

Advanced Contemporary Potion Making

by Lariope

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 8

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A/N: This story was written for the 2011 SSHG Exchange on Livejournal for Femmequixotic. It is complete in eight chapters, which I will be posting every three days or so. PLEASE HEED THE WARNINGS: This story is not for everyone. It contains adultery and may make you sad.

That said, thank you so much to Femmequixotic for the prompt. I loved writing for you. And of course, huge thank yous to my betas, OpalJade and Subversa, for endless encouragement and advice.

At seven in the evening, on September the first, Hermione Floo'd into the living room of the house she shared with her family in Ottery St Catchpole. She shrugged out of her purple robes, eschewing, for the moment, her usual Freshening and Cleansing Charms, and instead draped them over the back of the recliner.

Fortescue, the family Crup, nosed fretfully against her legs, his forked tail twitching. She bent and scratched him above the tail, and he threw himself to the ground, legs in the air, offering his belly hopefully.

"Poor Fort," Hermione said, stroking him, and Fort looked at her deeply as if to agree that he was deserving of much pity. "I know. It's hard being left behind. But they'll be back."

She hadn't taken more than a handful of steps into the house before tripping over a pile of Hugo's Muggle model spaceships (she had been pretending for some years not to notice that they had been enchanted to fly) that had somehow twitched their way out from under the table. She smiled a little sadly, nudging the pile out of the traffic area with her foot. This weekend she would clear the main floor of the children's debris, she decided. Right now, the reminder of them was pleasant, if a little achy.

Beneath the smell that she could only term 'home' (a mixture of cereal, Crup and clean robes), Hermione smelled the familiar scents of crushed grass, broom polish and sweat. He'd beaten her home, then. A bit surprising, given that it was still light out.

"Ronald?" she called.

"Up here, 'Mione!" he replied from the vicinity of their bedroom, and she wearily made her way toward the sound of his voice.

She found him emerging from their bathroom, dripping wet and clutching a faded blue towel around his waist. She kissed him briefly on the cheek before collapsing onto

their bed, hands beneath her head. The position caused her jumper and skirt to pull tight across her body and made it slightly difficult to take a full breath, but she felt too exhausted to move.

"Rough one, then?" Ron asked.

"A little worse than when Rose first went," Hermione admitted. "But we had a long day in the courtroom to distract me...you know that Auror that..."

"Got a little too free with the Obliviates, yeah," Ron finished for her. "You told me that was coming up. Azkaban?"

"No," she said. "Sensitivity training at St. Mungo's, if you can believe such a thing." She shook her head. "I'm the first to admit that there can be... circumstances... that sometimes you can't wait for official authorization, but the Obliviate affects the *brain*; I mean, that's your very self, isn't it? If you need 'sensitivity training' to be reminded that you can't just run around... and with no record keeping! We'll never be able to find those people and undo that kind of damage." She stared angrily at the ceiling.

Ron sat down on the edge of the bed and rubbed her forearm consolingly. "Poor 'Mione," he said softly. "Sent her babies off to Hogwarts and then had to deal with the incompetents at the Ministry. I believe this calls for takeaway."

Hermione snorted. "We always have takeaway on the first of September. Ever since Rose was a first year."

"Because it's always a hard day, and we always deserve it," Ron said, a smile twitching around his lips. He stood and began dressing. "You haven't asked how my day was."

"How was your day, Ronald?" she asked, playing along, but interested all the same. Hermione couldn't quite remember why she had begun calling him Ronald. It had been some sort of inside joke, years ago. Perhaps it had been a dig at the way she would sometimes come home from work still formally addressing her family as if they were fellow Ministry workers, or perhaps it was after an argument, as some kind of apologetic endearment. In any case, it had stuck.

"It was... interesting," he said.

"Mmmm?"

"Well," he said, "I'm not really starting class until tomorrow, so I thought it would be nice to kind of... get to know each other, you know..."

"So you took them to play Quidditch."

"Yeah." He looked an odd mixture of sheepish and defensive and proud.

"A bunch of children, not even of school age...certainly not supposed to be using magic..." She was scolding, but there was no heart in it. Ron's neighborhood Quidditch games had been going on for years and were famous among the children. The games had been, certainly, what kept her own children in such demand over the years, and most likely why Ron now found himself tutoring those local magical children not yet old enough for Hogwarts in reading, writing, and basic mathematics, as he'd done his own children before they'd gone to school.

"Finn Jordan is actually only six," Ron said conspiratorially, his eyes twinkling, scooting away from her as if dodging her imminent attack.

"Six!" Hermione said, struggling into a sitting position. "Ronald, that *really* is too young. We didn't even let Hugo have a toy broom until he was..." She sized him up for a moment. "You know what, I don't even want to know when you decided to give Hugo a broom behind my back. I can see that you've decided now that he's safely away at Hogwarts, you're going to begin *springing* these things on me."

"How can I be springing anything, 'Mione? If anything it's already sprung." He looked for a moment like the boy she'd known at Hogwarts, pretending at innocence and sparkling with mischief. "But, in any case, I've learned my lesson. Finn flew up a tree somehow..."

"On a toy broom?"

"Yes, on a toy broom, I swear. It only had the very slightest modification. He shouldn't have been able to get above three feet off the ground, but I think his magic just sort of... helped things along, and before I knew it, he was up the tree, and I went up there to get him and..."

"Oh Merlin, he didn't fall, did he? The nightmare of keeping the Ministry out of it the last time you had a Quidditch injury..."

"No, he didn't fall. Let me finish, Madam Doomsday. He didn't fall, but he erected some kind of shield around himself. I couldn't get near him for nearly a quarter of an hour! That kid's going to be a great Auror someday."

Hermione smiled a bit inside, but kept her face impassive. She had her role as the stern one to maintain, even with the children gone. "How did you get him to lower the shield?"

"Just talked to him," Ron said. "It was mostly fear that made him put it up...fear of falling, fear I'd be angry that he'd gotten so high. He just had to realize that I was still daft old Mr Weasley and that I'd get him down again."

Finally, she did allow herself to smile. "You're good with those kids," she said.

He grinned and gave her arm a final pat. "Glad you think so, Your Honor. Now, about that takeaway. Chinese, Indian or pizza?"

Hermione twirled a curly noodle around her fork. "Does it help?" she asked.

Ron chewed thoughtfully for a moment as if he were seriously considering her question and then broke in to a sheepish grin. "Does what help?"

She huffed slightly. "Being around children?"

"Bit soon to say, yeah? It's only been one day. Still, though, it helped when Rosie went, having Hugo around. So I imagine it will." He paused, about to lift another forkful of Lo Mein to his lips. "You're having a rough time, are you? You said it was worse than when Rose went."

She smiled vaguely at his concern.

"I think, with Rose... Rose was so ready to go. /was so ready for her to go."

Ron chuckled. And Hermione managed to smile at the memories of epic battles with her daughter.

"Hugo was always so much more... mine."

Ron put down his fork and picked up her hand. "Give it a few days. You were heartbroken when Rose left. But you got used to it. And you will again."

"I know."

Ron resumed eating, but Hermione let her attention drift away from dinner. No matter what Ron felt he had to say, it was true...Hugo had always belonged more to her, with his thick glasses and his Muggle science fiction and his potions. He was the quiet one, more apt to spend the afternoon in his bedroom comparing what he'd learned from his father of Muggle maths with his mother's first-year arithmancy texts. He was the one who'd spent weeks buried in her father's copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, and who had asked her very solemnly for help in locating Lothlorien. It had broken her heart a little, that the magic that infused their lives and made the world seem so limitless to him could not provide the wood-dwelling elves of his fantasies.

But Rose. Rose had been, almost from the very beginning, like a changeling. Oh, it hadn't stopped Hermione from adoring her, even when things were at their worst between them; or from marveling at her silken red hair; the way Hermione's own large, serious brown eyes sat twinkling vivaciously in Rose's face. It wasn't even that Hermione didn't think the best of her, only that she could never seem to quite join Rose. It was as if they were always standing on opposite sides of the street.

Rose had loved Quidditch and dress ups and dolls. Hermione remembered with a wince an early manifestation of Rose's magic in which all of her babydolls had begun to wail simultaneously, refusing to lie quiet and dormant again until Rose had personally comforted each one. Hermione, investigating the noise, had found the child in her bedroom, red-faced and panicking, leaking a few tears herself as she tried to mother seven babies into silence. A simple Finite had solved the problem, and Hermione had rocked a tearful Rose and assured her that, for now, it was fine simply to be a little girl.

For that had always been Rose, eager to grow up, eager to share in the mysteries of young adulthood. Hermione had been appalled when Ginny had sent the girl a subscription to *Witch Weekly* for Christmas the year Rose was ten, but Rose had loved it, and her grooming sessions (already of marathon length) took on epic proportions as she tried her hair and makeup...*makeup!* Was Ginny *trying* to kill her?...in the styles she found in the pages of the magazine.

Hermione was glad, of course, that Rose could have a different sort of childhood than she herself had had. Wasn't that what she'd been fighting for? A different sort of world? And if Rose had frills and crushes and pick-up Quidditch games where Hermione had had terror and lessons etched into the mind with blood, well, that was as it should be. She knew that.

And if she had always suspected that Rose would have preferred Ginny for a mother, she tried not to let it bother her. Ginny with her waterfall of red hair, so like Rose's own, and her stylish Muggle clothing and her Quidditch.

And her youth. How did she manage it? To seem so young, still, after James, Albus and Lily, after everything they'd been through? Some days, Hermione just felt so tired, and there was so much yet to do, so much that had been left just as it was, as if waiting for some new Dark Lord to happen along and pick up where Voldemort had left off.

After twenty-one years at the Ministry...fifteen of them as head of Magical Law Enforcement and ten as Chief Witch of the Wizengamot, Hermione wondered if she would see the changes she'd hoped for in magical law in her lifetime.

She would never say that aloud, of course. She was barely forty years old, and not even approaching what would be middle age for a witch... there was plenty of time left. But still, it was frustrating to wait, to work for months on laws that would not make it through the Wizengamot, to plan and revise, to use all the proper channels... It stood in stark contrast to her childhood, when it had seemed that everything changed so fast, when she could decide what was right and simply *act*.

Hermione's musings were interrupted by Fort's frantic barking, and she looked up to see a large, tawny barn owl soar into the open living room window. She looked at Ron.

"Well, here it is. The big news."

He grinned and jumped up to fetch the owl treats from the mantle, while she detached the letter from its outstretched leg.

She waited until he was seated again and said, "Together?"

"Together," he agreed, and she tore open the envelope.

His head bent close to hers as they scanned the parchment.

"Gryffindor!" he said triumphantly, and she sat back, smiling a little to herself. Another Gryffindor. She'd have thought... well, she'd thought maybe Ravenclaw, but Gryffindor was just fine, of course. And for a moment, she envied her young son, settling into his dormitory in that familiar old tower, meeting the Fat Lady and being with his sister again. He'd be starting classes the next day, she thought, and she hoped there would be another letter, telling her all he'd seen and letting her remember her own first week at school.

"Knut for your thoughts," Ron said, after a moment.

She shook her head. "Hmm? Nothing. Just woolgathering."

"You're disappointed, aren't you?" Ron said, goosing her ribs and making her squirm. "You held a secret hope that he'd be in Slytherin."

She batted him away and put on her swottiest voice. "Well, it would set a good example for my work on fairness and equality, Ronald. Just think, a child of ours in Slytherin."

He shook his head at her fondly. "You're too much, 'Mione. Well, I, for one, am happy to think of our children upholding the family traditions."

"What, sneaking out, making mischief and generally breaking any rules that aren't set in stone...and a few that are?"

"Exactly," he said.

She settled into the couch and let her head fall back, lazily flicking her wand to send the leftover food and dirty dishes to the kitchen. Ron made himself comfortable beside her. They sat gazing into the fireplace for some time, the silence spinning out until it was no longer easy and companionable, but just... silent. It was the lack of the children's noise, she knew, and they would grow accustomed to it in time.

She pondered, not for the first time, how difficult it would be to charm a Muggle television to work in a magical household. She had little interest in it beyond the challenge of making it work, but she felt sure that Ronald would take pleasure in it, and he wasn't the sort to enjoy reading by the fire as she did. Surely he was going to have to find something to do with his evenings.

She wanted to summon a book, but she didn't want to offend him.

"What the hell are you going to do with all this time?" he said suddenly.

"Beg pardon?"

"You must be going out of your head," Ron said, propping himself up on one elbow to peer at her. "I don't think I've seen you just sit down and relax in the thirty years I've known you."

"It's only been twenty-eight years, thank you very much," she replied. "And what about you? It's not as if you've been accustomed to a life of leisure."

"Yes, but *I'm* looking forward to it," Ron said. "I've thirteen years of sleep to catch up on. Lie-ins on weekends, lazy evenings on the sofa..." Fort, who was curled at their feet, thumped his forked tail against the wooden floor as if in happy acceptance of these new plans. "But I don't know how you'll stand it. Maybe you should take a class or something. We wouldn't want that brain of yours to stagnate."

"I don't think *my* brain is in any danger, Ronald," she replied, playfully shoving him back to his own spot on the couch. "But I'll take it under advisement."

Truthfully, it might be fun to take a class again. Hermione could not remember the last time she'd studied for her own pleasure, rather than for a bit of legislation she was writing or a case she was hearing. Certainly there *were* disciplines in which she'd gotten a little rusty. And it would help her keep her mind occupied, as he'd said, and not dwell on the absence of the children.

"You wouldn't be lonely in the evenings?" she said, after a time.

"I think I could spare you for a few hours," he said wryly.

"I meant that seriously, you know."

"I know you did. But Hermione," he said, "you've worked night and day for years. Before the kids came along, I wondered if you'd ever leave your office. And then there were stories and bedtimes, and your nightly revision of their work..."

She huffed at him. "Well, I had to keep apprised of what they were learning, didn't I? And you have to admit that I'm more experienced on the Muggle end of things than you are."

"I wasn't criticizing. Just saying that you've been caught up in work and the children for a long time. It might be nice for you to do something for yourself."

"And leave you alone to do what?"

"Do you honestly imagine that I'll be getting into trouble while you're gone? Throwing wild parties, maybe, or hiring house-elves?" He laughed. "I've got my own routines. And I meant it when I said I'd like to take it easy for a while."

"I'll think about it," she said and rose to make her way to the bedroom.

Ron followed her up the stairs and changed into the blue and white striped pajamas that never failed to remind her of both his father and the ghoul they'd once Transfigured in the attic of the Burrow. It was a distressing combination, but tonight it made her smile. Perhaps their children were following in their footsteps. And they hadn't been terrible footsteps, had they? There had been a lot of love and loyalty to go around during those years. A lot of daring; a lot of pure, foolhardy, Gryffindor courage.

Hermione carefully hung up her skirt and banished her jumper to the laundry basket. She slipped into the oversized Chudley Cannons tee shirt that she had appropriated from Ron long about 2002 and had been wearing to bed ever since. It was exactly the kind of familiar comfort she needed tonight.

She climbed into bed and twisted her hair up and away from her face as she nestled into her pillows. Ron extinguished the lights, but she lay sleepless in the darkness, thinking over what he'd said. She had expected him to fall directly to sleep, but his quiet, even breathing told her that he was as thoughtful as she was tonight.

At last, she said quietly, "Well, if you're sure... ~~thereare~~ subjects I'd like to brush up on. Mind magics, for one, though I'm not sure there are even classes offered on the subject. But I never felt my Occlumency was quite as strong as I would have liked, and I do think having more experience working with a runic Pensieve could only be beneficial to the collection and verification of depositions and testimony..."

Ron sighed, turning over to face her. "I meant for this to be something you'd enjoy. Not as an extension of your work at the Ministry."

"But I *would* enjoy it!" she protested.

"Just... consider doing something for pleasure. If not for yourself, then for my peace of mind."

She made noise that was half laugh and half sigh and pulled the covers up to her chin.

"For your sake, then," she said and closed her eyes.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

She'd settled on Athene University in London both for its reputation and for its location to and liaison with the Ministry. Most of the Aurors trained at Athene, and many of the solicitors in her office, Hermione included, had taken courses there to keep abreast of developments in the wizarding law of other countries.

Although she'd been pleased with the courses she'd taken at the school in the past, the selection outside of the law department disappointed her. She'd been able to find nothing on mind magics (except in the Divination department, which Hermione dismissed without further thought), nothing on the new Rune theories in the Charms department, and nothing in Arithmancy that she felt she hadn't already covered either in school or her own private studies. But Ron had been adamant that she study something outside the realm of her professional life, and since the class was really his grand gesture, she felt she should consider his wishes.

She decided, finally, on Advanced Contemporary Potion Making. The description indicated that they would be learning new, state-of-the-art brewing techniques, including charming ingredients for maximum potency, extended shelf-life potion preservation, and Arthimantic recipe prediction. It also stated that each student would be trained in brewing some of the newest and most difficult potions of day. This excited Hermione in particular. It had taken her several months to master the creation of Wolfsbane, one of the trickiest potions she'd ever attempted, but she'd done that without formal assistance of any kind. With instruction, she was certain that she could master several finicky potions within the term. It would be something to add to her resume, anyway, and Hermione had always enjoyed the methodic, rhythmic nature of potion brewing.

When the first day of class arrived, Hermione was amused to note that she was actually *nervous*. It had been some time since she'd been in a classroom...even longer since she'd studied anything at which she wasn't already an expert...and that old need to prove herself was beginning to assert itself. Of course, these days, she thought she could restrain the urge to wave her hand in the air at *every* question. In fact, she thought, as she walked into the laboratory, it might be better not to sit in the front row. She was a conspicuous persona even without her tendency to participate enthusiastically in class, and she wouldn't want to create a distraction. And perhaps, she thought a bit ruefully, she could use the reminder to sit back and listen.

That classroom was nearly full, but she spotted a workstation with an open seat toward the rear and made her way toward the table and its only occupant, a stringy-looking wizard in shirtsleeves, with long black hair in a queue down his back. He had a sour, beaky face, and in a way, he reminded her of Snape, which she supposed was vaguely appropriate for a potions class. She'd already set her notebook on the table and begun to pull out the chair when she realized that it was Snape, and she froze.

She wasn't at all sure what to say, and it was impossible to pretend she hadn't seen him when she was standing less than three feet away—and equally impossible to retreat now that she'd begun to seat herself.

"Hello, sir," she managed, sliding into her chair. She opened her notebook to the first page and began to root around in her bag for a quill. She wasn't sure that she could look at him without staring, and she was already trying to brace herself for whatever he might say to her.

"Miss Granger. What a pleasant surprise," he said in a tone that indicated it was anything but, barely cutting his eyes in her direction.

There was a moment of charged, dangerous silence. Finally, she said, "If you'd prefer to work alone, sir, I'd be happy to move to another workstation." She pulled her notebook toward her and prepared to rise.

Snape finally turned toward her and arranged his face into a look of predatory anticipation. "And where, pray tell, would you go?"

Hermione made a quick survey of the classroom and determined that, in fact, the remaining seats had filled. But before she was obliged to make an awkward reply, the instructor began to speak, and she turned toward him as if to grant him every ounce of her obedient attention.

In fact, she heard nothing that the man was saying.

There's no reason to be so shocked, she told herself sharply. It wasn't as if she hadn't known he was out there *somewhere*, although she actually couldn't remember the last time she'd considered where he might be. After the war, he'd had the good sense to lay low until things were safely settled and Kingsley had been made Minister for Magic. There had been some public outcry, of course, and he'd had to endure several less-than-comfortable hearings, but Hermione herself had ensured that he was not treated by the MLE as a former Death Eater, and he was not subjected to the same tracking spells that those war criminals existed under to this day. So why should she have known where he was? He could have been anywhere these last twenty years, and here was as good a place as any. There was no reason that her heart should be galloping along frantically like a runaway Abraxan.

Still, it was fascinating to see him after all this time, and Hermione wished she could somehow Stupefy the entire room, so that she might drink in his face and absorb the changes there at her leisure. Snape had been in his late thirties when he had taught her at school, she figured quickly, and that would make him nigh on sixty now, though he didn't look it...not by Muggle standards, anyway. His face had always been pinched and lined, and although it seemed nonsensical, it actually appeared as if the deep creases that she remembered delineating his scowl had lessened. He was still slender to the point of being boney, but his cheekbones and chin looked less as if they would tear through his skin at any moment. His hair was as dark as it had ever been. Whatever he had been doing all these years had been good for him, she thought.

And what *had* he been doing all these years? Not teaching, she was certain. She'd have known it if his name had turned up as an educator on any of the Ministry's lists, and besides, the *Daily Prophet* would have had a field day with the notion of Hogwarts' Dark Headmaster returning to the profession. Mentally, she pursed her lips. The press had never been kind to Severus Snape. Not even after, when they should have known better. No, if they'd known a thing about his life since the war, it would have been splashed across the headlines in the most lurid terms possible.

But Hermione found that she didn't much care to speculate any further on where Snape had been and what he had been doing. She just wanted to stare at the man who'd played such a prominent role in her childhood and then disappeared from her life as quickly and seamlessly as he'd entered it...and now suddenly materialized beside her like... well, like magic.

The man in question gave an almighty humph, and she focused on the fact that their syllabi had come winging across the room to settle before them. Hermione pulled hers to her, aware nearly the first time since she'd arrived that she was in class and she was *not paying attention*. But she quickly determined the reason for Snape's disdain as she read over the paper she'd been given. Matching your cauldron to your brew? *Keeping a tidy workstation*? Hermione snorted and pushed the syllabus away again, leaning back in her chair and sizing up the wizard who'd written it. He didn't seem to understand just whom he was teaching. Surely he'd received a roster... but then, if appearances were anything to go on, he was younger than she, and she knew that the events and players of a political war were likely much less captivating to those who hadn't lived through it and felt its effects intimately.

"Might as well be taught by Potter," Snape was muttering, and Hermione couldn't help but be sympathetic. This was not what she'd imagined when she'd signed up for the class, and it must seem even worse to Snape, who'd mastered the subject almost before she'd been born. She pulled out the course guide to double check her recollection of the description. She touched her wand to the text, circling in red the parts about state-of-the-art brewing techniques and instruction in the creation of the newest and most difficult brews of the day.

She hesitated for a moment before sliding it toward Snape. Was she really about to *whisper* to Professor Snape in the middle of a lecture? She gave herself a mental shake. He wasn't her professor anymore, and this class was preposterous.

"Any of this look familiar?" she hissed.

He glanced sharply at her, and then seemed to make the decision to reserve his ire for...Hermione glanced at the syllabus to check the professor's name...Dempster Potage. Turning his burning gaze on the round little wizard nattering on at the front of the room, he slipped his wand casually under his folded arms and touched it briefly to her paper.

Insulting at best, sabotage at worst. His spiky handwriting snaked onto the page. *Are you going to speak up or shall I?*

Hermione suppressed the smallest of smiles. There was something very pleasing about the idea that Snape might trust her to castigate this idiot for the both of them. She touched her wand to the paper.

Please, go right ahead.

Snape gave her a brief nod and then cleared his throat loudly several times. When Professor Potage continued blithely on, she watched with suppressed amusement as Snape reddened angrily, glanced about, and then, as if he were resisting the Imperius, raised his hand.

"Yes?" Potage said.

"Am I to understand," Snape began, "that this is a beginner's course?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Potage said. "Perhaps you've come to the wrong room? This is *Advanced Contemporary Potion Making*."

Hermione bit her tongue, eyes widening, and braced herself for the spectacle about to take place. Strangely, she felt the slightest thrill of anticipation, a reaction she'd never before experienced when faced with one of Snape's tirades.

"I shudder to think what you must teach in Beginning Potions," Snape replied. "The art of breathing in and out? How to differentiate between a cauldron and a hole in the ground?"

Hermione stifled a chuckle.

"I suspect that the good people before you today covered the basics of cauldron selection and the importance of keeping volatile ingredients contained when they were approximately eleven years old. Do you, or do you not, intend to cover anything that was advertised in the description of this course?"

Potage was blushing furiously, but he bit back any reply that he might have made to Snape's words and jabbed his wand sharply at the blackboard. The ingredients and instructions for the Felix Felicis Potion appeared in block letters.

"As you seem to feel that you are adequately prepared to begin," Potage said, a bit breathlessly, "please follow the instructions on the board. I will collect your potion at the end of the class period this evening. Perhaps I will revise next week's objectives based on your level of success tonight. However, I rather doubt it."

That said, Potage sank into the chair behind his desk and began to rapidly turn the pages of the book before him. Hermione glanced at Snape who raised an eyebrow as if to say, *if you must*.

"Sir," Hermione said in a loud voice, and several of her classmates jumped along with the instructor.

"Yes, miss? A bit confused about the directions...perhaps you'd like a bit of guidance?"

"On the contrary," Hermione said. "I've brewed this potion several times before and feel confident that I will be able to do so again. However, as we both know, Felix Felicis cannot be brewed in a mere two hours. Even if it were possible to complete the steps in that time...which I assure you, it is not...the potion must mature through a full moon cycle."

Professor Potage wrung his hands in frustration. "I'm well aware of the requirements of the potion, thank you. If you will simply follow the directions on the blackboard..."

"I intend to do so, Professor," Hermione interjected. "However, by my reckoning, when the two hours are up, I will have reached the stage at which it is necessary to infuse the solution with ground Unicorn horn. As I'm sure you've realized, if the potion is stopped at the point and the Unicorn horn is not added, there will be nothing to counteract the acidity of the Re'em blood, and what will result is..."

"Yes, yes, a solvent so strong that it will dissolve anything contrived to contain it. Thank you for your concern, my dear, but I assure you that you will not have reached that point in the brewing in two hours' time. Please begin."

Snape took a step toward the aisle to collect his ingredients, and Hermione quickly stepped out of his way, but he came up beside her, so close that she could feel the whisper of his breath against her hair. "In the interest of... *efficiency*," he said quietly, "I suggest that you handle the insect components and I will prepare the powders."

He strode away without waiting for a reply, and Hermione grinned broadly as she selected a cauldron and several knives, measured out a few liquid ingredients, and collected enough eyes, wings and eggs for the both of them. She hurried to her station and set about dicing and counting, leaving Snape to grate and grind as he would.

When she had prepared several precise mounds of ingredients, she felt a gentle nudge against her foot. He was ready to begin.

She carefully coated the interior of her cauldron with bat's blood and conjured a low flame beneath it, not bothering to check herself against Snape's progress. Several moments later, he slid a vial of elderberry juice across the desk to her, which she added to the cauldron, trusting his measurements. She indicated one of the piles of lacewing flies, which he levitated into his own cauldron.

After half an hour of furious brewing, it occurred to her that Snape had often known various additions and techniques that improved the output of a given recipe. While she certainly did not want to give him the impression that she needed help to brew this potion, any... extraordinary... results could only strengthen their case against the hapless Professor Potage, who was steadfastly not looking at anyone, willing, she supposed, to allow an explosion if it were going to prove his point.

"Sir," she began in an undertone, "I don't mean to interrupt, but I wanted to ask... that is, I wanted to indicate that I was," she paused, "open to advice that might achieve more... efficacious results."

Snape did not turn toward her, but she saw the corner of his mouth curl into a smirk. "I will be sure to keep that in mind, Granger," he said.

They brewed in silence for the rest of the hour, each taking ingredients from the other without hesitation. When Potage stood, Snape tapped Hermione's foot beneath the table with his own once more. She tipped her eyes to his briefly and then took up her wand.

"Please finish the step that you are working on," Potage said, "cast a Stasis Charm and decant your potion. You may deliver it to my desk on your way out."

Hermione cast her Stasis Charm and felt another nudge as Snape passed her a pair of Dragonhide gloves. "Just in case," he said gruffly.

When they had both decanted their potions and gathered their things, Hermione pointed her wand at the two perfect piles of ground Unicorn horn remaining on their worktable. "A shame we didn't get to work with such a valuable ingredient," she said.

"Indeed," Snape said and Vanished it himself.

Still gloved, they returned their cauldrons and other supplies to the front of the classroom, dropped their labeled potion phials into the stand Potage had left upon his desk and departed.

The night was hot and windy when Hermione stepped out into it from the well-lit hall of the Athene Potions Building. The breeze caught her hair and robes, and she felt almost exhilarated by the weather and the last two and a half hours. When was the last time she'd felt so mischievous, so full of latent power?

The door opened behind her, and Hermione turned to see Snape emerging, the look on his face as close to amusement as she'd ever seen.

"What was the duration of your Stasis Charm?" he asked.

"Twenty-five minutes," she replied, unable to suppress a grin.

"Soft-hearted," Snape said. "Mine was four." And with that, he Apparated to Merlin alone knew where.

Hermione did not wait for the inevitable chaos that would begin momentarily in the potions classroom, instead Apparating to Ottery St Catchpole. She was still infected with a kind of bubbling excitement left over from what could only be described as sassing a professor, and she wanted to walk a bit before she had to rejoin the real world.

How amazing to have seen Snape tonight...unexpected and unexpectedly amicable. She would have thought that they'd have fallen right back into their old roles as unreasonable professor and insufferable student. As she walked along the cobblestone lane to her home, it occurred to her that she'd allowed Snape to call her Miss Granger for the entire evening without correcting him. That was odd, especially because she'd been so desperate for the world to see her as anything other than Harry Potter's school friend...to see her as an adult in her own right...that she'd spent years demanding that the press call her by her married name. She'd have thought it would have been important to her on some level that Snape acknowledge that she'd grown up, that she was no longer the annoying little Miss Granger. She frowned. Well, it was hardly of any consequence. Although they had called each other by their old names, the spirit of their interaction was wholly different. She was actually *looking forward* to class the next week, to seeing him again and facing together whatever their actions tonight had brought about.

Besides, she thought as she climbed the front steps, she'd *felt* like Miss Granger tonight...young and bright and a little bit of a show-off.

"Hellooo!" she trilled as she opened the front door.

"How was class?" Ron called.

She made her way down the hallway to the living room, where she found him sprawled on the sofa, surrounded by books and papers covered in large scrawling letters.

"Oh, dreadful," she said, smiling. "An absolute joke, really, but you'll never believe who was in the class with me."

"Who?"

"Professor Snape!" she said. "Truly! And he was my *lab partner*."

Ron grimaced. "Has he hexed you? Why on earth are you smiling? That sounds like a nightmare."

"It should have been, I know, but it was actually... fun." She gave him a little shrug. It was difficult to explain why this thoroughly infuriating class in which she had been paired with one of the sternest taskmasters of her youth had been so enjoyable. "We... well, I guess you could say we taught our professor a lesson about underestimating his students."

Ron laughed. "I think just the combination of you and Snape should make any professor quake in his boots a bit. No wonder Voldemort never stood a chance."

Hermione smiled, but somehow the mention of Voldemort put a damper on her strange enthusiasm.

"How was your day?" she asked, settling on the couch beside him.

"Quentin Diggle got frustrated with multiplication and blew up his desk," Ron said, fingering the bridge of his nose. He began to gather the children's work into piles and set it aside.

"Oh, dear," Hermione murmured.

"And then Finn got scared and cried for nearly a half an hour. I'm starting to wonder if I shouldn't be seeing these kids privately in their homes instead of trying to do it all together."

"Would that even be possible, though? There aren't enough hours in the day!"

"I'd have to give up some time in the evenings, yeah," he replied. "But it might be worth it if it means they're actually learning something. I'm starting to understand why their lessons have been so patchy. It seems like they go along okay until something upsets them, and then there's some kind of outburst, and the teachers have just sort of... skipped over whatever set them off."

Hermione sighed. "I know. You're doing a really good thing, Ronald, teaching these children in an environment where an exploded desk just means a simple Reparo, rather than an Obliviate and a lot of fear and mistrust. I hate to take magical kids out of the Muggle schools, because I think they need to understand Muggles, but I have to say, I think you're doing a better job for them than the schools could."

Ron beamed at her and took her hand. After a few moments, he said, "Easy for you to say...a woman who just came home from terrorizing her teacher."

"Speaking of which," Hermione said, extricating herself from the couch, "I'm going to Floo Harry and Ginny and tell them about Snape."

"Hermione! You'll put them off their dinner," he said.

She waved a hand dismissively and grabbed the Floo Powder from the mantle. For a few more minutes, she wanted to talk about what had happened tonight and maybe recapture that odd feeling she'd had on the way home, that powerful feeling that anything was possible.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

Hermione Floo'd home for a change of clothing before heading to the second meeting of her Advanced Contemporary Potion Making class. Ron was not yet home from work, so she shed her Wizengamot robes, gobbled a quick meal of leftover chicken and headed upstairs, Fort dogging her footsteps the entire way.

"Fort!" she said, exasperated, as she bent to rub his pointy ears. "I'm going to step on you one of these days, and then where will you be, you bad old thing?"

Fort wriggled and licked at her fingertips, whether from affection or the smell of chicken, she neither knew nor cared. "I know, boy, but I have to go to class. Ron'll be home soon and then you can play," she said. She rose and entered the bathroom.

"You're looking peaky," the mirror helpfully informed her, and she stuck out her tongue at the glass. It was true...she did look peaky: tired and harassed, and her hair, which had been forced into a tidy, professional chignon this morning, was frizzing up and out of its containment. She sighed. It didn't really matter what she looked like, she supposed. It was just a class, and everyone in it was likely coming from a long day at work *somewhere*. Still, though. She'd sort of hoped to look... formidable this evening. Professor Potage hadn't called roll during the last class period, so he hadn't matched her face to her name, but surely after the events of last week, he'd be more interested to know who exactly had destroyed his desk (and probably the floor, too) of his classroom. She'd prefer that when he identified Hermione Granger-Weasley, she look as intimidating as possible. Snape, she was sure, would have no difficulties on that score.

She changed quickly into black trousers and a tailored, short-sleeved shirt, throwing her light-weight summer robes on overtop. She loosed her hair and cast a strong Smoothing Charm on it, hoping for the best.

"Verdict?" she asked the mirror.

"Better than nothing," the mirror said with a sigh.

Hermione huffed and applied some blusher and lip gloss. "And that's all you get," she declared, turning on her heel to Apparate.

"More than what I'd hoped for, my dear," the mirror replied somewhat bemusedly as Hermione disappeared into the ether.

She arrived in the classroom to find that Snape had yet to make an appearance. Hermione made her way to their empty workstation, wondering at the profound sense of disappointment she felt. It wasn't as if she didn't understand why he would choose not to return; even if he hadn't participated in harassing a professor on the first day of class, the material itself did not seem to have much to offer... and yet, she had looked forward to seeing him again. If last week had been any indication, he did not find her to be quite the officious little nitwit of years past, and she'd hoped that they might continue to... er, collaborate on these class assignments...and that she'd learn something of how he had passed the last two decades along the way. That mystery was far more interesting than anything Advanced Contemporary Potion Making had on offer.

She glanced to the front of the room, trying to assess the damage that their little stunt had caused, but there was nothing to indicate that anything was out of the ordinary. Professor Potage was pacing to and fro, glancing frequently at a piece of parchment, but he paid her no particular attention. Hermione found that she was unaccountably disappointed once again.

"Yes, erm, hello," Potage began, looking up from his parchment at last. "If I may have your attention please, class. Will Hermione Weasley and Severus Snape please see me before we begin?"

Hermione sighed and closed her notebook again. She rose and walked to the front of the classroom, head held high and a look of polite query upon her face.

"I am Hermione Granger-Weasley," she said crisply. "I regret to say that Mr Snape is not present at this time."

There was a sudden cough from the doorway, and Hermione's heart leapt at the sight of Snape standing there. He was looking at her rather sharply, but she disregarded it, turning back to Professor Potage.

"Potage. Weasley," he said.

"Yes. Very well, then, Mrs Weasley, Mr Snape. It seems I was remiss in neglecting to set a standard duration for Stasis Charms," Potage said. "In the future, please cast your charms to a length of no less than three hour's time. It is a large class, after all, and I would hate for you to lose points because I could not get to your potion before it... deteriorated."

Or before it ate a hole straight down to the bedrock, Hermione thought uncharitably. Well, if this was how he wanted to handle things, it could certainly prove amusing. She wondered how many times they could force him to admit to these *regrettable* omissions.

She glanced at Snape, hoping to share in a glance her take on the situation, but he only nodded sharply at Potage and strode to their workstation, leaving her to follow in his wake like a chastised student.

Professor Potage made a few more laps of the front of the classroom and then called the room to order, launching immediately into a lecture on Preserving Charms.

"...better than a simple Stasis Charm, which simply holds the ingredient at the precise stage of decomposition it had attained when the charm was placed. As all of you have surely experienced, when the Stasis Charm is lifted, the ingredients deteriorate rapidly, and must either be used at the very instant that the charm is removed or be rendered unusable. This has been a drawback to preserved ingredients for years, leading many to believe that certain potions can only be brewed at specific times..."

Hermione glanced over at Snape. His attention was riveted on their Professor, but his features had twisted into a look of disdain. He scratched down some notes without looking away from the front of the room. She wished she could lean over just the slightest bit and see what he had written.

"In fact, by employing the Preserving Charms correctly, one can arrest the development of the ingredient...be it leaf, stem, or berry...at the very moment it has been plucked. There is no further decomposition of its properties, magical or otherwise, leaving the ingredients nearly as potent as they were when they were still growing. The Preserving Charms require no removal...extensive research has been done on this for the last ten years, and the resounding agreement of the Society of Potioneers has been..."

Snape made an explosive noise with his lips, quiet enough to escape the notice of their professor, but loud enough to draw Hermione's eyes back to his face. Did he truly not believe in the Preserving Charms, or was he scoffing at the idea of charm work encroaching upon potion brewing? So far as she could guess, Snape *belonged* to the Society of Potioneers...he certainly had done when they were at Hogwarts...so he'd surely heard of all this before.

"Would you *kindly* cease staring at me, Granger?" he hissed.

"It's Weasley," she hissed back, earning her a furious glare. She turned immediately back to her notes, blushing all the way up to the tips of her ears. She hadn't really been staring at him so much as *thinking* while looking in his general direction. He needn't act as if she'd been goggling at him like a first-year.

"...drawbacks is how many potions recipes have been designed around using substandard ingredients. If, for instance, you were to use a Preserving Charm on the moonflower...gathered at the new moon, of course...to be used in Dreamless Sleep, you would find that you had created a brew strong enough to fell a manticores. Therefore, it is necessary to use caution when employing..."

Hermione doodled in the margins of her notes. She could see where the lecture was heading...an equation would be necessary to determine the amount of fully potent ingredient that should replace a weaker version for any given potion. Really, it would be best to run an arithmantic prediction for the overall potion to see what the benefits and drawbacks would be of increasing the potency of any ingredient in a given brew. She began to draw out such an equation for Pepperup Potion, as it was simple and the ingredients leapt neatly to mind.

Her attention was called back to the present by a practical demonstration of the Preservation Charm on some lovage. Hermione noted that Potage withdrew his arm as he cast and added the kind of jerky upswing to his wand that she associated with the Tergeo Charm...perhaps drawing the most magical aspects of the plant to the forefront...and finishing with a jab that reminded her of a Freezing Hex. She wondered if she was witnessing the wizarding equivalent of flash freezing. It was something to look into in the future, and she made herself a note.

Before long, each student had a pile of lovage on his or her desk with instructions to practice the Preservation Charm. Professor Potage made no mention of the danger of handling fresh lovage, but having no wish to inflame her brain, Hermione donned gloves before picking up her wand. She was inwardly quite pleased with herself when she saw Snape do the same.

"*Conservatio!*" she said, mimicking the wand movement as best she could and concentrating on the idea of drawing the magic to the surface and freezing it there. The lovage was briefly enveloped in a faint sparkle of magic and then fell quiescent. Hermione moved it to the corner of her desk for inspection and turned to see how Snape was progressing.

He jabbed his wand fruitlessly at the pile of leaves and roots in front of him, repeating the incantation in a more and more imperious tone, as if demanding that the spell take effect. Hermione squashed the smirk that threatened her lips and tried to determine the exact nature of his difficulty.

"I think you're missing the upward swing," she said.

Snape rounded on her, his black eyes hard. "I believe I already asked you to stop staring at me."

"I wasn't staring for Merlin's sake, I was thinking. You happened to be in my line of sight," she retorted, quickly stepping behind him and closing her right hand around his. "Like this: *Conservatio!*" Either his bafflement or the force of her will allowed her to dominate his wand hand, guiding him quickly through the charm.

Recovering himself, Snape tore his hand from her grasp. "Don't touch me," he growled.

Hermione returned to her area, both hands held up in front of her in a gesture of innocence, feeling somewhat stung. "Fine. Don't learn the charm," she said.

"The *charm*," Snape said, "is perfectly useless. Not only does it create ingredients that are out of balance with the needs of the potioner, it somehow weakens the overall brew. I have seen countless tests run...the notion that there is *agreement* among the Society is preposterous."

"Weakens the brew?" Hermione asked.

"Because that simpering idiot didn't mention it, it must not be true? I assure you, you will find whatever we make out of this mess will be less...not more...effective than the traditional recipe."

Hermione turned back to her notes and reviewed the equation she'd written for the Pepperup Potion. There was nothing in the Arithmancy to suggest that the potion would be weakened by a stronger ingredient. She pulled absently at a stray curl as she ran through the equation again. It might be that Snape was right and that it was the addition of a stray charm into the recipe that changed the balance. She scratched away at her parchment, attempting to take into account the additional bit of magic...

Her attention was returned to the class by the increasingly noisy throat-clearing sounds issuing from the wizard next to her, and she found that this time, Snape seemed to be staring at *her*. But before she could open her mouth, he said, "Out of the way. We have forty-five minutes to brew a Befuddlement Draught, and I refuse to spend the time watching you daydream."

This time, there was no mention of tandem brewing as they gathered their ingredients from the front of the classroom. Hermione wasted no time in being disappointed, however, as she was determined to find the cause of the weakening of the potion that Snape had described.

She Preserved her sneezewort and scurvy-grass, chopped and diced, and before long, was ready to light the flame under her cauldron. As she waited for her ingredients to begin the slow simmer that was called for in the beginning stage of the brewing, she surreptitiously watched Snape from the corner of her eye. He had managed the Preservation Charm without too much difficulty (she humphed a bit in her mind...not that he would show a scrap of gratitude) and was also beginning to brew. She glanced back at her cauldron to find that instead of warming toward a boil, the contents therein seemed to have cooled.

Odd. Hermione checked the recipe against the flame she had conjured and determined that it was, in fact, at the right level. She picked up her wand hesitantly. Increasing the heat would not be particularly wise. She'd seen too many cauldrons explode on impatient students who couldn't wait for a simmer. She risked a glance at Snape and saw him checking his own flame. Very odd.

It occurred to her that she'd earlier compared the Preservation Charm with a Muggle flash freeze. Was it possible that the ingredients were somehow *frozen* on the inside, and that they were affecting the temperature of the brew? Hermione tentatively raised the intensity of the fire beneath her cauldron. She heard a sharp exhalation from Snape.

"I believe you mentioned earlier the importance of keeping one's eyes to oneself," she said, but couldn't resist adding, "I've had an idea, and I'm testing it out."

"I have no wish to visit St Mungo's this evening based on one of your *ideas*," Snape replied.

Hermione resisted the urge to poke out her tongue for the second time that evening.

With the additional heat, Hermione's potion began to take shape as she had expected, and she spent the rest of the class period attending to it. When she was finished, she filled three phials and labeled them, tucking two into her handbag and reserving one to hand in. She began to tidy her workstation, noticing with some amusement that Snape was still brewing.

When he had finished, Hermione approached his potion with an empty phial in hand.

"May I?" she asked.

Snape looked incredulous.

"What? It's not a personal potion...there's nothing of you I could steal or use. I just want to test my theory...and yours, really, since you're so sure you've brewed a substandard potion."

"Explain," he said.

"After," she replied, and helped herself.

She could feel him seething next to her, but somehow, Hermione felt not just unconcerned, but exhilarated again. There was a chance she was really onto something...and even if she weren't, she knew that once she'd explained herself, he would be interested, and perhaps they could get back some of the camaraderie they'd lost.

Standing beneath a streetlamp in front of the Potions Building, Hermione gave him the quick version. "There's more to it than that, of course, but I thought..."

"Yes, I can see your line of reasoning," Snape interrupted, not looking at all convinced.

She shifted uncomfortably for a moment. "I have an extra phial of my own potion, if you you'd like to experiment with it," she said, debating and then adding, "sir."

"Severus will do," he said shortly and held out his hand. She quickly produced the phial and handed it over.

"Well, I... I suppose I'll see you next week," she said, rolling her eyes toward the building.

"Indeed," he said and then surprised her by saying, "Perhaps we should meet briefly afterward to discuss the results of this experiment. That is, if you can tear yourself away from the homestead for that long."

"Oh, yes! Yes, that would be fine," she said. "And Severus, I was wondering if you might make me a list of some of the articles you mentioned...effects of the Preservation Charms on brew quality."

"The Ministry hasn't so rotted your brains that you've forgotten how to research?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She gave a soft huff. "Of course not. I'd only hoped to speed the process."

"Merlin save me from overachieving students," Snape said. "I'll bring you the bloody articles."

She smiled openly at him for the first time, and he looked rather uncomfortable. "Next week, then," she said, turning to Apparate. Hermione felt the warm weight of his hand on her shoulder, suddenly, arresting her departure.

"I trust you will not be experimenting on yourself," he said sternly.

"No more so than you'll be," she said, smiling again, and spinning away into the night.

Several weeks later, Hermione's home was filled with the sounds of laughter, clinking glasses and a crackling fire. Harry and Ginny were visiting for the first of their much-planned and often daydreamed-about "empty nest" nights.

She was standing in the kitchen, refilling glasses, and regaling her friends with tales of her new Potions class.

"So we tandem brewed it to save time and managed to stop just as the potion became a corrosive. We never did get to see the damage, but I'd be surprised if there was much desk left after the Stasis Charm lifted."

"I want to hear about the part where you've been having drinks with Snape," Ginny said, laughing. "Ron tells me you're practically best mates these days."

Hermione handed her a glass and sat down on the couch next to Ron, who wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "My wife, who soothes the savage beast."

Hermione tried not to blush, since there was absolutely no reason to do so. "Hardly. We meet after class to discuss a project we're working on...trying to make Preservation Charms work for potion ingredients."

"Is that not the most Hermione thing you've ever heard of?" Ron said.

"Still, I can't believe you can actually have a pint with him," Harry said, smiling ruefully. "If you could go back in time to when we were at school and tell yourself that someday you'd have drinks with that man..." Harry shook his finger at the look she gave him. "I'm not saying he wasn't on our side...I'm just saying he certainly wasn't helping us with our potions homework then."

She humphed. "He's not helping me with my potions homework, Harry. We're collaborating on an experiment. And he's perfectly pleasant to be around." Most of the time, that was. Hermione smiled to herself. Just last week he'd done such a spot-on impression of Professor Potage that she'd laughed until tears had started to leak from her eyes.

When she refocused on the conversation, Harry was speculating on how the children were doing in potions.

"Lily and Al seem to have got the hang of it," Harry was saying, "but James takes after me. He couldn't brew his way out of a paper bag."

"He does *not* take after you," Ginny said. "You, at least, tried. James is too Quidditch mad to think about his classes."

"I don't know, Ginny," Ron said. "We were pretty Quidditch mad, and we did all right. I think we just weren't very good at potions." He laughed. "Remember the time that Neville blew up the Shrinking Solution? I was inches from doing the same myself...would have done, if the explosion hadn't kept me from adding the powdered newt."

Ginny glared at her brother. "You did all right because you had Hermione to coach you. I hardly think Genevieve Fenallen is *helping* James with his classes."

"Oh, lay off poor Genevieve," Ron said, leaning over and shoving his sister and nearly sloshing wine out of her glass. "She looked terrified of you all summer. And they're only fourth-years. I don't think you need to read too much into it."

"No? So you're fine with the fact that James reports Simon Brocklehurst hangs about Gryffindor Tower, waiting for Rose to emerge?"

Ron reddened slightly but kept his voice even as he replied to his sister. Hermione watched the two of them baiting one another with a kind of fond amusement. She glanced at Harry to share a look that only the spouses of siblings could, but found that he was as invested in the faux-argument as the others. Her amusement was suddenly tinged with an odd feeling of being slightly out of step with the others, as if looking at them through a fine film of glass.

In fact, she had known about Simon Brocklehurst, and if she had neglected to tell Ronald, well, it was because she'd wanted to spare Rose, for a time, from this slightly flushed, white-knuckled version of her father. It was... good to be noticed...invigorating to feel singled out, chosen for attention, and Hermione knew that she had longed for that at Hogwarts, even if she'd experienced it rarely. Well, she amended mentally, she'd certainly been singled out for attention often enough as the best friend of Harry Potter, but there'd been no swains waiting outside portrait holes, and she didn't begrudge her daughter those first adolescent stirrings of affection. Desire. Power. Whatever it was.

"Excuse me for a moment," she murmured, getting up to go and check on her potion. The others continued on in their teasing, and Hermione glanced back as she left the room. These were the people dearest to her heart, Harry and Ginny curled together on the hearth rug, Ron splayed out upon the sofa, and she wondered, for a moment, why she suddenly felt so claustrophobic, so *pulled* toward the silence and solitude of her makeshift lab.

Perhaps she was just missing the children and all the talk about them and their exploits this evening had made this melancholy ache inside her. She made a perfunctory check of the new Befuddlement Draught that she and Snape were working on. It was fine; it hadn't really needed checking, just a few days to mature before they met to compare notes. She just needed a moment, really, just a moment to feel like herself again.

She picked up a quill from her lab table and pulled out a roll of parchment. She felt the oddest urge to communicate, to be connected to the thrill and pull of life again, though she'd just left the room in which her life was ostensibly taking place. Oddly, she felt she wanted to write to Snape, which made no sense at all. She wouldn't even know where to send him a letter, and what on earth would she write? *Dear Severus, as I'm sure you've guessed, I've completed the potion. It's fine. Sincerely, Hermione?*

Maybe the wine was going to her head.

She picked up the quill once more.

Dear Hugo,

Aunt Ginny and Uncle Harry are visiting us tonight, and we were talking about you lots. I hope your ears were burning.

I was so excited to hear about your lovely experience with the Niffler in Care of Magical Creatures. That sounded like a lot of fun, and I'm so glad you and your Niffler won the race. They are such interesting creatures, aren't they? Cuddly and destructive, much like our beloved Fort, who chewed up a pair of your slippers last week. I think he was missing you.

I'm doing well in my class, too. Funny, isn't it, to think that we're both going to school at the same time? I'm working on developing a new charm to use in Potion brewing. The man who taught me when I was at Hogwarts is helping me. Maybe someday you will grow up and work with Professor Longbottom or even Professor Hagrid (though he'll be REALLY old by then!)

I hope you've been having tea with Professor Hagrid. Remember what I told you about casting the Softening Charm before you try to eat anything he gives you. Gran Granger would not be happy if she had to fix all your teeth...and you know she won't let me help!

I love you, Hugo, and I'm glad you're enjoying your classes so much.

Love,

Mum

Hermione set the letter aside, still feeling a bit out of sorts. But she was able, now, to rise and return to the living room, to sit down among the people she loved and reach... reach toward happiness.

"Everything okay, Oh Potions Mistress?" Ron said, scooting over to make room for her on the couch.

She smiled a rueful little smile. "More or less," she said.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

Hermione set her drink on the table, threw herself into a club chair, and leaned back to watch as Snape settled in at a more decorous pace. He stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossed them at the ankle and took a sip from his steaming tumbler of Firewhisky, closing his eyes and seeming to sink deeper into his chair.

"Better?" Hermione asked with a hint of amusement.

It was a moment before Snape spoke, and she allowed herself to keep looking, taking in the man whom she no longer thought of as her teacher or as the spy who'd given them everything to win the war. This man, scowling (though it was a contented scowl, if such a thing could be said to exist) even in repose, was just Severus, her potions friend. Dimly, she was aware that she was a bit more appreciative of his form than she might be of some other friends, a bit more aware of the picture she made on the chair next to his, but that was normal, wasn't it? These stray feelings, these anxious sorts of flutterings, bits of misplaced attraction...they were only human. It wasn't as if she intended to act on them. It was simply a distraction from everyday life, a tiny jolt to the system that kept things interesting.

"Infinitely," Snape said. "That man is a menace. I only give thanks that he is not teaching children."

"No, far better to leave that to snarling, perfectionist spies," she said.

"Hmm," he grunted, but there was a glimmer in his dark eyes that delighted her. Being impertinent, far from raising his ire, seemed to cement their acquaintance, and Hermione exercised the right as frequently as she could.

He took another sip of the Firewhisky and placed it resolutely upon the table.

"So," he said, "what outlandish new theories have you dragged me out to discuss this evening?"

"I've finished the tests on the store-bought Befuddlement Draught," she said. "There were marked molecular differences between all three of our test samples. I've run some equations...here, let me show you." She dug in her bag, pulling out a sheaf of parchment, and scooted to the edge of her chair so that they could look at them together. "You can see that if you change the rate of reaction, you're creating more of a bond between the inflaming qualities of the lovage and the sneezewort. That *should* create a more potent potion. What will be interesting is to attempt the additional heat on unpreserved ingredients."

Snape pointed at a string of symbols in red. "But the stronger potion lacks the overall balance of the original...the hellebore dominated here, and that would result in..."

"Mmm. Yes, perhaps in paralysis or amnesia."

"Reassure me once again that you are not using yourself as a test subject."

"Would a wand oath ease your mind?" she asked.

He scowled, sincerely this time. "That will not be necessary," he said.

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Severus. That was thoughtless. I promise that I am not ingesting the potions."

"If I didn't think you were far too guileless to lie, I would assume that was an evasion," he said, lifting an eyebrow.

"I solemnly swear that I am not testing the potions on myself in any way," she replied.

"Very well," he said, handing back the parchments. "I've gathered some more articles for you. I think you'll find the Pottinger Experiments interesting." He pulled some papers out of the inner pocket of his robes and returned them to their usual size with his wand. Hermione took the journals and tucked her parchments into them.

"Thank you. I'll look forward to discussing them next week," Hermione said, settling in for the leisurely drink that she had learned was the true point of their after-class meetings.

"Ah, yet more claims upon my time."

"Which implies, of course that you're quite busy."

"Naturally," he said and seemed disinclined to say more, but Hermione persisted.

"Give over, Severus. You know all there is to know about me, but I know nothing about what you do when you aren't in class."

"I would hardly claim to know all there is to know about you."

"Evasion," she said brightly.

"A simple statement of fact. I know you work for the Ministry, that you head the Wizengamot." He shuddered theatrically. "I know you like that miserable elf-made wine, bar pretzels, and my potions journals. I know you married Weasley and that there are two more red-headed brats at Hogwarts, most likely in Gryffindor, wreaking havoc upon

order and civility."

Hermione smiled at his list, and said, finally, "Well, you might have it right in Rosie. Gryffindor to the core, far too sure of herself, and if she hasn't yet shown a penchant for rule-breaking, I'd hardly imagine her the type to scorn it in others."

Snape inclined his head as if to accept the point he was due.

"Hugo, though... much quieter, more academic. Nose always in a book."

"No family resemblance there, I'm sure."

"You'd think... but no, he's quieter than I ever was. Less bossy, less... certain somehow that his gifts will be received."

"Well, he needs only to join up with two idiots who require constant guidance," Snape said. "I'm sure it would improve his self-worth tremendously."

Now it was Hermione's turn to look at him darkly.

He raised a hand to placate her. "You were saying, your son..."

"Hugo. And don't change the subject."

"I wasn't aware there was a subject to change," Snape said smoothly. "Is Hugo also in Gryffindor?"

"He is, which was a bit of a shock, really."

"You held secret hopes for Ravenclaw...or let me guess, Slytherin?"

"I know you think you're joking, but I would have been pleased with Slytherin. Proud that I had enough cunning to produce one, I suppose. And glad for what statement it might have made."

"And your husband would have been equally thrilled to have a son in Slytherin, I suppose?" Snape said, arching an eyebrow.

Hermione was seized with a strange discomfort at the mention of Ron. She knew Snape was right...Ron would have struggled with the notion of a child of theirs in Slytherin...but her sudden reluctance to speak had little to do with trying to explain the legacy of the Weasley family and the lingering resentments that stemmed from their own years at Hogwarts. Instead she just wished, for reasons that she could not explain, that Ron had not come up in the conversation. She waived her hand dismissively.

"Well, it's neither here nor there, anyway. Hugo is in Gryffindor. And you still haven't told me where you've been all these years."

Snape gave her a long look that she had difficulty deciphering. "I've been right here."

"Here?" she said.

"Here," he repeated more sharply. "Here as in Britain...in Manchester, if you must know. I shop in Diagon Alley. I work for Hogwarts, St Mungos, your precious Ministry, among others. I haven't gone anywhere. There is no mystery to unravel, no secret." He uncrossed his legs and sat forward, looking as if he meant to bolt for the door.

Hermione unstuck her tongue with haste, afraid that she would lose the chance forever if she did not stop him from going now.

"But why haven't I seen you? I haven't even read about you..."

"We are not all as eager for media coverage as *The Golden Trio*," Snape said with a sneer.

Hermione dismissed the barb. It was meant to distract, and she would not be distracted.

"Severus," she said, "until the first day of class, I hadn't laid eyes on you in almost twenty years."

"And why should you have?" he asked suddenly. "There are hundreds of wizards in Britain that you have likely never seen in twenty years, never known at all! I live a normal life. I brew potions for the companies that request them, and with the money that I make, I pay my bills. I live in my own house. I cook my own meals. My life is entirely my own, and that is the way that I like it."

Snape no longer appeared ready to leap from his chair, but there was an odd twanging quality to his demeanor, as if he were gearing up for a fight. She knew she must tread carefully.

"Except when you're being dragged out to discuss potions with insufferable Gryffindors," she said with deliberate lightness.

"Except then," Snape conceded with a snort, his shoulders losing some of the tension of the moment before.

"I'm glad for you," Hermione said, "that you've been granted your privacy. I wouldn't have expected it. And although it pains me to admit it, I'm also surprised that you easily found work in brewing. Glad, but surprised."

"I have found," Snape said stiffly, "that people have always been willing to overlook the more... unseemly... parts of my history, provided I was making myself useful."

Hermione kept silent for a moment, sipping from her drink and letting the soothing sound of the fire behind them quiet her feelings. She knew that despite the sadness of his statement, Snape was not asking for her pity. Instead, his words were meant to sting her, and she suspected that he meant for her to argue with him, which she could not, because of course, what he'd said was true.

"Why did you decide to take the class?" she asked at last.

He gave her one of his sharp looks and was quiet for so long that she was not sure he would answer. She did not intend to ask again...tonight anyway.

"Because I was struggling with a few of the larger orders for St Mungo's. I keep up with the latest potions research, as you know, and I was aware that there were some Charms techniques that were becoming popular in brewing large batches of various potions. I have never excelled in anything but defensive charms, and I knew I would benefit from directed instruction."

"Ah," she said. A part of her still waited for him to answer the unspoken question. It might very well be that Snape had lived under her nose all these years, but surely he did so by remaining extremely private. Why open himself up to repeated exposure to the masses?

"These classes are generally comprised of university students, Hermione," he said. "They neither know nor care who we are or what we might have done during the war. I did not expect to see anyone I knew."

She nodded. It was odd to find herself in a room full of people who not only did not stare at her, but showed no interest at all in either her actions or her opinions. She had been pursued by the *Daily Prophet* for so long that she had forgotten what life felt like outside its relentless gaze, and she realized, as she sat there, that she enjoyed it.

"And I believe that is quite enough of these sorts of revelations for the evening," Snape said, rising to his feet. "Until next week," he said, abruptly Apparating away and leaving her with the bill.

At least there would still be a next week.

Hermione crept up the stairs to their bedroom. Ron was surely already asleep; it was after 11, and he nearly always gave out before 10:30, whether he made it to bed or passed out on the couch beside the wireless.

She removed her robes in the dark and slipped into bed.

"Mione?" Ron mumbled.

"Sorry to have woken you. I had a bit of a longer brainstorming session than I meant to," she whispered.

Ron patted her arm sleepily and rolled over, snuffling something that sounded like, "Hope you had a good time," into his pillow. Within moments, the familiar sound of his snoring was punctuating her thoughts.

Hermione had never been able to read herself to sleep. Books excited her, got her mind agitated and roaming, rather than lulling her toward rest. For years, she had used her own routine, a rehashing of the day's events and the listing of the next day's duties to quiet her thoughts. But tonight she could not stop thinking of her conversation with Snape and all that he had (or had not) told her.

She did not know why she felt so ashamed that she had never seen him, carrying out his own life and routines in the wizarding world they shared. Perhaps it was the implication that she *hadn't noticed him*, that once his role in the war had been fulfilled that he had somehow become beneath that notice. She thought of what he'd said about his own usefulness and shuddered.

And yet, if she were to press the point, she was certain he would admit that he had not wanted to be noticed, that he was deliberately circumspect and simple in his habits and routines.

Not that she hadn't tried to be. Whatever he might think, Hermione had never sought the spotlight. She had never wanted the dreadful judgment of the press on her...on her *children*...as she moved through life. In some ways, she thought, everything that had happened in the last twenty years had been in reaction to that notoriety. Both Ron and Hermione and Harry and Ginny had wed young, and both couples had fled to Ottery St Catchpole and quiet village life among family. Oh, she wasn't saying that they'd married each other because of the press...who could survive what they had together and not feel that they shared something no one else could ever understand or intrude upon?...but there was a way in which they all knew, she thought, that it would have been unfair and perhaps impossible to drag an outsider into their world.

Would Harry have ever been able to believe that a stranger could care for him as more than 'the chosen one'? Would she have ever been anything other than "Hermione Granger, the brainy sidekick of Harry Potter" to anyone but Ronald? And even if someone had managed to get over that hurdle...no one could really understand the relentless scrutiny of the press until they were in it. Nothing was off limits to the quills of the journalists, and whoever had attached him or herself to a member of the trio would have found that their family's secrets...affairs, improper uses of magic, squibs, feuds...splashed across the front page of the *Prophet* alongside singularly unflattering pictures and spiteful commentary.

Suddenly, Ron gave a loud snort, and Hermione shot him a dirty look in the darkness.

As she collected her thoughts once more, they turned back to Snape. She didn't blame him for avoiding all of that. If she could have, Merlin knew, she would have. But it had seemed there was going to be no reprieve for the four of them, no time forthcoming when the press would turn its piercing gaze away from them, and so they had timed their pregnancies together so that their children would at least have the fortification of each other, tucked their families safely away from London, and hoped that their careers, at least, would benefit from the publicity.

She'd never had the luxury, dammit, of going unnoticed, of fading into the background. And perhaps that was what had her so wound up, after all: the notion that perhaps he thought she *should* have found a way to disappear, to leave all this behind, as if his choices had somehow been more virtuous than hers. She'd given her childhood and risked her life for the wizarding world, and if she'd come to *care a bit* about the fate of the world she'd sacrificed so much for and seen a chance to try to change it, what was wrong with that? Why shouldn't she be able to live out in the open like a normal person?

A strange, tingling feeling swept through her chest and down into her belly as she suddenly pictured Snape, sitting easily beside the fire in The Leaky Cauldron, a drink dangling from his pale, slender fingers, the very image of a *normal person* out in public, having a drink with a friend.

He hadn't just gone to a class in which he expected to see no one he knew. He'd... asked for her company. He'd accompanied her to *pub*.

She smiled tentatively and rolled onto her stomach. *Huh*, she thought happily, unable to be more eloquent, even in the privacy of her own mind. And suddenly, she found that she was quite tired after all.

A week later found Hermione up so up to her ears in work that she barely had time to spare a thought for Snape and her odd late-night realization.

"Miz Weasley," said a bored voice, and Hermione jumped, spraying ink across the parchment she'd been writing on. Though she'd invented the charm that allowed her secretary to speak directly into her ear from the next room, it never failed to startle her.

"Yes, Angela," she said, glancing at the clock. It was nearly six, and she'd been embroiled in new legislation concerning Goblin rights for the last four hours. Before that, it had been a review of several judgments set down by the Wizengamot in cases of Muggle-baiting, and before that a meeting with Harry (in his official capacity) about the use of Obliviation by the Aurors. She was tired, and there was ink in her hair, and there was nothing in the world she was looking forward to as much as having a drink with Snape later.

"There's been a call from Ted Thistlewaite in the Goblin Liaison Office. Seems there's an emergency meeting in Beasts and Beings tonight, and he'd like you to be there."

Hermione thought quickly. She'd been trying to get the Goblin Liaison people together with Beasts and Beings for months. The new legislation was set to be introduced to the Wizengamot in less than two weeks, and without the backing of those departments, she thought, there really wasn't any point. She'd simply have to go. And yet...

"Tell him I'll be there, Angela," she sighed.

"Yes, Miz Weasley."

Dammit. Dammit dammit dammit. She hated to miss class; today would undoubtedly be the day that Professor Potage finally said something of value. But more than that, it troubled her that she had no way of letting Snape know what had happened. For all that it had seemed he'd opened up to her the other night, she actually still knew remarkably little about the man. Where, exactly, in Manchester, did he live? She could hardly send an owl to search the entirety of the city. And yet it seemed unspeakably rude to simply fail to show up, especially because of their standing post-class date. Well, not date, of course...appointment. But still, she'd be terribly put out if he didn't show up to class. What if they started the charm work he needed today? And worse, what if he thought that she hadn't come because of something he'd said the other night?

She shook her head sharply. *For Merlin's sake, Hermione*, she said to herself. *Pull yourself together*. It was unfortunate, but it was her responsibility to attend this meeting, not to go running off to class and pubs with her former professor. She would simply have to explain next week, and he would have to understand. Probably he'd be glad for the reprieve.

Still, she couldn't shake a slightly frantic feeling as she left her office for Beasts and Beings.

Just as she got to the lift, she stopped short and cast the Ventriloquist Charm again. "Angela, Floo Mr Weasley and let him know where I'll be, please."

Losing her mind. It was the only explanation.

She'd heard nothing from Snape. That first night, she'd half-expected to come home to a scathing missive on the subject of those who fail to show up for their appointments, but there had been nothing, and somehow the lack of communication troubled her more than a Howler would have.

Still, she tried to put her lingering unease from her mind. If he wasn't bothered, why should she be? She was blowing the entire incident out of proportion. Really, she had no idea what had gotten into her lately. The draft of the Goblin legislation was due to the heads of Beasts and Beings and the Goblin Liaison Office in two days. She had no time for these petty little dramas.

"Miz Weasley?"

Hermione swore that damned charm was taking years off her life. "Yes, Angela?"

"You have a visitor. A Mr Snape. Doesn't have an appointment." Her tone left Hermione little doubt as to what Angela thought of those who turned up without appointments.

Good Lord, she thought. She was vaguely chagrined at the reception Snape must have received from Angela, and equally disquieted about what Snape might have done to the woman to convince her to announce him. She ran her hands distractedly through her hair, and then, almost in the same motion, tried to smooth it back down.

"Send him in, please," she said.

"Very well," Angela replied frostily.

Snape entered her office and shut the door firmly behind him. A nervous frisson shot through Hermione, both at the idea that he'd come here to chastise her and the idea that for the first time since school, she was alone in a room with Severus Snape.

"I'm so sorry, Severus," she began. "I never meant to skive off class...or our meeting. Things here have been simply mad, and there was an emergency meeting at Beasts and Beings, and I couldn't think of any way to contact you. I wouldn't have missed if it hadn't truly been necessary, but I've got this project on a very short deadline and..."

Snape was watching her with a slight smirk, as if he intended to let her run at the mouth indefinitely. She promptly shut up.

He held out a rolled parchment, and she hesitated for the slightest instant before taking it.

"Notes, Granger," he said with gruff amusement. At the look of confusion that must have been plastered across her face, he added, "From the class. That you missed."

She smiled then, and it was as if everything in her world had just subtly clicked back into place. She was Granger again, and Snape had brought her notes.

"Thank you!" she said and tucked the parchment into her bag. "That was incredibly thoughtful. I'm looking forward to reading them." She realized she was babbling senselessly again and added, gesturing toward her work, "I'm sure it will be more entertaining than this lot."

He shifted a bit from foot to foot, and Hermione realized that he had no more idea what to do now than she did. She stood up, but that only made things feel more awkward, as now they were standing face to face, separated only by the sea of parchment that was her desk. Still, she wasn't quite sure how sit back down without seeming as if she were dismissing him.

"Um, anything interesting in class?"

"No more so than usual. What paltry information Potage provided is in the notes."

Of course. In the notes. The awkward silence drew out still further, yet neither of them made a move to end their misery and part.

"Shall I expect you next Wednesday," Snape asked, finally, "or should we reschedule our little tête-à-tête?"

This felt more as if things were winding up, which both relieved the tension and heightened it somehow.

"I certainly plan to be there," Hermione said. "But in case something like this were to happen again, perhaps you could provide me with a way to reach you?"

"Also in the notes," Snape said, and with a tight smile, he turned and left her office.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

She considered him, the firelight glinting off his hair and the swirling amber liquid in his glass, his long legs clad so improbably in blue jeans, stretched before him and crossed at the ankle.

"What is your house like?" she asked.

He snorted. "Only twenty-one questions to ask, and you waste one on what my house looks like?"

She shrugged, only slightly embarrassed. "I'm curious," she replied.

"Old and ornate, decorated only in black velvet. Except the interior of my coffin, of course," he said. "Which is blood red."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Severus," she said. "It's just a question. And I'm honor-bound to answer all twenty-one of yours."

It was a child's game, really, this 'Twenty-One,' meant to be taken with an Oath of Honesty, but as neither Severus nor Hermione trifled much with Oaths these days, they skipped the charm and simply asked their questions.

Hermione could not put her finger on exactly when they had begun to spend more time on 'Twenty One' than on discussing potions theory, but tonight they had dispensed with potions entirely, moving directly into the game as soon as they had been served.

"It's a terrace house," Snape said, looking over her left shoulder, a habit he displayed, she had discovered, whenever he felt particularly vulnerable. "Brown and brick and entirely indistinct. It is of Muggle construction," he said, "but I have added wizarding components over the years of my tenancy...hidden doors, Extending Charms, and the like. It once belonged to my parents."

She nodded, trying to imagine it. It was, of course, sufficient as an answer to the question she'd asked, but there was so much more she longed to know. Did he have a Floo Connection? What color was his bedroom? She supposed, if she were honest, that she was looking for some glimpse of who the man might be in private, away from all the crushing expectations of ex-students and warriors, historians and magical solicitors. It seemed, however, that he was loath to discuss the details of his home life, and she was not going to waste any more of her questions trying to make him.

"Your turn," she said, sipping her wine in an attempt to fortify herself.

Snape raised an eyebrow, as if surprised to find that she would let the matter of his house go so easily. "Why the Ministry?" he asked, the ghost of a sneer on his face.

"The Fountain of Magical Brethren," she answered promptly.

"The Fountain...?"

"I saw it for the first time during my fifth year...and stop all your eyerolling...I was already long past S.P.E.W. It was just before the Battle of the Department of Mysteries." Here, she paused and felt her attention drift from her long-ago impressions of that statue.

"Does it ever feel strange to you to hear the names they've given these... these *events* in our lives? To me, that will always be the night we lost Sirius. To everyone else, it is 'The Battle of the Department of Mysteries.'" She rolled the stem of her glass between her fingers.

"You are not permitted a question until you have answered mine," Snape said, his face inscrutable. "And I believe you have pointed out in the past how foolish it is to waste them on questions that can be answered with yes or no."

"It wasn't truly a question, I suppose," she said a bit sharply. "Just a bit of vocal woolgathering. In any case, The Fountain. I don't know if it was the night I saw it that caused it to make such an impression on me...all that fear and pain and righteous Gryffindor anger...but it seemed... Severus, it seemed so wrong to me."

"The Fountain of Magical Brethren seemed *wrong* to you?" he asked incredulously.

"No, not like that, not like you're thinking. It seemed wrong that the Ministry would dare display such a thing, dare hold this idea up to the world that had *nothing* to do with what they actually stood for. Stand for. Presently. And I knew then that it would be my life's work to try to make that fountain a fair representation of wizarding law." She paused, and he waited, seeming to know that she would go on. "I don't mean those insipid looks on the faces of the magical beings, of course," she said. "Just the idea of brethren. Equals."

"Had much luck with that?"

"Don't be an arse. I said my life's work. I haven't even reached middle age."

Something flickered across Snape's face...just barely there and then gone.

"How old are you now?" he asked.

"Not your turn," she replied.

"Cheeky."

She grinned. And then the questioning fell to her, a moment that always paralyzed her. There was so much she wanted to know that it could barely be contained in questions, and there seemed to be a good deal of political maneuvering between them as the game wore on...a trading of personal and impersonal questions, sharp questions, painful questions that could only be reached after more mundane ground had been covered.

Well, turn about was fair play, she supposed. "Why potions?"

"Why not?"

"That's not an answer."

He took a slow sip of his drink and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Are you telling me that you've forgotten the reason I came to teach at Hogwarts?"

"I'm not asking about Hogwarts. I'm asking about now."

He sighed. "Because I excel at potions."

"So, because it's easy, then?" If she felt the slightest bit of disappointment in his answer, she quickly buried it. It wasn't as if the man didn't deserve *something* easy in his life.

Snape made a plosive sound with his mouth. "If potions were easy, why would we have chosen to take a class on them? Wouldn't we have long since learned everything there was to know? No, potion making is not easy, Hermione, and if it were, I'd have lost interest years ago."

"But you said..."

"I said that I practice potionmaking because I am good at it. I do not have a grand passion for it, no story of some pivotal moment in which I decided to commit myself to potions forever. It is simply something that I do well. It seems to me that most people enjoy the things they are good at."

"Do they?" she said. It seemed to her that there was some flaw in this particular statement, but between the wine and the force of his personality, she could not seem to come to it.

"Indeed," he said. "It is also the reason I spent so much time castigating hapless students. I'm rather good at that, too."

She smiled, allowing him to close the subject. "I can't argue with that."

"You don't agree?" he asked. "Surely you take pleasure in your aptitudes."

Suddenly, the flaw seemed clear. "You were an excellent spy," she said, "though I doubt you took much pleasure in it."

His face tightened. "That's in poor taste."

"It is," she said. "But it remains true. I was good at managing hotheaded young boys. Doesn't mean I enjoyed it."

"Oh, but you did," he said, leaning forward and looking rather predatory.

"Beg pardon?"

"You do it to this day. You married one."

Hermione gave him a long, level look. "Perhaps we should get back to the game."

"Perhaps we are finished with the game."

She put her glass down with unnecessary force, sloshing some of her wine onto the wood. "Oh, for Merlin's sake," she said. "We can have a disagreement, Severus. We can even both be deliberately unkind...and I will be the first to say I'm sorry. Which I am. I picked a poor example, and I will endeavor to be more thoughtful in the future. Now ask me a damned question."

Hermione's blood seemed to have collected entirely in her face during this little speech...she could feel it pulsing in the tips of her ears...and her heart beat madly as she waited for his response.

Snape uncrossed and recrossed his ankles. "One of the things I like most about you is that you sometimes forget to be 'thoughtful,'" he said quietly. "I would be most disappointed if you suddenly began being *politic* with me."

She nodded, somewhat appeased. Relieved. Something. Her heart began to approximate its normal rhythm once more.

"Which, of course, leaves me with the right to say any fucking thing I please." The corners of his lips turned up in a smirk, and he eyed her, as if watching for her shock, or her protest, but she made none.

"What do you like, Hermione?" he asked.

The question surprised her. *You*, she thought, sudden and unbidden.

"I like a great number of things," she said. "I could have said ice cream, and it would have satisfied your question. You should be more careful in your phrasing." Her words seemed to tumble out of her, buying time and covering that one traitorous thought.

"Fair enough," he said. "Imagine that you'd never seen the Fountain of Magical Brethren. Hell, imagine that there had been no 'Battle of the Department of Mysteries' in your fifth year. What would you have done with your life?"

"If there had been no Voldemort?" she said.

"I would have said, 'if you'd had a choice,' but perhaps they amount to the same thing."

She took a moment to think over his statement. Perhaps they did mean the same thing. Certainly, she could see that they did for him.

"I don't know," she said simply, honestly.

"Surely there were things besides fighting losing battles that you enjoyed."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "In the spirit of politics, I'm going to ignore that. There were a great many things I enjoyed. A great many things I excelled at, if I'm to abandon modesty as well. But I think it has always been the things that *didn't* come easily that intrigued me. I love Arithmancy...an equation so complicated that it feels as if my brain is burning with the effort. And potions...the seemingly capricious ways that ingredients interact, so difficult for me to intuit. The struggle was part of what made it worthwhile."

"Which is why, I presume, you worked so hard at broom flying."

"Oh, come now. I think everyone's allowed a few things that they simply don't like."

"I can think of quite a few things I don't like, but I wasn't trying to convince anyone that the hardest things were the most fun."

"Maybe not always the most fun... but the most worthwhile in the end. I know you see what I'm saying, Severus. You're just being difficult."

"Ah, but you prefer the difficult things, isn't that right?"

She shook her head with a kind of exasperated affection. "Difficult, I said. Not impossible."

It was sometimes jarring to arrive at home after these little excursions. It was as if she had literally been someone else for a time, and coming home felt a bit like having to put her real self back on like a poorly fitting robe. It wasn't fair, she knew, feeling this way. She loved her home; she loved her *life*. There was really very little sense in imagining what might have been if her childhood had been different. Her childhood was a fixed quantity, and the life that had sprung out of it was her own.

She opened the front door quietly, in case Ron had fallen asleep amidst his papers again...really, she should take more of an interest in his work. She could take on some of the marking at night. There was no need for him to work till all hours...but he was not in evidence. Already in bed, she supposed. Which was just as bad. She shouldn't go out gallivanting at night, leaving him to fend for himself, to have to go to bed without her. Not that a grown man shouldn't be able to spend an evening alone, for Merlin's sake. It wasn't her fault that he'd refused to learn to cook and subsisted on takeaway when she wasn't around. And besides, he'd spent the last ten years tutoring only his own two children. Perhaps it was good for him to take on a full workload for once. She'd been shouldering one since they were eleven.

She entered their bedroom to find him sleeping, a peaceful slackness to his face that she knew even in the darkness. She undressed quietly, casting Cleaning Charms on herself in lieu of her normal bathroom routine so as not to wake him.

"Mione," he said as she slipped between the sheets. "Mmm. You're late again."

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'll try to remember to use the Tempus Charm next time."

"S'ok," he said. "Come here." He rolled toward her, slipping an arm around her waist and nuzzling her right shoulder.

She froze.

He pulled her tighter. "Cold out there? You're all tensed up."

"It's cold, yes. It's nearly December." *Give yourself time*, she thought. *It doesn't mean anything. You'll be better in a minute.*

"Well, let's get you warm," he whispered, his easy, boyish lasciviousness as familiar as his sleeping face had been. She closed her eyes.

His hand roamed over her torso, settling on her left breast. Her skin seemed to crawl at his touch. She squeezed her legs together tightly. What the hell was wrong with her?

"Ron," she said, more sharply than she had intended.

"Mmm?" he replied, squeezing her nipple. It was all she could do not to bat his hand away *This is me, this is mine, don't touch!*

"Could we... not do this tonight? I'm not feeling up to it."

"Too much to drink with old Snapey?" he said, his voice half-amused and half-accusing. His hand left her breast, but it still roamed searchingly over her stomach. She longed to turn over, to squish all the parts of her that he wanted against the mattress and be simple and autonomous, if only for a little while.

"No, just... well, maybe a little, but mostly I'm just tired from too much thinking."

"Too much thinking," he mumbled, seemingly content to drift directly back into sleep. "That's my girl."

She was grateful, then, for his simple tastes, food and sleep and sex. Where one was denied, another would suffice. He was a good man, she knew. A good father, and a good husband. But when his breathing was slow and even, she did turn over, casting off Ron's arm and burrowing her face against her pillow. It was terrible, but in her confusion and distress, she imagined that her firm, smooth pillow was Snape's chest, her cheek pressed against the coolness of his bare skin.

The next morning, the light streaming in through the kitchen windows, glowing on the old wooden floors, was so clean and bright that it hurt her heart. How could she have doubted this life, with its chipped old table that had seen so many family breakfasts, so many celebrations? This was home, and she was grateful for it.

She'd been drunk, she decided. Wine did sometimes cause her to get maudlin and strange, and perhaps the heavy tone of her conversation with Severus and the references to the Voldemort years had encouraged her odd state of mind. The only consolation (besides Hangover Remedy), she thought, was that she had neither said nor done anything irrevocable. Her mind drifted back to that simple word...*you*. Thank Merlin she hadn't said it aloud.

And then, too, Professor Potage's useless little class was drawing to a close. There were only two meetings left before the end of term. She was sure that her sudden... attachment to Severus had to do with the fact that he would very soon be passing out of her life again. She could hardly imagine that he would want to continue their acquaintance once the class ended...not that their little get-togethers had been entirely about potions per se, but Hermione imagined that Snape must see her (as she did him) as a temporary visitor in his life, unexpected if not unwelcome, but unable to stay.

So, yes, she supposed these strange *feelings* simply stemmed from the impending loss of their friendship. She'd always had trouble letting things go. It probably had something to do with her parents.

That being settled in her mind, Hermione set about preparing an elaborate breakfast of the sort she usually only bothered with for the children's sake. And if there was a hint of apology for the night before in the eggs and bacon, it was not one she would speak aloud.

It would be a good day to sit down and really write to the children, she thought. They'd shared a few quick notes recently, but Hermione was overdue for a full account of Rose's dress for the Yule Ball (Yule Ball...in her third year! The girl really did take more after Ginny) and Hugo had gone quiet on the subject of Arithmancy lately, which worried her.

She was humming lightly to herself (a repetitive tune of her own devising) when Ron entered the kitchen, wearing baggy blue pajama bottoms and scratching at his head bemusedly.

"Practicing for the hols?" he asked her, smiling. "You know, I think it's supposed to be like riding a broom...you never forget how to do it. Not really."

He reached over her and plucked a piece of bacon out of the sizzling pan and popped it into his mouth. She'd seen that trick at least half a million times, as it entertained the children greatly, but now, instead of exasperated amusement, Hermione felt as if all her light-heartedness had suddenly run out of her, like the air from a punctured balloon.

Who was this man? Who cast Impervius Charms on the inside of his mouth in order to eat raw bacon out of a hot pan? In whose world did that qualify as charming? She considered extinguishing the flame, as there was no point in cooking...was there?...if Ronald was content to eat the food raw.

"I didn't hear you come in last night," he said from around the bacon. "Did you have a good time?"

Didn't hear... *Didn't hear?* So he could paw at her like an animal without even bothering to rise to consciousness?

Some distant part of Hermione's brain insisted that she was being ridiculous. She hadn't *wanted* to wake him...it was good that he'd slept through her arrival, or at least had no memory of it now. And if his subconscious mind found her desirable still, well, most wives would find that reassuring if not thrilling.

But her annoyance far outweighed whatever sense that small voice was making. She pursed her lips into a thin, hard line.

"It was fine," she said, plating the food with unnecessary force and sliding it down the counter to him. "Just fine."

Chapter Six

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

All day, whenever she thought of it, Hermione experienced a jolt of the adrenaline-pumping, stomach-swooping sort: the last class. The last time she would be certain to see Severus Snape. Oh, they might run into each other here or there...though knowing Severus, she rather doubted it...but never again would she carry the simple knowledge that she'd be seeing him that evening around with her in her heart.

It wasn't as if either of them would be signing up for Spring term's continuation of the abysmal excuse for a class. Potage hadn't covered a third of what he'd promised for this term, and she had no illusions that the second half of the course would be any different. And their research... well, their research had drifted down one of those endless corridors of the mind. They could continue poking at it forever, casually tweaking this or that variable, subtly modifying the charms and equations... as if either of them really cared. In Hermione's most candid moments, she wondered if they ever truly had.

It seemed she hadn't understood just how much she had come to rely on their time together, how often she had counted down the days, just to get through the week. This was drudgery, and he had been her reward for surviving it, the bright spot that made everything else bearable. It was... depressing to think of going on without anything to look forward to.

Which was a stupid thought, she told herself sharply. For Merlin's sake, she had plenty to look forward to. The children would be home in less than a fortnight. She was close to seeing wand restrictions lifted for the Goblin population. She had plenty in her life besides Severus Snape.

Still, the very thought of the final class this evening had sent her heart to fluttering a panicked tattoo against her ribcage at least a dozen times that day, and she had a change of robes packed into her latest beaded bag. It would be nice, she thought, if he remembered her looking smart.

As was the custom of university classes (Hermione had discovered), the last day of class was given over to matters of paperwork rather than potions.

Snape grinned nastily beside her as he scratched away at the end-of-course evaluation. She'd imagined the parchment with a glaring T at the top, the margins filled with Snape's spidery red ink, and smiled. Hermione had been slightly more circumspect in her evaluation, though she had ticked each of the boxes in the 'unacceptable' column firmly.

"If you will please Levitate your evaluations to the pile when you have finished," Potage said, holding up a modest stack of papers, "then you may go."

Snape delivered his evaluation with such force that it was a wonder none of Potage's fingers had been severed. Hermione sent her own on the heels of Snape's, allowing it to hover impatiently before the professor as he got a grip on Snape's unruly paper.

"Shall we?" Snape said, indicating the aisle, and Hermione's heart soared for no discernable reason.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, sweeping up her bag and swishing into the aisle, her head held haughtily as she passed their professor without speaking.

Her shoulders relaxed once they had crossed out of the building. She stopped, turning toward Snape as she always did after class to discuss the evening's events or to agree on a place to meet for drinks. She gave him a happy, end-of-class smile.

"We're out early," she said. "Do you want to go get a bite to eat before we set about obliterating ourselves?"

"I'm afraid I have other engagements this evening," Snape said.

This took Hermione by surprise, but she quickly recovered, deciding not to point out that it was unlikely that he had made plans for the hours they should have spent in class. If he didn't want to eat with her, it was no skin off her nose. He was probably just short of gold.

"All right," she said, affably enough. "Regular time at the Leaky Cauldron, then?"

Snape gave her a sharp, incredulous look, one that she'd seen him use in the classroom, one that said he'd heretofore been unaware that a human being could be so stupid.

"I thought I had made myself clear a moment ago," he said. "I have plans for the evening."

"Oh...I... oh," Hermione said, somewhat lamely, sure that all her hurt and confusion were currently displaying themselves on her thrice-damned Gryffindor face. "Of course. I'm sorry. I'd only thought since it was the last class...well, it doesn't matter." *Shut up while you have any dignity left at all*, she thought fiercely to herself.

"Surely you have a husband at home who is eager for your company, Mrs Weasley?" Snape said. As if they were *strangers*.

Once more, Hermione risked a glance into Snape's unreadable eyes. Was he chastising her? Had she been somehow inappropriate or... God forbid, had she said things she couldn't remember having said during their last game of 'Twenty-One'?

There was something mocking in his eyes as he looked back at her, and without thinking, she reacted to it.

"I do, of course. Ronald's been quite jealous...that I've been keeping you all to myself, that is. Everyone's has been dying to see you, you know. He's asked me to invite you to our holiday party." With that, she whipped a quill from her bag and touched it to a bit of parchment, watching as the invitation she'd so carefully copied dozens of times the night before materialized perfectly onto the page.

"Everyone will be there. Do try to come, Professor," she said, forcing herself not to look back as she Apparated away. She was sure that parchment had been reduced to a pile of ash before she had even reached Ottery St Catchpole.

Periodically, over the next several days, she wondered what on earth had made her do that. She swung through periods of lethargy and industry, burying herself in a book so as not to have to answer any of Ron's questions about why she didn't want to get out of bed, and then furiously cleaning the house in preparation for the children's arrival and their looming annual party.

It really was a huge to-do, she thought, and she supposed there might be a petty part of herself that had invited him only to remind him how many friends she had, how very full her life was without him. These were the spoils of a public life, she thought, that the Minister made it a point to drop by one's house for cocktails on Christmas Eve. And if he was squirming a bit at all she might have told those friends and associates about him, all the better. But then more likely she'd done it because her home, her marriage and her children, had always remained so private from him, and it had been a chance to remind him that whatever he thought she might have felt, in fact she was the head of a thriving, established household. A happy, warm, party-giving household. *Didn't she have a husband eager for her company at home* indeed.

But before she'd even properly worked herself into a full-on, holiday-ruining snit, the children returned from Hogwarts (with all their attendant chaos), and suddenly her life

really was the bustling, family-driven, manic burst of holiday cheer that she'd wanted him to think it was.

Rose was mad for the party; she'd invited Simon Brocklehurst (he of the Yule Ball tickets) and his family, and all she could do, it seemed, was lock herself in the bathroom and fuss with her hair. "Argh, it's so *red*," she could occasionally be heard to exclaim from behind the door.

Fort was constantly underfoot in a state of barely-suppressed canine frenzy. He barked at all the owls, coming and going with their RSVPs and their packages; he ate a bit of garland from the mantle and had to be taken to the Healer; he peed in one of Ron's good shoes.

Hugo was quiet...almost withdrawn...but he managed, each day it seemed, to break some Weasley family heirloom (once a terrible white ceramic Christmas tree that Hermione had always hated...she had longed to simply bin that one instead of casting a powerful *Reparo*).

But in the evenings, when the furor had died down, she enjoyed seeing the couch full of long legs and freckled bodies again, loved to watch the animation of her children's faces as they described their lives at Hogwarts to her.

"And then Rose made a *total* idiot of herself," Hugo said, "and asked Professor..."

"Hu-GO!"

"Well, it's true, according to Jamie and Al."

"Hugo, whatever Rose might have asked, isn't it better to ask a question than to miss something important? When I was in Muggle school, the saying went, 'There are no stupid...'"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Mum, no stupid questions, but Rose asked Professor Laurent *todance*."

"The man is part Veela," Rose wailed. "I was powerless to stop myself! I think it's hereditary. You know how Dad is with Aunt Fleur."

Hermione gave her a stern look. "Rose, that's no way to talk about your father." Inside, she finished *even if it is absolutely true*. She looked forward to telling this story to him later...in great detail.

"You just wait, Hugo Weasley," Rose said. "You wait until Victoire hits puberty."

"Victoire is my *cousin*," Hugo said with a disdain perhaps only mustered by eleven year old boys.

Rose chuckled darkly. Hugo glowered at her.

"I suppose we'll need to go shopping tomorrow," Hermione said, ignoring the children's argument as a powerful wave of affection for them washed over her. For them, if for no other reason, it was time to put this ridiculous business about Severus out of her mind. "Has either of you even begun to think about what to get your father?"

She was more or less successful at putting Snape from her mind in the whirlwind of preparations for the party. Even with the use of cleaning charms, which she usually disdained, she was tied up for days in the readying of the house, the dressing of three Christmas trees, and planning with the magical caterer. Thank Merlin for Hannah Longbottom, for if it weren't for their nearly familial relationship, Hermione would never be able to arrange for catering on Christmas Eve. As it was, Hannah set them an appointment each year, directly after the new year, for the following year's festivities, and Hermione needed only to consult with Hannah about the menu, rather than slave away in the kitchen.

Dress shopping with Rose took nearly a full day in itself, but they managed to survive it, both arriving at home with formal robes with a minimum of tears. Ronald and Hugo had no idea how lucky they were, being men.

On Christmas Eve, after the rest of the family had been pressed, dressed, and ordered to go sit quietly so as not to wrinkle themselves or break anything...or, at the very least, not to play Quidditch in the snow in their formalwear...Hermione entered the bedroom to dress for the party. The robes she'd chosen were longer than her normal party attire...floor length and slim, made of a heavy burgundy silk rather than the traditional holiday velvet. The front of the robes criss-crossed over her chest and shoulders before opening into a filmy sort of cape over her back. There was surely a word for such a dress, but Hermione did not know it. She had never, in fact, owned anything like it, and she felt a trifle self-conscious as she put it on.

She fought her hair into a loose, almost tousled chignon, the style's carefree charm belied by the industrial strength Sticking Charms holding it in place. The mirror clucked its approval, and Hermione smiled, turning to the side and sucking in her belly to look at her reflection in profile.

She'd rarely seen herself look so glamorous, look so little like a government worker or a mother of two. Even when she had been in school, there had been a weary, bookish look about her face, and later, a kind of bony grief that it had taken her years to shed. But tonight she looked... well, as good as she could look, and she supposed it was time to face up to the idea that she'd dressed this evening for Severus, who would certainly not be here to appreciate it, and would likely not appreciate it...shouldn't appreciate it...even if he were.

She indulged herself briefly in a fantasy of Snape's arrival at the party. In her mind, a glass dangled elegantly from her fingertips, and she turned *ah, Severus, glad you could make it*...before turning back to... well, to whomever. Ginny Potter, say, or Finnegan O'Rourke. He'd stand there, agog, looking at her, and she'd feel his eyes burning over her shoulder blades, her neck, but she would not turn; no, not until he...

"Mum!"

"What?" she snapped back.

"Dad said to tell you that Grandma Molly and Grandpa Arthur are here!"

"Well, go and say hello to them, Hugo! I'll be out in a moment."

She looked back at the mirror as she listened to her son's footsteps thundering down the stairs. "She says she'll be there in a minute," Hugo yelled in the distance. She sighed and suddenly, she saw in her reflection what she really was: a forty year old witch in a dress that was too young and too fancy by far, entertaining herself with ridiculous teenage notions. She turned away. There was nothing to change into, nothing for it but to go downstairs and begin entertaining her guests.

When he arrived, she was deep in conversation with Ragnok, her Goblin liaison at Beasts and Beings, and Susan Bones. There was no slim glass dangling from her fingertips, which was a good thing, as she likely would have dropped it when Ron came up behind her, seized her shoulder and hissed, "Snape is in the foyer."

"I beg your pardon?" she said, eyes wide and conversation forgotten.

"I said, Snape is in the foyer. He's asking for you. Did you invite him?"

"Of course I invited him, Ronald! I invited all of our friends, and we've been in class together for months."

"Well, go and take care of him, then. I'm afraid that people are beginning to swarm."

She hurried off to the front of the house, where Snape was, in fact, surrounded and having his hand wrung by Harry Potter. "So good to see you, sir," Harry was saying. "Hermione's mentioned you, of course, but it's just so good to really see..."

Hermione stepped deftly between them. "Hello, Harry, I see you've found Severus." She turned. "Severus! How lovely of you to come. Follow me, please, and we'll get you something to eat."

Her thoughts were reeling as she led Snape quickly through the kitchen and into her study.

"Are you all right? I'm sorry if that was a bit of a mob scene."

"It is a party," Snape said stiffly. "I hardly expected to be the only guest."

"Well, no, I suppose not," Hermione said, the words *but why are you here?* hanging unspoken between them.

"I believe you offered me refreshment?" Snape said after a few moments of tense silence.

She shook her head a bit wildly. "Yes, of course. Come with me. I think I saw my son, Hugo, in the kitchen as we passed. I'd love for you to meet him."

Hugo had gone by the time they reached the kitchen, so Hermione urged a plate into Snape's hands. She looked quickly through the crowd and spotted Rose, whom she disentangled from Simon Brocklehurst.

"Rose," she said, "this is my friend, Severus Snape. He was a professor of mine at Hogwarts. I'm sure I've written you about him."

That sounded wrong to her ears, as if Snape were a distant acquaintance or, conversely, as if she'd been writing long letters to her daughter about him. What on earth was she supposed to do with this man in her house?

"Hi," Rose said.

"Miss Weasley," Snape replied, holding his plate of hors d'oeuvres in front of him like a shield.

Hermione cast a sharp look at Rose while she continued scanning the party for Hugo.

"So what did you teach?" Rose asked.

"Potions," Snape said, the boredom in his voice almost matching that in Rose's. "I suppose Draco Malfoy teaches potions at Hogwarts these days."

"Yes, Professor Malfoy," Rose said. "That's who I've got."

"I see," Snape said, and both he and Rose turned to look at Hermione, as if expecting her to extricate them from this stalled conversation.

"Hermione! The Minister is here!" Hannah Longbottom called helpfully over the din.

"Oh, bugger," Hermione said under her breath. "Severus, Rose," she looked at them apologetically and shrugged. "Do your best."

She took off into the crowd to greet Kingsley, and then there was a minor mishap with a sconce that lit the wall on fire (honestly, could *no one else* cast an Extinguishing Charm?) and then Hannah needed her again to instruct the servers.

By the time she managed to return to the kitchen, neither Severus nor Rose was in evidence. Hermione swept the room with her eyes, but saw no cluster of heads that might have indicated that he was surrounded again, nor any sign of Snape himself. She sighed. More than likely, he'd gone. It wasn't as if she'd made him feel particularly welcome. *Well, what did he expect?* she thought angrily as she made her way back into the thick of the gathering *It's a party. I have guests. I can't handhold him every minute.*

It was hard to focus on the conversations going on around her, and Hermione drifted through most of the rest of the evening feeling oddly like a guest in her own house, a spectator, the friend of a friend.

Around half ten, when things had begun to thin out a bit, she noticed that Hugo had secreted himself away somewhere. She was sympathetic, of course. The boy was eleven...dress robes and awkward conversations with adults who only wanted to exclaim over his growth were hardly his preference...but she expected him to be here tonight, not hidden away in a book, no matter how much she wished she could join him. Quickly, she slipped upstairs and knocked on the door to his room. A few murmured words would bring him back down among his cousins, and he'd be there to see the rest of the guests off.

"Come in," Hugo said.

Hermione opened the door, expecting to find him on his bed, propped up with pillows, his good robes in disarray.

Instead, she was astounded to see him seated at his desk beside Severus Snape, a cauldron bubbling away in front of them.

"Hello," she said. It was all she could think of to say.

"Hello," Severus said.

"Mum!" Hugo said, "look...Mr Snape and I made Forgetfulness Potion!"

Hermione stepped into the room for a closer inspection. "That's wonderful, Hugo." She shot a look at Snape. "Forgetfulness Potion was on my first-year exam."

"An exam I compiled," Snape said, staring right back at her. "I'm sure Mr Malfoy has other ideas about which potions make good end-of-term examples."

She nodded. "I'm very glad that you two were able to find something useful to do," she said in a faintly bemused way.

"Mum...we made the equation, see? And *now* I understand how the Arithmancy goes with the potion making...it's in the reactions. If you can predict the reactions, you can see how each stage of the brewing..."

Hermione felt so much in the moments that her son explained Arithmancy to her that it was impossible to say anything coherent: chagrin that it had not been her but Severus who managed to explain this in a way that Hugo could understand; wonder that he'd gone to Severus at all...she'd been gently trying to get him to tell her the problem he was having with Arithmancy all hols; pleasure at seeing him working so happily, combined with vague regret that she would have to drag him away from this to say goodnight to his aunts and uncles... and then, too, a feeling nearly debilitating in its strength...something that she could not, would not examine right now...she just had to get them out of that room.

"Hugo, your Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny are leaving. And I think your Uncle George has brought you something from his shop. But I want you to promise me that you're not going to use whatever it is until..."

"Wicked!" he exclaimed, leaping up from his seat and running toward the door. At the threshold, just as Hermione was suffering an inner wince at his rudeness, he stopped and turned back. "Um, thanks, Mr Snape. It was fun. And I get it a lot better now."

"You are quite welcome, Mr Weasley," Snape said, and Hugo took off again.

Which left Hermione standing awkwardly alone with Severus in her son's bedroom. She could not stop her hands from wringing slightly.

"Thank you, Severus," she said.

"Whatever for?"

"For coming. For helping him. I knew there was something wrong, but he wouldn't tell me anything."

"In my experience, young boys do not wish to bring their academic struggles to the attention of their mothers. Particularly mothers who have a reputation for brilliance."

She shrugged, still not knowing quite what to do with herself. "I suppose. Still, I wish he would come to me."

"Well," Snape said, standing and smoothing his robes.

"Yes, well, it was good of you to come."

"Mmm. See to your guests, Hermione. I'll tidy up here."

"Oh, leave it, Severus. You don't need to clean up! I'll send Hugo back up later..."

"Have you lost your mind? And leave a Forgetfulness Potion simmering?"

"No, of course, you're right. I'll handle it."

"Hermione. Go."

She acquiesced with regret, knowing that by the time she made it back to this room, he really would be gone, and there was nothing for her to impulsively and irately invite him to now. This time, he would be gone for good. She looked back over her shoulder.

He was staring right back at her. She nodded and hurried from the room.

That night, after the guests had gone (some of whom were drunk enough that Ronald had to escort them through the Floo) and the empty glasses and plates had all been banished to the kitchen, after Hannah's staff had left and the lights had been turned off, after Hermione and Ron had sent the children's presents soaring down the stairs to rest under the tree...finally, she was in her own bedroom, exchanging her robes for her sleeping tee shirt and uncharming her hair. And it was there, in the dark and safety of her own room, that she revisited the scene in Hugo's bedroom, and allowed herself to feel for the first time that she loved Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, who hadn't really been able to leave things as they had been, who'd given up his solitude to see her on Christmas Eve. Severus, who treated Hugo with such kindness that Hugo had confided in him... Hugo had called his interaction with Snape fun! Hugo liked him...Hermione did not want to examine too closely the reason that this filled her with such elation, but it was true all the same: Hugo liked him. And if his interaction with Rose had been a bit stiffer, well, Rose was a teenage girl, and they were difficult at the best of times. It might be that in time...she cut that thought off.

"I love him," she said so quietly that it was barely a breath.

Suddenly, despite how hard she'd worked that day, she was too agitated to sleep. She slipped from the room and made her way down the hall to Hugo's door.

Something caught her attention in the hallway. It was an odd Concealment Spell...one that seemed to want her to notice it. She bent and felt around the floorboard until her hand collided with a rough, papered package. As soon as she touched it, the spell fell away. It was possible that this was a gift from one of the children, that Hugo or Rose had hidden it here until morning, but somehow she was certain that Severus had left this here for her to find. She sat down on the floor with her back to the wall and carefully peeled the brown paper away.

It was a replica of The Fountain of Magical Brethren, one of the cheap little brass ones that they sold in the Ministry gift shop. She'd passed them every day of her life; she could have had a hundred of them, if she'd wanted. And yet, somehow, the gift seemed to her the best she had ever received, and she cried, not for the thoughtfulness of the gift, but for what it cemented, the feeling that she was being seen at long last.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

AN: This is a PSA reminding you to please heed the warnings! It's not too late to turn back. Please proceed with caution, etc.

Dropping the children off at King's Cross was worse than it had been in September. Hermione drove them herself, in the family's *mostly* unmodified Volkswagen, as Ron's school children returned to school before Hogwarts resumed, so he could not accompany them to the station. Unfortunately, this only intensified her feeling that she was saying goodbye to the children for good, that her traitorous feelings had already fractured the family beyond repair.

She hugged them both fiercely and then stepped back, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. "You know I love you both more than anything," she said. "No matter

what."

"Mum, we didn't fail anything. You got our marks already," Rose said.

"This isn't about marks. It's just... I just love you. That's all."

"Mum, you're being weird," Hugo said, shrugging her hand away.

She grinned at them in a watery sort of way. "Maybe I am. I'm just your weird old mum."

Rose gave her an odd look, but caught sight of a few of her friends and began to gather her things.

"You'll write me when you get settled back in?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, of course," Hugo said.

"And if you have trouble with Arithmancy?"

He shrugged.

"All right, then. Be good. Don't use magic in the corridors. Be kind to Mr Filch."

"Mum! We're going to miss the train!"

"Go on, then. I love you."

She watched the train as it slowly chugged to life, bearing her children out of the station and away from her. It was as if she could feel the bonds that held her to her life stretching thinner and thinner, until the train was gone, and she returned to the car.

She told herself a great number of untruths as she drove toward Athene University. She told herself that it wouldn't be fair to judge Professor Potage's class without taking the course in its entirety. She told herself that she could always drop the course if her expectations weren't being met. She told herself that keeping her mind busy was important, especially with the children away.

When those stories remained unconvincing, she told herself that she was simply checking to see if the course had filled up. She could turn the car around right now and drive it back to her own house, Floo to work, and be done with this whole ridiculous mess. She told herself that if there was a line at the registrar's office, she would do just that.

In the line, she told herself that what she was doing would be worse than foolish, except that Snape would never sign up for the course himself, so disaster would be averted, and she would know for certain that he did not care for her, which he did not. She told herself that this would be a kind of closure, that being in Potage's classroom without him would be the sign that she needed that the feelings she held were completely one-sided, and then she would be able to put this down and move on.

And besides, she told herself, even if he were there, it didn't mean she had to continue to take the course. She could still drop it. She could still walk away.

She signed up for the spring term, and spent the drive home imagining what she was going to tell Ronald.

He had been, actually, rather unconcerned.

"Didn't you hate that course?" he asked, looking up from the coffee table, where he had spread Helen Jacoby's maths homework.

"I did," she said. "But we never got to the bit on setting Stirring and Stringing Charms, and I really wanted to learn those."

"Mmmm," Ron said, already turning back to his marking.

"And I'm still interested in the Preserving Charms, and *would* like to brew the Universal Antidote."

"Well, and you'd miss your new best mate," Ron said. This was delivered utterly without suspicion or malice, which broke Hermione's heart a little.

"Actually, I don't think Severus is signing up for the second part," she said. "He never said so, anyway."

"That's too bad," Ron said. "I know you enjoyed his company. He must be an acquired taste." He made a face, but it was meant in good humor, she knew.

"Yes, well," she said and drifted vaguely upstairs. *I am the worst sort of person*, she thought. *Everything about me is despicable. I will drop that class tomorrow.*

She saw him before she'd even fully entered the classroom...sitting at their usual workstation, his long hair hanging in two slick curtains, obscuring his eyes. She felt as if she'd stopped breathing, as if oxygen deprivation were making all the colors of the world stand out in sharp relief. He was here.

She walked toward the table, unable to take her eyes off his familiar, longed-for face. If he was here... if he was here, despite everything, then he must...

He was seated nearly in the center of the lab table, to prevent, she presumed, anyone from taking her place. The gesture seemed to restart her breathing, her heart, and she was able to speak.

"May I?"

He looked up at her sharply, dark eyes blazing with what looked like wonder and fear, mixed. He gestured to the seat next to him, not bothering to move back to his own side of the table.

She slid into the proffered chair, feeling, with an almost otherworldly clarity, the slide of her thigh against his. She did not pull away.

It raised the hair on her arms, on the back of her neck, to be so close to him, as if each hair were reaching toward him to close that final gap. She felt lightheaded with proximity, and she shifted slightly, just to feel the tingling sensation of her leg pressed against him. He neither flinched away nor looked at her. She could feel a kind of desperate heat radiating off him.

She did not hear a word Potage said in greeting or introduction, so absorbed was she in the dance their hands were doing on the table's surface. Snape withdrew a piece of parchment from his satchel and offered it to her. His fingers lingered on the page as he slid it toward her, nearly daring her to brush those fingers with her own, which she did, feeling a jolt of electricity to her heart that she hadn't felt since she was a teenager. Likewise, she offered him a quill, and he pulled it slowly from her fingertips.

His left hand rested idly at the side of his parchment, and Hermione had never been so grateful to be left handed as she laid her right hand beside it. There was a gap of less than two inches between them; anything might have closed it...a gasp, a sneeze...and it seemed that some energy was actually arcing and crackling between their flesh. She moved her hand infinitesimally toward his.

Snape leaned down once more to fetch his ink...his hand never leaving the table...but his shifting stance brought his left foot into contact with her right one. Her body answered with a throbbing in her core so deep and needy that it frightened her a little. *From his shoe?*

She had never experienced wanting like this...actual physical desire brought on by the body of another person. Oh, she'd felt excitement before, chemistry, but that was something more manufactured, worked up to, a heightened state of nerves and firing synapses. What she felt at the moment was something more primal, animal...the desire to feel skin on skin, the desire to *fuck* this man.

She glanced up at him. His face was unusually pale, save for spots of hectic pink burning at his ears and cheeks, at his hairline. He stiffened as he seemed to feel her eyes on him, and he turned to her slowly, slowly, so slowly.

She half-expected an admonishment to pay attention, but none came. Instead, he simply gazed back at her until she felt the blood rushing to her own scalp, but she did not look away. He studied her, his eyes lingering on her lips, her throat. Hermione felt as if her eyes were widening, her pupils dilating to take more of him in, more of his startled, greedy eyes, his burning skin, his slightly parted lips.

She swallowed. Audibly, she was sure. In a moment of heart-stoppingly foolish bravery, she slid her hand across the miniature chasm until it pressed against the side of his. At this, he broke their gaze and returned his eyes to his parchment. However, whatever tentative new link had sprung up between them could not be broken. Hermione felt they *breathed* in unison for the next fifty minutes.

She was startled when Potage stopped speaking and silence descended over the classroom. It was like waking from a hot afternoon nap, rising slowly through layers of dreams toward a filmy sort of consciousness, a smouldering world. The class was over.

She looked to Severus, who slowly removed his hand from where it had pressed against hers...*cold*...and gathered their untouched parchment. She stuffed the quills back into her bag and rose, feeling that momentary chill again as it raced down the side of her body. Merlin, it was as if she had been sitting *inside* him.

The classroom emptied before them, and slowly, she walked out, feeling his footsteps behind her, afraid with every step that he would suddenly Apparate away, leaving her here, and equally afraid with every step that he would not.

She knew, then, that if he asked, she would go with him, that all her stories and her promises to herself had been so much mental pretense. There are some forces, some magics, too powerful to be denied.

As it turned out, he didn't ask. There wasn't any need.

The lightest of touches to her shoulder brought her around to face him, and there they were, so close...kissing distance, her brain insisted. He slipped an arm around her waist, pulling her to him firmly, hip to hip, her startled hands just beginning to reach for him when he spun them away.

They landed, Hermione breathless with shock and want, in the middle of a dark, cluttered sitting room. Her first fleeting impression was of dust and a great number of books. Her next impression was of the taste of Snape's mouth, spearmint and heat, and a tsunami of renewed desire. She tugged frantically at his outer robes, eyes closed, blindly feeling for the clasp that would let her closer to his body.

She found it, and heard the heavy material slip to the floor, felt his hands working her own cloak's clasp.

"Are you certain?" his low voice growled in her ear, barely more than a breath.

"Bit late to be asking now," she said, resuming her attack on his clothing.

His skin tasted of sweat and the oils of plants...green life...and his hair was in her mouth. She ground against his leg shamelessly, feeling the gusset of her trousers pulling tight and maddening against her clit, but wishing it were his skin, the coarse black hairs of his thigh against her sensitive flesh.

She longed to engulf him, to take him somehow entirely into herself.

He stood beside the sofa and began quickly to undress, his fingers making short work of the buttons and closings hers had fumbled with. She watched him with undisguised hunger. His chest, mottled pink with heat, dusted with fine black hairs; his ribs, his slim waist, melting into a nest of darkest hair; his cock, rosy and thick...

"Fuck me," she whispered.

His eyes widened. "I'm sorry?"

"Fuck me, Severus. Please."

"I have every intention of doing so," he said. "But first you must stop gawking at me and remove your clothing."

She laughed then, because it was him, Severus, here with her, and this would change nothing, she suddenly felt. He would always be himself, and she would always be herself, and that was just as she liked it.

She toed off her shoes, shoved her trousers to the floor, and lifted her shirt over her head. Her body, she knew, was not that of a schoolgirl anymore. Two children and fifteen years of desk work had changed it irreparably, but he did not take his eyes off her as she undressed, and the burning look in them kept her self-consciousness at bay.

Gently, he nudged her down on to the cracked leather sofa, where her skin stuck and pulled with sweat. She reached up for him, tugged him down slowly, and he settled over her.

"I am afraid this time will be brief," he said gruffly, but she neither needed nor wanted any further foreplay. An hour and a half in Professor Potage's classroom had been more than enough. She gasped as he brought his pelvis to hers, absorbing the new and pleasurable sensation of his cock resting in the cradle of her thighs.

"We could try to draw it out," he whispered.

She shook her head violently in the negative and began to try to squirm upward against the leather, to bring the head of him into position.

"Come on, come on, come on," she whispered under her breath, barely aware that she was doing so.

"Like this?" he breathed, sinking deeply into her. His eyes closed tight, and his mouth fell open, his head rocking back to expose his throat.

"Yes," she hissed, arching up hard to meet him, drawing her knees up. "Yes."

Their coupling was frantic. Severus leaned his forehead against her shoulder, planted his hands on either side of her and pistoned his hips, driving them both at an

incredible pace, right from the start. Hermione's hands scrabbled for purchase on his back, his hips, trying to bring him in harder. Deeper. They were both sucking in huge, panting breaths.

It ended quickly, though neither of them moved from their position on the couch. Hermione was pleased when he did not withdraw from her, but reached down and pulled his wand from his trousers and cast an Expanding Charm upon the sofa. He pulled her with him as he rolled backward, until they lay facing one another, her thigh hiked up over his, his softening cock still buried inside her.

She gave an experimental little push and felt the wet crush of their bodies pressing together.

"Not yet," he whispered. "Soon."

She smiled a private smile. It seemed now that their most immediate need had been taken care of, she was able to breath properly again, to truly see the man who lay beside her, one arm folded beneath his head, the other slung over her waist.

She ran a slow hand down his side from smooth shoulder to coarse thigh, memorizing the outcroppings and soft hollows of him. He leaned forward and touched his lips to hers.

She did not think of Ronald, of how different it was, how strange to be kissed by someone else at long last. Instead, she simply thrilled to discover that kissing could be so revelatory, so urgent, that the movement of his tongue against her lips could send her heart into overdrive. Had it ever felt like this?

She ran her hands through the heavy hanks of his hair, dragging her fingertips lightly over his scalp and holding his mouth to hers. His shudder burned and multiplied in her belly.

Finally, the kiss broke, and she stretched until she could lick the whorl of his ear, take his earlobe gently between her teeth.

"You are the first thing I think of in the morning," she said quietly into it, her voice husky with harsh breathing, "and the last before I go to bed. I have wanted you for so long."

He writhed beside her, and she felt him going hard again, the very tip of him barely sheathed inside her.

"Say it again," he panted.

"Say what again?"

"Say how much you want me."

"I want you," she said but she could feel that it had lost some of its elemental power, so she tried again. "Severus, I want you with my whole body. I want your words in my ears and your cock in my cunt."

He growled, low in his throat, and began to slide slowly, wetly, inside her. He rolled them over until he rose above her again; his eyes locked with hers, and he did not break his heavy gaze as he thrust. It was, she thought, the most intimate, exposing moment of her life, to be looked at that way while he penetrated her. There was no room for thinking, as they looked at each other, only the two of them, caught in this ouroboros of desire. She felt her body yielding, not to him, but to them, to whatever it was that had grown up accidentally between them, choking out everything else, until she had no choice but to give herself up to it completely. The feeling rose up inside her, inexorable and frightening, so sure of itself in its raw power...so *good*...

"Please, please, please don't stop," she whimpered.

He stared back into her eyes and picked up the pace slightly.

Her head wanted to thrash against the arm of the couch, but his gaze fixed her in place. She could not twist or squirm away from the sensation that was threatening to overpower her; it simply built, feeding off his eyes and his cock, his skin pressed against her, the taste of her own sweat as it gathered on her upper lip.

"Please," she whispered, and then it crashed over her, and she was shuddering against him, her body throbbing and clutching him...

And still he moved inside her, slick in their accumulated wetness, pressing now, even more urgently against her clit and oh, God...

She came again, and it seemed to break something inside her, for tears rose to her eyes unbidden, and she felt them spill over onto her burning cheeks. He rode out his own climax, and still panting, gathered her into his arms. He did not say anything, did not ask her if she was all right. She could not have named the reason for her tears...joy or sadness...even if he had. He simply wound his hands up in her hair and held her against his chest, and she laid her face against his skin and breathed deeply of the scent of him as she had imagined doing so many nights in the past.

"Is there any chance that you could stay the night?" he asked her finally.

She peeled her face away from his chest, where it had stuck with sweat and tears. Normally, this might have embarrassed her, but just then she was loose-limbed, cleaned out, and filled with a kind of calm acceptance of her body.

"Yes, I think...Let me just write a quick note. You don't have an identifiable owl, do you?"

"Just a standard tawny."

She nodded. "Good."

Amazingly, she felt more awful about what she was currently doing than about anything she had done all evening. Somehow, it felt hurtful...to Severus, to herself, to Ronald...to suddenly bring this level of artifice to the situation, which heretofore had seemed to be comprised all of people acting genuinely. Poorly, perhaps, faithlessly, but still genuinely.

She rose from the couch with regret and located her bag.

Dear Ronald, she wrote.

I have been called back to the office from class, and it's the Department of Mysteries, so of course I couldn't tell you when I'd be back even if I knew. You know how these go. I'll be home when I can. Please don't forget to feed Fort.

Love,

Hermione

She looked up to find Snape standing behind her, reading the note over her shoulder. He nodded and whistled for his owl. When it had been dispatched, he motioned for her to follow him, and led her up a staircase that materialized from behind a bookshelf. She smiled a rueful little smile. There was something very Severus about that.

It struck her then, that he'd made a grander gesture tonight even than he had in showing up to her family Christmas party. That had been public, yes, but he could have left whenever he wished and returned to his privacy. Here, now, he'd brought her to his home. Of all the places they could have gone, he'd let her inside the one that he kept so separate from the world. It wasn't that he couldn't still bar her from it if he wished, but that... well, she knew now, didn't she? She'd seen it, seen the inside of him. She reached forward and took his hand.

His bed was a very large four-poster, uncurtained and spread with a white coverlet. He led her to it, and they both climbed in wordlessly. She felt, suddenly, bonelessly tired, spent. She had no energy for reflection or self-recrimination, which seemed to be what the situation called for. So she took the comfort of his bed, his body, and slept.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

Twenty-one years after the war, Hermione Weasley sends her second child off to Hogwarts. Her husband suggests she take a class in her new-found spare time. That class might change her life forever.

She arrived at home in a fog. It had been years...almost decades...since she'd slept in an unfamiliar bed, slept beside an unfamiliar man, whose angles and movements did not perfectly match her own. And periodically, she had woken in a panic, thinking *what the hell am I doing? I just cheated on my husband*. And then Severus had murmured her name, or drowsily brushed the hair from her face, and she had settled again into a thin and restless sleep.

The soreness she felt (it seemed she hadn't used some of those muscles in years) compounded the sense of otherworldliness she felt at arriving back in Ottery St Catchpole. She needed to sleep...really sleep...but she was far too restless and jittery to lie down. *This is no longer my house*, she thought. *I don't belong anywhere*.

Ronald was already at work when she arrived, either in the office they'd rented as a makeshift classroom, or in the home of one of his pupils. She knew she should know which, but it seemed she'd lost track of his schedule somewhere along the way. Despite her chagrin at how completely she'd seemingly already abandoned her life with Ron, it helped that she was alone, that she did not have to put on, for now, the weary face of the late-night worker and bury the maelstrom of emotions that were assaulting her. She felt certain, deep down, in the place she had spent months refusing to acknowledge or inspect, that she was going to leave her husband. There was simply no way back from where she'd gone.

Loving Severus was unlike anything she'd ever known. She wanted to compare it to being young again, though she didn't think she'd ever felt quite this way when she was young. She wanted to compare it to the first desperate lungful of breath after being submerged in water for far too long, but that felt terribly and unnecessarily cruel. She simply knew that the world was brighter, deeper, more vibrant for loving him, and that she could not imagine going back to a time in which her heart did not feel so matched, so near to exploding, as it did now.

She could only assume he felt the same way. Hermione had left early, before Severus had even gotten out of bed. He had not asked her to stay again, for which she was grateful, but they also had not set a time to meet again, and she felt, now that she was safely away, a mad desire to go back so that they might begin to discuss what all this meant. He knew her situation. He'd been to the house, met her children. If he was willing to... *to what?* she thought impatiently... well, *to pursue* her, then he must... he must want her, yes, as some permanent fixture in his life?

She realized that her hands were shaking slightly. She'd banked her family on his love for her and...

She Floo'd her office, because there was simply no way that she was going to be able to go in. There was too much to process, too much that would need to be set in order, and she knew that she was not going to be able to focus, let alone pull herself together enough to appear in public. And too, it seemed there might be some chance that he'd have tried to contact her there, for surely he would not Floo the house. She took several deep breaths.

"Angela," she called into the green flames in the fireplace.

"Miz Weasley," the girl replied. "You're quite late."

"I know, Angela, I'm sorry. But I've been unavoidably detained this morning. I'm afraid I won't be in. Would you please contact Ragnok in Beasts and Beings and reschedule our meeting for Wednesday, if he's available? And also find out the Wizengamot's preliminary schedule for next week and owl it over."

"Your husband called this morning," Angela said without acknowledging Hermione's requests.

"Oh?" she said. "Did he leave a message?"

"No, but he seemed to think you were somewhere in the Ministry. I told him that I hadn't seen you, and that to my knowledge, you were not in the building."

"That's fine, Angela," Hermione said. And, sadly, it was. The Department of Mysteries was an iron-clad alibi for all sorts of wrong-doers, as the Ministry would never admit it existed to anyone who didn't work there. Hermione knew that she was not the first, nor would she be the last, to use the Ministry's paranoia for personal reasons. She sighed.

"Did I have any other messages?"

"No, ma'am. I'll Floo when I've heard from Beasts and Beings. Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Hermione said. "Just a touch of a bug or somesuch. I'll wait for your Floo."

She withdrew her head from the fire and sat on the hearth, feeling momentarily too frightened and drained to get up. *What the hell am I doing?* She thought. *Am I honestly considering leaving Ronald? For a man who hasn't even said that he wants me?* She let her head rest in her hands, and felt the blood pounding in her temples. *Merlin alive, Hermione*, she said to herself sharply. *Are you really envisioning Severus Snape as a cad about town, seducing all the married women away from their husbands? Surely if he just wanted some female companionship, there were easier courtships to be had, yes? And perhaps the reason you haven't heard from him is that A. you left his home not yet an hour ago or B. he knows better than to try to owl you at home or at your very high-profile job. Perhaps you could leave off the histrionics and attend to the mess that is your life.*

Feeling slightly better (if a bit bemused that apparently, the voice that she chose to chastise herself with was that of Minerva McGonagall), she rose.

She wandered from room to room, taking in the clutter of her daily life with Ron. The genial mess of the Weasley household stood in stark contrast to the almost austere

home she had just left. Other than the sitting room into which they had first arrived, Severus's home was plain and white, almost as if it were waiting, like a blank piece of parchment. Could she live in such a place? Would the chaos of her *self* overpower it?

She looked around her. Never before had she considered any of their belongings or *Ron's*. Young as they were when they married, most of what they had, they'd bought together, or acquired from their families over time. She supposed that anything that had come from her family was technically hers. The console table in the hallway where they kept all their Muggle things...money, keys, mobile phones. The kitchen table where the children had done their schoolwork back before Hogwarts. The dresser in Hugo's room. A stray chair or two.

Not enough to imagine moving to a place of her own, she thought. And she felt in a deep and inarguable way that she was not entitled to anything in the house. Ronald had kept his promises, and so (regardless of whose money had been spent) it was he who had earned these things.

Oh? a small voice asked in her mind. And what about the children? Has he 'earned' them too?

The children were the problem she least wanted to consider. Every solution was the wrong one where the children were concerned; there was no happy ending for them now, and what hurt Hermione's heart the most was that she had somehow created a situation in which, for her to be happy, the children had to be unhappy. What kind of mother allowed these dichotomies? What kind of mother fell in love with a man who was not her children's father?

Hugo, she thought, might someday accept Severus, might learn to like him, even, if Christmas was any indication. But he would be hit the hardest by the destruction of their marriage, Hermione knew. So sensitive, so reliant on the safety of his family... Hugo would not understand what she had done to them.

And Rose? Rose was the more likely of the two to understand. She was at an age at which love was paramount, and she had a bit more distance from her parents than Hugo did, having left for Hogwarts two years earlier. She had friends whose parents had divorced; she was not so naïve... and yet, Severus and Rose, she thought, would never understand each other. Rose, with her boys and her clothes and her Quidditch...what could she share with a man like Severus? She was pretty, popular, and distinctly Gryffindorian. They were a recipe for disaster.

Hermione made her way upstairs, lingering in the doorway of Hugo's bedroom. She could smell his musty, little-boy smell, and she longed for him more acutely than she could ever remember having done. She crossed the room and sat down on his bed, pulling his pillow to her and hugging it over her stomach.

Who had invented boarding schools, anyway? she thought. It was barbaric, sending your children away for most of the year, losing them before such a thing was natural. She rocked slightly, still holding tight to Hugo's pillow.

If you do this, you really will lose them both, she thought. *And not in this maudlin, empty-nest sort of way*

She did not cry, because she was too stunned to do so yet. Too caught in the headlamps of that thought, too terribly aware of the truth of it.

You see them only three times a year as it is, and if you are lucky, when this is over...if Ronald is kind...one of those holidays might be yours. But you can only guarantee their presence. Their forgiveness is another matter. McGonagall's voice was back, and now Hermione did cry, her arms holding Hugo's pillow in a death grip.

"No," she cried aloud. "Not my children, no." She shook her head uselessly back and forth.

But how could it be any other way? she thought. Such exacting standards she'd always had, hadn't she? Fairness, justice, honor...weren't those the watchwords of not just their home, but of the House affiliation she'd passed along to her children like the color of their eyes? How could they forgive a mother who asked of them what she failed to hold to herself? The kind of mother who cared so little for her promises that she would break their hearts, their father's heart...

She lay down on Hugo's bed and sobbed. There was no way. She could not do it. Not with her children at stake.

But what about love? her traitorous heart spoke up. *What about the extraordinary?* Did she want to teach her children to settle for safety and routine when something life-changing came along? Should she teach them to deny their hearts, the truth? Would it truly be kinder to them to live a quiet lie?

Fort, perhaps drawn to the hitching sound of her breathing, padded down the hall and into the room, his nails clicking on the hardwood floors.

Fortescue. Here was one more betrayal to add to the list, for she had failed to think of Fort at all. The children were away, caught in the throes of their own lives, but Fort was here, and he endured in his helpless Crup way the loss of his beloved playmates, left behind with Ron and Hermione. And now she would tear even that apart. There was no way she could take him with her. He was the children's Crup...they'd got him when Hugo had turned two, and he should stay in the children's home. Besides that, the very idea of Severus tolerating a Crup was absurd...hair on the furniture, the potions garden all dug up...Oh, god, would she be made to give up everything she loved? Was that the price of this?

She scooped Fort up and buried her face in his neck. "I am so sorry," she whispered, over and over again into his fur.

After a time, she quieted and went downstairs to fetch a cup of tea. If the very thought of the family Crup was tearing her to pieces, she needed to regroup and consider the situation logically. She sat at the scarred wooden table, letting the warmth of her cup seep into her hands. She longed for Severus. Seeing him would remind her of how she had come to be in this situation, remind her why all this pain and upheaval was necessary. And yet, she felt reluctant to contact him.

Mostly, she was afraid of her own hysteria...she seemed to be swinging the pendulum between hope and despair; her thoughts were a scattered mess, and she didn't trust herself to refrain from sobbing all over him. And Severus was so frighteningly insecure, so apt to bolt at the slightest hint of her fear or reluctance. Better to have herself sorted first.

What she really needed, she told herself, was someone to talk to...a woman to whom she could lay out this whole sordid mess, someone who could be made to understand, someone who could stay calm and help her sort it out. What she needed was a best friend.

She threw a handful of Floo powder into the kitchen fire without a second thought. "Gin?" she said. "Are you busy?"

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, her worried face appearing suddenly in the fireplace.

As soon as she saw Ginny's hair shining molten emerald, Hermione remembered the problem. How had she surrounded herself entirely with Weasleys? She thought miserably. It suddenly seemed like incredibly poor planning to have her husband's sister as her closest friend. If trouble arose...even trouble not of her own creation...she would be left alone.

Not to mention the rest of the Weasleys, who'd been like family to her...who were family to her...and Harry. Married to Ginny, best friend to Ron, practically a Weasley in his own right, Harry would side with them, of course. (And what choice would he have? She didn't really have a 'side,' there was no argument in favor of what she was doing) and then even her childhood, fraught as it was, would be lost to her. The Golden Trio would be fractured beyond repair.

And while she was on the subject of the Golden Trio...the press! Oh, the press would have a field day. Hermione Granger betrays Ronald Weasley! Takes up with Death Eater Severus Snape! They would both be crucified. It would destroy the children. She remembered all too well the effects of the *Daily Prophet* on the Great Hall at breakfast.

"Hermione, answer me! What's wrong? I'm coming through."

"No!" she said, snapping out of her reverie. "No, I'm fine, honestly. I worked overnight at the Department of Mysteries, and so I'm a bit low on sleep, and then I used some doxycide on the curtains and it always makes me feel ill."

Ginny looked vaguely mollified. "Well, you need to use better ventilation. You scared me. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Hermione said quickly. *Why* had Flooing Ginny seemed like a good idea? "Nothing. Like I said, I spent the night in Mysteries, and so I've taken the day off to rest. I just thought I'd Floo to chat, but now I think I had better lie down."

"Yes, I think you'd better. I'll Floo later to check on you. When is Ron coming home? I could send Harry round with some soup after work."

"No, there's no need. Ron will be home soon. Thanks for thinking of me, Gin."

They disconnected, and Hermione sat at the table, staring at the wall and feeling her cup going cold in her hands. This was her life. There was no way out of it.

She fared no better over the next several days.

She stayed at work as much as possible, for when she was there, she was forced to attend to tasks other than remembering the thrill of seeing Severus waiting for her in that classroom, other than turning over and over her increasing certainty that she was somehow going to have to let him go.

Not for lack of loving him. Not because he was unworthy of the sacrifice or the pain that would result in leaving her family, but because she was Hermione Granger (Weasley or not). And if part of loving him were loving herself, then she had to admit that she could not do it while breaking all her promises, while harming her children. She doubted he would ever understand.

"So you were toying with me?" he sneered in her head. "You thought you'd have a bit of fun at Snape's expense, is that it? Sad old Severus, so starved for attention that he'd simply jump at the chance to roll in the hay with Weasley's seconds?"

She argued with him in her mind. She allowed the Severus of her imagination to say hurtful, awful things. She knew she deserved all of them.

When the day of the class finally arrived, Hermione was unable to eat. She sat at her desk in the Ministry of Magic, hollow-eyed with fatigue and empty-gutted, as if she'd been scraped clean inside.

She would never have looked through the post, if not for the charm: a familiar Notice-Me-Not that seemed somehow to beg for her attention all the same. She did not need to ask herself who had sent the letter. She simply warded the door and read it.

Hermione, it said.

I am writing to tell you that I have withdrawn from Advanced Contemporary Potion Making.

If I could, I would leave it at that, and you could make of it what you would, and perhaps your hurt and your anger would carry you through the coming months unscathed. But I admit, I am selfish. I have spent a lifetime encouraging others to hate me so that I could attempt to do the right thing, but I cannot bear your hatred. Selfishness got us into this. I suppose it will have to see us out, as well.

As I said, I have been hated, mostly justly. That was my own doing, and I would not change it now. It is not my intent to bemoan my fate or to rouse your sympathies. I only mean to make you understand the burden of it, the weight of so much scrutiny, so much judgment, upon one's soul. You may think you can imagine it. I do not think you can. You have been, in your short life, so righteously good, so universally admired. You have built a career on it. If there is any hope at all that your dream of equality for magical beings will be realized, that hope exists because of the esteem in which the wizarding world holds you.

I do not mean to imply that it is unjustified. You have not tarnished yourself, Hermione. All you have done is bring me several months undeserved pleasure. I am digressing.

The point is that it will all be destroyed if we continue on in this way. You are not naïve; you know what will happen. It will not just be the press. It will not just be your husband's family. It will be strangers on the street. Shops will turn away your custom. It will cost your job. You will fear the post. Your children will be taunted at school. And worst of all, you will be diminished in their eyes. You might think you can bear it. I know I cannot. I cannot bear to watch your life destroyed because of me.

I have looked for the loophole. I have allowed myself to imagine that there might be some way to continue our... here there was a blot on the page as if he had let his quill rest too long against the parchment... relationship while leaving your life unharmed. I was, after all, a spy. Secrecy is not foreign to me. But I find that I cannot stomach it. I have been slave to so much, Hermione. I cannot take your marriage as my newest master. However little I have, it must be mine. In time, I would grow to hate you, and I could not bear that either.

Perhaps it was not meant to last. Perhaps we were like our experiment with the Preserving Charms...add heat, and the potion becomes too potent for everyday application; leave it unmodified, and it is too weak to fulfill its purpose. I do not know. I regret not being able to find out.

I am making the house Unplottable, Hermione. Do not take offense. I would hide yours from myself if I could. Do not look for me. It would pain me to have to evade you.

Live well.

Severus

She folded the letter with numb fingers and set it on her desk. She laid both her hands on top of it as if it were his skin, as if this were the last touch she would ever deliver to him. She closed her eyes against the tears that were forming in her eyes.

"Live well, Severus," she whispered.

It was heartbreaking, she thought, that it should be the end of their affair that made her so certain it had been real. In that agonizing week before the letter had arrived, she'd asked herself a hundred times if she was sure that she loved him, if this were not all, in fact, some bizarre concoction of hormones and novelty that had left her as senseless and infatuated as a teenager. His letter, at least, had put that fear to rest. It soothed her, somehow, to know that she could still trust her own judgment, if not her own unfaithful heart.

She did not know how she was meant to go on, except to put one foot in front of the other. She did not know how many months or years would pass before she stopped watching for him in every black-haired stranger's face on the street, before she was able to open the post without looking for his spidery scrawl. But she knew that she must go home, because that was what he had bought for her with his love. A way back.

She dumped a scoop of food into Fort's dish and aimed her wand at the pan on the cooker, turning the beef. It would be these things, these simple routines, that would lead her back to her own life, if such a thing were possible. Dinners at home. Empty-nest nights with Harry and Ginny.

She heard the *pop* of Ronald's Apparition in the foyer. "Hello!" she called.

"Hey, 'Mione!" he called back, and the simple pleasure in his voice squeezed her heart. "I wasn't expecting you home!"

He walked into the kitchen, dumping a pile of papers onto the table.

"I decided to drop the class," she said, not looking at him. She removed the pan from the heat and set a knife to dicing peppers. "And you look like you could use a little help with the marking."

"Well, maybe just a little," he said, smiling his sheepish grin at her. "I think that Violet Dinwiddie is going to be a little Arithmantic prodigy when she gets to Hogwarts. I'd like it if you'd check over some of her more advanced maths, if you would. You know I sometimes get the signs..."

"Yes, I know," she said. "After supper I'll take a look."

"Dropped the class, eh?" Ron asked, coming up behind her and slipping an arm around her waist. "Just not the same without Snape?"

She closed her eyes and smiled a sad little smile, just the barest turning up at the corners.

"Something like that."