across from her. "Some of those arses should be forced to pay at least some debt to society."

Hermione took a sip of her tea and set the cup down with a clink. While crossing her arms over her chest, she said, "Even Draco Malfoy is going to be forced into this."

"What? Him? He's dating Parkinson last I saw."

"Yes, but he's on the list of those forced." Toying with the napkin Ron had placed before her, she said, "I don't like him and think he should do something for the Wizarding world after doing so much against it, but think about it... Would you want to be forced to leave the one you love behind? That's a bit extreme."

"I'm sure he'll protest and they'll give him some leeway. Hell, Parkinson can take the little test or whatever they do, and they can get matched up that way." Ron took a sip of his own tea, smacked his lips, and then gulped down another one.

"Well, they will have choices. I hadn't the chance to read over everything thoroughly, but it does seem... I just hate it. It seems barbaric."

"What was the uproar about? People against it?"

"Some," she said with a sigh, "but most were happy about it, saying how this can impact society positively, how it can help shape the next generation, mixing people this way...certain blood types together, certain classes. Others like Lucius Malfoy were furious."

"Heh, some poor sod might land a rich wife then." Ron grinned. "Lucky bastard... unless she looks like..." He shuddered. "Wouldn't be worth it." He then smiled. "I lucked out both ways, didn't I? You've got the looks and the money."

Hermione laughed. "So the truth is revealed then. I finally know what it is you want of me. I might have known it wasn't my brain."

Ron turned serious and put his tea down. "Do you want the truth?"

"I... yes." His somber expression startled her, and she nearly feared for the worst.

"It's your arse. Quite nice, that."

"Ron!" Hermione laughed in relief. "I was being serious."

"Serious it is then. What is it you want to discuss?"

"Our future. If we do this, get married, what's to ensure we'll always be happy?"

Ron's eyebrows arched at odd angles. "Sorry?"

"What do you want from this marriage?" she asked honestly.

"Sex. Kids. You. Sex. A family." He smiled. "Did I mention sex?"

"Maybe once." She returned his smile, saying, "Let's start with the family part. I'm not ready for children yet."

"But you will be before long." He smirked knowingly.

"Who's to say it will be so soon?"

"Well, you're going to be twenty-three this year. It's not much longer before you'll be ready, I'm sure."

"Ron, I'd like to further my career a bit more first. That could take longer."

"How much further?" He cast her a look filled with suspicion. "How long?"

"I would really like to be the head of my department one day. That takes a lot of time and energy. I couldn't do that and devote myself to a family fulltime."

"I'm not following you, Hermione. We've got Shorty, and Mum will always be round to help. You don't have to worry about that kind of stuff. Like I said, soon, not tomorrow. In a year or so, you'll see how important it is." He shrugged as if he had thought everything out completely.

"Ron, it may take up to ten years to work my way through the department ranks, and I can't just devote part of myself to something. I have to give it my all." She bit her lip and looked away, annoyed with the turn their conversation had taken. "And I don't want to depend on a house-elf or anyone else to take care of my family! I want to establish myself and then do like my mum did. The question is, Ron, are you willing to accept that and wait until I'm ready...without pressuring me?"

He blew out a long breath, which caused his fringe to twirl about. "That's... It's a real long time, that."

Hermione's face fell. "You wouldn't wait for me?" To her it was the equivalent of saying he didn't love her enough.

There was a short pause before he spoke, almost hesitantly. "Yeah. Yeah, I would."

He tried to flash a reassuring smile, but she could see that it was forced. "Ron, don't you dare try to lie to keep from hurting me. If we don't address this now, and honestly, we might end up wasting years of our lives."

"You sound like you want to end things."

"No! I want to marry you. I want a life with you, and *do* want a family...just not right now."

"I see." He stood and walked over to the counter and gazed out the window.

Unable to stop herself, she went to him and laid her cheek against his back, snaking her arms around his body from behind. "I love you, Ron."

"I love you, too, Hermione."

There was something in his voice that didn't bode well. "But?"

"But nothing. That's it. We'll do it your way. We'll wait."

She pressed a light kiss on his back. "I want you to be happy. This isn't about just catering to me and my needs."

Ron spun around to face her, not letting her hands fall from his body. "Five years," he blurted. "No matter where you are in your career, we'll try to start a family then. We'll work it out, do what it takes to get things done. I can help, you know, so don't be thinking you'll have to do it all alone. We don't need Mum or Shorty. Just us."

Hermione nodded. "All right. Five years."

"And if you change your mind and want to do it sooner, I'm good with that as well."

"About Shorty," she said, ignoring his mischievous smile, "will you try to stop using him for such silly things?"

"Like what?" he asked, truly puzzled.

"Running your bath water for you when you are two feet away from the tub for starters. Just because you can use him doesn't mean you have to."

"But he loves helping."

"But I disapprove of how you use him sometimes."

"It's his job, Hermione. Ask him. He'll tell you he doesn't mind."

"But /mind. You know how I feel about them...the elves and how they are treated."

"I'm no fucking Malfoy," he said, suddenly angry, and pushed away from her.

"I would never compare you to someone like him!"

"Here, Shorty, help me make this bed...' Sure sounds better than 'Get your ugly arse over here, Shorty, and let me kick you in the arse while I'm at it just because.'"

Hermione grabbed his wrist to halt his pacing. "You're taking what I said out of context. I just meant that I'd like you to be more respectful of him and of my wishes. We've been over this so many times, and you still don't get it! He's a creature with feelings...just like us."

"He's a bloody house-elf! There's a difference."

"I know how they feel, but that's been bred into them!"

"Ah, what happened to all that rot about how you understand them now that you are closer to them and have your own?"

"It's not rot! I'm just..." She released her hold on him with a long sigh and resisted the urge to shake him into understanding what she was trying to say.

"This isn't going the way I expected."

"What did you expect? You wanted me to simply say yes without giving it thought? Without discussing things?"

"Something like that, yes," he replied, the fight gone from his voice. "I just thought you loved me enough to want to be with me, to work things out as they come...like most people do." Spinning around to face her, his expression now torn between anger and hurt, he asked, "Do you think Ginny and Harry had a big long conversation when he asked her?" Before she could reply, he said, "Of course they didn't! Why? Because they love each other enough to know that they can face whatever comes together."

"I'm not Harry or Ginny!"

He swallowed and visibly tried to calm down. "Take a walk through the rest of the place. See if you like it. I need some time to think."

"Don't go, Ron."

Holding up a hand, he said, "Just let me be, Hermione." And with that, he turned and walked from the room without looking back, leaving a distraught and disappointed Hermione in his wake.

"What have I done?" she whispered.

She'd let her silly feelings and misgivings get to her... coupled with the troubling day she'd had at work. And now what? She'd just hurt Ron. Why couldn't she be more like Ginny? Why couldn't she live for the moment and trust in her heart enough to know that life would work out for them? Why did she have to analyze everything so much?

"I just wanted to be honest," she said softly, looking down at the shining diamond on her finger as if it would commiserate with her. She wanted Ron. Loved him. Knew they could have a good life together. But was it too much to ask that he respect her wishes? That he compromise also? That he didn't expect her to give up her goals and dreams to realize his so soon rather than waiting until she was ready for them?

"Not so perfect after all then."

AN: Ah, sometimes things just don't work out the way we've planned.

SW69's Additional Note: I thought I'd posted this already! Gonna put this up--finally.

Three

Chapter 3 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

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Severus Snape sat in the darkened, stuffy room with an untouched glass of firewhisky in his hand. He'd been there for at least an hour. He'd survived the war...somehow...and this was the thanks he got for all that he'd done? He was now being forced to marry someone, which would...allegedly...repay his debt to society. Hadn't he had enough masters in his life?

First, there were his parents. Then came Lucius Malfoy. Then the Dark Lord and, shortly after that, Dumbledore. Needless to say, he'd been shocked when he'd awakened

at St. Mungo's. It seemed that Fawkes had saved his life, and Severus had been sent there for help. Once his survival had been assured, he'd vowed to make the most of his life...to live it to its fullest and to do things that *he* wanted for a change.

There had been some talk that the Ministry was establishing a department that helped match couples...based on blood status, interests, and whatever else...but they'd assured the public that such a thing wouldn't be mandatory. Sneering, his eyes looked at the letter in his other hand. Again, he read, *Your probation will end early as a result of your pending marriage, and your debt to society for past misdeeds will be forgiven.*

For the last three years, he'd been on probation, though he'd never been indicted for any wrong doings. It seemed that not everyone trusted him.

Oh, they'd made it sound nice...how'd he have a choice, time to find someone who matched him perfectly, how'd he'd be paid by the Ministry a little each month to help out with his taking on a new partner, and how that rate increased with the birth of each child thereafter. "Bollocks," he muttered. They couldn't really force this on him, could they? The Wizarding world would never stand for something such as this.

A snort sounded...his own, to his surprise. What would they care about him? He was certain that no "good" or "upstanding" citizens would be forced into a situation; therefore, they wouldn't commiserate with him. Several loud thumps reverberated through the room. Someone was at the front door, and it could only be one whom he called friend, else the wards wouldn't have allowed the visitor to get so close.

He stood and went to the door, cracking it only slightly to see who was standing on its other side. "Lucius," he said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Lucius shook a parchment at him. "This! Did you get one?"

Severus recognized a letter identical to the one he'd been holding moments earlier. "I did."

"Well, are you going to invite me in?"

Opening the door wider and stepping aside, Severus asked, "But what *are you* doing with a letter? You're married."

"It's not for me! It's Draco's! They've already said they'll not retract it."

"But Parkinson..."

"They disapprove of the match."

"The letter plainly says that we can find someone suitable."

"Someone who's also taken the bloody survey and answered their questions. If the person comes up as a possible match, only then can they be chosen."

"You jest. My parchment said no such thing."

"Of course it doesn't. I've been at the Ministry all day learning what's not been said."

"I think it's time for me to drink my shot of whisky."

"I'll have one as well."

Closing the door, Severus led Lucius into his small sitting room where the untouched firewhisky awaited them.

Much later, after Lucius had left, an intoxicated Severus glared at the parchment and began talking to it. "How dare you show up at my home... uninvited!"

He snickered. "What the hell am I thinking?" Trying to school his expression into something business-like, he added, "I'll not talk to you again. Ahahahaha! I just did, didn't I? This... see? This is why I don't like to drink."

Straightening the crumpled parchment, he gazed at the questions. "Blah... blah... yes, yes. Oh, what blood status am I? You know I'm a half-blood already. It fucking says so at the top under the salutation." Snorting with laughter at the realization that he was still talking to the parchment, he shrugged and carried on. "So, what blood status would I prefer my mate to be?"

Lily's lovely face flashed through his mind, but instead of feeling the warmth that usually accompanied her memory, he felt angry. Why had she chosen Potter? Why couldn't she have just had more faith in him? Why? Why? "Why not make it a Mudblood, Little Survey Parchment? They've never failed me in the past, have they?"

Instantly regretting his words, he whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it." He'd not used that word in many years and loathed when others used it. What had prompted him to say such a nasty thing... and about *her* no less? It was that very word that had started their troubles. Sort of.

Not wanting to admit that he preferred redheads to any others, he snidely blurted, "Why, I would appreciate a brunette, I think." He closed his eyes and imagined Lily with brown hair and found that it didn't suit her. "Or not, if I must be honest."

His brow furrowed. "They can't be serious: what body type do I prefer? That's a little insulting, I think." His shocked expression turned into a sneer. "I can just see the lot now. 'Oh, I'll have a thin man with sallow skin please.' What irony if I'll not prove to be a suitable match for anyone."

He lifted a hand and gazed at his skin: not so sallow now that he'd been able to take better care of himself and was getting out more often. Mischievously, he announced, "I want a wife with plump arse, nice breasts... and strong thighs...the better to tightly wrap herself around my body. Ahahahaha." He laughed until his mouth ached, wondering what he'd found so funny in the first place. Actually, the thought of a woman with her legs wrapped around him as he fucked her was quite an appealing thought.

Severus thought about the friend he'd been talking to down the pub. She was exactly the type of woman he could appreciate, and she'd let it be known that he was her type. Briefly he wondered if she would consider taking the questionnaire and try to match her answers with his. It wouldn't be so bad, having her as a bedmate. He knew he couldn't love her. There was just too much regret and ill feeling left over from his last experience with love. However, he could share his life with someone and could very well *like* her a great deal.

"Ah, but not her," he decided at once. "Sex might be great, but what about the other twenty-three and a half hours of the day?"

"Definitely, for certain, most adamantly, I want a woman whose intellect matches my own... and who doesn't mind sex when I want it." He smirked. "Ah, who am I kidding? This is all rubbish anyway. I'm not going to allow them to force me into this."

Severus read through the rest of the parchment, for what must have been the hundredth time that evening, and made comments the entire time, wishing he could have a few choice words with the makers of the bloody questionnaire. Lucius had been right. Something would be done. This wouldn't hold up. People would be outraged.

Feeling dizzy, he sat down and read the last line. "I, Severus Snape, do hereby declare the above to be honest answers to the best of my ability and am now complete."

Surprising him, the parchment vibrated, rolled itself up, and then disappeared with a small popping noise. "What the fuck...?" He looked around. Had Lucius returned to mess with his head? Realization set in. "No... It can't be. Impossible. I wasn't even serious about half of what I'd said."

Staring at the empty bottle of Ogden's accusingly, he said, "Oral suffices." It was then that the sudden urge to sleep overtook him, and he eased back into his chair. Surely it was just a misunderstanding that he could clear up first thing in the morning. Being into his cups would make them understand that he hadn't truly meant to answer the questions and that he didn't even approve of the bloody demands they'd set on him.

First thing in the morning, he'd go round the Ministry and give them a few choice words, probably landing him in Azkaban. However, that sounded more appealing at the moment than some nagging harpy he'd never met becoming his wife.

Hermione awoke on the couch and looked around the unfamiliar room feeling disoriented. Then it dawned on her that she'd fallen asleep in Ron's new home while waiting for him to return. He must have returned because she'd been covered with a blanket and her shoes had been taken off. As she shifted, she felt something warm and small move against her. Immediately she thought of Crooks and reached behind her to pet her familiar...thinking Ron had gone to get him. What she found, however, was a wet nose and an eager tongue.

"Ugh," she said, sitting up quickly. "Muffin!" she exclaimed. "What do you think you're doing curling up with me?" She smiled despite herself and reached out to pet the little dog's white fur. "You poor thing. Do you miss your mummy?"

"I see she's growing on you," Ron said from the doorway.

She looked up to find him leaning against the doorjamb, a coffee cup in one hand, the shirt he'd had on the night before partially unbuttoned, and his feet bare. "Maybe," she said. "I'm sorry about last night."

"Me too," he said. "I feel like a right prick." He moved and walked into the room to sit next to her. "Sip?"

"No, I think I'll brush my teeth first."

"Ever the dentists' daughter."

"You know it," she said with a grin. "And you weren't a prick last night, not much of one anyway, so don't feel badly about it."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking. Haven't been to bed yet even."

Hermione noticed for the first time the serious expression on his face. "And what have you concluded?"

Ron sucked in a breath and exhaled it slowly. "I think we should take some time apart."

"What?" she asked, completely shocked. This turn of events hadn't been something she expected. She'd always thought that if they were to take a break, she would be the one to ask for it...not Ron. "Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe we're rushing into something here."

"But we *do* love each other. I did a lot of thinking last night as well, and I realized that what you said makes sense."

He nodded and didn't meet her eyes. "I don't want to wait for a family that might never come. I shouldn't have to barter with you on when we can try or not. Five years is a long time. I want to be a dad now."

Hermione swallowed. She knew she couldn't agree to it. She just wasn't ready to put something ahead of her career. "I'm not ready to be a mum."

"Yeah. I know."

"Well..." She was at a loss for words. "Maybe we can consider it at two years instead. I'm sure I can..."

"I don't want you to put aside your goals for me. It would be like what my dad did to Mum. It's just not right."

"Your mother loves what she's done with her life. You can't deny it!"

"Yeah, she does now, but she wanted to be a Healer at one time. I see the look in her eyes when she talks about it. She wonders what might have been. I just don't want that happening to you... or to us."

"So you're leaving me, ending things."

"No, not at all," he said, placing his cup aside and reaching for her hands. "I think we should take some time apart to think about what we really want. My cards are on the table. I want a family soon. It can work, I know it can...the family, your career. I know this because I love you enough to make it work somehow."

"Ho-how much time apart?" she asked, trying not to let her disappointment show.

"How much time do you need to come to a decision?" he asked as he squeezed her hands.

"This seems..." Her words trailed away. *Unfair*, her mind added after a moment.

"I'll always love you, Hermione, no matter what."

"I need to go home," she said, removing her hands from his and standing abruptly.

"Don't cry, love."

"Who says I'm about to c-cry?" Tears formed in her eyes, and she tried unsuccessfully to blink them away.

Ron stood and pulled her into an embrace. "Whatever you decide, I'll accept it. Either I'll be your husband or your best friend. Nothing will change that I want to have you in my life however I can. You know that, right?"

She nodded against his chest, still silently crying in despair. He would truly let her go if that was what she wanted. She'd even been toying with the idea lately, but only as a passing thought. She'd never really envisioned her life without him; she'd only wanted to put their marriage and family on hold until she was ready.

Would she ever be ready? That was the question and one that deserved an honest answer. Pulling back, she said, "All right. I'll owl you in a few days."

"Take your time."

Hermione lifted one of his hands and kissed its palm while Ron mirrored her action, lifting her hand and kissing the finger upon which her engagement ring now set. Without another word, she quickly Disapparated, needing her own home, her own bed.

Four

Chapter 4 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to Fizzabella for beta services! You're great, girl. Thanks for all you do for me. I appreciate it immensely.

Waking to a loud banging on the door of her flat, Hermione rolled over to look at the clock, squinting in the bright sunlight streaming through her bedroom windows. "Just a minute," she called out as she sat up to snatch her robe from the bedside chair. More banging sounded as she tied her robe closed.

"I said just a minute!" she yelled, her voice much louder than before. Who would be visiting her flat at eleven in the morning on a workday? Once she got to the door, she ran her fingers through her hair and asked, "Who's there?"

"Ron. Open up."

With a sigh, she unlocked the door and opened it. "Why aren't you at work?" she asked.

"I can ask you the same thing," he said, stalking in and looking around suspiciously.

"I'm not feeling well."

"It's because of me, isn't it?"

"What? No! I just..."

"Then what?" he demanded. "Ginny said she tried to Floo twice this weekend, and you were just moping about and didn't want to talk to her."

"I've just had a lot on my mind."

"You left work early on Friday," he accused, pulling her forward after she'd closed the door. "Sit."

After she sat next to him on the couch, curling her feet up under her, she sighed. "Friday was a disaster. There was so much going on...people for and against the forcing of certain types to use the new department to find spouses...and my mind just couldn't cope with it all, so I left early." She crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "I've not taken a personal day in several months, and today is the first sick day I've used this year."

"Well, what's wrong with you then?" His tone hinted at worry. "All right?"

"It..." she blushed, "it's my period. I'm cramping again...badly this time."

"You need to go to St. Mungo's like I told you last time. That's not normal, that."

"Of course it is," she retorted.

"Yeah? Never heard Mum or Ginny complain about it."

"Well, I doubt they'd want to confide something like that to you," she huffed, then smiled. "It's good of you to check on me, but you didn't have to come down here."

"I tried to Floo first, but I couldn't get through."

"Oh, right. I closed it off after I called in to work this morning. I didn't want to be disturbed and thought Ginny might try to call."

"You don't look like you're in pain right now. Is it done?"

"I took some pain potion and it knocked me right out. Now that I'm up, it's gone." She took Ron's hand. "How was your weekend? Have you done much in the house?"

"Yeah," he said proudly. "Been doing some painting and got rid of some stuff that I don't want. Mum liked some of that rubbish. Lady's things, you know."

Hermione nodded. "Have you thought about us?"

"Of course I have. You?"

"I have."

"And?"

Hermione released his hand and looked away. "I don't know how soon I'll be ready for a family, and you're right. Neither of us should have to put our dreams on hold because of the other."

"I see," he said sadly with a nod of his head.

"It's not about love. I love you, Ron. Always."

His blue eyes lifted to meet her gaze. "I feel the same. You'll always be the one who holds my heart."

"So, maybe we should try to be a part for a while. If you can find... love," her voice cracked, "elsewhere, then I want you to take it. Don't wait for me."

"Wh-what will you do?"

"Same thing I've been doing. Work. It's my main goal right now. You know that."

"Well, if, uh, some bloke catches your fancy..."

"I doubt that will happen."

"All the same, no reason you should sit at home if there's a chance for you to get some happiness." He wiped at his eyes. "Can't believe this. I'm a sap."

"There's nothing wrong with men crying."

"Oi, I'm not crying, just... just feeling a little emotional is all."

She grinned and then sobered. "I've shed more tears this weekend than I ever have before, yet I feel as though I could cry again. Now. This hurts so much." Hermione lifted her hand and slipped her engagement ring off. "This belongs to you."

Ron nodded and took it. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's only right."

He went to hug her and stopped, realizing he hadn't the right to do so any longer. "Ah, fuck, this is insane." He pulled her close and held her tightly. "How can I not have you in my life? Sod kids. I can wait."

She laughed and cried, holding onto him tightly. "I'm almost tempted to agree with you, but I won't."

They stayed that way for a long time, both uncertain what the future would hold. Finally, Hermione said, "Want some lunch? I can make some sandwiches."

"Where's Shorty?"

"I sent him over to Mum's old house to do some cleaning. It's probably not collected much dust since his last visit there, but I needed a break."

"All right. Might as well." He stood and stretched. "I'll make tea if you want to go get dressed."

"Yes, I'll only be a moment." As she went to her bedroom to fetch her clothes, she thought *Maybe being friends only won't be so bad after all.* The thought felt false even as it entered her mind. How long would she truly last without him? He was her rock, her life.

Severus tossed a handful of Floo powder into his grate. "Malfoy Manor," he called out before sticking his head into the green flames. Lucius' study came into view, and he saw that it was empty. "Lucius? Can you hear me? Bozzy?"

A few moments later, a small house-elf popped into the room. "Master Snape is calling for Bozzy?"

"Yes, is Lucius home?"

"Master is being busy with mistress." The elf's eyes widened, and he smacked himself in the head. "Master isn't taking any Floo calls."

Smirking, Severus asked, "Is Draco home?"

"Young master isn't being here."

"Very well. Have one...or both of them...return my call as soon as possible."

"Bozzy is doing what you is asking of him as soon as he can."

"Thank you."

He pulled back from his grate with a frown on his face. He'd wanted to know if Lucius or the Parkinsons had made any headway in the fight to eradicate the Ministry's latest scheme. Polls in the *Prophet* showed that the public approved of the new department, saying it could help many find well-matched spouses, and they seemed to also approve of forcing those on probation, parole, or living under supervision to utilize the Geneamorphological Agency.

The Ministry's angle was that it would serve several purposes. One, those who had committed some sort of crime against the Wizarding world, which had landed them in such a situation in the first place, would be giving back by starting a family. Severus wondered why anyone would want to have a criminal parenting children. For wasn't that what they were being seen as... if nothing else? They were also saying that it would save the public from paying extra taxes, as the Ministry employees who supervise and meet with said people were being paid to do so...at the public's expense. And the Ministry also claimed that it would free up the employees to dedicate much needed time on more hardened criminals.

Walking over to his desk, he looked down at the recent edition of the paper. Its front page's title seemed to be mocking him.

FOUNDER OF BATH'S YENTA LIVERY COMPANY CONFIRMED IN HEADING NEW MINISTRY DEPARTMENT

He snorted as the writer went on to explain what geneamorphology was, calling it the magical study of matchmaking, psychology, romance and geneology. "Romance," he said with a sneer.

"Yes, we've never met before, but we'll be fucking for the next hundred years and producing children while promising to raise them to adhere to the laws and to be better citizens than we ever were," he said out loud, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Ah, Severus," Lucius drawled from the fireplace, "practicing on how to sweep your new bride off of her feet?"

Severus spun around in embarrassment. "Have you had any luck?" he asked, ignoring his friend's jibe.

Lucius shook his head. "No, they won't budge. I can't even use money to pave the way for Draco and Pansy."

With a sneer, Severus said, "This is a first."

"Indeed." Lucius' voice was no longer light. "Draco, I fear, is considering rebellion."

"That will land him in Azkaban or... living as a Muggle if he's to stay in Britain."

"He's considering a move."

"But his probation..."

"Yes, he'd be a fugitive, never to return."

"Surely, he wouldn't."

"I hope not," Lucius said. "I hope I've raised my son better than to run from his problems."

"Have Pansy fill out the questionnaire with like answers."

"We have asked her."

"And?"

"And she's very upset she'll have to do it at all, but she's considering it."

Snorting, Severus said, "Well, let's hope so, else she must not truly want to win Draco's hand after all."

"I was thinking the same. Had the situation been mine, I would have done so immediately to ensure a pairing with Cissy."

"Ah... maybe this is for the best."

"Perhaps."

"All right. That's all I wanted to know. You may return to your... activities."

Lucius smirked at this, eyes glinting. "Once you're married, Severus, you'll be getting more frequent activities as well." He ducked out of the flame before Severus could toss anything at him.

"Does the man think sex alone can tempt me?" He paused and arched an eyebrow. "Come to that, *it would* be a plus."

AN: More up soon. :)

Five

Chapter 5 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to Fizzabella for the beta read!

"Are you truly all right?" Ginny asked for the hundredth time.

"I was until you showed up," Hermione said crossly. "For the last time, Ron and I have made a decision, and we are going to stick by it."

"But it's mental! You two obviously love each other. Why do this to yourselves? Hermione, look at Harry and me. We..."

"Now you sound like Ronald. We can't compare ourselves to you or any other couple. No two couples are alike. You're ready for motherhood. I'm not. Ron wants a family now. I want to wait a little and establish myself first."

Ginny pursed her lips as she thought for a moment. "I just love both of you and want you to be happy. Together. Harry wants that, too."

"It's what I want also, but what if time passes, and then I decide that I rather like my job and don't want kids at all? How could I do that to him? Have him invest so much of his life and heart to me only to disappoint him?"

"But you wouldn't do that."

"No, I don't think I would, but that's not the point." She sighed and placed a hand over Ginny's on the desktop. "What if I do this? Stay with Ron, I mean. I might get pregnant in a couple of years, either feeling guilty about his wishes, either by accident, or whatever. What if years later I don't reach my full potential at work and feel it's Ron's fault? Or, worse, what if I resent my child? I don't want that to happen. That would be awful."

"That would be, yes."

"That's exactly my point, Gin."

Ginny nodded, flipped her hand over to squeeze Hermione's and then asked, "So... you want to come over for dinner tonight?"

"Who's going to be there?"

"Us... maybe Ron."

"Ginny!"

"What?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"It's only been a couple of days, and you're already trying to push us back together!"

"Do you really think he's going to try to move on?" Ginny asked softly.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know."

"Do you want him to?"

"I... I don't know."

Ginny shook her head and threw her hands up in disgust. "This is ridiculous. What about one of those relationship counselors?"

"No thanks."

"Now you sound like Ron!"

"You approached him about this, too?"

"Well... I might have mentioned it."

"Please, Gin, stop trying to play matchmaker for us. We'll ask you if we need it, okay?"

Ginny nodded and crossed her arms over her chest. "All right. I don't mean to be a pain. Like I said, I just love you and worry about you."

Hermione smiled genuinely. "I appreciate that and feel the same way."

"Coming over for dinner then?" she asked brightly.

"You little shit!" Hermione laughed in amusement. "You don't give up, do you?"

"I didn't say I was trying to take over matchmaking like that Yenta Livery bloke. Just want my family to come over tonight. Besides, Neville is going to be there as well. That should prove it's not some trap to get you and Ron alone."

"Oh, all right. I'll be there, but no expectations, all right?"

"Thanks."

"Speaking of the Yenta Livery Company, did you hear that they might be closing a couple of their locations now that the founder has been hired by the Ministry?"

"Why though? The company would still make profit."

"I think the Ministry is insisting, wanting people to go through there only...probably to keep tabs on applicants."

"Government!" Ginny huffed.

"Oi, I work here," Hermione said with a grin.

"As I said..."

"I feel sorry for the ones they are forcing into this. It's barbaric."

"Not all of them feel as though it's a bad thing."

"Yeah? Tell that to the Malfoys or Professor Snape."

"Well, look at Stan Shunpike," Ginny said.

"He shouldn't be on probation for anything in the first place!" Hermione said hotly.

"The Wizengamot feels otherwise. I mean, he did hang out with the Death Eaters once they helped him escape."

"He felt he had no choice!"

"Anyway, my point is," Ginny said, loudly overriding Hermione's words, "Harry and I talked to him last night, and he's ecstatic. According to him, the YLC has already found three potential matches. He's met the three ladies and can't decide which to choose. He feels like this is helping him find someone when he thought nobody would want him before."

"What about lovers being torn apart? Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson for one example."

"Why would you care about that cow and prick?"

"I don't like them...either one...but still... say you and Harry weren't married already. Would you like the idea of having to go through this?"

"No, I suppose not. Thankfully, though, Harry's not an ex-Death Eater."

"And Professor Snape is?"

"Uh, yes," Ginny said snidely. "I know he was playing a role, but he wasn't always on our side, Hermione. He's done some things even in the name of good that aren't... admirable."

"I know," Hermione agreed. "I just feel sorry for them...yes, that does include Parkinson and Malfoy."

"Just be glad it isn't some nationwide mandatory thing and that you and other upstanding citizens," Ginny snickered, "are free to choose without going through the Ministry."

"Too right." Hermione nodded to her office doorway. "Now leave so I can finish my work, else I won't be able to join you lot tonight."

"See you around seven."

"Absolutely."

After her friend left, Hermione couldn't concentrate on the papers before her. She kept thinking about Ron and the decision they'd made. At times she felt so sure that she and he were doing the right thing, but at other times, she wanted to go to him and ask that they go back to the way things were. Life had been comfortable for the both of them. While she'd had her doubts about their future happiness and while certain things annoyed her, she'd not imagined breaking things off completely.

Ginny's words came back to her repeatedly. Would he truly move on? Did she want him to? Was it selfish of her to admit, deep down in the dark recesses of her mind, that she wanted him to wait for her? With a sigh, she tossed down her quill and sat back in her chair, rubbing her face with her hands.

Hermione swallowed nervously as she knocked on Harry's front door. Why she was nervous to have dinner with friends... and Ron was unknown to her. She mentally chided herself. She'd been having dinner with him for most of her life, more times as friends than as a couple, so this shouldn't be so strange for her. When the door opened, Hermione grinned. "You're looking dashing, Harry."

"Thanks," he said, beckoning to her. "Come in. We're in the living room."

"I... uh, thanks for the invite."

"Are you all right?" he asked, lowering his voice.

She nodded. "I am." When he cocked an eyebrow, she added, "Seriously."

"Okay then. We've got a surprise tonight!" he said, beaming again.

"What surprise?" she asked curiously, uncertain she could take any more surprises that might affect her. What had they planned? What had Ron done?

"It's not mine to tell. You'll have to see for yourself."

Suppressing a groan, she walked past Harry in the narrow hallway and entered the foyer, pausing when she heard unfamiliar feminine laughter. Her head slowly turned, her gaze meeting Harry's. Before she could ask the question on her mind, he spoke.

"She's not here with Ron."

Relief flooded her. "Okay."

"It's... it's Neville," he whispered. "Look."

She followed Harry into the room and paused once again. Sitting next to a grinning Neville was Hannah Abbot...someone Hermione hadn't seen at all in the years since they'd left school. "Oh... hi there," she said, looking between the two of them. "It's good to see you."

"Hello, Hermione," Hannah returned pleasantly, one hand moving to clasp Neville's. "It's been too long."

"I heard you'd gone to the continent to stay with relatives."

"I did for a while, but I've been back nearly a year now."

"Welcome back then," Hermione said warmly. "Neville, hello."

"Hi, Hermione," he greeted proudly.

"I didn't know that you two were seeing each other," she said, wondering when someone would fill her in. She hadn't known that Neville had been dating anyone. Each time she saw him, he talked about his duties Apprenticing with Madam Sprout, never mentioning his romantic interests.

"It only just happened recently," Neville blurted. "Y-you tell her, Hannah."

Hermione moved to sit in the only available space in the room... on the couch next to Ron, who nodded in greeting and took a deep drink from his glass of wine. "Do tell."

"Well, a couple of weeks ago I was reading about the Ministry opening its new geneamology department, and I thought, 'You know, that's what I should do. I'm alone and never seem to run into anyone I'm compatible with.' So I went in and did it! I filled out the information. Last week, I received an owl with the first of several matches." She looked at Neville adoringly. "And to my surprise, it was Neville."

"We met straightaway and talked," Neville added. "Gran really likes her."

"And I like Gran, too," Hannah said.

Hermione tried not to grimace at the sickeningly sweet display before her. She was happy for Neville and Hannah, truly, but she was also a little annoyed that they'd stooped to use the Yenta Livery process to find each other. It seemed wrong somehow.

"Anyway," Neville said, "when I got the owl inviting me here tonight, I thought it might be a good time to let you all know about us and that she and I are going to be married."

"Wow," Hermione said, completely lost for the right words. She wanted to say it was too soon, but she had no right to put a damper on their happiness.

"A real whirlwind romance," Hannah said, "and I can't be happier."

"They're planning on trying to have a baby right away," Ron said, speaking for the first time that night.

Eyeing him speculatively, Hermione again said, "Wow."

"It seems fast, but according to the questions and answers we gave, we match perfectly," Hannah said a little defensively. She leaned back and snuggled against Neville. "I've always thought him handsome, but we never had the chance to talk much at Hogwarts. I'd like to think we would have got together ages ago if we had."

"Well, I'm happy for you then," Hermione said, accepting a glass of wine from Ginny. "To your happiness." She lifted the glass to toast them and took a sip as she heard Ron say, "Yeah, cheers." She sensed the bitter tone in his voice and wondered if he was jealous of the couple.

Of course he would be, she thought sadly. Neville, whom Ron always thought of as being the last to get any girls, was getting everything Ron wanted.

"Kreacher has gone all out tonight," Harry said. "Fit for the occasion."

"Thanks, guys," Neville said earnestly.

Good for you, Nev, Hermione thought, honestly happy for him suddenly. Why wouldn't he deserve to be happy after all he'd gone through? Hannah had always been a good, honest person, and it was apparent that she truly adored Neville.

"Shall we eat then? I'm famished," Ginny said as she stood.

Harry rose as well. "Yeah, and there's something...oof!"

Ginny elbowed him. "Not now." She pulled him from the room, giggling as she did so.

Neville and Hannah quickly followed, leaving Ron and Hermione alone. "All right, Ron?" she asked. "You seem down."

"I am." He tipped up his glass and drank the rest of his wine.

"Can I help?" she asked, reaching out and placing a hand on his leg. She realized her mistake the moment she'd uttered it.

"Of course you can," he said, eyes blazing, "but you won't."

"I thought we'd decided to..." She looked away and wished she hadn't agreed to dinner with her friends.

"It's just hard hearing them going on about how great life is, how they're starting a family." He frowned and growled in annoyance. "I mean, come on? Neville's getting a wife before me?"

"Sshh, Ronald, he'll hear you."

He shrugged and stood. "Time to eat."

"Have you changed your mind about our agreement?"

Ron's blue eyes gazed at her for a long moment before he shook his head. "No." And then he walked from the room.

She'd almost hoped that he'd beg her to take him back. It would make things so much easier. She could always say that she'd felt like she'd had no choice, that he'd convinced her their parting was wrong. However, as she watched him walk from the room, she mentally slapped herself. She had to be stronger. He was being strong, even though it was costing him. She could do it as well.

As she joined the others, she accepted another glass of wine from Harry and waited as Ginny poured herself some pumpkin juice. "Harry wasn't lying," she said to her friend. "Kreacher did a great job with this."

There was a feast spread out on the long table before them; Hermione felt as though she were sitting at the Gryffindor house table at Hogwarts. Before her lay lamb chops, Cornish pasties, roast chicken, jacket potatoes, peas, carrots, rice pudding, and even mince pies.

"Is there something more going on?" Ron asked. "How'd Kreacher know about Neville's announcement?"

"He didn't," Harry said, looking over to Ginny.

"Oh, all right!" she said in exasperation. "Go on then."

Harry adjusted his glasses before running his hands through his hair. "We're... Well, no, Ginny is pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

Hermione gasped in shock. "Oh, Harry! That's wonderful!" She leaned over and hugged Ginny tightly. "You didn't tell me! How far along are you?"

"I'm just over two months. We wanted to wait."

"Why didn't you invite Mum?" Ron asked quietly.

"We told her earlier, her and Dad both," Ginny said, her smile faltering slightly.

"Congratulations," Ron said, raising his glass in a toast.

"Thanks, mate," Harry said, putting an arm around Ginny.

"That's such great news," Hannah said. "Maybe we'll be pregnant at the same time."

"Maybe," Ginny gushed excitedly and launched into what the Healer had told her at her appointment the day before.

Hermione only half listened as she watched Ron, who was pretending to be happy as he talked to Harry and drank more wine. She knew he was hurting and could feel it radiating from him. How could no one else see it? Or did they see it and just didn't care? Could someone really be so wrapped up in his or her own happiness to not see someone's blatant misery? In the same vein, why couldn't she give in and do what he wanted? She knew he'd be happy, and in the long run, she would as well. Her mother had held a career and had been a good mother. Why couldn't she do the same?

Ron wants you to be what his mother is, a voice whispered in her mind. And that was her biggest fear, wasn't it? She wanted more from life than to be a housewife who raised a load of children. Ron would be happy with that if she chose it. If she wanted a child, would he stop there if she requested it, or would he cajole and beg for more? She knew the answer to that. He wanted what she wasn't ready to give...what she might never be able to give. And she refused to ask him to put his life on hold while she made up her mind.

Feeling more determined to stick to her decision, she tuned into the conversation and merrily toasted her friends once more before tucking in to dinner.

AN: Yes, it's a little slow going, but to me, I kind of like the build. Hope you don't mind!

Six

Chapter 6 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to fizzabella for beta reading!

Severus frowned at the dour woman before him. "Are you saying that I have to choose one of these three matches? I refuse."

"Are you refusing to follow the law?" she asked in shock.

"I'm trying to follow the law," he retorted snidely, "but I am refusing to even consider a marriage with any of these three women. I don't want to converse with them much

less be forced to marry them."

"Oh, I see!" the woman said cheerfully, adjusting her nametag on her shirt. She tapped it with a too-long, curved fingernail. "Call me Joslyn, Mr. Snape. Or shall I say Severus?"

"Mr. Snape will be fine," he said curtly, adding her surname, *"Ms. Ulbrook"*

"As long as you are cooperating, you won't be penalized. We'll wait two weeks and put your answers through again to see what new matches might turn up. So, I'll see you in two weeks then?"

"That is acceptable." He rose and nodded.

"Lovely. It's a date then."

Severus arched an eyebrow, realizing the older woman was sizing him up. "It's a meeting. That's all."

"Why, of course," she said, a little put out. "I meant nothing more."

"Indeed." He strode out of the office, not bothering to close the door behind him, while thinking of the three choices the Ministry had given him; they were abominable.

The first had been nice, but other than the fact that she tutored Wizarding children in Potions, he truly didn't see what they had in common. She had several cats and lapdogs, wanted just as many children, and never stopped talking. He supposed she was attractive enough, but if he was forced to marry, he wanted to at least have someone he could truly be compatible with.

The second woman, he'd not been attracted to in the least. She'd sneered at his home the entire time she'd met him for the initial interview and had stated up front that he would have to agree to allow her to do with it what she deemed fit. Her attitude had caused him to have one, and things had just gone downhill from there.

The last woman to meet him had been very timid and seemed to think that he would attack her if she spoke her mind. He refused to live that way. He knew how it felt to feel trapped, and he'd never do that to another. She'd been relieved when he'd told her that he was certain they would not be well matched.

At least now he had bought himself more time. It was possible that the stupid new law would be overturned before then. Surely the community would come to its senses. Having reached the Apparition room, he turned and disappeared with a small pop, reappearing on the grounds of Malfoy Manor.

He paused after taking three steps. "Draco? Is something amiss?" The boy's countenance was unlike he'd seen him even as he'd lost one of his best friends in the final battle at Hogwarts.

"She's marrying Adrian Pucey," he said numbly, eyes wide in disbelief.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"Pansy. She went to the Ministry, put the same answers that I put on the questionnaire, and I was one of the matches, but so was he."

"And... she chose *him* instead?" Severus asked, also shocked at the girl's audacity. "I don't understand."

"She said... she said they met, and he offered for her right away. She feels he's got more to offer a family, as he's working in the Ministry now."

"I'm sorry, boy. I know how you cared for her."

"Fuck her," Draco said, suddenly angry. "That bitch! She chose him over me! I should have seen it coming. I should have known. Father tried to talk to me, but I wouldn't listen." The blond stalked off towards the barn.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To ride..." was all he replied, not turning around once.

Lucius had been making his way toward them. "He's told you then?" he asked Severus once in speaking distance.

"Yes." Severus shook his head. "I'm surprised. Malfoys have more money than the Puceys."

"I expect it's not only money she's taking into account."

"Ah, yes, clout."

"Indeed." Lucius stared at his son's retreating form. "He's matched with Astoria Greengrass. I've sent an owl for her to meet with him. He's not very pleased about it."

"The girl would be a good match," Severus said, thinking of her as a student. "She was quite bright, a much better student than her dunderhead sister, Daphne."

"And the family is well connected. It would do Draco good."

Severus nodded. "I can't help feeling badly for him."

"What of you? How was your meeting?"

"Horrid," he said with a growl. "I believe the old bat who worked my case fancies me."

"Good Lord. Joslyn Ulbrook?"

"One and the same."

Lucius' nose wrinkled in distaste. "What will they do now that you've refused your three matches?"

"I'm to wait two weeks to have my matches drawn again to give time for new replies to have been entered."

"Well, at least I'm not speaking with you through bars at Azkaban prison. That's encouraging."

"Any news on getting this overturned?"

"None. It looks grim."

"Excellent," Severus sneered, sarcasm lacing his voice.

"Do you want to come in? It's nearly time for tea."

"Might as well. I've nothing else to do."

"Ah, but that will change once you are married, my friend."

"I'm glad you find my situation so amusing, Lucius."

Lucius' smile faded. "I truly don't, but if we can't make light of something dreadful, what hope is there for us?"

"A fine explanation," Severus replied, knowing his friend to be truthful, "though I see the glint in your eyes. Yes, there's nothing so appealing as the Ministry releasing you from its clutches into the custody of a wife."

"Well, the thought of you married is honestly appealing. Think of the things we can do together, our wives included."

"We do enough together now."

"Yes, but it would be nice for Cissy to have feminine company. I know she longs for it. Our conversations tend to be boring to her after a while."

"Agree."

Severus privately wondered if he would ever find a match that met his expectations and wants.

A week had passed since Hermione's dinner with her friends, and she'd just been wondering how Ron was faring when she heard a knock at her door. Upon opening it, she smiled warmly in greeting. "Ron! I was just thinking about you. Come in."

"Took a chance you might not have worked late," he said, handing her a small bouquet of flowers as he entered.

"Orange Gerbera daisies. They're beautiful, Ron."

"I remembered that you liked them."

"So, what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We need to talk," he said, the smile leaving his eyes. "I've been thinking about something, and I... I want you to know about it before I decide anything."

"Okay," she said, noting his seriousness. "Let me just put these in water."

"All right." He looked around nervously. "Guess I'll sit on the couch for now."

After she found a vase and filled it with fresh water for the flowers, she made her way to sit next to him. However, the moment she sat and faced him, he jumped up and began pacing.

"Ever since last weekend, I've been thinking..."

"About?" she prodded when he paused for too long.

"Neville and Hannah, their plans, how they got together."

"I've thought of them as well."

"They're both ready to settle down. No drawing it out. They both want the same things."

"And you're angry because you and I are at odds."

"No, not angry. Disappointed, but as we decided, we're going to try doing our own thing."

"Right..." Her heart skipped a beat. She feared his next words and yet welcomed them at once.

"I thought I might go on and give it a try, but if you have any doubts or have changed your mind, tell me now." He stopped pacing, turned to her, and sucked in a deep breath and didn't release it until she smiled.

"I don't want you to wait for me. It's not fair. If you've met someone or think that you might like to go on a date, I don't want to stand in your way."

"Well... if you're sure."

"Ha-have you met someone?"

"No, I thought I might, you know, try it."

"Try it? Try what?"

"The Geneamorphological Agency at the Ministry."

"You're not serious."

"I am," he said defiantly. "What's wrong with that? Look at how Neville's happy! I could find someone who might want kids now, too." Again, he started pacing. "I just thought I'd try it to see who it picked for me. Maybe there's someone I can..." He stopped and looked out the window. "You're right. It's stupid, isn't it? It just feels like something's missing in my life. All my brothers have started families, except Charlie, and now even Ginny and Harry are going to start one."

"Ron... I'm just surprised by it. That's all." She stood and went to him, turning his face down to look at her. "If you feel strongly about this, maybe you should do it. Who knows? You might find what... what you're looking for."

"Do you think there will be another you, Hermione?"

She hugged him tightly and felt his trembling beneath her arms. "I almost hope not," she admitted, "but it might be best for the both of us if you do."

"Let me make love to you... one last time," he said, pulling back to look into her eyes.

Her answer was an intense kiss.

Much later as they lay in bed, limbs tangled, she listened to the sound of his light snoring and realized that she'd not taken her contraception potion. Instead of getting up to take it, she snuggled closer to her slumbering lover. Whatever happened would be the will of Fate.

Severus looked at his timepiece and hissed a sigh of annoyance. "Of course the girl's late. Why would she want to meet with me? I was her professor for Merlin's sake!" he grumbled, catching his reflection in a nearby mirror. This caused him to grimace. He'd taken a little extra time with his appearance today, and he still didn't feel as though he'd made a difference.

What would a young woman such as she want in such an older man? He'd never particularly cared for her. Although, he'd never outright disliked her either, so that was a plus. She was the first of three matches that he'd received this time around. At that moment, the door to the pub opened and in walked the young lady he'd been waiting for.

She looked much the same...long, dark hair and pleasant figure. He rose when she neared his table.

"Professor Snape!" she said breathlessly. "I'm sorry I'm late. I got lost on the way here, and the Muggle traffic is horrible." She leaned closer and extended her hand. "I wish we'd met somewhere in London at least. Why out here?"

"I live nearby," he said quietly, accepting her hand and shaking it. "Please, have a seat, Miss Brocklehurst."

"Call me Mandy," she said pleasantly.

He nodded, waited for her to sit, and pushed her chair in before returning to his own seat. "I took the liberty of ordering tea. I thought it might be too early for anything else."

"Ah, okay. That's fine. For now." She smiled and began digging in her handbag, then pulled out a parchment. "So, Professor... Should I call you 'Professor'?"

"I am still a professor," he said, not liking the smirk on the girl's face.

"And if we marry, am I to still call you 'Professor' or will it be Severus?" she asked, leaning forward and placing the parchment on the table. "That's a little kinky, isn't it?"

"I wasn't aware that I'd asked for your hand."

At this, she leaned back and wrapped one of her long locks around her index finger, twirling it slowly. "Let's cut the crap," she said, suddenly forceful. "We both need to find spouses. I know you. You know me. I don't see the problem."

"You were one of my students, Miss Brocklehurst. I will agree to nothing until I'm certain I can get past that."

"Once you've seen me in my knickers, *Severus*, you'll never think of me as a student. Trust me." She glanced at the parchment again and stopped playing with her hair. "It says you own your own home. Why didn't we meet there?"

"Why didn't you offer for us to meet at your home?" he countered, becoming angry at her presumptuousness and tone.

"I live with my parents still, so that wouldn't have been comfortable for us I think."

Truthfully, he hadn't wanted to show any of the women his home until they'd talked at length...after the way one of his previous matches had looked around his home with such disdain. "We'll not be going to my home," he said with finality. "Why are you so interested in finding a spouse?"

"Why are you?"

"I'm not. I'm being forced to."

She waved her hand in dismissal. "Right, the whole Death Eater thing." She cocked an eyebrow. "So what if you've got a bit of a dark past? That's done with."

"You've not answered my question."

Mandy sighed and brought a hand up to rub her eyes in resignation. "I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"He doesn't want anything to do with me or the baby. I need a husband or my dad will disown me."

Severus sat back as if he'd been slapped. "And so you want to marry me and want me to claim the child as my own?"

"Yes. Later, we can go our separate ways. Just for now, I need a husband." She shrugged. "You need a wife. We can do our own thing; there doesn't even need to be any sex between us. In fact, I'd rather there weren't. You should be glad that anyone is considering you anyway, what with the way you treated everyone back at school. I mean, that Ulbrook woman told me that you've been rejected at least five times before now and practically begged me not to bother meeting you. You're as desperate as I am, aren't you?"

He stood and scooted his chair back. "Our meeting is at an end. How dare you think to come here and insult me with..." His words trailed away as he groped for the right thing to say. "Good day, *Miss Brocklehurst*." Severus strode away, leaving the gobsmacked girl behind without another glance in her direction. He'd never admit it to anyone, but her words had stung him to the core. After listening to Lucius' endless fantasies about how great things could be for him once he married, he'd been expecting too much.

"That shall be rectified," he murmured as he opened the pub's door, feeling ridiculous for having hoped to have something with a woman resembling what Lucius had with Narcissa.

AN: I kind of feel sorry for Snape, but since I know what's in store for him, I won't let it bother me too much. Hehe. Hope you're enjoying!

Seven

Chapter 7 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to Fizzabella for the beta read!

Hermione lay back on the examining table, wishing the Healer would return with her test results. She stared at the peach ceiling and its large rectangular, floating lights while wondering what the Healer had found. The woman's demeanor had been professional, but Hermione had sensed that she'd detected something while examining her. Having changed Healers within the past year, she'd yet to have a gynecological visit with this Healer before.

The door opened, and Hermione sat up, pulling the thin gown down her thighs after realizing it had crept up while lying down. "Healer Scott," she greeted, trying to smile at the light-haired witch.

"Please, Hermione, call me Veronica."

"Habit," Hermione said. "Now, what's going on?"

"Straight to the point then," Veronica said kindly, placing the large envelope she held on the table next to the chair she'd sat in.

"You were gone for a while, and I could tell that something... something wasn't right."

"While we were talking and you explained what you'd been feeling, I had my suspicions. After examining you, I was quite certain, but I wanted to be sure to have the results before telling you my thoughts."

"Which are...?"

As Veronica pulled a light parchment from the envelope on the table, she said, "The diagnostic laparoscopy spell that I cast for the biopsy shows that you do have endometriosis."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak and then shut it. Endometriosis? She'd heard about that at some point in the past, but she'd never researched it further. She'd been prepared for the Healer to come back and say she had something else...anything else. Not that.

"From what I can tell, you are only at an early stage."

"But the pain is so severe sometimes. Are you certain?" Hermione asked, thinking of her menstrual cramps.

"Some women have minimal pain in the worst stages of endometriosis. Others, like you, have more pain even in an early stage. Hormonal stimulation in some cases causes the pain. I've got some pamphlets for you, and they should answer all your questions, even those you may not have yet." She smiled. "Here."

Veronica handed Hermione several papers that she'd taken from the envelope and remained silent while Hermione looked them over briefly.

Hermione said, "So it's basically tissue that's that causing all this trouble."

"Endometrial lining from your uterus that attaches in the wrong place, unable to shed during your flow."

"It says here that it thrives with estrogen?"

"It is an estrogen-dependant disease, yes, but it's still unknown exactly what causes it. There are several theories, one of them retrograde menstruation, which I am uncertain about. I do have colleagues here in London who are heading a study that might prove it to be hereditary. Sadly, there's no cure, just treatments." She nodded at the pamphlet Hermione held in her hands. "That one goes over the options available to us."

Hermione snorted. "A few days ago I thought I might be pregnant. My period was a couple of days late."

"May I ask again if your intercourse is painful? You seemed ill at ease when I asked earlier and changed the subject."

"No, it isn't. As I told you before, the only time I hurt is during my period. I thought it to be normal. My boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend now, he told me I should get it checked. I mean, in my defense, what woman doesn't sometimes deal with this?" Hermione blushed. "I only made this appointment because I thought I needed pregnancy confirmation. We had unprotected sex a couple of weeks ago around the time that I ovulated, according to a book that I bought last week." She shrugged. "I counted the days."

"Did you want to become pregnant?" Veronica asked.

"I... I've been quite adamant about wanting to wait to start a family. It's something we disagree on, but when I realized I'd not taken my potion, I foolishly thought I'd leave it to Fate. Then, the more I thought about it..."

"The more you wanted it?"

"I don't know if wanted is the right word, but if I would have been pregnant, everything would have been back to normal. Ron and I would have got back together, he would have got what he wanted, and I'm sure I would have adjusted."

"It sounds like you're just afraid of being alone and grasping for an excuse to not have to change your life." Veronica reached out and took Hermione's hand. "Becoming a parent, as you know, obviously, is a big responsibility and should be done for the right reasons. Perhaps it just wasn't meant to be."

"I agree," Hermione replied, squeezing the woman's hand, "but when my period started after I'd made the appointment to come here, I felt so disappointed, so let down."

"Which could be attributed to the melancholy we experience during this stage of our cycle. I think, however, you should truly examine your feelings. Maybe you want something that you weren't aware of. Is it possible that you've been adamant about not starting a family because it was something you'd always planned...building a career I assume...and you feel that if you betray that, you'll be betraying yourself?"

"Perhaps." Hermione looked back down at the pamphlets again and noticed one titled *Endometriosis and Pregnancy*. She opened it and skimmed over the first page. She gasped. "This causes infertility?"

"Many women who experience infertility happen to have endometriosis. There are proactive treatments that can help increase the chances of becoming pregnant."

Hermione suddenly felt the urge to cry. Was this punishment? She'd finally started to toy with the idea of becoming a mother, of truly being what Ron wanted, and then in a cruel twist of Fate, she'd been told that it might never happen!

"Hermione," Veronica said softly, "from what I understand, you've only had unprotected sex this one time. You do not know if you are having conception trouble. It's not a guaranteed act."

"But the book I read specifically said that sperm can live between three to five days, so why wouldn't my egg have been fertilized? Ron and I are both young and healthy. The window of opportunity was perfect for it."

"Nothing is set in stone. There are several factors that can play a part in it. If you should decide to become pregnant, I will help you in any way that I can if it becomes apparent that infertility is an issue." Veronica flashed her white teeth and chuckled. "And if you do become pregnant, it normally lessens the symptoms of endometriosis. Whatever route you take, I'll be here for you."

"Thank you, Healer Scott, er, Veronica. I appreciate the support you are giving me. I have a lot to think about." She lifted the pamphlets. "Lots to read as well." She was already planning to stop by Flourish and Blotts on the way home to see what books they had on the subject.

"I'm going to prescribe a potion that specifically targets this type of pain. It is much more effective than normal pain potions or Muggle medicine you might buy. You can get that from my assistant on your way out."

"Good. Normally I have to take so much, it knocks me out."

"Oh, no, this works great. You'll be able to go about your daily business as normal, at least for the time being. If the pain or symptoms get worse, we'll consider other actions. All right?"

"I expect I can get dressed now," Hermione said, taking the prescription from her Healer. "It's a bit drafty in here."

"Of course! I'll just give you some privacy." Veronica stood, her brown eyes meeting Hermione's. "I look forward to hearing from you."

"I'll definitely be in touch. Thanks."

The sandy-haired woman left Hermione alone, taking her envelope and test result papers with her. Hermione chuckled, trying to make light of the situation, and said, "I guess I've no other problems. Blast, I didn't even ask." She rose to find her clothes. "She would have mentioned it," she reasoned. "Just the endometriosis... I'll ask on my way out anyway to be sure."

Deciding to take a walk through Hyde Park, which she'd always enjoyed, even as a child, she found herself sitting on a bench next to the upside-down tree. While she'd been there, several tourists had stopped by to pose by its cave-like opening. She remembered doing the same with Ron the first time they'd visited together. He'd wondered what it would be like to have sex beneath such a tree, and she'd told him he'd not be finding out any time soon.

Hermione grinned in remembrance and watched as a young couple with a small child stopped near the bench.

"Mummy, look," the little boy said, eyes wide, as he pointed towards the tree.

"Want to have a look?" his mother asked.

The child, seemingly frightened, shook his head and retreated to hold onto his father's leg.

"Oh, it's only a tree, baby."

"Hold my hand," his father said. A shake of the child's head was his reply, so the man asked, "Want Dad to hold you?" When the boy nodded, the man picked him up and held him against his chest. "Now shall we see it?"

"Okay, Daddy."

Watching the family pleased Hermione and brought back fond memories from her own childhood. Then she began to imagine her own family...just Ron, a child, and her. There were so many redheads in his family already, she'd hope their child would have hair the color of her own to be different. However, she hoped it would have Ron's beautiful blue eyes.

Could it be that Healer Scott is right? Am I only refusing to start a family because it's not what I've always expected of myself? Am I not giving Ron's idea fair thought? Why couldn't she have her career and be a mother? Her mother had done it with very little time off. Many women did it. Why was this such an issue with her?

Her thoughts then strayed to Mrs. Weasley. What if she, like Molly, got sidetracked? What if she never returned to work after having her first child? What if she liked motherhood too much? Would she one day look back on her youth with regret? Would she always wonder what might have been if she'd used those early years to pursue her dreams first?

"I'm being ridiculous," she mumbled. *Hermione, get a grip. There's such a thing as analyzing things too much.*

The laughter of a child...the same little boy...drew her attention back to the family. A smile graced her lips again as she took in the happiness beaming from each face. And in that instant, she realized how very much she wanted this future with Ron. What if she had infertility problems due to her endometriosis and waiting the amount of time she'd asked would be time wasted? Why should she put off what should be?

Suddenly, it felt as though her time was running out, as if some clock had begun to tick inside her body. She stood, nodded to the boy's mother, and began walking to a private section of the park so she could Apparate to Grimmauld Place without being seen. She needed to speak with Ron, needed to tell him that she'd changed her mind, needed to confide everything her Healer had told her.

Hermione turned and Disapparated, appearing across the street from Ron's house. A thought plagued her then. What if she did have trouble conceiving? Would it be fair to make Ron go through that? *The Healer did seem optimistic though. I'll just lay it all out on the table and let him read the pamphlets. We can go from there.*

She strode across the street and knocked on his door. Seconds later, she heard barking from inside and chuckled. That dog would definitely take some getting used to, but she was certain that she...and Crookshanks...could learn to cope. Unable to contain herself, she knocked again and finally heard footsteps.

Ron then opened the door, an expression of surprise on his face. "Hermione!" He stepped out to greet her and closed the door behind him. "What brings you by?" He placed a kiss on her cheek and hugged her.

"I don't know where to start," she said in a rush. "I had an appointment today, then I went to the park, and I was thinking about..." She realized something was off. "What's wrong?"

"Er, nothing. Why?"

"Why are we standing outside on your doorstep?"

He scratched the back of his neck nervously, and his ears reddened. "I've got company, but that's okay. Come on in." He reached behind him to turn the doorknob and open the door.

Hermione followed him, and his new familiar, inside and then into the living room.

"Do you remember Samantha Fawcett?" Ron asked, guiding Hermione into the room. "From Hogwarts?"

"Hi there," the girl said in a friendly voice, rising and extending a hand towards Hermione. "I was in Ravenclaw, two years ahead of you."

"I do remember you," Hermione said, accepting the hand and shaking it. "I first saw you at the Dueling Club."

Samantha laughed easily. "Yes, I remember that. I remember thinking your mate was the heir of Slytherin, what with that snake incident."

"You and everyone else," Ron said, still looking a bit nervous.

"Don't forget the long white beard I had when I tried to get past Dumbledore's Age Line," Samantha replied, again laughing.

"Like so many others." Ron's expression turned wistful, as he'd obviously been reminded of Fred and George.

"Well, how are you?" Hermione asked politely.

"Doing pretty good. I've just recently stepped down from my assistant coaching position for the Holyhead Harpies. It's what I've been doing since I left school, and though I love it, it's time for a break, something different."

"She loves Quidditch," Ron added, "and she gets tickets whenever she wants...to almost any team's match in England!"

"That's impressive," Hermione said untruthfully, disliking the girl immensely. "How do, ah, you two know each other?"

"Oh..." Ron's voice trailed away as he looked from one woman to the other.

Samantha's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, but is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, nothing at all," Hermione replied smoothly. "I was just stopping by to... to see if... Well, I hadn't seen Ron in a few days, so I thought I'd knock him up. I'm sorry. I didn't know he had company." As she backed towards the doorway, Ron stepped forward.

"Wait, Hermione... I'll walk you out."

"It's all right. I know my way."

"I insist," he said firmly. Looking back to Samantha, he said, "I'll just be a moment. Then we can walk over to see Harry and Ginny."

"All right," the girl said, sitting back on the couch. "It was good to see you again, Hermione."

"Likewise," Hermione said, blindly walking down the hallway towards the front door, tears threatening to spill down her cheeks.

"Will you stop for a minute?" Ron asked, grabbing her wrist. "Why'd you come here today, Hermione? It wasn't just for a visit, was it?"

She shook her head. "Is she one of your matches?"

"Yeah," he admitted after a moment. "I should have told you we were meeting."

"You don't owe me an explanation, Ron." The bitterness in her voice belied her true feelings.

"Then why are you so upset?" he asked. "Have you... changed your mind about things?"

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and thought of the woman in his living room. The agency had seen fit to pair Samantha and Ron together. She knew that they both loved Quidditch a great deal, and she could only imagine that Samantha was ready to settle down, same as Ron. Why else would they be matched? Who was she to risk Ron's happiness? What if she told him of her feelings but she could never bear his child? Could she live with herself? Would he resent her?

"I shouldn't have just stopped by like this," she said, finally finding her voice. "I just missed you, that's all."

"Do you want me to ask her to leave?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "No, Ron, please. I'll be all right. I'm just being silly. Have a good time." She leaned up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek before fleeing his home. Fate had once again slapped her in the face.

SW: How many times have I had this happen to me? I realize that I do want something, and then it's too late. Kind of like life saying, "Ahahaha, sucker! You snooze, you lose." Sucks. Anyway, it's a sad situation all around. More up soon.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Disclaimer = the usual!

Thanks go to fizzabella for the beta! :)

Harry looked at her, aghast, and leaned back in his chair. The sounds of the pub died out around them as she concentrated on his green eyes, waiting for him to tell her what she should do with herself. When he snatched up his tumbler and knocked back the last of his drink, she finally spoke.

"Please say something."

He lifted his glass towards the witch waiting on tables, and she hurried over to replace it with a fresh drink. When the witch left, Harry said, "I think you're bloody insane."

"Why? I told you what Healer Scott told me!"

"Hermione, you need to tell Ron."

"I can't! You saw him with her!"

"Yeah, they've had, what, one date? Two? It's not too late." Harry took a deep drink and added, "He'd want to know, Hermione. He loves you. He's just doing that because he thinks it's what you want."

"But what if I can't get pregnant?"

"I doubt that Ron would care in the long run. There's always adoption."

"He *would* care. He wants to be a father...of his own children. I'm just afraid that I would ruin things for him. I mean, if she can give him what I can't, then why not let her?"

"It's stupid. This will come out eventually, and he'll be angry that you lied to him."

Hermione sighed, wondering why she'd even bothered. "I just wanted to talk to someone. My parents are still in Australia, and it's not like I can just pop round for a chat at any time, especially with something like this. Mum would..."

"So you think she'll be pleased that you didn't tell the man you love that you still want him, that you let him go off with some other woman, and that you're considering using a Geneamorphological Agency, one that you despise, mind?" He snorted. "Yeah, she'll approve of that. Why not?"

"If I use the agency, I can find someone who is looking for the same things that I am, and I can be up front about the endometriosis and how it may play a part in an inability to conceive."

Harry leaned forward and took Hermione's hand. "You don't even know if you'll have trouble, Hermione. You've admitted that you only didn't use the potion the one time. Do you know how many times Ginny and I forgot the potion? Loads."

"But I was ovulating! You might have forgot when she wasn't."

"Ginny and I have sex all the time. I'm certain she was ovulating at least part of the time," he said, sitting back again. "She went off the potion completely for the last few months, and she's finally pregnant. It's just a matter of timing and... and whatever else." He shrugged. "I think you loving Ron and going off to marry someone else because you think you're doing him a favor is mental. That's what I think about it."

"And I don't despise the agency."

"That's news to me. You were pretty riled up about it."

"Well, look at the people it's actually helping. I could be one of those."

"You should be talking to Ginny about this."

"I can't talk to Ginny about this! She'll tell Ron!"

"And I won't?"

"Of course you won't." Hermione smiled. "You love me too much." When he said nothing, she asked, "Right?"

"Right," he said with a nod. "I just hate this and don't like being put in this position. Ron's going to kill me."

"He'll never know."

"Yeah? Going to explain how you suddenly up and married someone else, are you? How you couldn't give him kids but don't mind having one with a stranger, eh?"

"Harry!" Hermione admonished. "You make it sound so... so cold."

"Because it is." He finished his drink. "I don't know what you were expecting me to say here. I think your reasoning is all mixed up. You're being a bit... irrational, which is something I'm not used to where you're concerned."

"I just need someone in my corner. I thought," she stood angrily, "that since I've never left yours, that person might be you. You're all I have, Harry. Thanks so much." She turned and pulled on her cloak as she made her way towards the door, Harry calling out after her.

The moment she stepped out onto the street a hand grabbed her arm, stopping her. Harry had followed her out. "Don't just leave like that," he said. "You know I'll always support you. It's why I didn't walk out, but that doesn't mean I have to approve of everything. Look at all the shite I've done that you didn't approve of, and you never minded telling me the truth. What sort of mate would I be if I weren't honest?"

Hermione became teary-eyed as she leaned into Harry and whispered, "I'm so confused. I feel like time's going to run out on me. I feel stupid for letting Ron go, but I can't make myself tell him how I feel. I'm afraid it will be a mistake. She's perfect for him."

"I still think you should tell him."

"If... if things with her don't work out, I will tell him," Hermione said, "but that's the only way." She looked up at Harry and wiped her eyes. "What did you think when you saw them together?"

"I, uh... Well, I hated it. She's not you."

"But?"

"But they seemed to get on."

"Exactly. And I'll bet she wants loads of little babies now she's taking a break from Quidditch."

"Don't know. Didn't ask all that."

"Maybe I will talk to Ginny. I can swear her to secrecy."

"I'm sure she'd have better advice than me, and you really need to see your mum. It's been a long time."

"I guess I'm still angry that they've decided to stay there instead of coming home."

"They probably just need time to deal with all that's happened. I mean, you cast charms on their minds to alter their memories without permission, you know?"

"Thanks for reminding me, but I was saving their lives!"

"I know that, but it's likely they don't think of it that way. What parents wouldn't want to try to protect their kids? Mine died for me. I doubt yours wanted to die, but they probably would have wanted the choice." He closed his eyes in regret. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, it's all right." She squeezed his shoulder. "I'm going to go home. Shorty's cooking something special for me he says. And I want to look up some things on the internet. There's always loads of information out there."

"Stay away from all those dirty story sites," Harry said, laughing and ducking her hand as she swatted at him.

"I can't believe Ron told you about that! I happened on that site by accident. I had no idea the author was writing something so... provocative!"

"Uh-huh," Harry replied. "That's why it's on your favorites then, eh?"

She laughed. "Well, Ron took a liking to it after that."

"Sure, blame Ron."

Hermione laughed. "Thanks, Harry. For everything."

"I'll tell Ginny to expect you."

"Tell her to pop round instead."

"Will do." He hugged her, looked around to see that nobody was about, and Disapparated.

Hermione, in turn, Apparated to the Ministry, intent on getting a copy of the agency's questionnaire.

Outraged couldn't begin to describe Severus at the moment. "You have discussed my personal information with others in the past, and I wouldn't put it past you to do so again. I demand that someone else take over my case," he said firmly, facing the smug witch before him.

"I'm afraid you can't prove that, sir," Joslyn Ulbrook said. "That would be against the rules, and I'd never do something like that." The glint in her eyes said otherwise. "However, if you would like me to look into your matches further, perhaps we can come to some sort of agreement. I could possibly fill out a questionnaire and might be a nice match for you."

"I would reject you just like I've done all the other halfwits!" Severus said angrily. "I want to speak to your supervisor."

"I *am* this department's supervisor," Joslyn replied, sitting back against her desk and bringing a hand up to play with the strand of pearls around her neck. "While my boss is away on maternity leave anyway, so your complaints about me shall be handled by me, and I seriously doubt I'll chastise myself." She smirked. "Why don't you...Miss Granger! Hello."

"What are you on about?" Severus said before he realized that someone else had entered the room. He turned to see an irate Hermione Granger standing behind him just in the doorway.

"Madam Ulbrook, I will be discussing what I've just heard with the Minister! How dare you use your authority to bully someone in such a way! I am appalled."

"You've misunderstood, I think," the woman said nervously.

"I have not," Hermione replied.

"Professor Snape, if you wish to make a complaint against Madam Ulbrook, I will be willing to document it, as I have one of my own to write as well."

"I will indeed," he said, rising. Part of him was annoyed that *this* particular person had come to his rescue, but he needed help. He'd not allow Ulbrook to get away with giving out personal information and then trying to bully him into choosing her as his match.

"Wait, I'll lose my job!" Joslyn said as she rounded her desk. "Let me explain."

"Explain it to the Minister," Hermione replied curtly, snatching up a blank questionnaire from a shelf next to the woman's desk. "I'll handle turning in mine on my own, thanks." Her next words were addressed to Severus. "Follow me please."

They walked down the hallway, leaving a sputtering Ulbrook behind, and waited for the lift. Once it came, Hermione punched in a number, and it slid sideways before dropping. At another stop, several parchment airplanes zoomed in and hovered above them. At another, many of them flew out. Finally, the doors opened on Granger's floor.

"It's just down the hall here," she said, walking to the left and looking at the form she'd taken from Ulbrook's desk. At her doorway, she waved her hand to unlock the warding and opened the door. "Come on in," she said warmly. "Have a seat."

"Thank you."

A moment later, she fetched a set of complaint forms, a quill, and some ink. "Please put anything you feel pertinent. I will bring this directly to the Minister. He's taken a special interest in dealing with those who dare abuse their power here. I will also log what I heard."

"I appreciate it." Unable to help himself, he nodded to the form in her hand. "Are you filling out the agency's questionnaire?"

"I'm thinking about it," she said, moving the paper to the side. "Is it not... Are things not going all that well for you?"

He decided to be honest since she'd come to his aid. "I loathed the idea of being forced into this at first, but then I thought it might have merit. The matches I've been given, however, have not been, in my opinion, true matches. I wonder if the Ulbrook woman has purposely been interfering with my case, hoping that I'll become desperate enough to accept her constant advances."

"I'm so sorry that you've had to deal with this," Hermione said. "It won't happen again, and I can guarantee that whatever matches you have next round will not be tampered with."

"I thank you." He dipped his quill in the inkpot and began writing, the scratching of their quills loud in the closed in room. After a few minutes, he said, "I thought that you and Weasley were an item."

"Oh..." Her voice cracked. "Well, we were, but things have, uh, changed. I just thought I might see what this is all about. Some people are saying that it's actually given them a better lease on life."

Severus snorted and continued writing in companionable silence. He couldn't help wondering what had transpired between the girl and Weasley. He supposed the oaf had done something to drive the girl away. The boy had never been one of the fastest brooms on the pitch. Once he'd completed his complaint, he asked, "Shall I leave this

with you then?"

"Yes, and I'll make sure that Kingsley gets it. Er... the Minister." She grinned.

"Kingsley is a fair man. I'm sure he'll look into it diplomatically."

"I agree." Hermione held out her hand, which he took and shook. "Thanks for trusting me with this."

"Good day, Miss Granger."

"Good day, Professor."

Severus paused in the doorway. "I was a little... inebriated and angry when I answered the questions the first time. I wonder if I might be able to alter some of them?"

"I'm not sure how that works, but I can find out for you. Shall I send an owl when I know something?"

"That is acceptable."

"Bye."

"Until later."

He left her office feeling better than he had in days and knew that he'd finally get a fair shake. Granger might have been an annoying swot back at Hogwarts, but she'd always been honest...aside from her lie about the Troll back when Potter and Weasley had rescued her. Maybe his matches would be more appealing this time around since they'd remain unaltered.

AN: And so now they've finally met up in the story. More up soon!

Nine

Chapter 9 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks to fizzabella for the read through!!

Hello there, I am R. S. Zeal and have been head of the Yenta Livery Agency for over eighty years. I founded the company after my aunt passed away and her business, another agency, was closed. I saw how happy she made couples, and I wanted to do the same. That's the reason I couldn't refuse the Ministry when asked to join its ranks to head the new Geneamorological Agency. Geneamorology is the magical study of matchmaking, psychology, romance, and genealogy. Our company proudly uses this system, which has been in place for well over two centuries, and our workers are trained in clinical and social psychology. We vow to help find compatible relationships with potential for long-term success for every person who signs up with us.

Please answer each question honestly, as your answers will be used to determine the best possible match for you. You may speak your answers or use ink. Once you are done, simply sign the parchment, orally or via writing, and for your convenience, it will be Apparated back to the Ministry and worked in the order in which it is received.

Good luck!

R. S. Zeal

**Pre-marital and marital counseling are available for an extra fee; contact your case manager for fee schedules and availability.*

Hermione read over the man's words slowly and then glanced down at the questionnaire. "I expect he's trying to set everyone at ease by sounding so informal." She smiled to herself, albeit shakily. "It sort of works, doesn't it?" She skimmed through it once more. "I guess I'd better not read it out loud," she said, wondering if anyone else had been foolish enough to do so without realizing that their words were binding. She then gave the long list of questions a once over, ending with the section she'd have to place her signature.

I, _____, do hereby declare the above to be honest answers to the best of my ability certify my answers as complete.

"Well," she said aloud, "I guess they need to know all this to be thorough and make the best match for us." Hermione dipped her quill in ink and began filling out the questions. She had nothing to lose. All she had to do was see who her matches were and meet with them. Nothing said she had to marry any of them. If Ron and Neville could do it, she could as well.

She conjured up the image of someone she'd want and tried to push away thoughts of Ron. She'd need someone who was the complete opposite of Ron: dark hair, dark eyes, and more intellectual with a full education and training beyond. Blood status never mattered to her, but she wondered how many who'd filled out the forms had requested purebloods only.

Would her prospective matches look down on her for being estranged from her family? For her part in their decision to remain so far away? No, she didn't want someone who'd been married before or who had any children. Previous ties might cause problems for them. Salary was important. She wanted a mate who made a comparable amount of money so that they contribute equally to the marriage. Her recent diagnosis of Endometriosis had made her realize that she did want a child or children, and while she still didn't want to become pregnant right away, she didn't want to put it off for a decade while she established her career either. She only wished she'd had her epiphany earlier. Then she'd not be filling out a damn questionnaire for the Ministry's Geneamorological Agency.

Sex didn't matter to her. She liked sex well enough and had enjoyed it with Ron, her only partner. However, it would be awkward to just start having sex with someone

new, especially if it were someone she'd never met before. Of course she'd have to have it to become pregnant, and so she jotted this down in an attempt to be honest. Several questions were left blank, as she felt the need to think on them for a while before answering. When she heard the Floo flare up, she put the parchment away and strode into her living room to see Ginny's head floating in the fire.

"Can I come through?" Ginny asked.

"Of course. I've been expecting you."

"Harry told me a little," Ginny said. "Wait. Hold that thought." Ginny's head disappeared for a moment and was replaced by her entire body. Soon she stepped out and dusted off the soot from her dress. "Now, I think you need a woman's advice, right?"

"A friend's at least," Hermione said, beckoning Ginny to follow her back into her kitchen. "I'll put on some tea for us."

The house-elf popped into the kitchen when Hermione placed the kettle on the hob. "Is Shorty being needed?"

"No, sorry, Shorty. I want to speak with my friend in privacy."

"Very well." The house-elf then disappeared.

Once Ginny was seated and Hermione had placed a tin of biscuits on the table, she sat across from her friend. "The tea will only be a moment."

"That's fine," Ginny replied, reaching for a chocolate biscuit. "What's going on?"

"What did you think of Ron's match?"

"She was nice. I sort of remember her from school, but not all that well."

"What do you think he thinks of her?"

"I think he's trying hard to not compare her to you. I think he does like her, but he probably feels like he's betraying you."

"Do you think she could make him happy?"

"I think *you* could make him happy, Hermione. I can't believe you're even considering not telling him what you feel."

"Well, looks like Harry told you more than just a little."

"Well, maybe he did, but only after I swore not to tell anyone else. Why would you do this? You know Ron wants a life with you."

"Did Harry tell you about my visit with the Healer?"

"Well, he did mention that, but you know as well as me that with magic, anything is possible. You'll be all right, I'm positive!"

"But it's not guaranteed. Even for us magical folk." Hermione rose to get the teapot and poured them each a cup. "I've read over the information my Healer gave me, and I've looked up information online. Sometimes the outlook is grim, witch or no."

Ginny shook her head. "Hermione, Ron would want to weather this with you. There are other options."

"Ginny, think about it. Think about Ron. Then tell me that he wouldn't be disappointed to never have children the normal way? Sure he'd love any adopted children, but you know as well as I that he wants to be a part of the entire process, wants his own blood to carry on his family name." She sighed. "The way she looked at him... I used to look at him that way."

"You still do."

"No, I don't. We're used to each other, know about each other's faults and have been arguing about them. She looks at him with wonder and curiosity and possibilities. Not long ago I was saying that I would not be forced into marriage, I would not be forced into having babies before I was ready, and here I am, wanting marriage and a baby."

"I think it's normal, isn't it? Seeing what you might be losing? Then finding out you may develop problems in the future? That can't be easy."

"I love Ronald enough to give him this chance with Samantha. I told Harry that if it turns out that he and she don't work out, I'll tell him the truth. However, if he can be happy with her, I won't stop it. Not when there's no guarantee that I can give him what she can."

"How do you know she can? You don't know that!"

"I'd feel like I am trying to trap him by luring him back to me knowing that I might not conceive."

"It was only the once, Hermione. That doesn't prove anything."

"I've been thinking about that. I thought it was only the one time, but it's about four times all together."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the first time we ever had sex, we were unprotected. It was a spur of the moment thing. Then there was the night after one of the Ministry balls and the night you married Harry." She took a sip of her cooling tea. "So that might be three other times that I didn't conceive."

"I don't approve of this," Ginny said sadly, "but I love you and want you to do what your heart says. I only wish you'd be honest with Ron. It's not right. It's his life, too, and he should have a say in it."

"How can I know for sure if he wouldn't just act noble? Stay with me because it's what he should do?"

Ginny drank some of her tea and popped another chunk of a biscuit into her mouth before answering. "You're grasping now. You'll never know the answer to that unless you talk to him yourself."

Hermione nodded to the parchment she'd set aside earlier. "I've started filling out a questionnaire for the Geneamology Agency."

"What's the rush? Why? Don't do that!"

"It's like a clock is ticking inside me! It feels like if I don't act now, it will be too late."

"Then act now with Ron! Trust your instinct!"

"My instinct is also telling me to let Ron go, that it's best for him, that I should do this with someone who knows up front that it may not happen." She tapped the parchment with her finger. "I'm putting this all down in writing so the person knows before meeting me. If I end up being an inadequate wife, then he was warned beforehand."

"Is that what you're afraid of? That you'll be inadequate for Ron?"

"He wants... he wants someone like your mum, and I don't know that I can ever be her. Even if I could, I don't know that I'd want to. I still want my career and will have to make sacrifices to see that realized, children or not."

Taking another sip of tea, Ginny frowned. "There's no talking to you when you're like this."

"I just wish you could see my side of things."

"I guess it's hard."

"What if you'd found out that you might not be able to have children? You know Harry, like Ron, wants a family of his own more than anything. Wouldn't you feel as though you were letting him down?"

"I would, yes, but I'd still talk to him about everything. I love him that much and know that he loves me enough to be honest. Not telling Ron is unfair. You should trust him."

"That's the problem. I do trust him. I trust him to choose me, despite what he might feel for this Samantha, despite that we might never conceive." She pushed her cup aside. "And then he'll be the one wondering what might have been if he'd only chosen the other woman. I can't live like that. I can't ruin his chances at a normal life."

Ginny rose. "I need to get back."

"I'm sorry you don't understand."

"I do. I just don't have to like it. I think you're doing yourself...and Ron...a disservice by keeping this to yourself." She turned away and then looked back. "And now you've got me and Harry in on it. It feels... wrong to me." Ginny tried to smile. "Just think about what I've said. What Harry's said. No matter what, we're still your friends and consider you family. That doesn't mean we have to agree all the time, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I know. Thanks for coming."

"I can only hope my words helped a little."

After Ginny left, Hermione gazed at the questionnaire but didn't finish filling it out. Maybe they were right. Maybe she should speak to Ron. She stood, fetched something from her cabinet, and then made her way into the living room to use its grate.

"Hermione," Ron said in surprise. "Do you want to come through?"

"I'd like that very much. Er, are you alone?"

"I am, yeah."

Hermione stepped further into the grate and walked out into Ron's living room. "I want to talk to you about some things."

"All right. I was thinking about going over to your place." There was an awkward pause before he said, "About the other day... Uh..."

"That's what I want to talk to you about." She took his hand and led him over to the couch. "I want you to be very honest with me about some things."

"Of course. You know I will."

"Sit here. I'll fix us a drink. What would you like?"

"Anything is fine."

Muffin padded into the room and sniffed Hermione's feet before moving over to sit beside Ron on the couch possessively.

"She's really taken a liking to you I see."

"From the start," Ron said, scratching the small dog behind the ears.

"I think I'd like some pumpkin juice. Have any?"

"I do. Want me to get it?"

"No, I'll be right back."

Hermione quickly found the kitchen, poured two glasses of pumpkin juice, and then pulled a small vial from the pocket of her robes. She placed a few drops in Ron's glass and then put it away before returning to the living room.

"Looks good in there. I see you changed things up a bit."

"Yeah," he said, reaching for his glass, "been getting rid of some of the old lady's stuff. Mum likes a lot of the junk I've tossed out. Naturally."

"Bet your dad's having a field day with some of this Muggle stuff."

"You know it." He smiled and took a deep drink from his glass. "Now, what do you want to talk about? I could tell that you had something else to say the other day. I've been trying to figure out how to approach you, but... I wasn't sure what to say. What you'd want me to say."

"It shouldn't be what I want you to say but what you want to say to me."

He nodded and took another sip of his juice. "I know. I just don't want to hurt you."

"What I'm about to ask might hurt me, but I'd rather know the truth. Promise?"

"Yes."

"Do you like her?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Samantha."

"Yeah, I do."

"Do you think you could love her?"

"Yeah." He opened his eyes wide. "What the...? I didn't mean to say that."

"Yes, you did," Hermione said softly. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," he replied immediately.

"I went to see my Healer, and I found out some things."

Concern flitted through his eyes. "All right? What did you find out?"

"I have something called endometriosis. Remember those pains I have when it's my time?"

He nodded. "What is this endometeors?"

"Endometriosis. It's some tissue that is latching on to the wrong place and causing pain."

"Well, what kind of potion can they give you?"

"Pain potion that's supposed to be really good. And there are other options, such as trying to lower my estrogen levels or even surgery."

Ron blinked uncertainly. "What are you going to do? Is that necessary?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm only at the early stage so far, but there's something that endometriosis plays a major factor in."

"You're scaring me. Are you going to die?"

She smiled. "No. It's not like that. It's just that about forty percent of women who have infertility problems also have endometriosis. Healers believe that it releases something into the body that stops eggs from implanting, making it hard for a woman to get pregnant. There are a lot of theories actually."

"So... there's only a slim chance that you can't get pregnant."

"I was thinking about us...when we had sex. There were four times that I know of that we had sex, and nothing came of it." She took a sip of her own drink. "The only time that I'm sure that I was ovulating was the last time we were together. I hadn't taken the potion, and yet, nothing happened, so I'm worried that I am one of the women that it affects."

"Well, you said there was treatment, right?"

She nodded. "Not guaranteed of course." She placed her glass on the table next to the couch. "Ron, if you and I were together, how would you feel if we could never have children?"

"Disappointed," he said immediately before slapping a hand over his mouth. "I mean to say... initially, I'd be disappointed, but we'd just have to keep trying."

"What if you'd never be a dad?"

"That would be hard, but..." His eyes widened as he looked at his glass. "Hermione, what did you do?"

"Veritaserum. I had to be sure you would be honest with me."

"Without my permission! What's got into you?" He tossed the glass across the room and jumped up. "Don't you trust me?"

"I think you'd try to be noble and do what you think is right instead of what your heart is telling you!"

"I love you. I want to be with you more than anyone else in the world," he said angrily.

"And would you be completely happy if we never had children?"

"No... shite."

"How would you feel about adoption?"

"I'd do it."

"And you wouldn't feel as though you've missed out on something?"

"Of course I would." He glared at her. "It's not coming out right! Fucking Veritaserum!"

"Would you resent me later in life, thinking that you'd missed your chance at a normal life if you choose me instead of pursuing Samantha?"

"I don't know," he said quietly. "Are you saying you want me back? Is that what this is?"

"I would, yes, but now that I know this, I'm afraid I won't be what you want."

"You're everything I want in a woman. I just hope you can..."

"Bear your children?"

"Yes."

"If you had a choice of a life with a wife who could have your children or one who may not be able to give you any, what would you choose?"

His face turned red, and he blurted, "One with children." He grimaced, as if at war with himself, and sat down on the couch again, putting his head in his hands. "This isn't fair, Hermione. How could you?"

"I realized that I want to have your children, that I don't want to wait, and then, like a slap in the face, I find out that it might not be possible. It's definitely not fair. And now... now you've found someone else, and I hate it. I hate her. I don't want you to love anyone else, yet I can't see any other way for us. The best thing I can do for you is let you move on. I love you that much, enough to make sure you can find the complete happiness that I might not be able to give you."

He began sniffing loudly, and though she couldn't see his eyes, she knew that he was crying. She slid closer and held him, each lost in thought for a long time.

"So that's what you wanted to tell me the other day," he said. "I knew that you must have come to work things out. Then I saw your face, could hear the hurt in your voice..." He looked at her evenly with teary eyes. "You say you don't want to hurt me; well, I don't want to hurt you either. How can I move on knowing that you love me,

that you want me? I love you too much to leave you alone."

"I want you to be happy."

"We can try to be happy together."

"But would we succeed? That is the question. Do you think I could be happy knowing that I'd let you down?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Just know that I love you, Ron, and that you have my blessing to move forward with your life. I would have chosen you. I would have wanted what you want. The choice seems to be out of my hands."

"Hermione..."

She pressed her lips against his for a chaste kiss. "I'm going to use the agency, too."

Ron stood up at this. "You're off to find someone else?"

"Not really. I just want to see what matches they show me. Maybe there will be someone who doesn't have children that high on his priority list. Someone who just wants a companion."

"This doesn't make sense! What are we doing here, Hermione?"

"We're making the best choice, I think."

"You're making this choice."

"No, we both are. You gave me honest answers." She stood up and went to him, but he shied away from her touch. "You know that this is right."

"I don't know that it's right."

"Do you want to try to make a life with Samantha?"

"Yes, but only if I can't have that life with you."

"That's what I mean. That life. Us, kids, a big happy home."

"Yeah," he said softly. "I can live without being a father by blood, Hermione. See? I'm saying it with your bloody truth serum!"

"You're saying that you could live with it, but it wouldn't be your first choice. Would it?"

He shook his head, unable to reply.

"Exactly." She took a step away from him. "From this moment on, we'll only be friends. I'll always love you and support you, Ron. Know that you can always come to me if you need anything."

"Anything but you in my bed as my wife?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"So am I." He turned away from her and scooped up Muffin, who'd been clicking her claws on the hardwood floor as she walked back and forth nervously.

"Goodbye, Ron," she whispered and headed for the Floo, hoping that what she'd done was the right thing and already regretting her manipulation of him.

AN: Hermione's really making some emotion-driven decisions here.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Same disclaimer as usual.

Thanks go to Fizzabella for the beta read!

Severus tossed the Ministry scroll onto the top of this desk and strode angrily to the window. Glancing out, he thought back to the conversation he'd had with Hermione Granger. What a fool he'd been! He'd trusted her to speak with the Minister on his behalf, to help right the wrongs that had been done to him, and now she'd done the same thing that bloody Ulbrook woman had been trying to do. Angrily, he went back to his desk, snatched up the scroll, and left the room.

He then pulled on his cloak and strode out of his home, intent on going to the Ministry. "I'll see about this," he muttered. The crisp air accosted him as he made his way to dark water of the river next to his subdivision. What was the girl's plan? What could she have to gain by placing herself as one of his matches? Was she as desperate as Brocklehurst had been? Whatever the reason, she would explain herself.

It didn't take long to Apparate to the Ministry and find his way to her office. Without bothering to knock, he strode in and slammed the door shut behind him, relishing when

she startled and grabbed at her chest.

"Professor!" she said, gasping. "You scared me!"

"Good," he said, stepping closer to tower over her seated form. "Explain this." He tossed the scroll he'd been holding onto her desk.

She gingerly reached for the scroll, not taking her eyes off of him. "If this is about changing your answers, I was going to owl you this evening."

"Indeed? So you admit it then?" He narrowed his eyes at her. "Why?"

"Sorry? Admit what?" she asked.

"Stop playing coy with me! You doublecrossed me!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said firmly. "And... I would appreciate it if you would go back to the other side of my desk and have a seat. I'm sure we can work out whatever..." Her words trailed away as her eyes drifted to the open parchment. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Feigning innocence then? I suppose it's a coincidence that you and I have been matched!" He didn't appreciate that she thought she could hoodwink him. "Don't lie to me."

"I am not lying. You think that I planned to...what? You think I've done what old Ulbrook was trying to do? I assure you that she has been demoted and is no longer in charge of anyone's matches. I would never do something like that!" she said indignantly, rising from her chair. "There has to be a logical explanation for this," she said, shaking the parchment. "Will you sit down so we can get to the bottom of this?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, he sat down and continued to glare at her. He met her eyes and couldn't discern any lies in them. Could it truly be a coincidence?

At that moment, one of the Ministry's interoffice memos flew into the room in the form of a paper airplane and landed on Hermione's desk. Before she could reach for it, it popped into the form of an envelope in a small puff of smoke. He watched as she sat at her desk and reached for it with shaky fingers and noted the Ministry's Geneamorphological Agency's crest stamped on the outside.

Granger opened it and read over the contents. "It's true," she said finally. "You are one of my matches. The third on my list." She seemed genuinely surprised.

"You mean you had no hand in this?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Of course not. I'm as taken aback as you are."

Severus stood. "... I shouldn't have come here like this, but I could think only that..."

"Only that I'd done something horrible. I spent so many years hoping to gain your approval, and you still think the worst of me." She threw the parchment onto her desk and leaned back in her chair. "I have no idea why we would be matched. I don't know that we truly have anything in common at all. This just makes me second guess the entire process. I mean, it can't be valid."

Straightening his spine, he said, "Don't worry. You would never be my first choice either, Miss Granger."

"That's not what... Oh, I see." She nodded. "You told me yourself that your answers were less than truthful. That explains it. As I was trying to tell you earlier, the Minister told me that he was certain you could change your answers since your matches hadn't been successful. I was going to owl you on my way out."

"That explains it then." He sneered at the woman before him. "I personally prefer redheads, but I mistakenly said brunette."

"Why? Why would you say brunette if that's not what you wanted?"

"I didn't realize that oral answers sufficed. I was simply reading through it and making snide comments as I did so. It... it popped away when I finished reading."

"You've got to be joking," she said, a hint of laughter in her voice. "I wondered if anyone would be foolish enough to do that. I never thought ~~that~~ you would be."

"As I told you before, I was angry and intoxicated. I wasn't thinking clearly. You forget that you are doing this by choice. I haven't one." He spun on his heel and reached for the door.

"Professor, wait."

He arched an eyebrow and turned back to face her. "Yes?"

"I didn't mean to insult you. If you don't like either of the other two matches this time, you are welcome to change your answers and perhaps get true results." She gave him a small smile. "I sincerely wish you luck."

Not sure what to say, he nodded. "... I wish you well also." He turned back to the door, and instead of opening it, he spun to face her and seated himself in the chair again. "Why are you doing this? I don't understand. Is this some misguided attempt to join the less fortunate? Are you on some crusade to save the unfortunates like myself whom this agency is affecting?"

She sucked in a deep breath and said, "The truth is complicated, and it's a long story. I just thought I'd put my form through to see what results were yielded. To be honest, I didn't expect much, but I'd hoped that it might work."

"Where is Weasley?"

"At home I expect."

"You know what I mean." He gazed at her until he saw her squirm slightly. "You told me that you and he were no longer an item, but I wonder what happened that would send you in this direction."

"I can't believe I'm going to tell you this, but... I might as well." She shifted in her seat and began toying with her quill. "Ron asked me to marry him. I knew that it was coming, and I'd been thinking about all the reasons why we shouldn't rush into it. My main reasons were wanting to get ahead in my career, not wanting to marry just because it was expected of us by friends and family, and I wasn't ready to start a family." She shrugged. "We talked about it, disagreed on some things, and couldn't come to an agreement that suited each of us."

"Such as?"

"Such as, I wanted to wait five years before trying for a family while he wants to start soon." She smiled wanly. "I was a fool."

"How so? I see nothing wrong with someone wanting to try their hand at their career first. You've a long life ahead of you. Nothing but time, Miss Granger." Severus wasn't sure why, but he detested the thought of the girl being chained to Weasley and ending up like Molly.

"Time, as it turns out, is not on my side, Professor."

"How so?" he asked curiously. "Are you dying?"

"No, not dying, but I do have a medical issue."

"Have you been to a Healer?"

"Yes, one."

"Have you been to another for a second opinion? What is the condition? The field of medicinal potions is making advances each day."

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable discussing something so private with you, but I can tell you that there is no cure for this." She swallowed thickly before speaking again. "I have something that females get, and sometimes it hinders the possibility of pregnancy."

"I see." He gazed at her for a moment, sizing her up, before saying, "But you just said that you weren't ready for children now. Maybe it's just as well. You might never have been ready."

She snorted. "Of course I had to see this lovely little family while out for a walk, and I had an epiphany. I wanted what Ron wanted after all. I didn't want to wait. I thought it felt as though time were about to run out on me, which could be the case, mind."

"So, did you tell him?" he asked, honestly intrigued. Had the prat turned her out when he'd found out about her condition?

"I went to tell him, and he had company, a lady...one he'd come in contact with through the matchmaking agency." Her eyes stared forward, but she wasn't seeing him. She was lost in memory. "I knew then that my chance had passed, that she could give him what I might never be able to."

"And so you made the decision for him," he said mockingly. "How noble of you."

She frowned. "If you must know, I... I talked to him after Harry and Ginny convinced me to do so. We've decided that it's for the best that we go our separate ways."

"Oh..."

"Don't think badly of him. He tried to talk me into trying, but in the long run, I think it just wouldn't have worked, no matter how much we love each other."

"And now you're looking to enter into a relationship with someone while you love another." He curled his lip. "And you intend to try to bring a child into that if possible I gather? How would that be for the best?"

"I don't know what your interest in this is, but I just thought that maybe I could find someone who is looking for the same things that I am. At least the person would know ahead of time that children might never be possible. At least I answered all of my questions honestly." She picked up the scroll he'd given her when he'd entered and tossed it at his chest. "Unlike some people. This talk is over. PI-please leave."

Her voice had taken on a slight tremor, and Severus feared she might burst into tears. "I will leave you then," he said, quickly fleeing before any sobbing could ensue. The last thing he needed was some frantic woman wailing about things that didn't concern him.

One thing that he'd previously thought had been confirmed however. Weasley was definitely not the fastest broom on the pitch, and the oaf had probably let the best thing he'd ever have going for him go when he'd let her walk out of his life. It wasn't until he'd got home that he realized that *he* might be the type of man she now sought. Why else would he have turned up as one of her matches?

"Well, she's right. I wasn't truthful about my answers." Puzzled, he went to the small sitting room and found a copy of his questionnaire on the rickety table. As he read over the answers, he realized that most of what he'd said hadn't been that far from the truth after all. "Granger..." he said aloud, realizing she and his ideal match seemed to blend with ease. He truly would prefer a younger woman, and he had nothing against her being a Muggle-born. Granger's body was quite attractive to him, as he'd always been fond of women who were built strongly. She was at ease in the Muggle world, having grown up there, which was the same for him. Her salary was probably comparable to his, if not better. Aside from his preference for eye color and hair color, Granger seemed to go along with what he wanted from a woman.

Shrugging away a feeling of uneasiness, he left the room and went down to his personal lab to check on some potions he'd left brewing. School would be starting soon, and he wanted his stores to be well stocked. While he worked, Granger's medical condition plagued him. What did she suffer from? Had Weasley given her some sort of sexually transmitted disease? He made a mental note to seek information in some of his texts that dealt with feminine complaints. Maybe something would jump out at him. Perhaps if he guessed correctly, he might be able to help her somehow. If she'd even want his help that was.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks to fizzabella for beta reading this!

After Snape had left, Hermione had looked at her parchment again to learn more about her other two matches. One was none other than Rufus Fudge, the old Minister's nephew, who worked in the Improper Use of Magic Office. The man was older than she, quite intelligent to be sure, but she didn't think she could ever find herself attracted to him. Would he be someone with whom she could explain her situation to and come to some sort of agreement? She hadn't interacted with him much in the past, but he seemed to keep to himself mostly. She supposed she could meet with him at least. Maybe after she talked to him, he might be more appealing to her.

The other name on her list was someone unfamiliar to her: Artemius Lawson. It would be easy to find information on him if she so chose. She was a Ministry employee after all. Her mind, however, wandered back to Snape. If he'd been truthful with his answers, would he still have shown up as one of her matches? She rolled her eyes at the direction her thoughts had gone.

He'd already admitted that she wouldn't be someone whom he'd pick. Of course he wouldn't have been on her list. It had been refreshing to talk to someone objective about the goings on in her life. Not that she didn't appreciate Ginny and Harry lending an ear, but Snape had no stake in what her decision would be. He'd made her feel a little better about her decision at one point when he'd agreed that wanting to get ahead in her career first wasn't something terrible. However, he'd ended up being quite blunt near the end, but at least she knew it wasn't because he was biased in Ron's favor. He was simply trying to see the other side of the coin.

She couldn't think about it any more today and decided it was time to go home and have a soak in her tub...after she stopped off at her mate's office to see if there was any information on this Lawson bloke. Hermione then wondered if Fudge had received his list of matches as well. She hoped that she wouldn't run into him just yet. She wasn't ready for it or the discussion it would entail. However, luck, it seemed was not on her side.

Rufus Fudge sat across from Hermione and looked everywhere but in her eyes. "It was fortuitous that we met today. I'd just received the owl," he said.

"Yes, it was indeed." She wished he'd at least look at her. Was it possible that the man was truly *this* shy? "Thank you for the invite for drinks to talk about this." She felt anything but grateful. She'd just left John's office with information about Lawson when Fudge had nearly knocked her over as he hurried toward the atrium. He'd reddened drastically upon realizing whom he'd bowled over and had promptly asked her for drinks to discuss the match letter. She'd agreed and hadn't seen a single thing yet that would make her consider him as a match.

His dark hair curled madly under his hat, which was lime green like the one his uncle wore, and his brown eyes reminded her of Ginny's. They were big and bright and beautifully shaped, which looked strange on a bloke's face if she were honest. Rufus was also on the heavy side, not that she minded much. Who was she to complain when she'd gained a stone in the last year?

"So..." she began, "what would you like to talk about?"

"I don't think we'll work," he blurted.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Oh... all right."

"N-no offense to you, but I need someone," his eyes met hers finally, "less assertive and less prone to chattering."

"I see," she said, completely insulted.

"You're great," he said, "and beautiful, but I just need someone a bit more..."

"You, sir, are looking for a mouse, not a wife." She rose from the table. "No hard feelings, all right?"

"None. Thank you," he said. "And I don't want a mouse." His voice had taken on a surprisingly firm tone. "I just want someone who won't try to use my gentle nature against me, someone who will compromise and take guidance."

Hermione's mouth opened, ready to form an indignant reply, but instead, she turned and fled the Leaky Cauldron, wanting to distance herself from the man who'd just offended her more than anyone had in years. Was it true? How could someone who didn't know her pull that observation out of thin air? Is that how Ron felt? That she tried to contradict him? Make him conform to her ways? That she wouldn't compromise?

The man's words had stung. She'd now been rejected by two men on her list: first Snape and now Fudge. Nothing Snape had said had hurt her this much. She supposed it was because she would expect nothing less from Snape, but this... "Is this how the world sees me?" she wondered. Perhaps she would do well to forgo the idea of finding a match. Why should she try to force herself on anyone else? She remembered the papers in her pocket. If Lawson didn't seem appealing, she'd not ask to have her questionnaire sent through again. She wasn't sure how much more rejection she could take.

"At least the lump said I'm beautiful," she said, the compliment only slightly softening the blow of his other words.

Instead of tapping the bricks to head into Diagon Alley, Hermione Disapparated, deciding to go home instead. The instant she appeared in her living room, Shorty bustled into the room.

"Mistress is having a hot bath the way she likes it. Mistress is having wine waiting for her. Shorty is fixing her a meal."

"I... Shorty," she said, taking on a chastising tone, "have you been spying on me again?"

"Spying? Shorty isn't spying. Shorty is knowing what his mistress needs."

She grinned. "Well, thanks." Sometimes she appreciated the little house-elf more than she'd ever thought possible. It was almost like having her mum back and taking care of her. Almost.

"I expect Harry's right. I need to make another trip to Australia."

Hermione rid herself of all thought while she shed her clothing and stepped into the hot, soothing, bubbly water waiting for her. After soaking a while, she reached for the wineglass and then drank its chilled liquor, smacking her lips. "Mmmm."

Her eyes fell to her clothing on the floor, and she noticed the corner of a paper sticking out from its pocket. "Right! Lawson." She flicked her wand. *Accio parchment.*

"Let's see what John copied for me."

Artemius Lawson hails from a long line of purebloods from Surrey who own a private estate on the outskirts of Haslemere. He reached the age of thirty-six on 10 March this year.

Her eyes drifted to the man's picture at the bottom of the page. He had an arrogant expression and seemed put out that someone had taken a photo of him. His hair was a deep brown, but his eyes were quite black, much like Professor Snape's. The left side of this face had bad scarring, as if he'd been burned badly.

Lawson often writes to the Wizengamot and any paper that will publish his letters to put forth his views on trolls and other magical creatures. He feels that they are too large and dangerous to be left roaming about. His famous quote after the battle of Hogwarts back in 1998 when a few trolls mingled into the fray under Lord Thingy's direction was "The beasts weigh a bloody ton and have a brain the size of a bogey. See what happens when you leave them on their own? They take up with the first Dark Wizard that comes their way and offers them something shiny. Lock the bastards up and toss away the key!"

Hermione partially agreed with him, having had a bad experience with the troll back at Hogwarts in her first year. Lots of magical creatures would never be able to integrate into society. Giants were another example. Grawp had made some improvements, but she wasn't certain he'd ever be able to live on his own without Hagrid's direction. To hear Hagrid tell it, giants could never be trusted completely. His own mum had taken off and abandoned him. They turned on each other at the drop of a hat as well.

However, back to the man at hand, she didn't like his tone. Just because trolls were dumb, she didn't believe they should be locked away. What she believed was that some sort of sanctuary could be built for them to live in peacefully. They shouldn't be exploited for their size either. She gazed back at Lawson's picture and decided she liked the man even less. What would he think about house-elves? He probably had a house full of the poor creatures.

"Hope he treats them well at least," she said quietly. Why would the matchmakers have seen fit to put him as one of her matches? Puzzled, she thought about her answers.

His physical description fit what she'd requested, as did his age, but she'd definitely written that she believed in the betterment of lesser magical creatures. Maybe her interests had been misunderstood somehow. Had the matchmakers considered his views to be a way to better the lives of the trolls? She certainly hoped not.

Going on to finish reading about Lawson, she decided that if he should try to contact her for a meeting, she would politely let him know that she was no longer looking for a spouse and would wish him luck in finding someone. The sod was probably looking for someone to join his crusade. She was sure, though, that they would likely be on opposite sides of many issues.

"So three down. How the bloody hell did Neville and Ron find matches so damn easily?" She smirked at her swearing. It wasn't often she did so, but she felt justified in its usage now. "And Snape's gone through this at least three times already. Rotten luck."

After eating Shorty's delicious meal, Hermione sat in front of her computer screen and went to her homepage to do some searching through her Wizarding Internet Service Provider, which the Wizarding world at large affectionately called WISP. As before, she typed in endometriosis and pregnancy, but this time she added forum. She wanted to see what others had to say about their experiences with it. Several links popped up through the search page, and she clicked on the first one.

AnnoyedMomToBe...Ten minutes ago

Today I started having some cramping, and I'm scared shitless that it might be a miscarriage coming on. My Healers told me it was possible to have an ectopic pregnancy because of where my endometriosis is placed. Anyone else have cramps at only a few weeks pregnant?

HatezHealers...Thirteen minutes ago

As I told you in a previous post, WannaBeMom, you should try other ways to conceive and not rely on Healers so much! I couldn't conceive until I had sex under a full moon on the twentieth day of my cycle!

WannaBeMom...Nineteen minutes ago

Um, yeah, well, my Healer said otherwise, and he's educated, so I'm going to stick to that.

WannaBeMom...Twenty minutes ago

This is @ BigJohnsonsWitch: so if you don't have sex all month and wait till you ovulate, that's the best chance? I'm just making sure. You are a Healer's assistant, right? That sounds like what mine says.

HatezHealers...Twenty-two minutes ago

Just because the Healer said so doesn't mean it's true! They just want your Galleons!

WTF...Twenty-seven minutes ago

Uh, scared and confused, you're kidding right? Of course you're doing the right thing. Think of all the times you tried and nothing happened. It was Fate that this happened right now. Your ex just wasn't the right one for you; nor was it the right time!

ScaredAndConfused...Twenty-nine minutes ago

I was diagnosed with endo about four years ago right after I got married. I'd been suffering from pain during my period for a long time, but when we started having sex, and I noticed the pain then, too, I knew it was time to see a Healer. They told me I had Stage 2 when they went in to check me, and they said I would probably never get pregnant. My hubby and I tried for a whole year after that and nothing happened. I finally consented to having a surgery for it to ease the pain, and they were able to not mess with my ovaries or anything. They started me on fertility treatments, and after six months, my hubby and I called it quits. It just took too much effort on our parts, and we both resented each other. Every month was a big disappointment. I've since then dated two other men and had unprotected sex with both of them. Nothing ever happened until three months ago.

I missed a period and found out that I am pregnant. It's the best feeling of my life, but I'm so afraid that something will go wrong. I feel sad that I couldn't share this with my ex-husband. Maybe if we hadn't tried so hard, it would have happened for us. Every time I saw him with his new wife and two kids, I hated them, hated her for what she could do for him that I couldn't. I guess part of me still loves him, but I do care for my current boyfriend, one of the two blokes I've been seeing off and on since my marriage.

We aren't very serious about each other, meaning we aren't anywhere near getting married, so I feel strange about bringing this baby into the world as a single mother. I mean, sure, he'll help out, but it's not like he'll be here every day with me. I'm scared and confused. Am I doing the right thing by going through with this? The Healers said that I'd never get pregnant, and they made me go through all that rubbish. Now I've done it on my own when I least expected it!

Hermione stopped reading. Was she going about this all wrong? If she worried about it, it wouldn't happen. It was something her Mum had always said as well. A watched pot never boiled. Maybe a watched egg never got fertilized. Would she and Ron have ended up hating each other like this woman and her husband? If so, she was glad that they'd parted before the bitterness and resentment had built up. Hopefully after time had passed, they could be friends. Having Ron in her life in some capacity was better than not having him at all.

KeepOnSmiling...Thirty-two minutes ago

I just want to tell you guys that you shouldn't give up! I tried and tried and tried to get pregnant and thought it would never happen. Then one day it did! I now have a beautiful five-year-old daughter. I've never been able to conceive again, but my endometriosis took a break while I was pregnant, and the pain has lessened considerably since her birth! I'll never give up hope for another. You guys shouldn't either!

WTF...Thirty-eight minutes ago

Get the laparoscopy. It's the only way to know for sure if it's endo or not and how severe it is.

CuriousAnn...Forty minutes ago

Does a laparoscopy hurt? My Healer wants me to have one, but I refused. It sounds complicated.

Sighing, Hermione clicked to leave the screen. Some of these made her feel that pregnancy was possible, but then others made her wonder if she wasn't getting her hopes up again. Was it truly something left up to Fate? What if she and Ron hadn't conceived because they weren't meant to be? She remembered her mother talking about unanswered prayers once. She'd heard a song by some American singer titled the same, and she'd said that it reminded her of how she'd felt about the man she'd dated before Hermione's father. Jane had cried when he'd left her, and she'd prayed to God to let him come back to her, which he hadn't. Then she'd met John Granger. She said she'd realized that God had had a plan for her, and that was for Hermione to be born. Sometimes unanswered prayers happened for a reason.

With that thought in mind, she opened up her email page to see what she'd received. Happily, and coincidentally, she noticed something from her mother. Immediately, she clicked on it. To her disappointment, it wasn't anything personal, just what Muggles called a forward, which contained some odd joke or nonsense. But at least her

mother had thought to send it to her. Clicking on reply, Hermione decided it was time to tell her mother what was happening, and hopefully, she would get some good advice in return. She hadn't missed her mum more than she did in that moment the entire time they'd been gone.

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to fizzabella for cheerleading and beta reading.

Lucius Malfoy closed the book softly, rose from his chair, and went to place it back on his shelf before he turned around to face his friend. "And you aren't going to offer for her?" he asked incredulously.

"What? Haven't you been listening?"

"I have indeed," Lucius said, seating himself across from Severus once again. "It's perfect. You're not looking for love, as you're still pining away for...I say! Don't glare at me that way! You know it's true."

"I am no longer pining away for Lily. I've made amends and did what I sought to do."

"If you say so, Severus," Lucius said in a disbelieving tone. "Regardless, you don't want love again. You've told me that. All you want is companionship, someone to have sex with on a regular basis. It sounds like that's what she is looking for. You wouldn't be expected to do any wooing, no lying about feelings. Everything is out in the open already. She loves someone else, and no matter what you say, so do you. It's perfect."

Severus sneered and wished that he could hex Lucius, a thought he had often. The man was just too smug for his own good. "It's different."

"How so?"

"She's... You know damn well how so! I'd have to put up with Potter if I made a marital arrangement with Granger! The only thing I want to see of him is his backside. He'll be coming round all the time...he and his wife and whatever brood they might have."

"Who cares?" Lucius said with a shrug. "Do what I do. Escape to your private study. You don't think I always sat round listening to Bella and Cissy's constant gossip, do you?" He smiled lazily. "Sometimes that can't be helped...your wife's family. Hmm. I do miss Rodolphus though."

"As do I," Severus said. "I should go to see him."

"As should I, but..." Lucius shuddered slightly. "When I left Azkaban, I vowed never to go back."

"I will send your regards when I go."

"If he'll see you."

"I know." Severus frowned. "I expect he won't, but I can try all the same."

"Think about what I said. Offer for Granger. It'll stop you from going through all that rubbish of meeting new women every couple of weeks."

"I don't think she's interested anyway."

"There's one way to find out."

"I'll think about it."

Lucius nodded and rose, going to the fire. "Drafty tonight, isn't it?"

"I was thinking the same."

"Bozzy?" Lucius called out.

Pop! "Master is calling Bozzy?"

"Yes, I need you to do something for me." Lucius strode over to his desk, wrote something down on a piece of parchment, and then gave it to the elf. "Have Achilles send this out straightaway."

"Bozzy will do as master bids," the elf said before popping away.

Severus felt suddenly uneasy. "What was that about? Why are you smirking at me?"

"Oh... that? It was nothing." Lucius shrugged and sat down, twirling his wand in his hand. "I just sent a note out to Miss Granger."

"WHAT?" Severus shouted. "You jest!"

"No. I asked her to meet me... er, you, at your home in about thirty minutes if she was free. I even included directions." He quickly flicked his wand, shouting *Protego!* and was able to block Severus' hex. "You'll thank me later."

"Bastard!" Severus said. "Bozzy! Come here!" He looked back at Lucius. "You're my Secret-Keeper! How could you?"

"She'll probably be living there with you soon enough, Severus. Might as well get that out of the way, right?"

A moment later, Bozzy popped back into the room, his large, oval-shaped, green eyes wide with alarm. "You has called Bozzy?"

"Where's the letter?"

"Bozzy has done what master instructed. Achilles has left with the letter his master is sending."

"To whom was the letter addressed?"

The elf looked over to Lucius for guidance. When the man nodded in approval, the elf said, "Miss Granger."

"Damn it, Lucius!" Severus yelled, casting a thunderous expression at his friend. "You'll pay for this."

"No, my friend, you'll be paying me for this."

"Oh, yes, I'll pay you back all right."

Severus stormed out of Lucius' room and Disapparated angrily. What would he tell the girl? What exactly had Lucius written?

Once home, he nervously looked around, not wanting to give a bad impression. His house, as always, looked unkempt and shabby. "Fuck!" He quickly began casting charms that set a duster to dusting his shelves and furniture in the small sitting room, one that set the mop to mopping the wooden floor in the small entryway, and one that shelved his books in the proper place while he ran round picking up stray items he'd left to drag on the floor, such as a few stacks of books and writing utensils. After that was done, he conjured air freshener to rid the rooms of the musty smell of stale air and old books and then started a pleasant fire in his rarely used grate.

"I hate foolish wand-waving..." he muttered breathlessly as he slumped down on his couch. "However," he added, looking around, "it seems to have helped in this case." He didn't plan on asking Granger to marry him, so he was uncertain why having the two rooms into which she'd venture clean made a difference to him. He'd had Narcissa and Lucius over and never once cared about the state of his home. Why now?

Would the girl even come? It was a Friday evening. She probably had plans...might even be meeting with one of her other matches to see if they were suitable.

"I should have never gone to Lucius' house this evening, and I damn well should..." A knock on the door interrupted his words *Bloody hell!*

On the way to the door, he thought about all the ways he'd like to punish Lucius for his meddling. There was another impatient knock before he could get there, but he still took the time to smooth down his hair before cracking the door slightly. He then tossed the door open and yelled, "You! What are you doing here?"

Lucius smirked and barged his way inside, tossing a parchment to Severus as he did so. "It seems she sent a reply with Achilles, and he brought it to me instead of to you." As Severus read the note, Lucius made a show of looking around and sniffing the air. "Do I detect a lemony-scent in the air, Severus? You've been doing some cleaning, haven't you? My, my. Whatever does this mean?"

"Shut up, arsehole," Severus bit out. "I've got to go."

"Where to? What's she have to say?"

"I'm surprised you haven't read it."

"I should have," Lucius retorted. "Where are you going? Come back here!"

Severus heard the last as he slammed his front door behind him and trotted off towards his Disapparation point, quickly passing through the rundown homes in his neighborhood.

Hermione paced before her fire, contemplating what Severus Snape could want with her. Did he think that the chat they'd had was not enough of a meeting to discuss their strange match on the agency's list? She'd just have to reassure him that she wouldn't try to hold him to anything and that she'd been about to write a response to say that none of her matches had worked out for her before his owl had brought his letter to her.

When he knocked on her door, she counted to ten, whispering, "Relax," to herself as she went to it. "Who's there?" she asked, though she knew it could only be Snape.

"It is I, Severus."

She opened the door. "Hello," she said, moving to the side and inviting him in. "I hope you don't mind, but I couldn't leave. I've got something simmering and have to check it every ten minutes."

He sniffed the air and asked, "Calming Draught? The last stage?"

"Yes." She smiled. "You're good."

"I'm a Potions master. I'm surprised you make your own."

"Well, I don't mind making some. I like cutting corners where I can. My parents raised me that way," she said with a shrug. "It's simple enough, just at this stage with the timer going off every ten minutes for an hour." She closed the door. "Would you like some tea or something to drink?"

"Ah... I... yes. Tea will do."

A chime began dingding.

"Blast. I'll be right back." She hurried off across the room and entered one of the doorways.

Severus walked over to some shelves nearby and looked at the knick-knacks she had lining them, along with some pictures. He recognized her parents, having seen them once when they'd taken her to Diagon Alley several years before. Most of the other pictures were of the Dream Team. He sneered and turned around. Her flat was nice and cozy. Definitely clean and feminine. Everything had its place.

As he approached her beige couch, he heard the distinct pop of Apparition in the kitchen. Had someone come for a visit? He walked over to the archway and peered in. To his surprise, he saw a house-elf putting a kettle of tea on. What was Granger doing with an elf? He backed up and quickly went to sit on the couch. Just as he did so, Granger came out of the room.

"Well, that's done for another ten minutes. I hope you don't mind, but I've asked Shorty to make tea for us."

"Shorty?" He knew the elf looked familiar! "Wasn't that the elf the Parkinsons gave clothes to?"

"Yes, the very same."

"How did you end up with him?"

"We came to an agreement." She perched on the cushion next to his and asked, "So what did you want to talk about?"

"Yes, about my owl earlier..."

"Professor?"

He shook his head, having trailed away while trying to decide what to tell her. He opted for the truth...somewhat. "I was at Malfoy Manor earlier and speaking with Lucius. I told him what had transpired between us."

"The match you mean?"

"Yes. That."

"Oh. All right." She smiled when he said nothing else. "And?"

"And he thinks that perhaps..." He stood up and walked over to her fireplace, pretending to inspect the vase of dried flowers on its mantle.

"Shorty has tea," said the little elf.

Severus turned around gratefully and took a cup from the service tray. "Thank you," he said, nodding at the elf.

"Thank you, Shorty," Hermione said as well.

"Does mistress want anything else?"

"Not now. Thanks."

Shorty bowed low, his ears scraping the floor, and then hurried back to the kitchen.

Hermione took a sip of her tea and then blew the liquid in her cup. "Still too hot."

"Indeed it is." He placed his cup on the tray again and faced her. "I want to apologize for the owl earlier. Lucius had an idea, and he thought to be helping me by sending it in my name. I will trouble you no more. Have a good night."

"Excuse me?" she said, her voice shrill. "You're just leaving? And without explaining why you've come in the first place?"

"Well, I just thought it best. I feel quite foolish to be honest, and I'd rather leave before actually acting a fool."

"Please. Sit down. Drink your tea. I'd like to know what he thought he was doing to help. I mean, I can't believe the man would deign to send an owl to me."

When he'd done as she'd bid, he finally spoke, voice surprisingly steady. "Lucius thinks that you and I could come to some sort of arrangement, that the agency's match could work for us."

"Oh." She appeared to be at a loss for words. Hermione blinked and looked down at her cup.

Severus rose again. "See? This is why I wanted to leave. I should not have come."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. I shall see myself out."

Feeling ridiculous, he quickly left the gobsmacked girl alone, mentally cursing Lucius as he made his way home. He'd just made a fool of himself, and what was worse, the girl would tell Potter about it. That thought made him sick. What had he been thinking? Why had he even gone along with Lucius' scheme? He hadn't planned on it, but once he'd entered her home, he sort of thought, deep down, that the idea had merit.

He walked into his home, slammed the door, and threw his coat rack against the wall across the room. It felt good to take his anger out on something. He wished that Lucius had remained so that he could be the brunt of it. Severus whirled around when he heard a soft tapping on his door.

Surprised, he strode over and wrenched it open.

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to fizzabella for cheerleading and beta reading.

Hermione stared at the door that Severus had stormed out of. Had he just proposed? And had Lucius Malfoy truly put the idea in his head? She wished he hadn't left like that. She hadn't meant to be rude. She'd just been so taken aback by it all.

"Shorty!"

"Yes, mistress?"

"Every time the chime rings on my cauldron, I need you to stir it for me...twelve times to the right and thirty times to the left. All right?"

"Shorty is happy to help his mistress."

"I'll be back!"

She snatched up the letter the owl had delivered earlier, read the address, and Disapparated. Instead of appearing in front of his home, she looked around to see that she was on the bank of a littered river. She looked at the address on the paper again and realized that his home probably had wards that disallowed anyone from Apparating onto its grounds without permission, so naturally, she ended up here. Walking towards the cluster of dirty, darkened homes, she wondered if this was a bad idea. Many of the homes seemed abandoned, as many of the windows were broken and missing glass altogether. Then she saw a street sign that said Spinner's End and knew she was on the right track. Her trek took her towards the end of the street where a large mill loomed in the background.

Mustering her courage, she strode up the front walk and knocked softly on the door, surprised there were no wards keeping her at bay. When he threw the door open, apparently in a rage, she jumped back. "I was just shocked," was all she could say.

"Your potion?"

"Oh," she said, surprised he hadn't told her to leave. "My elf is going to stir it for me. I should have thought of that sooner."

He gestured for her to enter and nodded towards the sitting room. "In there."

As she went into the room, she saw him hurry to pick up an overturned coat rack. She smiled and looked around the room. It was small but inviting. Several bookshelves lined two walls, and the fireplace's mantle was quite intricate, its designs obviously hand carved, for she'd not seen any spell work that looked as lovely as manual labor. The furniture was quite old and much used, but it showed he spent a great deal of time in his sitting room, probably reading from his many books.

She sat on the couch and watched as he slowly came into the room, his black eyes sizing her up. Hermione decided to break the silence. "When you said that Lucius Malfoy sent the owl with your address, my mind froze up a little. He and I are definitely not what one would call friends. In fact, I dislike him immensely. I can only wonder what he would gain from doing this."

"I know Lucius isn't the most pleasant person," he began, taking a seat in a chair across from her, "but he and I have been friends for many years. He was the first person at Hogwarts to welcome me to Slytherin. I suppose I've always looked up to him...most of the time anyway."

"That explains your relationship with him at least."

"As for why he would send the owl to you... He thought his idea had merit, and when I wouldn't act on it, he did so in my stead."

"I see." Hermione wasn't sure what to think about Lucius, but she knew one thing for certain. Snape was uninterested. "So you didn't agree with him."

"No."

"I apologize for coming here." She stood. "I do want to thank you for at least trying to set things straight and trying to explain the owl."

"Wait, Miss Granger, I'm not asking you to leave. I didn't agree with him because I thought it... odd, considering our past, but..."

"But what?"

"I suppose it made sense after I thought about it. We are both in situations that have us considering marriage."

"Did you meet with your other two YLC matches this time?" Hermione asked.

"No."

"Then how do you know that they wouldn't be better for you?"

"I don't know that."

Hermione felt honored that he would consider marrying her, but was he doing it just because he felt sorry for her after she told him her pitiful story? *Hang on. This is Snape. When does he feel sorry for anyone? He's just in a bind and thinks I'm the best route to go.*

"Do you really think we could work?" she asked, deciding to point out a few things. "We've never really got along in the past."

"We were student and teacher. We shouldn't have been on friendly terms in the first place," he said, seeming to relax. "I know it's strange. Frankly, I don't want to get married, but I have no choice in the matter thanks to the Ministry. You want to be with someone whom you can't, for your own reasons, so I'm not expecting anything from you. You aren't expecting anything more from me."

"But how is that fair to you?"

"Are you not listening, Miss Granger? I don't expect anything from you that you cannot give."

"And children? What if..."

"That does not matter to me. Trust me."

"But I'd like to be a mother."

"And if it happens, so be it."

"So... sex then..." She couldn't imagine having sex with him. That would be too much. In fact, she couldn't imagine having sex with anyone other than Ron.

"I am a man," he said, his eyes leaving hers as if embarrassed. "Besides, if you want to become a mother..."

She hadn't the heart to tell him that she'd read about insemination procedures, but he was right. If she planned on marrying someone, that would be part of it, wouldn't it? "Wait. Your answers. You said that they weren't honest. That means we aren't really compatible. Maybe this is just a disaster waiting to happen."

"I've revisited them and found, while I was feeling bitter at the time, many of my answers were truthful after all." His eyes traveled back to hers. "It may be, Miss Granger, that we are a well-made match after all."

"At least we know each other," she added, sitting back on the couch.

"And we could take things at a slow pace."

"A very slow pace," she said. "It would take adjusting."

"So you are willing to consider a match between us then?" he asked.

"Are you serious about offering for me?"

"I... Yes. I am."

"Give me a couple of days to think about this please. Will that be all right?"

"Of course."

"Professor, if you change your mind, please let me know. I don't want you to feel obligated. It may seem like a good idea right now, but you could wake up tomorrow and ask yourself what you'd been thinking." She smiled. "I will owl you."

"That is acceptable."

For the second time, she stood up. This time she looked around the room with a grin on her face. "Did I mention that I love this room? I thought of making shelves along my walls as well, but I thought that might be too much. It really works, though, doesn't it? Like a library in your own home."

"I've always had a love for reading and purchase books often. Sometimes it's hard to part with any. Actually, I don't know that I get rid of any of them." He gave her a brief smile and stood as well. "Shall I walk you out?"

"Thanks."

"Wait. I... My grate does work, but I rarely use it. Is yours connected?"

"It is."

"You can find me by simply saying Spinner's End."

Hermione walked over to it. "I was thinking earlier about how I loved this mantle. Did your father do this work?" She ran a hand along the carved wood.

"Long ago," Severus said thoughtfully. "It's one of my first memories... before things changed."

"I didn't mean to pry."

"It's fine." He nodded to a vase on the left side. "Floo powder. You may use it."

She reached inside and grabbed a handful of the powder, then tossed it into the grate. As the small, red flames grew and turned green, she said, "Maison de ville."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "French?"

"I've always been fond of the language and the land. I went there many times with my parents." She shrugged. "My parents have a home in what I call the country. My flat is in town, so..." She stepped into the grate, saying, "I'll be in touch," and swooshed away in a swirl of emerald green.

Back in her own living room, Hermione thought about what had transpired. How would life be if she were married to Snape? What sort of companion would he be? She wondered if he still loved Harry's mum even now. Was that why the thought of her loving Ron didn't seem to bother him? He understood what it was like to love someone and never have her. Of course, she could worm her way into having Ron, but she knew it was for the best if they moved on. Snape never had that chance with Lily Evans. The woman, from what Harry had said, had turned her back on him.

Deciding on something, she quickly tossed powder into the grate and called out, "Spinner's End." His sitting room came into view moments later, and she saw the surprised professor coming closer.

"Back so soon?" he asked, sounding amused.

"I wondered if you'd mind if I had a look at your answers to the agency's questionnaire."

"I wouldn't mind. Would you allow me first to correct the answers that I feel are false?"

"Of course. Send them when you are done." She flashed what she hoped was a reassuring smile and said, "Good night, Professor Snape. Again."

"Good night, Miss Granger."

The first thing in the morning on the next day, Hermione received an owl from Snape. She set about reading his answers.

What is your age? **41**

What age range do you prefer in a mate? **No one older. No one under 21.**

What is your blood status? **half-blood**

What blood status do you prefer in a mate? **any**

What is your hair color? **black**

What hair color do you prefer in a mate? **red**

What is your eye color? **black**

What eye color do you prefer in a mate? **green**

What is your body type? **thin**

What body type do you prefer in a mate? **voluptuous**

What is your highest level of education? **completed all schooling, took courses in Potions after for my own reasons**

What level of education do you expect in a mate? **completed schooling**

What is your job title? **Potions Master of Hogwarts**

What is your yearly salary? **I would rather not say, but I still make the pay I had as the Headmaster. It's enough to provide for a family.**

What salary do you require in a mate? **I would prefer someone who could contribute if needed but it is not necessarily important**

Are you at ease in the Muggle world? **yes**

If your mate required it, would you live amongst Muggles? **I already do**

Do you require your mate to do so? **Yes, if we're to stay here**

Have you been married before? If so, what ended it? **no**

Are you opposed to a mate who's been married before? **yes**

Do you have any children from a prior coupling? **no**

Would you consider a partner who has children from a prior coupling? **no**

How many times per week would you be willing to partake in sexual congress? **several**

How many times would you request sexual congress of your mate? **up for discussion, but I would like at least once**

Would you want a monogamous relationship? Expect your partner to practice the same? **that is up for discussion, but I would prefer it to be monogamous**

How many children would you expect from this relationship? **it doesn't matter**

What is your concept of marriage? **two people joining legally to share a home**

What are your expectations of marriage? **companionship**

What is your relationship with your family? **no relationship; they're dead**

What relationship would you expect of your spouse to have with your family? **see above**

What are your religious beliefs? **I haven't any**

What religious beliefs would you require of your partner? **doesn't matter**

What are your hobbies? **potion-making, reading, experimentation, writing**

What are your interests? **see above**

What are your favorite subjects? **Would you believe Potions?**

Have you mastered cooking and cleaning spells? **who hasn't?**

Do you smoke? Use drugs? Drink? **I drink, yes. What form of drugs do you mean? I do not smoke.**

Do you want a partner who smokes? Uses drugs? Drinks? **No smoking please. Drinking is fine, though no abusers**

Favorite holiday destination? **France**

Favorite food? **shepherd's pie**

Favorite book? **too many to name**

Favorite author? **see above**

Favorite music type? **depends on my mood. I like Elton John, however, anytime. He's got something no matter what mood I happen to be in.**

Favorite Quidditch team? **whichever English team is contending for a championship**

Favorite mode of travel? **Apparition**

Name long-term goals you have (at least three). **I've reached all of my goals.**

Name short-term goals you have (at least three). **coping with this matchmaking rubbish**

Name three bad habits you have. How could you overcome these? Would you do so if requested by your spouse? **cannot promise to change. I am a man who is set in his ways. I am sure there are several things about me that anyone would find unappealing. However, that is who I am.**

What three habits would you not want your spouse to have? **I believe I mentioned my dislike for smoking already. My father used to smoke, so I haven't any fond memories of it. I wouldn't enjoy marrying anyone who doesn't know the meaning of private time. I suppose I can cope with just about anything else, but I'll leave this open with an option to fill it later.**

If you had to describe your personality in one word, how would you do so? **impossible. And I don't mean me. I mean it's impossible to describe me with one word. However, I'm sure others would argue that I can be an impossible man at times.**

After reading the last, Hermione couldn't help smiling. She would have been one of those who thought him impossible, but now she wasn't so sure. He was offering her a chance to overcome her current predicament. He was asking, well, sort of asking, her to become part of his life.

"I wonder how many of these he had to change so that they were worded more appropriately."

She looked at several and noted that her answers had been the same: shepherd's pie, France, too many favorite books and authors to name, Elton John, hobbies, and so much more.

In the mood for a little music, she walked over to her stereo, turned on the CD player, and pressed play. The soothing sound of Elton John's piano sounded moments later. When Princess Diana had been killed a few years earlier, he'd remade one of his songs in her honor, and it had become one of Hermione's favorites. Her mother had always liked his earlier version of the same song, one that he'd sang as a tribute to Marilyn Monroe, an actress from the United States who'd died many years earlier. That was what happened to be playing at the moment, bringing tears to her eyes.

She'd not heard back from her mother since she'd written and requested a visit. Deciding to check her email, she sat at her desk and navigated through WISP to see if there were any new messages. Immediately, she saw bold font indicating there was.

"Mum," she said happily, clicking on the message.

Hermione,

Your father and I have been talking about you coming to Australia for a visit as you asked in your last letter, but we have decided that perhaps it's time we go back to England, at least for an extended holiday. We think it would be nice to spend the next few months at home. It's been too long, hasn't it? There are things that we need to discuss and work through.

I miss you, my Hermione.

It will take some time to get things organized here, but you can possibly expect us before your birthday.

Love,

Mum

SW69 says: I'm so sorry for the long time between updates. I'm in a Masters Program now and am still running classes for my kung fu school (on top of working). It slipped my mind! Please feel free to send me an email or something if you notice it takes more than a week. Cheers...

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

~insert the usual disclaimer stating I don't own and make no money, etc...~

Ron sat in the corner of the pub and stared blankly into the glass of port that had been placed in front of him nearly twenty minutes before. Thought after thought of Hermione flitted through his mind, along with different emotions. She'd lied to him, tricked him with Veritaserum! He could see her point; however, he couldn't stop thinking about her deception. Sure, what he'd told her had been the truth, but there was so much more he'd wanted to say. *I can fucking love her and be happy even if she wouldn't give me a family!* It was true. Yes, he wanted his own children.

But damn it, he'd wanted her, too. Had let his own wants sour everything. She'd only been trying to make things right for him, hadn't she? It had taken both Harry and Ginny to make him see that. Why couldn't he shake the disappointment? She'd always been so honest. This caused him to snort. Not always. But only dishonest for the right reasons. Again he thought of the things Harry and Ginny had said. Could he swallow his pride and go to her? Beg her to be with him? *Ought to make her arse take Veritaserum!* he thought, feeling his anger rise again.

Samantha came to mind. She'd been something of a surprise. He liked her a lot, knew it could be so much more, but it kept coming back to Hermione. Samantha was everything he wanted in a woman, and she wanted many things he wanted, things Hermione paid no attention to. How many times had she made it known that his love for Quidditch seemed pointless when there were so much more important things in the world to be getting on with? And again... back to the family thing. What woman didn't want to prove her love in the ultimate way by giving her husband a family? This made his mood darken once again. It would serve her right if he let her go. She'd see her mistake, wouldn't she?

He tossed back most of the glass in front of him suddenly... and promptly choked a little.

A derisive snort drew his gaze to the left as he wiped at his mouth and tried to catch his breath.

"I say," Lucius Malfoy drawled, "that's an expensive drink. Leave it to a Weasley to not understand that this port is to be savored, slowly imbibed, never guzzled." Lucius sneered. "Lucky for Miss Granger she's landed a man who can appreciate fine things, eh? One who will indeed savor her... slowly, appreciatively?"

Ron sprang up from his seat. "What the bloody hell are you on about, Malfoy?"

"Oh dear," Lucius said, voice full of mock concern. "Did you not know?" He raised a gloved hand to his mouth. "Apologies, Weasley."

There was no mistaking the gloating in his voice. "I asked what you're on about? What are you talking about Hermione for? What man?"

Ron remembered Hermione being indignant on Draco's behalf about being forced into taking the matchmaking survey, and he'd heard about Parkinson dropping Malfoy like a glass of dirty pumpkin juice when someone else offered for her...smart girl after all come to that. He narrowed his eyes. Had Hermione taken the bloody test and been paired with Malfoy?

"I've said too much already. Good day," Lucius said, eyes full of amusement as he turned away.

Resisting the urge to grab Malfoy's long ponytail and pull him back to make him answer his questions, he Disapparated straight to Hermione's flat, not caring if any Muggles were about. She'd have answers!

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Lucius heard the loud crack of Disapparation and grinned. Ah, Weasley baiting. Such fun. How he missed running into Arthur as of late. He hoped to be nearby when the idiotic boy accosted Severus, for surely he would. Lucius pulled out his silver timepiece, noting the hour.

"Narcissa," he said with a sigh, "late as usual."

"Fashionably, darling," she said from behind him. "Shall we?"

"Indeed," he said, holding out his arm so that she could slip hers around it. "You'll never guess who I saw sitting here."

"You're right. I'll never guess."

"Try."

She swatted his shoulder with her free hand. "Stop this. Tell me."

Lucius smirked. "Weasley."

Narcissa wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Which one? There are several."

How Narcissa loathed the Weasleys, especially now that the matriarch had killed her sister. "The one from Draco's year that was involved with the Granger girl."

Narcissa looked around quickly. "Where? I don't see him."

"Gone. Something must have upset him." Lucius made a tsking noise with his mouth. "How rude! Just up and Disappeared."

"What did you do?" she asked, eyes alight.

"I may have let slip that he mishandled his port." He snorted. "Imagine. He stared at the glass for a long time and finally just knocked it back. Or tried to rather. Half of it spilled down his robes and the rest went down the wrong way from the look of it."

"Is that all?"

"Ah, yes, there was something about my being glad Miss Granger has moved on to someone else who at least knows how to savor something fine."

"You didn't!"

"I did!"

"What did he say? Did he not know?"

Lucius led her towards the door. "He wasn't happy. I'd say he'll be on his way over to see her." He frowned slightly. "I suppose there's nothing to know, as even Severus isn't sure yet."

"Yes, that is true, but she'd be insane not to accept Severus in my opinion."

"But why make him have dinner tonight? Why not just say yes already and get on with the planning?"

"Perhaps, as a woman, she wants some pretense of romance while accepting a proposal." Narcissa paused in the midst of their walk. "Lucius, maybe you should tell Severus about Weasley. This may not end favorably. Not if the dolt goes there and causes trouble."

"Severus can handle a Weasley, I think. Has been doing so for years."

"But this has to do with the girl. To hear Severus tell it, that oaf still has her heart, though she won't commit to it. What if this ends up hurting Severus? As much as I dislike, er, wish Severus had chosen someone of better breeding, I do think he deserves to have a companion, especially one of his choosing."

"He didn't choose her! Not really," Lucius said in annoyance. "She was forced on him, same as our son's life is being dictated by bloody officials who think they know how to make things right. Bastards!"

"He was forced to do this, but you saw the way he spoke last night. He seemed to have... hope." Narcissa smiled fondly. "He couldn't wait to tell us what had transpired. Severus did much for us... for Draco. Don't forget that. And don't let one of *them* ruin this for him."

Nodding, Lucius said, "I shall send an owl while we await dinner. Come."

~~~~~

Ron Apparated behind his house, striding forward quickly, and stumbled in the darkness when his foot caught on a large tree root. He'd had a few more drinks after leaving Hermione's flat, unable to cope with what he'd heard. Just as he rounded the corner of his house, he jumped back into the cloak of darkness. Samantha was standing about ten feet away with Ginny.

"He told me to be here at eight," she said, voice worried. "I don't know where he could be. He's not at the shop. I checked there. Do you think he's all right?"

"I'm sure he's fine. Oh, you know, I think he went to the Burrow and likely got caught up in helping Mum," Ginny said, reaching out to touch the girl's arm reassuringly. Ron could tell she didn't believe a word of what she'd just said though.

He'd have to thank her later. *Damn it! Forgot about her coming over.* Instead of facing her, he remained hidden as Samantha prattled on about their previous evening and how he'd been distant. Ron closed his eyes and thought of what had transpired at Hermione's flat.

BANG! BANG!

"Come on, Hermione! I know you're in there! Open up!"

An elderly Muggle across the hall opened her door to have a peek at him. "What are you looking at?" he asked her rudely, then felt guilty. "Sorry. Don't mean to be..." The woman harrumphed and slammed the door shut.

He shrugged and pounded his fist against Hermione's door again. Suddenly, the door flew open widely, but Hermione wasn't standing on the other side. Ron stormed in and called out, "Oi, where are you?"

When the door slammed shut behind him, he spun around to see Shorty standing there. "Mistress isn't being here. Mistress is being out! Master Weasley shouldn't be causing trouble for Mistress!"

"I'll just wait for her then," he said, starting to pace. "When will she be back?"

"Shorty isn't knowing. Shorty thinks Master Weasley should leave."

Ron puffed out his chest. "I can be here if I want, thanks!" He began pacing again only to stop. "Where is she?"

Shorty slapped his hands over his mouth and muttered something that sounded like "doesn't want say."

"What was that?" Ron said, striding forward, trying to appear menacing.

"Mistress is being married!" Shorty blurted.

"WHAT?" Ron felt as if he'd been slapped.

"Not now," Shorty said, wringing his hands. "Soon. Mistress told Shorty he is getting a new Master soon, who will treat Shorty nice." Shorty seemed to stand taller. "He won't be using Shorty to get sweets and do all his work." Here the little elf deflated a little. "Shorty shouldn't say." He slapped his hands over his mouth again and angrily mumbled at himself.

Ron plopped down on the couch. So it was true. Hermione had chosen someone. He eyed the elf, who was still on the verge of hitting himself for what he'd revealed but doing so would defy Hermione's wishes. "Your new Master-to-be doesn't treat house-elves all that great," Ron spat out, remembering how Dobby had been treated by the Malfoys. "If you tell me where she is, I can go talk to her, maybe fix things."

"You is to be leaving! Mistress isn't wanting you here!" Shorty said and extended a long finger towards the door. "Shorty isn't knowing where Mistress is going, just knowing she is to be meeting her new husband."

"Bollocks!" Ron said. "You can find her at any time, at any place if you wanted."

Shorty crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "Shorty isn't doing it." With a pop, he disappeared.

"Come back here!" Ron called out, but he knew Shorty wouldn't listen. He had to find Hermione, with or without Shorty's help. If Hermione was going to meet up with Malfoy for dinner, perhaps it was in town where he'd seen Lucius Malfoy. Maybe they were all meeting to have a cozy family dinner to celebrate the upcoming nuptials.

How could she do it? Malfoy. They hated him. Hated everything he stood for. He'd stop this. She didn't deserve to be with someone like that! The bastard would hurt her, was just going to use her good name for better standing! "I'll not have it," he said and headed back to the pub he'd been at only minutes before.

Bringing his hands up to his face, Ron sighed. He'd failed. Hadn't seen Hermione at all. Oh, he'd seen the Malfoys, but neither Hermione nor Draco had been with them. He'd gone to Malfoy Manor, but he couldn't get onto the grounds. He'd been to other places, posh places Malfoy might take her. Nothing. She was nowhere to be found. At the last place, he'd ordered a drink that cost as much as some poor sod's pay for an entire day. What would Hermione want with that sort of life? She loathed it. Loved places like the Burrow, like the Leaky Cauldron, like The Three Broomsticks. Regular places. Regular people. Regular blokes. He frowned then. She'd always had money, wealthy parents and all. What if she wanted that life again and thought he couldn't give it to her? What if that was what was really behind her pushing him out of her life?

"And bloody making it look like it's for my own good!" he said... loudly. However, even as he said it, he thought of the pamphlets in his pocket that had given him more than enough information on endometriosis. She wouldn't do that.

"Did you hear that?" he heard Samantha ask Ginny.

"Um, what do you mean? Oh, the Muggles next door are always up and about."

"Sounded like Ron." There was a rustling of grass.

"Bugger," he whispered to himself, wishing he had Harry's Invisibility Cloak. If he Disappeared now, she'd definitely hear him. Ron decided to play the part and hurried around the corner, nearly running into Ginny. "Oi," he called out in mock surprise.

"Ron!" Samantha said. "I thought that was you. Where... where've you been?"

"Just back from Mum's. Had to help her sort out my dad." He looked at Ginny knowingly and gave a slight nod.

Ginny narrowed her eyes but played along. "Right. Dad. I suspected. I didn't want to mention that part," she said to Samantha.

"What's wrong with him? All right?"

"Er... yeah, I, uh, well..." He scratched the back of his neck, grasping for something to say.

"You've had drinks."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did." He waited for her anger.

"Well," she said with a smile, "I hope having drinks with him helped to sort things out." Samantha looked at Ginny while she took Ron's hand. "Sometimes a couple of pints and someone lending an ear helps a great deal."

Ginny said, "You should have sent an owl, Ron. She's been worried for the past hour and a half."

"Sorry," he said, unable to think of anything better. However, it worked.

Samantha gave him a hug. "It's all right. Family is important. I understand."

Ron agreed completely. It's exactly what he needed to speak with Hermione about. "I, uh, don't feel all that great. Do you think we could talk later?"

"Oh..." Disappointment was evident in her voice. "Of course. Absolutely."

"Too much I expect." He rubbed his stomach as if ill.

"Shall I come round or...?"

"I'll Floo you, eh?" he asked hopefully.

"All right." She rose up on tiptoe to place a kiss on his cheek. "I hope you feel better, Ronald."

He hated the way she said his full name. Only Hermione or his mum ever called him that. Why did she think she had the right? Why was he feeling this way suddenly? "Thanks," he muttered and made to walk forward, but she pulled him into a hug before she stepped back to Disappear away.

Once gone, he slowly turned to face Ginny, who had her arms across her chest and her foot tapping impatiently. "Explain."

He blurted all he'd been told and how he couldn't let Hermione marry a Malfoy and how he didn't bloody care about the Veritaserum rubbish as long as she'd come back to him. How he intended to find Draco Malfoy if it took all night.

And then he Disappeared before she could say another word.

~~~~~



There was a place he hadn't checked earlier. The Greengrass Pub in Diagon Alley was always a place that the wealthy sort could be found. Many times when his family had passed there when he'd been growing up, he'd sworn to be one of the patrons someday. He never thought this reason would take him there.

Luck was on his side. Just outside the pub was none other than Draco Malfoy... and his date. He could see Malfoy well enough, but Hermione was standing in the shadow of the lamppost. As he walked up, he heard Malfoy's sickening drawl.

"Maybe we can make this match work if we try and stay honest with each other, but I can't promise anything more right now. It's going to take some getting used to."

"Damn right it will," Ron blurted, stalking forward.

A surprised Malfoy spun around, wand out. "Stop right there, Weasley!"

"Get your slimy hands off my girl!" Ron pulled back his fist, ready to punch Draco, but stopped short. "Where's Hermione?"

The girl Draco had been talking to was not Hermione. She looked like Daphne Greengrass, only a younger version.

"What do I care where she is? What do you mean your girl?"

"But I thought..."

Draco warned Ron with his wand, moving it in front of him. "Stay back. I let you get away with hitting me at Hogwarts that night with all the fighting at the castle... It won't happen again, Weasley."

Ron waved away Draco's attempt to be threatening. "Your father told me that Hermione had a new bloke. I thought..."

"You thought I'd accept Granger? Are you mad?" Draco began laughing. Even the girl, Astoria, he was sure it was, had a smile on her lips. Draco nodded to his companion. "Meet my match, Weasley. A step above Granger, I'd say."

Indignant on Hermione's behalf, Ron said, "You'd be lucky to have her!"

"Perhaps luck is on Severus Snape's side instead."

"Snape? What about that wanker?"

"Yes, Snape. You heard right, Weasley. I expect they are finalizing their plans now." Draco flashed a feral grin. "Father says he's decided to accept Granger, what with the bad matches the Ministry's been trying to give him." Draco curled his lip. "You lose again, Weasel."

Ron hit Draco as hard as he could and was promptly hexed by Astoria.

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**SW's Notes:** Sorry for any errors here. I haven't had the time to get with my beta. I've been so busy with graduate school and only just had the chance to read it over, which prompted me to change something of course. You know how that goes. I shall make the changes I may have missed once we get it edited. Thankfully, I have a couple of weeks before summer school and am certain I can speak with her and get on a better schedule. Peace.

## Fifteen

### *Chapter 15 of 19*

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

No Galleons are being made. I don't own the characters. Etcetera, etcetera...

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Hermione frowned as she gazed at herself in the mirror. Why couldn't she have been one of those women who didn't have to put forth effort to be attractive? Come to that, she wasn't sure why it mattered. Snape had seen her at her worst, knew what she had to offer their union, and still wanted to go forward with their plans. Or did he? Maybe he'd changed his mind since the night before. Maybe he'd only agreed to dinner out of some attempt to be kind. Sucking in a deep breath, she unlatched the door and stepped out into the hallway.

"Well, here goes nothing," she said softly, disliking the twisted knots in her stomach. As soon as she rounded the corner, she saw him...tall, dark, and handsome...leaning against the wall casually. Her breath caught. It had always been an expression she'd heard, but she truly meant it. Tonight Snape looked handsome. He'd taken care with his hair and attire. Sans Wizarding robes, he was less intimidating. She smiled at the way the crisp, black fabric fit his frame perfectly, defining his shoulders. Strong. Safe. Snape.

"Hello, Miss Granger," he said politely.

"Hermione."

"Right." He gave a light smile and nodded towards the dining area. "I took the liberty of getting our table already after I saw you enter the loo." He offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"Yes... Severus."

This elicited a mixed reaction from him. For a moment, he seemed to stiffen, but then he relaxed and said nothing further as he guided her to his table. She wondered if he'd been thinking, as she had, about their relationship in the past...relationship being a terrible description. There was a lot to forgive, a lot to forget, and a lot of time to make things right. Hermione was willing. This was what she wanted, just a small chance to become a mother. If she couldn't bear his child, he wouldn't be devastated and would still accept her and their life. He wasn't expecting anything and even approved of her initial desire to lead a career-oriented life.

"You're shaking," he commented, pausing at their table to scrutinize her. "Are you quite all right?"

"I'm nervous!" she blurted. She resisted the urge to slap a hand to her face. Why had she admitted that?

"If you don't want to do this..." His voice had a slightly cool tone.

"I do want to." Hermione was certain she saw tension slowly release in his stance. "I just... I don't know. I can't explain it."

"Wine, I think," he said and pulled out a chair. "Please. Be seated."

Her bum had barely hit the chair before a wild-haired witch, strands of various colors that stuck out at all angles, appeared next to them with a small pop. "Wine, eh? Excellent. Excellent. Shall I bring the house best?" She flashed a toothy grin.

"That will do," Severus replied, arching an eyebrow. "And let that be the last time you use a charm to listen in to what we're saying."

"Oh, sir," she began, a light blush on her cheeks, "only do that in the first. Need to know when the patrons are ready, see?"

"You have been warned," he said firmly and took the seat across from Hermione.

"I wouldn't have thought about that," Hermione admitted.

"What's that?"

"Just how you realized she'd used a charm to hear us. My first thought was that she's an astute waitress."

"Years of practice." He waved away her compliment. "Second nature to always look for things that are out of place." Severus afforded her a tight smile. "I daresay your *nervous state* is hindering your ability at the moment."

Had he complimented her? She decided to take it as such. "I think so."

"Hermione, before we go any further, I need to know if you meant what you said about..."

*Pop!*

"Here you are! Made fresh by our best elves!" She placed a chilled bottle on the table, and with a snap of her fingers, two wineglasses appeared in front of them. "Take a look at these menus," which appeared on the table, "and I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Very well," Severus said with a slight nod. He began pouring wine for Hermione and then himself.

"You were saying?" Hermione asked, taking the proffered glass.

"Do you really want to do this?" His slender index finger moved back and forth between them. "Us. This marriage."

"Yes." She made sure to look him in the eye. *Let him look into my mind if it will put him at ease.* "I think this will work well. We've no false expectations, we know about each other's past actions, and we can give something we need to each other."

"A clean slate then. The past is in the past."

"If this is to work, then yes."

"Potter?"

"Still one of my best friends and part of my life."

He frowned. "He tries to be in mine at times."

"I know. In fact, I think..."

Severus held up a hand. "In my own time. If ever."

Hermione nodded. Panic set in and clawed at her mind. Again the random strands of doubt made an appearance. How could this work? Harry was an important part of her life. Although he wanted to befriend Snape, she was certain that he wouldn't approve of her decision. Their many conversations about her choices where Ron was concerned came to mind. God, what would Ron do? Life could never be as it was. Why couldn't things be simpler? What was she thinking...Snape, who'd hated her, who'd mistreated her and her friends! Snape who... She smiled slightly. Snape who'd bravely done what needed to be done to help Harry save the world; regardless of his delivery, he was a hero, just as much as Harry. Things would be different, but she could again find balance in her life. She'd see it done.

"You've just had an amazing display of emotions flit across your face."

There was a hidden question in his statement. She gave him what he sought. "To be honest, which I always expect of you as well, I thought about how much Harry has been an important part of my life... as well as Ron, how I don't really want that to end. Them being part of it." She bit her lip in thought as she went over how to word her feelings better. "I don't mean that they have to be round all the time, but I don't want to never have a chance to spend time with them again."

"Weasley will likely *not* want to come round anyway, Hermione. You do realize that, do you not?"

She nodded. "I suppose I'm hoping for that down the road when it's less hard for us both."

"I will not keep you from your friends." He leant forward and took a deep drink of his wine, eyes not leaving hers. Then his next words came out in the quiet, silken voice he used when he wanted to stress something important. "I expect you to do the same for me and be just as cordial with *my* friends."

Hermione sat back as if the wind leaving her body had pushed her against her chair. The Malfoys. She knew Lucius Malfoy was behind the initial owl, and that had surprised her, but after the turn events had taken, she'd not thought any more about the Malfoys. They were his friends. She wasn't sure how long it would take her to warm to them... if ever. Relief flooded her body with his next words.

"In your own time. If ever. My vow to you."

"Thank you." She lifted her glass of wine towards him and clinked it against his when he did the same. "To our beginning, though it may be slow and take adjusting, I think we're both mature and intelligent enough to make this work so long as we swear to always be honest."

"Indeed."

Dinner passed by so quickly for Hermione. She could hear her mother's voice: *Good times always pass us by so swiftly we have to wonder if they truly happened at all.*

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

Something in her voice caused him to straighten in his chair and gaze at her seriously. After the wonderful conversation they'd just had, how could he still doubt her intentions? And why did his insecurity put her at ease?

"My mum and dad have been in Australia..."

He nodded. "I know a little of the circumstance."

"We've not been as close as before. They've... not taken what I did as well as I'd have liked."

"They will understand in time, Hermione." He leant forward and placed a hand over hers for a brief moment. "Trust when I say that you made the correct choice. They were *not* safe."

To her embarrassment, tears welled in her eyes and threatened to spill over. To hear him, someone who'd been on the inside, admit that she'd done the right thing, that they might not have made it through had she not sent them off... She felt so validated. "I just wanted them to live. No matter the cost."

This time when his hand came to hers, it lingered and gave a light squeeze. "Sometimes we do what we must, though others might not understand our method."

Her tears spilled then. "Th-thank you."

The understanding that passed between them and the feeling it evoked was something she'd never felt before. Not even with Ron. For the first time in several weeks, she actually felt hopeful about her future. She wasn't sure if she could love Severus the way she loved Ron, but she knew, without a doubt, he could make her happy.

"Sorry," she said after a moment, regretfully taking her hand away to use the linen to wipe her cheeks. "What I mean to say is that I'd like to have them there when we marry. I don't expect anything lavish or any others to be there. Imagine the spectacle. The likes of Rita Skeeter and others like her would ruin things."

"A private affair suits me."

"My parents are coming home soon."

"We'll wait then."

"No," she said firmly. "I don't know when that will be. Mum says they have to get things in order first. I think we should be married sooner rather than later, yes?"

Severus gave a nod and flashed a small smile. "I am agreeable to that."

"Then we should do this, go to Australia. Once there, I'll explain everything to them."

"Everything?"

"I...well, maybe." What would her mum think about Severus? Would they understand? It might be better to pretend she and Ron had had a falling out, and she'd fallen madly in love with Severus on the rebound. That felt wrong though. Why should she be afraid? Why should she lie? Her parents had chosen to stay away, though she'd pleaded otherwise. If this kept them away longer or disappointed them, so be it. "Yes. All of it."

"Perhaps starting anew should be done with them knowing everything...even about us. They deserve that much. I would be willing to let them know what the Dark Lord had planned for them if that's what it takes to get them to understand."

"You're right. And it's not fair to them to lie about us. They know how long I cared for Ron before I sent them off and know how close we've been since. Honesty is best. If they don't understand my decision, I'll just have to live with whatever theirs might be."

"I agree." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I've never been to Australia. This should be interesting, I think. Perhaps we can take a few extra days to see a few sites... to get to know each other a little."

Hermione's stomach tingled. By getting to know each other, she couldn't help but imagine exploring each other for the first time. Was that what he meant? Would he want sex the same as any other man the night of his vows? And why shouldn't he? Was she ready? Would he give her time if she wasn't? She hoped the heat she felt in her face wasn't betraying her thoughts to him.

*CRACK!* A portly man she'd seen at the door appeared at their table. "Begging your pardon, sir, but I've got something of great importance it seems." He leant closer, eyes wide. "From Lucius Malfoy!" He extended a letter with the Malfoy seal. "That eagle owl...bloody huge, that... wouldn't stop pecking at me until I agreed to give this to you straight away!"

Severus took the letter and said, "I thank you."

"Anything to help our heroes, sir." The man gave them both a broad grin and disappeared with a crack.

"Are you anticipating something alarming, Severus? You look disturbed."

"If it's urgent... I worry about Draco these days."

Hermione watched silently as he opened the letter. His face gave away nothing. She didn't like Draco, but she'd heard what the Ministry's new law had done to his future. Someone had said that he'd looked dreadful as of late. "What is it?" she asked when his eyes met hers. Instead of replying, he handed the parchment to her.

*Severus,*

*I fear I had an encounter with Weasley earlier. Being that he was well into his cups, I thought he'd learnt about your proposal to Miss Granger, the whole drink the disappointment away nonsense, and made mention that she'd found a new prospect. I daresay he didn't take it well. Narcissa thought there might be trouble, and she was correct. I've just spoken with Draco, and he tells me that Weasley accosted him as he escorted Miss Greengrass at her family's establishment. In his stupor, the berk mistook what I said to mean that Draco and your intended were to be married. Draco has set him to right. However, if he meant to confront Draco on this matter, he might well be searching for you, not that he's deft enough to find your home. I think he means to take her back. Tread carefully. Do pop round when you can. I'd like to hear of your evening.*

*Lucius*

"In other words," Severus said blandly, "Lucius baited Weasley because he can, as is his way, and now he's trying to rectify his mistake."

Hermione expelled a long breath. Ron knew. It wouldn't be long before Harry, Ginny, and the others knew. This was her decision, and she would stick with it. Still, was he hurting? She hated to think so. Or to think she was the cause of his pain, yet again. Why had Ron reacted so strongly? Was it just because he'd been drinking? Did he want

her back? She hated that Lucius Malfoy was the sort of man who didn't mind kicking someone already down. Blast him! How could she ever become friendly with people like that?

"Hermione?"

"Sorry, I...lots of thoughts."

Severus nodded. "Would you like to speak to him before we finalize any plans?"

She shook her head. "No. It's done. Not the way I'd wanted him to find out, but he knows regardless. I don't want to see him until after."

"In case he changes your mind?"

"Yes." It was an honest answer, but it was one he deserved.

"I appreciate the honesty. This is what it is, and I'm not above taking what I want." He leant back against his chair, arched an eyebrow, and asked, "When do you want to leave?"

"Tonight."

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**SW's Notes:** So while waiting to get things back on track with my beta (I don't like posting without a second set of eyes, but I hate keeping people waiting...I'm sorry.), I decided to do some editing myself. Those edits were needed to make the story a little better where it was lacking. Therefore, three new chapters have been inserted. Sorry it took long to get them done (lots of graduate work that I get have on my plate...who knew?). Anyway, I expect to have these up within a week of each other again as planned now that it's fixed up where I like it and where I'm ahead of myself again.

Please forgive any errors you see; I did try to find them, but you know how that goes. I'll correct them as soon as I get my second pair of eyes. Peace.

## Sixteen

### *Chapter 16 of 19*

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

I'd like to thank lyn\_f for agreeing to read through this for me! And now back to regularly scheduled updates...

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Monica Wilkins exclaimed loudly as she tossed a stick at her laughing husband, who thought her fall to be extremely funny. "Go on and keep laughing, Wendell! See if you get any Yorkshire pudding with our roast tonight!"

"Oh, come on then!" He extended a hand. "You can't say the way you went about falling wasn't worth a laugh." Wendell then waved his arms about wildly, pretending to topple over. Unfortunately, during his antics, his shoe slid at the wrong moment, and with a loud thump, he landed next to his now laughing wife.

Hermione had paused to watch her parents with a sad smile on her face. They were still listed as the Wilkins family instead of reverting back to the Granger name. She'd not known that. It was hard to understand why they were taking so long to truly get over what she'd done. Why couldn't they realize that her memory charm had saved their lives? She sucked in a deep breath of cool air as if to calm her mind by pulling in Qi. She pulled her cloak more firmly around her and finally spoke.

"Mum? Dad?"

Their laughter froze immediately, and each parent slowly turned to look in her direction. For a brief moment, neither of them made a move, but then her mum began to rise from the path behind their home.

"Hermione," she said in a quiet voice.

"Hello." Hermione looked at her father to gauge his reaction. He seemed surprised and slowly stood, placing an arm around his wife as if she needed protection. "I shouldn't have just come by like this, but..."

"Nonsense," her mother said, running forward to embrace her.

Both women began crying as they held each other. So much time had passed. So much pain had been endured. Hermione began crying harder when she realized her father had come to hold her as well. It felt so good to be with her parents. The past several weeks of misery and uncertainty came pouring out through her tears. How she'd missed her family!

Several minutes later, Hermione found herself sitting at her mum's table with a steaming cup of tea in front of her. Her mother sat next to her, a hand rubbing her back soothingly. She took a sip of her tea and finally felt able to talk without crying.

"I wish I'd come sooner."

"I wish we'd asked you to," her mother replied.

"It's... it is good to see you, girl," her father said from his chair across from her.

Hermione knew that he had been angrier than her mother over what she'd done, and it showed in his actions still. He was the last to greet her, he sat across from her instead of next to her, and he didn't make complete eye contact with her.

With a sigh, Hermione said, "I wish I could make you understand everything."

Her mother removed her hand and sat back in her chair, hands clasped in her lap. "Your father and I have been talking about things. Doing research. We know what you said, and trust me, it's not as though we didn't believe you... but the shock of it all."

"The fact that you didn't trust us to protect you," her father said forcefully. He then slapped the table with his hand. "That we couldn't protect you!"

There was such emotion in his voice. Hermione immediately understood his frustration. "It's not your fault, Dad."

"When you're a parent, Hermione," he began, "I hope you never find a time when you are incapable of protecting your child."

"Or not having the choice to try to do so," her mother added.

Hermione's eyes shimmered once again with tears, but she determinedly wiped them away. "Which brings me to the reason I am here. I..."

"Are we to be grandparents? Are you and Ron having a baby?" her mother asked, grinning broadly.

"No, Mum, far from it."

The tone of her voice had both parents leaning forward in alarm, their disappointment in her forgotten as the thought of something once again threatening to harm her brought out their parental instinct.

"What is it, love?" her mother asked nervously.

"Is that Voldie-whatsit back?" her father asked.

She shook her head and took another sip of tea. "Ron and I have gone our separate ways."

"Oh... I'm sorry. What happened?" Her mum gave her a sympathetic smile.

"He wanted to marry me, was ready for a family."

"And you weren't," her father surmised. "Understandable. You're still young! Lots of time for marriage and kids."

"Perhaps not." Hermione shrugged. "I... Wait. I'll get to that."

"You're worrying me," her mother said.

"Mum, I've always respected you so much. You went out and started a career before a family. You established yourself as a successful woman, followed your dreams." She patted her mother's hand. "I've always wanted to be like you."

Upon hearing this, her mother seemed pleased. "Perhaps I hadn't found the right man before your father," she said, reaching across to take her husband's hand in hers.

"Only man who can put up with you," he said affectionately.

Hermione frowned a little. Hadn't Ron been the right man? "Anyway," she went on, "Ron's mum used to dream of being a Healer. She fell in love with Mr. Weasley and never followed through with it. She settled for being a mum and a wife." Hermione shook her head. "I respect Mrs. Weasley greatly. She's a very good mum, but I also feel sorry for her because she will always wonder what life would have been like if she'd actually become a Healer." Hermione leaned back in her chair. "They always only had one income and lived in poverty all this time. I saw first-hand how this affected Ron and his siblings. I guess I wouldn't want my children to go through that."

"Did you explain this to Ronald?" her mother asked.

"Yes, but he thinks his mum made the right decision, and he didn't understand why I couldn't have children right away while starting a career." She placed her forearms on the table and leaned forward. "To make this part of the story short, we bartered over the length of time he was willing to wait before having children. It resulted in him wanting to take some time apart to see what we really want. After a series of events, we decided to end things."

"We never really saw you two together as a couple, but we've always liked him and know how much he always meant to you," her mother said. "I wish things had worked out."

"There's more," her father said.

"You know how that saying goes...you don't know what you have until it's gone. While we were apart, I saw this beautiful little family and realized that I would want this with Ron after all, that I could make this work somehow."

"And he denied you!" her mother said, aghast.

"He met someone else."

"Bugger!" her father blurted.

"Wait," Hermione held up her hand, "I've left out something important. Our government had adopted a matching-making service to help people find suitable mates. Some people who were involved in the war are being forced to take part in this... basically to repay a debt to society."

"Barbaric," her mother said.

"I agree completely. Ron and I had dinner with friends. In fact, Neville, you remember him, yes?" Her parents nodded, so she continued. "He took their survey and found a perfect match. This sort of gave Ron the idea to try it. That way he might find someone who wanted to settle down right away and start a family."

Her parents looked at each other and waited for her to speak, as if at a loss for words. Hermione swallowed thickly. She was certain they might not like what she said next. "When I went over to tell him that I'd changed my mind, she was there. I couldn't bring myself to tell him, not if he might have found someone who could give him what he wants."

"But you could as well," her mum put in.

"I found out that I have endometriosis."

"Oh..." Her mother's voice was soft and full of immediate understanding. "My sister had that as well."

Her father nodded and crossed his arms in front of him. "I can understand, but you should have told him."

"Eventually, I did, and he would have chosen me instead of her, but I think it was out of loyalty. I... found out that he wouldn't be completely happy if we shared a life together and were never able to have children of our own. I just couldn't take that chance and made the decision for him in the end."

"Hermione, you don't know that it would never happen. Trust me."

"I never knew Aunt Catherine had this," Hermione said, "but I don't fail to notice that she died without any children."

Her mother had no immediate reply to that. She simply shook her head and looked at her husband.

"Catherine's death was far too early in life for any speculation on the connection of her childlessness and the endometriosis. You know that, Hermione," he said.

"Once I learned that there was a chance I may never be a mother, it felt like time had begun to work against me. It feels like each day is drawing me closer to a deadline, and if I pass it, then that's it."

"But you're a sensible girl. I'm sure you've always been dedicated about taking precautions. You have no..."

"Not always. There were a few times that I've spoken with my Healer about, and it seems that maybe this could be a factor." She shrugged. "Now to something you may not like. I took the Yenta Livery Survey myself to find a match of my own."

"Oh, Hermione," her mother said, "say you didn't."

"I did." She sat up straighter and met their eyes squarely before continuing. "I want to commit myself to a career, and I want to be a mum as well. That may not happen, but I need a husband who feels the same as I do...someone who won't secretly resent me for being barren if that's the end result, someone who can accept me for the person I am and intend to be without stipulations."

"Have you found this person?" her father asked. His expression showed no emotion, but his tone voiced his disapproval.

"I have." She ignored her mother's sigh. "He's someone I've known all my years at Hogwarts, and after speaking with him and comparing our questionnaire answers, I think we might be a well-made match after all."

"Someone in your year?"

Hermione bit her lip briefly. The moment had come. "No. He's... It's Severus Snape."

"What!" her father exploded. "That same professor who made that comment about your teeth!"

"And more or less goaded you into using magic to shrink them!" her mother added.

"Really?" Hermione said, sitting back in her chair. "A comment he made about my teeth when I was a teenager... that's all you can think of?"

"Well, we are dentists," her mother said, "and we disapprove of using magic to fix things!"

"Obviously," her father added, glaring slightly.

"Dad, you're going have to get over that eventually!" Hermione said heatedly. "Severus can explain to you exactly what Voldemort had planned for the two of you if you'd like! Then you might see that I did the best thing for you! If I hadn't, you would've got yourselves killed!" She stood up so quickly, her chair toppled over.

"I came here because I want to get married with my parents as witnesses. Severus may not be a conventional beau, but he's the best choice for me. No, we never got on well while I was at Hogwarts. I thought he was quite rude, but if it weren't for him, the sacrifices he made during the war, I'd be dead right now, along with my best friends." She wiped angry tears away from her cheeks. "All this hiding you've been doing here, not wanting to come home, all the time we've lost because of your anger... I hope you know how much I've suffered without you, how much guilt I've felt! How much more do I have to feel before I can be forgiven and have my parents back? You know, from your last email, Mum, I thought maybe you'd finally come round to seeing things my way!"

She shoved a hand into her pocket and pulled out a small piece of parchment. "Here's the address where Severus and I are staying. We're going to be married tomorrow night. If you want to be there, I would very much appreciate it." She started for the door and turned back to look at them. "And before you wonder too much, the reason I know that Ron wouldn't have been truly happy with me is because I used a truth serum on him... without his permission. Maybe I am a terrible person after all." Her voice caught as she said her next sentence. "I'm sorry to be such a disappointment. I will always love you no matter what, even with all of this. I just wish that you both felt that way, too." Unable to say more, she stormed off, not caring what they thought of her. She'd known it wouldn't be easy, but she'd hoped for something better.

"It's done now," she said to herself before Disapparating to the rooms she shared with Severus.

He looked up from his book as he relaxed in a chair by the fireplace. His expression softened when he saw her state. "I'm sorry," was all he said.

"I need to be alone," she said before hurrying to her room and closing the door.

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Severus closed the door to the Grangers' home with a click and adjusted his scarf before following the little path to the narrow pavement on the side of their home. Sometimes one had to improvise a little to see things done. Oh, her parents would see things her way now; he'd seen to that. He thought back to how she'd looked when she'd popped into their quarters earlier. Her eyes had been puffy, her cheeks red and swollen, tears everywhere.

Instead of feeling disgusted, he'd felt... protective. And guilty. He was partly the reason she was in pain, though not completely. That explained the guilt. However, the protectiveness, well, he attributed that to the fact that she would soon be his. *His*, he thought. Was it not his duty to keep her from harm and pain, even if that pain was caused by her family? In fact, the ferocity he'd felt well up inside him had surprised him. He'd not felt that way since... Well, it had been a long time. Instead of Disapparating, he decided to have a bit of a walk, enjoying the cool evening and the sounds of nature. He added a bit of whistling to the mix and continued on.

SW's Notes: I do know this is one of those chapters that says a lot of what you know already, but it was necessary. In other news, summer school is done within the next day, and I will have taken my Praxis 2 (English Content) by the time you've read this. ~Crossing my fingers~ Thanks again, my sweet Lyn, for helping me with beta reading. I'm excited to get this back on its schedule. Peace, all!

Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 19

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man

she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Thanks go to lyn_f for taking the time to beta this for me. I'm fortunate to have her.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No Galleons made.

"Can you believe this?" Ginny's face nearly matched her hair as she paced across the kitchen. "Harry, you have to do something! I went to her flat, and she wasn't there. Her elf wouldn't say where, exactly, just that she was with *him*."

Harry's eyes moved from his outraged wife over to his intoxicated friend. Ron had showed up the night before and told Ginny that Hermione was going to marry Draco Malfoy. Then he'd popped away to search them out. It was much later that Arthur Weasley had sent an owl to let Harry know that Ron had struck Draco. Ron had been taken to St. Mungo's to have some boils drained and healed (compliments of Astoria Greengrass). By the time Harry had got there, Ron had already been dosed with a strong sleeping potion. Harry had Transfigured his chair into a comfortable recliner but had also fallen asleep. When he'd awakened, Ron had left already. Harry and Ginny had had to barge their way into his home to check on him, and they'd found him with a bottle of Ogden's Old. He'd refused to be given anything to sober up.

"Well?" Ginny demanded, tapping her foot.

"I agree that Hermione's not made the best decisions lately, but..."

"But?"

Harry again looked at Ron. "But maybe we should leave it be."

"LEAVE IT BE, HE SAYS!" Ron roared suddenly. "Harry, I don't w-want her running, er, ruining her life because I was a right git."

What sort of friend am I? Harry wondered. One of the first things that had come to mind when he'd learned what Hermione was about hadn't been about Ron or even Hermione. It had been about Snape. Snape knew so much about his mum... even his dad. He'd tried to contact Snape a few times to get on good terms. He'd never envisioned him and Snape being mates, but he'd definitely hoped to be able to meet him for coffee now and then to talk about the past. There was so much Harry wanted to know...and not only about his parents. He made a sudden decision.

"Right then. He's not home. She's not home. The Malfoys haven't seen them," Harry said, standing. "I'll start my search in Australia."

"Australia?" Ginny asked incredulously. "What for?"

"Her parents, Gin."

"Harry's right," Ron said, slapping his forehead. "She'd want to talk to them." He hiccupped and reached toward Ginny. "Sober me up. I have to go with him."

"You're not coming," Harry said firmly.

"Bugger off, Mate! I need to go talk some sense into her." Ron stood and nearly toppled over.

Harry shook his head in annoyance and gave Ginny a pointed look. "Go on and give him some potion."

"Oh... yes." She flicked her wand to Summon a bottle from the shelf behind Harry. "Are you sure about this Ron?"

He snatched the potion from her, tossed back his head, and poured down a large gulp. As soon as he handed it back to her, his eyes narrowed. "Oi, what the bloody hell did you...?"

Harry caught him before he hit the floor. "Thanks for that."

"Sleeping Potion, always good to have on hand," Ginny said with a sigh. "He'll be right mad when he comes round."

"Keep him here. He'll only make things worse. I'll contact you when I find out something."

"I hope you find her before it's too late."

"Ginny, what if it's not such a bad thing?" Harry asked as he laid Ron the couch. He nodded to his friend. "He didn't make things better, demanding this and that. Hermione's always been about books, righting laws to make things equal for all. She's never once sat round talking about the big family she wanted to raise after Hogwarts. He shouldn't have thought he could force that on her."

"He wasn't trying to force her! He was just..."

Harry's voice rose slightly. "Bollocks, and you know it! He broke it off, started seeing someone else. When does he realize what he's losing? Now that he's found out she's only doing the same thing that he did!"

Ginny bit her lip. "I know he did a lot that was wrong, but she did as well. I just wish they could work things out. In my mind, it's always been you with me and Hermione with Ron. And to think of her with Snape, of all people, I just hate it."

"Snape helped us beat Voldemort."

"YOU beat Voldemort!"

"Yeah? Only because he helped and looked out for me all my life!" This was always a sore subject for them. He was glad she thought so highly of him, but he disliked the way she never wanted to give Snape credit for anything.

"I hope you find her," Ginny said, her tone effectively ending their conversation.

Harry gave her an unreturned hug and Disapparated.

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The building was small and quite aged. The grounds looked unkempt. Harry noticed most Muggles passing by without really taking note of the place. As he began to cross the pavement, he saw two familiar faces.

"Hello there, er, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins," Harry said, turning towards them fully.

"Grangers... Wilkins no more," John corrected as he extended his hand in welcome.

Harry shook it and smiled at them. "Glad to hear it."

"It's been a long time coming," Jane said, pulling Harry into an embrace.

Things had definitely changed. "I'm right glad that Hermione was able to... Er, that is to say, I'm glad that things are back on track."

"Well, after her visit the other night, we realized how much we were missing out on by remaining angry. We understand now, completely, why she did what she did," Hermione's dad said.

"Oh, we'd planned on going back to England, but..." Her mother shrugged. "Anyway, our little girl's getting married." She nodded to the building. "Shall we?"

"Never noticed this building before. Strange, that," John said, stuffing the parchment with the address in his pocket.

Harry grinned. "I was hoping I wasn't late. She has no idea that I'm here in Australia. I just left the local Ministry. Had a contact find out where they were."

"She'll be pleased then," Jane replied and started forward. "She may be doubly surprised. I don't think she thought we'd attend."

Surprised wasn't a word Harry would use to describe Hermione's reaction. Her face had gone from shocked to happy to suspicious when she saw him with her parents to angry. He'd say she was quite emotional.

"Hermione," he held up his hand, "brides are known for their wedding jitters, but come on... really."

"How could you?" she whispered angrily at her parents, causing Harry's eyebrows to arch in confusion.

"Oh, no..." he began as he realized what she thought. "I only just saw them outside."

"Do you want us to leave, Hermione?" her father asked. "What's all this?"

Harry interjected again. "They didn't contact me, Hermione."

"Wouldn't have bloody known how in the first place," her mother said.

Never again would Harry wonder where Hermione's expressions had come from. Mrs. Granger had the same set jaw and squinted eyes that spelled out indignation. "Hermione," Harry said again, this time trying to pull her aside.

"Unhand her, Potter," came a quiet voice from his right.

He blinked and stepped back to get a better look at the man before him. There was no animosity, no loathing, rising up within. All of what he used to feel towards Snape had died that night at Hogwarts. "Professor," he said, holding out his hand.

Snape only crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you doing here?"

"He's come round to stop the wedding!" Hermione said, voice rising. "I thought maybe they'd asked him, but..."

"I came on my own," Harry said firmly, pointing to her parents, "and they had nothing to do with it. Just saw them outside a moment ago for the first time since... you know, that day."

"Why would we call on him to stop it? We're here because we approve," John said in confusion.

"Approve? But..." Hermione also seemed confused.

"Yes," Jane said. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"I..." Hermione looked at Harry and then at her intended.

"A word?" Harry asked.

"Absolutely not," Snape replied for her. "She's made her decision."

"If I want to speak to him..." Hermione began softly.

"I didn't mean to say you couldn't."

"But that is what you said," Harry interjected.

"Enough, Harry," Hermione said, stepping between them in hopes of stopping any altercation. "I've made up my mind. You can go back and tell Ron it's done. We all just need to move on. This is my decision."

"Ron did want to find you. So did Ginny. But I came because I wanted to make sure you were certain..."

"I am," Hermione said as Snape also replied with "She is."

"And when I found that you were, I intended to stand in for you as a witness, give you support." Harry suddenly felt protective. "And she can answer for herself, thanks." This last was directed at Snape. The man looked as though he was ready to snatch Hermione and run off at any sign of trouble. Why? What was going on? Was Snape that desperate for a wife? And why did the Grangers seem confused about Hermione's reaction to their arrival?

"Harry... you're here for me?" Hermione asked, her voice suddenly soft and small. He thought she might cry. There were tears in her eyes. Her mum must have sensed it as well because she stepped forward and pulled Hermione into her arms.

"Brides shouldn't cry on their wedding day," the older woman said soothingly. "Their artfully made up eyes will leak and ruin everything!"

"John Granger," said Hermione's father as he stepped forward and extended a hand to Snape.

Snape briefly paused before doing the same. "Severus Snape."

"I'm Jane Granger. Sorry to meet you like this. She should have brought you round first." The lady was smiling and had offered her hand to Snape even though she was holding a now loudly crying Hermione. "Why so sad, love?" Jane asked as Snape lightly shook her hand.

"Y-you both sa-said Granger."

And then Harry understood. It symbolized everything Hermione had wanted so badly...her parents to try to be again what they once were. Their approval and love meant everything to her. He decided to give them a moment to speak privately and moved to the other side of the room. Snape followed.



"I still think you are up to something, Potter," the man said.

Harry glared at him defiantly. Why should he have to explain himself again? Hasn't he been one of Snape's strongest supporters all this time? Why couldn't the man just be friendly for once? "I'm here because I love Hermione. Yes, I wanted her to be with Ron, but if this is her choice, then she needs to know she's not alone, yeah?"

"So you aren't here to spirit her back to England and talk sense into her?"

"When can anyone ever change her mind once she's set on something?" Harry asked with a shrug. "And she's one of my best mates. That's something you're going to have to get used to." Inwardly, Harry hoped Snape would get used to it. He wanted to know the man, know more about his parents.

"She and I have discussed this already."

"Yeah?"

Snape's eyes narrowed. "I'll not have another Potter cocking things up for me. If you care about her, as you claim, you will keep your word about supporting her decision." Snape looked over his shoulder at the huddled Grangers; then his eyes darted toward the door. "I nearly expect Weasley to come bursting through the door, wand out, bungled spells falling from his lips."

"He's not coming. Ginny's keeping him back at home."

"How did you find us?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"I'm an Auror, and believe it or not, I can make deductions."

"Why would you support our marriage, Potter? What's in it for you?"

Harry noticed how Snape's fingers had travelled to slip into his pocket, likely where his wand lay hidden. "Going to hex me, are you? I'm sure that will go over well with your bride." Harry smirked. "Want to know what's in it for me? For one, I get to keep Hermione in my life and make sure she's happy. I plan to pop round often for visits, see? For another, I want to talk to you about..."

"Not that again, boy. I've told you..."

"Told me what? How you've met the Grangers before today? It's a bit odd they don't seem to remember that, though, eh?"

"Explain yourself!" Snape hissed.

"Perhaps you should explain yourself!" Harry said; his wand was suddenly in his hand instinctively the instant Snape's demeanor had changed.

"Explain what?" Hermione asked. "Harry, what are you doing?"

"Old habits?" he offered, pushing his wand the pocket of his robes.

She dabbed at her eyes. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you came here. You have no idea how alone I've been feeling. Mum and Dad, they weren't pleased. I had no one."

Harry allowed her to hug him as his eyes met Snape's. "Glad to see they changed their thinking then."

"Yes," she said happily, "they're tired of being here and are coming home sooner than they'd planned. They want to start the dentistry again and everything. I can't believe it!" She released Harry and reached over to take Snape's hand in one of hers. "It seems unfair that I have a friend here, but you do not. I'm sorry."

To his credit, Snape only appeared startled at her act of kindness for a moment. "It is nothing. This trip was to sort out your parents. You know that."

"Thanks," Hermione said, beaming brightly. "Shall we?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed." His eyes briefly met Harry's before he strode forward with Hermione on his arm.

Harry followed.

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**SW's Notes:** I can only apologize for my delay. Things came up, and I was unable to send this off to my beta and have it posted right away. Peace.

Additional Note: My beta is busy getting ready for an awesome recital, so this is the unbeta'd version. I shall replace it with the better version as soon as she has time to look at it.

## Eighteen

*Chapter 18 of 19*

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

**SW69 says:** I have had a series of issues that has kept me away (starting with laptop death and corrupt files and ending with graduate school studying and everything in between). Needless to say, here's the next chapter.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters. No Galleons being made.

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Hermione took in her reflection in the mirror. She looked unlike anything she'd ever imagined she would on her wedding night. The service had been quite plain, and the entire time she'd expected Ron to come crashing in and demanding she leave with him. Had part of her wanted that? If not, why did she feel a little let down that it hadn't

happened? Of course she knew her decision to marry Severus Snape had been quickly made, but she did feel, deep down, that it was the right one. No expectations beyond what they've already talked about. No disappointment if there would be no children...not by him anyway. She just wanted to have a life like that family she'd seen that day when everything had clicked into place. It wouldn't be with Ron, but it could be.

"But they had love, didn't they?" Tears welled in her eyes as she voiced this. She and Severus did not have love. It was doubtful they ever would. Not in a marriage of convenience. He wanted to be rid of the pesky law and have a companion... and sex. She couldn't forget the last. He'd specifically stated he wanted it and not occasionally. Would he be asking for his husbandly rights on this night? She couldn't be sure. They'd had dinner with her parents and Harry after the ceremony. She'd talked to her mum and dad for a little while, making plans for the next day, while Harry had whisked Severus away to talk privately. She would certainly find out what that had been about. Something had seemed a little strange, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

She wondered what would happen next. Would she come out of the bath to find Severus lying in bed awaiting her presence? If so, she could guarantee that he expected her to consummate their vows. And she would. She wasn't quite ready. Not yet, but she would do it because it was what they'd agreed on. She hoped he'd let her get accustomed to him a little first. They hadn't even kissed at the end of their binding. He'd simply taken her hand and pressed his lips first on the back of her hand, then on her wrist, and then, after turning her hand over, he'd placed one on her palm. Each press of his lips had sent a small tingle through her. They were simple gestures of affection, nothing overly sensual, and yet, they were enough to show her that there could be a connection with him. She'd just have to let it happen and not fight it.

Fluffing her hair and straightening her long nightgown, she sucked in a deep breath. It was time to meet her fate. She opened the door slowly. The bedroom was empty, but there was a pleasant fire in the grate. Severus had moved his belongings into the room. She could see his cloak lying over the back of the chaise near the hearth. Hermione straightened herself and went to the bed to lie down and wait for her husband.

*My husband.* Visions of his glittering, dark eyes, the tilt of his lips as he smirked, the way his hair fell, layered and fluttering about his face and shoulders, the strength in his stance... So many things women should appreciate about a man. So many things women had probably appreciated about him already. How many women? Would he find her lacking, as she'd only been with one man before him? Well, sort of. There was a bit of fooling around with another... but no penetration. Suddenly nervous, she pulled the duvet up to her neck and closed her eyes tightly.

Had Severus and Harry's mum been lovers? She doubted it, but why would he have held on to her memory for so long without having completely experienced her? Hermione felt a twinge of jealousy, though unwarranted. She had no right to ask for his feelings, especially since she had none and would unlikely ever develop anything like she'd felt for Ron, but doubt suddenly niggled her mind. What if she did fall in love with him? What if their bargain would one day be a source of misery? At this, she gave a light chuckle. *Like that will ever happen*, she thought in momentary merriment. The smile slowly faded as she settled into an exhausted sleep.

The next thing Hermione was aware of was sunlight warming her face. She opened her eyes and immediately squinted. "What..." She bolted upright and looked around the room. Severus was not there. The fire in the grate burned low but had been tended to. A glance next to her showed that the bed had been slept in. Why hadn't he awakened her? Had he tried? A check of her person showed nothing amiss.

Confusion set in. Last night she'd practically gone to bed dreading what might be expected of her, yet this morning she was offended nothing had happened. What if he'd come in, looked her over, and found her undesirable? No. She knew that wasn't the case. "I'm being ridiculous," she said aloud. The truth was that Severus knew she needed time, and being a man of restraint and one who apparently respected her, he'd decided to give her time to adjust. She smiled and hurried to get dressed.

When Hermione exited the bedroom, her breath caught in her throat. Severus was across the room placing a steaming plate of breakfast sausages on an already set table. The light shining in through the window encased him and made him appear to be glowing. He was so very attractive. When he looked at her with a small smile, she replied with a large grin. "This smells delicious and looks... quite inviting."

"I thought we might start this first day off properly," he said as he pulled out a chair. "I'm sure you'll be busy with your parents for much of the day. You'll need something in your stomach."

Hermione took her seat and waited for him to do the same before speaking. "I want to thank you, Severus."

"For?"

"I... just all of it."

He gazed at her for a moment and then nodded. "We'll need an adjustment period. Both of us will."

Her cheeks colored slightly as she began to busy herself with breakfast. Now and then she'd peek over at him, taking in his unrushed munching as he browsed through the morning's news. How different this man...her husband...was when compared to Ron.

Ron. Unwanted feelings of guilt and longing rose up in her chest, causing her heart to stammer. How would he handle this? How would she? What had Harry and Severus spoken about the night before? Why couldn't she stop this nonsense? Pushing away her doubt, she took a sip of juice. As she did so, her eyes met Severus' gaze.

"Is something amiss?" he asked softly.

"No. No, it's not. I just..." She shrugged. "It's different."

He seemed to stiffen. "Indeed?"

"I don't mean in a bad way. As you said, we'll have to adjust." She tried to reassure him with a smile. "I don't regret it, Severus."

"Nor I," was his quiet reply as he hid behind the newspaper.

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Severus was no fool. He could read her well enough to know that she had doubts. In fact, she seemed to waffle back and forth from determined resolve to pondering if she'd made a mistake. He would do what he must to put her at ease to ensure she wouldn't change her mind. As hard as it had been to lie next to her most of the night and not touch her (at least not in the ways he longed to), he'd done so because he knew to push her would ruin everything. He'd not lose her, not when she'd so willingly accepted their arrangement. Lucius had been correct. Having a wife definitely had its merits.

Hiding behind his newspaper and not reading a single word of it, he closed his eyes and remembered the heat of her body, the soft curve of her bum, as he'd pressed himself against her. The tickle of her tousled hair hadn't bothered him in the least as he'd leaned close to first inhale its flowery scent and then closer to rub his nose along the side of her throat just below her earlobe. He shifted in his seat as, once again, the thought of tracing her ear with his tongue, tasting her, turned him on. Who would have thought Hermione Granger might ever be someone he thought of as desirable? Yet, here she was. His wife no less. And soon... very soon, he would know all of her...every detail, every curve, every secret.

Mine, he thought with fierce want and pride. She was no Lily, certainly not, but she would not be left wanting of companionship or become sexually frustrated. He would see to that. Yes, their arrangement would work well for both their benefits. He sneered as he thought of the Ministry. How dare they think to force him into anything! Didn't they realize what he'd done for them? No matter. He felt as though he'd delivered them a blow in return, for his wife was one of their brightest employees, beloved by the Wizarding world at large. Perhaps they'd done him a favor in the end, eh?

Those thoughts brought him back to the conversation he'd had with Potter. Internally, he groaned. *What a pesky bugger!* However, the boy was quite clever and had even deduced what had happened with the Grangers. What had been more shocking was that he'd agreed not to say anything and had even said it had been worth it to see how happy it had made Hermione. For now, Potter was an ally. The boy...young man...would make certain that Weasley stayed out of the way while Severus made certain

Hermione and her family could rebuild their relationship. The price of putting up with his occasional presence and perhaps speaking to him about his mother and his wretched father now and again would be a small price to pay. The next thing Severus had to worry about was the return to England.

He wanted very much to get Hermione moved into Spinner's End as quickly as possible. He wanted her where he could be sure Weasley...or any other nosey do gooder...couldn't interfere with their lives. He knew there would be a time when they would be invited over to Malfoy Manor. He'd have to approach that subject cautiously. After all, she'd nearly lost her life there. However, if she expected him to suffer Potter in their home, then he expected her to do the same with his friends. Eventually. He meant what he said about giving her time.

Although, as he thought about the way her nightgown had slid upward to reveal one delectable length of leg that he'd been unable to keep his hand from running along its smoothness, he hoped some things might not take as much time as others.

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Samantha ran her fingers through Ron's hair in an attempt to wake him. She'd never imagined he could be so emotional, so intense. He'd been trying to break things off with her, ranting about his ex-girlfriend and how he'd been a right selfish prick. He'd admitted that he'd started to fall for her and wanted the kind of life she could provide for him, but walking away from Hermione had been harder than he'd thought. He was jealous of her decision to move on.

In her mind, it was definitely disappointing to know she was not his first choice, but if Hermione had run off to be married, and to bloody Severus Snape, she would no longer be an issue. Not truly. Ron would need time to move on, but he'd admitted that he did care for Samantha. He did want her. That had been enough for her. Now that everything was out in the open, they could start again, and this time she knew exactly what was needed to help him get on with it. She smiled as she remembered him asking her to leave. She'd forcefully pulled his face to hers for an intense kiss. His shock melted away, then his despair. When she saw he appeared numb and didn't know what to do, she'd whispered, "I think I want you to fuck me right now. Hard." His eyes had widened, and he'd hungrily pushed her against the wall, ripping at her clothes. That had been the first time. The second time had been less intense but just as fulfilling. Hermione Granger would soon be a chapter in his past.

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SW: Hope you liked this. More to come.

## Nineteen

*Chapter 19 of 19*

Hermione's life takes an unexpected turn due to a medical issue. What she wants is still possible, just not with the man she thought she'd have it with. Meanwhile, Severus is being pushed in different directions. Luckily, one of those paths lead to Hermione. This is a take on LOTM's YLC Challenge.

Disclaimer: Not my characters. No Galleons being made.

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"I can't believe you did this, Harry James Potter!" Ginny yelled, arms crossed over her chest. "Ron trusted you to stop this! I trusted you!"

Harry cocked his head to the side and glared at his angry wife. "You know, Ginny, you might be emotional, being pregnant and all, but there's no reason for you to treat me like rubbish all the time!"

"Like rubbish?" she asked shrilly, clasping her wand tightly.

"Oh, going to hex me then?" He shook his head. "This is not about you. It's not about Ron. Not really. It's about Hermione and what she wants. What she needs." He shrugged. "Snape is what she wants. She feels this is the right way to go for reasons of her own. We don't have to like it, but she damn well deserves our support." He hooked a thumb in the direction of Ron's house. "Your brother started this mess! If anyone's at fault, it's his arse."

She turned away from him, and he saw her wiping at her eyes. He knew she was shedding angry, frustrated tears. He hadn't meant to be so rough with her, but he was bloody tired of her moodiness lately. It was then that he noticed Ron in the doorway.

"So it's done then?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," Harry replied evenly. "She married Snape. Her parents were there. So was I for that matter. As a witness and for support."

"I see," Ron said, nodding in resignation. "I don't... blame you."

"As well you shouldn't," Ginny said, spinning around to face her brother. "Harry's right. You brought this on!"

"Don't think I'll go a day without knowing it," Ron replied. "I'll just go now."

"Wait, Ron," Harry began, "we're here for you, too. I'm sorry it went down this way, but..."

"S all right, Harry." He snatched up a biscuit from the tin on the table. "Samantha knows everything. She's going to help me through this. I'm not going to sit round pining for Hermione anymore. Doesn't mean I'm not hurt. Just coping."

Harry nodded, couldn't find the words to reply to his dejected friend, and simply watched him leave their home. He looked over at his wife. "Thanks for that."

"You're right. Not just about this. I have been a right foul bitch lately."

He smiled in understanding. "I know you don't approve of Snape, but I swear when I saw them together, it felt right."

"You're just biased because you think he's the last connection to your mum," Ginny said, again wiping her eyes. "Think of it from outside of your own desire, Harry. He was her professor and was a git to her and all of us, especially you, for..."

"This again?" Harry asked in annoyance. "I'm not going to stand here and list out all he has done for us. For me."

"Then tell me something. If not for the ties to your mother, why do you think he's right for Hermione?"

"Because I saw him looking at her... it was the same way I saw him look at my mum in one of his memories I'd seen. He'll keep her safe. He'll give her what she needs, and maybe, just maybe, he can come to care about her like he did for my mum." He took Ginny's hand. "And if that happens, Hermione will have the life she deserves."

Ginny smiled. "I just... We'll see how it goes, but I can't just change my feelings on this overnight." She shrugged. "My family likely won't either. Things will be different for us all for a while. It won't be the same."

"No, it won't be the same." He led her to the next room, thinking that things wouldn't be the same and would probably be even better.

Hermione brushed out her hair as she sat in front of the vanity in their shared room. She was smiling as she thought of her day. Her parents had invited both Severus and her over for lunch, and then they'd spent much of the afternoon talking about days before they'd left for Australia. Severus had even joined in the conversation and disclosed personal things she'd had no idea about.

She wondered if Severus had ever imagined such a scene playing out. She supposed that he'd never had time for any relationships with all the work he had to do for Dumbledore. At this, she frowned. All those years before Harry had returned to Hogwarts hadn't been very busy for him. It wasn't as though Voldemort were back before them. Was he still so very loyal to Lily Potter? This bothered her, but was she any better?

It was then that she thought of Ron. What was he doing? What was he feeling? Would he have truly been happy being married to her? "Did I make the right decision?" she asked her reflection, hating her sudden indecision. Ron would move on. She knew he would. Once the initial shock wore off, he'd be back with his newly found love interest and moving forward with making all those babies he wanted. There was a pang of jealousy. It wasn't just for someone else giving Ron what he wanted. It was also for the fact that Ron was probably guaranteed fatherhood while she may never be a mother.

Deciding to take a relaxing bath, Hermione went to the adjoining bath and began to fill the large tub with hot water and foamy suds. She pulled her nightgown over her head and tossed it aside. As she reached back to unfasten her bra, she heard the door open and then a small gasp.

"I apologize," Severus said as she turned to face him.

Hermione's cheeks reddened slightly. "No, it's all right. I didn't lock the door." She nodded to the tub. "I just felt like relaxing. Do you need the loo before I get in?" She was quite proud that her voice didn't display the nervousness and embarrassment at being seen so scantily undressed.

"Actually, I only needed to get a few things."

"Oh all right," she said and watched as he entered. He opened a drawer near the sink and rummaged inside. She realized she was still standing there with her hands behind her back at the clasp of her bra. This was her husband. She'd agreed to spend her life with him. They would soon have sex, and he would know more of her body than just what it looked like. Hermione unfastened her bra and let it fall to the floor. She then hooked her thumbs into the sides of her knickers and pushed them down, not daring to look in Severus' direction. Once done, she stepped out with one leg, then the other, and pushed them near her discarded bra and nightgown.

As she leaned against the wall and dipped a toe in to test the water, her eyes moved to where Severus stood and met his staring eyes as they watched her through the mirror. She saw desire there. Her eyes dropped to his hands as they clenched the countertop. His stance seemed rigid and his breathing slow and methodic. Pretending not to notice, she stepped into the tub and sunk beneath the foam.

"Ahh... quite hot." She leaned forward to put on the cold tap.

Severus cleared his throat. "It is indeed." Then he was gone.

Hermione felt empowered. He wanted her. He found her desirable. Had Ron ever looked at her that way? She'd seen want in his eyes often, but it was never like that. The effect she had on Severus was something new. So passionate. He'd tried to remain reserved but had to leave to keep from overstepping any boundaries she might have.

What were her boundaries? Was she ready for sex with Severus Snape? Her stomach tingled as she thought of it. She thought of his careful, graceful hands and imagined them running along her body. Deciding she was ready to be with him completely, she washed her body quickly and washed her hair. Once done, she decided to forgo her underclothes and only put her nightgown back on after spelling her hair dry. She took a deep breath, readied herself, and opened the door to find the bedroom... empty.

"Severus?" she called out quietly. Where had he gone? Disappointment flooded her body as she moved to the bed and lay atop its duvet. She nearly felt like crying, but she wasn't certain why. In fact, she felt quite emotional. Not wanting to examine her feelings, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to fall asleep.

Much later, she awoke to a dark room. She was now covered and spooned against Severus' body. She could feel his chest moving with his deep, even breathing. How long had he been there with her? She relished the feel of being held and decided to snuggle in a little more. She must have awakened him because his breathing changed. Hermione said nothing and pretended to sleep. After a few minutes, she felt him move as his hand moved up to brush the hair from her shoulder. He then pressed his lips against her neck just below her ear. She could hear his ragged breathing, heard a slight groan.

Heat flooded her body. She wanted him. But how to tell him? Should she just say "Surprise! I'm awake. Let's have sex"? Not a chance.

His hand slid back down her body from her shoulder, to her side, to her arse, to her thigh and back up to pull her tightly against him once again. The hand then slowly migrated to her breast, lightly caressing it. She felt her nipple harden. *Bugger this*, she thought.

Hermione reached up to place her hand over his. He stilled immediately. To let him know that it was all right. She moved his hand so that he could more firmly grasp her breast while she turned her face towards his. His lips were inches from hers. She could barely make out his face in the darkness, but she felt him shift and knew that he would welcome her kiss.

Inching closer, she lightly brushed her lips against his. That one movement sparked a chain reaction. Severus pulled her onto her back and leaned over her to take her lips more firmly. Her stomach began to tingle and sent jolts through her body when his lips parted and his tongue searched her mouth. One of his hands boldly traveled her body, exploring every curve. His lips trailed kisses down to the nape of her neck, moved up to nip her ear before his tongue traced its curve. It was this moment his hand slid up beneath her nightgown to discover she'd forgone her knickers.

Severus moaned and this undid Hermione. "Touch me, Severus," she said shamelessly.

"As you wish," was his silky reply. One finger traced over her labia lightly before sliding between, finding her aroused already. When she parted her legs to give him more access, he added another digit and leaned his head on her shoulder, breathing raggedly, as if intent on his work.

Hermione shifted to lean toward him slightly and placed a hand on his bare arm. She moved it up, beneath the sleeve of his shirt to touch his strong shoulder, momentarily grasping it with her nails as she muttered, "Anh." For his fingers and slid up to lightly fondle the bundle of nerves at her center.

"I... I want you," she said, not wanting to hurry him but not wanting to put off having him inside her a moment longer. "I need this."

Severus sat up and pulled her up with him. He grasped her nightgown and pulled it up. She raised her hands as he pulled it over and then tossed it across the room. Severus let one hand cup one of her full breasts and lowered his head to taste her skin. He flicked his tongue over her nipple. Once. Twice. Three times. Then suckled it lightly. "Mmmm," he moaned.

As soon as he lifted his head, Hermione reached out to tug on his night shirt, wanting to remove it.

"There are buttons," he murmured and hurried to unfasten them.

As he removed each button, she wasted no time touching his chest and running her hands along his flesh. He was very slim but had muscles. She could feel the strength beneath her fingertips. He shifted again, tugged at his clothing, and was naked. In an instant, she felt his lips against hers as he lowered her back down to the pillow.

He pulled back and whispered, "I wasn't sure if..."

"Yes," was all she said when his words trailed away.

Severus moved between her legs and readied himself. Hermione replied by hooking her legs behind his thighs. In one swift motion, he pushed in. Hermione's breath caught as he filled her. She moved a little to adjust to him. He was definitely no Ron.

"All right?" he asked.

She tilted her hips up in answer and reached up to clasp his shoulders. They began to move slowly at first, each learning the rhythm of the other. Severus began pushing harder, moving faster. Hermione joined him and moved her legs up to wrap around his waist tightly, wanting all of him.

With each stroke, she felt herself lose sight of everything that had happened, and for the first time, it felt like all was well in her life, that things would work out for her. She'd have everything she wanted. Severus would give it to her.

She could feel it then. Waves of feeling coming forward to claim her. Unable to stop herself, she moaned and moved frantically, willing it closer. "D-don't stop," she was able to say.

"Feel... so good," Severus murmured, his head now lowered near her ear.

His breaths and the sounds of pleasure he made each time they moved together drove her forward. She was more completely aroused than she'd ever been. "Oh...yes... Severus. I..." Waves exploded over her, and she couldn't keep herself from crying out. Over and over again he pushed in and out, and finally, as her peak descended, she felt him shudder, heard his moan and her name whispered as he collapsed against her. His forehead was damp with sweat. As was hers. Their encounter didn't take long, but it was intense and fulfilling.

He gave her a lingering kiss before rolling onto his back, breathing heavily.

She wanted to curl up against him but felt uncertain. Would her touch be welcome? He'd been holding her before, but had that simply been because he was aroused? Now that he was sated, would he still cling to her so possessively, so affectionately? She needed the affection, but she didn't want to push for too much too soon. Hermione settled for turning on her side to face him and placed a hand on his arm. Sated sleep found her moments later.

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**SW69 says:** Sorry for the length in time it took to update. It's been crazy. Our couple is finally on track to being a wonderful married pair. Or are they? We'll see soon.