

Book Club

by Prof M McGonagall

Professor Severus Snape believes that Muggle culture has nothing to offer the wizarding world. Professor Hermione Granger sets out to prove him wrong. Hobbits, house-elves and hens all play a part when Hermione attempts to bring Muggle appreciation to the Hogwarts staff.

Prologue: The Shadow of the Past

Chapter 1 of 9

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"Hermione!" Hagrid's loud greeting was the first thing Hermione heard when she arrived at the gates of Hogwarts. Before she had time to quite recover from the disorientation of Apparition, she was being lifted off her feet for a big, beard-filled bear hug. Thank Merlin, Hagrid always cleaned up carefully before the Remembrance banquets. *Eww!* The thought of a Hagrid hug when his beard was in its normal condition was enough to put her off her dinner. *Best not think about it before the banquet.*

"Hello, Hagrid. It's good to see you, too," Hermione replied once Hagrid had set her feet back on the ground. Together, they started to walk towards the castle.

"How've yeh been? Work goin' all right?"

"Yes. The Regulations for the Fair Treatment of House-Elves were passed just last week."

"Tha's wonderful! I still remember when yeh started Spew." Hermione cringed as Hagrid brought up her misguided (and misguidedly named) attempt to help house-elves, but Hagrid continued sentimentally, "Yer heart was always in the right place."

"Fortunately, I've done more research on house-elves since S.P.E.W. I think these regulations will actually be appreciated by them."

"You, Harry an' Ron were always up teh somethin'." Hagrid, apparently feeling nostalgic, pulled out his large handkerchief and snorted into it.

Hermione laughed. "None of that now, Hagrid. Mostly what we were up to was getting into trouble, if you'll remember."

Hagrid's laugh rumbled. "I guess so." By this point, they had reached the steps to the castle. "It's always a pleasure talkin' teh yeh, Hermione. It's too bad Harry an' Ron couldn't come tonight."

"I know they're both sorry they can't be here."

"Professor McGonagall explained it all to me, and I understand why they can't come, but it's too bad with it being the Fifth Anniversary, and all. An' speakin' of Professor McGonagall, she asked me to tell you that she would like to meet you in her office before the banquet."

"Thanks, Hagrid. I'll see you later, won't I?"

"O' course. I wouldn't miss yer speech." Hagrid, having delivered Hermione to the castle, ambled back toward his hut with his large strides.

Hermione turned and headed toward the Headmistress's office. Soon she was facing the stone gargoyle that guarded the door. "Hermione Granger to see the Headmistress." It wasn't long at all before Hermione was seated in Minerva McGonagall's office.

"Hermione, it's lovely to see you. Would you like some tea?" the Headmistress asked.

"Yes, thank you, Professor."

"Please, call me Minerva. You're not my student anymore."

"All right... Minerva."

Minerva smiled as she handed Hermione a cup of tea and one of her always-ready chocolate biscuits. Minerva was a firm believer in chocolate, something that Hermione had always appreciated about her former Head of House. "It's hard thinking of your former teachers as real people, but you'll get used to it. In fact, I hope you will have the chance to get used to calling me Minerva fairly quickly." Hermione stopped chewing her biscuit as she pondered what the Headmistress could mean. Minerva chuckled as she continued, "Professor Flitwick is retiring at the end of this school year, and I'd like you to think about being the Charms professor next year."

Where did this idea come from? Hermione asked Minerva as much. "Me? I haven't worked with charms professionally since I graduated. Why would you think of me for the position?"

"You may not do much work with charms, but in your efforts to get the new house-elves regulations passed, you have done a lot of teaching...educating the general public as to why the new regulations were needed and then building support for your view. That's what a good teacher does: convinces the students that they need to know the material and then gets them invested in learning it. Finding someone who knows the subject is one thing. Finding someone who can teach is another."

"And as far as your charms work goes," Minerva continued, "I probably shouldn't say this, but your charm against Marietta Edgecombe back in your fifth year was devilishly tricky. It took Filius more time than he'd care to admit to come up with the counter-charm. The charms you were using while you were hunting the Horcruxes were advanced as well. And you enjoy research, which is always a plus for an educator who wants to keep improving. The governors and I think you would do a wonderful job."

The warm glow that Hermione was feeling wasn't just from the tea that she sipped to hide her pleased smile. *Some thought has gone into this offer. It isn't just a case of the Headmistress being kind or the Board of Governors hoping to have a member of the Golden Trio on the staff of Hogwarts.* Still, the idea, flattering as it was, would take some getting used to. Her career for the past four years had been in the Ministry of Magic.

Minerva noticed her hesitation. "There are some other considerations, of course. I really need a Gryffindor on staff to act as Head of House. Professor Babbling is getting older and wants to limit her duties. Hagrid can't do it; he needs to be outside to oversee the grounds."

"I just haven't considered leaving the Ministry," Hermione slowly replied.

"Well, you certainly are at the top of your game there, with the passage of the new regulations. But just imagine what your well-publicised care for all magical creatures would mean at Hogwarts. We're trying to build more unity between the Houses, teach that Muggle-borns have as much to offer as pure-bloods. I think you would be good in that role. You know from personal experience how important it is to build these attitudes in people while they're young." Minerva paused to give Hermione time to think. "I don't expect an answer right now. Just give it some thought, Hermione."

"All right, Pro...I mean, Minerva."

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Hermione arrived early for the Remembrance Banquet so she could be seated before the students started milling into the Great Hall. The students looked younger to her every year. Walking amongst them didn't seem like camaraderie anymore...it just made her feel old. Well, okay, she realised that being 23 wasn't exactly *old*, but it did feel like it had been quite a while since she had been a student at Hogwarts.

The High Table had been expanded to include special guests and honourees, and Hermione headed toward the side where she had normally been seated for previous banquets. She started looking at the placards and quickly found her name second from the end. Casually looking at the placard on the end, she gasped in surprise as she saw the name "Severus Snape."

She had seen Professor Snape *die* in the Shrieking Shack, and although his body had gone missing, she had never doubted that he was dead. Harry called him one of the bravest men he ever knew and each year reminded attendees at the remembrances of the debt that was owed to Severus Snape because of his actions during the war. Hermione had included a remembrance of him in her own speech for the evening, partly because she knew that Harry would want her to, but mostly because she agreed with Harry on that subject.

Professor Snape must be receiving a posthumous Order of Merlin tonight. *But why a placard? If they wanted to save a seat in his honour, shouldn't that be more clear to the audience? Unless... could he be a ghost? That would just be my luck, having to converse with Snape's ghost.* A short time later, a few of her questions were answered when Professor Snape filed in with Professor McGonagall and some of the other professors through the staff door by the High Table. He certainly looked as though he were flesh and blood, not ghostly. "I might have known," Hermione thought she heard him mutter as he sat in the seat next to hers.

She stared at him intently, taking in the changes of the last five years. His large nose and prominent cheekbones still dominated his face, but he no longer had an emaciated, hollow look about him. His hair was still long but had been pulled back into a tail at the nape of his neck, perhaps in deference to the dress robes he was wearing. His dress robes were black, of course, with a subtle swirling pattern running through the fabric in a darker black. A wide, reddish scar peeked above the high collar of his robes. His skin was naturally pale, but it no longer bore the sallow look that she remembered. In fact, his cheeks were spots of red colour, and his eyes glowed like sharp pieces of obsidian, and... *oh dear, I've been caught.*

"Have you finished staring, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked in an arctic voice.

All at once, the poise that Hermione had thought she'd acquired through the years escaped her, and she was left to babble like a first year. "I'm sorry for staring, sir, but I thought you were dead. Oh! It's good that you aren't, but now I feel terrible that we left you alone in the Shrieking Shack. If I had known you were alive, I would have...well, we were quite busy that day...but I certainly would have made sure that someone knew..." She suddenly realised that Professor Snape was smirking at her, one eyebrow raised. She quickly...and audibly...snapped her mouth shut.

"Please spare me your platitudes. They are neither necessary nor desired."

"Yes, sir." Hermione turned away from Snape and gave a small huff of annoyance. She wasn't annoyed with Professor Snape for acting like he always had...well, perhaps a bit annoyed with his accustomed rude manner...but with herself for losing her composure. Suddenly, 23 didn't seem old at all. *Get a grip, Hermione*, she scolded herself.

Students started entering the Great Hall, along with other guests for the Remembrance Banquet. Amongst the many people, Hermione saw the Weasley family seat themselves at the Gryffindor table. Neville Longbottom sat at the High Table next to Professor Sprout, with whom he was apprenticing. Draco and Astoria Malfoy sat with Lucius and Narcissa at the Slytherin table. Andromeda Tonks and Teddy Lupin sat at the Hufflepuff table.

It wasn't long before the whispers and pointing started as people in the Great Hall noticed Severus Snape at the High Table. Hermione glanced at Professor Snape and noted how uncomfortable he looked under the scrutiny. *Not that I can blame him. I hate when people stare.*

Arthur Weasley was brave enough to walk up to the High Table. "Severus, it's good to see you alive... and well?" He held out his hand toward Severus, and after a brief pause, Severus shook his hand.

"Yes, I'm well, Arthur. Thank you for asking."

The Headmistress rose and crossed to the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, guests and students, please be seated."

"I hope we get a chance to talk soon," Arthur said.

"Perhaps," Severus answered, clearly uncomfortable.

Finally, everyone was seated, and Professor McGonagall stood to give her welcoming speech. "Today is the fifth anniversary of the victory over Tom Riddle, the self-styled Lord Voldemort, and his so-called Death Eaters. We gather here today to remember those who fought at this battle, particularly those who gave their lives. One of the best ways we can honour the memory of those who fought and died is to enjoy our time together and remember the happy times we spent in their company. We welcome our guests here tonight. Please enjoy the hospitality of Hogwarts."

The serving dishes on the table filled with the delicious food provided by the Hogwarts house-elves, and the next few moments were spent in filling plates and passing dishes. Summoning up her stock of Gryffindor courage, Hermione turned towards Professor Snape. "Sir, where have you been for the last five years? I truly thought you were... well, dead."

Professor Snape gave her a look that plainly said he wished he didn't have to suffer through her questioning. He returned his attention to his plate, taking his time chewing and swallowing a bite of roast before answering. "That was exactly what you were supposed to think. It was what everyone was supposed to think."

*Why would you want everyone to think you were dead?*The thought flashed through Hermione's head and must have flashed across her face as well.

"Think, Miss Granger," was Snape's impatient admonition. "If the Dark Lord had used the Killing Curse, there would have been no way I could have defended myself. However, I could...and did...take precautions in the event that he decided to use Nagini. The belief that I was dead gave me the time to disappear."

"I wish there had been some way you could have told the Order. We felt bad enough leaving you there. Then when your body wasn't discovered, I... I had horrible thoughts of... well, never mind."

Professor Snape gave her a long look from the corner of his eye, as though gauging her feelings of guilt. He finally replied, "I had made arrangements to be taken to the Prince family estate where I've spent the last few years recovering and resting."

"Why reappear now? Did someone discover you and spoil your secret?"

Professor Snape sighed. "You haven't lost your tendency to ask annoying questions."

"I'm sorry, sir," Hermione replied. She helped herself to another piece of pumpkin bread and was buttering it when something occurred to her. She grimaced and said, "You probably don't want my advice, but you might as well make up your mind to tell your side of the story to the public. Otherwise, Rita Skeeter will make something up, which is usually much worse. Believe me, I've had some experience with that."

"They ought to ban that woman from ever publishing again," growled Snape. "The fact is that Kingsley Shacklebolt always knew where I was, and he told Professor McGonagall. The Headmistress has asked me to teach Potions next year, and I've decided to accept. Kingsley pointed out that I might be better accepted by the parents of my students if they didn't think I was dead. I'm not sure about that. It's difficult to hate a ghost."

"Hmm. Knowing Kingsley, he decided that an Order of Merlin presentation will both publicise that you are alive and show the public that you have Ministry support."

"I see your time at the Ministry hasn't been wasted. I don't know if it's possible to redeem my reputation, but in all fairness to Professor McGonagall, I decided I would let Kingsley have his way."

*Redeem his reputation!*Hermione was just about to inform Professor Snape that he underestimated the understanding people had of his role in the war when he held up his hand.

"Before you launch into some misguided show of support, Miss Granger, please don't. I've read your comments on the subject before this, and you and I will have to disagree on the ability of the public to overlook my past wrongdoing."

Hermione pressed her lips together to keep from voicing her irritation with her former professor's lack of confidence in the goodness of people. Besides, she had every reason to believe that he could come up with quite a few examples of the worst that society had to offer, which would put her on the losing end of a debate with him. She turned away and exchanged a few comments with Professor Babbling, who was sitting to her left. Conversation soon dried up, however, because Professor Babbling was, ironically, a very quiet person.

Hermione was quite certain that Professor Snape would not appreciate an attempt to exchange small talk. She thought with longing of other banquets when Harry, Ron and she never ran out of things to talk about. She was composing a letter to them in her head and almost choked when Professor Snape addressed her.

"I see the Weasley family is here. I'm surprised that your stalwart companions aren't here since one is a Weasley and the other married into the family, I understand."

Hermione had hastily swallowed her food and gulped some water to avoid choking. Taking a deep breath...*I will not lose my composure this time...*she responded, "Yes, Harry and Ginny are married, but Harry is not in the country at the moment. He's in the US consulting with their Department of Magical Law Enforcement on a case. The case has reached a critical point, and he couldn't leave."

"Quite successful in his chosen field, I see," Snape commented dryly.

"Harry is highly motivated when it comes to the pursuit of dark wizards."

Hermione was surprised that Professor Snape let that pass without a comment...*really, what could he say to such an obvious statement?*

"And Mr. Weasley?" he asked.

Hermione gave a small chuckle, shaking her head at the irony of life. "That's a story. This past winter Ron and Luna took their honeymoon trip to Switzerland. Maybe you

didn't know that Ron and Luna had married?"

"Anything the Golden Trio does is fodder for the *Daily Prophet*," Snape answered, having apparently read too many articles about said Trio.

"No kidding," responded Hermione, having definitely had too many articles written about her. "Anyway," she continued, "Luna is a naturalist. Ever since Harry proved that her father's quest for the Deathly Hallows wasn't just a foolish dream, she and Mr. Lovegood have been more determined than ever to prove the existence of some of the strange creatures they have always believed in. Last winter, she and Ron documented evidence of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Snape merely raised an eyebrow, doubt apparent on his face.

"I know." Hermione held up her hand to forestall any comment he might be tempted to make. "Apparently, the Crumple-Horned Snorkack usually moves too quickly to be seen. However, they don't move when they hibernate. On their honeymoon, Luna and Ron went looking for hibernating Snorkacks and found some."

Professor Snape tsked. "Sounds like a romantic honeymoon. I can see that Mrs. Weasley would enjoy it, but Mr. Weasley?"

"Ron doesn't mind camping or hiking, as long as he gets plenty to eat," Hermione said, laughing. "So tonight Luna is in Switzerland being honoured by the International Society for the Preservation of Magical Creatures, and Ron wanted to be there with her. As he says, he's been honoured for his part in the war before, but this is Luna's first public recognition."

"Well, that's nice for Mrs. Weasley, although I don't quite know what to think of this discovery," Snape said, the deepening crease between his eyebrows indicating his conflicting thoughts.

"It does make one rethink the possibility of encountering Wrackspurts and Plimpies." Hermione smiled at him in return.

"Yes, and Gurdyroots. I may have a whole new line of potions research to undertake." Hermione was fascinated to see the corner of Professor Snape's mouth tilt up slightly.

Hermione chuckled. "I have the utmost confidence in your abilities, sir."

"Thank you, I'm sure." Professor Snape actually did smile and even gave a chuckle when Hermione laughed again. The silence after their laughter grew awkward as they both realised they'd *shared a joke*.

"I suppose Ron will have to take up tramping through the wilderness as a hobby," Hermione ventured to comment after a moment, unsure of what new subject she could safely move on to.

"That might prove more productive than his father's choice of hobby," Snape said, looking toward the Weasley family sitting at the Gryffindor table.

"Do you mean Mr. Weasley's interest in Muggle inventions?" Hermione asked. At the professor's nod, she continued, "I think it's admirable that he tries to learn more about Muggles. The wizarding world could benefit from learning about Muggles."

"What's the point? I'm half-blood and grew up in a Muggle household. Why would anyone want to do things the Muggle way when magic is so much better?"

"Are you just saying that to tease me, or are you serious?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"I assure you that I am serious. Living as a Muggle did more harm than good for my mother. Would you give up the magical world, Miss Granger?"

"No, I wouldn't because I am a witch, but there are Muggle ideas and culture that would make wizarding life easier or more enjoyable."

"Hmph. You'd have to prove that to me," was Professor Snape's final word on the subject.

Hermione knew that Professor Snape wasn't prejudiced against Muggles in the same way that many pure-bloods were. *Perhaps this is what Minerva meant when she said that someone needs to demonstrate that Muggles have something to offer*, thought Hermione. For the first time, she truly considered Minerva's job offer.

Chapter One: A Conspiracy Unmasked

Chapter 2 of 9

Hermione attends her first Hogwarts staff meeting, and Minerva announces her grand plan for the year.

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Author's Notes: Thanks to morethansirius, Lady Rhian and sshg316 for their alpha/beta work on this chapter. This was originally written for lotrangel17 for the SSHG Exchange on Live Journal.

August 18 saw Hermione making her way to the Hogwarts staff room for the first staff meeting of the 2003-2004 school year. She'd never been to a staff meeting before. True, they were probably like most other meetings, but it made her nervous not knowing what to expect. Taking a deep breath, she entered the staff room and stopped just inside the door. Professors were bustling about the room. Some were talking in small groups of two or three at the long table that had been set up in the middle of the room. Near the door, others were milling about a table which contained handouts that Hermione supposed were for today's meeting. An animated discussion drew her attention to a refreshment table on one side of the room where a group was discussing something Madam Hooch had evidently said about the Chudley Cannons.

Hermione quietly joined the queue to pick up the needed handouts for the meeting. *Now what?* she thought as she looked around the room and tried to decide where to go next.

Just then, Professor Vector looked up from her conversation with Professor Sprout. "Hermione! Come sit here," she called, gesturing to a seat next to her.

Hermione gave a grateful look to her former Arithmancy professor and crossed to the indicated seat. "Hi, Professor Vector. Thanks for rescuing me. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do next. Hello to you, too, Professor Sprout," Hermione added since the Herbology professor was looking at her with what Hermione privately termed her

"motherly" smile.

"Oh no, dear. You must call me Septima and Professor Sprout Pomona since we are colleagues now."

"Yes, indeed you must," Professor Sprout chimed in. "I do hope you have an easier time of it than Neville has. He is a dear boy, but if he's going to be teaching classes this year, he needs to start thinking of himself as a professor."

Perhaps if you didn't refer to your apprentice as a "dear boy," he'd have an easier time doing that was Hermione's thought. All she said, however, was, "Thank you, Septima, Pomona."

"If you'd like to get some breakfast, you might want to do that before the meeting starts," Septima advised.

"Minerva told me there'd be breakfast at this meeting," Hermione said. "I admit I've been looking forward to a good Hogwarts breakfast. I usually just have a bowl of cereal or a piece of toast."

"Yes, breakfasts here are good." Pomona nodded in agreement. "But they have a dreadful way of going to your hips." She rolled her eyes, gave a rueful smile, and patted one ample hip.

Hermione gave Pomona a small smile in return. It was nice of Septima and Pomona to be so friendly to her at her first staff meeting, but she had never thought she would be discussing Professor Sprout's weight this morning...or anytime, really. *Oh well...*

She made her way to the sideboard where breakfast was being served. Taking a small helping of her favourite breakfast foods and some coffee, she went back to her seat and began to eat. Professors Sprout and Vector...Pomona and Septima...had gone back to their previous discussion, leaving Hermione to eat in peace for a few moments. This didn't bother Hermione at all. She took the opportunity to look over the handouts which included the agenda for the meeting and a master schedule of classes for the school year.

Professor McGonagall entered the staff room and busied herself getting her notes ready at the podium in front of the room. She was followed almost immediately by Neville Longbottom, who quickly walked, head down, to the chair opposite his Herbology mentor. He sat down with a perfunctory, "Good morning, Professor Sprout, Professor Vector." He looked up after his nod of greeting to see Hermione. "Hermione!" He gave her a genuine smile and shook her hand enthusiastically across the table.

"Hi, Neville! It's good to see you." And it was lovely to see Neville and not feel alone as the youngest person in the room.

Neville looked as though he was about to continue the conversation, but just then, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and announced, "If you would all take your places, I'd like to begin."

There was some rustling and chattering as people took their seats. Neville said quietly, "We'll have to catch up later. Okay?"

"That'd be great, Neville." Hermione looked around the table as everyone was getting settled. Professor Trelawney sat at the back of the room, a bit apart from the table...*probably wants to keep her "mental eye" clear.* Firenze was also at the back of the room...*well, he obviously can't sit at the table.*...standing at a podium of his own. Professor Babbling and Professor Binns were further down the table as were Professor Sprout, Professor Vector and Neville. It was a bit disconcerting to sit amongst this staff and realise that she was the Charms professor. As she continued cataloguing professors up toward the front of the room, she noticed two unfamiliar faces which must belong to the Muggle Studies and Transfiguration professors.

She was a bit startled when the door to the staff room opened suddenly, admitting Professor Snape. Ignoring the table with the handouts and never acknowledging anyone in the room, he stalked to the only remaining chair at the front of the room very near the Headmistress's podium and sat down. His late arrival drew every eye, and Hermione had to admit that it was enjoyable to watch the graceful way in which he moved and the fascinating swirl of his robes. She gave herself a mental shake...*somebody might think I was actually attracted to him.*...and returned her attention to Professor McGonagall.

Minerva was looking severe, but there was a gleam in her eye as she said, "I saved a set of handouts for you, Severus." She set the handouts down at his place. He ignored them, and she continued, "I have some announcements and introductions to make. First, it has been decided that Neville is ready to teach the first year Herbology classes this year. We certainly wish to encourage you, Neville, and hope that you will find this new addition to your apprentice duties enjoyable."

A round of polite applause followed as Neville blushed a bit and responded, "Thank you, Headmistress."

"Septima will be taking on the duties of Ravenclaw Head of House now that Filius has retired. Bathsheba will be giving up her duties as Gryffindor Head of House, and our new Charms professor will be taking on those duties. I believe almost all of you know Hermione Granger, who not only was one of the students primarily responsible for defeating Voldemort, but also has more recently been responsible for the new Regulations for the Fair Treatment of House-elves. Welcome, Hermione."

Applause again followed, and Hermione responded, "I'm happy to be back at Hogwarts."

"And last, but certainly not least, is a man who wants no introduction, I'm sure. Indeed, for many years, he didn't want anyone to know that he had survived the war. Severus, I, for one, am glad that you have consented to come back to Hogwarts to teach Potions. Given what I said to you publicly the last time you were on staff here, I would like to apologise for my behaviour towards you during that final year of the war. I didn't understand what you were trying to do..." Here, Minerva had to take a deep breath. Tears shone in her eyes as she looked at Professor Snape and said, "But I should have trusted you, Severus, and I am sorry." Looking at her colleagues, she continued, "I know most of you were at the Remembrance Banquet, but it seems appropriate for us to show our appreciation to a colleague who happens to be the most recent Order of Merlin recipient."

The staff stood and applauded. Professor Snape looked as though he wished he wasn't there. Hermione stood with her colleagues, happy to be able to make this gesture. *He may not have been particularly nice at school, but he had cause. We wouldn't have won the war without him. Maybe he's mellowed over time, without the stress of his spying.*

All at once, the man whom Hermione didn't know began singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow, For he's a jolly good fellow..." His voice died away as he looked at the faces of his colleagues staring at him in horror. Professor Snape was giving him a violent glare. Looking around in confusion, the strange man asked, "Is that just a Muggle tradition, then? Don't any of you know the song?"

Minerva cleared her throat and covered her mouth. Hermione thought she looked as though she was trying to get the twitching of her lips under control. However, she was quite calm when she spoke, "Severus and Hermione, I don't believe you've had the pleasure of meeting James Beekman, our Muggle Studies professor. James, when you come to know Severus better, you will understand why no one sang along with you. Not because Severus isn't a good fellow, but because singing to him in that way would be something he would... dislike."

Dislike would be more like it, thought Hermione.

The professors began sitting down. James was a few chairs away from Hermione, but he came up to her to shake her hand, saying, "Pleased to meet you, Hermione." Then going to Severus, he extended his hand and said, "Pleased to meet you too, Severus."

"Beekman," Severus said in response. James Beekman held his hand out for a full ten seconds before realizing that Professor Snape was not going to shake it. He looked from his hand to Professor Snape, shrugged and went back to his seat. Hermione gave a mental eye roll at Snape's behaviour. *I guess mellowing was too much to hope for.*

Professor McGonagall continued her introductions. "Our Transfiguration professor is Ivy Turner. Severus, you may remember our former student, but Hermione has likely never met her."

Hermione turned to look at a blonde lady who appeared to be about 35 years old. "Pleased to meet you, Ivy," Hermione said, smiling.

"Professor Turner," was all Severus said, but he gave her a polite nod. *That was almost friendly*, Hermione thought.

"Nice to meet you, too, Hermione. Professor Snape," Ivy said, nodding to each of them in turn.

"I'm sure you'll have a chance to make new acquaintances and catch up with old ones later." The staff's chatter once more quieted as Professor McGonagall moved on to the next item on the meeting's agenda. "The Master Schedule is one of the handouts. I trust you can see for yourself when you will be teaching. Take a moment to look at the schedule and see if you spot any conflicts."

After waiting for the professors to look over the schedule carefully, Minerva asked, "Does anyone have any concerns?" Looking around the room, she didn't see anyone with a concern, although not everyone was studying the schedule as diligently as Hermione. "Well, if you notice anything, let me know sooner rather than later so we can change whatever needs to be changed."

"Next is a handout of students sorted by class and house. Transfer students' names are written in green ink in their year. Of course, we'll have to wait for the Sorting Hat to let us know in what houses the new students will be. Any questions?"

Seeing none, Minerva proceeded. "As you know, we've been working over the last five years to promote an end to prejudice and an appreciation for other houses and blood statuses. The problem many of us have in trying to promote an appreciation of Muggle-borns is that we don't know much about Muggle culture. For the first time, we have two Muggle-born staff members: James and Hermione. I've spoken with both of them about my idea of teaching Muggle Appreciation to the rest of the staff, and they've agreed. Each of them will be offering a course, and I'd like all of you to choose to attend at least one of the courses. James, why don't you tell us about what you will be covering?"

James stood up. "I love Muggle sports. Don't get me wrong, Quidditch is great, but I've discovered that wizards know next to nothing about any other sports. Muggles have some great games. We'll learn about rugby, cricket, football, golf, tennis, horse racing, polo, cycling, and basketball. Then, we'll spend some time watching games to see how the sport is played. For those who wish, we might be able to try out playing some of the sports. It should be fun and exciting."

He sat down amid some excited whispering amongst Madam Hooch and her friends. Minerva said, "Hermione?"

Hermione knew that James's course would be popular. Harry and Ron would pick that course in a second compared to the course Hermione would offer. "Muggles who enjoy reading often participate in book clubs, so I thought I would offer to lead a book club. We would read a Muggle book and then meet to discuss it. Muggles have some wonderful literature. I thought it might be fun to compare Muggle and wizarding culture at the meetings, too. For example, we might compare Muggle and wizarding wines and cheeses or Muggle and wizarding gardening techniques." She looked around the room and saw some of the staff members nodding or looking interested. *Well, at least I'll have a group to lead.*

"Pardon me, Headmistress." The voice of Professor Snape interrupted her mental count of possible book club members. He was speaking in that quiet way that meant he was irritated. "Are you saying that *all* of us are expected to join one of these two groups? Don't you feel our time would be better spent in preparing for our classes or monitoring the students?"

"Yes, Severus, I expect all staff members to engage in one of these two groups. I see this as important preparation for your classes. It will assist us in relating to the Muggle-born students and in helping the pure-blood students gain a better understanding of their fellow witches and wizards. As the plan is to meet about once a month, I don't see that it will impinge too much on your grading and class preparation time." Professor Snape looked like he wished to disagree. Minerva gave him a cold stare, and he finally sat back with resignation.

His presence is likely to dampen any meeting, Hermione thought. *Given our conversation at the Remembrance Banquet, he isn't likely to want to compare Muggle and Wizarding culture. He'll probably choose the sports club... I hope.*

"Are there any questions for James or Hermione? No? As you leave, you will notice pieces of parchment on the table at the back. One piece is labelled for James's sports club, and one is labelled for Hermione's book club. Sign your name to whichever club you wish to participate in, and James or Hermione will contact you about their club's activities. Off you go. Lunch will be served in the small dining room."

Hermione, James and Minerva chatted as the rest of the staff left, each professor signing his or her name on the way out of the room. After the last staff member left, Minerva went to the table and signed her name to both lists. "If you don't have your meetings on the same day, I'll try to attend both clubs as long as my duties permit."

"Thank you, Minerva," James responded.

"Yes, thank you. It's kind of you to be so supportive," Hermione added.

"Not at all. I find both of your ideas interesting." Minerva picked up the lists and glanced at the signatures on each. "Well, you both have nice sized groups." She handed each of the club leaders their piece of parchment. "Please, don't be afraid to come to me if you've got questions or concerns." She gave Hermione an especially meaningful look. "Any questions or concerns."

Hermione had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach as she took her list. Minerva's look had not been comforting. She glanced down at the names on her list. The look from the Headmistress was soon explained as she saw the familiar, spiky writing of her former Potions professor. Severus Snape had signed up to be in her book club. *Oh, dear...*

Chapter Two: At the Sign of The Prancing Pony

Chapter 3 of 9

The book club has its first meeting, and Hermione gets to know her colleagues better... both the good and the bad.

A week before school was to begin, Hermione had arranged for the members of her book club to have a short meeting in the staff room. She had gone to London just the day before to pick up enough copies of the book the club would be reading first. They were stacked on the table next to her while she waited for the club members to arrive.

Her colleagues entered with comments such as: "Look at the size of those books!" "How can we read that in a month?" "That's what comes of putting an insufferable know-it-all in charge of a book club."

That last comment was from Severus Snape, of course, and Hermione rolled her eyes. *I won't comment that he should have plenty of experience with excessive reading, given all the essays he assigns in Potions.*

Very soon the members of the club were seated at the table. There was Professor Snape, as well as Pomona Sprout, Septima Vector, Minerva McGonagall, Sybill Trelawney, Ivy Turner, Bathsheba Babbling, and Professor Binns. *When Minerva said she wanted all staff members to participate, I didn't realise she meant ghosts as well.*

"Here are the books that we will be reading to start. I know they're long, but don't worry, as the book is split into six parts. We'll take one part each month for six months." She passed out the books, and the club members read the cover: *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien.

"There were many books I could have chosen, but I thought this might be interesting for wizards to read. It is a book in the fantasy genre, a style of literature that Muggles use when they want to include magic in their stories. This is an iconic work of Muggle fantasy literature. It should give us a lot to discuss as we look at some of the ideas that Muggles have about magic. More than that, it is a really good story and should give us an opening to talk about different aspects of Muggle culture."

"How much must we read before the next meeting?" asked Ivy Turner. Hermione thought she detected a note of censure in the Transfiguration professor's voice. *I wonder what's wrong with her. Maybe she's having a bad day.*

"Please read the Prologue and Book One. That's a little more than 200 pages which should be fairly easy to read in a month. I know some people tend to skip the prologues of books, but it is important to read this one so that you understand what the main character is like and what has happened before this story starts. We'll have our first meeting after curfew on October 3 in my sitting room."

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The evening of October 3 found Hermione putting around her sitting room, making sure everything was arranged to her liking. Her table had been magically enlarged to make room for her guests. The food was on a serving table under a warming charm, and a selection of drinks sat nearby. Off to one side at a separate table was a plate of Limburger cheese which Hermione had procured especially for Professor Binns. She remembered Sir Nicholas's 500th Deathday party and how he had told Harry, Ron and her that ghosts couldn't taste food unless it was extremely pungent or rotting. Hermione couldn't bring herself to serve rotting food to Professor Binns, but she hoped the smell of the Limburger cheese would be enough to allow him to "enjoy" the food.

Hermione greeted her guests as they arrived. When everyone was there, she said, "In the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*, I noticed something that Middle Earth, Muggles and wizards have in common. All cultures seem to enjoy meeting up with friends at a pub or bar or inn. The Shire had 'The Green Dragon' and 'The Prancing Pony.' Hogsmeade has 'The Three Broomsticks' and 'The Hog's Head Inn.' Almost every big and small Muggle town has a bar or pub.

"Many Muggles enjoy fish and chips at the pub, so I went to my favourite chippy and picked up some for us to enjoy. There are some sauces you can put on the fish: chippy sauce, malt vinegar, salt or tartar sauce.

"Nothing goes with fish and chips as well as good ale, so I have a selection of some Muggle ales here. I also have some mulled mead and Ogden's Old Firewhisky in case you don't care for the ale. Help yourselves. When you've got something to eat, come to the table, and we'll begin our book club discussion."

As people were lining up for the food, Hermione showed Professor Binns where the Limburger cheese was. "Ah, how kind of you to think of me, Miss Granger." He took a deep whiff of the smelly cheese. Hermione felt her nose twitch at the thought of the unpleasant odour, but Professor Binns said, "That's delightful!"

"I'm glad you're enjoying it, Professor." Hermione looked around to see if her guests needed anything. She saw Professor Trelawney beckoning her from the serving table.

"Could I have something else to drink?" she asked. "I don't believe I should care for any of these."

Either she only drinks cooking sherry, or she's given up alcohol."Of course, Sybill. I have these bottles of water or club soda."

"Water in bottles? Whatever for?" Sybill didn't wait for an answer but took one of the bottles and went to sit at the table.

Hermione got her own serving of fish and chips and her favourite selection of the ale and joined the group at the table. Everyone seemed to like the food, and several had taken a glass along and were sampling the different kinds of ale.

"This is delicious, Hermione," Pomona said after having eaten a few bites of the food.

"The fish and the ale really complement each other," Bathsheba Babbling noted.

"Has anyone tried the chippy sauce? It originates here in Scotland." That comment was from Minerva, who was very proud of her Scottish heritage.

"This tastes so good; it can't be good for you," Septima's voice was full of mock anguish.

Ivy Turner tsked. "I don't see the draw, myself. It's not as though it's gourmet food." Some of the professors looked rather uncomfortable at the rude remark.

I don't think she is getting the point. Hermione laughed. "No, it's definitely not gourmet food. It's what Muggles call 'comfort food.'"

"My father used to bring in fish and chips from the nearby chippy Friday nights after he got paid. I looked forward to that every week," Professor Snape said.

Tension in the room eased as curiosity about Snape's remark grew. Ivy seemed especially curious. "You had Muggle parents?" she asked, obviously surprised.

"My father was a Muggle, and we lived in a Muggle neighbourhood. So we generally followed Muggle practices."

Hermione felt that there was a lot he wasn't saying about his family, but she was grateful that he had helped diffuse the tension after Ivy's unfortunate remark.

Septima was enthusiastic. "Then you can help Hermione with the Muggle culture aspect of our class, Severus." Minerva tried to suppress a snort and almost succeeded.

Severus considered Septima's remark while he took a sip of his ale. "I didn't say I enjoyed living a Muggle lifestyle, Septima. I'm not sure I will be of much help to Hermione because I don't remember anything really positive about Muggle culture."

"Except for fish and chips," Hermione pointed out.

He smiled. "I'll give the Muggles points for take-away food," he responded as he took another bite of fish.

Seeing that most of her guests were finishing their food, Hermione decided it was time to start the book discussion. She helped her colleagues levitate their empty paper

plates into the fireplace to dispose of them. "While we are talking about the book, please feel free to get something else to drink if you wish," Hermione invited.

She accioed her book, and the others followed suit. "Before we start discussing the story in more detail, what are your impressions of the book so far?" Hermione asked to start off the conversation.

Her colleagues stared down at their books or glanced sidelong at each other, unwilling to be first to speak. Hermione gave a mental shrug. *And we criticise the students for not wanting to answer questions.*

Severus gave a mighty sigh and finally spoke. "I didn't want to start off on a negative note," he said, in what Hermione privately termed his snarky, silky tone, "but is this the best the Muggles can do? *This* is supposed to be the top of fantasy literature? I could barely get through it with all the singing and the story-telling and the... slogging through the wilderness. Where is the plot?"

"Why don't you tell her how you really feel, Severus?" Minerva shook her head and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

"I thought that was the point of the question, Minerva."

"Your observation is fair enough, Severus," Hermione said before Minerva scolded Severus any further. "Did anyone else have a similar reaction?"

Some of the club members nodded their heads or grimaced a bit in agreement with Snape's point. "There were parts I really enjoyed, but there were definitely 'slower' parts of the story." Septima tried to phrase her objection gently.

"That's not an uncommon reaction to Book One. It does have more background information and less plot than the rest of the story." Chuckling a little, Hermione continued, "I can, however, tell you from personal experience that it is less boring to read about weeks of camping than it is to live it."

"To what is she referring?" Sybill whispered loudly to Minerva.

Minerva sniffed. "I would guess she is referring to the several well-publicised months she spent hunting Horcruxes with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley."

"Oh," Sybill responded vaguely.

"The author Tolkien spent many years developing these books," Hermione explained. "He was a linguistics professor and deeply interested in the development of languages. He created several languages of his own, and then began playing with the idea of a world and history to go with his languages. He wrote many stories of Middle-Earth that take place ages before this story. Some of this information is included in these books. Most of it has been published separately. In Book One, he's trying to tell the story, but he also has to explain some of the history."

"He must have really loved poetry to write all those songs and poems," Pomona mused.

"Yes, and he tries to give the songs different styles for the different races. Elvish poems are very complex while the hobbit poems are very simple by comparison."

Hermione paused a moment to see if there would be more conversation about the poetry. "Other thoughts?"

"The elves confused me at first," Pomona mentioned. "I kept thinking of house-elves when I was reading about them, and those two pictures didn't mesh."

Hermione suddenly pictured Kreacher or Winky with a blonde elf wig such as Orlando Bloom had worn in the movie adaptations. She couldn't help laughing a bit at that image.

Ivy joined her laughter. "No, indeed. Imagine house-elves as noble as the elves in the story."

Hermione bristled a little at this. "House-elves may not be as lordly as elves, but I have known them to be very noble."

"Of course you have, Hermione." Septima smiled gently at her. "That's because you treat them with nobility."

Sybill suddenly gasped, her eyes opened very wide behind her glasses. "I predict," she said dramatically, "that Tom Bombadil will play an important role in the future of the ring."

Hermione bit her lip to stop the laughter from bubbling up but said, "He did seem to be unaffected by its power."

"I didn't like that section," Professor Binns's voice floated over from the end of the table where he sat. "The barrow-wights give ghosts a bad name."

"They were far more like Inferi than ghosts, Cuthbert. I doubt any of us thought of you during that section," Severus reassured him. The others murmured their agreement.

"So, the story will move along better in the next section?" Ivy asked. "I'm sure Severus will agree that our time is precious to us." She gave Severus a little smile. Severus nodded.

Our time? Does she spend a lot of time with Severus? Something about the thought of Ivy and Severus rankled, but Hermione ignored that and answered, "There will still be a lot of travelling all the way through the story, but the action does pick up from here on out."

Hermione was feeling out of sorts after Ivy's last remark, so she said, "Why don't we call it a night? Thanks to everyone for your discussion. We'll read Book Two for next time. Would the first Friday night in November work for everyone? Did you enjoy the structure of tonight's meeting?" Seeing general agreement from her colleagues, Hermione said, "All right, we'll operate the same way at the next meeting. Good night, everyone."

The book club members started filing out of her sitting room. Pomona, Septima and Minerva remained behind. "Let us help you clean up, Hermione," Pomona offered.

"Thanks. That's nice of you." The ladies started cleaning up what little mess there was. The book club members had been considerate about cleaning up after themselves.

Minerva said, "I don't want you to have to pay for things like this with your own money. We'll ask the club members for donations and pay for the rest out of the school budget."

"Are you doing the same thing in James's club? I don't want any special treatment," Hermione answered.

"When have you ever known me not to be fair? I will send a note out to the club members explaining the situation."

"I'll try to come up with a proposed budget so that you have some idea of how much I'm thinking about."

"That will be very helpful, Hermione." The cleanup accomplished, Minerva said, "There are enough bottles of ale for us each to have one more. May we, Hermione?"

"That would be lovely. I'd like to hear your feedback about the meeting tonight. Let's sit over by the fireplace." Taking their drinks, they sat on the sofas and chairs on the other side of the room.

"I think the meeting went really well, Hermione," Pomona offered.

"We never really got into any organised discussion of the deeper elements of the story," Hermione objected.

"I'm not sure you would have wanted to do that too much at the first meeting. Everyone had something to contribute to the discussion, so you can tell they're interested."

"Some people had too much to contribute," Septima said darkly.

"No, Severus really did have a valid point about the pace of Book One," Hermione said. "He only commented so strongly because of a discussion we had about Muggle and wizarding cultures at the Remembrance Banquet."

"And Ivy?" Septima prodded. "Do you have an excuse for Ivy's remarks?"

"Oh, Ivy is just a spiteful cat." Minerva sounded almost as annoyed as Septima. "And believe me, I know spiteful cats."

"You and your cat jokes, Minerva." Pomona shook her head but smiled at her friend.

"You've never talked with Mrs. Norris for any length of time. Now, there is a spiteful cat. But you won't get me off the subject so easily. Ivy is probably being spiteful to you, Hermione, because you're the other young female staff member. She had a crush on Severus when she was a student, and she's apparently decided to try again now that she's an adult and Severus is a relatively wealthy, decorated war veteran."

Hermione sat speechless as she contemplated that Ivy would feel jealous of her. Septima asked, "Oh, has the Wizengamot finally released Severus's inheritance from Albus?"

"Yes," Minerva answered, "but that was just a competency so Severus wouldn't be a pauper in the event he survived the war. When he was discovered to be the last surviving descendant of the Prince family and inheritor of the Prince estate, he moved into the state of being relatively wealthy."

"I thought Septimius Prince disowned Eileen when she married Tobias," Pomona pondered. "Severus used to hate him."

"It turned out that old Septimius was right about Tobias, didn't it?" Minerva answered. "Severus grew to understand why the old man made that choice."

"Wait a minute," Hermione interrupted. "Ivy had a crush on Professor Snape?"

Minerva gave her an amused look that seemed to say, *Keep up with the conversation, Granger.* "I suppose you have a hard time understanding that attraction since Severus was always rather cruel to you, Harry and Ron," responded Minerva. "But Ivy was in Slytherin House, and... well, there is something about Severus that is rather fascinating. He catches the eye." Minerva looked rather abashedly at Pomona and Septima for support. They both nodded their agreement.

"I wish the poor boy could find some happiness. He deserves it after all those years of spying," commented Pomona.

"Do you think Severus liked her?" asked Hermione.

"He didn't even notice her when she was a student; he was still in love with Lily Potter," Minerva answered.

"And now? Do you think he would fall in love with her now?" Hermione found herself quite curious about Severus's personal life, although she wasn't quite sure why.

"I don't think Ivy is the one for him. She has no understanding of how the war changed him," Minerva said.

Her tone of voice doesn't sound very certain, though Hermione thought.

"Men don't always make the wisest decisions when it comes to who would be the best woman for them." Septima's words echoed the worry in Minerva's tone.

After a moment, Pomona changed the subject. "What about our Hermione here? We need to find someone for her." *Oh no, not well-meaning match-making!* "Not Severus, dear...don't look so petrified. You're far too serious with all you took on as a child during the war. You need someone to make you laugh, and Severus is not that sort of person."

"All our young fellows are taken," mused Septima. "James is married, and Neville is dating Hannah Abbott."

"You'll have to take this conversation somewhere else," Hermione said as lightly as she could. "I refuse to listen to you discuss this in front of me. I'm shaking in fear of who you'll try to set me up with."

Laughing, the trio of ladies...*mother hens, really...* bid her a good night. Yawning, Hermione warded her door and put out the lights in the sitting room. Going through to the bedroom, she thought back on the conversation. *They are dear ladies, but I may have to set up some boundaries.*

The discussion on Severus had been intriguing, she thought as she got ready for bed. It was true that Severus always caught her eye. She had attributed that to leftover feelings of fear and caution from her student days. Fascinating, though? Well, maybe she could understand the fascination of his graceful movements and swirling robes. His eyes were so dark...

She climbed into bed, quite drowsy after the last bottle of ale. She spelled the room to darkness. Lying down, her last thoughts were of swirling, black fabric and intense, black eyes.

Author's Note: The words and images of *The Lord of the Rings* belongs to the estate of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema. Chapter titles in this story are taken from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Chapter Three: Many Meetings

Chapter 4 of 9

Severus and Hermione share a meal and discuss... literature, of course.

Disclaimer: I don't own it, and I'm not making any money from writing it.

Thanks, as always, to morethansirius and sshg316 for all their help with this story.

On a Saturday evening about two weeks later, Hermione was returning to Hogwarts after spending a day running errands in London. She had asked a few of her colleagues whether there was anything she could pick up for them. Pomona had asked for a book on Muggle gardening techniques, and Severus had asked her to pick up a shipment of fresh potions ingredients at Slug & Jiggers Apothecary.

She stopped first at the greenhouses which she passed on her way to the castle. Pomona had told her that she would be working on a project there. Entering Greenhouse Two, she went to Pomona's office. Pomona was in the midst of a tricky manoeuvre with a Chinese Chomping Cabbage but was able to look up when Hermione said, "Here is a book on Muggle gardening, Pomona. It's one my mum recommends as being a good, general reference for most gardening methods."

"Thank you, Hermione, and thank your mother, too, for her recommendation."

"You're welcome. I brought back plenty of Thai take-away. Would you like to take a break and have dinner with me?"

"Oh, I'd love to, but I'm at a bad moment in the harvesting. If I leave now, the cabbages will chomp each other to death. Maybe another time?"

Now there's one thing I don't miss about Herbology. "No problem, Pomona. Be careful with those plants."

"Don't worry, dear. I'll be fine."

Hermione continued on her way to the castle. When she got there, she headed to the dungeon to Severus's office. "Come in," Snape answered when she knocked.

Opening the door, Hermione entered the Potion master's office. He was sitting at his desk grading essays. "Hi, Severus. I've brought your potion ingredients."

"Thanks for getting those. It saves me a trip."

"You're welcome." She placed the package on his desk and turned to go. She hadn't been planning to ask Severus if he wanted to share her take-away. They really weren't on friendly enough terms to make inviting him as natural as asking Pomona, but then she remembered him saying how much he had enjoyed the fish and chips. *What could it hurt?* "Severus," she said slowly, turning back toward him, "I brought back plenty of Thai take-away. Would you like to take a break and have dinner with me?"

Severus gave her a curious look and returned his attention to his essay while he finished writing his comments. "If you wish," he answered indifferently.

"You will?" Hermione asked in confusion. He looked at her with some exasperation. *He said so, didn't he?* She smiled. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't really expect you to say yes."

"Why did you ask me then?" Severus rose and went to a table sitting nearby covered with scrolls. He carefully placed the scrolls on top of a book shelf to clear enough space for them to eat.

Hermione brought the take-away over to the table and started setting out the boxes of food. "Well, I really do have a lot of food here. Do you have any plates?"

"On the shelf above my desk. I'll get them." He brought the plates back to the table and looked at the numerous food cartons. "Merlin, Hermione, why ever did you order all that food?"

"If you must know, I couldn't decide amongst my favourite dishes." *Oh, that didn't sound at all defensive* she thought sarcastically.

Severus raised one eyebrow, expressing his disbelief.

"It's true, at least partially." They sat down and started dishing food from the boxes on their plates. They ate for a moment in silence. "Thai food was my family's favourite take-away. My dad always picked up the set meal for three because it had all our favourites."

"So, why aren't you eating this meal with your parents?"

Hermione stopped eating and sat back in her chair. Severus looked at her intently but kept eating. She looked down at the table. *Should I tell him the truth?* She took a deep breath. "Did you know that I... arranged to keep my parents safe during the war?"

"Arranged?"

She sighed. "I *Obliviated* my parents and gave them new identities and encouraged them to move to Australia. When the war was over, I searched for them and reversed the spell. They've recovered their memories, but... they've also changed. Little things, mostly. One thing is that they don't love Thai food anymore. Isn't that odd?"

"Unexpected, I suppose."

Hermione chuckled. "They developed some unexpected hobbies in Australia. My dad now collects historical bicycles, and my mum has taken up surfing."

"Surfing?"

"Yes. They're looking forward to visiting me now that I live in Scotland so that Dad can meet with the Scottish Section of the Veteran-Cycle Club and Mum can surf at Thurso East."

"So you're still on good terms with them? How did they react when they found out what you had done?"

Sighing, Hermione said, "About like you'd expect, I suppose. They can understand why I did what I did. They're not happy that they had no choice in the matter; I can understand that. We're trying to make the best of it."

They ate in silence for a moment before Severus observed, "You didn't have the best mentor for being open in matters relating to the war. Dumbledore had a habit of keeping secrets, even from people who needed to know."

"Not telling Harry the Prophecy, for instance," commented Hermione.

"Yes, among other things."

"Did he keep secrets from you?"

Severus raised an eyebrow in sardonic amusement. "Of course he did. Always for the greater good, he assured me. What I didn't know couldn't accidentally be revealed to the Dark Lord."

"I can't imagine what you had to go through all those years, Severus."

Severus pursed his lips briefly. "When I first started to read *The Lord of the Rings*, I thought I would have a difficult time reading about Gandalf. Wizard, lore-master, leader

of destroying the Ring. Does that remind you of anyone?"

"Dumbledore," breathed Hermione.

"Indeed. One could argue that he manipulates Frodo into volunteering to take the Ring. That he manipulates the Fellowship of the Ring."

Hermione frowned. "I never really thought of Gandalf in that way, but I guess I can see your point."

"He tells everyone what they need to know and eventually sacrifices himself so that the Fellowship can continue, much like Albus did. The parallels were causing me to question everything the author seemed to take for granted. That's when I realised something. My memory of Albus is a lot like your relationship with your parents. I've come to understand why he made his choices, and even though I didn't always like what he did, I can try to make the best of it."

Hermione answered slowly, "That's a lot to forgive."

Severus gave her a shrewd glance. "And I've never struck you as being the forgiving type. Don't deny it." He looked at her expression and smirked. "I see that you weren't going to deny it." He ate a few more bites, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I never expected to live through the war. A lifetime is a long time to be angry with someone."

Hermione was considering what he said carefully. *Is he trying to imply that perhaps Mum and Dad will someday be able to forgive me?* She felt as though a weight on her heart was easing a little. She gave Severus a sudden, warm smile. She thought she saw a look of answering warmth in his eyes, but then he returned his attention to his plate.

"What Muggle item will we be exposed to at the next meeting?" he asked before taking another bite of food.

"I'm thinking wine and cheese. I placed an order for a variety of Muggle cheeses today. Mum and Dad helped me to pick out some good Muggle wines. I'll pick up wizard cheeses in Hogsmeade the day of the meeting. As for the elf-made wines, I'll owl Rosmerta at the Three Broomsticks and ask her for her suggestions."

"Why don't you let me take care of the elf-made wine? My Grandfather Prince was not a person I looked up to, but he did keep an excellent wine cellar. Rosmerta won't be able to get you anything nearly up to his standard."

"Those wines must be very rare, Severus. I wouldn't want you to give up something of so much value."

Severus gave her a lofty look. "I've already conceded points for the Muggle take-away food. I'm not going to concede points on the wine if I can help it."

"But I'm supposed to be showing you the good in Muggle culture, and I..." She suddenly realised there was a suspicious gleam in his dark eyes. "You're teasing me." She laughed. "I wonder how many times you were making jokes in class, and I never noticed."

He gave her a look from the corner of his eye. "I never joke in class. However, I won't deny engaging in irony from time to time."

Hermione laughed. "For all those times you engaged in irony at my expense without my knowledge, I will gratefully accept your offer to bring the elf-made wine."

He gave her a dignified nod. "It will be my pleasure to show you the superiority of wizarding culture." The corners of his mouth twitched with humour despite his dignified air.

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The wine and cheese night at the book club was a success. In general, it was decided that Muggle cheeses were slightly better, probably due to using a natural aging process rather than an aging spell. Apparently, aging shouldn't be rushed.

On the other hand, Hermione had to admit that the elf-made wine was better than its Muggle counterpart. In discussing the techniques used to make wine, the club members decided that house-elves' ability to control the science of wine-making with magical precision probably was the factor that caused the elf-made product to stand out.

According to Minerva, the Prince Estate wine cellar was quite famous in the wizarding world. Everyone expressed their thanks to Severus for sharing such a treat with them.

Ivy, in particular, was full of praise for the wines. "Severus, I've dreamed of tasting the wines from the Prince Estate ever since I heard of the wine cellar there. They certainly don't disappoint. However did you know to bring wine to tonight's meeting?"

Severus responded, "Hermione told me a few days ago when we were having dinner." In a surprisingly short time, Ivy had excused herself to go to the other end of the room, supposedly to look at Hermione's bookshelves.

Pomona drew Hermione aside. "Watch out for Ivy during the discussion tonight. Just look at her."

Hermione did look. Ivy's face bore an extremely petulant expression. "What is she so upset about?"

"I'm not sure, but look at Severus."

Severus was looking at Ivy, a confused expression on his face, before turning away to congratulate Bathsbeba Babbling on the recent publication of an article.

"Hmm. I don't know. I guess we better start the discussion and see what happens."

Hermione requested everyone's presence at the magically enlarged table to begin the discussion of Book Two. Once everyone was seated, she began. "I hope everyone found that the pace picked up a bit from Book One."

Septima responded, "You were right. The pace did feel faster."

Ivy commented under her breath, "If you call a long chapter where everyone sits and talks about history fast-paced."

Seriously? This will play well in a room full of teachers.

Cuthbert Binns's voice came from where he was floating at one end of the table. "Of course, I call all that history fascinating. The battle with the orcs in Moria and the sacrifice of Gandalf strongly reminded me of the Goblin Rebellion of 1612 and how many brave sacrifices were made."

Bathsbeba Babbling barely glanced in Ivy's direction before turning away from her and saying, "I've been interested in the runes in the story. It's apparent that Tolkien developed these runes along with the various languages. It's fascinating how each language has its own set of runes and usage rules. The moon runes on the doors of Moria are also intriguing. I would think something similar could be done with a spell, although for what purpose I'm not sure." She trailed off as she pondered the possible uses of moon runes.

Pomona picked up from there. "There were also some references to Herbology. Aragorn was looking for a plant with special healing properties, did you notice?"

Sybill interrupted excitedly, "I didn't notice plants, but Aragorn has the Sight. He warned Gandalf not to go to Moria."

"Whatever small amount of magic we see from Aragorn, we see far more in the elves," Severus commented. "Aragorn has minor knowledge of healing with magical plants, but the elves are masters of healing. Aragorn gives a vague forewarning to Gandalf, but the pool of Galadriel can show events that are actually happening."

"Exactly," Septima responded, obviously thinking. "Why can't the elves take care of the Ring, then? If they don't want to keep it, they could take it to Mordor to destroy it."

Hermione responded, "You really get the feeling that the elves are distancing themselves from the events of Middle-Earth. They can leave and take their boats over the sea."

"They also don't want to be tempted by the Ring," noted Severus.

"Boromir is the only practical one," Ivy put in. "He's the one that wants to at least try to use the most powerful available weapon to save the ones he loves. If he were at Hogwarts, he'd be a Slytherin."

That would be a big blow to inter-House unity.

"Ivy, did you read all the way to the end of Book Two?" Minerva asked.

"We-e-ll, almost."

Minerva answered, "The *knowledgeable* characters, like Gandalf and Elrond, seem to indicate that the Ring itself is evil and corrupts anyone who uses it. I think we have a hard time with that because magic depends so much on the intent of the witch or wizard."

"Good point, Minerva," answered Hermione thoughtfully. "Even the Elder Wand wasn't evil of itself, even with a name like 'Deathstick'. It depended again on the intent of the caster. When Dumbledore used it, it was used for good. When Voldemort used it, it wasn't. That's very different from the One Ring in the story, which exhibits its own power."

"In any case," Ivy spoke as though bored by Hermione's comments, "the only real wizard in the story is dead. It made me wonder why we should bother reading anymore, although I have to admit that I am curious how the situation with the ring will turn out."

"Don't worry, we haven't seen the end of wizards in this story." Hermione waited to see if there was going to be any more discussion. Once again, Ivy's remark seemed to have brought the meeting to a grinding halt. *And I was worried about Severus ruining meetings.*

So Hermione concluded the meeting. "Book Three for next time. As you know, Frodo and Sam have left the Fellowship. Book Three follows what happens with the rest of the group. Some very different characters will appear in Book Three. I hope you enjoy it. Next time, as it will be December already, I'll be throwing a Muggle-style Christmas party. If you want to get into the spirit of things, you could wear Muggle party clothing or red and green robes. Let me know if you have any questions. Thanks for a great discussion. Have a good night."

As the club members were leaving, Minerva said, "Severus, could you stay for just a minute?" Severus turned to sit at the table again. Ivy, who had been trying to leave with Severus, glared at Hermione for a moment. Hermione, however, was busily cleaning up after the meeting and didn't even notice. Ivy gave a huff of annoyance and then left.

"What can I do for you, Minerva?" asked Severus.

"I'm wondering if you ran across a spell while you were headmaster that allows Hogwarts to be visible to Muggles?"

"Not that I can think of, but that was never a spell I would have used during my tenure as headmaster."

"No, I suppose not."

"Is this just a theoretical question, or do you need a spell like that?"

"James Beekman has a twin brother who is a Muggle," Minerva explained. "He is coming to visit James in a few weeks, and naturally, James would like to show him Hogwarts."

"I suppose you've checked the regular headmaster files."

"Of course."

Severus rose. "Well, come on then."

"Come on where?" asked Minerva.

"I have some ideas of where to look, but it will be easier if I show you. It won't hurt to have another set of eyes for the files I'm thinking of."

"Sounds like fun," muttered Minerva.

"Good night, Hermione," Severus said, almost cheerfully.

"Good night, Severus. Thanks for bringing the wine. Good night, Minerva."

"Good night, Hermione."

"If you need help, let me know," Hermione offered as she walked them to the door.

Minerva smiled. "Oh, I do have an idea how you can help James's brother." Minerva walked off down the corridor, leaving Severus and Hermione staring after her, very puzzled indeed.

Chapter Four: A Long-expected Party

Chapter 5 of 9

Hermione hosts a Muggle-style Christmas party. The "Mother Hens" attempt matchmaking, and a moment of romance occurs.

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Thanks, as always, to my alpha/beta team of morethansirius and sshg316.

How'd I get myself into this? Hermione looked around the small dining room off the Great Hall. Somehow, the Muggle Christmas party she had planned for the book club meeting in her sitting room had turned into a full staff Christmas party for the purpose of introducing Edward Beekman to James's colleagues. Minerva had not forgotten Hermione's offer to help, and once she and Severus had found a spell to allow a Muggle access to Hogwarts, Minerva had asked Hermione if she would consider turning her small party into a bigger one.

James's wife had offered to help. Jasmine was a Muggle-born witch and did understand Muggle Christmas customs. Their six-month-old son took a lot of her time, however. So Hermione was taking care of the final preparations herself. She had overseen the placement of the Christmas trees, the decorations, the party favours, and the arrangement of the room. There was a small space for dancing since Arthur Weasley had found a way of charming a CD player to work at Hogwarts. Hermione had a selection of Christmas CDs that had been gathered from Muggles that she and Jasmine knew.

She and Jasmine had overseen the preparation of the food, giving the house-elves specific instructions about the Muggle recipes. There were a variety of sandwiches, including hot beef, cucumber, and tomato and watercress. The food and drink came in Muggle and wizarding varieties: cheeses, crackers, candies and cakes, fruit and fondues, wines, mulled mead, Firewhisky, holiday punch, and eggnog.

The arrangements taken care of, Hermione went off to get dressed for the evening. She had decided to wear Muggle clothing, since she had suggested it to her book club members, but when she went shopping for a holiday party dress, she knew that many of the current fashions would shock her colleagues who were used to wiches being covered by robes. She chose instead to wear a vintage dress in holiday green velvet. The boat neckline and tight sleeves to just below the elbow seemed demure enough but were offset by the fitted bodice and the plunging back neckline. Looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror, she decided that she liked the green organza cummerbund that seemed to cinch her waist in. She wore a faux diamond pin that matched the accents on the cummerbund. Wearing her hair up showed off the back of her dress with its deep "V" cut.

Fairly satisfied with how she looked, she made her way down to the small dining room. As hostesses, she and Jasmine had decided to be there early enough to greet the guests as they arrived. She noticed several people in the room. *Oh no! It must have taken me longer than I thought to get ready.* Looking again, she realised that half of the people were Jasmine's family, and the other three were Minerva, Septima and Pomona, who had promised to arrive early in case of last minute emergencies.

Feeling a little better, she walked over to Jasmine and James and the third person in their party, a man dressed in a gray suit, burgundy shirt and silver silk tie. *That must be Edward. Wow, he's quite a bit better looking than James, and James isn't exactly bad looking.* "Hi, James. Hi, Jasmine. I hope you weren't waiting long."

Jasmine replied, "No. We just got here ourselves. Hermione, this is James's brother, Edward. Edward, this is Hermione Granger, the Charms professor here at Hogwarts."

Hermione held her hand out to Edward Beekman. "Hello, Edward. It's nice to meet you."

Edward shook her hand, replying, "Nice to meet you, Hermione. I've heard a lot about you, but no one told me how stunning you are."

Yeah, right. She looked at Edward carefully to see if he was teasing her. His admiration seemed sincere, so she smiled and said, "Thank you. I'm not sure why you would hear a lot about..." Just then, she noticed Minerva, Pomona and Septima all watching her conversation with Edward with avid interest. *Those three just couldn't take a hint.* "Ah, you've been talking to Minerva, I expect." She looked at her three friends, eyebrows raised. They sent sheepish glances her way.

Madam Hooch and Firenze arrived, followed shortly by Professor Binns and Sybill Trelawney. "Time to greet our guests, Jasmine," Hermione said. As she walked towards the newcomers, she passed by Septima, Pomona and Minerva. "I will speak with you later," she said with a meaningful look.

"Oh, good. We'll want to hear what you think of Edward," the irrepressible Septima answered.

Hermione chose to ignore that response. She followed Jasmine and went to speak to the newcomers, welcoming them and inviting them to help themselves to the refreshments.

Bathsheba Babbling and Poppy Pomfrey arrived. Hermione spent a little time responding to their complimentary remarks about the Christmas decorations. They headed toward the food table. Hermione turned back to the door and saw Severus walking into the room. He had dressed in Muggle attire, wearing black trousers and a black cashmere sweater with green flecks in it. His graceful stride was even more pronounced without his billowing teaching robes. *Oh my...*

"Good evening, Severus," she said with a smile, trying very hard not to let him know she had been watching him walk.

He shook her hand but lingered with her hand in his as he glanced at her dress in appreciation. He actually smiled at her. "You look lovely, Hermione."

"Why, thank you, Severus." Hermione felt herself blushing a little and turned away quickly to point out the food and beverages.

"Where is that music coming from?" Severus asked. "That doesn't sound like the WWN."

"No, it's not," Hermione agreed. "Arthur Weasley figured out how to charm a Muggle CD player so that it doesn't need electricity to operate, so we're listening to Muggle Christmas music."

"It's certainly an improvement over Celestina Warbeck's *Greatest Hits for the Winter Solstice*."

Hermione laughed. "I agree. I was thinking of sending a selection of Muggle Christmas CDs for Ron to take home to the Burrow with him this year. Maybe Molly will become a convert."

"And give up 'a cauldron full of hot, strong love'? That's asking an awful lot," Severus responded with mock seriousness.

"You're probably right, but it certainly can't hurt to try."

At that moment, Ivy Turner walked in. Hermione saw that Ivy had noticed the good-natured conversation she and Severus were having. Ivy hurried to Severus's side. "Good evening, Severus." She smiled warmly up at him. Turning to Hermione, the smile disappeared. "Hermione," she barely acknowledged.

"Hi, Ivy." Hermione had to work to give her a genuine smile and to find something nice to say. "Your robes... I've never seen anything like them."

Ivy preened a little. Ivy's green dress robes were unique. The collar fit closely around her neck to just below her jaw where the back half suddenly flared out around the back of her head and reminded Hermione of nothing more than the wicked queen in the Disney movie *Snow White*. She wore a green velvet cape that stood straight out from the shoulders as though an iron rod had been threaded through the fabric. "I had them made from my original design," Ivy said proudly.

"Oh?" Hermione tried not to laugh. "How creative you are, Ivy."

"Thank you." Ivy's voice finally sounded gracious. "Severus, would you escort me to the food table?" Ivy grabbed his arm, accidentally jabbing her shoulder into Severus's arm, and steered him away from Hermione.

Jasmine came up to Hermione. "What on earth was that get-up?"

"Ivy's own design," Hermione said, biting her lip to keep laughter from bubbling up.

"Poor Severus. I hope his arm doesn't get bruised." Jasmine giggled, and Hermione stifled a laugh.

"Hermione," Edward called. Both Hermione and Jasmine turned to see Edward walking towards them. "No one is dancing. Why don't you and I get the ball rolling?"

"Okay," Hermione answered.

They walked to the dance floor, and Edward took her in his arms. He was a pleasant dancer. "What is it you do, Edward?" Hermione asked.

"I'm a solicitor."

"That's interesting. Before I started teaching here, I worked at the Ministry of Magic for Magical Law Enforcement. I worked in the department that deals with the laws and regulations regarding interactions with magical creatures."

"You need special laws for that?"

"With the large numbers of magical creatures and the differences in intelligence, intent and information...or misinformation...we know about them, it is really important to have rules in our dealings."

They danced for a bit in silence. They had been joined on the dance floor by Argus Filch and Sybill Trelawney. *Argus isn't a bad dancer*, thought Hermione in amused surprise, *but I'm not sure how well wizarding dance steps go with this song.* Ivy glared at the dance floor before practically dragging Severus out to dance. "What made you want to teach?" Edward's questions quickly drew her attention back to her partner.

"Minerva was very persuasive about teaching young minds not to be prejudiced. That was what the Voldemort Wars were basically fought over."

"According to her, you played a key part in the war."

"I never really looked at it that way. I was just helping my friend, and I was trying to protect myself and my family."

"You're a Muggle-born like James, then?"

"Yes, my parents are both dentists."

They continued to get to know each other throughout the rest of the dance. They both enjoyed the research aspect of the law and the chance to fight for the rights of the underprivileged. A love of history was something else they both shared. The dance ended very pleasantly.

After their dance, Edward said, "I'd like to dance with you again, but I promised Jasmine I would dance with her because James doesn't like dancing. Maybe later?"

"Later would be fine." She gave him a smile before she walked over to the refreshment table and picked up some food and something to drink. She looked around for a place to sit. *I might as well face the interrogation now.* She went to sit with Pomona, Septima and Minerva.

Septima asked, "Well, what did you think of Edward? You two looked very nice together."

"He is very nice," Hermione responded. "He was charming. I think he's going to ask me to dance again later."

"Nice and charming? That's it?" Minerva asked.

"What did you expect after one dance? He's nice, and we have some things in common."

"Now, dear, don't be irritated with us," Pomona urged. "We just want to see you happy."

"I know. You're all very good to me, but I'm certainly not going to be pushed into a relationship. If it works out, fine. But, please, no pushing."

Septima nodded. "We'll try to be good. Right, ladies?" Pomona and Minerva agreed.

Just then, Severus approached their table. "Hermione, would you care to dance?" A sudden gleam appeared in Minerva's eye. Hermione ignored her for the moment and said, "Sure, Severus." She gave Minerva a quick glare as she got up from the table.

She and Severus walked to the dance floor, and he held out his arms. Hermione stepped into his arms, and they began to dance. *Why didn't I notice if Edward's hands were warm?* Her hand felt cocooned in his, and the warmth that she felt through her dress from his hand on her back seemed to spread to her toes.

"You've done a marvellous job on the party, Hermione," he commented.

Hermione hadn't realised how deep his voice sounded until now when his mouth was so close to her ear. Suddenly, her senses seemed to be attuned to him. *He smells like new parchment, and herbs, and... something else. What is it?*

"Hermione, are you all right?" Hermione suddenly noticed she'd been taking deep breaths through her nose, trying to ascertain what Severus smelled like. *Stop that before you make a fool of yourself!*

"I'm fine, Severus. Thank you. Jasmine and I had a good time planning the party together."

They danced silently for a moment. Still lost in the spell of her senses, she didn't know that she had been rubbing one finger of her hand on his sweater, enjoying the softness of the cashmere. That is, she didn't know until Severus moved his hand slightly so that his thumb was caressing the skin of her back at the lowest point the plunging neckline left bare. Suddenly all Hermione's attention was drawn to that spot on her back.

What is happening here? Hesitantly, Hermione raised her eyes to Severus's face to find his dark eyes looking into hers. Her stomach gave a little flip at the vulnerability she saw there.

"Hermione?" Severus asked softly.

What should I do? What is happening here? Hermione's thoughts were whirling. She bit her lower lip, confused.

"This is unexpected, isn't it?" He was looking at her with one eyebrow raised, a hint of humour in his eyes.

"Yes. I'm barely beyond thinking of you as my professor." *I hope he doesn't feel insulted by that.*

"I hope you've gone beyond thinking of me as your professor, or this could be awkward," he replied.

Hermione gave a nervous, little giggle. "Well, I've begun to think of you as a friend since our take-away dinner."

"So have I. I was expecting this to be a dance between friends."

"I don't know..." Hermione stopped, not knowing quite what to say.

"I'm guessing that you would like some time to mull things over. Is that right?"

Hermione gave a little nod.

"Good, because I would, too. Is that okay?"

Hermione gave him a relieved smile. Severus gave her a small smile in return. He pulled her closer as they danced, his jaw resting lightly against her hair. Hermione relaxed and let herself enjoy the dance. She smiled slightly. *I'm not telling the "mother hens" about this.*

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A week later, the book club met to discuss Book Three. Christmas holiday was coming, and the staff members were wearing down. Hermione herself felt a bit unprepared for leading a discussion. Preparing for the Christmas party had taken more time than she had planned. Thinking about the Christmas party in the week since...particularly one special dance...had kept her rather more preoccupied than she had anticipated.

Ivy had told her rather coldly that morning that *she* wouldn't be attending the book club that night as *she* had only committed to *one* meeting per month for this Muggle club, and the Muggle Christmas party had fulfilled that requirement. Hermione had expressed her regret that Ivy wouldn't be able to be at the meeting, but privately she thought, hugging herself to contain a little thrill of excitement, *Maybe she has some reason to be jealous after all.* Then she had covered her mouth with one hand to stop herself giggling like some hysterical teenage girl over her first date. *Get a grip, please. You're in the staff workroom. Anyone could come in at any moment. Besides, all this is very preliminary; nothing has been decided or really even hinted at. Okay, so there's a definite mutual attraction, but that might not turn into anything else...* Taking a deep breath, Hermione had decided that the best thing to do would be to go to the privacy of her office as soon as possible.

Somehow, she managed to get through classes and to the book club meeting without embarrassing herself. The discussion at the meeting covered a wide variety of topics without very much organization, as had become the norm. The Ents were discussed in some detail. Although some magical plants had rather highly developed instinctive systems, such as Mandrakes or Whomping Willows, none had the intelligence and longevity that the Ents seemed to have. Pomona enthused at length over the imagination of Tolkien in coming up with these wonderful trees.

Septima enjoyed the hints of romance to be found between Aragorn and Eowyn and the Ents and Entwives. Hermione hoped that Septima wouldn't be too disappointed over the fact that there was so little romantic development in the story. She determined to buy Septima some good romance novels for a Christmas present. She also began to wonder if it would be possible to show the book club the movie adaptations where the romantic element seemed to be played up quite a bit more. *Hmmm, The Return of the King is due out in theatres any day.* She set that aside to be thought about later.

The discussion then moved to the themes of death and new life and how they were developed in the characters of Boromir, Gandalf and King Theoden. Hermione was thrilled that they were finally talking about some of the deeper aspects of the story. When they started talking about the dual nature of good and evil in the character of Saruman, at first...remembering their discussion about Dumbledore and Gandalf...she worried that this might strike too close to home for Severus. He seemed to be enjoying the discussion and the debate over the finer points of the story, however.

Eventually the discussion wound its way down, and Hermione pointed out that the first Friday of January was the last Friday before school began again. Did they want to put off the meeting until the second Friday or go ahead and meet as scheduled? They chose to meet the first Friday as they were mostly planning to be back by that point to be getting ready for the next round of classes. After mentioning that Book Four followed Frodo's and Sam's progress, she wished them a good final week of classes before the holidays.

She was glad that Severus appeared to be taking his time about leaving, waiting until he was the last book club member left in Hermione's sitting room. "That was a good discussion," he said.

"Yes, it was a lot of fun to talk about some of the themes of the books."

Severus came up to her and taking a gentle hold of her chin, he raised it to look into her face carefully. "Are you all right? You look a little tired."

Hermione gave him a rueful smile. "Don't we all? I'll be glad when this next week is over and Christmas break is here."

"Indeed." Severus gave her chin one final caress before walking over to the table and sitting down. "What are your plans?"

"I'll be here for the first few days until all the Gryffindors have gone home. I don't have any students staying the entire holiday, do you?"

"No, my last Slytherin leaves for home on the 22nd, and then I plan to go home for a few days."

"So do I. I'll stay at my apartment for a bit, probably visit Harry and Ginny, Ron and Luna, maybe the Weasleys. I'm spending Christmas with my parents."

"What are you doing Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, nothing much. Probably I'll go to Mum and Dad's and watch Christmas movies. We usually attend a Christmas Eve service. What will you do?"

"Well..." Severus took a deep breath. "I've been mulling things over this past week. Have you?"

Hermione felt a little breathless, too. "Yes."

"Would you spend Christmas Eve with me?"

"I'd love to."

Chapter Five: The Window on the West

Chapter 6 of 9

Hermione and Severus spend Christmas Eve together. Is romance in the air?

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They're gone! Hermione thought when the students left for the Hogwarts Express on Saturday, December 20. Oh, she had found her first few months of teaching rewarding, but they had also been quite demanding. Some holiday time was very welcome. As Gryffindor Head of House, she was responsible to stay while she had any students at the school. There were five Gryffindor students still at Hogwarts for one reason or another, but by Monday they would be going to stay with relatives or friends. With so few students to supervise, she would have some free time. *Maybe I can arrange some time with Severus. We haven't had any time to talk since the dance, really. It might make Christmas Eve less awkward.*

With these thoughts, she went to lunch. Lunch in the Great Hall was a much less formal event during the holidays than during the school year. The students were allowed to sit at any of the house tables they wished. Hermione was happy to see that all of the students were sitting together at the Hufflepuff table. It was nice to see a small example of the inter-house unity the staff was trying to promote.

Just as lunch was about to start, Severus slipped into the seat next to hers. That... *awareness* she'd noticed ever since the dance was evident with him sitting nearby. She took a deep breath. *Lunch time in the Great Hall is no time to be exploring this mutual attraction.* Instead, they exchanged small talk as the meal progressed, keeping their eyes mostly on their plates.

The meal was nearly completed, and people were lingering to finish up conversations. Hermione finally took a good look at Severus who happened to choose that moment to look at her as well. Their eyes met for the first time that meal. Hermione felt her stomach give a little flip. *I can't believe that I'm attracted to Severus Snape...and not just a little bit!*

"What are you planning to do with your afternoon?" Severus asked.

"I thought I would grade some essays. The sooner I get my grading done, the sooner I can enjoy my holiday."

"That's my thought as well." Again, their gazes locked briefly as the promise of spending time together on Christmas Eve loomed large for a moment.

Hermione looked away, fiddling with her glass before asking, "I suppose you're planning to grade in your office?"

"That's what I had intended. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking about grading in the staff room this afternoon. I could use a change of scenery."

Severus looked at her for a moment. "Perhaps it is time for a change of scenery." The corners of his mouth turned up in a small smile, and his eyes were warm as he looked at her.

He's flirting with me! Hermione couldn't resist giving him a glowing smile, no matter who might be looking. "Well then, maybe I'll see you there later."

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They had sat at different tables in the staff room so they could spread out their grading, mindful of the fact that any of their colleagues could walk in at any time. They had, by unspoken agreement, sat on opposite sides of their tables and managed to exchange little glances during the afternoon. For the most part, they had shown admirable concentration and perseverance, in Hermione's opinion, considering what she'd rather be doing. The thought of being able to enjoy her holiday with no guilt about work left undone was a strong motivator.

With a long sigh, Severus clasped his hands in front of him, stretching the knots out of his arms and shoulders. He carefully capped his ink bottle and stacked his essays neatly in front of him. "Are you close to a stopping point?" he asked.

"I'm... nearly... done. There!" Hermione said as she finished the last of her comments on a student's essay. Following Severus's lead, she gathered her materials together.

"Good, because it's almost tea time, and the staff generally takes tea together on this first day of holiday before those who are travelling take their leave."

"Really? I wasn't aware of that."

"Minerva likely forgot to mention it. It's not anything formal. I never used to attend unless Albus demanded it, but as I'm already here, I may as well stay for tea."

Minerva, Pomona and Septima entered the staff room chatting. Minerva called the house-elves to help her set up the tea. "Severus," she said with surprise, "you're here for tea."

"As you can see," he responded. "*Someone* forgot to mention the holiday tea to Professor Granger, so I decided to introduce her to the dubious pleasures of the annual tradition."

Hermione covered her mouth to hide her smile, and Minerva's lips twitched as though she was trying to keep a straight face. Pomona sighed, looked at Septima and pressed her lips tightly together.

Minerva said, "How generous of you, Severus. You're getting positively mellow."

Septima gave a little snort of laughter. A look of uncertainty flickered in Severus's eyes for a moment before being shuttered behind a blank expression. *He really doesn't know how to handle being teased.* Hermione felt a sudden urge to protect Severus. *I can't be too obvious about it, though.* "Not too mellow, Minerva. He made it clear that he thought you should have been the one to tell me about the tea."

Glancing at Severus, she noticed a glint of humour in his eyes. Minerva gave a mock huff of annoyance, and Pomona and Septima tried to stifle giggles. Relieved, Hermione settled in to enjoy tea with her colleagues.

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The next days passed quickly with times spent preparing for the next term and times spent with others. Hermione met the "mother hens" for tea and an exchange of Christmas gifts. For Septima, who always caught the romantic nuances in *The Lord of the Rings*, she had purchased a couple of good romances. Minerva received an assortment of chocolate biscuits since she was so generous in sharing hers. Hermione gave Pomona a Muggle gardening catalogue and gift certificate because the Herbology professor wanted to try some experiments with crossing new Muggle hybrids and magical plants. Hermione was surprised at how much she had come to care for these women. They weren't in her age group, but they were still her friends.

She and Severus found time to spend together, too. Not wanting to generate gossip, they were careful not to be closeted away in private but to meet in public places, such as the library or the staff room...places where casual friends might meet. One day, Severus took her to a little-used meeting room in the North Tower that had a lovely view of the expanse of grounds to the west of the castle and some very comfortable chairs.

"I've never seen this room before," Hermione said in surprise.

"You gave up Divination rather early...before you had time to scout out the good study places in the North Tower. This one was always one of my favourites. Even when school is in session, it gets relatively little use." With a hand on her back, he guided her to the west window. "Look at the grounds from here."

"Oh, Severus, the West Gardens are beautiful from up here! With the grounds sloping down, there is really a good view of the Quidditch Pitch."

"If you have a pair of omnioculars, you can watch the game from here, which would be a nice change on some cold Saturday."

"True, but I don't think the Gryffindor team would be too happy if their Head of House wasn't attending the game in the stands."

"As long as it was on a day when they play Slytherin, I think it would be perfectly suitable."

She laughed and playfully shook her finger at him. "Aha, I see your strategy. I will, but only if you spend it here with me."

He chuckled as he grabbed her finger. "Ah, now that is a temptation."

Her breath caught as he touched her. *How could even a casual touch affect me like this?* She saw the change in his eyes as he reacted to the energy that was generated by the simple touch. The strength of her reaction to Severus when they danced at the Christmas party had been unexpected. As always when confronted with the unexpected, she wanted to research carefully before committing herself to a course of action. She was beginning to see that Severus seemed to react the same way. Hermione reflected that ever since the party, it felt like they were still dancing...dancing around their feelings, careful not to make a misstep.

Severus sighed and gave her finger a quick squeeze before letting go and stepping back. "Maybe we ought to head back for dinner, but I wanted to talk about Christmas Eve. I thought I would meet you at The Leaky Cauldron and either Floo or Apparate to my house from there. Is that acceptable to you?"

"That would be fine. What time would you like to meet?"

"How about noon? We could return to Prince House in time for lunch, all right?"

"Sounds good. I'm looking forward to it."

"As am I."

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The weather was sunny on Christmas Eve when Severus and Hermione Apparated to the gates of the Prince Estate. With a wave of Severus's wand, the gates opened, and they proceeded up the lane. Wrapping her cloak more tightly around her to fend off the breeze, Hermione wondered why they had not Apparated closer to the house. Then they rounded a bend in the lane, and she caught her first good view of the estate.

A wide expanse of parkland appeared before them, covered in a thin layer of snow. She could make out more formal gardens which led to a hill upon which the hall sat. "Oh my," she breathed. The hall was made of stone that gleamed golden in the sunlight at that distance. A large, square tower rose in the centre of the hall, flanked by several sections, each of which looked like a large house that reached its own peaked roof. Several gables and chimneys rose from the roof, imposing and yet somehow inviting.

The angle of the lane changed again, giving yet another view of the hall. It had clearly been built at different times and in different sections, and yet the whole seemed to fit together as though the design had been uppermost in the minds of the builders. As they walked, Hermione could see more of the formal grounds. She saw that each of the gardens was separate and yet harmonious. "Severus, your home is beautiful, and we haven't even seen the inside. I admit, I had no idea you were from somewhere like this."

"I'm not from here, Hermione, although this has become my home. I grew up in a little house in a mill town not far from here." They walked in silence for a moment. "My mother grew up in this house. When she married Tobias Snape, my grandfather disowned her. I never came here until six years ago. By that time, my grandfather had passed away, and since I was the only member of the family left, the house passed to me. I made preparations to come here in the event I needed a place to escape. None of the Death Eaters would be likely to associate this house with me. When I was bitten by Nagini, I was Portkeyed here."

Hermione filed away these bits of Severus's history, eager to learn more about him. By that time, they had reached the steps that took them from the lawn to the house. This close, Hermione could see that the hall was built around a square tower which was at the centre of the house. "What an interesting history this hall must have!" said Hermione.

"There is a book in the library," Severus said, smiling.

"Now you're just taunting me. You must have some idea of how much I love to read histories."

"I believe I've heard it mentioned a time or two." He gave a little smirk before continuing. "To give you a little history, this tower was the first part of the hall built. It was built in the 13th century as a lookout post for the local castle. Ironically, the hall is still here, but the castle is now a ruin on the eastern border of the park."

They had arrived at the tower and the front entrance to the hall. Taking her hand, Severus looked into her face intently as he said, "Welcome to my home, Hermione." Looking into his eyes, she realised this was somehow an important moment for him. He offered her his arm, and she placed her hand on it. Opening the door, he escorted her inside.

Hermione felt as though she had stepped back into the 13th century when she walked into the front hall. The walls were the original native limestone of the tower. Tapestries and coats of arms decorated the walls. A fire burned in the enormous fireplace, taking the chill out of the room. The Prince family crest hung above the fireplace, while a group of chairs sat nearby in a formal arrangement. A large, carved wooden chair dominated the seating and reminded Hermione very much of a throne. Severus noticed the direction of her gaze and said in an ironic tone, "My grandfather was apparently anxious to display the strength and dignity of the Prince family."

A soft pop sounded in the hall, and three elderly house-elves appeared. Together, they bowed and then said in unison, "Welcome to Prince House, Miss Hermione Granger."

"Thank you," Hermione replied. "What are your names?"

"I am Winkin," said the first.

"I am Blinkin," said the second.

"I am Nodd," said the third.

Someone had a sense of humour. "I'm very pleased to meet you," Hermione answered. Remembering her house-elf etiquette she inquired, "Which one of you is the Senior Elf?"

Immediately, Nodd stepped forward. "Miss Granger may be addressing Nodd as Senior. May Nodd take your cloak?"

Blinkin quickly followed Nodd, swatting his hand impatiently. "Miss Granger may be addressing *Blinkin* as Senior. Would you be liking something to drink?"

Importantly, Winkin stepped in front of both Blinkin and Nodd who were nearly hopping with impatience to be of service. "*Winkin* is actually eldest here. Would Miss Granger like...?" He apparently had to think of something different to offer than what had already been offered her. Seeing Winkin's hesitation, the other two began jostling for position. Winkin's face lit up. "Would Miss Granger like a place to be sitting?"

Hermione looked in bewilderment at Severus. She had never seen house-elves behave this way. The hierarchy of a house's elves was generally extremely formal and carefully followed.

Severus rolled his eyes and said sternly, "Enough! What sort of impression do you think you are making on Miss Granger?" Seeing the elves' forlorn expressions, he softened his voice somewhat. "Winkin, you may go make sure that Miss Granger's seat at the lunch table is ready and then that the lunch is properly prepared. Blinkin, you may get the lunch drinks ready and make sure the table is properly set. Nodd, you may take Miss Granger's cloak and show her where she can freshen up after our long walk. No punishing yourselves. Now, go!"

Winkin and Blinkin popped out of sight to go attend their duties. Nodd held out his hand to Apparate Hermione to one of the bedrooms. Instead of the medieval furnishings that she was expecting, this room was decorated in the style of a modern country manor and looked like it had come out of the pages of a magazine.

"Has this room been redecorated recently, Nodd?"

"Yes, Miss. We was told to be making it nice for Professor McGonagall when she comes to stay."

"Has she been often?"

"She was helping nurse Master when he was sick, and she comes to stay during holidays sometimes. May I take your cloak, Miss?"

Hermione removed her cloak and gave it to Nodd, who whisked it away to the wardrobe with a snap of his fingers. Looking in the mirror above the vanity table, Hermione fixed the damage that the breeze had done to her hair. She brushed a bit of lint from her burgundy dress robes and Transfigured her outdoor boots into a pair of shoes. When she was satisfied, she told Nodd, "I'm ready." Nodd took her hand, and with a snap of his fingers, he transported them to a pretty room where lunch had been set up.

"You have survived the enthusiasm of my house-elves," Severus noted. With a thank you to Nodd, he dismissed the little elf.

"I'm curious about their behaviour," Hermione said with a little laugh.

"The three of them are the oldest elves on the estate. They were born triplets, which is extremely rare amongst house-elves. My grandfather had named Winkin the Senior Elf because he is the oldest of the three, but that was causing a great deal of bad feeling from Blinkin and Nodd. I eventually named them all Senior Elf but gave them each their own area to be responsible for. Winkin is in charge of the kitchen, Blinkin is in charge of the rest of the house, and Nodd is in charge of the grounds. Usually, that works, but they *all* wanted to have the honour of greeting a guest."

"Apparently, you don't entertain much," Hermione noted with a smile.

"Well, up until last June, I was in hiding," Severus reminded her. "I didn't plan to regale you with my housekeeping problems." In a tone that said, *Let's change the subject*, he continued. "May I say that colour suits you?"

"Why, thank you, Severus," Hermione replied playfully. "May I say that you look quite dashing as well?" She recognised the dress robes that he had worn to the Remembrance Banquet.

"I hope you won't mind having lunch somewhere besides the formal dining room," he said as he seated her at one end of a little table. It was set up in a small alcove that had windows on three sides and a beautiful view of the lawns outside. *I wonder what they look like when the flowers are blooming. It must be breathtaking.* Severus continued. "There are a few rooms that have been redecorated since I came here, but the dining room isn't one of them. It can be a little daunting in all its medieval grandeur."

"You've redecorated this room then? It's lovely!"

"No, this was my grandmother's writing room, and my grandfather allowed her to decorate it to suit her. She had her desk set here in this alcove. I have set it up as a breakfast room and eat most of my meals here."

"Do you not use a desk when you are here? I find it hard to believe that you don't engage in study at home."

"I have my desk in the library." Hermione perked up when she heard one of her favourite words, and Severus laughed. "Yes, I'll give you a tour when we are through eating."

Lunch was a very enjoyable meal. Not only was the food delicious, but they found all sorts of things to talk about: the house and gardens, their childhood homes, their love of history and research, projects that each of them was contemplating or working on. After lunch, Severus gave Hermione a tour of the house, and the conversation continued. Ever since the dance at the Christmas party, Hermione had been wishing for a time when she could talk to Severus and get to know him as a person, not just her former Potions master. Severus must have been feeling the same way because he was far more forthcoming than Hermione ever expected he would be.

They had settled in the drawing room for tea. The drawing room was beautifully panelled in dark wood squares. A white marble fireplace dominated one wall. Rugs and seating arrangements were scattered throughout the room. This room had been decorated for Christmas with a tree, evergreen boughs, candles and the like.

Hermione and Severus were sitting on a sofa in front of the fireplace, the tea service sitting on a table in front of them. Severus served her tea, and they leaned back on the sofa, sipping tea, quiet for the moment. Hermione stared at the fire and chose her words with care, remembering how he had reacted to this question at the Remembrance Banquet. "You've been so open with me today, but will you tell me about how you survived that last attack in the Shrieking Shack and what you did after that?"

Severus sighed and took her hand in his. "Yes, you deserve to know because... I'm not the same person now as the man I was before... and I hope that will mean something to you."

Hermione clasped his hand tightly. *Yes! It means something to me.*

Severus took a sip of tea and began. "That last year at Hogwarts was... difficult. I didn't expect to live through the war. It was only a question of whether the Order or the Dark Lord would kill me. And, to be honest, a large part of me wanted to be dead, but I still had tasks that only I could complete. After all those years of spying, the added stress was making it hard to get through each day."

He was quiet for a moment, and Hermione tried to imagine what he might be leaving unsaid. She could imagine it must have been difficult to try to do what was best for the students and staff when he was so hated by them. He continued, "So I gave myself a project, a good Slytherin puzzle. I decided to see if I could trick my way into survival and escape. It gave me something to focus on besides my immediate situation."

"I reasoned that if the Order tried to kill me, I couldn't fight back without hurting or killing an ally. If the Dark Lord used the Killing Curse, there wouldn't be much defence against that. But if he used Nagini to kill me, then I might have a chance. I made an antivenin potion and kept a time-delay Portkey pinned to my robes at all times. So when I was bitten, I was Portkeyed here."

"A time-delay Portkey?"

"My thought was that the Dark Lord or whoever attacked me would have time to leave me for dead before I disappeared."

"That makes sense, but who took care of you, Severus?" Hermione asked with concern in her voice.

"I had instructed Winkin to go to Kingsley Shacklebolt with a letter I had prepared. Fortunately, Kingsley was willing to consider what I had to say, and when he talked to Harry Potter and saw the memories in the Pensieve, he was convinced. He contacted Minerva, and they oversaw my healing with the help of the house-elves."

"Did it take you long to heal? The antivenin must have cut down on the time you were ill."

"Not really. You see, I couldn't actually test the antivenin before I used it. It did keep me alive, but barely, and my recovery was long and painful. I couldn't get out of bed for weeks. I couldn't speak for longer than that. I was terrified."

"Because you thought you might never speak again."

Severus stared into the fire before continuing. "In my worst nightmares, I wouldn't be able to speak. My father would threaten my mother, and I wouldn't be able to tell him to stop. The Marauders would insult or curse me, and I couldn't respond. I would be in front of a classroom and not able to give my lecture. I would be standing in front of the Dark Lord trying to convince him of something, unable to speak."

He looked at Hermione then. "My voice, my words, saying the right things had been my main line of defence for so long that I wasn't sure if I could survive without it. I couldn't encounter anyone or stand trial. I swore Kingsley and Minerva to secrecy and bound the house-elves not to tell anyone of my survival or location."

"And you just stayed here?"

"I went into hiding. When I was allowed to get out of bed, I would sit either at my desk or at the table where we lunched. I didn't do anything, or think anything, or even see anything, not really. I didn't have anything to do or to live for. No direction."

"No thoughts of, 'If I live through this, I'd like to...'" Hermione left the thought hanging.

Severus shook his head. "My plan for 15 years was to avenge Lily to redeem the mistake I made that had led to her death. Joining Dumbledore, spying for the Order, teaching at Hogwarts, protecting Harry Potter, all of it had been for that goal. When it was done, I had nothing left to do, and neither of my masters could give me advice because they were both dead."

"What happened?"

"Kingsley and Minerva were desperate to figure out what to do. I believe they eventually talked to a Muggle counsellor who suggested that they give me projects to do. Kingsley would come for a visit and ask me to think about ways to find and capture a Death Eater still on the loose. Minerva would ask me to puzzle out ways to help the castle heal. Pretty soon, Minerva said the new Potions teacher couldn't keep up with her teaching duties and make the potions for the Infirmary. Could I make a few batches of some of the more common potions?"

"They made you feel needed again."

"Yes, and that helped, especially after I started to be able to talk again. What finally brought me out of it, however... Come with me, and I'll show you."

His hand still held Hermione's, so he helped her up from the sofa and led her into his grandmother's sitting room where they had eaten lunch. They walked up to the alcove where the table was. It faced west, and the sun was setting as they approached. It was a beautiful sight. Standing there, Severus put his arm around her shoulders. She put her arm around his waist and leaned against his shoulder. She spoke softly, "It's beautiful. How did this help you?"

"I was standing here, thinking about sunsets and the cycles of the days and the seasons. I started thinking that my life was at a sunset. The old part was over, and a new part could start now. I'd paid my debt to Lily, and I could leave her in my past. I'd done what Albus had asked, and I could leave him in my past."

Hermione nodded. "And that left you free to think about your future?"

"Yes," Severus responded. "So I decided to come out of hiding, to be around people again, and to see what happiness I could find. Getting back to what I said at the beginning, that's what I hope matters to you. That's what I've mulled over since that dance before inviting you here. Everyone knows that I was in love with Lily Evans. Lily Potter. Even my students, and especially the three of you, know that it made me bitter and miserable. But now I hope *you* know why I'm not that person anymore." He smiled a bit. "Still sarcastic and grumpy, I suppose, but not bitter."

Hermione raised her head from Severus's shoulder to look up into his face. He was smiling down at her with a look... *I think my heart's just melted into a puddle of goo.* One arm was still around his waist, but she gently brought her other hand to his face, cupping his cheek. "Severus, I can't believe you've told me all this. *Thank you* for trusting me so much."

That smile just lifted a bit more. "Why wouldn't I trust you, Hermione? You're one of the most caring, compassionate people I know, and I..." Suddenly, he brought his mouth to hers in a kiss of such sweetness, such tenderness that it nearly took her breath away. Her hand moved from his cheek to snake into his hair at the back of his head as she melted into his kiss. She felt his free arm go around her waist, pulling her even closer as his lips explored hers. Without thought, their mouths opened to experience this kiss more fully.

The light of the sunset gleamed through the windows onto the couple entwined in each other's arms, kissing each other as though they never wanted to stop. Slowly, Hermione became aware of whispering going on in the room. Her eyes opened to see Severus open his eyes. They both turned their heads towards the sound. Winkin, Blinkin and Nodd stood there, heads down, glancing fearfully up at them.

"Well?" Severus asked in a severe tone.

Winkin stepped forward with a squeak, as though he had been pushed by Blinkin. "Pardon me, Master, but you did be ordering supper to be served in a few minutes..."

"We came in to set the table, Master, and we is finding..." Blinkin clearly didn't know what he had found.

Nodd trembled. "Is we to be punishing ourselves, Master?"

Severus and Hermione just looked at each other and gave a little laugh. Severus responded, "No punishment is necessary. Professor Granger and I will just go into the drawing room while you finish the supper preparations. Thank you."

With dignity, he offered Hermione his arm, and they slowly walked into the drawing room where they burst out laughing. Severus walked her over by the Christmas tree and motioned her to a nearby chair. "I have a gift for you," he said, still smiling.

He reached under the tree to get a small box, beautifully wrapped. When Hermione opened it, she discovered two gift cards to see *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* at a theatre in London, along with a gift certificate to a nice restaurant. Hermione smiled. "Severus, what a great idea! Is this your way of asking me on a date?"

"Well, if you wanted me to be the other person to go to dinner and a movie with you, I certainly wouldn't object." He gave a little smirk.

"All right. That will be fun. Here's your gift."

Hermione handed him a long, narrow box wrapped in green and gold paper. When he opened it, Severus discovered a self-writing quill. "Thank you, Hermione. It's the deluxe model, isn't it? I've always wanted one of these, but it's just something I'd never purchase for myself."

"I figured it could come in handy when you want to take notes during a potions experiment. Besides..." She giggled a little. "Now that I've had some experience grading essays, I've come to realise that your hand must be extremely fatigued after writing all those comments." She grinned at him.

"Cheeky witch," he growled in mock anger.

Winkin came in to announce that supper was ready. Hermione and Severus went back to the room they had so recently vacated. Severus held Hermione's chair as she was seated before seating himself. Time passed swiftly as they partook of a delicious meal and delicious conversation. As they ate their dessert, Severus asked, "You have to leave soon, don't you, so that you can attend Christmas Eve service with your parents?"

"Not right away, but pretty soon," Hermione responded.

"Would you like to go to dinner and the movie next week?" Severus asked. "I had thought maybe New Year's Eve."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Severus. I can't on New Year's Eve. Harry and Ginny have invited me to a party at their house."

"That's all right."

"Do you want to come with me to Harry and Ginny's?" Hermione asked.

"Do you think that's wise?" Severus asked. "Do you want to have to endure the reactions you're likely to get from Potter and Weasley?"

Hermione smiled. "Harry and Ron. Hmm, maybe not quite yet. Would you like to go to the movie on Saturday or Sunday?"

"How about Saturday? Why don't I pick you up at your parents' house?" Severus asked.

Hermione hesitated. "Well, I don't know..."

"You think it's too soon for me to meet your parents?" Severus questioned.

"Oh no, it's not that. It's just... well, my parents don't really know what I did during the war. Meeting you would bring the subject up, and it could be... awkward for me."

"What do they think you were doing during the war?"

"They think I was on the run with Harry and Ron, staying safe. They don't know about breaking into the Ministry or Gringotts, or going to Malfoy Manor... or Bellatrix..."

"What about Bellatrix?" Severus asked sharply.

Hermione bit her lip. "It's something I don't talk about. I'm sorry I brought it up."

Severus took her hand. Gently, he asked, "Hermione, what about Bellatrix?"

Hermione looked at him, remembering how open he had been with her earlier. She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "When we were caught by Snatchers and taken to Malfoy Manor, we had the Sword of Gryffindor with us. Bellatrix knew it was supposed to be in her vault, and she decided to question one of us to find out what else we had taken from her vault." Hermione couldn't look Severus in the eye without crying, so she turned away. "She chose me. She used a knife and the Cruciatius Curse. I'm sure you can imagine how it proceeded from there. Fortunately, before she got a chance to do too much damage, Dobby came and freed Harry and Ron. Then the three of them came for me. That's when Dobby was mortally wounded. If he hadn't had to save me, he wouldn't be dead."

Severus spoke, concern in his tone. "Hermione, you surely cannot blame yourself for Dobby's death. You didn't choose to be captured and questioned."

"Oh, but you see, we did choose to be captured. We had figured out that Harry needed to defeat Draco to get the allegiance of the Elder Wand. And our plan depended on Dobby's knowledge of Malfoy Manor. Of course," her tone grew sarcastic, "we didn't force Dobby to go, but I could see he was afraid. Harry had asked Dobby if he would help, and Dobby didn't want to refuse Harry Potter. Harry Potter had freed him. Asking Dobby for that favour was almost as bad as coercion. I'm such a hypocrite. Rights for the house-elves as long as it doesn't interfere with my plans."

"But Dobby did choose to fight," Severus said calmly, "just like Kreacher and the house-elves at Hogwarts. It was their choice. Just like you chose to fight, even when you were afraid. Isn't that why you've interceded for the house-elves...to give them the right to choose?"

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but Severus interrupted her. "I don't think the main issue here is whether you disregarded Dobby's rights. Hermione, who knows that you were tortured during the war?"

"Harry and Ron know, of course." Her voice took on a hard edge as she continued. "The Malfoys know. They stood there while it happened and did nothing. I can't... I can't remember if anyone else was there. It's all a bit of a blur, except the pain and trying *not* to tell Bellatrix where we got the sword."

"Do you ever talk about that with Harry and Ron?"

"I did try at first, but it made Ron feel guilty that he hadn't been able to rescue me sooner. Then Harry would get depressed remembering Dobby. Eventually, it was just easier not to talk about it."

"Why haven't you told your parents about what you did in the war?"

"They'll know I lied to them! They're already having a hard time trusting me because of my altering their memories. If they know I lied to them besides..."

"I would guess they probably already suspect that you're not telling the whole truth. You can't really hide the effects of something like that. Believe me, I know. It might be better to tell them."

"Oh, I don't know, Severus..."

"You're a teacher. Who would you trust more: a student whom you suspected was lying to you or a student who came to you and admitted they had misled you?"

"I see your point, but we're not talking about a late essay. This is quite a bit bigger than that."

"Just think over what I've said."

Hermione nodded slowly.

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She had to admit that Severus had given her a lot to think about. She thought during the Christmas Eve service she attended with her parents. She thought during the day she spent with her parents on Christmas, and during the dinner at her uncle and aunt's house on Boxing Day.

She didn't spend *all* that time thinking about whether or not to tell her parents about her war exploits. She spent quite a bit of time in fond remembrance of the kisses that she and Severus had shared before she left the Prince Estate on Christmas Eve. *That man surely can kiss!*

They had spent an enjoyable evening together on Saturday having dinner and seeing the movie. Hermione thought the movie was wonderful and wondered if Arthur Weasley could charm a DVD player and television to work at Hogwarts the way he had the CD player for the Christmas party. She filed that thought away to ask Arthur at Harry and Ginny's party.

After the movie, she invited him back to her apartment for a drink. Mostly, though, the invitation was an excuse to kiss him again. He had a way of almost worshipping her lips with his own that was terribly exciting. She didn't want to have to wait a whole week before seeing him again at Hogwarts.

"Severus," she said breathlessly when he took a break from her lips to nibble her neck and earlobe, "will you please come with me to Harry and Ginny's party on New Year's Eve?" She gasped as he grazed an especially tender spot just beneath her ear.

"Mmmm." His voice seemed to vibrate through her, causing her to squirm in his arms. He chuckled at her reaction. "I thought you weren't sure if you wanted to brave Potter's and Weasley's reactions just yet."

Hermione lifted her head from where it had been resting on the arm extended across the back of her sofa. "I thought that was how *you* felt. I certainly have no qualms about telling them that you and I are having a relationship."

"I don't have *qualms* about people knowing we're in a relationship. It will cause a great deal of gossip and speculation, two things that I hate. To be honest, I'm not sure if I wouldn't feel more comfortable making our relationship public the first time to our colleagues or your parents, not Potter and Weasley."

Seeing her disappointment, he asked, "Could you give me some time to think about it? I spent years trying to stay out of the public eye. Except for that little flurry last spring when I got the Order of Merlin, I've managed to do it. Potter and Weasley, on the other hand, seem to attract attention."

Hermione remembered that he had spent years virtually alone. "Of course, I understand. I don't want to pressure you. How about if you decide to come, you just show up at 12 Grimmauld Place anytime after 8:00 that night?"

He kissed her tenderly and said, "I don't deserve someone who is so patient with me. Are you sure you want to put up with this sour old man?"

Hermione snorted. "Oh, Severus, don't be silly. You've been so sweet to me. And I certainly don't think of you as old. Not when you kiss the way you do." They engaged in some heated snogging for a few more moments before saying good night. Severus promised again to consider her invitation for New Year's Eve.

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Hermione had a little shopping to do for the book club before she went back to Hogwarts. There was a stationer's shop not far from Grimmauld Place which turned out to have exactly what she wanted. She had done her shopping so quickly that she had some extra time. She shrank her purchases and put them in the pocket of her coat before walking down the street to a coffee shop. She picked up a newspaper at the counter along with her coffee and sat down at one of the tables near the window of the store.

She was reading quite happily when she heard, "Hermione?"

Looking up, she saw Edward Beekman standing next to her table. "Edward! How nice to see you! Would you like to have a seat?"

"Gladly, thanks." They spent an enjoyable half hour talking about their holidays and their errands. Edward had her laughing out loud over his rendition of trying to find the perfect gift for his new girlfriend. Apparently, his gift had been wildly successful if his blushes were anything to go by.

"Can I walk you somewhere?" he asked when they had finished with their coffee and conversation.

"No thank you. I'm just headed a couple of streets away for a party. If you happen to see them, tell James and Jasmine that I said hello. And have a happy new year!" She shook his hand. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, wished her a happy new year and walked off.

Hermione walked to Harry and Ginny's house. It was wonderful to spend time with Harry, Ginny, Ron and Luna. Harry was no longer doing undercover work because Ginny would be having their first baby in just a few weeks. Ron and Luna were planning another trip, this time to Brazil. The Weasley family was there, along with Andromeda Tonks with Teddy Lupin. Hermione enjoyed herself and even remembered to ask Arthur about charming a telly and DVD player.

Her enjoyment was dampened by the fact that Severus never came to the party. She didn't let herself mope, but as the evening wore on, her disappointment grew. *You told him there is no pressure, but naturally, he would feel pressured after so many years alone. The Weasleys can be a bit overwhelming.*

As the night wore on, she couldn't ignore a growing feeling of uneasiness and insecurity. *What if it's not him? What if it's me? What if he doesn't want to have a relationship with me?* She hated when she did this to herself, but she could never quite get over those feelings of insecurity she had had as a child...feelings that caused her to try to answer all the questions and prove that she was just as good as anyone else, even if she hadn't been born into the wizarding world.

All in all, she was glad when the party ended. She was relieved that Christmas break was nearly over. Friday evening couldn't come soon enough for her. Then she could see Severus and reassure herself that everything was all right.

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Members of the book club arrived fairly promptly, considering that some of them were just coming back to Hogwarts from their holidays that day. Hermione had presents for them. She had purchased a calendar for each of them with an artist's rendition of different characters and scenes from *The Lord of the Rings*. She had also purchased a variety of sizes and types of Post-It Notes. If there was anything that teachers would appreciate about the Muggle world, it should be Post-It Notes. Even Ivy seemed impressed by them and the ideas that Hermione had for using them.

She was just sitting everyone down to start the meeting when Severus walked in. He apologised for being late and took his seat. He had given her a brief nod but no more. *He must really be worried about gossip.* Well, she could respect his reticence. She continued the meeting with barely a pause.

"Book Four only has four main characters in it: Frodo, Sam, Gollum and Faramir. I thought we could play a little game. What if these four characters were being sorted into houses here at Hogwarts? Which house would each of them belong to?" *That got everyone's attention*, Hermione thought. "I tried to decide in what order to discuss the

characters. I finally settled on alphabetical sorting, which means Faramir would be first."

Septima, as usual, was one of the first to respond. "I think he would be in Ravenclaw. He seems to love learning. He's spent a lot of time with Gandalf to learn more about the lore of Gondor, and he understands the wisdom of not using the One Ring."

From his usual corner of the room, Cuthbert Binns, a former Ravenclaw, stated his opinion. "Look at how well his attacks in the wilderness are carried out. That shows thoughtful planning."

"Very logical reasoning," Hermione responded with a smile. "Do any of the other houses want to make a case for Faramir?"

"The attacks are very cunning, a trait normally associated with Slytherin," Ivy countered.

Severus continued, "He's a younger son who needs to find a way to stand out in spite of his popular and successful older brother. He gets to know Gandalf and excels in learning, thus giving him a way to get ahead. Ambition is a trait typical of Slytherins. Not using the One Ring could be self-preservation instead of wisdom."

"Yes, and he was cunning enough to trick people into accusing themselves with their own words, another Slytherin tactic," Septima muttered.

"You're just angry because we used the same points to make our case for Slytherin that you used to make a case for Ravenclaw," Ivy responded airily.

Before the debate could get stormy, Pomona chimed in. "He could be a Hufflepuff. He is very loyal to his family and his country. He chooses to be a friend to Frodo and let him continue his mission, in spite of what he thinks his father would want. To me, he's showing loyalty and friendship, even though the two things come into conflict."

"I think a case could be made for Gryffindor," Minerva countered. "There he is in the wilderness with a small band of soldiers making surprise attacks on the enemy. That takes a lot of courage."

"That's right, Minerva." Bathsheba Babbling, another former head of Gryffindor House, was ready to make a case for her house as well. "He went against his father's orders to allow Frodo to continue on his quest. I don't know how much of that was due to friendship, as Pomona suggests, or how much of that was trying to do what he thought was the right thing. That takes a great deal of bravery as well. He could get in a lot of trouble from his father...and did, in fact."

"Well, what do you think?" Hermione asked. Given the fact that many houses' answers had countered each other, it was a tough choice, but eventually, the consensus put Faramir in Gryffindor.

"Next up would be Frodo," Hermione prompted.

"I liked that he was kind to Gollum," Sybill said in her vague way, "and found a way for him to be useful. That seems very much like the kind of person Helga Hufflepuff was."

"Well said, Sybill," Pomona murmured her approval.

"He showed a great deal of bravery, going on despite being unsure and scared. A Gryffindor trait, to be sure."

"I thought it was a very Gryffindor moment when he ran off like a lunatic and got caught by orcs," Severus said to Ivy in an undertone. They chuckled together.

Minerva snorted her disapproval.

"Before you come to blows, I'll put in my two Knuts for Ravenclaw," said Septima loudly.

"By all means, Septima," said Severus smoothly.

Minerva gave another huff of annoyance at Severus's seeming cooperation.

Septima pretended to ignore the two of them and said, "He enjoys learning. He loves lore, and he speaks the Elvish language. He's clearly a well-educated Hobbit."

"Severus or Ivy, would either of you care to speak for Slytherin?" Hermione asked.

Severus and Ivy looked at each other. "He doesn't seem very Slytherin to me," Ivy commented. "He has no sense of self-preservation or ambition. He does make some good alliances, I guess."

With Slytherin basically out of the running, the majority of members voted for Frodo to be in Ravenclaw.

"Now let's move on to Sam," Hermione suggested.

"Wait a minute," Pomona said. "I thought you were going in alphabetical order. That would bring you to Gollum next."

"His real name is Smeagol, which puts him alphabetically after Samwise," Hermione responded. "Anyway, what house would Sam be in?"

Everyone looked around at each other. Finally, several of them answered, "Hufflepuff."

"Loyalty *is* his strongest trait," Pomona said rather proudly.

"Do you all agree?" Hermione asked. Everyone nodded. "Well, that was easy. And that just leaves... Smeagol."

Everyone looked at Severus and Ivy. Severus looked pained. "Don't. Say it."

"What?" Ivy asked. "Wait a minute, you're not trying to make Smeagol a Slytherin?!"

"Of course they are," Severus said. "They'll say that he was ambitious to get the Ring and that he made an alliance with Shelob to do it."

"Well, of all the insulting... As though Slytherin House would accept some sort of hybrid Hobbit! That would be like letting in a half-blood or a... a Muggle-born!"

"Professor Turner," Severus said in a very quiet tone that let everyone in the room know that he was quite angry, "I am a half-blood." Ivy closed her mouth with a snap.

"If you all will excuse me, I'll take my leave. Good night." Severus stalked from the room.

Ivy rose with a show of dignity which was somewhat mitigated by her stooping to collect her gifts from Hermione. "I believe I'll say good night as well," she said as she swept from the room.

Everyone looked at each other with shock.

After a few seconds, Minerva said quietly, "I was going to say that he shows some bravery by going into some very scary places and exploring frightening paths in Mordor. Of course, some of that was from necessity, but still..."

"I was going to point out that, although he's not well-educated, he seems to be good at retaining the lore that he learned as a child so many years ago," Septima responded.

They both looked at Pomona who said, "Well, I wasn't going to claim him for Hufflepuff." Minerva gave an inelegant snort of laughter, and Septima rolled her eyes. Pomona raised her eyebrows, "Well, if he'd been in Hufflepuff, he probably wouldn't have turned out so badly. Name one bad wizard to come out of Hufflepuff house."

Everyone but Pomona and Sybill said in unison, "Hildegard Bridgewater."

Pomona and Sybill stood. Pomona responded in icy tones, "There has *never* been any proof that she was evil. She could just as well have been placed under the Imperius Curse. Good night!" She and Sybill turned as one and left the room.

Minerva sighed. "Hmmm, well I suppose we might all just as well leave then. Good night, Hermione." Those who were left murmured their good nights to her.

Hermione sat alone in her room, a bit overwhelmed. *What has just happened?* Her fun idea for a game had offended some of the members of her book club. Even more troubling was the question of what had happened to Severus. He'd barely looked at her. *Something must be wrong. But what?*

Chapter Six: The Last Debate

Chapter 7 of 9

Severus explores trust, Hermione exercises courage, and the Mother Hens are very... motherly.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything belonging to the Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings universes. Thanks to my alpha/beta team of morethansirius and sshg316.

Hermione went down to breakfast the next morning a bit tentatively. Given how things had gone the night before, she seriously considered having breakfast in her room. However, students would be arriving back at school tomorrow, and classes would begin the next day. That just left today to soothe hurt feelings left from last night's book club meeting and to figure out what was going on with Severus. *Not to mention any last minute preparations for class on Monday. Oh, and checking on a couple of dormitory issues before the Gryffindors return tomorrow.* She gave a mental shrug of her shoulders. *Well, it all has to get done...* There were times she missed her colour-coded schedules.

She found a seat next to Pomona at breakfast. "Good morning, Hermione!" Pomona greeted her cheerfully.

Hermione gave her a relieved smile. "Good morning, Pomona. I felt so badly about how the book club meeting ended last night. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, I should be the one to apologize. People just like to bring up Hildegard Bridgewater to annoy Hufflepuffs. I don't know why I let it get to me like that last night. You and I know that there's nothing to all that."

Hermione just nodded. She had heard of Hildegard Bridgewater being the only evil wizard to come from Hufflepuff House, but she didn't know what counter-arguments Pomona was referring to. She was longing to ask Pomona, but she didn't want to bring up last night's discussion any more than she had to. She decided to visit the library later and do some research. *I'll just put it on the list,* she thought, privately rolling her eyes. She knew that was going to have to wait, perhaps for days.

With one item ticked off her mental list, she determined to move on to the problem that was troubling her even more. She had noticed Severus coming in and sitting at the other end of the table. He had apparently inhaled his breakfast because he was already getting up to leave. "Severus," she called. She thought he paused for a brief second, but then he continued on his way.

She didn't want to make a scene in front of their colleagues, so she excused herself to Pomona and followed Severus from the Great Hall. When they were both in the hallway, she called clearly, "Severus!" He continued to ignore her, and she knew that he must have heard her. Frustration filled her. *How are we supposed to solve anything if he won't talk to me?* "Severus Snape," she called again, her annoyance evident in her tone, "are you afraid to talk to me?"

That stopped him in his tracks. She saw his fists clench before he took a deep breath and slowly turned around to face her, his face a blank mask. "Actually, yes, Hermione, I am afraid to talk to you."

"Why would you be afraid to talk to me?" she asked, bewildered.

A look of hurt flashed across his face before he forced it behind the blank mask. "That's right. You would have no idea, would you?" Sarcasm had entered his tone.

Hermione massaged her forehead with her fingertips. *This is not going well.* Her frustration level had reached new heights. "Severus!" She took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Very deliberately, she said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Severus's nostrils flared as he took in a long breath and let it out through his mouth in an exasperated sigh. His voice was resigned as he said, "That's a good act, Hermione, but I saw you with Beekman."

"Beekman?" She cast her mind back to the last time she saw James and then remembered her cup of coffee with Edward on New Year's Eve. "Do you mean Edward? How did you know...? Were you *spying* on me?" She saw that flash of hurt again as she apparently confirmed whatever Severus was thinking. "Wait a minute." She held up her hand for silence while she tried to think. "You saw me with Edward. That means you must have been planning to go to Harry and Ginny's party. You Apparated to the area early and saw me talking with Edward. But instead of coming up and talking to me yourself, you just left. Is that what happened?"

"I know we didn't make any official decisions about our relationship. I thought the things we said on Christmas Eve indicated a certain level of trust and... commitment that I guess you don't feel."

"That's not true!"

"I spent 20 years serving a man who was an expert at keeping secrets. I can't... live that way again. And you're keeping secrets, too. Look at how you've avoided telling your parents about who you are all these years. And now Beekman. I can't be in a relationship like that, Hermione."

"Severus, I'm not keeping any secrets about Beekman!" she almost shouted. She took another deep breath. "But you're right. We both need to let ourselves trust again if we're going to be happy. I have to let myself trust my parents again, and you have to learn to trust me." She looked him straight in the eye. "Maybe you don't believe me, but I just want you to know that I am *not* playing with your feelings or dating Edward Beekman. I really care about you."

Severus stared down at her intently. "I want to believe you, but..." He shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"Well, that's something, I suppose." She didn't know what to say to him. Good-bye sounded so final. And she suddenly realised she didn't want final with Severus; she wanted forever with Severus. *I'm in love with Severus Snape, and I think we just broke up.* She turned and walked away because she was afraid she was going to cry in front of him.

As she passed the door to the Great Hall, Pomona, Septima and Minerva joined her. Septima looked back and then turned to Hermione. "Severus?" Septima asked her softly, her tone laced with surprise.

"Severus?" Pomona echoed. "Hermione, not Severus. You should be with someone who makes you laugh. You've had to deal with so much seriousness in your life already. Severus is a good man, but he really has no sense of humour."

"Pomona," protested Minerva.

"He *is* a good man," Hermione agreed. "He has a *brilliant* sense of humour. And he's a *great* kisser. And I don't just like him; I *love* him!" She burst into tears.

Pomona looked distressed that Hermione was in tears, and Septima seemed intrigued that Severus was a good kisser.

Minerva put her arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Come on, dearie, I've some chocolate biscuits and tea in my office. We'll talk it over."

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Tea and chocolate biscuits and sympathy and talking had led to a plan. As Minerva pointed out, Severus was not walking away from Hermione, but he was convinced that Hermione was walking away from him. "Make it clear that you're not," was Minerva's advice.

The longer Hermione thought about that, the more sense it made. Why wouldn't Severus assume she would walk away when things got tough? Lily had, and Dumbledore had. Everyone from the Order had deserted him during that last year of the war. This idea Severus had that she was keeping secrets might just be a defence mechanism, but it was something that could be straightened out over time. Making him believe she would be there for him, no matter what, was a trickier problem to solve.

She tried over the next several days...as much as she could without his cooperation...to act as though they were any other couple who had an issue to work through. She spoke to him whenever she could. She asked his advice on various matters. She tried to find thoughtful little things to do for him.

Pomona and Septima tried to be helpful as well. One or the other would often sit next to Severus at a meal until Hermione came, at which point she would give up her seat so that Hermione and Severus could talk. They switched hall patrol duty so that Severus and Hermione would end up patrolling the Hogwarts corridors on the same evenings.

Finally, Severus complained to Hermione. "I can't go anywhere without Pomona and Septima and even Minerva coming up and telling a story about how wonderful you are, how *loyal*. Why are they trying to push us together?"

"Believe it or not, they want me...they want *us*...to be happy. If you're going to be involved with me, you have to learn to deal with my friends."

"Who says I'm going to be involved with you?" Severus turned, his robes billowing, and walked away. But Hermione noticed that he asked that question in a snarky tone, not a sullen or resigned one, and she thought she detected a slight spring to his step as he proceeded down the hall.

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About a week after returning to Hogwarts, Hermione was at breakfast. She was sitting next to Severus...thanks to Septima...when an owl flew into the Great Hall. "That's Harry's owl," Hermione said with some excitement.

"And Potter's owl is always cause for rejoicing," Severus commented. He had taken to conversing with her through ironic comments, but Hermione thought this was better than not speaking to her at all. It was far better than speaking with that resignation he had shown when saying he couldn't be in a relationship with her.

"Maybe the baby's arrived!" The owl had landed on the table in front of her, offering its leg, and Hermione unfastened the message before giving the owl a bit of breakfast. She expected the owl to fly away, but it stepped over to Severus and offered him the other leg.

"It must be something else. They wouldn't be sending me baby news," he commented as he unfastened the little scroll.

"Mine is," Hermione said after opening her scroll and skimming over it. She smiled. "Ah, a little boy."

"Whom they've named James Sirius," Severus responded. "I've got one, too," he said, waving his letter towards her. "But I can't imagine why they would invite me to the christening of a child who is named after two people I despised."

"I think I know why they invited you," Hermione said tentatively, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. She leaned toward him and spoke quietly, "I told them that we were seeing each other."

"You told them what?" Although Severus tried to keep his voice down, his voice and manner drew eyes from all over the Great Hall.

"Do you think we should talk about this somewhere else?" Hermione asked, looking down at her plate.

Severus noticed the attention they were getting and said through gritted teeth, "Small dining room?"

"Fine," Hermione agreed. They stood and left the Head Table with as much dignity as they could muster, considering that they were drawing looks and whispers from their students and colleagues.

Once they had reached the small dining room, Severus said, "Explain."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at his tone. Severus rolled his eyes a little but said, "Please."

"I told Harry and Ginny at their New Year's Eve party. I was hoping you would come, and I didn't want Harry to ask you uncomfortable questions. Once I told Harry and Ginny, I had to tell Ron and Luna. Besides, you seemed worried about their reactions. I thought if I told them, then you wouldn't have to be concerned about it anymore."

Severus looked confused. "You told them we were seeing each other?"

"In the interest of full disclosure, I suppose I should tell you that my parents know as well. I told them at Christmas. I'm sorry if that makes you uneasy now, but after Christmas Eve, that's what I assumed." Severus wore a curious expression. "Severus?"

"It appears that I had some mistaken ideas. Frankly, I'm not sure how to react at the moment, but you and I both have classes to teach in a few minutes. Do you mind if I

take a little time to think before we finish this conversation?"

"No, you're right. We should finish this when we have time to talk." Hermione felt more encouraged than she had in a long time. Standing on tiptoe, she gave Severus a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Have a good day, Severus."

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Due to the christening of Harry and Ginny's baby, the decision was made to have the book club meeting a week earlier than the scheduled time. Hermione was a little worried that it would rush people to have to get Book Five done sooner than usual, but she was assured that with all the action and battle scenes, the reading went fairly quickly.

Hermione asked each of the book club members what they had liked about Book Five.

Sybill liked seeing Pippin and Merry each on his own, each taking a part in the war. "It's like watching your students growing up. It's very fulfilling to see them reaching their potential." Hermione hadn't realized Sybill felt that way about teaching. *At least, I can respect that attitude.* That made her feel better. She hated not being able to respect her teachers. One of her greatest embarrassments was still her misguided crush on Lockhart.

Minerva's comment brought Hermione back to the discussion at hand. "I liked the fact that Eowyn snuck off to battle. She needed to be part of the activity, and what a part she played!"

Severus said, "I thought the Headmistress was supposed to be neutral about house affiliation. That was a Gryffindor comment if I ever heard one."

Minerva just smiled. "You wouldn't expect me not to be true to my nature."

Septima sighed. "Yes, Eowyn was heroic, but it was so sad that she joined the army because of her heartbreak over Aragorn. At least, Aragorn understood that and felt badly about it."

Bathsheba looked at Septima with confusion. "How is it better that Aragorn knows she's in love with him? That's just an embarrassment for Eowyn."

Septima just shook her head. "Eowyn's a Gryffindor, no doubt. She took her chance on basically telling Aragorn how she felt, but Aragorn didn't feel the same way. I agree that no one wants to be in that position, but he feels badly about it. That's better than if he didn't care one way or the other."

Hermione carefully did not look at Severus. She had revealed a lot to him in their last conversation, and Septima's remarks were hitting a little too close to home.

"Since this part is less about romance and more about battle," Severus said pointedly, "as a Slytherin, I applaud their attempt to divert Sauron. The plan to attack Mordor directly is audacious and seemingly suicidal...rather Gryffindor...but at least, they're making an attempt."

"Yes," agreed Ivy. "I rather think Sauron is a Gryffindor. He's so obvious. The Mouth of Sauron, for example, is just a creepy and obvious way to say 'I'm evil.' I have to respect that he showed them Frodo and Sam's things. That certainly demoralized them."

Bathsheba responded, "It makes me think that Frodo and Sam are still all right. Otherwise, he would have shown them something more gruesome. I expected Sauron to be creepy, but I thought the death of Denethor was even creepier. He was completely unhinged."

Pomona commented, "The story shows so many people facing death bravely and with honour. I suppose the author needed to show a contrast in the death of Denethor. I never liked him anyway."

Cuthbert said thoughtfully, "I thought it was interesting to see how the various characters faced death...some with despair, some with bravery, some with honour, some because they couldn't face life anymore. My favourite part of the chapter was that ghosts got to do some of the fighting, too."

"Are you ever sorry you're a ghost, Cuthbert?" Hermione asked.

"No, I never had a family outside of my Hogwarts students, so I could never imagine anything else would be better than staying and teaching here."

It wasn't too much later when the meeting broke up. As Ivy was getting ready to leave, Minerva said innocently, "Ivy, I was wondering how Edward is doing."

Ivy blushed. "How do you know about Edward?"

"James mentioned it, of course."

Septima immediately picked up on this. "Ivy, you're seeing Edward Beekman? He certainly seemed like a nice young man when I met him at the Christmas party."

"You do know he is a Muggle, don't you, dear?" asked Pomona.

"I'm well aware of that, Pomona," Ivy responded. "Now if you will please excuse me, I'll say good-night."

Septima, Pomona and Minerva left soon after, leaving Hermione and Severus alone. Hermione was standing near the door, having seen her guests out. Severus came to stand next to her. "Did you know he was seeing Ivy?" Severus asked.

"No, oddly enough, Ivy doesn't confide in me. I hadn't seen Edward since the Christmas party until we coincidentally ran into each other at the coffee shop. He was telling me funny stories about finding the perfect present for his new girlfriend, but he never mentioned Ivy."

Severus winced, then took her hand in both of his. "It seems I couldn't have been more mistaken in my assumptions on New Year's Eve. I apologize, Hermione."

"I accept your apology, Severus, but I wish you would have asked me about it and given me a chance to explain." She stared down at their joined hands for a moment before taking a deep breath. "We each have baggage left over from the war. I wonder if you would be willing to help me with mine."

"What do you mean?"

"I've asked my parents if I can stay with them during the weekend I go to London for the christening. I've known since Christmas that I need to tell them about the war, but I've been trying to get the courage. I'm so afraid I'll lose what little I have with them. I think I could face possibly losing them if you were with me. Will you come with me, Severus?"

Gently he cupped her face with one hand and looked down at her tenderly. "I'll be there with you, Hermione."

Chapter Seven: Homeward Bound

Chapter 8 of 9

Hermione and Severus visit her parents, and the book club finishes the book.

That last book club meeting went so well, Hermione thought. Not only had club members alluded to House differences without hurting each other's feelings, but the conversation she and Severus had shared afterwards had put their relationship back on track. Like any couple, they had some issues to work through, but they were kissing again. That thought alone made Hermione smile.

"Hermione, don't look like that," Severus whispered in her ear. They were sitting together on a sofa in the parlour at Grimmauld Place enjoying...or enduring, in Severus's case...the party after the christening of little James Sirius Potter.

"Like what?" she whispered back as she smiled up at him.

"Like you want to be kissed." Then he did something that Hermione had never expected him to do in front of Harry and Ginny and their guests. He leaned down and kissed her.

Conversation stopped for a moment except for the loud "Ewww!" that came from Ron.

"Ronald!" Luna hissed.

"Oh, right. Sorry, luv," Ron whispered loudly. Speaking normally, Ron said, "Eww... um, I spilled some punch on my shirt. I better go clean it off." He left the room hurriedly.

Hermione had opened her eyes and was sharing a look with Severus. She giggled helplessly, and the corners of Severus's mouth twitched in response. "Oh, he's trying so hard, Luna," she said, shaking her head in sympathy at Luna.

"He really is," Luna agreed, "but it's difficult for him. He sees things black and white. He'll agree that you, Hermione...and even you, Severus...deserve happiness. But that you would find it together..."

"... or that it might involve *kissing* each other," George Weasley interjected, eyebrows waggling playfully, "is something dear little Ronniekins can't deal with."

"Yet. He can't deal with it yet. Don't worry, Hermione. I'm working on him. Thank you for being patient with him, sir," Luna said.

Severus gave a small chuckle. "Call me Severus. Hermione warned me that if I were going to be involved with her, I would have to learn to deal with her friends."

"Oh, so you've decided to be involved with me, have you?" Hermione asked saucily.

Severus actually blushed. "Cheeky witch," he muttered.

Hermione took pity on him and rose to leave. "We promised to have dinner with my parents tonight," she explained. Suddenly, her stomach felt like lead as she thought about the topic of discussion she would be bringing up that evening.

She felt Severus's arm go around her shoulders and felt his support immediately. "It's the first time I'm meeting Hermione's parents, and we don't want to be late," he said. They exchanged goodbyes with everyone and left Grimmauld Place to Apparate to her parents' house.

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Dinner with her parents was going fairly well, for the most part. Charles and Alexandra Granger and Severus had spent the time getting to know each other. Hermione didn't feel that the dinner table was the appropriate place to talk about the war, but the waiting was making her more and more nervous. As the meal went on, she grew quieter. Her parents looked at her with some confusion but continued with the meal politely.

After dinner, they moved to the lounge to talk some more. Charles said to Severus, "Hermione's told us about you before, of course. I know you were quite a hero in the wizarding war. Hermione's never told us much about the war. Of course, she was in a safe house most of the time, but I guess I'm a bit curious about the war and your role in it."

Hermione took a deep breath. Severus, sitting next to her on the sofa, took her hand and held it tightly. *I can do this. I have to do this.* "Before you ask Severus about his role in the war, there are a few things I should tell you."

"Why, dear?" asked Alexandra.

"You won't fully understand Severus's part in the war until... you hear about mine." She finished in a rush.

Charles and Alexandra exchanged meaningful looks. "I always thought there must be more to it," Charles said. "All right, go ahead."

Hermione started with her first year and began explaining things to her parents in a way they hadn't heard from her before. She had hidden a lot about her school years from them.

"Why didn't you tell us this?" her mother asked in exasperation as she realized the danger her daughter had been living in since she was 11 years old.

"I was afraid you wouldn't let me go back to Hogwarts," she said, her voice laden with guilt.

"Of course, we wouldn't have let you go back. You could have been killed!" her father said angrily.

"But Harry is my friend, and he needed my help. The danger was mostly aimed at him."

"Why would someone target a boy?" Alexandra asked, bewildered.

"There was a prophecy, you see." Hermione explained about the prophecy and how it had affected Harry and his family. She went on to explain about Professor Dumbledore's lessons on Horcruxes, Dumbledore's death and Harry's decision (along with Hermione and Ron) to leave school to hunt the Horcruxes. She described their breaking into the Ministry, their trip to Godric's Hollow, the visit to Xenophilius Lovegood, the decision to be captured and taken to Malfoy Manor, the death of Dobby, their visit to Gringotts and their escape on the dragon and their eventual return to Hogwarts. She gave some details of how the battle had gone, Severus's supposed death, his memories and the eventual defeat of Voldemort.

When she finished, she sat quietly, holding tightly to Severus's hand and awaiting her parents' reactions. Her parents, to their credit, had listened carefully during her long narrative, only asking an occasional question. Now they sat silently for several minutes, obviously thinking over what had been said. The tension in the room grew more and more acute, and Severus put his arm protectively around Hermione.

Charles Granger's fist came crashing down on the arm of his chair, causing them all to startle. "Why the hell weren't we ever told about this?" he shouted.

Nervously, Hermione tried to respond. "I didn't want you to pull me from the school. I..."

"Not by you," her father interrupted. "You were a child. A child who ought to have known better, but still a child." He glared at Severus. "Why weren't we told by the school that these things were going on? We entrusted our only child to the care of Hogwarts, and her life was endangered over and over and over again!" Suddenly, Charles stood up and began pacing angrily around the room before turning and shaking a threatening finger at Severus. "And now you sit there with your arm around your student, holding her hand. What kind of operation were you running up there?!"

Severus stiffened as this accusation was flung at him, and Hermione yelled, "Daddy, stop!" She got up and quickly went to her father, grabbing him by both arms so that he had to stop or run her over. "Daddy, I swear to you that Severus and I never thought of each other romantically before this school year. Nothing like that ever happened to me at Hogwarts. Daddy?"

Charles nodded his acceptance of what she had said. Alexandra said quietly, "I believe we were told about the Basilisk incident but in a very misleading way. Professor McGonagall wrote to us and said that you were suffering the effects of a magical accident, that you were not in any danger, but that you wouldn't be able to write home for a while. We were told that you would be under observation and treatment at the Infirmary at Hogwarts and that we would be updated on your condition weekly. Then we were told weekly that your treatment was progressing normally. Eventually, we were told that your treatment was completed and that you were fine. Shortly after that, you wrote to us, and everything seemed all right."

Severus sighed. "Technically, what you were told was true. Hermione was petrified but not in any danger. As soon as I finished making the Mandrake potion and it was administered, she was back to normal."

"And that is supposed to make us feel better, I assume," Alexandra said in icy tones.

Hermione started to protest their accusing Severus, but he said, "No, Hermione, they're right to be angry. How would you feel if it was our child?"

Hermione gasped. *Our child.* She watched Severus's eyes widen as he realised what he'd just said. They stared at each other wordlessly for a moment before Severus returned his focus to Hermione's parents. "We struggled with what to tell you. Minerva...Professor McGonagall...and I were in favour of telling you more, but Professor Dumbledore was afraid that you would remove Hermione from Hogwarts. It was clear she was a valuable asset to Harry Potter and was needed for the war effort, so we remained too quiet. We tried to protect the three of them ourselves, but sometimes that was not enough. I apologize. You had a right to know more."

Charles grunted. "Oh, let's all sit down," he said grumpily, his actions suiting his words. Everyone else followed his example.

They all sat silently and waited for Charles to speak, but it was Alexandra who spoke first. "Thank you for telling us, Hermione. We always knew that something didn't quite measure up about what you said. It felt like you were holding something back...like we knew you, but then... we didn't."

"That's exactly how I've felt," Hermione said. "You changed in Australia. You came back with different interests, different hobbies. I thought maybe your feelings about me had changed, too."

"When the memories came back, we could remember how much we love you," her mother answered, reaching across the space between her chair and the sofa where Hermione was sitting to take her hand. "We just didn't know if we could trust you because we didn't understand what you were trying to protect us from. Now that we understand, I think we can move forward. Don't you, Charles?"

"Yes," her father said, his voice a bit husky with emotion. He cleared his throat. "But if you two are going to talk about having children..." he looked pointedly at Severus, "...you'd better think about getting married." Hermione looked at him with surprise. "You thought I missed that comment because I was angry, didn't you, missy? Well, I didn't."

Hermione blushed as she looked at Severus. Severus looked at Charles and said, "We'll take it under advisement, sir."

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The Book Club met at the beginning of March to discuss Book Six. It was a lively discussion as the club members were enthusiastic over the thorough way in which Tolkien had tied up the various plot lines in the story. Pomona said, "Tolkien must have been a great lover of gardening. I love how he describes the plant life of the different settings in the story. Plants played such an important role in this last part of the story. Aragorn couldn't get married until the new tree sprouted and was transplanted in Gondor. Sam fixed things in the Shire by using the soil that Galadriel gave him to help things grow again. All the plant references certainly made it an enjoyable book for me."

Here at last, Septima could be enthused over the various threads of romance in the novel. "I was glad to see that Aragorn finally got married. I wish that we had heard more about this Arwen throughout the whole story. I thought it was strange that two of the more minor characters, Faramir and Eowyn, had more of a love story than Aragorn and Arwen."

Hermione responded, "There is a more complete version of Arwen and Aragorn's story, as well as more information on the origins of Middle Earth and what happened to all the main characters, in the Appendices at the end of the book."

After everyone had a chance to comment, Hermione introduced them to their topic of Muggle culture for the evening...Muggle film entertainment. Arthur Weasley had finally come up with charms that would allow a television and DVD player to function, so the evening culminated with a viewing of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

"They changed quite a lot in the movie," Bathsheba Babbling said with some disapproval. "That battle with the Orcs, for example, didn't happen until *The Two Towers*."

"True," agreed Sybill, "and they left out the whole section about Tom Bombadil and the Barrow-Downs. That was a big scene."

"I'm glad that we saw a little more of Arwen, but she didn't do all those things in the book that the film has her doing," Septima noted.

"I pictured Frodo as being older," Minerva commented.

"What did you think of Gandalf?" Hermione asked.

"I liked Gandalf," said Ivy. "He seemed like a real wizard."

"He reminds me a bit of Professor Dumbledore," Cuthbert observed.

"Except that Gandalf dresses with more dignity," was Severus's rejoinder. That brought a laugh from the group.

Hermione tried to explain how filmmakers often cannot adhere directly to the text of the book, due to time constraints and the fact that some things don't translate well to film.

Minerva finally grasped what Hermione was trying to say. "It might be interesting to read a book about the happenings of a typical school year at Hogwarts, but can you imagine someone trying to fit all that into a three-hour film?" This also made the book club members chuckle.

I don't have the heart to tell them about Prisoner of Azkaban coming out in May. What kind of name is that anyway? It should be called 'The Battle for Buckbeak' or 'The Tale of the Time-Turner'.

They enjoyed the film so much that they had decided to watch the other two films during April and May's meetings. Septima said, "Wouldn't it be fun to start a Muggle film club for the students next year? That would give them a good exposure to Muggle culture." Others agreed, and Minerva said that would be one of their discussion items in staff meetings after school was over.

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They'd had to postpone the May meeting in order to wait for the release of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* on DVD. It was almost the end of the school year, and Hermione wanted the last book club meeting to be something special. She decided to have the meeting in the Room of Requirement, which had finally been repaired through years of charm work to counteract the Fiendfyre exposure it had suffered.

She arrived early to the meeting with the television and DVD player shrunk in her pocket. Pacing three times in the hallway in front of the blank wall, she thought carefully of what she wanted. A tall, arched door with intricate carving appeared. She went inside and was quite pleased with the results. The room bore a strong resemblance to the House of Elrond. The walls were made out of white limestone, intricately carved and having arched doorways. From the windows, she could see beautiful, autumnal trees in spite of the spring season in Scotland.

The room had been set up as a sitting room with graceful, curving seats. Hermione took the television and DVD player out of her pocket, changing them into their normal size. Severus had insisted on bringing some of the elf-made wine from the Prince Estate, and Hermione had asked the house-elves to prepare some finger sandwiches.

The book club members arrived, and with much oohing and aahing, they settled in to watch the final instalment of *The Lord of the Rings*. When it was over, they sat quietly for a few moments, enjoying the atmosphere and the wine and mulling over the film.

Pomona said, "This book club has been a lot of fun this year. I've enjoyed it so much. Thanks for leading it, Hermione. You did a splendid job of introducing us to Muggle culture."

"Hear, hear," said Severus, who was sitting with his arm around Hermione, her head cradled on his shoulder. They had made their relationship public to their colleagues several weeks before.

Septima seemed enthralled by her surroundings and said dreamily, "This reminds me of the room where Arwen professed her love for Aragorn and gave him that beautiful pendant. What do you think his proposal was like?"

Minerva said, "I'd assumed that was the proposal."

"Oh, no, Minerva," Septima said firmly, "I'm sure Aragorn would be man enough to propose." Septima stood and walked toward the window. "He'd pick some place beautiful, like this window overlooking the valley, and arrange to meet her here. He'd be standing, waiting, when she came in." She looked around the room. "Severus, come here. You be Aragorn waiting by the window."

"I think not," Severus replied.

Pomona encouraged him. "Oh, why not, Severus? There's no harm."

Severus gave her a look from under one raised eyebrow and sat back more comfortably against the sofa.

"You're the only living male here, Severus," Minerva noted. "You're not likely to get out of this without a lot of nagging."

Sighing gustily to show his distaste of the idea, Severus got up and walked toward the window. Septima took his arm and led him to his position. "There. Now Aragorn is waiting by the window, and Arwen walks in to meet him." She looked around the room once again and said, "Guess who gets to be Arwen, Hermione."

Hermione certainly didn't want to be on display in front of her colleagues, but, taking pity on Severus, she stood up and joined him.

"Do you think he'd get down on one knee, Pomona?" Septima asked.

"No," Severus answered with some asperity. "After all those years of walking and riding, he'd be afraid his bad knees wouldn't let him get up again. I think he'd hold her hands like this." Severus took hold of Hermione's hands in his own.

"How would he know she would say yes?" Bathsheba asked. "It would be humiliating if she didn't."

"Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith," Septima replied.

"What would he say, Severus?" Pomona asked softly.

Severus was looking at Hermione with varying emotions flitting across his face and in his eyes. Apprehension and embarrassment were the chief emotions at first, but that soon changed to a look of determination. "I was going to do this after the meeting anyway."

Going to do what? Hermione thought, feeling as though her brain was moving too slowly.

Severus continued, "I don't know what Aragorn would say, but I know what I would say." Reaching into one of the pockets of his robe, he pulled out a beautiful ring. "Hermione, I love you very much. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Hermione had never imagined Severus proposing to her in front of a group of people, but she saw the look of love and trust in his eyes. Here was clear evidence, if she still needed it, that Severus had grown to trust her. He would never want to appear vulnerable to others. Giving her the chance to reject him in front of their colleagues showed a trust, not only in her, but in their relationship. With no doubt in her heart, she threw her arms around his neck and said, "I love you too, Severus. Of course, I'll marry you."

With tenderness, he placed the engagement ring on her finger and kissed her while their friends clapped their approval.

Author's Note: Stay tuned for the Epilogue...

Thanks, as always, to morethansirius and sshg316, my alpha/beta team. Your advice was very helpful in this chapter.

Neither the Harry Potter or The Lord of the Rings universes belong to me. I am making no money from this work of fanfiction.

Epilogue: The Appendices

Chapter 9 of 9

And now it's time for the happy ending!

It was a Midsummer Day wedding, just as Aragorn and Arwen's had been, held on the lawn of the Prince Estate. Severus and Hermione had decided on a "Lord of the Rings" theme for their wedding, partly because asking their guests to dress in a costume appropriate for *The Lord of the Rings* meant that they could invite a few of Hermione's Muggle relatives, and partly because it was the book that had—at least, indirectly—brought them together.

Hermione had chosen to wear a pale green gown similar to one that Arwen had worn in the film, and Severus wore robes in dark forest green in the style of Aragorn. Nodd had done an outstanding job on the gardens, and the colours were as breathtaking as Hermione had imagined at Christmas. They stood under an arched canopy in front of a garden full of roses to exchange their vows.

After the ceremony, guests enjoyed the refreshments that had been prepared by Winkin. Blinkin was in charge of seeing that everything was running as smoothly as possible, which he did without drawing much attention at all. Hermione's Great-Aunt Edwina happened to be walking toward Hermione just as she finished conferring with Blinkin on some matters.

"Hermione!" Aunt Edwina trilled.

Oh no. What did she see? Hermione reached for her wand, concealed under the sweeping sleeves of her gown. She had been hoping to avoid Obliviating any of her Muggle relatives, but she had known it might be a possibility.

"Somebody certainly is creative," Aunt Edwina enthused. "Dressing their son as Gollum. I wonder how they got him to wear all that make-up?"

It wasn't long before Hermione and Severus wandered over to a table of their colleagues. James and Jasmine Beekman were sitting across from Edward Beekman and Ivy Turner. The table was also shared by many members of the book club. Septima had apparently brought up the plan of having Hogwarts Film Nights during the upcoming school year.

"Who will decide on what films to show the students?" James asked.

"Perhaps we'd better view some first and decide what is suitable," Minerva pondered. "Instead of having a staff book club or sports club, we might need a staff film club."

"I have a few suggestions," Edward mentioned, but his amused glance was for Severus and Hermione. "How about *Bringing Up Baby*?"

"Oh," Jasmine broke in, "or *Three Men and a Baby*."

"How about *Look Who's Talking?*" James queried.

Their colleagues were looking at Severus with varying degrees of amusement. Hermione turned to him to see the look of fear on his face. With mock anger, Hermione turned to the staff members and said, "Don't be traumatizing my husband on his wedding day."

Pomona giggled. "You must have something in mind you want him to do later on today, eh, Hermione?"

Poor Severus was blushing as Hermione turned to lead him away. Looking back over her shoulder, she gave a little wink and a smile. "Indeed I do."

Severus led Hermione toward the head table. "You sound anxious, my dear," he said teasingly. "Perhaps it's time for us to thank our guests and take our leave?"

Hermione nodded her agreement with a glint in her eyes. "Yes," she answered throatily. "I want my husband all to myself."

"Your wish is my command," he purred in his silky voice. Holding his hand up to get their guests' attention, Severus waited until they had appropriately quieted before beginning his speech. "My dear family, relatives, colleagues, friends, acquaintances: We are gathered together here... Wait, we've already done that part." There were appreciative grins from the crowd who were happy to have their share in even a mild joke.

"We hope you have enjoyed yourselves as much as we have," Severus continued. A ripple of applause ran through the guests. "We won't keep you long. I just have a few things I want to say. First of all, Hermione and I feel that it was a wonderful occasion to have all of you together. On occasions such as these, there is never enough time to catch up on all the news. Now, let me make sure I get this part right. I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve."

At this, those who were familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* gave a hearty laugh as they recognized a quote from Bilbo's birthday party speech. Hermione saw Harry sit up a little straighter as he listened to what Severus had to say. "Secondly, we appreciate you playing along with our wedding theme." He put his arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I like to think that I would have been smart enough to fall in love with this beautiful lady without the help of our book club, but the fact is that *The Lord of the Rings* helped bring us together, and it will always hold a special place in our hearts. We thank you for sharing our special day.

"Thirdly and finally, I wish to make an *announcement*." Hermione didn't know of any plan to make an announcement, and she stopped looking over the crowd and instead looked up into her husband's face. Severus looked down at her with a smile and moved his hand from her shoulder to her waist to hug her to him more tightly. "I regret to announce that—though, as I said, this has been far too short a time to spend among you—my wife and I have some *pressing business* to attend to." There were a few chuckles, winks and nods from their audience. "We are going. We are leaving now. Good-bye!" With a look of suppressed glee, Severus twisted them both into an Apparation which took them to the master suite of Prince House amid the gasps and shouts of their guests.

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Harry refused to speak to them for several weeks since he was put in charge of the Memory Squad that had to deal with the Muggle wedding guests. Strangely, Severus and Hermione didn't seem to mind. They were attending to pressing business.

The End

A/N: This is a work of fanfic which is written for fun, not payment. J.K. Rowling, Scholastic and Warner Brothers own the words, characters and images in the Harry Potter universe. The estate of J.R.R. Tolkien, along with various publishing companies, and New Line Cinema own the words, characters and images in the *Lord of the Rings*

universe. I used chapter titles from the *Lord of the Rings* books and adapted Severus's wedding speech from Bilbo's birthday speech in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Thanks, as always, to my alpha/beta team of sshg316 and morethansirius for their help. In particular, the ending of this story would not have been as satisfying to me without their helpful input.

This was written as a gift for lotrangel17 for the 2011 SSHG Exchange. While the story was written based on lotrangel17's prompts and interests, a hook for me to get into the setting and characters more quickly was to write a sort of prequel to my drabble series *Walking Club*. So if you're in the mood for a short (and very fluffy) look at Severus and Hermione's married life after this story, you could take a look there.