

Take a Chance on Love

by magalena

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Please note: several characters in this story are OOC due to the premise of the original prompt.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

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Hermione sat in her chair and smoothed her palms across the surface of her desk as she surveyed her new office. Everything was unpacked and settled to her satisfaction. She tried to convince herself that it felt good to be back in London after all this time, but she wasn't so sure that was the complete truth.

A light knock brought her out of her musings. "Yes, enter," she called.

The door opened, and a messy dark head poked around the edge. "Hermione?"

"Oh, Harry! It's so good to see you." She rose and rushed to greet him with a big hug and a quick kiss on his cheek.

"I just heard the news this morning. Is it really true? You've transferred back as head of your own department, no less?"

"Yes, it's true," she replied with a smile while she perched her bum on the edge of her desk.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"We weren't allowed to tell anyone... security issues. You know how secretive the Department of Mysteries is. But, yes, I am back for good if this all works out. I'm not really

the sole department head, though; it's a dual role that I'll share with the wizard who's been my partner in the field for over five years."

"Who is it?" Harry asked. "You've never talked much about who you work with. They're keeping it all very hush, hush. What's the big secret?"

"I'm not a liberty to reveal his identity just yet, not even to you, Harry, not until the Minister clears it. But don't worry. You won't be kept in the dark for long, as I expect the announcement to come at any time."

"Well, I really don't care who your mysterious partner is. I'm just glad you're home finally. I've missed you, Hermione. It's been so long since I've seen you," her old friend admonished half-jokingly.

"Yes, it has been quite awhile, hasn't it? I think the last time I was home was for Neville's gran's funeral, four years ago. And I am sorry I wasn't able to get back for little Al's christening, but we were in the middle of a very complex case, and I just couldn't get away at that time. Of course, you also knew where I lived. I would have loved a visit from you and Luna, or Ron and Pansy, or even just you and Ron if the girls couldn't come." Hermione poked right back; she wasn't going to let Harry make her feel guilty. In the decade she had been gone from England, neither one of her supposed *best* friends had ever bothered to pay her a visit. While she had come home often in those first years, as time passed her visits had become fewer and farther between until she'd just stopped coming back at all.

"I know, Hermione, but we've been so busy with the kids and our work, and it just seemed so hard to arrange our schedules..." Harry stopped before he dug himself into a pit so deep he'd never be able to scrape his way back to the top. "But you're right, you are. Absolutely right. We shouldn't have left all of the burden to make the effort on you. I'm really sorry for that, Hermione. Please forgive me."

Hermione sighed. In truth she had been more than a little annoyed with both Harry and Ron. She had never made friends easily, back at school or in her present life. Still, she realized that she could ill afford to cast off old friendships that still meant something to her, even if she had been hurt by their seeming lack of interest in her life.

"Yes, Harry, you're forgiven," she said with a sigh. "I'll even give you the chance to make it up to me by inviting me out to dinner or over for a few home cooked meals."

Harry grinned and readily agreed, "I think that's a brilliant idea."

"I can't wait to see the kids. How is my goddaughter? Only a couple more years and Selene will be off to Hogwarts. That's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"She's beautiful, precocious, and too darn smart for her own good," replied Harry with a chuckle.

Hermione smiled in response. "And the twins and little Al?"

"Remus and Ronnie are hellions, but we adore them anyway. Remus is a bit more like Luna, wild for magical creatures and a bit dreamy. Veronica is already taking to a training broom like a pro, so I'm sure that she's going to be a Seeker. They'll be seven in a few weeks, and you're hereby invited to their birthday party, by the way. The kids will all be thrilled to see Auntie Hermione. And little Albus Severus has never even met you. He is growing up way fast, too; he's three now, not a baby anymore," Harry concluded wistfully.

Hermione shuddered a bit. "Honestly, Harry, I'll never understand why you and Luna named that adorable child after that horrible man."

Harry looked surprised. "Who? Dumbledore or Severus?"

"Well, Snape of course, and to make him the boy's godfather, as well... I just don't understand you two. Whatever were you thinking? But come to think of it, Dumbledore wasn't much better considering all of the manipulative things he did for the so-called *greater good*. The old bastard," Hermione replied with a bitter tone in her voice.

Harry frowned. "I suppose even if he did use me to achieve his ends, Dumbledore did what he thought he had to in order to save the wizarding world. And weren't you always the one defending Snape to Ron and me, telling us to show him respect and call him professor and insisting that if Dumbledore trusted him, we should trust him too?"

"Well, that was before I realized how barmy old Dumbles really was. And I did feel we should respect Snape's role as a professor back at Hogwarts, but that doesn't change who he really is, does it? He's still a mean, awful, hurtful man. I heard that he's no longer teaching; thank Merlin for that at least."

Harry looked taken aback at the animosity in Hermione's words. "Awww... Hermione, he's really not like that, honest. Those things may have been true back when we were at school, but he was playing a role; he had to stay in character so he didn't reveal himself to Voldemort.

"But you are right...he's not teaching any longer. Severus works as a consultant to the Aurors' office now; he has for the past several years. In fact you'll most likely be working with him, at some point, as he is our top Dark Arts expert. And to be completely truthful with you, he has become a good friend to me and even more so to Ron."

"You can't be serious!" Hermione exclaimed, shocked and almost disgusted at Harry's statement.

"Oh, but I am. Severus is a regular guest in our home and at the Weasleys', both Ron's and Pansy's and at the Burrow. He and Ron have been working very closely together on a project for the past several months. They also partner together for dueling tournaments and coach a dueling league for young wizards at the Aurory. And they even get together regularly to play wizard chess, or gobstones, or just to hang out down at the Leaky for a pint or two.

"Look, it's true that Severus will never be the life of the party. But he's certainly not the devil incarnate, or the greasy git, or the bat of the dungeons that we called him as children..."

"Harry, you talk as if you actually like the prat," Hermione interrupted.

"Hermione, I do like him. I'm trying to tell you he's not at all the man you seem to remember him to be. He's not Little Mary Sunshine, by any means. He can still be quite sarcastic and cutting, and he's bitter at times, but who can blame him for that after the life he's led? And it's certainly true that he's not at all outgoing, and he tends to be rather quiet and bookish. He treasures his solitude and guards his privacy like a Rottweiler. But he's loyal to a fault; he doesn't make friends easily, but the people he does call friend... well, he'd do anything for them. All in all, deep down he is a good person and a good friend..." As Harry made this statement, he paused and gazed at Hermione in contemplation. "Hmmm... that sounds very much like another close friend of mine, as a matter of fact."

Hermione's eyes snapped up in shock. "Don't even imply that I am anything like that prat, Harry. Ever. If you want to think he's your friend, you go right ahead, but don't try to get me involved. As far as I am concerned, he's a complete arse, and I want nothing to do with him."

Harry replied solemnly, "Look, Hermione, I'm just happy you're back, and I don't want to argue with you about Severus. Just be aware that he will be invited to family gatherings and such, and he is welcome there, as are you. None of that is going to change, so please don't ask or expect us to exclude him because you don't care for him. And I hope you won't let that keep you away either.

"Now, on to a different topic: do you have a place to stay? You know you're welcome to come to our place for a few days until you find something."

"Thanks for the offer, Harry, but that won't be necessary. I do have someplace to stay temporarily. But I am looking for a nice flat or perhaps even a small house of my own. I think I'd actually prefer a house, so if you have any leads on that front, I'd appreciate it," said Hermione, happy to get away from the topic of Snape.

"Okay, but the offer stands," replied Harry.

"I really do appreciate it, but honestly the kids would probably drive me round the bend. I'm not used to all the chaos you and Luna call everyday life," responded Hermione with a smile.

Just then there was a light tap on the side door to her office. Before she could reply the door opened and the man standing there looked surprised. "Oh, I'm sorry, I assumed you were alone. I didn't realize that you would have visitors here already. I've just received a memo from Kingsley. He's scheduled the press conference for two o'clock and would like us in his office fifteen minutes early."

He turned slightly to nod at Harry. "Mr. Potter."

Harry stood frozen, looking as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Well, I suppose since Kingsley is announcing it this afternoon anyway, there's no harm that the cat is out of the bag. My partner and joint head of the D.I.D.A. should, of course, need no introduction to you, Harry."

Turning to the tall blond man leaning against the doorway, she smiled and said, "Shall we adjourn to your office to review our statements for the press conference, Lucius?"

~**~

Harry was called to Kingsley's office to be briefed on the appointment of the dual heads to the newest department in the Ministry Bureau of Investigations, the Department for the Investigation of Dark Artifacts, otherwise known as the D.I.D.A.

"This new department will be dedicated to discovering and deactivating, if necessary, Dark Artifacts. There is already a small team of wizards and witches who've been working for the Department of Mysteries for the past ten years performing just this task, here and around the world. They are rather like a special type of curse-breaker and very well trained in their field. We've kept them busy enough that the M.B.I. has decided to give them their own department," explained Kingsley to Harry. "Lucius and Hermione are two of the best we have, so they were offered the job to head the department jointly."

"Kingsley, Hermione is one of my oldest and dearest friends. Why am I only now learning that she has been working closely with one of my oldest and not-so-dearest enemies? In spite of any favors that git's wife may have done for me at the Battle of Hogwarts, I still don't trust him," said Harry.

Kingsley patiently explained, "Harry, as employees of the Department of Mysteries, both Hermione and Lucius held positions equivalent to Unspeakables, and thus they weren't permitted to talk to anyone but their superiors about their cases or their association with each other."

He laughed when relating their reaction when they had been assigned to work on their first case together. "Between the two of them, they owled or Floo-called the Ministry at least once a day for weeks, repeatedly demanding that we reassign the other one to a different partner. But in the end, they worked brilliantly together, so much so that shortly thereafter it was decided to pair them up permanently as a team; they have worked together ever since. They are without a doubt the M.B.I.'s top field agents; if you ever get the chance to see them together in action, you'll be amazed.

"I need you to set up the security detail for today's press conference and for Malfoy Manor. With the Malfoys coming back, there is some concern for the family's safety, and I'd like you to handle the project personally."

"Why is Malfoy working for the Ministry in the first place?" asked Harry.

"After the war, Lucius was acquitted, but the conditions of his parole dictated he work for the Department of Mysteries; considering his expertise in the Dark Arts, it seemed like a good fit."

"Who on earth would think it was a good idea to trust Lucius Malfoy with Dark Artifacts?" asked Harry.

"Ummm... that would be me, actually."

"Oh, sorry, Kingsley, I meant no disrespect."

"I figured we could make use of talents that weren't readily available from just anyone; plus at the same time, it offered the Ministry an opportunity to keep an eye on him and make sure he wasn't stirring up trouble. However, he was worried about his family's safety, so we agreed to relocate them outside England. They've all been living abroad, first Spain, then Argentina, and for the last five years in the US...Chicago, I believe. But now, Lucius naturally wants his family here with him. I think...or hope anyway...that after all this time none of the Malfoys would be in any danger, but just to be on the safe side, the Ministry will provide security for the first few months until they get settled."

"Hermione had been living near Chicago for the last five years," stated Harry bluntly.

"Well, of course. They were partners and had to work together every day," said Kingsley. "Look, Harry, if this is going to be a problem for you, say so now, and I'll ask Robards to assign someone else. I thought you would be the best man for the job. By putting our top Auror in charge, I hope to send a message to any malcontents who might cause trouble. Plus I thought you would want the assignment, considering your debt to Narcissa. But if your feelings toward Lucius...or perhaps it's Draco...are going to interfere with this assignment, then maybe it would be better for someone else to take it on."

Harry answered, "No, Kingsley, I can handle it. I do admit that I don't entirely trust Lucius, but if you say he's been working for us for the past decade, then I believe it. I just don't really like the idea that Hermione has been working that closely with him and I never even knew about it. But I can put my personal feelings aside and act professionally."

"Thanks Harry. I knew I could count on you," Kingsley responded with a smile, shaking Harry's hand vigorously.

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Harry observed the press conference in his official capacity. And although he knew this was not what Kingsley had been referring to, he got a chance to see Hermione and Lucius together in action, so to speak. He watched as they charmed the crowd of reporters. They both were very captivating speakers. Their demeanor with each other was relaxed, bantering back and forth, and they knew each other so very well that they practically finished each other's sentences. They finessed the crowd who were initially a hostile press. Between them, they outlined their vision for the future of the D.I.D.A. and explained their background and training; they spoke of their many years of experience in fieldwork and then shared a few anecdotes about cases they'd solved.

Harry felt a flash of jealousy. He thought briefly of the Hermione he'd known more than a decade earlier when he and Ron had been the center of her world, the ones who finished each other's sentences. Hermione had drifted farther and farther away from him with each visit over the years until she'd just quit coming back. He realized now that he was probably more to blame for that than Hermione; she had made an effort, but he was determined now to make up for past mistakes.

After the press conference, there was a short meet and greet with the department heads and a few higher-ups in the Ministry. As he watched them from across the room, he saw Malfoy lean in to whisper something in her ear and his fingers lightly caressed the small of her back. Hermione responded with a smile and a light touch to his forearm as she leaned up to say something in return, causing Lucius to chuckle deeply. Harry had a light bulb moment and was shocked and appalled by what he'd just witnessed.

He approached Hermione as she stood making small talk with Arthur Weasley, Kingsley and Malfoy. He grabbed her arm, a bit more roughly than he'd honestly intended. "I need to talk to you. Now," he demanded as he pulled her away from the three.

"Of course, Harry. You can walk with me back to my office." She pointedly removed her arm from Harry's grasp, then politely made her excuses to the three men before she led the way out of the room.

She didn't say a word all the way back to her office. Harry could tell she was angry by the set of her mouth and the way she held herself so stiffly. As she entered her office,

she warded the doors before she moved behind her desk, placing it between them like a shield. "What the hell was that all about, Harry?"

"Are you having an affair with Lucius Malfoy?" he asked bluntly. For a brief instant, before she could turn away and cover up her emotions, he saw the flash of shock and hurt in her eyes.

Shaking her head, Hermione's hand covered her eyes then slid slowly down to her mouth. He thought he heard her mumble, "Not you too, Harry....," before she confronted him.

"Why would you even think such a thing? Is it because of my promotion? Do you think the only way I could get this job is by sleeping with my partner? Like I couldn't be here because I earned it, so I must have slept my way to the top? I know that thanks to Skeeter's rumor mongering in the *Prophet* that's probably what most of the public would like to believe. But you know me, and I never thought you would think that of me, Harry. Hell, maybe you think I fucked Kingsley as well. That would make a lot more sense in regards to this promotion. Is that what you believe, Harry?"

"Hermione, no!" cried Harry. "I'm... I... that's not what I meant at all. It's just that you looked so at ease with each other, so close... intimate almost. I just... I assumed... that is, it looked like..."

"So, if I were to see you at a cocktail party, whispering in Ginny Weasley's ear, and then she laughed and patted your hand, I should assume that you two are having an affair?"

"Well, no! But Ginny and I are friends. And I would never cheat on Luna; that's just crazy."

"Yes, well, believe it or not Lucius and I *are* friends. He's not just my work partner, he is my friend, in fact, one of my closest and most trusted friends. But we are not nor have we ever been lovers. He's a married man just as you are, so what makes you think he would cheat on Cissy?"

"Well, he's Malfoy," declared Harry as if that explained everything. Even as he said it, he knew how stupid it sounded. With all of his experience as an Auror, he'd made a rookie mistake...he'd allowed his emotions to take control over logical thinking.

At that moment, the side door to her office swung wide, and the wizard in question stood there with a malevolent glint in his eye. "Are you all right, Hermione?" Lucius asked.

"I'm fine, Lucius. I am quite sure I warded that door, though."

Lucius stood next to Hermione, and he smiled. "And I unwarded it, my dear. I did not care at all for Mr. Potter's actions toward you downstairs. Just what is going on here?"

"In answer to your question, it seems Harry has decided that you and I simply must be having an affair."

Lucius' head snapped up, and he looked at her with wide eyes. "An affair? You and I... with each other?"

Hermione nodded, and as their eyes met, they both burst out in raucous laughter. Lucius laughed so hard he had to lean on Hermione's desk to keep himself upright, and Hermione was wiping tears from her eyes when she finally turned back to Harry.

"As I already pointed out, Lucius is my work partner and my friend; I would not be willing to put either relationship at risk merely for sex."

"Well, I must point out that it would not *be* mere sex; I am quite sure that it would be really, really, hot sex. Great sex, in fact. The best ever, probably," interjected Lucius. "But then again, I am old enough to be your father, which might make it a bit awkward."

"Oh, I don't really think that would be a problem, Lucius. You know that I've always had a big thing for older men, and you actually *are* quite sexy for a man your age. "

"Well, I do appreciate that, sweet. But we both know what *thereal* issue here would be..."

"Narcissa!" they both cried simultaneously.

"You see, Harry," Hermione stated quite seriously, "Firstly, not only is Lucius a married man, but he is married to the love of his life. He would no sooner cheat on Narcissa than you would cheat on Luna.

"Secondly," she continued, "Narcissa is *my* friend, as well, and I would never dream of hurting her in such a way. And thirdly..."

"She would kill us both," interrupted Lucius.

"Oh, definitely. Happily and violently, she would torture us endlessly without a qualm, and then she would dispose of our bodies in such a way that we would never, ever be found."

"Mulch," concluded Lucius. "I'm quite sure she would turn us both into mulch."

"So, Harry, if we ever both turn up missing, you may assume that we lost our heads and gave in to temptation and got caught fucking like bunnies. Then, when Cissy learned of our betrayal, she mulched us and fed us to her roses. Be sure to check there first, won't you?" Hermione directed Harry facetiously.

They were making fun of him, and he knew he deserved it. "Okay, okay. I believe you. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. " Harry apologized. "You two just seemed so cozy and easy together; at the time it seemed to be the only thing that made sense. I would never in my wildest dreams have imagined you being friends with a Malfoy, any Malfoy, Hermione."

"Well, that may be true, Harry. But on the other hand, I never would have pictured you and Ron being such good buddies with Snape either. That seems pretty unbelievable to me, so I guess we'll both just have to accept that things have changed, and we're all dealing with a whole new world."

TBC

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected

bonds of friendship have been formed; and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

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Hermione settled into the routine of her new job, although, at this point, she wasn't entirely sure it was what she'd hoped for. It involved a lot more administrative shite than she really cared for and far less of the real down and dirty work involved in decoding Dark Artifacts, the part of the job she really loved. A conference with Lucius revealed he felt the same way. He was a bit more willing to deal with the daily humdrum of paperwork, as he'd been accustomed to managing such things with his family businesses, but he, too, feared he would quickly come to miss the fieldwork aspect, as well.

The solution they settled on involved hiring someone to delegate the lesser, more mundane tasks to. Hermione found the perfect candidate in Percy Weasley. Ever the Ministry's man, he was more than willing to deal with the day-to-day bureaucracy and keep their department running smoothly.

They spent the morning meeting with Percy and outlining their expectations for his role in the department. Hermione felt that they had definitely made the right choice and looked forward to spending the next few days doing extensive research on some new artifacts that had been turned over to the Ministry.

After lunch, she spread her research materials over the conference table and had just settled down to her task when she was interrupted by a red-haired whirlwind.

She was grabbed up and hugged so hard she could barely breathe, then spun around until even when they stopped she felt like the room was still spinning, just like the first time she'd gone through the Floo.

"Ron! Ron, stop. Put me down," she laughed as she returned the hug. Ron hadn't changed; he reminded her of a great big puppy dog, all gangly arms and legs and full of boundless enthusiasm. "It's so good to see you. Harry said you've been out on an assignment. I'm so glad you're back."

"I know. I just now heard about your new job. Imagine that, our Hermione a department head before she's thirty. I knew you'd end up doing great things, 'Mione. I never doubted it," praised Ron. "And I hear you've even managed to tame the fearsome Lucy-Lu. Six years working with the bugger, and you haven't killed each other yet. And not a word to us about any of it. You do know how to keep your secrets; that's for sure, love."

"Oh, my God!" Hermione exclaimed, but she couldn't keep the silly grin off her face. "Ron, don't ever let Lucius hear you call him that, or you'll be hexed seven ways from Sunday."

"Oh, hell, I'm used to working with Severus; after that, Malfoy pales in comparison. He doesn't scare me," he replied with a cheeky grin.

At the mention of Snape, Hermione's enthusiasm waned, and she commented glumly, "Yes, Harry has been singing Snape's praises too. He says he's like a part of the family and that he's best buds with you both."

Ron frowned, puzzled by her reaction. "Well, yes. It's fair to say that he is a friend of all our families. Pansy's been fond of him since he was her Head of House, plus Severus and I have worked closely together for quite a while and I've gotten to know him pretty well. He's not at all like when we were kids, Hermione. So, yes, I do count him as a close friend."

Hermione merely sniffed and said, "Well, to each his own. I have no desire to nurture a friendship with the man. It looks like I am going to have to work with him, though. I'll put up with him because I'm a professional, but I don't have to like him." Turning away from Ron, Hermione straightened her piles of folders and books, organizing her research for the new project.

Ron was silent for several seconds, but Hermione could feel his eyes upon her. Finally, she heard him step forward, and his hand settled on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Well, all that aside, love, I want us to catch up with each other's lives. What do you say we go out for a bite and a drink or two after work, just you and me? Do you have plans? I want to hear everything you've been up to and tell you all about my family. How about it?"

Hermione paused to blink back the quick sting of tears. She knew that Harry meant well when he'd talked about getting together or having her over to the house to catch up. Thus far, however, he hadn't actually bothered to initiate anything, and she'd been home nearly two weeks. She knew he was busy with his job and his family, and although she'd never in a hundred years say anything to Harry, it had stung that he hadn't bothered to follow through. But Ron's immediate invitation and interest touched Hermione's heart. She hadn't realized until just that moment how very much she'd missed her 'boys.'

"No, I don't have any plans," she replied huskily, her voice tight with emotion. "What about Pansy? Won't she expect you home? It's your first day back, and I'm sure she wants to spend time with you. Do you want to have her join us?"

"Oh, Severus and I actually got back last night. But I pushed all the paperwork off on him and took the morning off to spend some quality time with my witch," Ron explained, puffing out his chest with a knowing look, a wink, and a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Besides, Pans already had something planned with Daphne for tonight, so she won't miss me. I'll Floo-call her and let her know, though, so she won't worry. And we do really want you to come over sometime soon so you can see the new house and everything, but for tonight, it'll just be us, kind of like old times minus Harry. Is that okay?"

Throwing her arms around Ron, she hugged him just as tightly as he had hugged her before. "Oh, Ron. That sounds wonderful; I'd love to. Stop by my office at the end of the day, and we'll leave from here."

~**~

True to his word, Ron showed up just after five, warbling, "Oh, Luceeeeee, I'm hooome," when he saw Lucius standing next to Hermione in the conference room.

Hermione was trying to gather up her books, reports, and research materials, and Lucius then snatched it all out of her arms and piled it back on the table.

Pausing only to give Ron a strange look, as if he thought the Auror might be a bit off, he admonished, "Hermione, stop! You are not taking all of this home with you. You promised Cissy that you would stop pushing yourself so hard. She'll have my head if I let you spend yet another weekend working..."

"What's going on?" asked Ron.

"My *partner* here thinks he can tell me what I can do with my free time. If I want to get a head start on my research for this project, then I shall," Hermione declared, scooping everything into a pile and attempting to gather it up.

"Tell your stubborn friend that she no longer needs to prove anything to anyone. As one of the youngest department heads in the history of the Ministry, she's already proven her worth; it won't kill her to relax and have a real weekend like normal people," said Lucius, grabbing at the pile in her arms.

Within seconds, they were bickering like an old married couple. Ron watched, open mouthed, as the two yammered on at each other, becoming louder by the minute. After a short time, he actually feared they might come to blows or hexes. "STOP!" he yelled as he stepped between them and physically pushed them apart.

Turning to Lucius, he spoke first, "Malfoy, you've worked with her for nearly six years, so you must know by now that for her research is relaxation. Telling her not to study or research would be like telling Dumbledore not to eat sweets."

"See," Hermione gloated, turning to gather her prize.

Ron grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand back. "No, Hermione, wait. I truly never thought I'd hear myself say this, but Lucius is right. You do work too hard; you always have. You've always pushed yourself to extremes. It's time you started to ease up. You've earned it, love."

At her frustrated look, Ron asked, "Now, tell me this, is there anything with this project that is so urgent that it needs to be done in the next twenty-four hours?" Ron looked out of the corner of his eye at Lucius, who shook his head slightly.

"No... I guess not," Hermione finally admitted softly, looking longingly at all of her lovely reference materials.

"But you really do want to sink your teeth in and get started on it anyway, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," she replied eagerly.

"Okay, here's what we'll do," said Ron. "You can choose...," he started as he looked at the massive amount of books, journals, folders and loose parchments, probably enough to fill a whole section on one of her beloved bookshelves back at Hogwarts. He glanced again at Lucius. "... five things to take home and work on over the weekend."

Her eyes widened. "Five? Are you insane? I'd be done with that in less than twenty minutes, half an hour tops. One-fourth of it, at least."

Ron looked over at Lucius again, who frowned and shook his head. "Eight things," Ron countered.

"Ronnn, be reasonable," she whined. Then realizing that wasn't going to soften him up, she snarled, "No less than twenty-five."

"Ten," countered Ron, standing firm.

"Twenty."

"Twelve, and that's my final offer. And that big, fat, ancient-looking Grimoire over there counts as two. And... you can't spend more than one afternoon on this over the whole weekend."

"Fine," she sneered, then she smiled internally to herself. She was half-angry at him for telling her what to do, but the other half was pleased to know that he cared enough, they...he and Lucius both...cared enough to tell her what to do because they thought it was for her own good.

"Fine," agreed Lucius. "While you make your decision as to what you want to focus on, Mr. Weasley and I will step into my office for a moment. Please join us when you are done, my dear." Just before they stepped through the doorway, Ron noticed Lucius flick his wand discreetly at the pile. He whispered for Ron's benefit, "An accounting spell. She won't be able to cheat. Twelve is the limit."

"Clever," replied Ron with a nod.

Lucius offered him a drink while they waited, but Ron declined, explaining that he and Hermione were going out for dinner and maybe a few drinks afterward. The two made small talk about Quidditch, the Ministry, and Lucius' and Hermione's promotions. Lucius inquired after Pansy and asked about the project Ron and Severus were working on.

"Oww!" they heard from the conference room just before Hermione stepped through the door with her much reduced, Auror-approved pile of research material. "Very funny, Lucius," she said, sucking her stinging fingertip.

"Forgot how to count to twelve, did you?" he asked with a smirk.

"No, I forgot about the Grimoire counting as two," she admitted sheepishly. "Here," she continued, showing them all to him. " Take these home for me, will you? And don't even think of shrinking them; a couple of those parchments are ancient."

"Wait," said Ron, confused. "Home? You're living at Malfoy Manor?"

"Just temporarily," Hermione explained. "Narcissa and Lucius invited me to stay there with them until I can find a place of my own."

"Now, Hermione, you know Cissy would like nothing better than to have you stay with us permanently. It's not as if we don't have the room. The entire manor has been renovated in our absence," Lucius assured Ron. "There is no longer any remnant of the Dark Lord's presence there."

"I do know that I'm welcome, Lucius. You both have made me feel at home. While the manor is beautiful, it's not really my style.

"And Cissy does tend to mother me," Hermione said in an aside to Ron. "Not that I'm complaining. I do love her, and she's been a good friend to me, but I really need my own space."

"Well, before you find that space and leave us, we must invite your friends over for dinner one night, perhaps next weekend or the one after. Cissy loves to entertain, and I am sure she and Draco both would like to see Pansy. Of course, you'll want Potter and his wife, and we could invite Severus, as well."

"I'll think about it, Lucius, and discuss it with Cissy later," responded Hermione. She'd never explained to him her animosity toward Snape.

As Hermione and Ron were riding down in the lift, Ron suddenly started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Hermione asked.

"Lucius Malfoy just invited the 'Golden Trio' to his house for a friendly little get-together. Times have certainly changed, 'Mione; there's no doubt about that, no doubt at all," concluded Ron with a grin.

~**~

Hermione suggested they Apparate to Hogsmeade for dinner. "I haven't been there in years; it will be just like the old days at school," she said.

In actuality, she remembered what Harry said about Ron and Severus going to the Leaky Caldron for a pint, so she figured there was little chance that they would run into him at The Three Broomsticks. Not that she was avoiding him because it looked as if she would have to deal with the git at work and he was going to be present in her private life due to their mutual friends. But for tonight at least, she just wanted Ron to herself.

As they entered the pub, a shout greeted them, "'Ermione! Whut're ya doin' 'ere? I 'ad no idea you was back."

"Hagrid! It's so good to see you," she greeted their old friend. After a few minutes of small talk and promises to come visit him soon, she and Ron chose a relatively quiet table in a corner. After ordering the special of the day and a butterbeer for old time's sake, they sat back to catch up.

"So... partners with Malfoy, huh? How did that happen?" asked Ron.

Hermione shrugged. "There was a case in Argentina. Ancient relics were being smuggled out of the country; one in particular carried a Dark Curse that wreaked all sorts of havoc. By the time the Department of Mysteries was called in to help, three Muggles had already died. I'd just closed a case in Indonesia and was waiting for a new assignment, so they sent me. The first day I walked into the office and saw Lucius Malfoy sitting there, I thought it was some kind of bad practical joke. I knew that he was working for the department, of course, and had even heard that he'd built quite a good reputation for himself. I just never considered that I'd ever have to deal with him personally." She paused to take a long sip of her butterbeer.

"So, what happened? Were there explosions, fireworks? Did hexes fly?" asked Ron with a grin.

"I think I said something like, 'No fucking way,' and stormed out of the room. Unfortunately, our supervisor was waiting outside the door to push me right back in. Lucius wasn't any happier than I about the assignment, although I misjudged his reasons."

"How so?"

"I assumed he didn't want to work with me due to my being a Muggle-born. And to be completely honest, I still thought of him as a Death Eater, even though I knew he'd been acquitted."

"Well, I can't say I'd have reacted any differently if it had been me," said Ron. "In fact, the first few times I had to work with Severus, it felt really weird. I kept expecting to hear, 'Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley, and a detention with Mr. Filch,'" Ron imitated Snape's voice to a tee. "But you said you'd misjudged Malfoy? So, what was that about?"

"Well, he didn't want to work with me anymore than I wanted to work with him. But his reason wasn't because I was a Muggle-born, as I believed, but because he felt I was too young to know enough about Dark Artifacts to be effective. However, I'd been working in the field for four years at that point and on some really complicated cases. I figured I could hold my own, and so did our boss. He told Lucius he was underestimating my capability and he should give me a chance.

"We both tried so hard to get out of that assignment, or get a new partner. I must have Floo-called Kingsley twenty times, and I think Lucius was contacting him every other day, too," Hermione said with a chuckle.

"So, how did you finally come around to working together without killing each other?" asked Ron, pausing to pass the plate from the server to Hermione, before taking his own. "Thanks, love," he murmured in an aside to the girl.

"Believe it or not... Draco."

"Draco? You're kidding me. Okay, there has to be a story there, so let's hear it."

"Well, I'd come across some information critical to the case, and it couldn't wait, so I Floo'd to Lucius' office at his home. It was supposed to be secure. There shouldn't have been any interaction between Lucius' family and myself. Just as you guys didn't know who my partner was, neither did his family know about me. But somehow, Draco was in the office instead of Lucius when I arrived. He was shocked to see me, to say the least.

"Granger?" gasped Draco. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see your father on official business, Draco. You are not supposed to be here."

Lucius entered the study just then, and it was like a Lumos went on in Draco's head as he made the connection.

"This is the partner you've been trying so hard to get rid of? Are you mad, Father? You made her sound like some piece of pretty fluff who wouldn't know her wand from a candlestick. This witch was hunting bloody Horcruxes and breaking into Gringotts when she was only seventeen years old. It doesn't get much darker than that, does it? If you would want anyone at your back...anyone at all...it would be Hermione Granger."

"Wow, thanks, Draco. I didn't know you cared," quipped Hermione. "But to be perfectly honest, I was eighteen at the time, and I'd really rather you not bring up that Gringotts thing. I've been trying to get the goblins to forget about that one for years."

Draco turned on her abruptly and snarled, "I really don't give a damn about you, Granger. But my father I do care about. His work is very dangerous, so I would prefer that his partner be the best there is. That's you, whether I like you or not."

"It was just about then that Narcissa showed up. From that point on it was like a three ring circus. His office was supposed to be secured, but both Draco and Narcissa bypassed his wards at will. I wanted to Oblivate them both according to procedure, but Lucius absolutely refused to let that happen. We finished our business that night regarding the case, and Cissy insisted I stay for dinner. Somehow, from then on, I gradually became part of the family."

"Seriously?"

"Honestly, it's true, I swear. Since I couldn't Oblivate them, the department made them swear a wand oath for security, and Lucius and I have been partners ever since. Cissy sort of adopted me; like I said earlier, she tries to mother me. It seems she always wanted a daughter, and for some reason, she just took a liking to me, or perhaps like Draco, she figured Lucius should have someone reliable backing him up," Hermione explained.

"And as for my reservations about him, I learned over time that though Lucius had long been an advocate of preserving pureblood traditions, he never actually wanted to eliminate Muggles and Muggle-borns. That was lip service to protect his family during Voldemort's reign. Cissy had a strong influence on him, as well. Although most people think of them as pureblood supremacists, the Blacks were clearly divided politically; if you analyze it, it's easy to see. Andromeda was married to a Muggle-born, Sirius was friends with both a werewolf and Harry's mum, and Regulus turned against Voldemort in the end. Certainly not the typical old-school purebloods that we'd imagined them to be," Hermione concluded.

After considering for a moment, she added with a smirk, "So, I guess in a weird, twisted sort of way Draco is now like my own bratty little brother."

Ron snorted and nearly choked on his food.

Pounding him on the back, Hermione said, "So, enough about me. Tell me what's been going on in your life, Ron?"

Ron updated Hermione on the rest of the Weasley clan's news. He told her all about his and Pansy's life together. He was quite enthusiastic about their new home...recently remodeled and decorated by Pansy...in Ottery St. Catchpole. It was not far from the Burrow and Harry and Luna's home, the former Lovegood residence.

"I'm very glad to hear that you and Pansy are so happy together, Ron. I must admit that I had my doubts about you two together in the beginning, but it seems that saying 'opposites attract' has proved true in your case," said Hermione.

"Yup, we just seem to fit. I really love her so much, 'Mione. We've decided to start a family," he confided.

"Oh, Ron, I'm so happy for you two," cried Hermione. She threw her arms around her friend in a tight hug.

"Well, to tell you the truth, we've already started. Don't be angry at me for not telling you sooner. I meant to, but you know I'm not much good at writing and keeping in touch and such," Ron said with a guilty look.

"Just how far along is Pansy?" asked Hermione suspiciously, pulling away to glare at Ron.

"She's due in a couple of months, actually," he admitted.

"Two months? Ron, were you even going to bother to tell me at all?" asked Hermione, feeling left out and somewhat hurt.

"Course I was. In fact, Pansy and I have discussed it, and we want you to be our baby's godmother."

"Me?" gasped Hermione. "You want me to be your baby's godmother?"

"I just said that, didn't I? Please, Hermione. I know I haven't been a very good friend in the past few years, but you're still one of my best mates in the world. It would mean a lot to me and to Pansy, too, if you'd agree." He sounded truly contrite. "Please, Hermione."

"Yes, of course, Ron. You know I'd love to; I'm honored," said Hermione. "I wish we'd managed to stay in touch better than we have, but now that I'm back here, I hope that will change. I can't wait to see the house and Pansy and spend time with both of you."

"That's great, Hermione. Thanks so much, love. It means a lot to me that two of my closest friends will be my child's godparents. Let's celebrate! We need something stronger than butterbeer. Rosmerta! A round of firewhisky for us over here!"

After a couple of rounds there, they decided to move on to the Hog's Head for a few more. It was quieter there, plus Hermione wanted a chance to say hello to Aberforth.

~**~

As he entered the Hog's Head, the first thing to catch his eye was the good looking brunette standing at the bar. She dropped her napkin, and as she bent to pick it up he got a glimpse of the most gorgeous arse he'd had a chance to ogle in a good long time. It was wonderfully rounded, firm looking and just waiting for him to run his hands all over it and give it a good tight squeeze or two. She didn't look at all familiar to him, but he certainly wouldn't have minded getting to know her better and getting his hands on that arse. It stood to reason, if she was hanging out in the Hog's Head unescorted, she must be looking for company.

He'd had a few too many drinks already, but he figured that he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't take advantage of an opportunity for a free shag if it was offered. Hell, even if she were a lady of the paid persuasion, that could be arranged as well. To him she looked like she'd be worth any price.

Staying in the shadows by the door, he observed her from behind and hoped that the front of the package was as nice as the rear. He figured he just couldn't be so lucky; she probably had the face of a gargoyle. Still, he hadn't been with a woman in awhile, and he could always keep his eyes closed, or just fuck her from behind if she turned out to be too horrible.

Sidling up to the woman, he heard her say something to Aberforth, but he wasn't paying attention to her words. Slipping up close to her, his body practically rubbing against hers, he ran one hand over that luscious arse, giving it a pat and a little squeeze while the other hand roamed down her arm, his fingers drawing little runes along the way. He leaned in and whispered a thoroughly obscene suggestion into her ear.

Her body stiffened, and he instantly got an intensely bad vibe. She stepped back and turned to face him, with fury in her eyes just as Ron Weasley appeared behind her.

They all spoke simultaneously:

"Snape!"

"Granger?"

"Severus!"

Not even bothering with her wand, Hermione drew back her hand and slapped him hard across the face. "How dare you, you slimy bastard! Keep your hands to yourself and stay away from me, Snape!" she shouted as she stormed out.

He held a hand to his stinging cheek as he watched her stomp out of the pub and thought to himself, *Sweet mother of Merlin, she's magnificent.*

TBC

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed, and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, Clairvoyant and SoftObsidian. Also, many thanks to pythia_delphi for the awesome prompts.

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"Severus, what just happened?" asked Ron warily.

"You really don't want to know," replied Severus. "Good god, she packs quite a wallop for such a little thing. But she was absolutely glorious, wasn't she?" he said as he rubbed his cheek. Then, he turned to Ron and ordered, "Cast a numbing charm on my face. It still stings like hell."

As Ron raised his wand, he stumbled back a bit.

"Wait a second, are you drunk? Don't point your wand at me if you're drunk, Weasley. I don't trust you that much. Here..." Reaching into a pocket on the inside of his robes, he produced a small vial of Sobering Potion. Even though he was no longer a Potions master by profession, he was still always prepared. "Take this before you do it."

Ron reached for the potion just as Severus snatched it back. "Hold on. If I sober you up, you'll probably feel compelled to strike me even harder than she did."

Ron's eyes narrowed as he looked at his partner uneasily. "I really don't like the sound of this, Severus. You'd best tell me exactly what's going on. Let's grab a table that's more private, and we can cast a Muffliato. Aberforth, give us a couple firewhiskys, would ya?"

"How are you going to fix my face if you're going to continue drinking?"

"Honestly, Severus, for your own safety, I'm getting the idea that I really shouldn't be sober to hear this story. You're just going to have to just suck it up and live with it; I have a feeling you probably deserved it."

"You're probably right," he replied glumly, grabbing the bottle from Aberforth and taking it to the table.

"You asked her to do what!" shouted Ron a few moments later. He nearly overturned the table as he jumped to his feet and confronted Severus. "Damn it all, Snape. You were right...I think I am going to have to hit you. How could you say something like that to Hermione, to any woman?"

"Well, I didn't know it was Granger at the time, now did I? I only saw her from behind, and her arse was calling to me. She was all alone; you were nowhere in sight, so I figured... a good-looking witch... alone at the Hog's Head... she must be looking for companionship. In fact, I actually thought she might be the kind of witch who would require payment for her services, but she looked like she was worth any cost. I wanted that arse."

Ron considered for a minute before he commented, "All right, I can see that, I guess. But dear Merlin, Severus, you can't just be popping up to any random witch in a bar and saying things like that. You're lucky she only slapped you; she could have hexed your bollocks off and deservedly so." Ron then smirked as he sat back down and asked, "So... when her arse was calling to you, what exactly was it saying?"

Severus took a sip of his firewhisky, propping his elbow on the table, and stared off into nowhere as he considered the question. "I'm sure I heard, 'Touch me, Severus... squeeze me... kiss me... spank me, Severus.'"

"Stop, stop! This is my friend you're perverting. It's just not right," said Ron with a shudder, but he choked back a laugh at the same time.

"Not right for you, of course not; you're a happily married man. But she's perfect for me. Dear Merlin, she's marvelous! She finally grew into her hair, or learned to tame it, at least, and she turned out to be quite good looking. Plus, I know she's clever, organized, extremely intelligent. We could have real conversations about things I'm actually interested in. Do you know the last witch I was seeing thought that a two hour discussion on whether to wear the black shoes or the silver ones constituted an intelligent exchange? I'm tired of going out with war-hero groupies or fortune hunters or bimbos or one-night stands. Granger is like the answer to my prayers, and I didn't even know I was looking for an answer. And sweet Salazar, that arse!" Suddenly a thought occurred to him, and he grabbed the front of Ron's shirt. "She's single... Weasley... Ron, please tell me she's single, or else I may have to kill someone."

"Severus, I've never seen you like this before..."

"Is. She. Single?" he demanded.

"Yes, yes. She's single, as far as I know, at least she didn't mention that she was seeing anyone, and I think she would have said something if she were. But I don't think this is a very good idea at all, Severus. There's an even bigger problem than her not being single."

"It doesn't matter; whatever it is, I can deal with it. She's perfect for me."

"Ummmm... Severus, this is a pretty big problem."

"What on earth could be so important?" snapped Severus.

"She's made it quite clear she doesn't like you. Actually, she doesn't like you a lot. In fact, I don't understand it because I've never known Hermione to hate anyone other than Voldemort and maybe Umbridge. I'm sorry to say this, Severus, but I'm pretty sure that she hates you."

~*~

Hermione Apparated outside the wards of Malfoy Manor and walked up the long drive. She could have arrived directly into the family entrance...she had permission to...but she needed the time to get her bearings. She shut the door and wandered over to sit dejectedly on the bottom step of the grand staircase. Ten years she'd been gone, and his opinions clearly had not changed; his actions showed the truth of that.

Cissy discovered her there a few minutes later. "Hermione dear, is something wrong? You look upset. What's happened?" her friend asked in concern.

Hermione grimaced and replied, "Cissy, I'm sorry, I didn't meant to disturb you. I just had a rather upsetting encounter; I was accosted in a bar in Hogsmeade."

"Oh my, are you sure you're all right?" asked Cissy, drawing her up off the step to lead her into the rose salon. "Sit here by the fire, dear, and I'll have Tweeny bring us some tea."

"I'm fine, Cissy, no harm, really," Hermione responded in a subdued tone. "I was just embarrassed and insulted."

"Tell me what happened."

"After we had dinner at the Three Broomsticks, Ron and I wandered over to the Hog's Head for a couple of drinks. Ron went to the loo, and I was standing at the bar alone, talking to Aberforth. Then without any warning, this bastard rubbed up against me, felt up my arse and whispered several lewd comments in my ear," explained Hermione. Her hands shook a bit as she took the tea that Narcissa offered her. "I was so furious, and I smacked him right across the face as hard as I could. I told him to keep his hands off of me, and I left. I didn't even say goodbye to Ron."

"Oh, my goodness, that's dreadful. We should report this cretin to the Aurors. It's simply not right that a lady should be assaulted, especially in a public place."

"Well, I doubt that would do much good. It was the Hog's Head, after all, and that sort of behavior is likely the norm there; it's not the most polite place, you know. Plus, this particular cretin, while not an Auror himself, does work closely with them, so I seriously doubt they would censure one of their own."

"Well, that makes it even worse; for a public servant to behave in such a brutish manner is simply unacceptable. At the very least, you should report his actions to his supervisor," suggested Cissy.

"It wouldn't matter. They aren't going to do anything to Snape..."

"Severus? It was Severus who assaulted you? Are you sure? Well, I guess that's a silly question, isn't it? You would recognize Severus, of course you would. Oh, Hermione, that really doesn't sound like him at all. For all his rough upbringing, he has better manners than most purebloods I know. And I do know for a fact that Severus Snape knows the proper way to treat a lady. I simply don't understand why he would act this way. What is wrong with the man?" asked Narcissa.

She looked up as Hermione stood to go up to her room. The look on Hermione's face was something between hurt and sadness.

Hermione replied, "Well, it's rather obvious, isn't it? He doesn't consider me a lady."

~*~

Ron and Severus spent well over an hour drinking and debating the pros and cons of Severus pursuing Hermione. Ron was highly doubtful of the idea and tried to discourage his friend from his wild plan. Severus, however, seemed convinced that he could overcome all odds.

Ron snorted. "You're going to get yourself hexed, and that's a damned sure fact."

"Pfffffft... shows what you know," insisted Snape confidently, gesturing drunkenly. "I'm sure Granger wouldn't hex me."

"Maybe your Granger wouldn't, Severus, but mine would without a second thought," said Ron with a chuckle.

Suddenly a thought occurred to him. "Shit! Hermione! She was pretty tipsy when she left here. I should have made sure she got home okay. I hope she didn't splinch herself." Looking a bit panicked, Ron asked Abe if he could use his Floo to make a call.

As Ron was kneeling on the hearth, Severus meandered over, thinking he'd best check, too. He arrived just in time to hear a house-elf reply, "The Master Malfoy is not beings home right now, but Mistress is in."

"All right," agreed Ron. "Let me speak with your mistress then."

Severus leaned heavily on his shoulder and asked, "Why are you calling Malfoy Manor?"

"Get off, Snape... You're going to push me right through the Floo," complained Ron.

Just then, Narcissa Malfoy appeared in the Floo. "Mr. Weasley? Is there some sort of problem?"

"No, ma'am, I just wanted to make sure that Hermione got home all right. She was a bit upset when she left here, and I was worried about her Apparating safely."

"Hermione is fine, Mr. Weasley. She arrived home some time ago and has already retired for the evening. While she was, as you say, a bit upset, she was all in one piece." Peering through the Floo she asked, "Is that Severus Snape behind you there? Could I have a word with him, do you think?"

Ron grabbed Severus as he attempted to lunge away and pushed him close to the Floo. "Hello, Narcissa, I'd heard you were back. Lovely to see you after all this time," responded Severus nervously.

"Severus, I'd like a word with you, but I'd rather not have this discussion through the Floo. Could you please come to the Manor to see me? Tomorrow would be perfect, around ten." She didn't even give him a chance to accept or decline, just assumed he would respond to her summons. "Wonderful, I'll see you then, Severus." She closed the Floo connection without another word.

"Excellent, Weasley, your inability to skilfully lie has landed me into trouble." snapped Severus. Then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "And why is Granger staying at the Manor, of all places?"

"First, I haven't got you into anything, Snape. You got yourself in it, hanging over my shoulder like that. If you hadn't been eavesdropping on my Floo call, Mrs. Malfoy never would have seen you there. And next, don't you read the papers at all anymore? Hermione is at the Manor because she's been working with good ol' Lucy for the past five and whatever years, and she has somehow become great friends with both Lucius and Narcissa. She's staying with them while she looks for a place of her own."

"Well, shit, damn and double damn! Now I'm stuck going to the Manor tomorrow; there's no way out of it. Granger probably told her what happened, and now Narcissa's going to rip me a new arsehole," moaned Severus.

Ron looked at his partner with curiosity. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were scared of the woman, Severus."

"Are you insane? Of course I am. Merlin, I'd almost rather face the Dark Lord himself. That woman scares the shit out of me!"

~*~

Severus arrived at Malfoy Manor promptly the next morning for his meeting with Narcissa, only to find himself detained at the gate.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Zabini?" he sneered at his former student.

"Sorry, Professor, standard procedure. You aren't on my list, so I'll have to check with Mrs. Malfoy before I can let you pass." Blaise summoned a house-elf and sent a message to Narcissa.

"Why, pray tell, is the Ministry paying highly ranked Aurors to be guard dogs for the Malfoys? If security is needed, why not send someone from the MLE? Why send a full-fledged Auror? Is there some imminent danger?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Professor..."

"Drop the title, Zabini. I am no longer your, or anyone else's, professor, nor have I been for quite some time. Plus, I have a higher security clearance than you can even begin to imagine. And since you are rather new to the Auror squad, you probably haven't realized that I am technically your superior. So, I ask again: Why are you here?"

"Sorry, sir, I know you aren't a professor anymore. I still think of you that way, though; I can't help it. At any rate, I'm not at liberty to discuss my assignment here, even with you. You'll have to ask Harry or the Minister yourself about that."

"Don't think I won't, Zabini," he growled. He was both pleased and disappointed that he hadn't been able to bully any information out of Zabini. Pleased because it meant the man was doing his job, even willing to stand up to his former mentor and Head of Slytherin House, and disappointed not to get the information he wanted.

Just then, the house-elf returned, confirming that Severus was indeed expected. Blaise motioned him through the gates.

"Aren't you going to check to make certain that I'm really Severus Snape and not someone using Polyjuice Potion?" he questioned.

"Not necessary, sir. Once I let you through this checkpoint, the wards just before the house are set to allow approved visitors only. If you were, by chance, an imposter, I dare say you wouldn't like the results," Blaise explained with a grim smile.

Once at the house, Severus was ushered into a sunny room which had a view of the famous Malfoy rose gardens. He stood, staring out at the sea of flowers, and wondered what he was doing here.

Narcissa entered and greeted him warmly. "Severus, it's so good to see you after all these years. You're well, I hope?" she asked as she kissed his cheek and hugged him lightly.

"I am, and you?" he replied, a bit leery that she seemed so cordial, but he knew how Narcissa worked. She would lull him into a sense of complacency, and then she would strike.

"Good... Wonderful, in fact. It feels so good to be home. I missed it dreadfully, but I didn't realize how much until we came back; isn't that strange? Our travels were lovely, the years abroad an adventure, but I am ever so happy to be back."

Severus was surprised at her openness, yet he knew it was wise to be a bit wary. "And to what do I owe the honor of this meeting, Narcissa? Was there a reason for your

summons?"

Narcissa smiled knowingly. "Really, Severus, have you ever known me to issue a summons without cause? Will you join me on the terrace? It's such a lovely morning, and I'll have Tweeny bring us tea."

After a good half hour of sipping tea, nibbling the excellent biscuits and the little cakes the Malfoy house-elves were famous for, and making small talk that was in reality a careful interrogation, Narcissa finally got to the point. "I understand you ran into Hermione in Hogsmeade last evening, Severus."

She studied him closely, which made him extremely nervous. He wanted to jump up and scream his guilt. *Yes, it was me. I was a complete ass; I made a fool of myself and probably ruined any chance I might have had with the girl.* Instead, he spoke calmly. "It was a case of mistaken identity, nothing more," he claimed, trying to brush it off. "I only saw her from behind, and I thought she was someone else. I made some inappropriate remarks, and I am ashamed to say I may have manhandled her a bit. Before I could apologize, she slapped me and left. That's really all that happened."

"Really, Severus, is that all there was to it?" Narcissa sat back and stared at him, one finger tapping at her lips as she contemplated. "You see, I'm baffled because the Hermione I have come to know would be incensed at the treatment you describe, enraged, furious. Yet the Hermione who came home last night was much more subdued. Can you explain that to me, Severus?"

"I have no idea what to tell you, Narcissa," he replied, truly bewildered by her question. What was she getting at?

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "So, you're sure... that you and she... there's never been..." She finally sighed heavily, "I just thought, perhaps... oh, ye gods, never mind."

Was he sure of what, he wondered. What was she implying? Before he could ask her, she continued in a completely different direction.

"I'm sure that many people will find the Malfoy family's closeness with Hermione strange, considering our history. However, she and Lucius have worked together for nearly six years, against their own wishes in the beginning, and they have come to know each other very well. She has become like a part of my family; in truth she is like a daughter to me. A much-loved daughter, Severus, and I will not have her hurt. I thought that perhaps there was something in your past that might have affected her, for it's clear that just the mention of you upsets her greatly."

Narcissa continued to study him closely. If he weren't an expert at Occlumency, he might have been worried, although he could detect no invasion. She just continued to stare, as if doing so would reveal great secrets. When no response was forthcoming from him, she continued, "Tread lightly here, Severus. For if you do hurt her, you will answer to me. I realize it won't always be practical since you work in the same offices and you have mutual friends, but I suggest you stay away from Hermione as much as possible."

Severus stared at the woman in disbelief. This was why she had called him here? To warn him off like a clucking mother hen, as if he were some errant schoolboy. Well, to hell with that! He'd just discovered something the night before that he wanted, truly wanted for the first time in years.

He did something he rarely did: threw back his head and laughed loudly. "Oh, Narcissa, believe me when I say this: I have absolutely no desire to hurt Granger, quite the opposite, in fact. I was being honest when I said the incident last night was mistaken identity; I would have approached her in an entirely different manner had I known who she was. But if you think warning me off is going to stop me from pursuing her, let me tell you, it has only piqued my interest. Not you, nor Lucius, not even Voldemort, were the bastard still alive, could deter me from my goal once my mind is made up."

Getting up to leave, he said, "Oh, don't bother to get up, my dear; I'll see myself out. But since you have proclaimed yourself Granger's surrogate mother, I have a feeling you will be seeing more of me in the very near future. Good-bye, Narcissa."

He strode back through the drawing room, leaving Narcissa staring open mouthed at his departure. Just as he was crossing the foyer to exit the manor, he caught sight of Hermione coming down the staircase, and he paused.

She saw him at the very same moment. "You!" she cried. "How dare you show your face here after your actions last night?" She fairly flew down the rest of the stairs toward him and raised her hand as if to slap him again.

Better prepared this morning, and half expecting such a response from her, he grabbed both her hands before she could strike him and lightly shoved her back against the wall, her hands pinned by his at her shoulders.

"Now, Granger, before you get yourself all worked into a tizzy, allow me to tell you that I came here to apologize." This was a complete lie, as he'd come there not to apologize, but at Narcissa's summons. But of course, Granger didn't need to know that. "I am truly sorry for that little scene last night. You see, I had no idea it was your gorgeous arse I was ogling and later fondling, and I am sorry if I insulted you."

"If you insulted me? Is that what you call an apology, you prat? If so, it is a piss-poor one, indeed." His fingers caressed her wrist just over her pulse point, and Severus could feel her heart rate increase. She actually stood quite passively before him; his grip on her hands was slack, and she could have pulled out of his grasp with little difficulty, but she didn't even attempt it. That should have been a warning to him.

"My, my. Such language and from such a pretty mouth," he teased. She tensed, and somehow, in that instant, he sensed her intent and jumped back with his lower body, still holding on to her hands just as she jerked her knee upwards to where his groin had been a fraction of a second before. "Uh, uh, uh. That's not very nice."

"You aren't very nice," she responded as she glared at him with narrowed eyes. And yet she still didn't make any attempt to get away. He watched her closely, and he would almost swear she was trying not to smile.

"Granger, I swear, I'm honestly trying to apologize here. Why must you make it so difficult? I will let you go, if you'll just listen to me, okay?" Severus leaned in slightly, but only after he wandlessly cast a sticking charm on her trainers, just to be on the safe side, so she couldn't lift her feet to get her knee anywhere near his bits. He was so close to her now he could feel her body heat and see the pulse beating at her throat. He sniffed deeply, his nose inadvertently grazing her neck and pulling an almost inaudible sound from her; it was half gasp and half moan and so sexy he went half hard at the sound. "Umm... you smell like sunshine."

Hermione muttered, "How can you expect me to take you seriously? You claim that you want to apologize for manhandling me last night, and yet, here you are doing it all over again."

"I assure you, this time it's purely a matter of self-preservation. You certainly don't expect me to just stand here and let you slap me again, do you?" he asked her. "I'm going to let go now...so don't hit me. All right, Granger? Don't hit..."

Before he could finish his sentence, Hermione managed to get her right foot out of her shoe, and her knee very nearly struck its target; however, he again anticipated her and managed to turn enough so that her knee struck his hip rather than his groin. Still, it was hard enough to draw a grunt of pain from him.

"Shit! Next time I must remember to not only stick your shoes to the floor but your feet to your shoes. Damnation, Granger. That's going to bruise," he mumbled as he let her hands go.

"Good," she snapped. "I hope it does, you bloody jackass. And there isn't going to be a next time."

"Severus, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Narcissa, standing in the hallway outside the drawing room, her wand in hand.

Hermione answered, "It's quite all right, Cissy. Apparently, just *another* little misunderstanding. Mr. Snape is leaving now."

Leaning closer again, he whispered softly, "I am leaving, Granger, but we're not finished."

Before she could ask him what he meant by that, he sauntered off, leaving the two women staring after him in disbelief.

~*~

"Just what the hell was that all about? Why was he even here?" demanded Hermione, minutes later, seated on the terrace while Cissy poured her tea.

"Well, that was my fault, I'm afraid," Cissy admitted with a slight grimace. "You see, your friend Ronald Floo-called last night to make sure that you had arrived home safely, and when I saw Severus there with him, I asked him to come around this morning. I rather insisted, actually, didn't really give him a choice."

"But why?" asked Hermione, dumbfounded. "Why would you do that?"

"Well, Hermione, his actions just didn't make sense to me; it just didn't sound like the Severus I recall. I wanted to find out what he was up to. He claimed he mistook you for someone else, and he did admit he acted rudely. I warned him not to bother you anymore. I told him he'd answer to me if he did."

"Oh, Cissy, that's so sweet of you," said Hermione, touched by her friend's concern. "Well, I expect that I've seen the last of him then. If he's been warned off by Narcissa Malfoy, he wouldn't dare bother me after that. I just don't understand why he felt compelled to stage that little scene in the hallway then."

"Oh, dear, Hermione, you don't understand. Severus doesn't plan to stay away at all. In fact I believe that he made his intentions quite clear. He plans to pursue you."

TBC

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed, and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

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Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

After the bizarre encounter with Snape in the morning, Cissy took Hermione out shopping. While Hermione personally hated clothes shopping, she realized that as a department head she couldn't very well show up to work in her ensemble of choice: Muggle jeans, tee-shirt, and trainers. Luckily, Narcissa loved shopping, and she was good at it. She always seemed to know what went with what, what was in or out of style, what accessories were best with each outfit, and what hues would compliment Hermione's coloring. Since Hermione didn't care at all if her shoes matched her robes, or if anything matched anything, for that matter, Cissy insisted on supervising her shopping. Hermione was a department head now, after all, and according to Cissy, she needed to dress the part.

After arriving back at the manor, Hermione was happy to spend a good four and a half hours coordinating her research and making some decent headway on where to start on Monday with the new artifacts. She had to admit it was rather nice not to spend the entire weekend on work. She now had time left over to look at some real estate ads and circle a few that she wanted to check on Sunday.

Hermione had come to the conclusion that she did want a house of her own rather than a flat in London. Something small and in the country, perhaps a cottage with a nice-sized yard so she could get a dog. She had debated on that choice. Although she missed Crooks, she also had very fond memories of a dog from her childhood. From her earliest recollections, until she'd left for Hogwarts, her family had owned, or been owned by, a little Norwich Terrier mix named Jack. He had died in Hermione's third year while she'd been away at school, and her parents had opted not to replace him. But she thought now that she'd like the companionship of a dog.

They had a quiet dinner that evening with just 'family,' the three Malfoys and Hermione. While she had spent a good deal of time with them in America, she hadn't been living in their home, and she could now see the potential for awkward situations. Lucius and Cissy were particularly flirtatious with each other all through dinner, sending heated glances across the table, brushing hands or fingers whenever they got the chance. Hermione even caught them playing footsies under the table at one point.

"Lucius," Hermione stated calmly as she lifted the fork to her lips, "that happens to be my foot you're rubbing your toes on."

He actually blushed. Hermione had not realized that Lucius Malfoy was capable of such a thing, but he straightened in his chair and turned a lovely shade of pink. Then shrugging, he stood and held out his hand for Cissy. "Shall we forgo dessert and take a walk in the gardens, darling?"

Cissy rose, taking his hand, and agreed as she flashed him a blinding smile. "What a lovely idea, Lucius. I'd love to. Excuse us, won't you, dears?"

Hermione and Draco were left to consume their dessert in silence. Over the years, the two had come to tolerate one another. While they were not bosom friends, neither were they bitter enemies; they stood on neutral ground and generally circled each other warily.

After scraping out the last of her crème brûlée...it was her favorite, after all...Hermione stood and wandered over to gaze out the French doors. "Maybe I'll take a walk in the garden too."

"Errrm... Granger, I really don't think you want to do that," he warned cautiously.

"Why not?" she asked, wide eyed.

"Because with the looks those two were shooting across the table at each other all night, you might see more than you really want to."

Hermione's eyes grew round as his meaning sunk in. "Oh... Oh! Oh my, I guess *really* don't want to walk out there, after all." She sat on the sofa and accepted the wine that Draco offered. "It is kind of sweet, though, isn't it?"

"What's sweet about it?" asked Draco. "It's been like this all my life. I always had to worry that my friends or I might run across my parents going at it like kneazles in heat. Eeeewww... it's just not right. Things like that can emotionally scar a young boy... or even an older boy. Hell, it would scar me now, and I'm a grown man."

"Well, I think it's sweet that they're still so in love after all these years. After everything they've gone through, they still want each other so much. I can't imagine that. I have come to believe it's something I'll never have."

Draco looked down at her, puzzled by her statement. "You don't know that, Granger. You just haven't met the right bloke yet."

Hermione gave him a sad little half smile and shook her head. "No, it's just not going to happen for me. I'd have to be able to trust someone enough to... to make that sort of commitment... I just couldn't." She looked at Draco curiously as he sat at the other end of the sofa. "How about you, Malfoy. Do you see yourself with someone, living happily-ever-after?"

"Not right now, but someday, maybe. I certainly hope so. I'm young, so I'm in no hurry, but someday... yes, I'd like to have the kind of relationship my parents have."

Hermione leaned her head back and chuckled. "You do realize that for at least a year your mother was convinced we would end up together."

"I know," said Draco. "She believed that all of our antagonism toward each other was some form of unresolved sexual tension. She was positive we'd end up married and she'd have her two favorite children together forever."

"I'm glad she finally realized that was never going to happen," said Hermione. "You make a much better brother than a boyfriend, for me at least."

"Why, Granger, I do believe that's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me," replied Draco with a grin.

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Severus arrived at the Potter's home for Selene's bi-weekly potions lesson. He was usually invited to stay for dinner afterward, and this night was no exception. Even after years of dinners with the Potters, he never knew what to expect; it could be a five-course gourmet meal, or it could be peanut butter and dirigible plum jelly sandwiches. Tonight, however, was one of his favorites, cottage pie with bread and butter pudding for afters.

While Luna and Harry got the younger children ready for bed, Severus sat down to catch up on the news, if one could call what the *Prophet* printed news. He wanted to see what Ron had been referring to regarding Granger and the Malfoys.

He'd just finished the article on the press conference when he got that prickly feeling on the back of his neck, like he was being watched. Lowering the paper slowly, he peered over to top to find Albus Potter standing there in his pyjamas, freshly scrubbed from his bath, a plushie dragon stuffed under one arm, and a story book clutched under the other.

"Hello, my little man. What's all this?"

"My daddy tell-ded me to ast, is otay you to wead me a stoway, Unca' Sev."

"Oh, he did, did he?" At the little boy's serious nod, Severus chuckled. "Climb on up here then, lad," he said, patting his lap. Al passed him the book, then the dragon, then clamored up after. He settled himself comfortably under Severus' arm, with the dragon, Norbert, snuggled in his lap as Severus proceeded to read his story for him.

About ten minutes later, Severus looked down to see that the boy was sound asleep. He carefully set the book aside and was about to shift him around to carry him to bed when he looked up. There in the doorway stood Harry, his arms wrapped around Luna's waist as she leaned back against him. They both wore huge grins as they observed him with their son, his namesake.

"Oh, Severus," whispered Luna, "I wish I had a picture; no one will ever believe it."

Severus stood up with Al in his arms, shaking his head as Harry stepped forward to take his son from him. "No, all that jiggling around will just wake him up. I'll go put him to bed."

As he passed Luna, he growled, "Not one word of this to anyone, woman. I do still have a reputation to uphold, you know." Luna giggled and patted his arm as he walked by.

Once Severus got Al settled in for the night, the three adults sat down to share a bottle of wine.

"I ran into Zabini over at the Malfoys'. Care to explain why the Ministry is paying Aurors to stand duty as security guards at Malfoy Manor?"

Since Severus actually did have the high security clearance he'd boasted to Zabini about, Harry had no qualms about explaining the situation to him. "... So, there really hasn't been any overt threat at this point in time. It's really more of a precautionary measure. Hopefully, the Malfoys will settle in, and there won't be any problems at all."

"And why were you visiting Malfoy Manor, Severus?" asked Luna innocently.

"I... umm... Narcissa asked me... errr... you see, she was worried about...." Unusually inarticulate, Severus stumbled about, not wanting to tell them how he'd insulted Granger. "Something happened that..."

Finally taking mercy on him, Harry explained, "Severus, I already talked to Ron, and we know what happened at the Hog's Head."

"Well, hell! Why didn't you just say so instead of torturing me," said Severus with a scowl on his face.

"Ron also tells me that you intend to pursue Hermione romantically. Do you really think that's a good idea?" asked Harry with a worried expression.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" demanded Severus. "I don't understand. Granger and I are perfect for each other; I can see it, so why can't the rest of you? We have a lot of similarities: we're both highly intelligent, logical thinkers, methodical, analytical; we love books and research; we're both solitary beings, introverted..."

"It's obvious you've put a lot of thought into this, Severus," said Luna softly.

"I'm just trying to point out that we have a hell of a lot in common. As friends to both of us, I would think that all of you would be happy at the possibility of us together. In fact, I'm surprised none of you came up with the idea first."

"All the things you've said are true," admitted Harry.

"Yes, they are," added Luna, "so it seems as if you would be perfect for each other. But there's one big problem. You want Hermione, but she's been quite clear that she doesn't want you."

"You said it yourself, Severus, both of you are our friends. What if you pursue this and it causes a rift between us all. We don't want to be forced to take sides, and we don't want to lose either of you as friends," said Harry.

"I won't ask you to take sides, and I won't ask for your help in wooing her. Just don't try to stop me. I don't understand it myself. For some reason, once I saw her there the other night, I just can't let go of the idea."

Luna gasped, "Un colpo di fulmine."

"Excuse me?" said Severus.

"Un colpo di fulmine. Well, that explains it, of course," said Luna. "You've been struck by lightning."

"Luna, I've not been struck by lightning," said Severus patiently.

"I know that, not really. It's figurative, Severus. It means like a bolt from the blue, love at first sight. Although, I guess in this case, it's not exactly first sight, is it? I mean, since your first sight of Hermione was something like eighteen years ago, and she left England before you recovered, so technically, you haven't seen her since before the war ended. Maybe it's love at first sight after an eleven year absence."

Severus shook his head. Luna never ceased to amaze him. "Whatever it is, when I confronted her at the Manor, her reaction to me was not entirely negative, no matter what she may claim."

"Honestly, none of us knows why Hermione doesn't seem to like you now; she used to be one of your staunchest defenders," said Harry. "Even when we all thought you were a real git, she stood up for you. What made that change, I wonder?"

"I don't know, but somehow I'd like to find out."

~*~

Sunday's agenda proved just as busy as Saturday's. Hermione wondered whether she would ever have time to bring work home on the weekends anymore. Still, it was lovely to enjoy a lie-in, something she hadn't indulged in since weekends back at Hogwarts.

After breakfast, Hermione set off with her list of properties. Ultimately, none of the ones she viewed seemed to call to her, but it was too early to get discouraged. She was sure her cottage was out there somewhere, but she just had to find it.

She'd finished her house hunting just in time for the late luncheon she had scheduled with Ron and Pansy. Hermione had been very careful to ascertain that it would *burst* the three of them for lunch and no other friends would be included. Ron had assured her that no one else had been invited, immediately understanding the meaning behind her questioning.

Hermione arrived by Floo, as she'd never been to their house before. Stepping out, she banished the soot with a discreet spell, then turned to face her hosts. Ron stood with his arm draped across his wife's shoulder while she leaned into him with her arms wrapped around his waist.

"Parkinson," Hermione sneered.

"Granger," Pansy sneered right back.

"Bitch."

"Cow."

"Sneaky slut."

"Filthy tart."

"Slytherin slag."

"Gryffindor whore."

The two glared through narrowed eyes, then burst out laughing as they embraced.

"Dear Lord, Pans! I know Ron said you were due soon, but I'm scared to hug you too hard, else that baby might just pop out here and now," teased Hermione.

"Oh, you can't hurt me or him, so give us a good hug there, Granger," she replied with a laugh, throwing her arms around Hermione and hugging her tightly.

Ron just shook his head. "You two are going to have to learn a normal means of greeting each other before junior is born. I'm not going to have my son hearing his mum and godmother calling each other slag and whore."

"I suppose you're right, Ron, so it's all the more reason for us to get it out of our system now, isn't it?" said Hermione with a grin. The greeting was a ritual between the two girls resulting from a practical joke they had played on Ron years earlier.

For all that they had disliked each other back at Hogwarts, the two actually were friendly since shortly after the war had ended. Both girls had volunteered at St. Mungo's, helping to take care of those injured during the final battle, and had got to know each other through their contact there. In spite of her own friendship with Pansy, Hermione had been surprised at the idea of Ron and Pansy as a couple. They seemed so different, but she'd been supportive of the two in the end. Hermione's volunteering had merely been a result of wanting to do something helpful after the war, but for Pansy, it had led ultimately to a career as a mediwitch.

Over lunch, the three caught up on what was going on in each other's lives since Hermione had last been home. Hermione was now able to speak somewhat more freely about her job and what she had been doing for the last ten years. She learned that Pansy was planning on going back to work part-time at St. Mungo's after the baby came. She also found out what Ron's project with Snape was all about.

It seemed Snape had come to the conclusion that Ron was a 'sensitive' in relation to Dark Objects, and they had been working together to hone his natural skills in that area. This revelation came as a shock to Hermione, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it made.

"So, your reaction to Slytherin's locket when we were on the Horcrux hunt..."

"...Wasn't just me being a big jerk," responded Ron. "I didn't realize it at the time, but it turns out I have very strong physical and emotional reactions to Dark Objects."

"Oh, Ron, I'm sorry. I didn't think you were a j..." She paused as Ron gave her a look that said he knew what she really thought. "Well, okay, maybe I did think that at the time, but I was hurt. Harry and I both were when you left us, but knowing this now... I guess now I'm the one who feels like the jerk. We should have realized. You did seem to be affected by it so much more than either of us, but sensitives are so rare that it never even occurred to me. I'm sorry, Ron, I should have figured it out."

"Don't be silly. None of us could have known, Hermione. We were just kids, and the fact that we made it through at all was mostly due to sheer dumb luck."

"I'd heard a buzz since I've been back that the Auror department had a lead on a sensitive, but I just didn't know it was you. You do realize that you're going to be recruited by the D.I.D.A.?" said Hermione with a grin.

"And you do realize that Severus and I are a team in this? It's actually a skill that can be quite useful in our work, and he's helped me tremendously in learning how to use it without going all mental. If your department recruits me, then he's going to be part of the package too; we're a team now," said Ron, noting that the smile immediately faded from his friend's face at the mention of Snape.

After some consideration, she replied carefully, "I'd realized that I was going to have to deal with him in some manner, working with M.L.E. Hopefully, Lucius will take on that responsibility so I won't be forced to have to deal with Snape directly."

Ron laid his hand over Hermione's and spoke softly, "Hermione, I really don't understand what you have against Severus. You haven't even had any contact with him in

years. What's changed? What could he have done to make you dislike him so much?"

Hermione removed her hand from beneath Ron's and shrugged. "I just don't trust him. I can't explain it to you, but I just don't... I won't," she said, her voice low.

Ron was going to push the issue, but he glanced up to see Pansy standing in the doorway behind Hermione. She frowned at him slightly and shook her head, telling him without words to let it drop.

"Here we go then, loves," said Pansy, brightly setting down the treacle tart. "Let's finish up here, then we'll give you the grand tour of the place. You're going to love it."

Hermione did love it; she oohed and ahhed appropriately at all of improvements the two had made in their home. She admired the decorating that Pansy had done and was enchanted by the nursery. Seeing the way her friends had made the house into a home only made Hermione crave her own space all the more.

While Pansy was showing her the back garden, Hermione told her about her own search for the perfect house or cottage. Pansy immediately had some suggestions. There was a house for sale just down the road a bit, but Hermione vetoed that idea right away. As much as she loved her friends, with Harry and Luna living close-by, Hermione really didn't want the Golden Trio to end up being neighbors. Pansy came up with yet another suggestion. It seemed her gran's sister, her great-aunt Blossom, had died, and none of the family wanted to keep her cottage. It was in the neighboring county of Dorset, just southwest of Sturminster Newton along the River Divilish. She gave Hermione the address and directions, encouraging her to go and see the house.

As they neared that back door of the house, Hermione heard Ron talking to someone inside and recognized Severus' voice. She stopped outside, then turned to Pansy and said, "I think I'll just pop home from here. Tell Ron I said good-bye, will you, Pans?"

"Hermione, I heard what happened at the Hog's Head. But Severus really isn't that bad... he's not. It was a mistake, and he admits it," said Pansy. "I know that you once thought as highly of him as I do. I know that's true, Hermione. I remember how you used to visit him almost every day at St. Mungo's. Can't you get over what happened the other night and start fresh?"

Hermione shook her head, refusing to meet Pansy's eyes. "It's not just because of the other night, Pans. And I'm not convinced that it really was a mistake. I believe deep down that's how he really still sees me, thinks of me. I'm just some slag to him; I'll never be good enough in his eyes. I won't even try to justify myself to him, as it's not worth my time." Giving Pansy a quick hug, Hermione said, "I'll be in touch soon. Bye, Pansy." With a crack of Apparation she was gone.

~*~

Pansy sat on a bench pondering what Hermione had just said. Ron came out and sat beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"I got rid of Severus, but I guess Hermione has left already, huh?"

"Yes, she heard you two talking and recognized his voice. She said to tell you good-bye and that she'd be in touch soon," answered Pansy. "Ron, something's not right. I tried to talk to her about Severus, and the things she said just don't sit right with me, they don't add up. I think we need to figure this out."

"Okay, love. Maybe we should get Harry and Luna's input too," replied Ron. "Should we include Severus?"

Pansy thought on it for a minute, then rejected that idea. "No, let's compare notes first. I don't want to get Severus involved just yet. It would probably seem like a betrayal to Hermione, like we're all ganging up on her, taking sides. I don't want to risk that. She already seems different from before, kind of distant from us. Let's try to make some sense of it on our own first, just the four of us, before we talk to either Severus or Hermione."

~*~

After leaving Ron and Pansy's house, Hermione decided to check out the lead on Aunt Blossom's cottage. She Apparated and then followed Pansy's directions. She walked along the country lane to the gate and turned up the path. The cottage sat back from the road. She came around the bend in the path and caught her first glimpse of the place, and her heart melted right then and there...she was home.

It was perfect, not too large, but not too small. She could see it needed a bit of TLC: a fresh coat of paint and a good weeding for the flowerbeds. She'd have to get the roof checked for leaks, but all in all, it was perfect. The main part of the cottage was older, a two story with a quaint, thatched roof, but there was also a newer addition. Walking around the back she peered through the windows and discovered that a good portion of the newer addition encompassed a modern kitchen and a master suite.

Thrilled, Hermione did a little dance of joy. There was a worn bistro set on the small patio off the kitchen; that would be a perfect spot to sit and enjoy her morning tea and scones. A quick scouring spell removed the rust, and she sank into the chair, surveyed what would be her back garden, and pictured her imaginary dog dashing about.

A few moments later, Hermione thought she truly was imagining things when she heard the yip of a dog. Suddenly, a shaggy monstrosity burst through the brush in pursuit of a rabbit. He was huge with wiry greyish-black fur and and big, expressive brown eyes. If she had to guess, she'd no doubt he was part wolfhound.

"Hey, you!" shouted Hermione.

The dog stopped short and seemed surprised to find someone sitting behind the cottage. After considering her for a moment, he trotted over and sat politely before her as he cocked his head from side to side, studying her. Then he held out his paw, as if to shake her hand in greeting.

Hermione laughed. "Well, aren't you a handsome boy? And so polite, too," she said, holding her hand out to let the dog sniff before she shook his paw and then scratched him behind the ears. "Not a stray either, I see," she said, taking note of the collar. "A neighbor, then. Well, I intend to live here, and perhaps you'll come back and visit me after I move in, yes?"

The dog appeared to nod in agreement with the plan.

"All right then. I'll make sure to put dog treaties on my shopping list. Best be off home then, boy, before your master finds you gone."

He licked her hand and gave her a big doggie grin before he loped back through the bushes he had appeared from.

"Well, at least the neighbors are friendly," she commented as she Apparated away, making plans to call the solicitor first thing in the morning.

TBC

Chapter 5

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed; and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, Clairvoyant and SoftObsidian. Also, many thanks to pythia_delphi for the awesome prompts.

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Severus refused to give up his plan to win over Granger. However, as a result of his conversations with both the Potters and the Weasleys, he did decide to change his tactics and pursue her less aggressively. It was best to keep her guessing, he decided, especially as he continued to gather information to further his cause; he hadn't been a spy for all those years for nothing.

He took note that while she was never outright rude to him, she did try to avoid him whenever possible; therefore, he made a point of showing up in her vicinity when she would least expect it, but he was always subtle and made it appear random.

He and Ron had been recruited to work with the Department for the Investigation of Dark Artifacts, just as she had predicted. Subsequently, Severus ran into her more often: in the elevator, in the dining hall, in the hallways, in Lucius' office, in the lab, and in the conference room. She couldn't even avoid him in her own office, as he had taken to leaving his reports directly with her rather than Lucius. He refused to leave them with her assistant because it gave him a chance to talk to her personally. And although he could tell she always seemed reluctant at first, just wanting him to drop off his files and leave, he had managed to engage her in some interesting discussions.

~*~

Snape was driving her slowly but surely insane. He never did anything that would be called pushy or antagonistic or threatening; he was always just annoyingly present. The more she tried to avoid him, the more he was there, but there was always a legitimate reason for his whereabouts. She was sure it was intentional, and she had no idea why he was doing this. He had not made one reference to their horrific final encounter a decade earlier, and it was driving her mad; if not for that, she could almost accept the man.

When he passed her in the halls, he always gave her a friendly nod. She simply ignored him. Once in the crowded lunchroom, he had asked if he might sit at her table as there were no other open seats. She had wanted to refuse, but grudgingly, she had allowed him to join her. She had pulled out a report to read, thinking to avoid speaking with him. He had merely asked her a couple polite questions about the report, as it pertained to something he was working on, and then he had spent the rest of the time in companionable silence, reading a journal of his own. He seemed to understand, unlike some of her friends, that not every second needed to be filled with meaningless chatter.

In the crowded elevators, he somehow always ended up right behind her. This made her nervous...twitche. His actions were never lewd, like at the Hog's Head; in fact, he never even touched her. But he would be so close she could smell the subtle scent of his cologne and she could feel the heat of his body. Like a magnet, she felt drawn to him, and she had to physically stop herself from leaning back into him...sweet Circe, what was wrong with her? She did *not* want Severus Snape. She would not allow herself to.

Even outside work, he managed to show up. Of course, she had expected that he would be at the Potter twins' birthday party. Harry had warned her in the very beginning that Snape was a regular guest at family gatherings. But did he have to be so damned comfortable there? She found it most annoying that she had started to almost look forward to their little tête-à-têtes. She didn't think that was a good idea at all.

Hermione sat under a shade tree in the back garden talking with Selene. She was enjoying getting to know her goddaughter better after being gone for so long.

"I love hearing about all the different places you've been, Aunt Hermione," Selene said wistfully, a dreamy look on her face that reminded Hermione a little bit of a young Luna.

"Maybe when you're a little older, your parents would consider letting you go on a little trip with me. That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

"Wow, that would be great. I can't wait to ask Mum." She lunged forward to give Hermione a hug. "That's a very pretty necklace," she said, noticing the pendant Hermione was wearing.

Hermione fingered the necklace, then removed it to place it over Selene's head, magically shortening the chain so it was the perfect length. "It's turquoise from Argentina, a souvenir from when I lived there. It was a gift from a very good friend of mine."

"Oh, Aunt Hermione, I couldn't take your friend's gift. I wasn't hinting or anything. I don't want you to think that."

"I know you weren't, sweetie. But I just remembered something she told me about turquoise: it is the stone of friends, and if you give turquoise to a friend, the bond will always be special. Turquoise is also a protection stone, especially if it has been given in friendship. So, I want you to keep this in honor of our friendship. Okay? And the lady who gave it to me won't mind; she's one of my most special friends in the whole world now, so I guess that part worked. I'm sure she would approve of me giving it to you."

"I love you so much, Auntie!" exclaimed Selene, giving her another hard hug. Suddenly, she straightened and looked across the yard to the tall dark figure talking to her father. "Oh, Uncle Severus is here. This is the day he usually gives me a Potions lesson, but since it's the twins' birthday party, we had to postpone it until next week. I've finished my assignment, though, and I want to see if he'll give me something else to work on. I really like Potions a lot, and I might become a Potions mistress some day. I'll see you later. Okay, Aunt Hermione?"

Hermione watched with a twinge of jealousy as the girl ran off to greet Snape. She knew it was petty of her, but she couldn't help how she felt. He'd had years to know Harry's children and be a part of their lives and to become friends with Harry and Ron while she'd had to make do with miserly little bits and pieces of time spent with them. And she'd been gone from this place because of him. It just wasn't fair. She saw Selene hold up the necklace to show him and point to her before Selene ran off into the house.

He was approaching her little corner of the yard, striding purposely toward her, when he was intercepted by the whirling dervish that was Al.

"Unca' Sev, Unca' Sev!" shouted the boy, running at him full speed.

"Hello, little man. What are you up to?" asked Severus, bending down to swing the little boy up into his arms.

Who in hell is this person? thought Hermione. *Because he surely isn't the Snape I grew up knowing.* She felt a twinge in her chest as she observed the interaction between the two. It made her wonder whether this was the man he might have been long ago if Voldemort had never happened, and her heart ached just a bit for that man at the thought of all those years lost in service to a mad master. Two of them, really.

"My daddy said you's might be maybe... maybe bwingin' Tom Widdle wit' you today?" said the boy hopefully.

Tom Riddle? What in hell was Al talking about?

"Sorry, Al, but I left Tee at home. With the party going on, I was afraid he'd be in the way. Maybe your mum and dad will bring you out to visit soon; you can play with him then."

"Otay, Unca' Sev," agreed the boy happily. He scrambled down and ran off across the yard toward the crowd of cousins gathered by the gift table.

Severus turned back to approach Hermione, only to find her spot empty and the witch nowhere in sight. "Damn it, Granger, you can't escape me forever," he muttered as he headed back toward the house.

~*~

A couple of weeks later, Lucius and Cissy hosted a dinner party to celebrate Hermione buying her own home. The deal to purchase Aunt Blossom's cottage had gone through quickly and without a hitch. She was planning on taking some time off from work to get settled into her new home.

Hermione knew that both Harry and Ron had been invited with Luna and Pansy. Draco had gone out with Ginny Weasley a few times, so she was coming as his guest. Lucius had renewed his friendship with Snape and had invited him, as well. She couldn't blame Lucius. He knew she didn't care for Snape, but he had no idea as to the real cause of her animosity. Realizing that everyone would be paired in couples except the two of them, and fearing she would be stuck as his unofficial partner for the evening, Hermione asked Cissy if she might invite a guest herself.

Hermione was sure showing up with Ivan Markov would send a message to Snape that she was neither interested nor available. Ivan had played professional Quidditch on the same team as Viktor and was now an assistant coach with the Falmouth Falcons. He really wouldn't know anyone there, but Hermione figured Ivan would fit right in with all her Quidditch-mad friends.

She was surprised and a bit put out when Snape arrived with a statuesque beauty, named Justine Merryweather, who had honey-blond hair, clear blue eyes, and a body that instantly made Hermione feel dumpy and inadequate. She wasn't envious of the golden-haired beauty on his arm, she told herself; she certainly had no reason to be jealous of his companion. Hermione plastered a bright smile on her face and pretended to be enjoying herself.

By the end of the night, Hermione's cheeks ached from smiling so hard. While everyone else appeared to be having an excellent time, she felt like smashing something, or absconding with Lucius' best liquor and having a private party of one. Being the guest of honor, she couldn't get away with either action, so she went over to the bar to fix herself a double.

Severus wandered over and poured one of his own, then refilled Ron's glass, as well, when he appeared and held it out to him. She couldn't help but overhear their conversation. It's not as if she were eavesdropping, as they were right there next to her, for Merlin's sake.

"So, Justine, huh?" said Ron with a nudge and a wink. "Wasn't she the one with the shoes?"

"Ummm... Yes, that's her," replied Severus.

"I see she chose the silver ones tonight," said Ron while giving Snape another nudge.

Hermione couldn't help but glance over at the woman's feet. Good grief, how did she walk in those things? Of course, walking probably wasn't what Snape planned on doing with her anyway. Wondering about Ron's question, Hermione couldn't stop her mind from imagining all kinds of kinky scenarios between Severus and Justine. And in every single one of them, the witch in question was wearing little more than those unbelievably high heels.

Hermione snorted, drawing the attention of the two.

"So, Hermione, I didn't know you were seeing Ivan Markov," said Ron.

Hermione smiled what she hoped was a mysterious smile. God, her cheeks ached. "I wouldn't say Ivan and I are seeing each other exactly... I guess I'd call it a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"Oh, uh, okay," said Ron. He turned and wandered back to the rest of the crowd, leaving her alone with Snape.

"For some reason, I had the impression that you didn't like Quidditch," said Severus.

"Oh, you're quite right I don't like Quidditch at all," said Hermione. Then she let her eyes roam appreciatively over Ivan. "However, I do like Quidditch players. They're just so... umm... how should I put it? Athletic. Yes... athletic, both on and off the field," said Hermione with what she hoped was a knowing look. "Oh, yes, I *do* like Quidditch players... a lot."

Glancing over at Snape, Hermione could have sworn he growled a bit at her remark and he definitely looked like he wanted to hex Ivan, or her, or maybe both of them.

~*~

The Quidditch player comment was nearly the straw that broke the Thestral's back, so to speak. After the dinner party, he got rid of Justine and went home to drown his sorrows in firewhisky. Severus very nearly decided that Granger wasn't worth the grief she was putting him through. But in the end, there was just something that wouldn't let him give up.

He had no reasonable explanation for his attraction to Granger. Maybe Luna was right, and he'd been love struck. 'Un colpo di fulmine.' The truth of the matter was he had never really considered settling down with just one witch, ever. But now, that was *all* he could think of. And when he thought about what he might want in a woman under those circumstances, Granger had all the right qualities.

When he'd seen her that night in the Hog's Head for the first time in years, he just wanted her, plain and simple; that was all. He just wanted her. When she slapped him, for some reason, it only made him want her more. When she rejected him at Malfoy Manor, he wanted her even more than he'd ever wanted anything, and that was saying a lot. And her continued rejection of him simply fueled his attraction. Maybe he was some kind of closet masochist, always drawn to what he couldn't have.

Perhaps it also had something to do with the fact that all the people he now called friends were happily married family men. By Merlin's hairy toes, that sounded nauseating, even to him; what on earth was he thinking? Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, hell, nearly all of the Weasleys, for that matter. Even Lucius Malfoy, who despite all the rumors spread about him years ago, had loved the same woman devotedly since he was twenty years old. Who would ever believe that Severus Snape would want the kind of lives they had all achieved? And yet he did. He wanted what they all had, and he wanted it with Granger, damn it!

He decided he needed to back off for a few days and do some serious thinking about Hermione Granger.

~*~

The Quidditch player comment seemed to have done the trick. Hermione hadn't heard anything from Snape in several days. Of course, she was on holiday from work for awhile, but she'd half expected him to show up with the boys when they came by to help her move. Luckily, he hadn't. She should have felt relief, but instead, she felt an odd sense of disappointment. She'd almost looked forward to sparring with him.

Hermione really didn't have many things of her own at Malfoy Manor; however, she did have quite a few things in storage that she'd brought back from Chicago and some things she'd kept from her parents' house when they'd sold it. She had restored their memories after the war, but it turned out that they really had always wanted to live in Australia. Most of the things she'd kept had a sentimental value: her great-gran's cheval glass, Grampa Granger's writing desk, Great-Aunt Maeve's china cabinet, and her mum's and dad's table settings, both the everyday stuff and the good china.

Cissy had also insisted on taking Hermione up to the attic storage area at the manor and having her pick out some things to help furnish her new home. Although she'd been reluctant at first, the thought amused her that somewhere some ancient Malfoy ancestor might be turning in their graves at the thought of a Muggle-born using their pristine pureblood belongings. It gave Hermione the push she needed to accept some very nice pieces of furniture.

The boys helped her settle it all in on Sunday, and she spent the past few days picking out some things to complete her cottage. She dubbed it Blossomwood in honor of Pansy's great-aunt Blossom and because it tickled her fancy to give her humble little cottage a name.

Although she'd been reluctant, she'd finally given in to Cissy's insistence that she borrow the services of one of the house-elves for a few days. So, she had ended up with Neeley, and between them, they had cleaned the cottage completely from bottom to top. They'd even cleaned out an old storage shed out back and set it up as a sort of lab space where Hermione could work on her Dark Artifacts, if she were so inclined, but its distance would keep any dangerous items safely away from her living area.

Hermione let Neeley weed the flowerbeds out front, but she insisted on doing the potions garden in the back by hand, as there were several herbs and other plants that were easily damaged by magic. After working for nearly three hours, she realized that there were actually several separate sections of herbs and plants; Blossom must have been well versed in the arts of Potions and Herbology. There was a section with herbs mainly for cooking, a section for medicinal plants, and another that had a variety of things that were used in other potions not of a medicinal nature. She found weeding to be hot, sweaty work and decided to take a break and sit on her little patio with a cold drink.

Hermione surveyed her work with satisfaction, but knew it needed a lot more attention. Some plants needed to be thinned, some cut back, and some transplanted entirely; maybe she could get Neville to come over to take a look and give her some advice. She lifted the cold glass and ran it across her forehead; the ice-cold condensation felt good against her hot skin. Just then, Hermione heard a crashing in the bushes, and the same grey-black dog from before came galloping through her yard.

"You again!" she cried. "And still chasing rabbits, are you?"

The dog stopped short and looked at her with a big doggie grin on his face. He trotted over eagerly and sat before her, just as he had done before.

"Well, I really don't mind so much if you chase them; keeps them out of my garden, doesn't it?" she said. "What do you do if you catch them, though?"

The dog gave a quick little growl and a ruff and snapped his teeth together, as if to demonstrate what he might do to a rabbit when he caught it.

Hermione could easily picture bones snapping in the powerful jaws. She gulped. "Really? Well, that's a little gruesome, isn't it? Do you think you could maybe chase them a bit, then let them go?"

He flopped down at her feet and whined, as if telling her he didn't really think much of her idea.

"Then again, I suppose you are a big, bad hunting machine; chasing prey and just letting it go probably doesn't sound like such a good idea. Hmmm... I suppose it wouldn't be natural to expect that of you; you are a dog, after all. Perhaps we could come to an agreement of some sort. For example, you could be allowed to chase the rabbits away from Blossomwood...that's here, by the way...but any actual catching and crunching and munching of bones and bodies and such could take place elsewhere. Do you think that would work for you?"

The dog sat up and ruffed several times, nodded his head and held his paw out to shake. Hermione shook his hand and said with a chuckle, "All right then, it appears we have a deal. Oh, wait. I almost forgot, I have something for you. Neeley!" she called to summon the little house-elf.

The little elf appeared with a pop, but upon seeing the huge dog, she shrieked and jumped back behind Hermione. "Missy!" she cried. "There is a monster in your garden."

Hermione laughed and reassured her. "No, Neeley, it's not a monster; this is a dog, and he belongs to one of the neighbors. At least, I'm fairly sure he does."

"Neeley has seen dogs before, Missy, and I does not think that is one," she said warily, peering out from behind Hermione.

"Well, you will have to take my word for it, Neeley. He is most assuredly a dog. Now, I called you because I bought some treats for my friend here. Would you bring them for me, please? They should be in the cupboard behind the kitchen door."

"Very well, Missy... I will sends them out to you."

A few seconds later the box of dog biscuits arrived on the table, but the little elf did not show up. Clearly, she did not think as highly of dogs as Hermione did.

~*~

Severus owed Lucius to let him know that he was taking a few days off of work, but he planned to be at his home in case anything urgent came up. Severus lived in the Blackmore Vale area, just west of Piddles Woods. When he'd been released from the hospital, he'd had no desire to return to Spinner's End. He had hit a bit of luck at that time: some land developer had been buying up all the property in the area. Fine with him. He had been happy to be rid of it, as nothing there had encouraged him to keep it. So, he had received a nice amount of Muggle money out of the deal, and when converted to Galleons, it had been more than enough to buy the comfortable country house where he now lived. It was no Malfoy Manor, but it was definitely a huge step up from the two-up, two-down he'd had at Spinner's End.

The first couple of years, he'd lived in relative solitude with only his house-elf Ned for company. He'd never owned an elf before in his life, but upon his release from St. Mungo's, he'd been too weak to be on his own and in need of some assistance, despite nearly a year of rehabilitation. Ned had served him during all his years at Hogwarts, and when he'd heard through the house-elf grapevine that Severus was going to need help, he'd volunteered to leave Hogwarts to serve the former professor again. Severus had been reluctant at first; in spite of the fact that years earlier he'd sneered at Granger's ill-fated attempt to liberate house-elves, he'd personally had no desire to "own" another being. In the end, they had worked out an arrangement suitable to both parties, and Ned had been with him ever since.

"Ned, I'm going for a walk, and I'll be back in time for dinner," called Severus on his way out. The little house-elf gave a wave of acknowledgment from the kitchen.

Once outside, Severus whistled for his dog. Tee came bounding up to greet him, and they set off for a hike. Walking cleared his head, and he needed to give some serious thought to what his next plan of action would be.

After walking for a bit, suddenly Tee took off like a shot, barreling through the brush and brambles. "Tee! Tee! Come back here, you blasted mongrel!" Tee minded just as well as he always did, which is to say not at all. Well, at least he was going in the opposite direction of Mrs. Harrigan's house--Severus mentally referred to her as *Mrs. Harridan*. A prissy old biddy she was, always complaining about Tee scaring her chickens.

"Bloody dog," he muttered as he scrambled down the hill after him. At the bottom of the hill, he caught sight of the dog already quite a way ahead down the path. Tee stood as if he were waiting for Severus to catch up, then he was off again, veering off on a much smaller overgrown path that led down to the river.

Suddenly, he heard a splash and a woman's voice cry out.

"Damn! Jill, Jillie!"

Had someone fallen in the river? A child? Instead of following the path, Severus used his wand to slash the brush out of the way as he half-slid the rest of the way down to the edge of the bank. He heard Tee barking madly and the woman shouting again.

"Gods be damned! Where in hell is my wand? Oh, shit, hold on, Jillie. I'm coming!"

Severus ran around the bend just in time to see Tee and Granger both jump into the river at the same time from opposite banks. And floating down the river towards him,

dog-paddling for all she was worth, was a small dog, little more than a puppy really. She looked to be fighting a losing battle against the current. The pup went under once and managed to bob back up to the surface, but it was clear she was weakening. She went under again and popped back up as Severus waded out into the shallows. What he intended to do exactly, he wasn't quite sure since he wasn't a strong swimmer by any means. Using his wand he summoned a dead branch to put in the pup's path and pull her in. But Tee came up beside the pup, snagged her collar in his teeth, and managed to haul her to the shore.

Granger was coming right behind, so Severus held the branch out to her. As she grabbed it, he stepped forward to pull her in, not realizing that he stood on the edge of a drop off. His feet went out from under him, and with a shout, he plunged in over his head.

He flailed about in a panic for several seconds before he came to his senses, her voice shouting in his ear. "Stop! Snape, Snape, Severus! Stop or you'll drown us both!"

He managed to stop thrashing, and in just a couple of seconds, his feet found purchase in the muddy shallows, and they both dragged themselves to the shore.

Tee waited for them there, bounding back and forth excitedly. The puppy lay on the grassy bank looking exhausted and bedraggled, but very much alive. Severus managed to scramble up the bank first and held out his hand to pull Granger up. After checking quickly on the pup, Hermione fell to her knees and threw her arms around Tee, telling him what a brave and wonderful dog he was and promising him a whole box of dog treats next time he popped by. Severus had no idea what she meant by that, but Tee ate up the attention and lapped at her face.

While she was lavishing praises on his dog, he quickly glanced up and down the path and, seeing no one around, cast a discreet drying charm on both of them. He then knelt to check on the puppy and cast a couple of simple diagnostic spells; she seemed to be breathing all right but had started to shiver, so he cast a gentle warming spell. Taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, he transfigured it into a small blanket to wrap around the pup and passed her over into Hermione's arms.

With Hermione's focus no longer on him, Tee came over and leaned heavily against Severus, causing him to fall from his knees onto his arse, obviously right where the dog wanted him. Tee flopped down next to him and laid his head in Severus lap.

"Get off me, Tee, you great oaf," ordered Severus.

Tee merely tried to butt his head up beneath Severus' hand, as if saying, 'Pet me...you know you want to.'

"You imbecile, stop," muttered Severus. "You're making a fool of yourself."

Looking down at Tee, then back up at him, Granger appeared confused. "This is your dog?"

He merely nodded in response.

"Somehow, I never pictured you as a dog person."

"I'm not."

"And yet clearly, you have a dog."

He sighed. "It's complicated."

Granger cuddled her dog to her chest and kept looking from him to his dog and back again, her nose scrunched up. "Why did you name the poor thing Tom Riddle?"

"The second."

"Excuse me?"

"Tom Riddle the second. How did you know that was his name?"

"Oh... at Harry's that day, I overheard little Al ask if you'd brought Tom Riddle to the party. It confused the hell out of me, that's for sure. You referred to him then as Tee, and you just called him that here. But why on earth would you name your dog Tom Riddle?"

"The sec..."

"The second, yes, I know. Why?"

"When I got stuck with him, he was just a puppy, and he was the devil incarnate. He chewed my slippers, he chewed my shoes, and he chewed my best dragonhide boots. He dug up my garden, and then he tracked mud through my house and onto my bed. He ate everything in sight, including but not limited to numerous loaves of bread, six pork chops, a beef brisket and half a couc--not all on the same day, mind you. He was evil personified, hence the name. It seemed fitting at the time. But now, I mostly just call him Tee for short."

Hermione got quiet, clearly deep in thought.

Severus scrambled for something to say to keep her talking so she wouldn't get up and leave. "What did you mean when you said you'd give him treats when he popped by *again*?"

"Oh, he's been by to visit me a couple of times now. I live just down the path and on the other side of that hill over there." Hermione pointed.

Severus wrinkled his brow, trying to figure out where she meant. "I realized you were buying a home, but I didn't know it was around here. You bought the old Bagshot Cottage?"

"The solicitors handled all the paperwork, so I didn't really check on the name of the owner. It belonged to Pansy's great-aunt Blossom, so I had assumed Parkinson."

"No, Blossom Bagshot. She was the sister of Pansy's paternal grandmother Bertha. They were distant cousins to Bathilda, I believe."

At the mention of Bathilda, she shuddered, and Severus could have kicked himself. He'd heard the story: In Godric's Hollow, Harry and Hermione had met who they'd thought was the famous, old historian, and that encounter had ended in disaster. He decided a change of subject was in order.

"You didn't have your wand with you today?" he asked.

She shook her head and looked guilty. "No. Big mistake, I know. First lesson in Defense, do not go anywhere without your wand. But I've only had Jilly for a couple days, and when I saw her run off, I just went after her. My wand is lying on the table on my kitchen patio. You obviously have your wand; why didn't you levitate her out of the river or something? It would have saved you a dunking."

"I was reluctant to use such strong magic openly for fear of being seen by passing Muggles. Piddles Woods, just east of here, is a nature preserve. Many people come and hike the trails there, and often they wander into this area, even though it is private property. Levitating your pup or parting the river like Moses parting the Red Sea would have been a bit extreme. However, if worst had come to worst, I'd have done whatever was necessary."

Hermione set Jilly on her lap and idly petted her with one hand while she patted Tee lightly with the other hand. He could tell she was deep in thought again; he could practically see her connecting the dots. Her eyes moved rapidly, taking in the river and the scene before them, the branch he had Summoned, and the spot where he'd fallen in.

Suddenly, she turned toward Severus and thumped him hard on the shoulder with the hand that had been petting Tee. "You idiot," she admonished him. "You can't swim can you?"

Looking a bit embarrassed, he shook his head and admitted, "Umm... no, not very well."

"Then what the hell were you thinking going into the damned river?"

"I wasn't planning on actually going in; I was only going to stand in the shallow part. I thought perhaps I could magically shift the current a bit, then snag the pup with the branch and pull her to shore. I didn't realize it dropped off there. When my feet went out from under me, I... I panicked." He was flustered. "I've never learned to swim. Always had a bit of a fear, I guess. When I was young, one of the neighbor boys drowned in the river near my house." Now why had he told her that? He must be out of his head to run off at the mouth so.

Hermione cuddled the puppy again as she processed what he'd said. "So, let me see if I have this straight. You've never learned to swim. Not only that but you actually have a fear of water. And yet, you went into the river to help save my dog?"

He nodded.

"You are an idiot, Snape," she said. But in the next instant, her actions belied her words as she threw her free arm around him and hugged him tightly, puppy and all. "Thank you."

TBC

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed, and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, Clairvoyant and SoftObsidian. Also many thanks to pythia_delphi for the awesome prompts.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

Severus was sure the incident with the pup would change Granger's attitude towards him. He looked forward to being in her good graces and thought it would lead to a new beginning for them. But if anything, she seemed more distant and intent on avoiding him. He couldn't understand it. Sitting on the grassy bank of the river, she'd seemed so at ease with him.

He had no idea why she was determined to dislike him so. Oh, he'd been a right bastard to her and to all her friends back when they were his students, but surely she understood that things had changed and he was a different person, especially considering his new friendships with Potter and Weasley. Choosing to do what he always did when he needed answers, he decided to do some research to see what she'd been up to since the end of the war.

First, he checked through the press clippings for anything he could find on her. There was very little mention of her once she'd officially started working for the Department of Mysteries. That wasn't unusual, as most Unspeakables kept a pretty low profile and were fairly well protected by the Department unless they did something particularly stupid. Although she technically wasn't an Unspeakable, she had the same type of clearance, so he knew the rule probably applied to her, as well.

All he could find was the occasional blurb here and there: *Miss Granger, who has been absent from England for the past several years, was in attendance at the wedding of Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood... at the wedding of Ron Weasley and Pansy Parkinson... for the christening of Miss Selene Lily Potter... Miss Granger, formerly one-third of the famed Golden Trio and a long-time friend of Neville Longbottom, was seen at the funeral of his grandmother, Augusta Longbottom...*

Deciding to go back a little farther to the time before she'd left England, he was shocked at the sudden amount of space the press, namely Rita Skeeter, had devoted to smearing Granger's good name after the end of the war. From immediately after Voldemort's fall until Granger actually started working for the Department of Mysteries, the papers had been laden with unending lurid headlines and attacks against her. The viciousness of some of the things Skeeter had succeeded in printing about the Gryffindor golden girl shocked even Severus.

Skeeter had basically called her a glory-seeking slut willing to sleep with anyone if it would gain her a bit of celebrity status. There had been, of course, mention of Krum, Potter, and Weasley, but she had also tried to link Hermione with practically everyone from Cedric Diggory to Colin Creevey and all the way to Voldemort himself. Her name had even been linked to his. Skeeter had claimed that inside sources reported that Granger had spent hours daily "sitting vigil" at his bedside during the months he'd been in a coma. She had then implied that perhaps the outstanding grades the girl had received while at Hogwarts were actually earned through questionable extracurricular activities rather than legitimate class work.

This was outrageous. She was a war hero. If not for her, he truly doubted Harry would have stayed alive long enough to finish his task. Why hadn't the Ministry or the Order defended her? Why hadn't any of her friends stood up for her and protested these slanderous statements? There was much more to this story than what he'd been aware of. He decided the best way to find out was to go to the source. He Apparated to Ottery St. Catchpole.

~*~

Severus arrived at Ron and Pansy's home to find Harry and Luna there, as well. Whatever they'd been up to, they all looked as guilty as sin. So, he challenged them outright. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Going on?" asked Ron nervously. "Nothing's going on, Severus, nothing at all."

"Don't lie to me, Weasley. You're a horrible liar. You four are up to something, and I want to know what it is."

None of them seemed to want to draw Severus' wrath, but finally Luna spoke up. "We're here because of Hermione."

"What about Hermione?"

"We're worried about her; she's just not her old self. She seems closed off somehow... cold... different," said Harry. "And like we said before, Severus, we just don't understand where this sudden animosity toward you, in particular, has come from. She was always the first to defend you before. So, we've been trying to figure it out."

"Yeah," agreed Ron. "We were trying to decide when it all started, but we've seen and heard so little of Hermione over the years that we're not exactly sure. It's been quite obvious since she moved back here; that's for sure."

This statement puzzled Severus. In truth, he'd only come to be friends with Harry and Ron over the last few years. He'd spent nearly a year in the coma and then another year regaining his strength in St. Mungo's. Even after that, he'd spent several years living in self-induced exile before he'd finally decided to leave his solitude and actively rejoin the wizarding world. He honestly hadn't given her much thought before now. He'd known that Granger had left England, but he'd somehow assumed that the boys had stayed in close contact with her over all that time.

"What do you mean by that? That you've seen and heard so little of her? And what the hell was all this about?" Severus demanded, enlarging and throwing the copies of the *Prophet* on the table.

Picking up one of the papers, Ron grimaced at the lurid headline: *The Brains of the Golden Trio or Gryffindor Whore? Who is the REAL Hermione Granger?* "I forgot how bad it was," he said softly. "How horribly Skeeter painted her...."

"Bad!" roared Severus. "That one is mild compared to some; they practically crucified her. Why were there no rebuttals? Why didn't the Ministry do something? Why didn't you, her bloody friends, or the Order, do something?"

"I did print rebuttals in the *Quibbler*, Severus," said Luna softly, tears in her eyes. "But we've never had the readership that the *Prophet* has. It didn't do a whole lot of good because, other than Hermione's true friends, most people in the general public just discounted my articles."

"We wanted to do something, Severus, but she wouldn't let us; she told us not to. She was afraid Skeeter and the *Prophet* would have turned on us, too," said Harry.

"So, to protect your own reputation, you left your best friend out to hang?" asked Severus, shocked. This did not sound like the Harry Potter and Ron Weasley that he knew.

"Severus, it's not what it seems," said Ron. "Skeeter hated Hermione. Hermione had blackmailed her years earlier, you see, and she wanted revenge; that's why she printed all those lies about her. But for some reason, she didn't bother with us, so Harry and I were still in the public's good graces. Hermione begged us to ignore it. She was afraid if we defended her, or tried to fight it, then Skeeter would have discredited us, as well. We needed to maintain a positive influence with the public."

"It still sounds like you were putting your reputations before your friendship."

"No," gasped Harry. "It wasn't like that at all. It was for you. After the war, when we realized what you'd done, for me, for all of us... We knew we had to protect you, to clear your name. You were in a coma and unable to defend yourself, and honestly, Severus, we weren't even sure that you would if you could. There was still talk of convicting you for killing Dumbledore. But the wheels turned so slowly, it took a long time before your hearings started. We had to bide our time and retain our popularity in the public eye in order to sway others to our side. It was all in order to have the influence to get you pardoned when the time came. Hermione insisted upon it. She was afraid if we crossed Skeeter, she'd manage to turn the public against us, like in our fourth year when Voldemort returned."

Severus sat down hard. "You're saying she allowed herself to be slandered and vilified in the press as some insane means of protecting me? Dear Merlin, no wonder she hates me."

"But that's not it, Severus," said Pansy gently. "That's what we don't understand, you see. She didn't hate you back then. See this article..." She pointed to the one that had linked Granger to him. "We obviously know the part about how she 'earned' her grades and being tied to you before the war is rubbish. There's actually a bit of truth here, though."

"Hermione did spend hours at your bedside every single day for months. We both quit volunteering at the hospital by that point: I to start my medi-witch studies and she to do her training at the Department of Mysteries. But I know for a fact that she came to St. Mungo's nearly every evening. If she had studies to do, she did them there at your bedside. But she also took time to read to you, talk to you, brush your hair, hold your hand, or just sit quietly by your side. Those are not the actions of a witch who resented you, or hated you, Severus."

Ron continued, "So we figured something must have happened. But we don't know what or when. We know that she finished her training at the Department of Mysteries right about the same time you finally came out of your coma. But then, within a matter of days, she took an assignment out of the country and was gone, practically without any warning. We were wondering..."

"Wondering what?" asked Severus defensively, looking at Ron.

"Well, when you regained consciousness, did you have some sort of disagreement with Hermione? Or a confrontation?" asked Harry. "Something that would explain this huge change in her attitude about you?"

Severus was puzzled. He tried to remember those days; they'd always been a bit murky to him. "No, I don't think so, but then, my memories of the first month are foggy. In fact, I have no memory at all of the first couple of weeks."

"Oh, I do remember that now," said Pansy. "You had some kind of mind-altering reaction to the combination of potions, didn't you? You were quite delusional for a while." She stopped to think for a moment and giggled. "I heard that you thought Professor McGonagall was Lord Voldemort and that Madame Pomfrey was Bellatrix Lestrange. It was rumored that you caused quite a scene when they came to visit you. I heard you threw your dinner tray at them and tried to Avada them with your butter knife. Thank goodness you didn't have access to your wand; it could have been a real disaster."

"Well, I certainly have no memories of any of that. So, I suppose if Granger showed up in my room, I could have said anything to her without having any memory of it now."

"But Hermione wouldn't take something like that seriously. If Severus were delusional... Would she?" asked Harry.

"Perhaps she didn't realize, Harry. That type of patient can be very convincing. I don't know if she would have heard that he was out of his head before she visited him; it took the Healers quite a while to figure out exactly what was going on," said Pansy. "Oh, wait. Now I remember. It was just around that time that she suddenly stopped coming by. I thought she'd just got busy for a few days. That did happen from time to time. But then, I found out at Ron's birthday party that she'd moved to Florence on an assignment. It was all very sudden, as I recall. I remember because we had become fairly friendly by that point, and I was a little hurt that she didn't bother to say goodbye. Harry told us the transfer was all very sudden."

"I remember that, too," said Harry. "She said she was leaving immediately on an assignment. She made it sound like a great opportunity, but she said she had to transfer right away, within days, or lose her chance for the job."

Luna got a strange look on her face and started quickly thumbing through the papers on the table.

"What is it, Luna?" asked Harry.

"Just a thought, love; let me work through it for a minute," she responded, humming tunelessly to herself.

The group sat in silence for a few minutes, the rustling of paper and Luna's humming the only sounds.

Suddenly, Pansy gasped. "I just remembered something Hermione said. It was right after the Hog's Head fiasco. I said it was a mistake on Severus' part and asked her if

she could get over what happened that night. But her reply seemed odd to me."

"What did she say?" asked Harry and Severus at the same time.

"She said, *'I'm not convinced that it really was a mistake. I believe deep down that's how he really still sees me, thinks of me. I'm just some slag; I'll never be good enough in his eyes.'*"

"I don't think that! Why in Merlin's name would she say something like that?" Severus practically shouted.

"Well, you did accost her in a bar, Severus," said Harry.

"And you felt her up and made lewd suggestions to her," added Ron.

"And maybe, just maybe, mind you... it wasn't the first time you said and did hurtful things," offered Luna. "Whether intentionally or not."

Severus protested, "I've never..."

"Not that you can remember, by your own admission and from what Pansy has told us," said Luna softly. "Look, this is just guesswork and supposition, but I've arranged these articles in a kind of time line based on events as we know them. First, there's all this bad press about Hermione that went on for months after the end of the war.

"Then, here's the news of your hearing, Severus. Ultimately, all charges against you were dismissed. We were all happy about that, Hermione included. And we know she was still coming to see you almost every day then because that's when the rumors were leaked about her sitting vigil at your bedside, and this article linking her to you appeared.

"And I know personally that Hermione was nearing the end of her training at this time because of this article," Luna pointed to an article, dated in late February, about a collection of Dark Objects being uncovered in Wales. "She couldn't talk about her work specifically, but we now know that it entailed decoding Dark Artifacts. And I remember her telling me that she was going to take an assignment in Wales. I remember this clearly because I asked her to keep an eye out for Welsh Pixies; they're much rarer than the Cornish ones, you know. She was quite excited about it. The assignment, I mean, not the Pixies."

"Okay," said Ron. "I never thought I'd be saying this to you, Luna, but I do see the logic in this. Everything is feasible, so far."

"Oh good, I'm glad you think so, Ron. Well, then here is an article about Severus coming out of his coma. Now, we know that you have no memory of this period of time, Severus. But we also know that up to this point Hermione continued coming to see you every day. But then we learn that she stopped coming by very suddenly, and that was just before March first because Pansy learned, on Ron's birthday, that Hermione had suddenly taken the assignment in Florence. But it was just a little over a week earlier that she told me she definitely was going to stay in the UK and work out of Wales."

"So, we can assume that something drastic happened between this week...", said Harry, pointing to the article about Dark Objects in Wales.

"...And just after this week," concluded Severus glumly, pointing to the article about him reviving from his coma. "Bloody hell!"

Things were not looking good. Right now, it seemed highly likely that he had somehow managed to bugger his own love life nearly ten years earlier, and he had no memory of the event at all.

~*~

Aside from all her other worries about Snape, Hermione was quite upset when she realized that her lovely home was right in the same neighborhood where he lived. She thought her friends had purposely set her up, as they knew how she felt about the man. But Ron denied everything and was pretty convincing about it, too.

"Hermione, I don't know why you're getting so freaked out. Sure, Severus does live in the area, but so do a lot of people. It's not as though he's in the same building in the flat below you, or something. His house is across the river and nearly a mile away."

"I still think you should have told me, Ronald," Hermione admonished.

He knew she was put out with him when she pulled out the 'Ronald.' "Would you have loved the cottage any less if you'd known?"

Scrunching her nose, she shrugged and said, "No, I suppose not. It's true I do love it there."

"There you go, then. All's well that ends well," he concluded.

~*~

Hermione was in a quandary. She knew from first-hand experience that Snape was a bitter, cruel, hurtful man able to wound deeply with just his words and tone of voice; he was entirely capable of breaking someone's heart. But the Snape she discovered since her return seemed like a completely different person: decent, caring, considerate. She'd seen him interact with Harry's children, who treated him as a well-loved uncle. The man had a dog...a dog who absolutely adored him, for fuck's sake! Dogs were good judges of character in her opinion; how could Tee be wrong? Who was this man, and where was the Snape she knew?

She soon learned that some parts of the old Snape were definitely still there. She'd seen him when a wizard who was suspected of using Dark Magic to control and abuse his girlfriend was brought in. He had torn into that man up one side and down the other, telling him in no uncertain terms what he deserved. He'd hardly raised his voice, yet by the time Snape had finished with him, the bloke had practically pissed himself. Oh yes, the old Snape, or at least part of him, was still in there, and who knew what might trigger his appearance? Hermione shuddered at the thought of dealing with that Snape.

Plus, she was confused by his actions toward her. He seemed bent on pursuing her as if the events from the past had never happened. She felt an inexplicable attraction to the man in spite of the knowledge deep down that it was a very bad idea. Feeling unbalanced and unsure how to deal with the whole situation, Hermione reverted to avoiding him at all costs. However, as it turned out, some things were unavoidable.

~*~

Friday afternoon, Hermione was sitting at her desk when a tap came on her door. Harry's head poked around the edge of the door; it reminded her of the first day she'd sat in this office. "Hi, Hermione. Megan said it was okay to come in."

"Sure, Harry, what's up?" asked Hermione as she closed the file she'd been reviewing.

"Ron asked me to pass the word...he's just left to take Pansy to St. Mungo's."

"St. Mungo's? Why? What happened? Is she all right?" questioned Hermione in rapid-fire succession as she jumped to her feet.

"Hermione, calm down," said Harry with a laugh. "She's having a baby, remember? She's gone into labor."

"Oh... Oh! I didn't even think... Well, what should we do? Should we do anything?" Hermione didn't have a clue what was expected, as she'd been out of the country when all of Harry and Luna's children had been born. "Should we go down there, or would we just be in the way?"

Harry laughed again. "Well, these things take time; it's not as though the baby is going to be born at any minute. If you want, we can go down after work and see how

things are progressing."

"Thanks, I'd like to do that," said Hermione, breaking into a grin. "He is going to be our godson, after all."

Harry stopped dead and turned to look at Hermione with a strange look on his face. "What gave you an idea like that, Hermione?" he asked.

"Oops! Maybe I've let the cat out of the bag," she said, biting her lip. "I guess I wasn't supposed to say anything, but I thought Ron would have asked you by now."

"Hermione, I'm not going to be asked to be the baby's godfather."

"Oh yes, you are, Harry," said Hermione. "When Ron asked me and I agreed, he said he was so happy to have two of his closest friends as... Oh, shit... He didn't mean you and me, did he? He meant Snape. They asked Snape to be the godfather."

"Hermione, in addition to working together, Severus is one of his closest friends," said Harry. "Ron wanted you to be the baby's godmother, and Pansy agreed, but she wanted to choose the godfather, and she wanted Snape. Ron was happy with that choice, as well, and it's fine with me." He looked at her nervously before asking, "You aren't going to change your mind now that you know, are you?"

Hermione paused to think for a moment but then shook her head. "No, I couldn't do that. I wouldn't. I just didn't think is all. When Ron said two of his closest friends, I just assumed... it's okay. It'll be fine.

"So, we'll go down together after work then and see how things are going and if there's a new little Weasley in the world yet?" asked Hermione.

"Okay, I'll pop by here around five o'clock and get you," said Harry.

"Sounds good to me," responded Hermione cheerily as she picked up the file she'd been working on. As soon as the door shut behind Harry, her smile faded, and she rubbed her fingers across her brow as she murmured to herself, "Why can't things ever be easy? Bloody, bugging hell!"

~*~

Severus arrived at St Mungo's after work to see if his godson had arrived yet. As he stalked through the halls, he couldn't help but think that if he'd been wearing his teaching robes, they would have billowed. He had taught most of these dunderheads, and they still scurried to get out of his way. He smiled to himself; he still had it.

"Hello, Professor," chirped a happy little voice. "It's so good to see you again, sir."

"Mrs. Cadwalader," he responded with a nod. Her presence reminded him that he had spent nearly two years in this hellhole; many of the the people there had spoon fed him and wiped drool from his chin, in addition to caring for various other intimate bodily functions. It did tend to humble a man. With a sigh, he turned to the young woman who had always treated him with respect and kindness when he was her patient and greeted her a little more pleasantly and informally. "It's good to see you, too, Imogene, after so long. How is that boy of yours? Robert, was it?"

She beamed. "Rodney, sir. And he'll be a third year at Hogwarts next fall."

"Really, already? It's hard to believe that much time has passed. And please allow me to offer my condolences on Leland's passing. I was sorry to hear of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Snape. I do appreciate it," she responded.

"Please, do call me Severus, my dear. Well, I really must be off to see some friends. Good day to you."

"Good day, Severus."

He rounded the corner to find Arthur and Molly in the maternity waiting area and went to sit with them while they awaited the birth of their newest grandchild. Shortly after five-fifteen, Harry and Granger arrived together. Molly rushed to greet them, giving them both hugs and fussing over them, as she was prone to do. While Molly chatted with Hermione, Harry moved over to sit by Arthur and Severus and join in their conversation.

After a bit, Molly drifted back over, pulling Hermione along with her. Harry got up to let Molly have the seat next to Arthur, moving to the empty chair. The only available spots were two chairs by the window, rather far away from the group, or right next to Severus on the sofa.

Severus was amused by Hermione's dilemma; she didn't want to sit next to him, but she didn't want to call attention to it either by sitting too far away or by moving one of the chairs closer. He merely sat back with a smirk on his face and his arms draped across the back of the sofa. He made a sweeping gesture with one hand to indicated she was welcome to sit by him.

With a sniff she plopped down on the sofa but scooted away from him as far as she possibly could.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye and had to suppress an unnatural urge to grin. She was adorable when she was in a snit. Merlin, he wanted the woman. Now, all he had to do was convince her that she wanted him, too, in spite of whatever might have happened between them before.

~*~

Pansy gave birth to a healthy baby boy, and they named him Andrew David. He was named after no one in particular because they said they just wanted him to be himself. Hermione got to hold him barely an hour after he was born. He was so tiny and helpless and new. She'd never in her life really thought about having children, but holding little Andrew caused her heart to ache a little. She'd quickly passed him off to Ron, not liking the yearning that holding the babe brought out in her.

Afterward, she and Harry stopped at the Leaky for a celebratory drink. Before long, they were joined by several Weasleys and eventually Snape and Ron and a few others, as well. Although she was getting used to being around him, Snape's presence still made her uneasy. And tonight, after holding Ron's baby boy, she couldn't help but think of the past and of all the years she'd been gone. She thought about how long she'd spent away from her friends and all of the events she had missed: births, christenings, holidays, birthdays. So many things she'd missed.

After a few more drinks, she became a bit maudlin, thinking about all those things, and then angry that Snape could pretend that the past had never happened. She'd left by her own choice, yes, but she would never have made that decision if she hadn't been devastated by the things he'd said to her. Hermione realized she was getting a little drunk and was in danger of doing something stupid and rash, so she told Harry she was tired and wanted to go home. Harry insisted that she'd had a little too much to drink to Apparate safely, and he wanted to make sure she got home safely.

"I could escort you home, Granger; it's not as if it's out of my way," Snape offered upon overhearing their conversation.

Before Hermione could reply, Harry cut in, saying, "No, it's all right, Severus. I'll be happy to take Hermione home."

Hermione was relieved for a brief instant that she wouldn't have to deal with Snape, but then the half-drunk rebellious side, which had been dying to finally confront the man, jumped forth and protested. "No, Snape's right; it's on his way, and besides, there's something I've been wanting to ask him for quite some time now."

Harry looked worried. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Hermione?"

"It'll be fine, Harry," she assured him, patting his hand.

Hermione turned to Snape and grabbed her jacket off the back of the chair. "Let's go," she said curtly.

~*~

She'd had more than a couple drinks and didn't want to take a chance of splinching, so Hermione let Snape Side-Along her. They landed on the walk between her gate and the front door. Even with his hand on her arm, she stumbled a bit when they arrived, and he drew her close to his side to prevent her fall.

"Careful there," he said. Once she was steady on her feet, he released her and followed her to the cottage door. "You said you wanted to ask me about something, but perhaps it would be best to wait for another time."

She turned to confront him. Not expecting him to be so close when she stopped and turned, she nearly ran into him. Hermione placed her hands on his chest, meaning to push him back and put some distance between them. His hands fell to her hips to steady her, and her breath caught when she looked up and saw his eyes on her mouth; he had the look of a starving man. Instead of shoving him away, as she had planned, her fingers clenched the front of his robe, and she pulled him against her as she raised up on her tiptoes to close her lips on his. It was like she was possessed; she couldn't stop herself. It was barely a touch at first, but then it spread like wildfire, like a spark to tinder igniting a tiny flame. Before she knew what was happening, an inferno blazed between them, threatening to consume them both.

Somehow her hands ended up twined around his neck, the fingers of one hand threaded through his hair to pull him down to her. He held her tightly to him, so close she could feel his hardness pressing against her. She moaned, tilting back her head to give him better access, as his lips left hers to nuzzle and nip along her neck. At this point, Hermione opened her eyes, and the realization that she was standing at her front door and damn near snogging the pants off Snape, or vice versa, brought her to her senses. She shoved him away, as she had intended in the beginning.

Her hand came to her mouth as she choked back a sob. "What kind of game are you playing!" she demanded.

"What?" Snape looked confused.

"This! What is this? What are you playing at!"

"I didn't start this; you kissed me first," he defended himself.

"Only because you're driving me mad. I don't understand what's going on here. Is this some sort of cruel joke? Are you trying to make me want you, then planning to slap me down like you did ten years ago? I'm not the silly little girl I was then. I made decisions that day that changed my whole life. I went far away from my home, my friends, and everything I ever held dear. I was gone for a very long time all because of the things you said to me that day. And now, you act like it never happened. You come on to me like there was nothing in our past. I don't understand your actions, and I don't understand you, Snape. So, I will ask you again: what kind of game are you playing?"

TBC

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed, and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, Clairvoyant and SoftObsidian. Also, many thanks to pythia_delphi for the awesome prompts.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

Severus looked down at Hermione sitting on her sofa as she stared at the vial he'd pulled out of the pocket in his cloak. He held it out to her, practically shoving it in front of her face. "Take this," he said gruffly.

"What is that? Get it out of my face," she said, trying to bat his hand away from her. "I want an answer to my question, Snape."

"This is a sobering potion. Before we have this discussion, I want to know that you are completely sober and coherent," he answered. He'd swallowed the contents of a similar vial himself seconds earlier. "Now take it."

"Oh, very well then. Give it here," she said, snatching the vial from his hand. Popping the cork and looking him directly in the eyes, she drank it all down in one gulp with a little shudder of distaste. "There. Are you satisfied?"

Severus studied her eyes for a moment; he saw that they looked clear, and he was convinced that she was sober now. "Quite," he replied curtly. "Now tell me what you meant when you said that you made decisions that day that changed your life. What day exactly are you talking about?"

"What!" she screeched in outrage, jumping to her feet in front of him. "How dare you! How can you pretend that you don't know what I'm referring to? It was the day when I came to St. Mungo's and found out that you'd regained consciousness after nearly ten months of worrying that it might never happen. Ten months of visiting you, of hoping and praying and pleading to Merlin, or the stars, or any bloody deity that would listen, to bring you back. And when it finally happened, when all my hopes and prayers were answered, that was the day you destroyed me."

She paced the whole time she was ranting at him, but now she stopped before him and poked him directly in the sternum for emphasis as she concluded, "That's what day, you bastard. How dare you ask me that, as if it simply slipped your mind."

Snape dropped onto the couch like a sack of lead. He propped his elbows on his knees and, reaching up, pinched the bridge of his nose. He squinted his eyes shut for a second before looking up at her grimly. "Sweet mother of God, Granger. Please... please tell me you have not lived the last decade of your life based on the delirious ramblings of a twisted fuck like me. I *don't* remember it! Shit, they tell me that I thought Minerva and Poppy were Voldemort and Bellatrix. I don't remember the first couple of weeks at all, or you being there, or anything I may have said to you. So, I have no idea who I thought you were."

"You thought I was a nobody, a filthy little slut," said Hermione sadly, her voice barely above a whisper as she repeated the hateful words. "That's what you called me. According to you, I was someone no self-respecting wizard could ever really want. Someone whom they might gladly use, as you assured me Harry and Ron certainly had."

Someone to solve their problems, to do their research, to warm their bed. You said I was just a cunt to fuck; that's all a dirty Mudblood whore like me was good for. And I'm giving you the mild version."

"Dear Merlin, Granger, I have no idea why on earth I would say any of those things to you. Someone must have given me the *Prophet* before you came in that day. I most likely stumbled across one of Skeeter's asinine articles about you. But, Granger... Hermione, I swear to you, I was not in my right mind. I couldn't have been. I had some kind of reaction to the combination of potions they were giving me. It caused me to suffer from delusions and memory loss."

Hermione appeared defeated as she sank next to him on the sofa. "Delusions? Memory loss?" she asked dumbly.

"Gra... Hermione, none of those things were true. Why, by all that's holy, would you take anything I said to heart?" Severus asked. "I was nobody but your greasy git of a teacher. My opinion should not have mattered that much to you, certainly not enough to make rash decisions that would affect the rest of your life."

"Why... why? Because thanks to Rita Skeeter and her filthy innuendos, that is what the general public really thought of me. From the time I was barely sixteen years old, most of the wizarding world believed I was some kind of sleazy, manipulative slut willing to pursue any famous wizard I came near, from Viktor Krum to Harry Potter to Ron Weasley. According to all of her accounts, the only role I played at all in bringing down Voldemort was little more than a camp follower tagging along with Harry and Ron to warm their beds on the Horcrux hunt."

Looking up at him with pain-filled eyes, she continued, "But you knew me, Snape, you knew who I was. You knew me from the time I was an eleven-year-old girl desperately trying to fit into a world that didn't want me. I looked up to you, and I respected you. I trusted you when no one else did, and when everyone told me I shouldn't, I still did."

"And then afterward, when Harry revealed the truth about you, about your true role in the war... I had a foolish schoolgirl crush on you. You were a hero to me. I came and sat by your bedside nearly every evening for months. I talked to you, I read to you, and I cared for you. I made up stupid, silly little-girl happy endings for you. And even though I knew it was an impossibility, I still fancied you; I dreamed of a future with you. Call it what you will, a crush, hero worship, fantasy... whatever... to me it felt real. Logically, I knew it would never happen, but I hoped and I dreamed, and then when you finally came out of your coma, the very first thing you managed to do was crush me. Again. Just like you always did before, back at school. Every. Single. Time. Only this was a thousand times worse."

"So, I figured if even you, of all people, could believe all those filthy, ugly rumors, could believe the very worst of me... well, then what chance did I have to make anything of myself here. It's not that I care what people think; as you said, I knew the truth, but it just made living a normal life so bloody hard. That's why I left. I went to my supervisor at the Department of Mysteries the very next day and asked them to send me abroad with the International Dark Artifacts Division."

Hermione finished her story and stared at her hands in her lap, her fingers clasped so tightly together her knuckles were white. Severus sat next to her, dumbfounded, unsure what to do. Finally he reached over and gently untangled her hands and twined his fingers in hers, holding her right hand in his. "Hermione, I am sorry that those things I said hurt you so much..."

"Do you want to know something funny? Totally ironic?" she continued on, as if she hadn't even heard his words. "Back then, when Skeeter was smearing me across the headlines of the *Daily Prophet*, when you were calling me a worthless whore and a filthy little slut, I'd never even slept with anyone, not Harry, or Ron, or anyone else. I'd never been with any boy beyond a few innocent kisses." She paused to look down and seemed surprised to see his hand holding hers, and she pulled her hand out of his grip and back into her lap. Then she added, "I'm not that innocent, naive little girl anymore, and I'll never be her again."

"Hermione," said Severus softly. Severus tried to get her to look at him, but she wouldn't. So, he slid off the couch and knelt before her, crouching down to get at eye level with her. "Hermione..."

She continued on, as if she still hadn't heard him. "And now you tell me that all the decisions I stupidly made in haste were based on what? Not lies, exactly, but misinformation, based on something you don't even remember."

"Hermione, look at me," he said, tipping her head up so she had to look at him. "I'm truly sorry for all you went through because of those things I said. I swear if I'd been in my right mind, I never would have said anything of the like to you. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?" He stared at her, hoping against hope that she would.

She twisted away from his gaze and stared blankly across the room. After a minute, she sighed and said, "Well, I suppose it would be both foolish and unfair of me to hold it all against you now. By your own admission, you were delusional and have no memory of the act, so it was through no fault of your own, obviously. You wouldn't lie about it; I could check it out easily enough. All this time, I have blamed you for my decision to leave, but in reality, it was of my own accord. The choice was mine, although I must now admit, it was a rather impulsive and stupid one."

"Then you will forgive me for all those ugly things I said?" he asked, moving around so that she was forced to look at him again, though she clearly would have rather avoided him.

"I suppose it would be rather petty of me not to. So, yes... Yes, I... I forgive you," she said.

Severus stared at her, pleased to have her forgiveness, but puzzled by her demeanor. She seemed unnaturally calm, not in a peaceful way, but as if she had checked out and wasn't really there. Her forgiveness should be a good thing, and yet he felt empty rather than encouraged. "Hermione, perhaps this was the hand of fate. Ten years ago, you said you cared for me, 'fancied' me, but in all honesty, I probably would not have been amenable to any kind of relationship with you at that time. Now you have had a chance to grow up, to mature, to come into your own. You have returned here a strong, independent woman and at a time when I have finally come to understand what it is I truly want. Now we are both at a point in our lives where we can pursue a relationship."

Her head snapped up at his words, and she shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm sorry, but that can never happen."

"What do you mean?" Severus felt a dread spreading throughout him, a tightness in his chest. "Perhaps deep down you really cannot forgive me."

"Don't be ridiculous, of course I have. I said I did, and I meant it. But don't you see, that doesn't change the basic truth, does it? When I told you I was not that same girl from ten years ago, I meant it. I do understand now that you weren't responsible for the things you said to me that day, but they still did damage. I was hurt, devastated. When I left St. Mungo's that day, something inside of me was broken, and it still is. I don't think it can ever be fixed. I can never be that girl again."

"You see, after that day, I realized how foolish I'd been. To give someone that much power over you, to be able to hurt you that much...it's a very stupid thing to do. I swore that no one would ever have that kind of power over me again."

As Severus considered her words, the aching in his chest had grown until it threatened to consume him. "Are you saying in all the years you've been gone you have never had a relationship with anyone? You've lived all these years alone?"

"Not exactly. I had relationships. Although, I'd have to say they've been strictly short term, a period of weeks, a few months at the most. You see, I've come to realize no matter how much I might fantasize about it, there can never be any happily-ever-after for me. Because I just can't allow myself to give someone that much power...I can't trust anyone that much."

"Well, that's a rather sad, depressing way to live your life, don't you think, Hermione?" he asked bluntly.

She looked up at him with a sad, twisted little smile of acknowledgment. "Yes, I do, Severus, but it's all I know now. It's who I am."

After a moment, she reached out to run a finger lightly over the back of his hand. "I suppose it's possible that we could still have some fun, the two of us. I must say I found that kiss very nice, and I think we could enjoy ourselves quite nicely for a while," she said. "I have to admit, after all this time, I'm still attracted to you even after everything that happened."

For a brief moment, his heart leaped, and he considered saying yes. Given time, he was sure he could change her mind; he could make her love him. But then reality set in. He just couldn't face the idea of being with her, falling in love with her, all the while waiting...waiting for the day to come when she would reject him and send him on his way. He'd already spent a good portion of his life obsessing over a woman who didn't return his affection. He just couldn't do it all over again.

He shook his head and replied, "I'm afraid not, my dear. A few months ago, I probably would have jumped at the offer, but as of late, I have found myself wanting what I believed I could never have. I want what my friends have: a home, a wife, a child or two. I guess what I'm saying is I do want the proverbial happily-ever-after, and I thought that we might be able to find it together, the two of us. But if that's not possible, then I suppose I'll have to look elsewhere."

Hermione dropped her hand with a sigh. "It's all right, Severus, I understand."

"We'll still be seeing each other at work and through our mutual friends. But I won't be bothering you anymore. You have my word on that," he promised as he walked to the door. "Goodbye, Hermione."

~*~

As soon as he left, she felt drained. She'd held these feelings inside for years, the anger and hurt simmering all that time, and all the while, she'd told no one. She'd wanted to finally confront him, to make him understand how much he'd hurt her and ruined her life. When she'd come back home to England, she'd been furious that he'd seemed to be ignoring all the vicious things he'd said to her back then, but he hadn't been ignoring them at all: he simply didn't remember it. The scene that had shaped her decisions and changed the course of her life wasn't even a dim memory for him. It was like it had never happened. Except for her, it had.

His words of contrition echoed in her ears. A few weeks ago, she would have been quite pleased to hear them, but now she just felt empty. She'd had a chance to reclaim what she had so desired all those years ago...she could have had it handed to her on a silver platter...but instead, she'd kept her heart safe and let him walk away.

If her heart was safe, then why did it hurt so damn much, she wondered. She curled up in a fetal position on the couch and let the sobs overtake her. The last time she'd cried like that was ten years ago.

Hermione spent the weekend in a fog, alternating between crying on the couch and crying in the bed, with occasional bouts of cleaning and baking to try to take her mind off of everything. She hadn't cried in years, and now it felt like she would never stop.

She still wasn't up to her usual standards when she returned to work on Monday. She nearly got caught by a stray curse that a rookie would have recognized. Furious, Lucius stormed into her office and tore into her, ranting that she was going to get herself or someone else killed if she didn't get her head out of her arse. This resulted in Hermione bursting into tears again, leaving Lucius open mouthed and appalled.

"Stop that, stop it right now," he ordered. "You know how I hate dealing with weeping women. I've never seen you in such a state in all the years I've known you. I demand that you stop that caterwauling this instant."

"If you don't want to deal with it, then get the fuck out of my office!" she shouted at him.

"Very well then, I shall. You know where to find me when you come to your senses." He left in a huff.

Later that afternoon, she went to Lucius' office to apologize. While there, she handed him a parchment.

"What is this?" he asked, unrolling it even as he asked. Upon skimming the contents, he sat up straight in his chair and demanded, "What the hell is this, Hermione?"

"It's my resignation. I thought it only right to inform you before I send it to Kingsley. I'm thinking of returning to America. You were right this morning. It's bad enough that I could have been hurt, but I could have hurt or killed you or someone else, and that is totally unacceptable. I don't belong here," she said.

"Now that is ridiculous. I absolutely will not take this seriously," he said, tearing up the parchment and throwing it in the fireplace.

"That doesn't change anything. I have copies," Hermione responded dully.

Lucius came and crouched by her chair, tipping her face up with two fingertips beneath her chin. "Tell me what's wrong, sweetheart."

Looking into Lucius' silver-grey eyes, she realized that, in a world where she had learned to put her faith in no one, she trusted this man, her former enemy, with her life. With a little grimace, she said, "Better pull up a chair, my friend. It's a very long story, and your knees will get sore like that."

Taking her at her word, he pulled up his chair...only after he told his assistant to cancel his appointments and hold all calls and visitors...and then he warded the door. He sat before her, cradled her hand in his, and commanded, "Now, tell me everything."

And she did from beginning to end, from right after the war up to the past weekend. By the time she was done telling the tale, she was exhausted, both physically and mentally.

"Hermione, it seems to me that you are not happy with your decision about Severus; it's clear that you still have feelings for him."

"Whether I do or not, Lucius, is immaterial. I am unable to act on them because I can't change the way I am. I just can't bring myself to trust him or any man. I'm too scared. And if I can't do that, then any hope for a relationship is null," Hermione said sadly.

"Well, quitting your job and going back to the States is certainly not an answer either. You will not run away again; that is too much like what happened ten years ago and very unlike the bloody Gryffindor you are. Take some time off...Merlin knows the Ministry owes us both months of holiday pay. Take a few weeks or a month, more if necessary, and collect some of it. You deserve it. Figure out what it is you really want to do. But, Hermione, don't cut yourself off from your friends: myself, Cissy, even Draco. We all care what happens to you. The same is true of the Potters and Weasleys, I'm sure. You're not alone, you know."

Hermione threw her arms around Lucius and hugged him tight. "Thank you, Lucius. You are such a sweet man and a good friend."

"Dear Merlin, do not ever let that rumor get spread about. It would surely ruin my reputation as a dark, evil ex-Death Eater. I'd never get any respect around here again," he mumbled as he kissed the top of her head.

~*~

Hermione spent the first week just puttering around her cottage, catching up on a bit of research that she'd been putting off. She brewed a few household and personal potions, as she actually enjoyed the process and much preferred fresh brewed to store bought. She played with Jilly and took her for walks through the woods and along the river.

While Cissy's cure for the blues would have involved endless shopping, she knew that Hermione would be bored to tears, so instead, she took her to lunch or came to visit her at the cottage. Occasionally, Cissy joined her and Jilly on their walks, and it was during one of these excursions that they happened upon a monstrosity big dog who seemed unusually happy to see Hermione. She was equally happy to see him, hugging him and talking to him, as if he could understand her. The strange thing was it almost seemed as if he did by the way he responded to her. Hermione explained that the huge, ugly dog belonged to Snape and had the ridiculous name of Tom Riddle the Second.

Cissy appeared shocked at first, and then she burst into giggles. "Only Severus would name his dog after the Dark Lord. It is just so typical of him," she declared as she bent to pet the creature. While Hermione fussed over Tee, Cissy straightened and looked around, and if she noticed the tall, dark figure standing in the shadows halfway up

the hill, she didn't say anything to Hermione.

~*~

He had thought he would see her at work at the M.B.I. offices, but Lucius had informed him a bit curtly that Hermione was taking some personal time. He hadn't seen her in nearly three weeks, since that day at her cottage, aside from when he'd seen her from a distance walking her dog with Narcissa.

It was Andrew's christening, the day of his naming ceremony, when Severus and Hermione would assume their roles as his godparents. Observing her now from across the room, he could see that, at first glance, she looked lovely. But when he scrutinized her appearance more closely, he could see the glamour she wore to cover the dark circles beneath her eyes and assumed she was not sleeping well. And if he was not mistaken, she had lost a few pounds, so she probably wasn't eating well, either. He didn't know why these things bothered him...she had made her choice...and yet, they did.

She approached and greeted him politely, "Good afternoon, Severus. Are you ready to become Andrew's godfather?"

"It is an honor I am looking forward to," he said even while thinking his reply sounded stilted.

"So am I... to be his godmother, I mean," she replied while waving at someone across the room.

Following her gaze, he commented sarcastically, "I see you've brought your pet Quidditch coach." For some reason, he felt put out that she would bring the man to a family gathering.

"Actually, Ivan is here with Ginny today. She and Draco are on the outs this week," she explained. Then, turning back to Severus, she admitted, "Ivan and I were never really an item, you know. He was doing me a favor because I didn't want to come to the dinner party alone that night."

"But you said..."

"I know what I said. I didn't want to look... I don't know... like I couldn't even get someone to come with me that night while you showed up with the gorgeous Justine of the painfully kinky shoes..."

"Justine of the what?" he asked, staring at her.

"Oh, never mind about that. Just my imagination working over time. I just..." Suddenly, she stopped and clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, dear Merlin, you didn't bring her today, did you? I am so sorry. I really meant no offense. I shouldn't have said that. Please forgive my rudeness." Hermione's face flushed with embarrassment.

He chuckled. "Don't worry. I did not bring Justine today. She was someone I went out with for a while, but like your Quidditch coach, she was merely doing me a favor that night."

Hermione appeared relieved to hear it, and with a smile, she laid her hand on his arm and said, "Severus, I wonder if we might talk about..."

Before she could finish, a pretty auburn-haired witch sidled up very closely to Severus and interrupted, "I've got Rodney settled with some of the Potter and Weasley cousins. That should keep him busy and out of trouble until the naming ceremony starts... Oh, I'm so sorry; was I interrupting?"

Hermione pulled her hand off Severus' arm and took half a step back. "No, not at all."

"Hermione, may I introduce you to Imogene Cadwalader. Imogene, this is Hermione Granger." Severus said. "Imogene is a friend of Pansy's and works at St. Mungo's. She allowed me to escort her and her son, Rodney, here today."

Hermione smiled and said, "Of course, Mrs. Cadwalader, I remember you from when I volunteered with Pansy at St. Mungo's right after the war."

"Oh, please, Miss Granger, call me Imogene."

"Of course, Imogene, and you must call me Hermione." Seeing Pansy across the room, Hermione saw her escape. "Oh, I see Pansy giving me the sign it's almost time. I promised I'd help dress little Andrew for the ceremony. If you'll both excuse me, please."

~*~

Hermione told Pansy she'd meet her in the nursery as soon as she made a quick trip to the loo. Once behind closed doors, she covered her eyes with her hands and took three deep breaths before lowering her hands to stare at her reflection in the mirror. "Well, that was a damn close call, Granger. You almost made a complete fool of yourself," she said.

When she'd put her hand on his arm, she'd been on the verge of asking him to give her another chance. What an idiot she was! Thank the gods that Imogene had arrived when she had, or Hermione would have totally humiliated herself. It was crystal clear that he had wasted no time with his plan to find someone. She knew from Pansy that Imogene was a widow, and Severus had mentioned that he would like a child or two. Here was a ready-made family for him. "You should be glad for him. After everything he's gone through, he deserves some happiness in his life," she muttered to herself. But deep down, she wasn't happy for him at all, and that made her feel even worse. She was learning that she had the potential to be a real bitch sometimes.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. Andrew was a perfect little angel, not crying or fussing at all as Ron and Pansy held him and introduced him by his name to the crowd of friends and family gathered in a circle around them. They pledged their love and protection and promised to guide him and teach him and to learn from him, as well.

As she turned to Hermione and Severus, Pansy said the words to begin the ceremony. "You stand beside us for the love of this child. Will you tell the gods and all present who you are?"

To which they answered in unison, each announcing their own name, "We are Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, the chosen godparents of Andrew David Weasley."

Ron then asked, "Do you know what it is to be a child's godparents?"

They responded, Hermione speaking the first line, Severus the second, and then completing together, "It is to love, nurture, and show guidance. It is to help Andrew make choices should he need assistance. It is to be a second mother and father and to be there when called upon."

Taking the baby from Pansy, Hermione held him while Severus stood close, and he actually put one arm around her and the other under her arm so they were both supporting the baby together. Then they recited the words in unison, "May the gods keep this child pure and perfect and let anything that is negative stay far beyond his world. Andrew, our godson, may you always have good fortune, may you always have good health, may you always be joyful, and may you always have love in your heart." Hermione bent to kiss the babe's cheek, and Severus followed suit; then, they handed him back to his parents and stood by as they finished the ceremony.

Ron and Pansy carried Andrew around to each group of family or friends and allowed each of them to kiss the child in turn and offer their good wishes and blessings. They returned to stand by Hermione and Severus. Glasses were passed out among the crowd, wine for the adults and fruit juice for the children. Severus took the last two and handed one to Hermione: they raised them and asked the crowd to join them in the toast, "Welcome, Andrew David, to our family and to our hearts. Your parents love you, and we thank them for giving you the gift of life. We ask the gods to watch over you, Andrew David Weasley, and over your mother and father, and we wish your family love and light."

It was a lovely ceremony and a wonderful party. Hermione put on a happy face and pretended to be enjoying every minute of it, but in truth, she felt nothing but a growing

sense of melancholy. She was relieved when the party started breaking up. By that time, she wanted nothing so much as to escape to her own little sanctuary. Saying her goodbyes, she Apparated away to Blossomwood.

TBC

AN: Some of the naming ceremony was based on info from this site: http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/paganbabies/ht/Baby_Naming.htm

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

More than a decade has passed since the end of the war, and things have certainly changed. New and unexpected bonds of friendship have been formed, and old ties have been strained. Will returning to England after all this time be the new beginning Hermione had hoped for, or will it be the worst mistake of her life?

stopper reviewing.

AN: Many thanks to my super, wonderful betas, Clairvoyant and SoftObsidian. Also, many thanks to pythia_delphi for the awesome prompts.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. I make no money here.

As soon as she got home, Hermione stripped out of her clothes, pulled an old T-shirt out of her drawer and over her head. It was one of Harry's that she'd kept since the days of the Horcrux hunt, and it was rather like a security blanket for her. Crawling under the covers, Hermione curled up into a ball. She hadn't cried at all since that day in her office with Lucius, nineteen days ago, and had believed these feelings of despair and depression were finally disappearing. But that was all out the window tonight.

Just when she'd finally made the decision to talk things over with Severus, he'd shown up with Imogene. He'd certainly wasted no time in his search, had he? Of course she was the one who had told him outright there was no future for them, so in reality, she had only herself to blame. Again. She managed to stave off the tears until Jilly hopped up on the bed with her, the little terrier burrowing close to offer her comfort, as if sensing her depression.

"Is this what the rest of our life is going to be like, Jilly? Is this what we have to look forward to? Will we become two old ladies together, living alone until we're old and grey? And all because I was too much of a coward to go after what I really want?"

It was like a summer storm starting slow and building fast until it overtook her completely, her body wracked by sobs. She cried until her throat was raw, her head ached, and her eyes practically swelled shut. She cried until she simply had no more tears to cry, and she was exhausted; then she finally fell blessedly asleep.

When she awoke the next day, she felt like Thestral shit and knew the last thing she wanted to face was a crowd of well-meaning friends. So, the first thing she did when she managed to drag herself out of bed was block her Floo; then she cast an Anti-Apparition spell not only over the house but around the whole yard; and finally, she put up some of the most powerful wards she could think of. No one was getting in here without her permission. After all that she crawled back into bed and slept like the dead for another four hours.

When she eventually awoke for the second time that day, it was nearly eleven a.m. She reflected as she sipped her tea and nibbled on her toast that she'd actually felt much better when she'd hated Severus and blamed him for her alienation from her friends and so many years spent away from home. Now that she knew the truth of the matter, she could no longer blame him, and it only made her feel like an idiot for acting so impulsively all those years ago.

A couple hours later when she heard the ping that announced someone was testing her wards, she simply ignored it. An hour later, there was a much stronger push on her wards, but she ignored that one too. However, an hour after that, Luna's hare Patronus hopped in and delivered a message. "Hermione, I'm waiting outside your gate. May I come in please?"

Hermione opened the front door and looked out to see Luna standing alone at the gate. "Harry's not out there with you, hiding out under his invisibility cloak, is he, Luna?"

"No, Hermione, I'm quite alone," she replied calmly.

"Come on through then," said Hermione, and with a wave of her wand, she adjusted the wards to admit Luna.

"Thanks," said Luna upon entering the cottage. "Harry was quite worried about you. Cissy contacted him to see if he'd heard from you when she found your Floo blocked. She said she'd sent Draco over to check on you, but he couldn't get through your wards. She didn't want to tell Lucius about it, as he'd already threatened to Crucio Severus if he found even a hint that you were unhappy again."

Luna tilted her head to the side and looked at her friend. "You are unhappy again, aren't you, Hermione?"

Hermione blinked back the sting of tears as she nodded. Damn it, she wasn't going to cry any more; she was bloody sick of it. She'd done enough crying to last another ten years.

"Come on, I'll make you some tea," offered Luna, grabbing Hermione's hand and leading her into her own kitchen.

Soon they were settled at the table with a pot of tea and some chocolate biscuits and leftover scones Luna had scrounged from the cupboard. "Harry said he was going to try to break through your wards, but once he realized how complex they were, even he didn't stand a chance. He said Lucius or Severus might have been able to, or one of the high level curse breakers, but he didn't want to call anyone's attention to it officially. He didn't want to get you in trouble, as he was sure there were several spells of a rather dark, questionable, and probably illegal nature."

"I didn't want to be bothered," said Hermione bluntly, making no excuses for her wards.

"That's exactly what I thought. That's why I asked Harry to let me come and talk to you. I figured if I asked politely, you would let me in."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at Luna's simple logic. "Thank you for coming, Luna. I thought I wanted to be alone, but now that you're here, I find myself grateful for your company."

"Can you tell me what's making you so sad, Hermione? It has something to do with Severus, doesn't it?"

Hermione considered for a moment but then decided to tell Luna the truth. She left out most of the really ugly details of her encounter with Severus in the hospital all those years ago. But she did reveal how truly heart broken and devastated she'd been afterward and how that was the reason she'd left England. She also told her how even now her fear of being betrayed again was controlling her life. And she revealed that even though she'd finally realized she had feelings for Severus, she knew it was all too late, as he'd already moved on.

"Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry," consoled Luna. "I know how hard it must be for you to get over that kind of hurt, but sometimes you just have to take the risk, or else you'll never be able to move forward."

"Oh, Luna, you just can't understand. You have everything...Harry and the kids. Your life is perfect."

"Well, now it is, but don't you think I had to take a chance in the beginning to get that life?"

"Harry's over the moon for you, Luna," said Hermione, exasperated. "He'd do anything for you."

Luna shook her head and smiled a little sadly. "But don't you realize how hard it was for me the first time Harry ever asked me out? Or the second time or even the third? How much I wanted to just say no and close myself off from that possibility?"

"No, I don't. Why would you even have considered that?" wondered Hermione, confused by her friend's statements.

"So I wouldn't be hurt, of course. Do you think I don't know what people said about me, what they still say? 'Oh, there's that Loony Lovegood girl; she's a very odd witch, so strange she might even be a bit mad, or maybe she's just simple minded. What on earth would Harry Potter ever see in someone like her? He'll come to his senses someday, just you wait and see, and then he'll move on.' It was scary, Hermione, giving my heart to Harry and wondering if all those people were right and he might wake up one day and decide he'd made a horrible mistake. For Merlin's sake, he's Harry Potter, the-Boy-Who-Lived, Savior of the Wizarding world, and I'm just plain Loony Lovegood, weird witch extraordinaire. But I'm ever so glad now that I didn't say no to Harry. I'm happy I took a chance.

"And what about Ron and Pansy?" Luna continued on before Hermione had a chance to object. "Don't you think it was a huge risk for them? Her family were traditional purebloods, and his were considered blood traitors, on opposite sides of the war. They were rather like that young couple in the story by that Muggle playwright, Billy Trembleance."

At Hermione's blank look, Luna prompted, "Surely, you must know the story, it's famous. *Romany and Julianna*?"

"Er... *Romeo and Juliet*... by William Shakespeare?"

"Yes, you do know it!" Luna clapped her hands in excitement. "Is that his name, really? Hmm... Anyway, Ron and Pansy were rather like poor Romany and Julianna; in the beginning, their families and all their friends were at odds with each other. A lot of people said they'd never make it, that they were just too different. But they took a chance, and they got a happy ending, unlike that poor young couple in the story. And now they have a beautiful baby boy and hopefully a lovely future. If you still care for Severus at all, you have to take a chance, Hermione."

"I don't know if I can, Luna. It hurt so much the first time, and I don't think I could bear to have my heart broken again. Besides, it's probably too late already; I'm sure Severus has moved on."

Luna was silent for several minutes, thinking. "There aren't any guarantees in life, Hermione. I can't promise that if you reveal how you feel to Severus, then it will all work out. I don't know if it will. But I do know this: you can lock your heart up in a box, and it'll stay safe there and it won't ever get broken. But years from now, when all is said and done, when you open up that box, you're likely to find that your heart has shriveled up to nothing.

"You're worried that Severus is seeing Imogene, but personally, I don't think he is. Whether that's true or not, though, you'll never know how he feels if you don't ask him. You have to take a risk sometime, Hermione, or you're going to end up, years from now, old and alone with a shriveled up heart in a box.

"Please, take the risk, Hermione, please," pleaded Luna, taking both of her friend's hands in hers and giving them a squeeze of encouragement. "Take a chance on love. Take a chance on Severus."

Hermione held tightly to Luna's hands for a moment as she thought about what she'd said. Then she threw her arms around Luna and hugged her tight. "All those people are so wrong about you, Luna. How did you ever get to be so wise?"

"I've been eating my spinach," she replied as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

"Spinach? I... what?" asked Hermione, looking totally confused.

"Yes, spinach. Like in those Muggle cartoon stories and moving pictures that Ron likes to watch. He said you sent him a whole case of VVDs for Christmas. There are these three stooges; Ron and Harry seem to like them, but I think they're very silly. Then there's this funny redhead named Lucy. Ron has been calling Lucius, Lucy. But Lucius isn't funny at all; in fact, I think he's rather scary. And he's not even a redhead, so I'm not sure exactly what that's all about. But the one I'm talking about is a sailor who eats his spinach, and it makes him very wise; he always saves the day. I figure there's usually a tiny grain of truth in most stories, so I've been eating my spinach."

"Oh, no, it makes him strong, not wise. The spinach makes him strong, Luna," explained Hermione with a smile.

"Really? Well, poo! And I don't even like spinach," she grumbled. Then she flexed her arm. "Maybe I am getting just a bit stronger, though. What do you think?"

"Oh, Luna, I think you are both the wisest and the strongest witch I have ever known. Thank you for being my friend," said Hermione, hugging Luna again.

"You're welcome. Are you going to go talk to Severus, then?" she asked with a hopeful expression.

"Yes, I am," replied Hermione.

"Umm... You might want to change first before you go. Although he would probably enjoy seeing you in nothing but that tee shirt." Luna's brow wrinkled as she studied Hermione, then leaned forward to sniff her shirt. "Isn't that Harry's shirt? I'm sure I remember him wearing it on a Hogsmeade weekend when I was in my fifth year."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, Luna, I'll explain later." She turned to go to her room to get dressed, then paused. "Oh, wait, I don't even know where Severus lives."

Luna smiled. "Well, that's not a problem; I can take you there. Ummm... Hermione, you might want to brush your hair too, not that it isn't lovely like that, all matted and all. It kind of gives you that 'just tumbled out of bed at four in the afternoon' look, but maybe just pull a brush through it a time or two."

Hermione rushed back to hug her one more time. "Oh, Luna, I really do love you."

"Well, I love you too," Luna said. Then she called loudly down the hallway as Hermione dashed off to change, "But I am already married, you know."

~*~

Luna brought Hermione to the lane leading up to Severus' house. "It's up the hill, around the bend and down the other side. I've brought you this far, but you'll have to go the rest of the way yourself."

"Thank you, Luna, for everything. Whatever happens from here on out, whether it's good or bad, I do appreciate all your help," said Hermione.

"Good luck, Hermione," Luna said just before she Apparated away.

Hermione trudged up the hill and over the crest, stopping there to gape at her first site of Snape's home. While it was not on the same scale as Malfoy Manor, it was still huge by her standards. She could have put four Blossomwoods inside with plenty of room to spare. It sat on the other side of the River Divilish upon the high bank. There was a bridge that crossed over the river, and then the lane went on up the hill to the house. She approached slowly as she was very nervous. Unlike her normal plan of action, she had not rehearsed what she was going to say a hundred times, and she was unsure of how her arrival would be received.

As she crossed onto bridge, she breached the first set of wards. Mere heralding wards, not meant to prohibit access but to signal the occupant that someone approached. Most people would not have even noticed the slight waiver of the wards as they passed through, but Hermione did. At the far side of the bridge was a closed iron gate; it fairly crackled with security wards. She held up her wand in one hand with her other arm extended before her, palm vertical, fingers up, sensing the wards. If Harry had thought her wards were tight, he'd find Severus' impenetrable.

She had no intention of trying to breach his wards; that would be incredibly rude. But she stood there for several minutes studying them, feeling them out; they were extremely complex, and she found them fascinating. Even as she studied them, she felt a shift, and new protections were suddenly woven into the fabric of the magical barrier. What in the hell? Was that...?

"Are you trying to break through my wards, Granger?" said a gruff voice from behind her.

She turned to see Severus, already halfway across the bridge. "No, actually, I was just feeling them out," she answered, a bit embarrassed to be caught checking out his wards. "They are very intricate; I'm quite impressed. I must say, though, I haven't run into any wards incorporating house-elf magic before."

"House-elf? What are you talking about?" Stepping up, he examined the wards himself; then he chuckled as he murmured, "Well, that cheeky little bugger. It seems apparent that Ned noted your approach and decided he doesn't like you much. He's added something of his own to the mix."

"Ned would be your house-elf, I assume?"

"That would be correct," he replied, looking at her curiously. "Why are you here, Granger?"

At that instant, Tee rounded the stone abutment at the end of the bridge, and upon seeing Hermione, he gave a bark of joy and barreled forward to greet her. He skidded to a stop directly before her and raised his paw to shake.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh and shook his paw vigorously before giving him a good scratching all over as she chattered at him. "Tee, my friend, I'm so happy to see you! Why haven't you come by to visit me lately? Jilly has missed you too."

The big dog ruffed and growled, as if he were actually trying to respond to her questions.

Severus watched for several seconds. "Who did you come here to see, me or my dog?" he asked in an amused tone.

Hermione stood from where she was bent over petting Tee. Looking up at him through her lashes, she bit her lip nervously before she answered, "You, I came to see you, Severus. Can we talk? Please," she added, afraid he would refuse.

He studied her carefully for several seconds, as if contemplating his answer, before he responded curtly, "Very well, come with me." He turned and the gate opened itself as his wards shifted to let them past, and he led the way to his house.

Once inside, he settled her in a drawing room and excused himself, saying he would be just a few minutes. He'd left the door slightly ajar, and she could hear voices from the back of the house in what she assumed was the kitchen. She couldn't hear everything, but from what she could piece together, he and Ned were having a difference of opinion. The gist of it was, as Snape informed Ned, don't mess with the wards, don't screen the guests, and yes...she's *that* Hermione Granger.

He returned several minutes later, levitating a tea service, which he set on the table in front of the fireplace. "I thought you might like some tea."

Hermione looked from Severus to the door and back to the teapot. "Umm... Did Ned make that tea?"

He frowned at her as he answered, "Yes, he did."

"I think I'll pass," she replied cautiously.

"Oh for Merlin's sake, he didn't poison it. Here see..." He poured some tea in both cups and took a sip of his. "See? Completely safe."

Hermione swallowed nervously, searching around the room. "I was actually hoping you might have something a bit stronger."

Looking a little puzzled, he stalked across the room and returned with a decanter of brandy and poured a dollop in her tea. He set it down on the table and then snatched it back up and poured some in his tea before plunking it back down again. "Won't you sit?" he offered, indicating the sofa.

Hermione sat down and took a sip of her tea. Instead of sitting in one of the end chairs, Severus went around the table and sat on the other end of the sofa, and he took a sip his tea.

They sat in awkward silence for several moments before he finally spoke. "Is there an actual reason for this visit, or did you just get the sudden urge to come over here to drink tea laced with brandy and stare at my carpet?"

She glanced up at him, her eyes narrowed in irritation. "This is very difficult for me, Severus. Just give me a minute here, okay?"

"Well, excuse me, Hermione. Take all the time you need, of course. It's certainly not as if I have nothing else to occupy my time," he muttered sarcastically.

She sat for several minutes in silence again, gathering her courage. After several false starts, she slumped down again in silence. She stood suddenly, declaring, "Bugger this! I shouldn't have come here. This was a big mistake!"

She rushed toward the door and was nearly there, her fingers on the knob pulling it open when a large hand flashed over her shoulder and slammed it shut. "Stop. Don't go. I'm sorry that I antagonized you. You clearly came here for a reason, and I'd honestly like to know what it is." She nodded and allowed Severus to lead her back to the sofa.

Hermione sat and reached for her teacup; she swallowed the contents in one gulp, then refilled it directly from the brandy bottle and drank that down as well. She eyed the bottle, considering, when Severus cautiously moved it out of her reach to the end of the table.

As the brandy warmed her stomach, she closed her eyes and said, "Before I make a complete fool out of myself, I must know one thing first." She opened her eyes to look at him, and he nodded.

"Okay, then. Just how serious are you about Imogene Cadwalader?"

Severus looked shock by this question. "Imogene? I'm not... that is to say... I'm not even seeing her, really. Why do you ask?"

Hermione huffed out a sigh of relief. "Well, you brought her to the christening, and she seemed very possessive of you, so it seemed logical to assume you two were... you know?"

"No, I don't know. I had escorted her at Pansy's request. Imogene has been reluctant to go out much on her own since Leland died. Why should it matter to you anyway?"

Hermione closed her eyes and heaved another sigh of relief before answering. "Because if you had already begun to form an attachment, then I would not bother you any further. I would not disrupt your life by telling you the things I came here to say."

His brow arched, and his face took on an interested look but he said nothing.

Damn the man! she thought. *He just can't make it easy for me, can he?*

Finally, he spoke. "Please, Granger, don't keep me in suspense," he said. "What is it precisely you came here to say?"

She licked her lips and looked longingly at the liquor bottle for a few seconds, but then taking another deep breath, she fixed her eyes at a fleck of lint on the floor and plunged ahead. "I've had a lot of time on my hands, and I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. I've come to realize that despite everything... Dear Merlin, I have feelings for you. Maybe I always have. But when I let you leave my house that day, I knew as soon as you left that I'd made a horrible mistake..."

"Hermione," he interrupted.

"No, Severus, don't stop me, please," she said, holding up her hand. Her eyes were still glued to the carpet. She just couldn't bring herself to look into at his face, terrified she would see rejection there. "I have to say this, or I never will. This is very difficult for me. I came here on an impulse, you see. I really haven't had time to prepare what I was going to say, or to revise, or to rehearse, or anything at all. So, this is just off the top of my head, and if I don't say it now, I'll never be able to get it out.

"Where was I? Oh yes... I'd made a horrible mistake, and I knew it as soon as you left. I couldn't fix it, though, because I was still too scared to willingly give you that much power over me. But somehow, you already had the power whether I gave it to you or not. Because when I realized you had offered me the chance to have just what I wanted all those years ago and I turned it down, I was miserable and depressed and damn near despondent."

"Hermione..."

"Severus, please, just let me finish, or I'll never get it all out. I cried for nearly twenty-four bloody hours straight. I was so distracted when I went to work that I nearly lost a hand to Shefflelump's Slicing Curse. Such a stupid mistake! A rookie would have recognized it. I tried to resign after that, but Lucius wouldn't hear of it, and he insisted I take some time off instead." This whole time, Hermione's eyes hadn't shifted from the floor in front of her. Now she glanced out of the corner of her eye at his shoes, too frightened to risk looking at his face, so she tried to ascertain by staring at his feet whether he even gave a damn about anything she was saying.

"So, I had lots of time to think over the last couple of weeks, and I'd already come to the conclusion that I would ask you to give me a second chance at working on a relationship. When I saw you at Andrew's christening, I was just about to ask you to consider it or at least ask you to talk to me later. Then along comes Imogene with her auburn hair and her perfect breasts and her ready-made family, and she seemed so possessive of you, but maybe that was just me thinking it was so. And you said you'd escorted her there, and you seemed so perfect for each other, and I just knew that I'd lost any chance through my own stubbornness and pride and fear..."

"Hermione, please..."

"Severus wait!" She held her hand up again. "I know it sounds like I'm rambling but I'm almost there. I swear. Please, just a moment more." Her voice shook now, and a few tears leaked from her eyes although she had sworn she would not cry any goddamn more! "I knew I'd lost my chance, and I was miserable all over again, and I don't want to be old and grey and living alone with my dog. You said it was fate and maybe you were right because I've never felt about any other man the way I feel about you. Perhaps that's simply because I've been guarding my heart all this time like Luna said, but I don't want to end up with nothing but a shriveled up heart in a box! She's so wise and strong, and maybe it's the spinach, but I think it's just because she's Luna, and she told me to come here and tell you, so I did, and oh... Oh... Oh, good Godric, Severus. Say something!"

Hermione stopped talking, and there was dead silence in the room. She glanced over. Severus' feet hadn't moved; they weren't telling her a damn thing. She heard him clear his throat, and then a hand appeared in front of her, offering a handkerchief. She took it and wiped her cheeks and her eyes, and she loudly blew her nose.

Her eyes rose slowly from his feet up to his knees, gradually up his legs, past his hips and his waist, over his chest and the scars on his neck until she finally, reluctantly, met his eyes. His head was cocked slightly to the side, and there was just the trace of a smirk as one corner of his mouth lifted.

Finally, he spoke, "I must admit, I have no idea what even half of that meant." She started to look away in defeat when Severus caught her eyes and continued, "But honestly, love, you had me from the words, 'Dear Merlin, I have feelings for you.'"

Hermione's brain took a moment to process his words. "Really?" she squeaked.

"Yes, really."

She lunged, and his arms and his lap were full of witch. "You arse! You could have said something!"

He laughed, Severus Snape actually laughed. "I tried. I tried several times, and you kept telling me to wait until you were done."

She was about to ask him when had he ever let what she or anyone else wanted stop him before, but then he was kissing her, and she was much too distracted to care.

She returned his kisses in kind, and soon, their hands were everywhere, pulling at each other's clothes, trying to get to skin. He nibbled his way down her neck and across her collar bone until he reached the top of her breasts. Severus gathered the hem of her jumper and pulled it roughly over her head, tossing it aside. Straddling his lap, Hermione rose to her knees; his hands gripped her arse, and she whimpered as his hardness pressed against her. Arching forward to undo the back of her bra, she practically pushed her breasts into his face. He pulled the offending garment away, and as her breasts spilled out, he buried his face in her cleavage.

Lifting his eyes to hers, Severus spoke low and urgently, "Dear gods, Hermione, I want you now."

"I thought you'd never ask," she said. "Take me upstairs, Severus, please."

Within an instant, Severus Apparated them to his bedroom.

Much, much later, as they lay twined in each other's arms, Severus whispered, "Will you stay with me?"

"Forever," she promised.

~FIN~

An Epilogue (of a sort)

Severus and Hermione didn't get married and live happily-ever-after, at least not right away. They agreed that it was important to take it slow at first. They both had too many issues.

Still, they simply couldn't get enough of each other, which Draco could attest to when he popped over to the country house unexpectedly one day and caught them in the garden *in flagrante*. In all fairness, both Tee and Jilly had tried to stop him from going out there, but he just wouldn't listen. He swore seeing his godfather and the girl who was practically his sister going at it like Kneazles in heat would definitely scar a man. But he was happy for them anyway.

They did get to the happily-ever-after eventually; they married three years later and decided to enlarge and live at Blossomwood. The country house was lovely, but they much preferred the hominess and solitude of the cottage. They lived there, just the two of them, along with Ned and Tee and Jilly, until eventually the babies came along, first Claire, then Luke, and finally Fionna.

Severus eventually left his job as Dark Arts Consultant with the D.I.D.A. and became the Head of the Ministry Bureau of Investigation, which made him Hermione's boss. But that only lasted until the year Fee went off to Hogwarts. That was when Hermione became the first Muggle-born to be elected Minister of Magic. And that technically made her Severus' boss. Again.

Their life was full and happy and never boring. And it was all because they'd both finally learned to take a chance on love.

~FIN~

AN: As promised here is the original prompt from pythia_delphi for the SSHG_Exchange fic: Severus has mellowed considerably since the war and is now good mates with Harry and Ron. Hermione, however, is a different matter. She cannot bring herself to forgive or forget Severus' unkind remarks and personal insults to her at school and either goes out of her way to provoke him or avoids him altogether. This, of course, turns Severus on immensely, and he determines to win her over. Humour, romance, sarkiness, and a happy ending please. A little OOC is a-okay.

I varied it slightly in this: *She cannot bring herself to forgive or forget Severus' unkind remark and personal insults to her at school* changed that part just a bit as that seemed petty to me, so for the purpose of my fic, I wanted her to have some bigger reason for her aversion to Severus.