

# You Are Not Alone

*by themistresssnape*

Three years have passed since the defeat of the Dark Lord, and Hermione Granger has returned to Hogwarts alone and broken hearted. The Golden Trio splintered after the victory and Hermione has been alone and drowning in studying abroad. Upon her return to Hogwarts, she must face the man she hasn't seen since her graduation and learn if he could ever forgive her for the pain she dealt him those years ago. Can they learn to trust each other or will their pain and pride get in the way?

## Learn To Be Lonely

*Chapter 1 of 14*

Three years have passed since the defeat of the Dark Lord, and Hermione Granger has returned to Hogwarts alone and broken hearted. The Golden Trio splintered after the victory and Hermione has been alone and drowning in studying abroad. Upon her return to Hogwarts, she must face the man she hasn't seen since her graduation and learn if he could ever forgive her for the pain she dealt him those years ago. Can they learn to trust each other or will their pain and pride get in the way?

It ended on a June day in a foggy moor that had been the beautiful grounds of Hogwarts. Coated in mist and blood and mud and smoke, the victorious stood to survey the damage and to take stock of who had been lost in the battle. Comrade and enemy alike lay side-by-side in the blood-blackened field, their lightless eyes staring off into distant nothingness. The black of the Death Eater's robes were mingled in among the black of the Hogwarts robes, born upon the backs of students who had graduated moments before the battle began.

Yes, Voldemort and his followers had finally decided upon the time when they would wage their final battle against Dumbledore and the Order. Graduation Day, they reasoned, would be the day they would least expect. Everyone would be caught up in saying goodbye to their friends and taking a bittersweet look at those hallowed halls of learning for the last time. *Oh, yes, Voldemort hissed in his twisted little mind, Dumbledore won't see it coming. The dimwitted fool will be to befuddled by saying goodbye to Potter and the rest of the lot to be wary of what is going on under his nose.*

The plan would have worked, had it not been for a tall and silent, black robed figure who was listening intently to Voldemort's plans. In the three years since his return, Voldemort had yet to doubt the one Death Eater whom all the others questioned. He punished the doubtful while allowing Severus Snape to quietly and methodically gather up the information the Order needed to stop him once and for all. It seemed that Voldemort, with all his power as a Legilimens, couldn't, or more logically wouldn't, see the truth that was in his most favorite follower. And it was here, when Voldemort had given himself over to that emotion of the foolish, to love and trust, that he was undone.

Dumbledore and the Order had been warned with sufficient time to prepare the students. An announcement was made that the graduation ceremony would take place two hours earlier than originally planned. Dumbledore told Harry that they would be going into battle with Voldemort that day and to prepare himself. And prepare himself he did. Harry dug up the coins Hermione had made for the D.A. in fifth year and warned them all. If Voldemort had the bullocks to attack Hogwarts Castle itself, Harry Potter was going to make sure it was the last thing he ever did.

The day of graduation dawned pale and overcast. It seemed as if all the teachers were on edge when the students made their way to the Great Hall for the ceremony. Snape had been summoned early that morning to the Riddle House for final instructions and was the only teacher absent from the hall. Dumbledore made his excuses, that he had taken ill the night before and wanted to wish the graduates the best of luck in their future pursuits. Harry and the others knew, of course, that he had been

summoned. It wouldn't do to have their only source of information inside the Death Eater ranks to be uncovered when the end was so near. Only a few more hours and the redemption of Severus Snape would be certain. He would either be heralded a hero or burn in hell at the wrong end of an Unforgivable.

The ceremony had only just ended when there was a great crash on the grounds as a tall and silent Death Eater blew apart Hagrid's hut. The signal from Snape; the end was near. It was time to face the demons the Wizarding World had sought to exorcise for over a dozen years. Let the fates decide which side would see the light of the morning in victory. Dumbledore locked the students below sixth year in the Great Hall and warded it with every protective charm he could think of at the time. Merlin help them if the Death Eaters made it into the castle. If they did, two hundred innocent children would meet their end with the stroke of a single curse.

Dumbledore and the Order led the charge into the grounds, keeping Harry and the D.A. behind them. It would be the end of them all if Harry was caught by a stray curse before he could get to Voldemort. Oh, yes, they were all thinking about the prophesy, wondering how the final confrontation would end. Every member of the Order hoped that Snape and Peter Pettigrew would be nearby. It would take the two of them to help Harry destroy Voldemort once and for all.

It had been Hermione that figured it out. Bright, clever Hermione had remembered Wormtail's wizard's debt to Harry. It had been Hermione who had brought the information to the one man who could help them. She told Snape, who had unfortunately been unconscious during the incident in third year that led to the debt in the first place, and he promised to do what he could. Now here she was, back to back with Ron, trying desperately to walk sideways and keep a constant Shield Charm around Harry. She could see Snape in the distance, his form so recognizable in the black robes that billowed out around him as he strode quickly around the battlefield, doing what he could to keep from harming members of the Order while holding his charade together for the last few moments.

And then the charade had fallen apart. Snape had pinned Tonks to the ground with his boot in her back, trying desperately to tell her where to attack to take out as many important Death Eaters as possible, when he had seen Hermione. Fearlessly facing an unending onslaught of Death Eaters from every angle as she struggled to keep up with Ron and keep the Shield Charm going. Harry was leading the two of them, protected by their shields, saving his energy for that final meeting with Voldemort. For the first time in many years, Snape felt his chest tighten as he watched Hermione go so willingly to her death in order to protect the Boy-Who-Lived. His pulse pounded in his ears. *She will not die for him!*

The thought was upon him before he could control it. He swept away from Tonks, who staggered to her feet and joined in the fray. Snape ripped his Death Eater's mask from his face as he went, casting hexes all around him as he strode purposely toward the moving caravan of Harry Potter and his faithful friends. Hermione looked up in surprise when she saw him striding toward her, his mask and his charade of loyalty to the Dark Lord forgotten. She dropped her end of the shield enough to let him through and then quickly built it up again before any of the other Death Eaters could figure out what had happened. She felt him turn his back to her and stand at her shoulder, facing the opposite way that they were moving. He cast his own Shield Charm and at once the bubble around them expanded high above their heads.

Seeing Snape inside, several Death Eaters charged the shield and were promptly blasted away by a few well-placed hexes from the Boy-Who-Lived. They were upon Voldemort now, and the look upon his face was of sheer and utter terror. It was as if he knew he had fallen victim to that which he had called foolish for so many years. He screamed in rage to the Death Eaters around him. "The filthy traitor is mine!"

Harry knew when he heard Voldemort filled with rage at this betrayal that Snape had exposed himself. Glancing over his shoulder, Harry saw him standing with Ron and Hermione, doing what he could to protect them all. Quickly turning his attention back to the battle, Harry allowed one fleeting thought to swim through his mind. *The greasy git's not so bad.* But then the thought was gone as Voldemort was but a few feet away from him, his wand raised and his cold eyes flickering with hatred.

"Hold strong," Harry called behind him. He heard several grunts in response. "When I say so, let go of the shield so I can get through. If this doesn't work, do what you can to get away and get Neville. He's the only other one who has a chance of ending this."

Snape concentrated hard, trying to see the picture of Harry confronting Voldemort in his mind. He would have given anything for them to turn in their formation so he could see what was going on but he knew Hermione and Ron would never take their eyes off Harry once he was outside of the shield. He heard Harry speaking again, and his voice was more authoritative than Snape had heard in the seven years he had known the boy.

"Wormtail, it's time to pay your debt. Do this and it is forgiven!" Harry called to the stooped, beady-eyed man who followed after the hem of Voldemort's robes. "Disarm Voldemort! Do it now!"

Voldemort turned to the stooped man standing to his side as Harry had hoped he would. The moment Voldemort's attention turned to Wormtail for that blissful split second, Harry called out, "Let go!" Hermione, Ron, and Snape dropped the shield to let Harry through. The *Avada Kedavra* was out of Harry's mouth before Voldemort could understand what had happened. There was a deafening roar and a great blast of green and red light as Voldemort fell into a heap on the ground. His cold eyes stared into a vast expanse of nothingness, and it was over.

Death Eaters all around them stopped and looked. Their master had fallen and the very traitor who had led the way was shielding the Boy-Who-Lived. Cries of anguish and fear echoed across the battlefield as many faithful Death Eaters charged at Snape, wands held aloft and ready to cast as many Unforgivables as they could. Snape felt the shield around him drop as Hermione and Ron pressed their backs against him, ready to defend him if anyone got too close. They shifted as Harry joined them, and the unlikely guard of Severus Snape was formed.

Dozens of curses and hexes were thrown as the Death Eaters converged on the four of them. Snape's only thought was to protect Hermione. *She will not die for me either*, he thought as he cast curse after curse at his childhood friends. One by one they fell, and others were captured and detained by the members of the Order. At the end of it, they stood looking around them at the bodies lying the mud and muck that oozed black with blood. They had won. It was finally over.

[illegible]

The Great Hall was bedecked with hanging black banners bearing the Hogwarts crest and a silver star for everyone who had died during the battle the week before. The students had remained at the castle, despite the fact that the term was officially over. The Ministry informed the parents that it was the safest place for them at the moment, while the few straggling Death Eaters were rounded up and shipped off to Azkaban. There would be no arguing of the Imperius Curse this time. Anyone who had fought on Voldemort's side on that last day was cast into the prison without trial or hearing. Snape alone was cleared and was relieved to see the putrid Dark Mark fade from his skin in the hours after the demise of the Dark Lord.

The students arrived in the hall to find it bare of the usual House tables. Hundreds of chairs were lined up in rows along the length of the room. One single, long line of chairs stood at the front of the hall where the High Table usually sat. There sat the teachers who remained, and those who did were badly bruised and bandaged even a week after the battle. Many chairs, however, were empty. Sprout, Moody (who had arrived after the fiasco with Dolores Umbridge to serve as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher), Vector, Trelawney, they were gone. Their seats were left empty as tribute to their bravery and their sacrifice. Extra chairs had been added to accommodate the remaining members of the Order. Remus Lupin was nursing a set of bruised ribs as he took an empty seat near the fireplace. Tonks was sitting at his side, her right arm bandaged up in a sling.

As the students filed into their seats, a great jumble of Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, Gryffindors, and Slytherins, Dumbledore rose to his feet before the entire assembly and raised his hands for silence. A somber quiet fell over the room as each and every eye in the hall was turned upon their headmaster, who had a nasty scar stretching across the bridge of his crooked nose. "Before we say our final goodbyes, seeing as we will soon be enjoying a celebratory feast in honor of the ultimate demise of Lord Voldemort, I have a few things I would like to say. So many of you have seen the terror of what hatred and racism of bloodlines can do. I hope now you can look at the people around you and see them for the human beings they are, whether they are pure-bloods, half-bloods, or Muggle-borns."

At this Hermione, who was sitting in the fifth row between Ron and Harry, reached out for both of their hands. She patted Harry's affectionately and smiled softly at him. On her right, Ron grasped her hand tightly in his and pulled it into his lap. He gazed at her briefly, but his eyes spoke volumes. Hermione's breath caught as she stared into the freckled face of her best friend as she saw love and desire in his eyes. She squeezed Ron's hand and gave him a warm smile before turning her attention back to Dumbledore.

"We have lost many," Dumbledore continued, "and I am sure we will all grieve them for a long time to come. You have lost teachers, classmates, friends. You have seen

"More than this, more than remembering the ultimate sacrifices of those who have been lost, remember the brave and heroic witches and wizards who fought and lived. Honor their time and their risk of life. Thank them and tell their stories as well. They are among you, teachers and classmates alike. You are all the victors of this war for you have lived through perilous times and will live on to tell the story." Dumbledore swept his arms in a wide arc to encompass the entire hall, even the tall, silent, black-robed figure that was huddled in the far corner. A smile spread across his face as Dumbledore raised his wand and conjured a table that spanned the width of the High Table dais. "And now, we celebrate our last day together this term. For some, it will be the last time you will see Hogwarts castle until your own children find their way to graduation. For others, it is simply the beginning of seeing the castle in a new light. Feast and enjoy this day together. We will miss you all!"

"Is this seat taken at the moment, Miss Granger?" he purred from his stature above her. Without waiting for her answer, Snape sank ceremoniously into the seat Ron had occupied a few moments ago.

Hermione Granger stood in the entrance hall of Hogwarts Castle three years later. It was the first time she had set eyes on the castle since the victory celebration. To her eyes it had not changed, but in her heart it was different. As glad as she was to be home again, her heart was heavy as she gathered up her worn bags and trunks. They had gone with her on her travels abroad in the past three years. She had visited Viktor Krum in Bulgaria and taken a holiday in Italy for a summer. She found her way to France where she spent a year studying under a Charms master. She had received her certification as a Charms mistress from the Ministry a year ago when she returned to Britain.

Hermione hadn't spoken to the man in three years, not since the victory celebration. She had thought of him often in those years, of how he had exposed himself in the battle to protect Harry and Ron, to protect her. She traveled with her books and often pulled her potions texts from her trunk and leafed through them. She could smell his classroom and hear his deep and silken voice as he instructed the students. And so the owls went, first to Dumbledore and then to Snape himself. Twelve owls not including the one to Professor Dumbledore, she kept a tally on a sheet of paper as she sent them. Twelve owls that flew away with a letter and returned with nothing, each time tearing away a little of her resolve to send another.

So there she was, two days before the start of term, a bit in the dark as to what position she would be taking. Dumbledore hadn't been very clear on that point. Unsure of which classroom was hers, Hermione was lost to the fact of where her quarters would be located. And so, she stood, and she waited.

Hermione had been standing in the entrance hall for what seemed like forever. Snape smirked demurely to himself and stepped out of the shadows. He cleared his throat and leveled his dark eyes at his former student. "Are you lost, Miss Granger?" he purred.

"Yes, sir," she replied, blushing slightly. She was twenty-one, twenty-two counting the year with the Time-Turner, and here she was, still intimidated by Professor Snape. "Actually, he didn't even tell me what I would be teaching."

Hermione stepped past him when he remained standing at the door. The room smelled of books, leather, and brandy. *That's a wonderful smell*, she thought with a small smile. *It's comforting. It's his smell.*

"I will acclimate you to the stores tomorrow, although I am well aware that you should be able to navigate it on your own after that stunt in your second year," he said, still standing just outside the door. "I will be arranging my new office if you should need anything."

"New office?" she chirped. The look on her face was something of relief. "So you weren't sacked?"

He forced back a smile. "No, far from that. I am the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he said smugly as he turned on his heel and disappeared.

# Masquerade

## Chapter 2 of 14

Hermione is beginning to settle in at Hogwarts in her new teaching position. But she isn't as happy as she should be.  
Snape seems to be in a foul mood as well.

### CHAPTER 2: Masquerade

The start of term came off without a hitch. Hermione had taken her place at the High Table between Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick, where the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher usually sat. Snape had grumpily informed them, as they filed up to the High Table on the night of the start of term feast, that he refused to give up the seat he had occupied for the last twenty-one years. He had been forced to give up the rooms and office he had lived in and made his home, he groused. He was not about to give up his chair as well. He sneered a bit at Hermione before tossing in, "I can't see my Slytherins as well from all the way over there, either."

Dumbledore had been wonderful with her introduction. He had acclaimed her a war hero, who had played a key part in the downfall of the Dark Lord. The stories were more for the benefit of the new students who were Muggle-born. Those who had at least one magical parent had heard the stories of the war and knew perfectly who she was. Dumbledore couldn't resist throwing in a passing reference to Professor Snape as a war hero as well and smiled slightly, as he had elicited a very dark sneer from the younger wizard. When Dumbledore had finished introducing her, Hermione stood for a moment to a great round of applause that echoed off the walls of the Great Hall. She blushed slightly and nodded her head, her loose curls bouncing a bit, before sitting back down again.

Hermione had been petrified the next day. Her first class was with the third year Gryffindors and Slytherins. She remembered quite well the terrible taunting that went on between the members of these two Houses, knew how pointless and ruthless it was to begin with. She had left the classroom door open as she prepared for their arrival, realizing for the first time how terribly stuffy it was down in the dungeons. She sat at her desk, idly glancing at the clock every few minutes as she tried to put some finishing touches on her syllabus. It was only moments before the bell when she noticed several faces peeking around the edge of the doorframe. She drew in a deep breath and steeled herself. *It's just like taking an exam*, she thought to herself. *You can do those. You can do this, Granger!*

She stood from her desk and walked steadily and briskly to the back of the classroom. "Well, come on. We haven't got all day," she said firmly to the students who had lined up outside the door. "When the door's open, feel free to come in from now on. Find a seat, quickly. We've got a lot to be getting on with."

The first half an hour or so went smoothly as she had planned on spending the first day explaining some of her rules and what kind of work load they could expect from her. She was just outlining the first reading and essay assignment when she caught sight of two rather large sized Slytherins heckling an impish looking Gryffindor at the back table. Hermione felt her face go red with indignation as she slammed her book onto her podium loudly. Every eye in the room was fixed upon their tiny teacher, who now looked as if she could have taken on the Dark Lord single-handed. She cleared her throat loudly and gripped the edges of the podium until her knuckles were white.

"I am sure you are all aware that paying attention is of the utmost importance in this class. Now, if it is too difficult for you to get along with your classmates *no matter what House* they are in, be prepared for me to delve out punishments. House rivalries beyond those for the House or Quidditch Cups are pointless. For every snide comment I hear from any of you... yes, Gryffindors, I mean you as well... for every snide comment I hear from any of you about a member of another House, I will not only remove House points, you will also serve detentions," she said, almost through clenched teeth. She looked at every face in the room before she continued. "Have I made myself clear?"

The students were quick to agree, and the two Slytherins at the back table quickly clammed up and began ignoring their Gryffindor tablemate. Hermione quickly finished giving them their first assignment and allowed them to pack up a few minutes before the bell. She exhaled a long breath as the students filed out of the room. Perhaps she had been too harsh on them. She didn't want the students to hate her, but she didn't want them to walk all over her either. It didn't matter now; her first impression was made and there was nothing she could do to take it back. She gathered up her papers and made her way into her office where she waited for her next class after lunch.

It had been a week since that first class, and Hermione was beginning to hit her stride with the students. The word went around quickly that it was dangerous to misbehave in Professor Granger's classroom. The whispers filled the Great Hall as students whipped from one House table to another, Slytherins as much as anyone else. Although they wouldn't admit it, it seemed as if the Slytherin students were glad someone had finally called them on their bully tactics. It was quickly established among the student body that Potions was now a class to look forward to rather than one to dread unless your House color was green.

Hermione was sitting at the High Table that morning, talking to Professor Flitwick about her year studying Charms in France. He seemed quite interested in the spells the French Charms master had developed and was begging her to teach them to him as soon as she got a chance. Hermione tried to be nice, as she had always been fond of Professor Flitwick, and claimed she already had a multitude of grading and planning to do. The truth was, she didn't want to be around anyone more than she had to. It was bad enough to sit at the High Table and watch the students laughing and joking about with each other and wish she could have that. She grimaced slightly, realizing that she hadn't laughed in two years, not since Ron had ended things with her.

It was more disturbing, however, to sit at the High Table and try to make pleasant conversation with McGonagall and Flitwick when a man who so obviously despised her sat four chairs away. Snape had not spoken more than a grunted, "Good morning, Professor Granger," to her since he had helped her reset the wards on her private stores. When he did condescend enough to look at her, he sneered, and his dark eyes flashed with malice. A week into the term and he had already deducted over two hundred points from the various Houses and given six detentions with Filch. He was in a foul mood and it seemed, at least to Hermione, that it was her fault.

Of course, it probably was. She hadn't exactly been warm and inviting to him since she had arrived. It was difficult for her to be that way these days and more so if she was trying to be that way around Snape. He must have been annoyed with all of those letters she sent begging for an internship. No doubt Dumbledore had tried to influence him somehow, which certainly wouldn't have helped the situation. If Hermione knew one thing at all about Severus Snape, it was that he would rather be in control of a situation or be dead. How hard it must have been for him, to be forced to rely on Harry, the son of the man he hated so much, for his salvation all those years. The battle couldn't have been any better, standing by and protecting the Boy-Who-Lived while he garnered the glory of the Wizarding World yet again. And then, at the victory celebration, what it must have cost him to...

*Oh, don't think about that, Granger*, Hermione berated herself as she stared into her cup of coffee. *Think about that and sooner or later you'll start thinking about Ron... See what you've done now, you prat? Don't go getting all teary-eyed in front of everyone!* She swiped absently at her watering eyes and busied her hands with pushing her eggs around on her plate with her fork and knife. The stupid prat of a Weasley was still tearing her heart to shreds, and there was nothing she could do about it. How had she let herself be so blind? She thought she loved him. She thought he loved her. The first few times his eyes, and his hands, roamed she thought he was just having

The morning post was beginning to arrive. A familiar snow-white owl swooped through the mass of gray and brown barn owls and came to rest on the table in front of Hermione's plate. She reached out and stroked Hedwig's feathers softly before undoing the letter tied to her leg. Slipping her finger beneath the seal and cracking it open, Hermione felt her heart sink a little further into her chest. She quickly read the letter Harry had scrawled to her.

*Congratulations on getting a job at Hogwarts! We're all proud of you! Ginny and I wanted to let you know that we are getting married! You have to be here, at the Burrow, on December 24th. Ginny sends her love.*

*Harry*

*You've got a while before your first class, go down to your room and have a nice cry. No sense in being a big girl when no one's watching.* Yes, a good cry would do her good. The bell rang loudly overhead, and the students began filing out on their way to their morning lessons. Hermione slipped out of a side door of the Great Hall and wound her way through a labyrinth of passages and staircases until she reached the dungeons. The tears were welling up into her honey-colored eyes before she had even opened the door to her chambers.

Alone.

[illegible]

*Well, Severus, here you are,* a rather pesky voice in his head intoned. It had been there for years, constantly nagging at him. He ignored it most of the time, but sometimes

That was when it hit her; *Severus Snape had gotten a haircut!* Not a trim, not an abysmal homegrown attempt to do something with his infamous locks, a right proper haircut. Was it that way when she had arrived in August? She couldn't quite remember. She had been far too nervous about seeing him again that she hadn't taken much time to notice how he looked. Hermione felt herself blush as Snape shifted uncomfortably under her scrutiny.

"Yes, I will see you at dinner... Severus," she managed, mustering up a warm smile. He was speaking to her again, full sentences that meant something, even if it was from across the room. It was enough. She could smile, if only just for him.

Snape was in a less foul mood as he took his seat at the High Table that night. Perhaps it had been worth Dumbledore badgering him into taking her the message about the meeting. Her smile had been worth it; that smile that made his heart pound a little harder in his chest. That smile that made her sad honey eyes light up. If she had asked him for the moon at the instant when he saw her smile, he would have used every ounce of magic in his body to give it to her.

The old man's blue eyes twinkled when Snape sneered at him. "Of course, Headmaster. Professor Granger will be in attendance."

*Speaking of the angel*, Snape thought wistfully as Hermione came through the doors of the Great Hall. Her eyes looked red and swollen, as if she had been crying. Snape's chest tightened at the sight, and he suppressed the urge to go and embrace her. He nodded to her stiffly as she passed in front of him to get to her seat. She graced him with another gentle, yet sad, smile.

"Ah, there we go," Dumbledore said jovially. "First smile I've seen from her since she got here! Maybe she's finally starting to adjust."

Snape grunted as the students began filing into the Great Hall for dinner. A few seats away, Dumbledore was grinning madly, and his blue eyes were twinkling in Snape's direction. *Oh, that can't mean anything good*, Snape thought as the murmuring in the hall rose to a deafening pitch of formless noise. Benches scrapped against the stone floor, girls squealed, and boys with varying degrees of cracking voices speculated about the Quidditch match set for the next weekend. The teachers were mumbling between themselves about having duty for the Hogsmeade trip tomorrow.

*Snape smirked. I do enjoy listening to their misery. I have the day off and intend on taking advantage of the absence of these dunderheads. Ah, a relaxing day with a few good potions journals in a quiet corner of the library. And maybe some tea service, Dobby does make an outstanding honey and lemon tea. Now if only I could get that irritating hawk Pince to leave me be!*

The noise level of the hall began to fade as dinnertime approached. Hundreds of expectant eyes turned to the gold plates on the long House tables. Snape stared out over the hall, wishing like hell it were tomorrow morning already. With the noise level dropping to a dull roar, Snape could now hear voices from down the High Table. It was Professor McGonagall and Hermione.

"Albus and I thought you had enough on your plate right now without having to worry about Hogsmeade duty, Hermione," McGonagall was saying. "You just get adjusted, and then we'll see about getting you on Hogsmeade duty next term."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione answered sadly. "I feel bad about it though. I really don't mind if you need me."

"I'll keep that in mind, dear, but I doubt we'll need you. You just enjoy your day off. And, do call me Minerva; you're not a student anymore." Professor McGonagall patted Hermione's hand affectionately and turned her attentions to the headmaster, who was beginning to speak.

Snape allowed his mind to wander as Dumbledore began giving out notices about the Hogsmeade trip. It was the usual blather about which places were out of bounds and how the students were supposed to behave. Snape had heard this speech a hundred times. He settled himself comfortably in his seat and tried as slyly as he could to sneak a peek at Hermione. *She doesn't have duty either,* he thought as he stared covertly at those sad honey eyes. *Perhaps she would like some help marking those papers. Or maybe she's running low on potions for Poppy or her own personal stores. Hmm, maybe I should ask her tonight at the meeting. Maybe we could work on something together to...*

Snape's thoughts froze as Dumbledore's words began to seep through his ears. "As you all know, next Friday is Halloween, and I have decided to try something a little different for you all. On Halloween night, we will have a ball and not just any ball. We will be having a costume ball," he said, his blue eyes twinkling with delight. "Everyone is invited to attend... in costume. The ball will last from seven to midnight, and there will be a light dinner served. I have spoken to Professor McGonagall, and she has agreed to spend the first class with each of you next week teaching you how to transfigure your normal robes into whatever costume you desire. If you continue to have trouble, I'm sure your Head of House would be more than willing to help you. And now, tuck in!"

At his end of the table, Snape looked like the first student who asked him for help creating a costume would get hexed six ways to Sunday. Immediately his mind began turning at a monstrous speed. Somehow, he had an idea as to why Dumbledore had called the staff meeting for later that night. *Damn that man*, he thought as he speared a piece of roast beef on the end of his fork. *If he thinks I'm going to show up to this damn excuse to let the students gallivant around, he's finally gone off his fucking rocker.*

[illegible]

No sooner had the door shut on the staff room a few hours later than Snape began ranting at Dumbledore at the top of his lungs. "Albus, you've gone off the bloody deep end! If you think for one solitary second that I am going to attend this blasted thing, you're sorely mistaken." Snape was livid, and it wasn't helping his temper that Dumbledore was grinning at him like that. "What, pray tell, is so funny?"

"Perhaps I have lost my mind, my boy, but I am assured that you will attend the Halloween ball. You see I am requiring all of the faculty to attend..." his eyes twinkled maddeningly, "...in costume."

Snape was seeing red. He glared around the room, looking for someone else to object to this humiliating demand. Sinistra was looking out the window, carefully avoiding his eyes. Flitwick was bouncing on the balls of his feet in glee. McGonagall was trying desperately to hide a grin behind her hand. Dumbledore was staring at him with those damned twinkling eyes. Finally, his eyes fell on Hermione, who was leaning up against the mantelpiece and staring into the fire.

"Surely you see the absurdity of this... ah, Prof...Hermione," he said desperately.

Hermione turned toward him at the sound of her name. She smiled softly at him and looked into his flashing ebony eyes. She felt as if she could get lost in those eyes, if only she could get close enough. They could draw her in and hold her captive for the rest of her life, and she wouldn't fight it. She cleared her throat and murmured, "I think it's a wonderful idea, Headmaster."

Snape ground his teeth and turned away from them all. She was his one chance of making Dumbledore see how preposterous this idea was. *Alone again*, taunted that annoying voice in the back of his head. He threw up his hands and sank angrily into a chair in the corner. "Fine, I'll attend but only because I'm being forced. But don't expect much."

Hermione wanted to go to him and try to convince him that it could be fun to be someone different for a night. But something in those eyes held her back. She tried to force a smile for him and, as lightheartedly as she could muster, said, "I suppose a smile would be all the costume you would need, Severus."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth than she knew she shouldn't have said them. The other teachers were either trying desperately to stifle their laughter, or they were doubled over in it, clutching their ribs. Snape was glaring at her, those eyes dark, merciless and cold. His posture stiffened, and he crossed his arms over his chest,

Dumbledore stood from his chair and tapped the side of his crooked nose where the faint remnant of his battle scar was still visible. "Well, apparently you all now know why I asked you here in the first place. I am asking you all to be in attendance for the Halloween ball next Friday and to be in costume. I do not care what or who you dress as, that is, as long as it is appropriate to wear in front of the students. And if any of you feel as Severus does on the matter, then I suppose I shall have to be blunt. I ask out of politeness. However, I expect everyone to be in attendance for the entire ball. Now, if there are no questions, you are free to go about your evening as you so desire."

"Minerva, I suggest that we leave Severus to his little tantrum," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye. He held out his hand to McGonagall and waited for her to join him. It took him a moment to notice that her eyes were darting between Snape in his corner and Hermione, who was nervously twitching as if she wanted to get out the door quickly.

They met in a flurry of robes and angry curses. Snape quickly lost his balance and tried to grab onto Hermione's shoulders for support, but gravity had already done its work. His foot slipped on the hem of his cloak, and he lost whatever grip he had on her. He fell swiftly and landed face first on the stone floor with a sickening crunch.

Dumbledore tried to hide a grin as he squatted next to Snape, who was now sitting upright next to a pool of blood on the floor. "Move your hands and let me see. Oh, come on, Severus. Stop being a great child and let me see!" He struggled with Snape for a moment before he could get him to drop his bloodstained hands to his lap. Dumbledore looked at his dripping nose carefully before snorting slightly with laughter. "Well, my boy, I think you have broken your nose... again! Come on, up you go. I'll take you up to Poppy. I'm sure she'll set it without asking too many questions."

Hermione pulled back from the older witch's grasp and swiped at her swollen eyes. "I'm a terrible person. The things I've done to that man... I don't see how he could ever forgive me."

Hermione gave a short nod and buried her face in her hands. "I did a terrible thing to him before I left school. He came to me at the victory celebration and he... Oh, Minerva, I said terrible, horrible things to him. The things I said, they were worse than anything Ron and Harry could ever have said. I *laughed* at him! The look on his face, it has haunted me ever since. I see it all the time, and I just want to cry for the evil things I said to him."

McGonagall embraced the young girl again. She couldn't remember if Severus had ever said anything about his exchange with Hermione at the victory celebration. Goodness, it had been three years since then. It must have been something, though, if it haunted Hermione's every thought. *The poor girl*, McGonagall thought sadly. "There must be something you can do, Hermione. Go and talk to him. I'm sure the two of you can come to some agreement."

"If you care enough to cry over it, Hermione, I'm positive you care enough to make him listen to you. Albus does it all the time. Sooner or later, Severus will thank you for it."

[illegible]

"Thank you, Poppy," he mumbled, looking as if he were twelve again. Madam Pomfrey smiled, remembering the first time James Potter had broken his nose in a fistfight. Snape stood and made his way to the door, Dumbledore dead on his heels.

Snape wheeled around and stood nose to nose with Dumbledore. He sneered and clutched his hands into fists at his sides. "I DID!" he bellowed. "I opened up to her once, I let my guard down. And the wench laughed in my face. *I'm not the one who should apologize!* I WILL NOT DEAL WITH IT AGAIN!"

With that, Snape stormed away from the headmaster toward his rooms. *Damn if I go down to see her now, he seethed. I'm going soft. One smile and I'm ready to forget that she ripped every ounce of pride I had to pieces. Bring on the potions journals and the biggest fucking bottle of Firewhiskey in Hogsmeade!*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Chapter 3... I hope you like it. I thought I'd whet your appetite just a little about the victory celebration. I promise that I'll get everything out in the open about the celebration in Chapter 4, which I will start on as soon as possible. Anybody want to venture a guess as to what happened? Oh, and the inspiration for this chapter is the song from the Phantom of the Opera movie that plays when they lift the chandelier up at the beginning of the movie. See you in a few days! Please review!!!



# Think of Me

Chapter 4 of 14

Hermione finally goes to talk to Snape about the victory celebration. Will he be willing to listen to her, or will he push her away forever?

## CHAPTER 4: Think of Me

Hermione cried herself to sleep that night, something that wasn't unusual for her these days. The music box on her mantle played her songs over and over throughout the night, acting as if it wanted to milk every tear from her eyes. The episode with Snape in the staff room had been horrible. Hermione didn't think she had ever been more humiliated in all of her life. Sure, she could live through a war. She could live through seven years under the man's annoyingly watchful eyes. She could live through Ron turning his back on her the way he did. She could live through the loneliness with only her myriad of tears and her music box for comfort. But she didn't think she could live through hurting Snape again.

The victory celebration played itself over in her dreams. She felt her head spin at the déjà vu of watching herself from a few feet away, sitting in her chair next to Ron. Hermione watched her dream self with anxiety as he released her hand and stood. He looked down at her with love in his eyes, the only time she could ever remember him doing so, and told her he was going to get her something to eat. He disappeared into the crowd seconds later, and Hermione's blood began to run cold. She knew what was coming. Any second now she would hear...

"Is this seat taken at the moment, Miss Granger?" he purred from his stature above her.

Hermione looked at him with fear in her eyes. *Oh, please, please just turn around and go back to the shadows,* she begged in her mind. It was useless, she knew, but the thought of having to relive this again was tearing her apart. She winced in almost physical pain as he sank languidly into the seat that had belonged to Ron only a few moments before. The words were out long before she was ready to relive them.

"Yes, sir, it is. Ron was sitting there. He's just gone to get me something to eat," Dream Hermione said harshly. "I'd rather he not have to fight with you over his seat. He's been through enough lately, and I would appreciate it if you would leave us both alone."

From her vantage point near them, Hermione noticed the glint of hurt that swam through Snape's ebony eyes. She saw him visibly steel himself. His back went painfully straight, and his features looked as if they were made of stone. *You stupid little girl! How could you have sat so close to him and not seen how that had hurt him? Gryffindor know-it-all be damned. Gryffindor heartless bitch is more like it!* Hermione was seething as she listened to their exchange.

"I promise I will leave as soon as Mister Weasley reappears. Until then, please indulge me and allow me to enjoy your company for a short while," he said. He looked at her for a moment, and his eyes softened a bit. "Besides, I am under the impression that you will be leaving us permanently after the celebration is over. I would not want to miss this opportunity to thank you for everything you have done."

Dream Hermione's eyes widened incredulously. "I believe you have had too much to drink tonight, Professor Snape. Otherwise, you wouldn't sully yourself to speak to me in a civil tone."

The look that fell over Snape's face was enough to make Hermione cry as she watched him. His ebony eyes glistened so much so that it looked as if he was going to cry. Whatever color he had in his face drained away, and his hands began to shake in his lap. He tried to regain his composure and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I can assure you that I am not inebriated, Miss Granger. The habits of a life of spying do not fade away so quickly. And, I feel I must apologize for the way I have treated you all these years." He smirked as she mimicked his movements and crossed her arms over her chest disbelievingly. "You are bright, Miss Granger. I had hoped you would have figured out long ago that I could not praise you as I would have wished. It has been an honor to teach you, to watch you grow into the fine, brilliant young woman that you are now."

"I watched you in the battle. I saw you do whatever was in your power to protect Potter. You were willing to give up your life to make sure he finished what he started. I was in awe of your bravery that day, Miss... uh.... Hermione. I have never known anyone quite like you. You are an extraordinary witch."

Hermione shuddered as she saw Dream Hermione grimace at these words. She knew what was coming next; she knew the words he was about to say. If only she could stop her dream self from speaking, from laughing at him. She would even settle for keeping him from saying those words, as precious as they were to her now, to stop the hurt she was about to cause him. *Keep your mouth shut, you stupid twit! Please, for the love of Merlin, don't laugh at him. Don't you see how much this hurts him, how his pride is bruised right now? Please, just this once don't say anything; let's see what happens if things went differently.* But Snape continued on, getting the words out before whatever minute amount of Gryffindor courage he had in his Slytherin soul failed him.

"I have thought so for a while now. Your bravery, loyalty, and intelligence have awed me. At the battle, as I watched you go so willingly to whatever fate Potter was leading you to, I knew that if we both survived I would not leave these things unsaid. Hermione..." Dream Hermione winced visibly again as her name dripped from his mouth. His voice began shaking, and the real Hermione was silently pleading with him to remain silent. His features softened, and his eyes looked at her with more gentleness than anyone had ever seen from him. "I must confess that I have found myself quite fond of you, Hermione. To be truthful, I have found myself very much in love with you."

Dream Hermione's jaw dropped, and her eyes glinted in disbelief. She stared at Snape as he sat in front of her, a nervous muscle in his jaw ticking as he ground his teeth and waited for her reply. Mirth flickered into Dream Hermione's eyes, and she began to laugh. She doubled over in her lap, laughing without abandon into the palms of her hands. Snape's eyes darkened, and his features fell back into their cold, stone-like mask.

Dream Hermione swiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and looked him in the face. "I never would have thought you had a sense of humor, Professor."

Snape cleared his throat painfully and sneered, "I was not trying to be funny, Hermione. I told you the truth." Hermione felt so terrible for him.

As suddenly as Dream Hermione had started laughing, she stopped. Her face contorted like she was about to be sick. She scooted away from him on her chair and eyed him with suspicion. Real Hermione made one last attempt to salvage what she could of the situation. *Apologize! Please, just say you were caught off guard, and you didn't know what to do. Don't say those things to him; you'll save yourself a lot of heartache.* It was to no avail.

"You've had too much to drink, Professor. I can't believe you actually said that," she seethed. She wrapped her arms around herself for protection. "I'm eighteen years old! You're... you're... you're older than my father! That is a terrible joke. I've dealt with enough of you all these years. Seven years I've listened to you berate my friends and me. Seven years I've watched as you refused to acknowledge my presence and insult my intelligence. Seven years I've been petrified of doing one thing wrong in front of





# Invisible

## Chapter 5 of 14

The night of the Halloween Ball has arrived. Will Hermione's costume make a big impression on Snape? Who will Severus decide to dress as? What happens when a few unexpected guests turn up at the ball?

## CHAPTER 5: Invisible

*Happy bloody fucking Halloween*, Snape thought as he made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast on Halloween morning. The sky reflected in the enchanted ceiling was overcast and gray, just like Snape's mood. He dropped gracelessly into his usual seat and began filling his plate with biscuits, eggs, and bacon. A cup of his favorite, steaming breakfast tea appeared before him as the early bird students began filing into the room. There was a clinking of cutlery as the students began filling their plates with food. Snape sneered.

*It's going to be a wonderful day, he thought sarcastically. Everyone will be so wound up about this stupid ball that they won't have any mind to pay attention. At least it will be good for me. I can hack off House points left and right, maybe assign a detention or two. Maybe I'll even cajole a few dunderheads into provoking me so I can give them a detention tonight. That'll give me an excuse to get out of this damned thing.*

*You know Dumbledore won't fall for that,* came another voice inside his head. Oh, dear Merlin! Didn't this stupid thing ever shut up? That stupid voice had been at him all week about his confrontation with Hermione in the library on Saturday. *There's no way out of this one, Severus. Go and enjoy yourself! Or... at least, try to. I think you've quite forgotten how. Maybe you could even ask Hermione for a dance. You know, show her that you still love her, even after all that mess.*

He sneered violently at the thought, enough to prompt Dumbledore to ask if he was all right. As he assured the headmaster that he was fine, Snape could still hear that pesky voice harping off in his head. *You know you've thought about it all these years, Severus. That's why it hurts so much. You've turned it over and over in your head until you feel dizzy. And now, she's come crawling... well, not literally crawling, but you get my point... back to you, begging for forgiveness. No matter how deep she cut, no matter how much she hurt you, you know as well as I do that you'll give it to her.*

"Yes," he muttered under his breath, hoping no one heard or saw him talking to himself. "Yes, I'll forgive her because I just don't have it in me to deny her anything now. Not after that admiring display in the library yesterday. But I won't do it now. I have waited over four years to have her in my arms. She can wait a while longer as well."

Snape started shoveling food in his mouth with as much ferocity as to rival Ronald Weasley's ardor. Mechanically, he forced himself to focus on his task at hand. *Chew. Chew. Swallow.* He snickered at himself, thinking that pain in the arse conscience of his had disappeared. He thought wrong.

*Just look down at her, Severus. Just a quick peek. She looks so lovely this morning. Seems like the old Hermione's back... look at how confident she seems. That she stood up to you is a feat in itself. She literally bared her soul in front of you. You wouldn't have seen anything any clearer if you'd done Legilimency on her. Her emotions always did show on her face. Never could hide anything, that one.* Snape chuckled, remembering the look on her face when he made brought up her theft in her second year. The first time he'd seen her in three years and he had made her smile. Shock, awe, humiliation, humor. He quirked an eyebrow in amusement.

*Astounding, isn't it? You can make one woman feel so much at one time. There used to be a time you could do more than that, Severus. Think of how sweet it would be with Hermione, knowing she was willing. Knowing she wanted you and loved you. Give in, just this once. Those beautiful chestnut curls twined around your fingers or spilling out behind her over your pillows. Her soft curves pressed against you. That tantalizing mouth turned up to you, just waiting...*

"ENOUGH!" he hissed, drawing a bit of attention from Professor Sinistra, who was sitting next to him. "I just want to get this damned day over with."

[illegible]

Hermione stood in front of the mirror in her bathroom, staring at herself. Her chestnut curls were cascading down her back in soft ringlets. She took a handful of the curls dangling over her left shoulder and pinned it back near the crown of her head with a few bobby pins. Then, she clasped a large, bright red rose behind and just above her ear. She stood back to take in the rest of her costume with glee.

The brownish gold skirt looked as if it had been ripped in a few places and fell at a bit of an angle to about mid-calf. A dark green lace shawl was wrapped around her and fell off her right hip. And oh, the bodice! It had taken McGonagall and two house-elves to get her into the thing properly. It laced up tightly in the back like a corset and squeezed her ribs until it was difficult for her to breathe. It was a deep burgundy as it rose from just above her hips, up over her stomach, and pushed her already ample cleavage higher. A small red rose rested like a brooch on the bodice, drawing attention to her breasts. Straps of white lace were attached to the top of the bodice, but they continually slipped off her bare shoulders until she was tired of adjusting them.

Hermione turned on the spot, admiring the way the skirt and the shawl fell over her arse and hips. The gold bracelet jingled as she moved her wrist. The one on her ankle did the same. She smiled shyly and felt a blush rise all the way from the top of her breasts up to her hairline. She looked perfect, and she knew it. She only hoped Severus felt the same. *I hope this works*, she thought as she made her way out of her rooms, setting her wards as she went.

[illegible]

The Great Hall was decorated with its usual floating jack-o-lanterns, live bats swooping through the room, and the bright, twinkling stars reflected in the enchanted ceiling. The usual House tables were gone, replaced with several dozen round tables that could seat twenty or so. A dance floor had been placed at the far end of the hall. Situated under the high vaulted windows, the dance floor glittered with moonlight and the lights from a plethora of candles. Hermione's breath caught as the beauty of the room washed over her. *If anything is going to happen, it's going to happen here. Please, Severus* she thought desperately.

Hermione made her way through the room toward the faculty table. McGonagall and Dumbledore had already arrived, and were waving her over enthusiastically. "Good evening, Hermione," Dumbledore said as he held out a hand to her. Hermione took it and giggled slightly when the headmaster bent to kiss it. "You look simply ravishing. I should hope you're not trying to make someone jealous."

"No, Headmaster. Trying to catch someone's attention actually," she replied, sliding into the seat Dumbledore offered to her. As she did, Hermione slipped her fingers between her breasts, and pulled her wand from the front of her corset. She cast a quick Warming Charm on her bare feet before slipping her wand back in its hiding place. "I'm sorry. There was just no other place to put it."

Professor McGonagall smiled. "Just turn away from the students if you need it, dear. Speaking of the students, they should begin arriving any moment now."

Professor McGonagall had no sooner spoken those words that the doors to the Great Hall were flung open. The students began filing in, gasping at the beautiful twinkling of the stars and the wafting of the moonlight over the dance floor. They stared around at each other's costumes, making comments to friends and giggling. As the tide of students pouring into the room subsided, Dumbledore turned to Hermione and smiled.

"I hope you wouldn't think it too forward of me to have arranged a surprise for you, my dear," he said sweetly. Hermione smiled warmly at him. She had always thought of him as a bit of a grandfather figure since she had never known her own. "Good, because I think they are arriving now."

Dumbledore turned his attention to the large fireplace and clapped his hands jovially as the flames burst forth in a green flicker. First one, then two, then three forms swept out of the flames, dusting soot from their clothing. The first was a tall young man who didn't look much older than Hermione. His hair was sandy blond and pulled into a ponytail with a red ribbon. His clothes looked as if they were made of fine silk and lace. He wore a cravat, breeches, white stockings, and delicate heeled shoes. The second form was a young woman, her long black hair pinned up in a delicate design. Her dress was long and full. It was hunter green with a very form-fitting bodice, showing off the woman's ample cleavage. She fluttered a lace fan in front of her face and smiled up at the first figure. The last figure dusted soot off of orange and maroon robes that bore a cannon on the back. A long arm reached up to shift the soot out of bright red hair...

*Oh, sweet Merlin, please, it can't be,* Hermione thought desperately. The last figure looked up and saw her. A pang of lust flashed through those oh, so familiar eyes, as he looked her up and down a few times. Hermione felt her stomach lurch like she had missed a step when going down a flight of stairs. She wanted to be sick, the way he was looking at her. She only wanted one man to look at her like that, and it certainly wasn't him.

"Oy! There's Hermione," the last figure said, taking a stride toward the faculty table. The first two figures followed him in silence. "Thanks for inviting us, Professor Dumbledore."

"You are most welcome, Mister Weasley," Dumbledore replied, apparently oblivious to the discomfort of the young lady sitting nearby. "And I take it these two strangers would be Miss Weasley and Mister Potter."

The first figure bowed low, nearly toppling the wig off of his head. He blushed slightly as he adjusted it. Pulling himself up to his full height, the first figure replied, "Percy Blackney, the Scarlet Pimpernel, at your service." The figure, most recognizably Harry at such a close range, smiled and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you again, Professor."

"And you as well, Harry. Ah, let me see... if you are Sir Percy Blackney, then this lovely young lady must be Marguerite St. Just Blackney, your French wife," Dumbledore said, bowing low, taking the second figure's hand and kissing it. "A pleasure to see you again, Miss Weasley. Please take a seat; dinner will be served shortly."

Harry, Ron, and Ginny each took a seat at the table. Harry sat in the seat Professor McGonagall had vacated only seconds before when she ran off to stop what appeared to be a duel in the entrance hall. Ginny sat to Harry's left. Professors Sinistra and Flitwick occupied the next two available seats on Ginny's left. Ron slid in between Hermione and Professor Flitwick.

"Long time, no see, 'Mione," Ron said, his voice a low whisper as he eyed her again. Hermione's skin crawled. "I never saw you wear that when we were together."

"I bet you saw plenty of other girls wear less, Ronald!" she hissed under her breath. She cast a glance at Professor Dumbledore, intending to beg for help, but found him in a deep discussion with Harry. Ginny was staring in her direction. "Can I see your ring, Ginny? I've been dying to see what it looked like ever since Harry told me you were engaged."

Ginny's eyes lit up as she reached over the table with her left hand. Hermione gasped at the rather vulgar diamond on her finger. "Merlin and Queen Mab, Ginny! That thing must weigh a ton! It probably weighs as much as it cost!"

"Harry won't tell me how much he spent on it," Ginny replied, glad to see Hermione lightening up a bit. She glared at her brother, who was openly drooling over what was popping out of the top of Hermione's bodice. "I thought it was extremely heavy the first week or so I wore it, but I'm used to it now. I hardly notice the thing anymore."

Hermione giggled and let Ginny take her hand back. Professor McGonagall had returned, and, noticing her previous seat had been taken, slid into the chair on Dumbledore's right. That left one chair, the chair between Hermione and McGonagall, for the only missing occupant of this table. *Severus, where are you?* Hermione thought irritably. *Please, hurry! I can't sit next to Ron all night while he stares at me like a piece of meat. He'd straighten up if you were here!*

Just then, the doors to the Great Hall flew open with a bang. A very sour, very uncomfortable Severus Snape entered, and stalked his way over to the faculty table. Hermione's eyes were so wide she feared they were going to fall out as she looked at him. Snape looked very different, very different indeed. He was dressed in red, and not just any red. It was blood red. He wore a red silk shirt that could barely be seen beneath a heavy, long sleeved red coat. The coat had four gold buttons on the front and tails on the back that fell to just behind his knees. Gold embroidery decorated the cuffs and the tails of the coat. His very fitted trousers were the same blood red. He wore black riding boots that came up to his knees, and a black belt with a sword dangling from it. A long red cape was draped over his left shoulder and trailed behind him. Most of his face was covered with a white mask that resembled a skeleton's face. A few strands of his black hair tickled the sides of his face while the rest was pulled back at the nape of his neck and tied with a black ribbon.

*Oh, sweet Merlin!* Hermione gasped as her heart began to pound out of control in her chest. She looked him up and down once... twice... three times, and still couldn't get over it. *Red looks good on him. Oh, bloody hell, everything looks good on him.* She could feel the blush rising from the tops of her breasts all the way up to her hairline as he slid into the seat between herself and Professor McGonagall.

"Miss Daae," he purred into her ear as he sat down. He smirked when he saw the shiver that ran through her. He brushed his hand against her bare shoulder and felt her body quake at the contact.

Hermione swallowed... hard. She glanced at Snape out of the corner of her eye and felt her heart skip a beat. He was smirking at her. It wasn't the same smirk she had known as a student. No, this was something different, something that made heat and tension pool in the pit of her stomach. It was something that made every fiber of her being strain toward him. She cleared her throat and hoped like hell her voice wouldn't crack. "Phantom. It seems we meet again."

Snape leaned close to her to whisper in her ear, and every cell in her body began screaming in triumph as she felt the fabric of his coat against her skin. "You look ravishing this evening, Miss Daae. Actually, you look to me like you want to be ravished this evening."

Her breath quickened again, and she felt as if her heart was going to burst within her chest. Snape's words twirled themselves through her mind and conjured images of them together. She could see herself, sprawled and writhing beneath him as he pistoned into her over and over. Hips bucking and her fingers wound in his hair as his tongue slipped in and out of her, torturing her in pleasure. His hands guiding her gently as she knelt before him, sucking him to oblivion. *Oh, fuck!* she thought as wet heat pooled beneath her thighs.

[illegible]

Hermione was silently thanking whoever had bewitched the clocks that night. It seemed like every minute of the Halloween ball went on for hours. Dinner was pleasant, sitting next to Snape. She listened to his voice as he talked about nothing in particular, leaning her way every once in a while to whisper enticing things in her ear. She could feel the heat that emanated from his body. She felt it mix and pool with her own.

She had been right, of course. She felt much more at ease with dealing with Ron as long as Severus was nearby. It wasn't that Ron's manners improved any when Snape appeared. (They didn't.) It wasn't that Ron noticed the whispered conversations between the two. (He didn't.) It wasn't that he took the hints about leaving her alone that Hermione had been trying to give him. (He wouldn't.) It was simply the knowledge that if Ron tried anything, Snape would step in. *We're not a couple. That's not why he would do it*, she thought with a smirk. *He never liked Ron. That hasn't changed, and I doubt Severus would pass up the opportunity to give him a good whack with that*



While she waited, Hermione let her mind wander. Monday was the twenty-fourth, the day of Harry and Ginny's wedding. Even though she didn't relish the thought of seeing Ron again, Hermione had promised Harry that she would be there. She wouldn't disappoint Harry for the world. Hopefully, she would be back in time for the staff dinner. She had a present she wanted to give to Severus.

The Slytherins were quite pleased with themselves when they caught their Head of House sneaking glances at the Potions mistress when she wasn't looking. It seemed that Hermione wore a perpetual blush whenever she was in the presence of Severus Snape. It wasn't just the students who noticed, either. Dumbledore had taken to throwing twinkling glances at her and smiling knowingly. Professor McGonagall had even offered to make sure that Hermione and Severus were assigned to Hogsmeade duty at the same time if she, Hermione, wanted. For Snape's part, at least, he was looking very full of himself lately. He smirked whenever he saw her, but there was no malice in his face. It was the closest thing to a smile he could give her, at least for the time being.

*Has she suffered enough*; his blasted conscience quipped in Snape's ear when he woke early on Christmas Eve. The early winter morning sun glinted through the frost covering his bedroom window as Snape made his way to the bathroom. He quickly showered and dressed.

The vision of Hermione that had been haunting his dreams came to him again as he sank onto his sofa with a cup of hot tea. Her appearance at the ball! Snape could feel his groin jump to attention at the remembrance of those soft, sweet-smelling chestnut curls tumbling down her back, her creamy white skin shining in the moonlight. He remembered every shiver, every sharp breath, every glance, every blush she gave him that night. He smiled inwardly at the way her warm honey-colored eyes glistened in the flickering lights.

Oh, to know how her soft skin felt against his as she traced the line of his jaw with the tips of her fingers, as she rested her head against his chest as they lay together in bed. He wanted desperately to feel her soft curls tickling his nose as he rested his chin against her head as he held her. He was quickly becoming obsessed with her. He watched her every moment he dared, gazing longingly at her lips when she smiled or when she spoke. He watched her tiny hands as she ate and wished to Merlin to feel those nails digging into his back and arms as she writhed beneath him.

*Soon, he thought with an inward smile. Soon she'll know that I have forgiven her, that I never stopped loving her. Soon she will be in my arms for good. Oh he groaned loudly, how much I want her beside me. I don't know how long I can wait to feel her curling into bed next to me, those curls tickling at my nose, the sweet smell of her perfume on my sheets and clothes.*

Packages in hand, Hermione made her way up from the dungeons to speak to Professor McGonagall before she headed off to the Burrow for the wedding. She still didn't want to leave Hogwarts on Christmas Eve, but she had made a promise to Harry. As distant as her best friend had once been, Hermione could not bring herself to disappoint him. She loved Ginny like a sister and only hoped that one day she could invite the two of them to her own wedding.

Professor McGonagall smiled softly and nodded. "Yes, dear. We'll be holding it in the Transfiguration room, a few of the staff have decided to bring dates." Seeing the terrified look on the younger witch's face, she hastily added, "But I'm quite sure Severus is coming alone. Pity, he so longed to invite a girl to the dinner, but couldn't screw up the courage to ask her."

With that, Hermione smiled a final time at Professor McGonagall and sped off to collect her packages. She scrambled out the door and across the sloping Hogwarts lawns to the Apparition point beyond the gates. Clutching her packages close, Hermione took a graceful step and turned on the spot, thinking with all of her might about the garden of the Burrow. With a loud *pop!* she was gone.

Ginny looked absolutely radiant, and Harry was more handsome than Hermione could believe. The Burrow had already been full to brimming when Hermione Apparated into the garden, and the wedding hadn't even started yet. She pushed her way through the jungle of former Hogwarts friends to deposit her gifts on the table, greeting people politely as she passed. She smiled as Remus Lupin grasped her swiftly and pulled her into a possessive hug. He kissed the top of her head sloppily and mumbled something that sounded remotely like, "Always thought you were the prettiest witch, 'Ermione. Give us a kiss." Giggling, Hermione kissed a very inebriated Lupin on the cheek before wrenching herself from his grasp. She didn't see how he was going to stand in as one of Harry's best men. He looked as if he were going to fall over as it was.

Ron raised his chin toward the staircase leading up to the upper levels of the Burrow. Hermione nodded politely in thanks, and ran up the stairs two at a time. Ginny was standing on the third landing, tapping her satin slipper-ed foot in annoyance.

Hermione followed Ginny into her bedroom and obediently began changing into the soft pink robes that were handed to her. "Yelina? Who in the hell are you talking about, Ginny?"

When the ceremony finally began, with Amos Diggory presiding as the official of the Ministry, Hermione found her eyes and mind wandering helplessly. She caught sight of every couple in the room and began to feel terribly lonely. Molly and Arthur were standing nearby, looking on proudly as Harry and Ginny took their vows. Remus and Tonks were cuddling together as he stood up as one of the best men, looking more than a bit wistful. Ron was practically wrapped around the raven-haired Yelina, who stood at his side as he served as the other best man. Fred and George were there with their girlfriends, who both looked suspiciously round about the middle. The sight made her even lonelier.

As the ceremony ended, and Harry took Ginny into his arms for a kiss, Hermione felt hot, jealous tears prickling her eyes. She slipped away, mumbling a congratulations and something about the need for some fresh air, and escaped out into the snowy white garden. All around her, the ground glistened in the fading twilight. It was after eight o'clock already, and she had promised Ginny she would stay to see them have their first dance before she went back to the castle for the staff dinner. Now, Hermione cursed herself for her sense of honor when it came to promises. She didn't want to be at the Burrow, she wanted to be at Hogwarts gossiping with Minerva and listening to Albus tease her about dating once in a while. She longed to hear Severus' amused, "Dating, indeed," from across the room, and to look up and see his eyes shining at her. Anything to make her feel as if she were loved as much as the women who were paired off inside the Burrow at the moment. She only felt that when Severus was nearby.

Hot tears trickled down her cheeks, making them chill in the winter wind. *Now I see why it hurt him so much to have me laugh at him. He had been alone for so long, and then he finally opened up his heart to feel something and gets it handed back in pieces. If I were him, I don't think I could forgive myself. But I don't think I could take it if he didn't.*

[illegible]

Unfortunately, it was nine-thirty, and Hermione had yet to make an appearance. Grumbling to himself about being so daft as to get his hopes up, Snape stalked across the room to have a few choice words with Albus and Minerva. "I beg of you, please let me leave this damned excuse for a party. I am sure neither of you would miss me standing against the wall and scowling."

*Damn Albus and those bloody twinkling eyes* Snape thought as he latched onto the older man's words. *Of course you can stop me, you barmy bat. You do it all the time. All you ever do is... Wait a minute, what did he say?* "Excuse me, Headmaster? I thought I heard you say someone was looking for me tonight."

*Potter, Snape thought acridly. Yes, of course, Potter and a Weasley again. Am I never to have the woman to myself? I suppose Weasley has waylaid her again, professing his undying love and his ignorance at betraying her. Heart of gold that she has, Hermione's probably taken him back. He growled audibly. Damn them both to the Dark Lord's grave and back!*

[illegible]

She heard the door of the pub open behind her, but didn't spare the newcomer a glance. She continued sipping at the mulled wine Rosmerta had been supplying her with and thought about how much she longed to tell Severus about the terrible day she had experienced. She longed to look into those glittering black eyes and to hear that voice thrumming in her ears.

[illegible]

"Drowning our sorrows in alcohol, Professor Granger?" He dropped gracefully onto the stool next to her. "It seems we have something else in common."



have a long weekend, so I'm aiming to get Chapter 7 up sometime then. Please don't come after me with pitchforks and torches! \*innocently batting my eyes\* You know I love you all! By the way, you can check out the lyrics that inspired this chapter by going to [http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/1157334420/Phantom\\_Of\\_The\\_Opera/Wishing\\_You\\_Were\\_Somehow\\_Here\\_Again](http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/1157334420/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Wishing_You_Were_Somehow_Here_Again)

# Measure of a Man

Chapter 7 of 14

A chance meeting in The Three Broomsticks after Harry's wedding leads to some tender confessions. Is it the beginning of something new, or is it the beginning of the end?

## CHAPTER 7: Measure of a Man

Hermione jumped when she heard the deep baritone of Severus Snape rumbling in her ear. She thought it was a figment of a drunken haze brought on by a few too many glasses of mulled wine. She smiled lazily, a becoming, beautiful blush spreading over her features. "More than sorrows, sir. I'm trying to drown you," she mumbled as if she were speaking to herself.

Snape narrowed his black eyes at her for a moment, watching her slip out of the winter jacket she was still wearing. There was a glow coming off her as she smiled at him again, obviously still thinking he wasn't really there. "I see, and why are you trying to drown me, Professor Granger?" His voice was rough and thick as he spoke to her. Every fantasy he'd ever had about her came flooding to his brain as he watched her.

Hermione reached her hand out and took his large hand in her own. She rubbed the pad of her thumb over his palm and laughed quietly. "Please, at least while you're here in my mind, don't be formal. Call me Hermione, or whatever you feel the urge to say as long as it isn't 'Professor.' As long as I've had you in my head, you've been this way. I want you to be Severus, just this once."

A warm hand clasped over hers as she continued to ramble on. He began stroking the sensitive skin of her wrist with his fingers. He brought her hand to his mouth and lightly kissed where his fingers caressed, letting his hot breath drift over her skin. The small, barely visible hairs on her arm started to prickle. "I am whatever you want me to be, Hermione," he purred against her skin.

She drew a sharp breath and chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. Heat pooled at her core as her Figment Severus continued to lovingly caress and kiss her hands. "If only that were true. I would give anything to have the real you, the real Severus to touch me the way you always have. You are a comfort to me, but I feel so empty when you are gone. I will never be whole as long as you are the only part of Severus I possess."

Hot, stinging tears were rolling down her cheeks as she spoke. She sniffled and grasped at the hand locked over her own. "Hermione, you could have more, if only you were to ask. I would give you the moon, the earth, the skies, if you would have me," he murmured softly. He swept the pad of his thumb under each eye, collecting the tears that had spilled from their honeyed depths. He touched her nose gently before reverently sliding his fingertips over her lips. "I have dreamt of this, of you, for so long. Say you'll have me, my Hermione."

"You know I couldn't want anything more, but nothing I say to you here will matter. Only I will know, and it will do nothing but tear my heart to pieces each time I think of it," she said, her voice cracking. Her eyes were beginning to turn red and swollen from her tears. "I wasted all those years chasing after Ron and running all over the continent. I went back to Viktor for a while, but all I could see was your face. How I've loved you since I realized how much I hurt you. What it must have cost you, Severus! The real you could never forgive me for all that I've done. You will never love me."

Hermione's breath caught in her chest as she felt a pair of strong arms wrap around her to pull her close. She had just enough time to take in the thick, masculine smell of him before she felt two soft, warm lips descend upon her own. The kiss was tentative and shy as Severus tried desperately to show her that he was real. Her words were branded on his soul the second his lips touched hers, his fingers twisting gently around her chestnut curls.

Kissing Hermione Granger was more than Severus had ever imagined it to be. He longed to coax her to open her lips to him, to let him explore the warmth of her with his tongue, but he refused to push her. More than anything, he was desperate for her to realize that she was not imagining this. He held her tightly in his arms, and nearly groaned when she relaxed into him. Her hands, which were trapped between them, splayed against his chest. He held her back from him, letting his gaze take in the flush that colored her cheeks, the way her eyes had drifted serenely closed, the slight plump in her lips as she turned her face up to him. *Merlin help me, but she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!* He placed another chaste kiss on her lips before he released her.

*None of the other times have been like this,* she thought as she felt those soft lips pouring emotion into her. *It's almost as if this isn't a dream. If only it were real! Oh, Severus, how I wish it were real! If there is any mercy in the heavens, when I open my eyes, please don't let this have been a dream. But it can't be, it just can't...*

Honey eyes met black as Hermione's lids fluttered open to find the flesh and blood version of her dreams gazing back at her. Her hand flew to her mouth as she sucked in a startled breath. *It can't... oh, hell, what have I said!* Her mind began to race against the lethargy induced by too much alcohol. She could remember everything she had uttered when she thought she was speaking to her own conjured Snape. Moreover, she could remember everything he had said in return.

"Professor Snape, I..." she mumbled, her eyes casting around for anything but those eyes. They were pulling her in, threatening to drag her under the tidal waves of emotion raging in their black depths. For the first time since he had known her, Hermione Granger was speechless.

Severus smiled, a genuinely happy smile that reached his eyes. "Please, at least while you are here in my arms," he murmured, pulling her close again, "don't be formal. Call me Severus, or anything you have the notion to say as long as it isn't 'Professor.'" Her own words echoed in her ears as she turned her face up to him, taken aback somewhat by the smile on his face and the force of emotion churning in his eyes.

He pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead, relishing the feel of her warm body pressed against his. From somewhere nearby, he heard Rosmerta mumbling something that sounded remarkably like, "It's about damn time, daft bastard." Hermione sighed contentedly against his chest and rested her arms around his ribs.

"I meant every word of it, Hermione," he whispered against her hair. It smelled of jasmine and lavender. He would remember it until the day he died, and it would always be a comfort to him. "If you will have me, I will give you anything you would ask of me."

"How could you want me after everything I've done to you? I was so hateful and cold. Severus, I must've torn your heart to shreds!" She felt like sobbing against the warm strength of his chest. His wool jacket was a bit scratchy against her cheek, but she would never feel the coarse fabric again without remembering the feel of his soothing arms around her.



Her voice had stumbled a bit when she said his given name, but he smiled indulgently anyway. Snape stretched his arm on the back of the couch behind her and was pleased when she settled against his side. She rested her cheek on his shoulder and sighed contentedly. "And why is that, Hermione?"

She turned her face toward him at this and smiled warmly. His black eyes were churning as he gazed down at her, watching intently as she closed the distance between them. He smiled softly and moved to place a gentle kiss on her forehead. "There's no need to rush, little one," he murmured so that no one else could hear. "I told you I would wait for you, and I will. When you are ready, Hermione, and not a moment before. You will not lose me."

Sighing, Hermione relaxed against him and listened to the sounds of his even breathing. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall were chatting over a bowl of lemon drops at his desk. Professor Sinistra was reading a copy of *Witch Weekly* while Flitwick was prodding at the pieces on his chessboard. The air in the room was so different from the way she had felt at the Burrow for Harry's wedding. She didn't feel lonely or outside of everyone's happiness. She felt safe and cared for as she felt Snape's hand begin to stroke her arm gently.

"Why did you never answer my letters, Severus?" she whispered. She didn't know why the thought had come to her, but she found herself desperate to know. For some reason, she felt as if he would answer her.

The hand stroking her arm pulled her closer, and he kissed her hair. "I was still hurt, and I didn't know if I could bear to see you again. I didn't have the strength in me to have you walk back into my life just to leave again within a year," he said sadly. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Hermione. It was never my intention."

She opened her mouth to reply when the clock on the mantle chimed the hour. It was midnight, the first official moment of the new year. She smiled as Dumbledore kissed Professor McGonagall on the cheek, making her blush. It seemed that Sinistra and Flitwick were too absorbed in their activities to even notice the time. Hermione felt as if she were finally home.

"Happy New Year, little one," Severus murmured into her ear. He pulled her close and smiled smugly as her eyes drifted closed and her face turned upwards. He pressed his lips against hers gently and was surprised to feel them part slightly. Blood coursed through his body, pooling in his tightening groin. He bit back a groan as her tongue traced his bottom lip tentatively.

Just as suddenly as Hermione's burst of courage came, it ebbed away. She pulled back from him and drew in a deep, shaking breath. She smiled shyly and traced the buttons on the front of his coat with her finger. "Happy New Year, Severus."

[illegible]

The start of the new term gave Hermione plenty of time to think about the things that had begun between Severus and herself. She found herself thinking about him more often the longer they were apart. It took great control to keep herself focused during class in order to ensure that nothing went wrong and no one was hurt. The students seemed to notice a change in her as well. She smiled more and didn't always look as if she were about to burst into tears. She had a bit more color to her than before as well. Her cheeks were perpetually pink, and her honey eyes were warm and bright. During the class where she taught her fourth year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws how to brew a Draught of Humor, they even saw her laugh happily.

Professor Dumbledore was happy to see her in better spirits. It had not been lost on him that she had sought Snape's company on New Year's Eve. His blue eyes twinkled gleefully when he saw either of them. They had both been through so much. Both Severus and Hermione deserved an opportunity to be happy and to put the past behind them. Dumbledore was grinning softly as Hermione took her seat at the High Table during the first week of February.

"You've been looking much better lately, Miss Granger," he said happily over McGonagall's empty chair. "I daresay you've been looking better since New Year's."

Hermione smiled and glanced down the length of the High Table. Snape was sipping a cup of tea and talking in quiet tones with Professor Sinistra. "Thank you, Headmaster. I've simply decided to stop feeling sorry for myself and do something for me."

"Good for you, dear," Dumbledore said, patting her hand in a grandfatherly way. "And it's nice to see Severus enjoying some company for a change. You've been good for him."

A bright blush crept over her face at Dumbledore's words. Her gaze was still fixed on the dark figure at the end of the table, willing him to break away from Sinistra and look at her. After a moment, fathomless black eyes flicked up at her and immediately softened. His eyes gazed over her face and seemed to melt into inky pools at the smile on her lips. His own quirked upward in a slight smile as he appeared to listen to Sinistra's words, all the while his mind on the beautiful witch holding his gaze captive.

[illegible]

Hermione was terribly nervous when a letter arrived for her the next morning during breakfast. The untidy scrawl on the outside was painfully familiar to her after spending seven years correcting, and even rewriting, his essays. She grimaced as the old tawny owl flew away, its wings flapping laboriously as it made its way out through the rafters of the Great Hall. She could feel black eyes on her as she broke the seal of the letter. He had to know by the expression on her face that this did not bring welcome news. Unrolling the letter, she began to read.

*Hermione,*

*Want you to know I'm getting married to Yelina Karstoff, my date to Gin and Harry's wedding. Don't know when. Will let you know as soon as I do. Gin and Harry send their love. Mum wants to know if you'll visit for Easter.*

*Ron*

She released a breath she didn't know she had been holding. A soft smile stretched across her face as a weight seemed to lift off Hermione's shoulders. That night in Dumbledore's office, when she declared her New Year's resolution to Snape, Hermione decided she would let go of her past and learn to live again. This was her first sign, her first chance to give up those things that had weighed down her heart and soul for three long years.

"Good news, dear?" Professor McGonagall asked from next to her.

Hermione smiled again, a bit wider and happier this time. "Smashing news, Minerva. Ronald is getting married. You wouldn't happen to have a spare quill on you, would you?"

"Oh, no, dear, I don't. Albus borrowed my last one yesterday to do the crossword in the *Daily Prophet*," McGonagall replied, absently patting the pockets of her robes. "Mister Weasley is getting married, you say?"

Nodding absently, Hermione turned to Professor Flitwick on her left and asked him for a quill. He produced a battered looking brown one from his pocket, along with a travel size pot of ink. Dipping the quill into the inkpot, Hermione began scribbling her reply on the bottom of Ron's letter.

*Ronald.*

"There'd still be a Snape teaching Potions," he said firmly. He took her left hand in his own and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her ring finger. Hermione giggled softly.

"I think I might have been a mother by now, too," she murmured, pulling back to lock her eyes with his. "I would like to be a mother some day, Severus. What do you think?"

"I would like for you to be as well." Before she could answer, he descended his mouth upon hers in a tender but possessive kiss. He crushed her to him and groaned as she tentatively begged entrance to his mouth with her tongue. Her fingers twined in his hair and tugged gently, sending bolts of electricity straight to his groin.

Breathless, Hermione pulled away from him and rested her head against the crook of his neck. She kissed what she could reach of his neck and sighed, her warm breath washing over him. He shivered and inwardly groaned as she shifted against him, her arse rubbing against his growing erection.

"I'm sorry, Severus," she muttered thickly, tears stinging her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm just not ready yet."

He pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and stroked her hair. As much as he wanted to finally find himself buried to the hilt in her tight, wet heat, he had promised he would not push. It was one promise he refused to break, no matter how difficult it was. "It's all right, little one. We have time."

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A/N: First off, if anyone had trouble reading chapter 5 "Invisible," I've fixed the problem of the screen width. Just thought I'd let you know, it's much easier to read now. Secondly, a Clay Aiken song inspired this chapter. You can find the lyrics here: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clayaiken/runtome.html>

## When You Say You Love Me

Chapter 9 of 14

Snape and Hermione spend a quiet evening in his office. Hermione asks a few questions and some pleasurable mayhem ensues.

### CHAPTER 9: When You Say You Love Me

For as long as he could remember, Severus Snape had never been a happy man. It was his nature. He'd learned long ago that when good things came his way, they often came with a price that was too great to bear. He did not hold those good things too close for he refused to be ripped apart when they were taken from him. He had learned to live with the disappointment, hopelessness, and loneliness that had marked his life since he was a teenager. Sometimes, he wondered if there was any possibility for him to believe in joy again. Lately it seemed as if the Fates were smiling on him, taking pity after all those years of hard, harsh living. As callous as he was to all other things, Severus had given in whole-heartedly to the ray of hope that was Hermione Granger.

She was what he lived for these days, nothing more, nothing less. He woke up each morning for the moment he could take her into his arms and tell her he still loved her. He trudged to meals with the sole purpose of seeing her, even if from afar. He kept extra hours in his office in the hopes that she would show up after dinner, as she was want to do these days. So often would he be sitting at his desk, grading the myriad of pathetic and sickening essays he was forced to endure, when her head would pop around the cracked door.

"Are you too busy for company, Severus?" she would ask brightly, smiling her heart-melting smile.

He would try to look annoyed and sneer, but he always replied with, "Not for your company, little one."

It had become an evening routine for them. She would always appear after dinner, a bag over her shoulder with essays or samples to grade. Sometimes she simply brought a book, and, by the end of the night, had read so many bits of it out loud that he would give up his grading in order to have her read to him. It was very domestic and a bit disconcerting for him. Severus had never been a domestic creature, but in the here and now, with Hermione curled up in an expanded armchair, it was right.

Hermione had come to love her evenings with Severus, even when they were sitting in silence, each absorbed in their own tasks. His presence was comforting as the smell of leather, books, and brandy wrapped around her. The scent still clung to a few of her jumpers even after being washed. She secretly slept with one beneath her pillow. This was true intimacy, sitting in such complete comfort and seemingly knowing the other's every thought.

*Intimacy.* The images that single word conjured were enough to make her blood boil in her veins. His nearness made her body sear with fire, and his touch shot electricity through her every limb. The sheer maleness of him, his height above her, those broad and sturdy shoulders, that utterly masculine smell, made the insides at the pit of her stomach rush hot and wet. And yet his kisses and his touch seemed to frighten her as well. She didn't know why, she only knew that she wanted it to stop. She wanted to be ready to really be intimate with him, to know him inside and out, and for him to know her as well.

"Severus," she asked timidly one evening near the end of February. She had been there for nearly two hours, curled in her chair and reading *Pride and Prejudice*. He was grading third year essays on grindylows.

"Yes, little one?" he replied without glancing up from his work. Hermione marveled at his ability to almost wholly devote his mind and attentions to two completely separate tasks.

"Why do you call me that? 'Little one?'" She folded her book in her lap, keeping her finger inside to mark her page, and looked up at him with questioning eyes.

Snape looked up from his papers a little startled. He seemed lost in thought for a while before he locked her eyes with his. "What would you prefer me to call you? Herm-y? 'Mione? Granger? Miss Granger? Something else perhaps?"

She giggled slightly. "It's not that I don't like it. I just want to know why you use it. And for heaven's sake, none of the others please. I am a different person than the girl who answered to those terrible nicknames." Her eyes sparkled at him, and she smiled.

He gazed at her intently for a moment, taking in her crackling honey eyes, the faint blush on her cheeks, the way her grown up curls rested over one shoulder. "I honestly don't know where it came from, Hermione. In my mind it just seems to fit you. Perhaps it is because I have this overpowering urge to protect you. Maybe it's because you are much shorter than I, and you seem to fit in my arms perfectly. I cannot give you an answer other than that."

Hermione opened her book and put it face down on her chair to hold her place. As if he'd taken that move as a sign that she was finished talking, Severus went back to grading his essays. He didn't hear her as she came up beside his chair and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed into her touch as she rested her chin on his shoulder. Her warm breath tickled his neck when she spoke.

"Say it again, Severus," she whispered softly before beginning to press gentle kisses along what she could reach of his neck. Something akin to a purr rumbled low in his

throat, and his shoulders began to rise and fall in time with his rapid, shallow breaths. "Call me your little one again."

"Little one," he murmured huskily. She was getting braver as one hand came up to undo the tiny buttons at his throat. Soon, she had the collar of both his coat and the white linen shirt open. He groaned softly as her fingertips began to stroke the skin where neck and shoulder meet. Her lips soon followed, flicking her tongue tentatively to taste him. Severus twisted his head to the side slightly to give her more room. "My little one."

"Yes," she murmured against his skin, sending shockwaves of pleasure through him. Her fingers began dipping lower into the collar of his clothing, the tips grazing against the sparse black hairs on his chest. She scratched her nails lightly over his skin as she pulled her hands back upwards. Gently, she began kneading the tense flesh of his shoulders as she kissed her way from his neck, pausing at that sensitive spot behind his ear, to the crown of his head. She placed a chaste kiss to his hair and sighed. "Severus, would you do something for me?"

It took him a moment to find his voice, lost as he was in the soothing ministrations of her hands. "Anything, Hermione, anything your heart desires."

Her hands stilled and were removed as she walked around to stand at his side. He pushed his chair back from the desk when she pushed his shoulder slightly. Severus blinked, and found Hermione moving the papers on his desk. When she had safely gotten them out of the way, she turned to lean against the edge of his desk in front of him. A bright blush colored her face, and her darkened honey eyes were staring nervously at her hands.

Severus reached out to her and stroked her hips soothingly. Hermione jumped visibly as the heat from his palms seeped through her clothing and running straight to her core. Her breath came in quick, shallow gasps as she tried to get up the courage to make her request. She squeezed her eyes shut and chewed her bottom lip as she focused on the feel of his hands. Her voice was thick and hoarse when she spoke. "I want to feel your hands..."

He applied a little more pressure as he stroked her hips. "They are here, Hermione," he purred. He felt her body shiver beneath his hands and smirked. Perhaps the point had come... "Would you like them somewhere else?"

She nodded stiffly, unconsciously shifting to get his hands where she most desperately wanted them. Hermione almost groaned in frustration when his hands moved away from her tender core as they slid beneath her arse. He lifted her slightly and planted her swiftly on his desk. "Where would you like my hands, my Hermione?"

Hermione squirmed until her thighs were splayed open. Severus sucked in a started breath when the musky scent of her arousal hit his sensitive nose. When he realized what she was asking him for, Severus felt the rush of blood to his groin. His trousers were unbearably tight as he thought of sheathing himself in her dripping heat. His usually steady hands were shaking as he reached up to undo the clasp of her robes.

The black work robes, so similar to the ones she wore as a student, slipped from her arms and pooled like ink on his desk. She wore a pale pink jumper and a loose, knee length black skirt. Soft, black leather sandals dangled precariously from her feet. Severus deftly removed the sandals and let them fall to the floor as she perched her bare feet on his chair on either side of his knees. She looked as if she were shaking.

He bent slightly and kissed each of her knees in turn. "It's okay, little one. I promise you that I will not hurt you," he purred as his hands began slowly stroking her legs from ankle to knee. "Let me give you what you seek, Hermione. I promise it will be an overture to greater pleasures."

Hermione opened her eyes and stared down into the velvet depths that were gazing so lovingly at her. She cupped his cheek, feeling her fear start to ebb away. Severus loved her; he wouldn't hurt her or turn her away as unsatisfactory. Not like Ron. *No, don't think of him now. It's Severus who is here with you. It's Severus whose hands are working such magic. He isn't rejecting what you offer to him, he wants to make you feel pleasure, to make you feel loved beyond all else.*

Severus saw the momentary flicker of fear in her eyes before it rolled away. Encouraged, he stood up and captured her lips with his. His kiss was demanding and possessive, his tongue darting out to demand entrance into the hot recesses of her mouth. She returned the kiss with as much passion as she could muster and felt a new rush of liquid fire where she so desperately wanted him to touch. He pulled back from the kiss to breathe, but continued fluttering gentle kisses along her jaw and over her neck, hoping to distract that part of her that was afraid of the hands that were sneaking up her thighs.

One long finger stroked teasingly along the crotch of her knickers. She shuddered around him and opened her legs wider. Severus hooked his finger into the crotch of her knickers and slipped them from her body. He wrapped the other arm around her back and pulled her closer until her chest was pressed flush against his. Her taunt nipples seemed to sear into him through their layers of clothing, evidence of how desperately she wanted his touch.

Her knickers fluttered to the floor at his feet as his hand returned to its place between her thighs. He rested his palm over her mound for a moment, allowing her to adjust to the feel of him so intimately. His dilated eyes raked over her face, her bottom lip plumped from his kiss and her constant habit of nibbling on it, a hot blush rising in her cheeks. Her breath was coming in quick gasps as she stared up at him lovingly.

"I will not do anything you do not want, little one," he murmured reassuringly, resting his forehead against hers. "Are you ready? Are you sure?"

Hermione's eyes drifted closed, and she nodded slightly against him. Severus began to remove his hand, letting his ring finger dip between her folds as he brought his hand forward. Her juices coated his finger as he passed lightly over her opening, across her labia, and onto that deliciously sweet spot begging for his attention. He swiped his finger over it gently, curling it and letting his fingernail graze slightly as he ended the stroke. He repeated the entire motion a second, then a third time before adding his middle finger.

Her breath coming in shallow pants, Hermione fisted her hands in the open collar of his jacket. She shivered every time his fingers grazed over her opening, making her feel desperately empty. She prickled with liquid fire as his fingers rubbed her clit, pushing her higher and higher upwards toward her breaking point. Her head fell forward against his shoulder, her mouth hanging open.

"Please," she begged softly. "I need something... something..."

He kissed the top of her head and murmured in her ear, "What do you need, little one? Tell me." He continued teasing her, increasing the pressure at the top of each stroke.

She gasped as he hit that sensitive bundle of nerves and arched provocatively into his hand. "More... I... oh... I'm empty."

He groaned at the thought of sheathing himself deep into her at that moment. Repositioning his hand, Severus slowly slipped his index finger into her opening and growled at the tightness grasping at him. He pushed into her gently and rubbed her clit with his thumb. She keened into his shoulder, her teeth grasping the wool of his coat. He pumped his finger into her with long, curling strokes, drawing out her shivers and cries. She was positively dripping over his hand, and he was sure there would be a stain on his desk by the end of this.

"More," she pleaded, slipping her hand beneath her skirt. She clasped her hand over his and positioned two fingers at her opening. He let her guide his movements until he had two fingers sheathed in her tight opening, his thumb still pressed against her button. He thrust his fingers into her until they hit a barrier. *Holy fuck!* he thought desperately. *She's still a virgin!*

His resolve to please her strengthened, and he began his ministrations with renewed fervor. Soon she was digging her fingers into his arm and panting against his chest. Her hips bucked toward him, adding to the pressure on her clit. Her rational mind shut down, the only thought running through her was a keening cry for more. She felt as if she was teetering on the edge of a precipice as he gave one last, long stroke and murmured huskily in her ear. "Let go, little one. For me."

It was her undoing. She fell over the edge of her precipice with a crash into a million pieces. She came apart in his arms, keening out his name and fisting his jacket until her knuckles were white. He was painfully hard as he felt her slump forward against him and wrap her arms around him as she came down from her climax. She pressed fleeting kisses along his throat and sighed against his chest.

"Positively radiant," he managed, dropping his bag and coat to the floor before he pulled Hermione toward him for a kiss. Her bag joined his on the floor as her arms came around his back to hold him close. The kiss was unhurried and sweet as he trailed soft caresses from her lips to the base of her throat. She tasted like peach wine and felt like heaven in his arms. Her warm curves were cushioned against him, her hands tracing soothingly across his back. He kissed her neck once more and rested his forehead against her shoulder. "You look absolutely beautiful. Hermione."





He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and began to lead her to the street. He hailed a cab and whispered the address to the driver. The ride was short and smooth while Hermione tried fruitlessly to remember the way they had come. *Two rights, a left, another right, left... wait, was that a turn or a circle? Where in the hell are we going?* Severus helped her from the cab a few minutes later and came to stand behind her. There were strong lights filtering through the cloth over her eyes as she felt his fingers on the knot at the back of her head.

"The Polish Philharmonic?" Hermione asked, breathless. The symphony. Severus Snape had brought her to the symphony. As soon as the thought settled in her mind, she turned and enveloped him in a loving embrace. She stood on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips. "Severus Snape, you're bloody wonderful, do you know that?"

[illegible]

"I will see you at dinner, little one," he murmured against her lips. "I am going to miss you tonight."

*And I you*, he thought as he made his way to his chambers to get ready for dinner and the return to life as usual.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go to the store. I've a craving for lemons. \*wink and snicker\*

Hermione makes dinner for Severus, and dessert is a bit more than he could have hoped for. \*Beware of Lemons\*

[illegible]

Hermione Granger never forgot anything she had ever learned. Whether it was the way to do an algebra problem in primary school or the right way to swish and flick in Charms, she would remember it until the day she died. Her mother had once told her that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. That was why she was practically a nervous wreck in her transfigured study-turned-kitchen making dinner for Severus Snape.



Severus kissed his way up her body, stopping to tease her breasts languidly, as she came down from her high. "Hermione," he whispered softly in her ear as he held his body above her on his forearms. "You're beautiful when you're sated."

She smiled and trailed soft kisses over his shoulder. "I'm not quite done yet, Severus," she said boldly, trying to fight the blush rising on her cheeks from her brashness. She pushed at the waistband of his boxers with the heels of her hands before mumbling, "OFF! Get them off!"

He chuckled as he twisted over her to push his boxers over his aching cock and down his legs. He kicked them off impatiently and turned back to engulf her in a penetrating kiss. His heart began to race as the moment of truth sped toward him. He would have to be gentle with her. Keeping her mind occupied elsewhere with his mouth, Severus guided himself to her opening and pushed into her slowly. He felt her tense around him at the intrusion.

"Look at me, Hermione," he said, his voice raw and husky from holding himself back. "Do you trust me?" Her dark honey-colored eyes fixed on his ebony ones as she nodded. Severus dropped his forehead against hers and pushed in a bit further. "I will never hurt you, love."

Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her pelvis upward, pushing him in more. She hissed in a breath as he tore through her hymen and sheathed himself to the hilt. Severus held still for a moment, waiting for her breathing to slow a bit. It was such sweet torture to be clasped in her tight, wet heat and not being able to move. It felt as if hours had passed before Hermione began to writhe beneath him, begging for something more than what she already had.

Severus pulled out almost halfway before thrusting back into her again. *It hurts*, Hermione thought as she bit into her lip to stifle a scream. *It hurts, it hurts! Oh God, please...* The turmoil in her mind ebbed away as he picked up a rhythm of long, slow thrusts. The sting that emanated from the friction he caused gave way to an overwhelming sensation that peaked when he hit that spot deep inside her and his pelvis ground against her clit. She raked her nails down his back and arched up to meet him, wanting more.

It was as much torture for him as it was for her with his slow movements. He was on the verge of losing his resolve at being gentle when she began thrusting up against him with a bit of force. Taking that as an invitation to pick up the pace, Severus began thrusting into her faster and deeper. He nipped at the flesh of her breasts and kissed her feverishly as he felt the onset of her orgasm set in. She pulled away from him, her breath coming in ragged gasps as he hit that delicious spot within her over and over. She gave a keening cry as stars flashed before her eyes, and the strongest wave of pleasure she'd ever felt washed over her. She arched against him, trying to keep her body in contact with his, and threw her head back against the mattress, whimpering and screaming.

When her inner walls began contracting around him, Severus could hold on no longer. He thrust into her urgently as he came, spilling himself deep into her. He collapsed against her, unable to hold himself on his shaking limbs any longer. Their sweat-streaked bodies lay entwined together as she stroked his hair and kissed his shoulders.

Rolling off her, Severus pulled her back against him. He swept her tangled curls away from his face, piling them on top of her head, and pressed lazy kisses on the back of her neck. Her hands traced along his arms as they wrapped around her, his left hand settled low over her abdomen while his right rested between her breasts. "Severus..."

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered, tickling the tiny curls at her neck. Somehow, it was easier to say when she couldn't see his face. It would get better, but for now, he didn't want her to see the tears in his eyes.

"I love you, too." With that, Hermione whispered a cleaning charm over the blankets before pulling them over their sated bodies. They were asleep before the candles burnt out.

There was no going back for either of them now.

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A/N: There you go, Hermione's first time and a first for Severus, too, I guess. I conceived this chapter coming a little later but it just fit here. As for the title, my favorite song from The Phantom inspired it. You can find the lyrics here: [http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/185563755/Phantom\\_Of\\_The\\_Opera/Past\\_The\\_Point\\_Of\\_No\\_Return](http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/185563755/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Past_The_Point_Of_No_Return)

## Seasons of Love

### Chapter 12 of 14

The morning after. Severus does some thinking and asks Dumbledore a very interesting question.

#### CHAPTER 12: Seasons of Love

The early morning sun trickled through the curtains of the enchanted window in Hermione's bedroom. The light cast a golden glow over the lovers curled together in the bed beneath the warm blankets. They lay facing each other in the growing light. Hermione's tangled curls were tucked beneath her cheek and splaying over the buttercup pillows behind her. Her lips were slightly parted, her warm breath washing over the relaxed fist that rested on the mattress in front of her. A slight tinge of pink graced her cheeks as she snuggled further into the warmth of the blankets and the body next to her.

Severus had been awake for some time before the morning sunlight began peeking through the curtains. He was disoriented for a moment before he remembered where he was and who was in the bed with him. When he realized that it was Hermione whose hair was tickling his nose and whose knee was slipped between his thighs, he sighed with contentment at the memories of the night before. He could smell the scent of lavender from her hair and the faint traces of sex. His lips curved into a satisfied smile and his eyes drifted closed as Hermione shifted closer and rested her arm across his ribs. Her warm breath bathed his chest in small puffs and tickled through the sparse black hairs there.

*I don't deserve this*, he thought as he brushed a few curls away from her face gently. She looked so peaceful and happy as she slept with the golden light of a Scottish morning reflecting off her skin. *Maybe there is some justice in this world. After all the hell I've been through, she is the light of hope and contentment that has always eluded me. If there's any redemption for me, it's here, in her arms, with her at my side.*

It was then, as he let his thoughts wander over the warmth of her next to him, that he realized his pesky little bitch of a conscience had neglected to plague him these last months. Not since early January. Four months of peace and contentment without that voice of disdain and depression nagging at him. Perhaps it was because his insecurities about Hermione had lessened as they spent more time together. Perhaps it was that he was beginning to live for himself for the first time in his life. He didn't know why, just that he relished in the peace he had in his grasp and longed for more.

Hermione stirred and rolled onto her back, dragging him back to the present. The buttercup sheets clung to her form, accentuating the curve of her breasts and the feminine swell of her belly as the blankets fell away. Severus traced the curve of her stomach lightly and felt his chest tighten with the longing to see her swollen and round

[illegible]

"Why do you insist on doing that the Muggle way?" Fantasy Severus asked teasingly from the sofa where he was reading a book. *Of course, Real Severus thought, I'll forever be snarky. She seems to have gotten used to it. She always was the only one with enough wit to understand what I said.*

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

A/N: I know this chapter is short but I've completely diverged from my original outline. I think things are going pretty well, don't you? Oh, hell, I've got to go back to the market. I need more lemons. \*snicker\* By the way, this chapter came from the opening title of RENT, whose lyrics you can find here:  
[http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/20416/RENT/Seasons\\_Of\\_Love](http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/20416/RENT/Seasons_Of_Love)

## Chapter 13 of 14

CHAPTER 13: All I Ask of You

There it was, in the first shop he visited, sitting in a green velvet box beneath a soft light. It was a broad white gold band covered by black onyx all the way around. An intricate filigree of white gold and tiny diamonds covered the layer of black onyx. The filigree was twisted into hearts and curves and glittered no matter which way Severus turned it. He could imagine the ring on Hermione's finger clearer the longer he looked at it. He bought it on the spot and paid 164 pounds for it. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his Muggle jacket and Apparated back to Hogsmeade, all the while his heart pounding in his chest.

\*~\*

He had been disappearing for whole afternoons for the past few months. At first, Hermione thought nothing of it. They had been spending a lot of time together, and she thought he might have wanted a bit of time to himself. *Why didn't he just say so though?* a little voice in the back of her mind asked. The more frequently Severus disappeared without excuse, the more Hermione began to worry. He always brought her something, a book, a new supply of parchment or quills, or perhaps a small bag of sweets from Honeydukes, but still the doubts lingered. Perhaps he had tired of her, of her love of reading books to him in his office, of her presence in his office to begin with. They had only slept together once; perhaps his patience with her innocence had run out.

She saw Severus in the distance, a tiny black speck that was slowly growing and becoming clearer as he came closer. Her heart pounded so loud she thought the whole world could hear it as his form became more defined... as did the curvaceous one at his side. The closer they came, the faster the tears streaked down Hermione's face. Tall and dark, her hourglass figure making Hermione feel terribly dumpty, an exact copy of Yelina Karstoff sauntered toward her, melting perfectly into Snape's side.

"Please, no," Dream Hermione wailed at them. "I can't go through this again."

Dream Severus sneered at her and hugged the woman closer to his side. "Don't cause a scene, Hermione. You knew it would happen. You are so plain and complacent. You tried my patience and it broke. I'm done with you." He captured the woman's lips with his own in a searing kiss.

Dream Hermione felt herself slump to the ground, her face hidden behind her palms. When she looked up again, she saw Ron with another copy of Yelina at his side. Harry was next to him, wrapped around a Yelina clone with red hair. Viktor appeared; his Yelina clone was blonde. Hermione felt like retching. She felt like dying. Everyone she had ever loved had abandoned her. She was too much trouble, too plain to be loved the way Harry loved Ginny. The way Molly loved Arthur. The way her mother loved her father. The way she loved Severus. Such a thing would never be hers. Unbeknownst to Dream Hermione, Real Hermione began sobbing in her sleep, clutching at the dark clad form that had appeared from the Floo.

[illegible]

*Stay calm, Severus, the worst she can do is say no his brain reminded him. If she does, you could always try again later. She may not be ready. It has only been a few months. She's been through enough as it is. Maybe she doesn't even want to get married, but as long as she's with me, it doesn't matter.*

The ring was tucked in the inside pocket of his robes, and his confidence was firmly locked in a recess of his mind, cowering behind a door. Two wars and years of spying had done nothing to sway his knowledge that he was one of the most powerful wizards in Britain. The thought of proposing to Hermione Jane Granger, however, had him scared out of his mind.

The trip through the Floo from his office to her sitting room did nothing to calm the raging of his stomach. It took every ounce of strength he could muster not to retch all over her rug as soon as he emerged from the fireplace. The sound of desperate sobbing reached his ears, and he took notice of the form curled helplessly on the sofa. Tears streaked from beneath Hermione's lashes, her face twisted into a mask of despair. Her nails scratched against the sofa as she grasped for something. The sight made his stomach turn anew. *What the hell...?*

His legs had moved him to kneel at the side of the sofa before his brain had registered the need to move. Severus reached out a shaking hand and pushed the curls from her face. His palm was wet with tears as he stroked her face soothingly. "Wake up, Hermione," he murmured, leaning over to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. Her arms came around him, pulling him tightly to her. Her face was buried in the front of his robes, her muffled sobs coming even harder. "I'm here, little one. Everything will be all

right."

There was a soft groan as Hermione awoke from her dream to find his arms around her. She sniffled and moved away from him, swiping at the tears haphazardly. "I'm sorry, Severus," she mumbled, looking anywhere but into those eyes. She knew he was looking at her with that tender light in his ebony eyes, and, right now, she couldn't bear to see it. "I think I'm just going to go to bed."

Severus tried to look into her eyes, but she refused to look directly at him. He grasped her chin with his finger and thumb and forced her to face him. "Look at me, Hermione," he ordered softly. "What's the matter? Have I done something to upset you?"

Hermione felt the tears welling up again as snippets of her dream began flashing through her mind. "It's nothing. I'm just..." She made the mistake of looking up into his black eyes, flickering with concern and love. She could see her reflection in them. The words came before she could even taste them, let alone stop them. "You've been going away so often lately, and you don't tell anyone where you're going. You've been distracted when I've come to see you, and you lose interest in whatever we're talking about in a few minutes. It feels like you've gotten tired of me, that you don't want me any longer."

"I understand if you have, Severus. It wouldn't be the first time I've offered myself up and been rejected," she said, her voice shaking with unshed tears. "Ron didn't want me either. Frigid. Sexless. Undesirable. Take your pick, Severus. I'm sure you could come up with more. No wonder you haven't wanted to sleep with me anymore. Ron was right; I'm not supposed to be loved. I'm a walking textbook to be used when desired, a brain to keep handy in battle then stuck in a library with books, the only lover I'll ever have."

Hermione stood up and stumbled off in the vicinity of her bedroom, leaving Severus kneeling on the rug and feeling as if he'd been hit. Her words rolled around in his brain, trying desperately to make some sense. After a few moments the words began coming together, the thoughts becoming cohesive. The more sense Severus made of what she had said, the more his anger with Ronald "the Prick" Weasley grew. What had the prat done to her that had broken her so badly?

He followed her as though he were hypnotized. His feet were moving of their own accord. His brain was working in overdrive as he found himself in the doorway of her room. Tears stabbed at his eyes for the first time in years as he caught sight of her, curled into a ball on her bed and sobbing until her eyes were dry. Severus went to her side and sat on the edge of the bed, stroking his hands through her curls.

"Hermione, whatever Weasley told you is a lie. You are a beautiful, desirable woman. It's not that I haven't wanted to make love to you again. Believe me, I have. It's just that I didn't want to push you," he said softly, planting soft kisses on her hair and shoulder through her blouse. "I haven't gotten tired of you, little one. I cannot bear to think of my life without you now. You are so much a part of me that I can't breathe when you aren't near me. I love you, Hermione. I always will."

She turned over to look at him. His ebony hair was hanging over his face, hiding his eyes from view. Her hand found his and linked their fingers together. Her voice cracked when she spoke. "Where have you been going, Severus?"

This wasn't going the way he wanted it to go. He didn't want to ask her this way, but he couldn't refuse her anything, no matter how many plans he had made. "I've been making trips to a few shops in London and Hogsmeade. I was looking for something for you," he murmured. He reached into his robes and pulled the green velvet box into view. Severus opened it and looked at the ring for a moment before turning it toward Hermione. "I've been looking for this."

Hermione's eyes fell on the box. She clamped her hands over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. Tears seeped out from beneath her lashes as her breath hitched deep in her throat as she felt Snape's voice wash over her.

"I don't know if you will have me, Hermione, or even if you want me, but I can't see myself whole without you. I would be honored if you would consider taking me as your husband, and allow me to take you as my wife." Severus fell onto one knee at the edge of the bed and stared up into her honey eyes. His breath halted, his heart froze, and his entire being was wrapped up in the one word that could make or break him. He would either be a husband to the woman he loved most in the world or his heart would shatter into a thousand pieces among the fires of hell. One word, that was all he needed. One word.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked from his expectant face to the ring in his hand. She watched the diamonds dance in the candlelight, the black onyx seeming to fade to deep purple. The black stone reminded her of his eyes, the eyes that could always see right through her. She looked down at his face again. A smile spread across her lips and some of the tension eased out of his face. Hermione slipped the ring from its box and felt the cool metal tingle against her skin as she slid it onto her left ring finger. It glittered on her hand as she cupped his cheek in her palm. She nodded at him softly.

"Yes," she breathed, kissing him lightly on the forehead. She wrapped her arms around him and held him close to her as she rained kisses onto the top of his head. "Oh, Severus! Please forgive me for being so stupid. Everything was going so well, my mind just kept telling me that something had to go wrong sooner or later. And seeing Ronald at Christmas with that... that *woman*... well, I just haven't forgotten about it. I haven't forgotten about anything he said to me before we split up either. I love you so much it hurts sometimes, and I don't want you to settle for someone beneath you. I'm not worthy of you, but I don't want to lose you, Severus."

He smiled and kissed the soft swell of her stomach as he knelt on the floor in front of her. "You are a beautiful, intelligent, extremely desirable woman, Hermione Granger. I cannot understand for the life of me why Mr. Weasley would turn down anything you would offer him, but I am not so blind and stupid. I will do whatever it takes to keep you in my life because I love you more than anything I've ever known," he murmured, standing up and situating himself on the bed next to her. He took her hand in his, lightly brushing his thumb over the back. "There is no life for me without you."

For a long while, Severus stared at the ring on Hermione's finger, wondering if those words had actually come out of his mouth. So long he had guarded his thoughts and actions, and yet he felt himself letting go when he was with her. He could be who he would have been if Voldemort had never come to power. There was something in Hermione's honey eyes that soothed him at the darkest part of him. It was a balm to the sores so many years of living a double life had caused. If ever he had met someone with a pure heart, it was Hermione. His Hermione. His life. His wife.

The gentle hand on his cheek roused him from his thoughts. He turned his head to look at her and saw the calm longing in her eyes. Slowly, he pulled her to him and kissed her. It was gentle and languid, every part of his brain consumed with the feel of her lips against his, her tongue tangling passionately with his. Severus stroked her back and her hair as he lowered them back onto the bed. Hermione lay half on top of him, her hands grasping handfuls of his robes. When she felt warm hands sliding beneath her blouse, Hermione pulled away from him and gasped for air.

She closed her honey eyes and rolled onto her back. A soft sigh escaped her as his warm hands trailed over her skin before he began undoing the buttons of her blouse. A spark went through her as Severus lifted her and pulled the fabric from her body. Her soft chestnut curls tickled across her skin and pooled behind her on the bed. Severus was on his knees on the bed beside her, holding her up with one hand while the other worshiped the swells of her breasts and the gentle curve of her stomach.

Hermione dropped her head back and gave in to the feeling of his fingers against her flesh. She dimly registered that her bra had been removed as she felt the satin straps sliding down her arms. Her eyes snapped open again when Severus lowered his head and took one taut nipple in his mouth. His breath was hot against her already fevered skin as he nipped gently before soothing her with swift strokes of his tongue. As he moved his attention to her other breast, Severus snaked his hand across the soft curve of her belly and began undoing the buttons and zipper of her trousers.

Before she was aware of it, Hermione was completely naked. Severus had lowered her back to the bed, eliciting a whimper of protest from her, in order to slide her trousers and knickers down her legs. He proceeded to place gentle kisses from ankle to hip on his way back up to her. He tarried for a moment at her knees, stroking the soft skin at their backs and teasing them with feather light kisses. Her legs opened willingly for him, her hands absently reaching down in search of him. Hermione's head was tilted back, exposing her delectable neck, her honey eyes lightly closed and soft, panting breaths escaping her lips.

Severus rested on his forearms and stared up the length of her body from his vantage point between her thighs. *Good gods, she's beautiful*, he thought with a smug grin. She had agreed to marry him. He felt his heart swell at the thought. He sighed contentedly, blowing a rush of warm air over her wet flesh. She shivered and gasped as his fingers gently opened her folds and his mouth descended upon her. He lapped at her opening with long, broad strokes as his nose teased her tight bundle of nerves. She felt the tension beginning to knot in her abdomen when he deftly slid two fingers inside her. He pumped them in and out slowly, curling them against that deliciously sensitive spot within her. Her walls shuddered around his fingers as she came, gasping his name and flexing her fingers painfully in his hair.



## CHAPTER 14: Finale B (No Day But Today)

Much to the surprise of everyone in attendance, Severus Snape cried at his wedding. It was entirely too much for him to see Hermione sweeping up the aisle formed by dozens of lined chairs in the Great Hall. The tears slid hot and refreshing down his cheeks as the doors of the hall swung open that summer afternoon to reveal the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. The cream colored gown hugged the swell of her breasts and the soft curve of her stomach before sweeping over her hips and dropping to the floor in a wide, full skirt. Tiny pearls were sewn into the bodice, even across the sleeves that fell off her shoulders slightly. There were starbursts embroidered in silver thread on the skirt. A circle of bright daisies and yellow roses was perched upon her cascading chestnut curls. A bit of lace had been sewn onto the crown of flowers as a veil. Part of it trailed behind her barely skimming the floor while another portion had been pulled forwards to cover her face. Hermione carried a bouquet of yellow and white roses tied with a piece of lace.

Hermione came down the aisle with only Ginny, in her pale yellow robes, as an escort. Her parents were in attendance, sitting with the Weasleys and Professor McGonagall. She hadn't wanted her father to walk her down the aisle. It wasn't that she didn't love him; it was simply that the act itself was a part of the Muggle ceremony that Hermione hadn't wanted. Hermione had wanted to do this one thing for Severus, to give him a truly wizard ceremony that would make him comfortable. It didn't matter to her whether they were married in the biggest Muggle chapel in Britain or if it was a simple ceremony with just the two of them in Dumbledore's office. As long as she would be Mrs. Hermione Snape by the end of the day, she would be happy.

Of course, Severus hadn't been the only one to cry. Hermione had felt the tears prickling at her eyes as soon as she saw him standing at the front of the hall. His jet black hair was tied back with a white ribbon, something Hermione had begged him to do just for today. He wore black trousers, a crisp white button down shirt, and his frock coat with the top few buttons undone. He smiled at her as she came toward him, and the tears began to flow. He couldn't believe his luck at having Hermione. His heart was pounding in his chest as she came up next to him and slipped her tiny hand into his.

"I love you, Severus," she had whispered, giving his hand a loving squeeze.

Severus had brought her hand to his lips and lightly kissed it. "I love you too, Hermione."

[illegible]

The platinum ring that Hermione had given him the day they were married stood out on Severus' finger as he sat in Headmistress McGonagall's office five years later. The witch looked a bit older than she had a few years ago, but they all did. Her gray hair was still pulled back in its severe bun and tucked under her hat. Her square spectacles rested on the end of her stern nose as she regarded Severus.

"The time has come at last, Severus," she said softly. "The time has come for me to retire. I'm getting old. I think I shall join Albus in Greece for a while. It has been so long since the two of us have seen each other."

"Come of it, Minerva," Severus said jovially. The years of marriage had softened his exterior considerably, at least outside of the classroom. He smiled more often and was more open to physical contact with those around him. "Just marry the man. He's been asking you for years."

McGonagall acted as though she hadn't heard him and continued. "Seeing as you are Deputy Headmaster, *Professor Snape*," she jabbed innocently, "you will be taking over as Headmaster next term. That is once the school governors approve the appointment. Assuming they are going to, we need to discuss who your deputy will be."

Severus thought for a moment, conjuring a cup of tea and a bowl of lemon drops. Until the day he died, Severus would curse Albus for getting him addicted to those infernal sweets. "Perhaps Filius would like the position?"

McGonagall shook her head. "He is planning on retiring within the next year or so as well."

"Sinistra then. I can abide her easily enough."

"She prefers her position as it is. She has no wish to advance to a deputy position." McGonagall tried to hide a smile that Dumbledore himself would have been proud of.

"Fine, Minerva," he grumbled. "Why don't you tell me who my deputy is going to be as you have most obviously already talked to them."

"We've never had a husband and wife team before, Severus. Perhaps Hermione would be up to the job."

The office was silent for a while as Severus pondered the thought of his wife serving as his Deputy Headmistress. The castle would be run in an impeccable manner that was for sure. Of course there were the children to think of. Hermione already had her hands full. Would she be willing to take on even more?

[illegible]

Hermione was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the sitting room in the chambers she shared with Severus. Her hair was pulled into a loose ponytail that draped over her shoulder as she changed the baby girl lying on the floor in front of her. The little girl was a year old with wide brown eyes and a head full of black hair. When she was done changing her daughter, Hermione gathered her up in her arms and stood up, trying desperately to balance out the weight of the child with the growing swell of her belly.

"Mummy!" a voice called from down the hall. Hermione smiled indulgently as she waddled toward the direction of the voice. "Mummy!"

A five-year-old boy poked his head out of a doorway and grinned happily at his mother. His eyes were a deep chocolate that were almost the same shade as the black curls that tickled his ears. "Mummy," he said again, smiling. "Come play with us."

"Can you wait until Christine takes her nap, Gerard? I'll come play with you and Rachel then, okay?" Hermione said, her voice a bit weary. She ruffled her son's hair and planted a kiss on the top of his head.

"Hermione?" came Severus' muffled voice from the sitting room. "Hermione, are you here?"

Sighing, Hermione turned around and waddled back down the hallway to the sitting room. Christine was drifting off to sleep against her shoulder, and the baby was kicking relentlessly at her bladder. "I'm coming, Severus. Give me a minute."

[illegible]

"You're not teaching this year," Severus said sternly as he and Hermione sat in the sitting room. "You don't eat well, and you barely get any sleep. I'm making an appointment at St. Mungo's for the both of us."

Hermione looked up from the newborn nursing at her breast and glared at her husband. "Severus! I can most certainly teach this year, and I intend to. Gerard and Rachel will be going to nursery school. Molly has already said she would be more than willing to stay with Christine and Brandon while I have classes."

"No, Hermione. I won't lose you, and if you don't start eating better and getting more sleep, I will. Please don't make me pull rank on you," he said softly, reaching out to stroke his son's brown curls. "The children are running you ragged, love. I want you to take a break for a while, just for a year. I'm sure I can persuade Remus to take over Defense for a year, and I'll go back to Potions until you're ready to come back."

Severus kissed her forehead softly and watched his son's chest rise and fall as he nursed. Four children in eight years. It was too much for her to handle while trying to teach. He didn't want her to quit teaching or doing anything else she enjoyed doing. He just wanted her to take better care of herself, to put herself a bit higher on her list of



"I am going to make an appointment for the two of us at St. Mungo's in the morning. Then I will see if Molly will stay with the children while we're gone." He fell quiet for a moment before he caught Hermione's gaze with his own. "Do you want more children, Hermione?"

Severus put his arm around her and let her head drop against his shoulder. He kissed the top of her head and smiled softly. "It's alright, love. There's nothing wrong with you not wanting more. We have our family, and that is enough."

"Snape, Brandon," said the ragged looking man standing in front of the Great Hall. Remus Lupin looked older, but they all did. He tried to hide the proud grin as the small boy clambered up to take his seat on the Sorting Hat's stool. Remus dropped the hat onto the small boy's brown hair and held his breath.

Hermione placed her hand on his arm and drew his attention back to their youngest son's sorting. The Sorting Hat was beginning to stir on the small boy's head. Remus spared a glance at Severus and Hermione, who were both beaming with pride. His one-year stint as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had turned into a permanent position. Severus had continued teaching the sixth and seventh years, but had been content enough to let Remus have the rest of the lot. Hermione had returned to teaching Potions when Brandon was three and had taken the Deputy Headmistress position a year later much to her husband's relief (as he had managed almost four years without a deputy).

"*SLYTHERIN!*"

Hermione leaned in to kiss Severus lightly on the cheek. "I suppose I owe you a few Galleons, don't I?" She chuckled at his smirk.

"What do you need to pay Remus for, dear?"

She smiled at him before sweeping her eyes across the Great Hall. She easily caught sight of each of her children as they began eating their meals. She saw the Potter twins laughing and joking with Brandon at the Slytherin table. Gerard was talking to Mary Longbottom, who had been chosen captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team this year. Gerard himself had been chosen Head Boy. Rachel was gossiping with Greta Karstoff-Weasley. Greta had taken after her mother in her looks, but she was rumored to have Ron's temper. Christine had her nose buried in a copy of *Hogwarts, A History* that was propped up on a jug of pumpkin juice.

She blushed, much as she had on that night at the Halloween costume ball (a tradition that Headmaster Snape insisted on keeping), and squeezed his hand in return. "I love you too, Severus."

AN: Well, that's it. It kind of feels right to finish this tale at the same time I finish the semester. I've put in a lot of late nights on this one and I'm sad to see it end. I hope you've enjoyed the ride as much as I have. I've another story in the works, so I'll see you next time! I think the song for this chapter fits well; it's the closing theme of RENT. You can find the lyrics here: [http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/20724/RENT/Finale\\_B](http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/20724/RENT/Finale_B). Also, if you'd like to see what inspired Hermione's wedding gown, take a look here: <http://www.monstersandcritics.com/artman/uploads/phantom3.jpg>.