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

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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 onto 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 build 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.

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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

them slain in battle or taken away in the prime of youth to Azkaban for their choices. Do not forget the sacrifices these people have made. Honor their memories by honoring life. Continue to live and revive the memories of the fallen by telling their stories to your children and your grandchildren.

"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, blackrobed 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!"

With this, Dumbledore sat in his seat and turned to Professor McGonagall. The students began to mill about, saying their goodbyes to each other. Here and there couples were whispering promises to write every day over the break. Some were proposing marriage in light of the new life they had all been given. Hermione and Ron were sitting off near the fireplace together, clasping each other's hands tightly and whispering intently to each other. When Ron stood up and disappeared into the crowd to get Hermione something to eat, the tall form of Professor Snape practically materialized at her side.

"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.

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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 then spent a month visiting with the Weasleys at the Burrow. She couldn't have stayed any longer. It was too uncomfortable to be around Ron all hours of the day and night. They had dated for several months after the victory celebration but things had slowly fallen apart from the beginning. It was messy and difficult. It was painful, at least for Hermione. She thought she was in love with Ron, but his cold indifference to her was clear as to how he felt about her. She made a quick exit from the Burrow and visited with her parents.

She had been at her parents' house when her Charms mistress certification arrived from the Ministry. Hermione was proud of herself for achieving something so great so young. But, as much as she loved Charms, it wasn't her passion. What she really loved was Potions. It was months before she could get up the courage to send an owl to Hogwarts. She wanted to become a Potions mistress, and she wanted to study under her former teacher, Severus Snape.

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.

At first she thought he was away on a well-deserved holiday. But as the unanswered letters piled up, Hermione realized that he didn't even want to speak to her, let alone take her as an apprentice. She wrote a final time to Dumbledore, asking if he know of any other respectable Potion masters in Britain. That was how Hermione found her way to Ireland where she studied for eleven months. It was a wonderful education, but it wasn't Professor Snape.

She had arrived back in Britain two weeks ago. Dejectedly, she went back to her parents' home. Hermione had no more than Apparated into her bedroom when two barn owls came soaring through the open window. They perched on the edge of window and dropped their letters onto her bed. The first owl flew off without a backward glance while the second sat there, a familiar twinkling in its eyes. The first letter bore the seal of the Ministry of Magic. It was her certification as a Potions mistress. The second bore the Hogwarts Crest. It was a letter from Dumbledore. He was offering her a job and a place to live.

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.

Snape, who had just finished tending to some pre-term affairs, had seen her arrive. He was surprised that Dumbledore and McGonagall weren't standing in the entrance hall to greet their golden Gryffindor. Standing in the shadows of the dungeon stairs, blending perfectly into the dark recesses in his usual black robes, he watched and waited. He waited for her to go storming off in search of Professor Dumbledore or McGonagall's office. He had known she was coming, Dumbledore had told him the moment Hermione's acceptance owl arrived. All in all, he wasn't displeased at seeing her again.

His chest tightened for a moment as he thought of all the unanswered letters in a box in his office. He couldn't bring himself to answer them, not after... He shook his head to clear his thoughts and took a long look at her. Her honey brown eyes looked dark and saddened. Her once bushy locks had straightened into soft curls that cascaded down her back since he had last seen her. She looked taller, if it was even possible. She looked beautiful. Beautiful, but sad.

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.

She visibly jumped at his voice before turning to face him. She smiled softly, almost sadly, as her eyes focused on him. The image of the dozen letters she'd sent to him rose in her mind. She choked back tears at the thought that they had probably found their way to his fireplace unopened. "Not lost, exactly," she replied slowly. "Just a bit confused."

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her. "Ah, I take it the headmaster neglected to tell you where you will be living."

"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."

Snape's eyes widened involuntarily at this. He quickly composed himself and answered gruffly. "You will be taking my former position, *Professor* Granger."

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and her cheeks reddened as her mouth seemed to begin working without her consent. "Former position? Oh, you haven't been sacked, have you? Not after everything you've done! They can't still be in a knot over you being a Death Eater. I mean, you don't even have the Mark anymore. How could Dumbledore allow."

Snape cleared his throat forcefully and held up his hand to stop her. He drew his wand and cast the charms to levitate her luggage. He guided them toward the entrance to the dungeons and beckoned her to follow. He led her through a winding labyrinth of corridors until they reached his former chambers. He pushed open the door and guided her bags into the bare sitting room.

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

trouble adjusting to being in a committed relationship. After the twelfth time, Hermione realized that the only one in a committed relationship when it came to her and Ron was she. He could have cared less, but she realized it too late. Her heart was in bruised pieces before he ended their... whatever... for good.

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.

Hermione.

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.

Always,

Harry

Hermione absently fed Hedwig a slice of bacon before slipping the letter into the pocket of her robes. She thought about the letter as she watched Hedwig fly off through the rafters and out into the clear blue sky. No "how are you" or "we miss you" or "how're you holding up." Could it be possible for someone to feel so terrible, so brokenhearted over something that was supposed to be a happy occasion? Not that she ever fancied Harry, but it would have been nice to know that he worried about her. Of course, no one worried about the bushy-haired Gryffindor know-it-all.

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, 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.

Hermione slammed the door behind her and warded it, adding a Silencing Charm for good measure. It wouldn't do to have someone hear her crying her eyes out. She flicked her wand toward the mantle, and a music box sprang open. It began playing a slow, melancholy tune as she sank to the floor, the tears pouring down her cheeks in rivers. The words wrapped around her and seeped into her, the truth of them chilling her to her bones.

Child of the wilderness

Born into emptiness

Learn to be lonely

Learn to find your way in darkness

Who will be there for you,

comfort and care for you?

Learn to be lonely

Learn to be your one companion

Ever dreamed out in the world

There are arms to hold you?

You've always known

Your heart was on its own

So laugh in your loneliness

Child of the wilderness

Learn to be lonely

Learn how to love life that is lived alone

Learn to be lonely

life can be lived

life can be loved

Alone.

She drew a deep breath and shuddered as the tears welled up anew. Leather and books and brandy, she thought sadly. His smell. Why had she bewitched the thing to play songs that reminded her of Snape? Hermione had never felt more alone in her life and she was. There was no one to talk to now. Harry was busy serving as Head of the Auror office at the Ministry of Magic, and he was far too wrapped up in himself and Ginny Weasley to care what was going on with her. Ron was helping to manage the Chudley Cannons, not that he would have spoken to her if she wanted him to. She had grown apart from her parents since the war, and, besides, they didn't understand much about her to begin with. She had always been different, and she had always been alone, even when she had her two best friends at her side.

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Snape had just sent his fifth year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws packing and was already tired of having to break up whispered conversations about Professor Granger. The stories of her signature first class had swept the school like the plague, and the students were so keyed up by her presence that they dared to not give him all of their attention. Filch would have two hardworking Ravenclaws in his hands that weekend, and Hufflepuff was already trailing in the House Cup by a hundred and fifty points. That would teach them to not pay attention in his presence!

He was seething as he sank into the chair behind his desk at the front of the room. The classroom door was slammed shut and may Merlin help the first student who came through it. Snape picked up his grading quill and dipped it into his ever-present pot of red ink. He set the quill to parchment, forcefully slashing though the wrong answers on the quiz he had just given. True, he wasn't much for giving written tests, but that was when he taught Potions. Defense Against the Dark Arts was something wholly different. There were a large number of curses and other things that the Ministry simply forbid students under seventh year from seeing. So, Snape was forced to give written assignments, and this batch of dunderheads was no better than the ones he had instructed in Potions.

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

it snuck up on him so quickly that he couldn't get away from it. Here you are, free of Voldemort... Oh, do stop flinching, you great bat. I recall a time when you would grovel at his feet and call him "master." You've got no one to answer to, save Dumbledore whenever the barmy old codger decides to insinuate himself into your life. You've got the job you've always wanted. Shouldn't you be happy?

Snape sneered savagely as he crossed out a wrong answer on the test paper in front of him. Damn his useless conscience. Yes, you should be, shouldn't you, Severus? But you're not. You're positively miserable and lonely. Don't try to argue, you know you are! And don't try that, "no one likes me because I used to be a Death Eater" garbage because it's a lie, and you know it. No one likes you because you won't let them. You just hide behind the faithful standby Death Eater excuse because it's convenient

He made another great red slash mark across the paper, nearly slicing it in two. He growled angrily and swatted his hand near his head as if trying to shoo away a bothersome fly. That's what his conscience was, a stupid and bothersome fly that popped up in the most uncomfortable and horrible times. He threw his quill onto his desk and rested his head in his hands. Snape growled again, this time so forcefully that it threatened to make his throat raw. The drawer of his desk was open slightly, and Snape could see one of Hermione's letters peeking out. He must have forgotten to move them into the desk in his rooms. Oh, no, the voice was at it again.

Never did answer those, did you? Ah, I see. One of the great heroes of the downfall of the Dark Lord is petrified of writing a letter to a girl! I always knew that courage and pride you had was such a joke. Ever thought of what might have happened if you had answered them? Another violent growl escaped his throat. It must have hurt her, sending letter after letter and yet hearing nothing in return. Poor thing, I bet she doesn't even know why you never answered them.

"She knows damn well why they weren't answered, now bugger off," he mumbled into his palms. "I want to be left alone."

The little voice in his head laughed. Alone? Stupid prat, that's all you've ever been. And that's the way you'll stay if you don't stop being so bloody proud!

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Hermione nearly missed her class because she had spent the last two hours after breakfast crying. The music box on the mantle had played on, the songs just multiplying the pain she felt in her chest. It tightened and jumped when she noticed the time on the clock. She pulled herself off the floor and wiped at her eyes with a tissue. A quick glance in the mirror told her that she looked terrible, but there was little she could do about it. Her eyes were red and swollen, as was the tip of her nose. She smiled grimly, a smile that looked more like a grimace, and steeled herself.

If there was one thing that Hermione Jane Granger was good at, it was getting the job done despite however she might feel about it. Staring into the mirror, Hermione set her face in a pleasant mask and forced herself to think of her students. She could finish crying later, but they needed her now. She gathered up her things and made her way back to her classroom where her second year Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors were waiting in their seats. She smiled at them and began her lecture, knowing in the back of her mind that at the end of the period, her public masquerade would be over and the private tears would flow freely again.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The song Hermione listens to was actually the inspiration for the first chapter but I couldn't find a way to make it fit so I added it here. The song came from the movie soundtrack to the Phantom of the Opera. You can find it here: http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/906347594/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Learn_to_Be_Lonely

You can also find the lyrics to the song that inspired this chapter here: http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/1367660762/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/masquerade/why_so_silent

Overture

Chapter 3 of 14

October has arrived and Dumbledore has a surprise for the students AND the staff. Have Snape and Hermione gotten past their bad times, or are there still more to come? And what will Snape think when he hears what Dumbledore has in store?

CHAPTER 3: Overture

It seemed as if Hermione blinked and it was the end of October. A silent chill had fallen over the normally drafty dungeons, and the wind whipped over the grounds. It was a week to Halloween, a holiday Hermione had once enjoyed with her friends. She smiled sadly as she remembered her first year and getting trapped in the girl's toilet with a mountain troll. Then came the memories of second year and Nearly Headless Nick's terribly depressing deathday party. Her smile faded as she realized there would be no more memories of Harry and Ron in the castle. The chill of the room settled down to her bones, making her feel more alone than ever before.

Hermione was sitting at the desk in her office late one afternoon and grading essays when she heard a reluctant knock on the door. It was open, and it was unusual for someone to knock rather than simply let themselves inside. She waved her hand at the door absently in a gesture for whomever it was to come in. A chill ran down her spine when she heard a velvet voice speak from near the door.

"The headmaster would like me to inform you that there is a meeting tonight in the staff room after dinner," Snape purred as he gazed around his former office.

Gone were his multitude of preserved specimens that lined the walls. It appeared Hermione had given the shelves a good scrub before filling them with a plethora of books on a thousand different subjects. Muggle and magical alike, they lined three walls of the room from floor to ceiling. A warm, welcoming fire crackled in the hearth while the clock ticked soothingly. The room was brighter than he had ever managed to make it, and it seemed so inviting. It looked like a gentle, loving person lived here and not an overgrown, sour bat.

Snape let his eyes travel back to Hermione to take in her form. He saw the shiver that ran through her and promptly dismissed it as the cold dungeon air. The light that filled the room seemed to collect in her chocolate curls and made her look as if she wore a halo. Her honey eyes drifted slowly up from the page she was grading to fix on him. She twirled her quill between her fingers, the feathered tip brushing her cheek every few rounds. She smiled faintly.

"Thank you," she mumbled as she took in his tall, lean form resting lazily against the inside doorframe. His hair still looked greasy from her distance, but it looked as if it were fuller somehow. It didn't lay lank and dull against his head. A few strands still fell forward enough to shield his eyes, those eyes that could see straight through her.

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.

"I shall see you at dinner them, Mi... um, Professor Granger," he said as steadily as he could muster. He turned on his heel and began to leave as he heard her small, unsure voice behind him. He turned just in time to see her smile, the first genuine smile he'd seen from her since she arrived. He felt his heart began to melt and his chest tighten from the sad beauty of it. How could I have been angry with her?he thought. She was so young. I never should have...

"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.

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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.

"Evening, Severus," Dumbledore said as he took his seat a few chairs from Snape. "Delivered that message, I trust?"

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.

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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,

closing himself off. Tears tickled her eyes as Hermione turned away from him and found herself being watched by Professor McGonagall.

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."

With that, Dumbledore turned to hold the door open for the rest of the staff as they exited the staff room. Within a few minutes, only three others remained in the room besides Dumbledore. Snape was still sitting in his corner pouting like a spoiled child. Hermione was staring into the fire, wondering why she opened her mouth. Professor McGonagall was looking sadly at Hermione, her mind turning as to how to bridge the obvious rift between Hermione and Snape.

"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.

"I am not having a tantrum!" Snape thundered as he shot up from his chair. The sound of his angry bellows made Hermione jump. She didn't want to be in the same room with him. She wanted to get out and go back to her room. She wanted to sob until she couldn't breathe. Hermione turned swiftly from the fireplace and made a beeline for the open door... just as Snape was striding toward Dumbledore.

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.

Snape groaned and rolled onto his back, his hands coming up to cover his nose. Blood poured between his fingers and dripped down onto his black robes. He struggled to sit up before he choked on his own blood and glared at Hermione, who was standing above him dumbfounded. A long string of curses came out of Snape's mouth. "Of all the damned, stupid, mother fucking, spawn of hell..."

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."

With that, Dumbledore led a very reluctant Snape out of the staff room. As they made their way down the corridor, Hermione and McGonagall could still hear Snape cursing at the top of his voice. The two women grinned grimly at each other before McGonagall reached out to take the younger witch into a gentle hug. Hermione collapsed against the older woman's chest and began to sob with all of her heart.

"Oh, my dear Hermione, what's the matter?" McGonagall murmured as she soothed Hermione's curls. "Please tell me, dearest."

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."

McGonagall tried to stifle a laugh. "It's just a broken nose, Hermione. I daresay Severus has had quite a few before this. He'll be fine. Poppy will set him to rights." She stared at Hermione as she wandered back over to the fireplace. "There's something else, isn't there?"

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."

She trailed off, staring into the grate. McGonagall's mind began working in overdrive, trying to remember anything she could about that day. "Sometimes, I think that if I had treated him differently, if I had made different choices that day, my life wouldn't be the way it is. His life wouldn't be like it is. We would both be different people," Hermione continued, swiping at her eyes again. "There's nothing I can do about it now. What's done is done, and I only have myself to blame."

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."

"He'll never let me near him now, Minerva. He'll never listen to anything I have to say." Hermione's sobs came anew as she clung to McGonagall.

"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."

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Madam Pomfrey looked as if she wanted to laugh when Dumbledore brought Snape up to the hospital wing to have his nose reset. The younger wizard had sank onto a bed near the back of the room and waited for the mediwitch to work her wonders. It didn't take much, just a quick incantation and a sharp tap on the nose with her wand. Madam Pomfrey cleaned the blood from his face and robes and conjured up a bag of ice for him to put on his nose.

He sneered as he felt the bump on the bridge of his nose. "Damn that clumsy girl!"

Dumbledore smiled softly and patted Snape's back. "It was an accident, Severus. Things like this happen."

Snape turned his dark ebony eyes on Dumbledore and practically growled at him. "I think you need to learn to mind your own business, Albus."

Madam Pomfrey bustled back over to Snape's bedside and checked his nose one final time. "Everything has set back fine, Severus. You can go whenever you feel like it."

"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.

"Apologize to the girl," Dumbledore said as he fell into step beside Snape. "Open up and let her talk to you. It's the only way you two are ever going to get past whatever is sitting between you. You have to let your guard down sometime, Severus."

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 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

you in the hopes that you might praise me some day.

"And do you think, just because you hopped in and played the chivalrous knight at the battle, that I'm going to dissolve into tears when you finally praise me? And then you tack on that last piece of nonsense. You love me? You're fond of me? Please, Professor, give me just a bit of credit. I'm not a dunderhead." Dream Hermione was ranting now, and a few people were turning to stare at the two of them. "You are a terrible person to say such a thing. You are so Slytherin that it makes me sick. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to find Ron."

Real Hermione saw Snape's eyes glint with malice at the mention of Ron's name. She resigned herself to watch the scene as it neared its end, knowing it was useless to stop her dream self from saying those last cutting words. "Yes, Professor, I'm going to find Ron. The person that I love and who doesn't love me just to get something out of it. Do have a nice life, Professor.'

With that, Dream Hermione disappeared into the crowd and left a very stunned Snape behind. Real Hermione sat up in her bed, her nightgown sticking to her in a cold sweat. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and her breath was coming in gasps. She looked at the clock on her nightstand; it was 4:30 a.m. Tears were flowing from her eyes as her music box continued on the mantle

Think of me

Think of me fondly when we've said goodbye

Remember me once in a while, please promise me you'll try

When you find that once again you long to take your heart back and be free

If you ever find a moment spare a thought for me.

We never said our love was evergreen

Or as unchanging as the sea.

But if you can still remember

Stop and think of me.

Think of all the things we've shared and seen,

Don't think about the way things might have been.

Think of me,

Think of me waking, silent and resigned.

Imagine me

Trying too hard to put you from my mind.

Recall those days, look back on all those times,

Think of the things we'll never do.

There will never be a day when I won't think of you!

Flowers fade, The fruits of summer fade,

They have their seasons so do we.

But please promise me that sometimes

You will think...

--Several moments of wordless opera singing--

When Hermione awoke the next morning, it was nearly 10:30. She sat up in bed, the dream of the victory celebration still swimming through her brain. She felt the tears welling up in her eyes again and buried her face in her comforter. The music box was still going, stuck on the song it had been playing when she had awoken from her dream. She listened to it sadly, and Professor McGonagall's words from the night before came back to her. "If you care enough to cry over it, Hermione, I'm positive you care enough to make him listen to you... Sooner or later, Severus will thank you for it."

She pushed her blankets away from her and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Drawing a deep breath of the cool dungeon air, she stood and stretched languidly. The air filled her lungs with that same smell that lingered in every room Snape had previously occupied. Hermione didn't know why it was there; it wasn't in the classroom or in the passage between her office and her rooms. That comforting smell of leather, books, and brandy that assailed her senses every time she entered her rooms. She didn't put it past Snape to bewitch the rooms and office to keep that smell just to torture her. She deserved it after the way she had treated him, but it had had a soothing effect on her as well.

As sad as she usually was, Hermione could sit in her sitting room in front of the fire and breathe in his smell, comforted. Sometimes she could imagine that he was there with her. She could see him in her mind's eye as he sat in the chair next to the fireplace reading a book and sipping at a glass of brandy. He was always in his white dress shirt and black trousers, his long legs stretched out in front of him. His long black hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail at the nape of his neck. More often than not, he was oblivious to the fact that she watched him from where she was curled up on the sofa. Hermione liked the times she could think of him like this. He always looked so happy and content.

The images she often conjured of him came flooding into her head. Snape reading comfortably by the fire. Snape marking essays and making lesson plans at the desk in the corner. Snape napping on the sofa, his black hair looking like an ink spill on the pale pillow beneath his head. Hermione smiled softly as she padded to her bathroom. What she wouldn't give to see him like that every day. Not just in daydreams but in his real flesh and blood. If only she could undo what she did those years ago and maybe, just maybe..

Maybe McGonagall is right, she thought hopefully. If I could just get Severus to listen to me, to see how terribly sorry I am about what I did. Maybe he could forgive me;

maybe he could see that I care for him so much it hurts. Just maybe, he might still feel something for me. It couldn't hurt to try. The worst he could do is exactly what I did to him three years ago.

Hermione cleared her throat as she removed her nightgown and stepped into her shower. "I'll spend the whole day finding him and trying to make him listen to me if I have to. I can't keep all of this inside anymore."

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Snape had ensconced himself in the Restricted Section almost as soon as he got out of bed that morning. His nose and cheeks were still sore, and there were faint purple bruises under his eyes. He was in the foulest mood he'd known in years as he sifted through dozens of potions journals and books at a table in the back of the library. Dobby had popped in only a few moments after Snape had arrived, bringing with him Snape's morning tea service. Dobby had tried to deliver it to Snape's rooms, but once he realized the professor was gone, he went to the first place he thought to find him.

And so, there he sat several hours later, his rather large nose stuck in a pile of books and sipping at a cup of very strong tea when the bane of his present existence swept into the library. Hermione looked flushed and out of breath as she came to a stop near Madame Pince's desk. She looked frantically around the room, her curls bouncing and swirling around her shoulders. Her honey eyes finally settled on him, and a soft smile spread across her face.

Snape groaned as she began to make her way through the maze of tables toward him. I don't want my nose broken again this morning, Professor Granger. Please go back to your rooms and let me enjoy my day off, he thought as she drew closer. He covertly swept his ebony eyes over her, taking in the Muggle jeans and pale blue blouse she wore. He swore inwardly as his mind began churning with thoughts he really didn't want to be thinking. Merlin, she looks beautiful like that. She looks beautiful all the time.

Hermione was standing at the edge of his table, quietly waiting for him to acknowledge her presence. She twisted her hands at her sides and began to chew on her bottom lip. It seemed as if she stood there for hours before he looked up at her with those dark ebony eyes.

"May I help you, Professor Granger?" he mumbled coldly, crossing his arms over his chest to close himself off.

She drew a deep breath, and the scent that permeated her rooms overwhelmed her again. Flashes of Snape the way she imagined him swam through her mind and she smiled. "Is this seat taken at the moment. Professor?"

His eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and he recognized his own words coming from her. He shook his head slightly. "Not at the moment, although I am quite busy at present."

"Oh," she whispered, noticing for the first time the multitude of books and journals strewn across the table. Don't give in, Hermione. You'll never forgive yourself if you don't say anything to him. Just get it out and put the Bludger in his court. "If you'll just give me a few minutes, I promise it won't take long."

"I really don't have the time right now, Professor Granger. I would like to finish this research while I have the chance," he returned, trying to turn back to his work. He hoped she would take the hint and leave him to his work. He didn't feel like stretching his emotional muscles with her at the moment. "Now, if you please, Professor, I am otherwise occupied."

Hermione grit her teeth and pulled out the chair across from him. She sank down into the chair angrily, crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at him. Snape picked up the nearest journal and began reading, trying his best to ignore the feeling of her eyes boring into him. He could hear her angered breathing and could sense the blush rising in her cheeks.

They sat that way for a few minutes before Snape couldn't take it any longer. "Fine, Professor Granger. You have five minutes. I suggest you get on with whatever was so important."

She drew a deep breath to steel herself and leaned forward, resting her arms on the table in front of her. "I wanted, first and foremost, to apologize to you about last night. It was an accident, but I still feel like it was my fault. I would like to ask you to forgive me for...um..."

"For breaking my nose, Professor Granger. It is not the first time it has happened. If it will balm your conscience, then you have my forgiveness," he said shortly.

"Thank you, sir. There is one more thing I would like to ask your forgiveness for," she said, her voice beginning to shake as her nerves started to fail her. "The way I acted at the celebration, it was completely..."

Snape stiffened visibly in his seat. "I don't wish to talk about that particular event, Professor. Now if you'll excuse me..."

"No, I will not excuse you! You are going to listen to me if I have to sit here and stare at you all day. Even if I have to follow you around the castle harping at you until you finally get so sick of me that you have to listen." Hermione's hands flew to her mouth in surprise. She hadn't meant to be so mean or forceful. He'll never listen to me now.

He quirked up an eyebrow and settled back in his seat. "Very well, please continue, Professor. But I warn you, I reserve the right to get up and leave this conversation at any time I choose."

It was the best Hermione was going to get and she knew it. She clasped her hands together and drew in a steadying breath. "I said terrible, hurtful things to you at the celebration. Things that I never should have. I can't say that I didn't mean them because at the time I did. I laughed at you. I laughed when you told me those things that must have cost your pride to say."

Snape cringed as the memories of that day came flooding back to him. His heart began to pound and all the anger he felt when she shunned him came flooding back. He wasn't prepared for the words that came from her lips.

"I don't mean those words any longer, Severus. I have spent that last three years running that day over in my mind, hoping to Merlin that I could go back and change it," Hermione whispered softly. She saw a flash of hope spark in his dark eyes. "There wasn't a day that I didn't think of you after the celebration. Even when I was with Ron, as terrible as that all turned out to be, I thought about you every day. I cried almost every night over it. I still cry about it.

"I wanted to write and beg you to forgive me, but I never had the courage. I wanted to tell you in the letters I sent to ask to be your apprentice, but I couldn't. It just didn't seem like the right time. And then you never answered them. I got the impression that you wanted to forget that you ever knew me. Someday, if you could, I'd like to know why you never answered them." She saw him cast a glance at the books littering the table and swallow hard. She stood up and pushed her chair back under the table. "Thank you for your time, Severus. I'll leave you alone to your research."

Snape nodded dumbly and watched her as she walked silently out of the library. Her curls were swaying against her back, and her head was held high. Something was different about her now. He looked at her differently. She was still beautiful in his eyes, but somehow his old admiration for her started to seep back into his bones.

"I never answered them, Hermione," he said huskily, "because I couldn't bear for you to reject me again."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I hope you guys enjoyed the revelation of the victory celebration. I hope it was worth the wait! Chapter 5 is in the works... We get to see what costume Snape wears to the Halloween Ball and how he deals with what Hermione said to him. See you soon. Please review!

The lyrics for the song in this chapter came from http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/359238177/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Think_of_Me

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 filling 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."

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 broach 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.

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The Great Hall was decorated with its usual floating jack-o-lanterns, live bats swooping though the room, and the bright, twinkling stars reflected in the enchanted ceiling. The usual House tables were gone, replaced with several dozen round tabled 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, Severusshe 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 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.

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

Later on in the evening, the teachers were supposed to walk around and make sure that the students were behaving themselves. Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall disappeared out into the entrance hall to check for couples trying to hide in the classrooms or sneak away without being noticed. Professors Sinistra and Flitwick took to patrolling through the tables. Which left Snape and Hermione to break up the joined-at-the-hip couples on the dance floor.

Snape stood, and in a whirl of red, was disappearing into the crowd of students. They parted as he approached, and those who had been clinging tightly together separated so far that Hagrid could have fit between them. Hermione smiled at her tablemates before sweeping off behind Snape. She followed him through the crowd, keeping her eyes on the blood red of his cloak that trailed off behind him. Through the labyrinth she followed, reprimanding a few students here and there, trying desperately to not lose sight of Snape ahead of her.

Someone grabbed her by the arm and pulled her roughly backwards. An arm clasped around her waist, pinning her against the hard male body behind her. The embrace was cold, and it frightened her. Something told her that it wasn't Snape, who wouldn't have dared to do such a thing in front of a room full of students. Peeking a glance over her shoulder, Hermione saw it was Ron. His eyes were dark with lust, and they were trained on her heaving breasts.

"It's last dance, 'Mione. You saved one for me, right?" he asked huskily in her ear. His voice sent a shiver down her spine, but it wasn't the same as the shiver Snape's voice gave her. This time, it was a shiver of fear.

"Let go of me, Ronald. I don't want to dance with you." Hermione struggled, trying desperately to hit him somewhere, anywhere that would make him let her free. "Please, don't do this. Please..."

Just as suddenly as Ron had grabbed her, Hermione felt him let go and back away. She looked behind her and saw a swirl of red. Then...nothing, nothing but a crowd of students who were making their way off the dance floor as the candle light in the hall grew brighter. The ball was over, and the students began filing out the door to go to hed

Hermione rushed back to the faculty table, hoping to find Snape there, but he was gone. She hugged Harry and Ginny goodbye and told them she would see them at the wedding. Ron was nowhere to be found. Neither was Severus. Hermione fought back tears as she followed Professor Sinistra out of the doors of the Great Hall and disappeared down the dungeon stairs to her rooms.

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Damn you, Weasley! Snape thought as he watched from the side door of the Great Hall. Hermione had followed him through the students, just as he had wanted her to. Like Christine was drawn to the Phantom, so had Hermione been drawn to him. That embarrassing display of having to strut... and yes, for Hermione, Severus Tobias Snape would strut... about it that god awful Gryffindor red costume had almost been worth it. If damned Ronald, friend of Harry-Bloody-Fucking-Potter, Weasley hadn't shown up.

The lust that raged in the prat's eyes was unavoidable. Snape had been surprised himself when his trousers began to feel a bit snug at the sight of Hermione in her costume. A few seconds of thinking of McGonagall naked on a cold day had taken care of that, however. He was pleased with her choice of costume, although how she knew his favorite play was *The Phantom of the Opera* he would never know. *Probably that meddling old codger again*, he thought. *I should remember to thank him for it one day*.

Snape had gotten so close to having Hermione in his grasp, and then that stupid son-of-a-whore Weasley had to get in the way. The way he'd heard it, Weasley had dropped Hermione a few years ago when she learned he couldn't keep his hands to himself. Now, here he was, doing his best to practically feel her up right in front of the students! Couldn't have that, now could we, Severus? No, had to play the gallant knight again... well, gallant phantom this time. It still hurts though, doesn't it? You had her, for the briefest, sweetest moment... then, Weasley! And you're invisible to her again. She runs off to Harry's arms... and in front of the prat's fiancée no less... instead of running to you.

Snape growled at the voice that was ensconcing itself in his brain. This wasn't that pesky, annoying, always-shows-up-when-something-good-is-going-to-happen conscience of his. No, this was a different voice, one he hadn't heard before. It welled up inside him and felt as if it was going to bust out of him in a green rage. The voice laughed at him.

She cleared her conscience last week; Severus, that's all. She doesn't really care about you or your feelings. You saw her tonight. She may be over Weasley, but she was falling all over Potter right in front of his fiancée! Hermione Granger finally learned how to toy with men's emotions, and she's practicing on you, you great prat! You were always invisible to her, you are invisible to her, and you're always going to be invisible to her. Get used to it.

Snape howled angrily as he slammed the side door to the Great Hall. He followed the labyrinth of passages up until he reached his rooms. Muttering the password and taking down the wards, he slipped inside, ripping the mask off his face as he went. He threw the mask on the table by the door and made his way to the liquor cabinet in the corner. *Nothing left to do but get drunk over the woman*,he thought as he poured himself a healthy tumbler of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey. Taking the bottle with him, Snape plopped down on his sofa and began to drink himself into oblivion.

A/N: It's not exactly the way I wanted but this is how it came out. I may go back later and rearrange some things. I'll let you know if I do. If you're having a hard time seeing Snape and Hermione's costumes based on my descriptions, leave me a note and I'll post the links for you! And here is the link to the lyrics that inspired this chapter. It's a deviation from the Phantom theme; this is a Clay Aiken song. http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clayaiken/invisible.html

Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again

Chapter 6 of 14

It's Christmas Eve at Hogwarts and the day of Harry and Ginny's wedding. Will Hermione be able to go to the wedding and still make it back for the staff dinner with Severus? Will Ron try to cause trouble at the Burrow?

CHAPTER 6: Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again

November faded much as October had. The cold winds of winter fell upon Hogwarts, and the snow began to fall in thick blankets. Hermione suddenly found herself giving her last test of the term on the Friday before Christmas. The students seemed to be doing well; at least, no one had complained of any problems yet. Some of them even

looked as if they were about to finish up.

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.

Severus. Heat pooled between her thighs at the memory of him at the ball. Hermione knew she blushed every time she saw him. The students had noticed and snickered at them. There were a few Slytherins who were brave enough to try to start trouble over it. They claimed to have a new message from Professor Snape every time they came through the door of the Potions classroom. It was funny how Professor Snape's angry, "Sit down, Mister Dashwood," could turn into, "Tell Professor Granger to meet me behind the Quidditch shed at midnight." Or, how Hermione's exasperated, "For the last time, you don't need the fire that hot," became, "Send word to Professor Snape that I would like to marry him."

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.

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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.

"I thought she had suffered quite enough at the ball, what with that *Weasley*," he spat the word, "around. Pawing all over her and drooling everywhere. Prat. But, then again, it wasn't an appropriate setting at all for what I had in mind," he said aloud, smirking.

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.

His arms felt so empty as he thought of Hermione. He longed to take her in his arms, to feel her warm breath on his skin, to kiss her until she was speechless, and tell her that she was his and that he loved her. He'd spent a year after she had left him trying to forget how much he cared, but he loved her still. His love for her grew each time he saw her blush in his presence, each time he saw her tell his Slytherins who was boss in the dungeons, each time she would try to engage McGonagall in conversation. He longed to see her at meals each day and wished that Dumbledore would meddle a bit and move Hermione's seat a little closer to his.

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.

Snape moaned at the vision and struggled to get a hold on himself. He was so hard now that it was painful. How he longed for his Hermione, to hold her close and show her how much he loved her. There were times when he loved her so much that it hurt, and all he wanted to do was to make love to her so slowly that she cried from the joy of it. Then again, there were times when he wanted her so desperately that he could drag her into his office and shag her senseless over his desk. He could only hope that she wanted the same

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. Ofthe 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.

Severus stared out of the window and smiled as he thought about her. The erection tenting his trousers was demanding his attention, and the continued thoughts of Hermione weren't helping. He unfastened his trousers and freed himself from his boxers. He did not have his Hermione there to help him, not yet. So he thought of her smiling mouth and soft, sure hands as he grasped himself and pumped his fist across his length. He growled her name softly as he found his release.

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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.

"Minerva," Hermione called, seeing the older witch heading up the staircase toward the second floor. She sat her packages by the door leading to the dungeons and crossed the entrance hall briskly. "The staff dinner is at eight o'clock, right?"

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."

Hermione blushed from her hairline to her toes at this and smiled sweetly at Professor McGonagall. "I have never known Severus Snape to be without courage, Minerva. Perhaps he just isn't sure she would return his advances. If you see him before the dinner, please tell him that someone is looking forward to seeing him this evening. Now, if you will excuse me, I'm off to the Burrow for this blasted wedding. It had better be over by eight. I'll leave in the middle of the damn thing if I have to."

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.

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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

"Oy, mum, 'Mione's here!" came a voice that was too satisfied for Hermione's liking. She turned slowly to find Ron leaning against the mantle nearby, a drink in one hand, and a very busty raven-haired girl in the other. "Bout time, 'Mione. We've been waiting on you to get started. Ginny wants a word before, though."

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.

"Merlin's beard, Hermione, I thought you'd never get here. I was thinking we'd have to go through with this without the maid of honor!" Ginny's annoyed scowl quickly melted away to glee at the surprised look on her friend's face. "Yes, I know it's sudden, but I couldn't stand having that nut-job Yelina doing it. C'mon, I've got a set of robes here for you. Hurry!"

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?"

Grimacing as if she had just gotten hold of a very sour lemon drop, Ginny mumbled, "That tart Ron's been chasing lately. I didn't want her to come, but Harry said my git of a brother threatened to not come if she wasn't invited. I couldn't do that to Harry, but I'll be damned to one of Filch's detentions before I'll let her be the official witness at my wedding."

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.

Hermione wished with everything that was in her that this wedding would be over soon. She wanted nothing more than to get out of the Burrow and away from these cuddling couples as quickly as possible. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to go back to Hogwarts. She wanted to be there... No, want simply isn't strong enough. She *needed* to be there. She needed to be as close to Severus as he would allow her to be. Just to look up at him from across the room would have been enough for her now.

As the ceremony ended, and Harry took Ginny into his arms for a kiss, Hermione felt hot, jealous tears prickle 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.

I wish he were here now, she thought sadly. Perhaps he would have come, if I had asked. Maybe it would have shown him how much I enjoy his company. I haven't really been close to him since the Halloween ball, but surely he's noticed I can't help but go red every time I see him. I miss him terribly. Being alone is unbelievably horrid. I don't see how he has managed all these years.

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

"Oh, Severus, I miss you," she muttered into her palms as she wiped away the tears on her face. She had made up her mind. She was going to say goodbye to Ginny and Harry, and then go home. Home to Hogwarts. Home to the only man she had ever really loved, and who she hoped could love her in return.

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Severus Snape was about two seconds away from killing himself as he stood against the wall in the Transfiguration classroom. Albus and Minerva were twirling around the makeshift dance floor to the horrible music emanating from the wireless. Flitwick was swinging about in Professor Sinistra's arms and giggling maddeningly. Snape had never felt lonelier in his life. Nor had he wanted to see Herminone Granger so desperately. He had expected to see her at the staff dinner, as Albus had insisted that everyone attend, and welcomed the opportunity to spend some time with her. He had been unable to spare even a few moments to do more than smirk gently at her during meals. Tonight, he had an excuse to latch onto her and demand her complete attentions.

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."

Dumbledore grinned joyfully, and his eyes twinkled. "Really, you would like to leave, Severus? I was under the impression, at least from what Minerva here has mentioned, that someone was looking forward to seeing you tonight. But, if you really wish to leave, I suppose I can't stop you."

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."

"Yes, that's what I said, my boy. According to Minerva here, Hermione told her to keep the other witches away from you," he said, his eyes twinkling madly. "Apparently, she had to attend Mister Potter's wedding this afternoon. I was under the impression she would be returning in time for the dinner."

Potter, Snape thought acidly. 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!

"Of course. If you will permit me, Headmaster, I believe I am going to retire for the night. Do not expect me at breakfast tomorrow." With that, Snape turned on his heel and stalked out of the Transfiguration classroom. He didn't stop when he reached the stairs leading to his office. Instead, he made his way out of the castle to the Apparation point just outside the gates. With a distinct *pop!* he Apparated to the Three Broomsticks.

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Hermione had been sitting at the bar of the Three Broomsticks for nearly half an hour. She had finally had enough of seeing the sickeningly happy couples at the wedding, and, by the time she was able to beg away, she thought the staff dinner would be over. So, she decided to make a stop at Rosmerta's and get as drunk as she dared. She had missed seeing Severus at the dinner and was too depressed to go searching the castle for him. Maybe it just wasn't meant to be.

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.

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As soon as Severus stepped through the door of the Three Broomsticks, he saw her sitting there at the bar. His heart drummed against his ribs as he crossed the room deftly to stand behind her. It seemed as if she was oblivious to his presence, at least until he leaned down to whisper softly in her ear.

"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

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 were 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.

"That's nothing for you to worry about anymore, little one. All that matters is that it is there and whole now, and it is yours if you desire it." He kissed her hair as he twined it gently around his fingers. It felt softer than silk against his skin.

The tears came, fresh and hot. How could she deserve this man? For months she longed for him, longed to sit with him in the library or the staff room and talk about Potions and books. Now here she was, drunker than she would have liked, more than a little brokenhearted over feeling lonely at Harry's wedding, and being held gently in the arms of the only man she had ever loved. More surprisingly, he had told her that he had forgiven her for the things she had said, the way she had left him, and the years she had stayed away.

"It feels as if I don't have a heart left to give you, Severus. It's been torn out and stomped on by so many, I've agonized over what I've done to you for so long. How could you ever love someone like me? I don't deserve you." She shuddered in his arms and buried her face in his jacket.

Severus stroked her curls gently and spoke soothing words into her ear. "You will be whole again, Hermione, I promise. I have waited for you four years now, even after you left me. I can wait longer if that was what you needed. I will always love you, little one, no matter whether you have a whole heart to give me, or just a few pieces."

He pulled her back from him, and wiped the tears from her face with the pad of his thumb. "You have done what others have wanted for too long now. It is time you got what you wanted, Hermione. I will not push you. Take your time, and think of what you really want out of your life, out of the man who loves you. If you find that I measure up to that man, I will be waiting for you. There will be no other for me."

He smiled slightly again and placed a last chaste kiss on her lips. She sank unceremoniously onto her stool and stared into her half-empty glass of mulled wine as he pulled away from her. A thousand thoughts swept through her mind like a whirlwind. She could still feel his arms around her, his lips murmuring into her hair, the scratch of his wool jacket against her cheek. His words echoed through her thoughts, making her desperate to believe that they were true. From what seemed like a great distance, Hermione heard his voice again.

"Would you see that she gets back to her chambers safely, Rosmerta? I would be most grateful, as I think she might be better off without my presence for a while." Snape conversed with the barmaid for a few moments before handing over several coins to cover Hermione's drinks. Before he swept out the door and into the night, Severus took Hermione's hand in his own and kissed her knuckles gently. "I will see you at Hogwarts, little one. Please, be careful."

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Not exactly the Christmas Eve I had in mind Snape thought as he shut the door to his chambers quietly. He poured himself a shot of Firewhiskey and settled in his favorite armchair in front of the fire. At least I had her there in my arms, if only for a little while. And I meant everything I said. I will wait for her as long as she asks me to, it is the least I can do for her now. I would go to the moon to prove how much I love her.

"I wonder if this had anything to do with Weasley," he wondered aloud. "Hasn't the little bastard hurt her enough? If I had known what she was walking into with the wanker I would have hexed him silly at the victory celebration."

Severus sat staring into the fire for a long while, thinking of how sweet it had felt to have her in his arms. He drifted off to sleep sometime around midnight, dropping his untouched Firewhiskey to the floor, and slept uneasily until a house-elf woke him up.

"Master Snape, Professor, sir," the elf squeaked, tapping Severus's knee gently. The wizard jolted awake, his wand at the ready. He softened a bit when he caught sight of the elf and wondered sleepily where she had come from.

"Yes, what do you want at this time of night?" he grumbled, swiping his hand over his face.

The elf backed up from Snape a bit and bowed so low that her pencil thin nose touched the floor. "Totty has come to tell Master Snape, Professor, sir, that the lady has done his request. Says to tell that his request is safe and sleeping."

For a moment, Snape was unsure of what the elf meant. Then, his conversation with Rosmerta came back to him. Hermione was back at Hogwarts, sleeping off her night of mulled wine in her room. "Thank you, Totty. You may go now."

As soon as the elf disappeared, Snape stood up and stretched. He repaired the broken glass on the floor and cast a quick *Scourgify* on the puddle of Firewhiskey. As he began to undress for bed, Severus noticed the faint smell of jasmine and lavender on the front of his wool coat. He smiled and thought of her as he draped the jacket across the extra pillows on his bed. Yes, he could wait for her.

A/N: I know this chapter is short compared to the others, but there was so much packed into Hermione's display at the beginning that I didn't think anything else was needed. Things are getting better, now we're just waiting on Hermione. I promise it won't take long. ;) This chapter was actually inspired by the Clay Aiken song "Measure of a Man." You can find the lyrics here: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clayaiken/measureofaman.html

Run To Me

Chapter 8 of 14

Hermione makes a New Year's Resolution and learns to let go of the past. What will Severus think of her new resolve?

CHAPTER 8: Run To Me

By New Year's Eve, Hermione had almost convinced herself that her encounter with Snape at the Three Broomsticks was a dream. No matter that she could feel his lips against her skin and his arms around her as she drifted off to sleep at night. His words echoed through her thoughts when it was quiet. She blushed even more readily when she saw him at meals and was surprised to find him smiling softly at her. His deep black eyes were soft and tender when he looked at her, and it sent a comforting wave of warmth over her.

Although he was desperate to have her in his arms again, Severus was true to his promise. He was careful not to say anything to push her, but he was more conversational and attentive to her when he was able. He made sure that he smiled more in her presence, although the memory of her in his arms was enough to trigger a soft smile. When Professor Dumbledore hosted a small dinner in his office on New Year's Eve, Severus was pleased to find Hermione settling into a seat next to him on the couch in front of the fire.

"I have a resolution for the new year," she whispered conspiratorially. The warmth of the fire forced her to shed the sweater she wore. A soft, golden glow came off her as she smiled up at him. "This year will better for me, Severus."

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?"

The rumble of his voice through his chest was comforting as she settled against him. Hermione stared into the flames, watching them dance and cast shadows on the floor. She knew what happened in the Three Broomsticks was not a dream, and all she wanted was to feel the peace of being in his arms again. "I am going to do something for me for once. I am going to be happy."

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."

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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.

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,

I'm very happy to hear it! I hope you are as happy as possible. Please do let me know when you have set a date. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

Send my love to Harry and Ginny, and tell them I'm sorry to have left the wedding so early. Hopefully I will see you all soon.

Regretfully, I have to stay here at Hogwarts for Easter. Tell your mother I am grateful for the offer and miss her, and the rest of your family, terribly.

Take care,

Hermione

Sighing, she rolled the letter and sealed it with the tip of her wand. She scribbled Ron's name on the outside and slipped it into her pocket. She would send it through the Floo once she got back to her office. "There, that feels much better."

"What's that, dear?" McGonagall asked softly. The older witch smiled at Hermione in a motherly sort of way and was pleased to see her look peaceful.

Hermione looked down the table to where Snape was sitting, sipping on a cup of strong coffee while he read the paper. She smiled brighter as something caused him to sneer in his trademark way. It's gone, she thought. Everything with Ronald is gone. I have my life ahead of me, and a man who swears he'll wait as long as he has to. I don't deserve him, but I'll do everything I can to keep him.

"Minerva, could I get you to pass a message along for me?"

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Severus felt as if his heart was going to bust straight out of his chest. The little color he had was drained from his face, and his hands were shaking slightly. Ever since Professor McGonagall had given him Hermione's message, Snape found it hard to keep his mind on anything but her. His every insecurity was racing through his brain, driving him insane with the thought that Hermione had come to her senses about him. She had decided that she didn't want him or the love he had to offer.

Minerva had said Hermione wanted to see him in his office during lunch, which was going to end in ten minutes. Snape's stomach was churning and doing acrobatics in his gut as the minutes ticked by without her appearance. He sat behind his desk, the early afternoon light filtering through the windows, and tried to occupy his mind with grading. It was useless; he heard every tick of the clock as if his own life were slipping away. Then he heard it, a gentle knock on the door, and his heart dropped like lead into his lap.

"Enter," he said hoarsely, praying to Merlin it wasn't a student on the other side of the door. It creaked open, and a small, feminine hand appeared. A mass of soft chestnut curls and the face dearest to him followed. He let out a long breath and smiled softly at her. "Hermione. I was beginning to think you had forgotten about me."

A beautiful smile lit up Hermione's face, and Snape's heart ceased to beat. The rest of her slipped into his office and pushed the door closed behind her. She leaned against the door, her palms pressed against the cool wood on either side of her. Her wide, honey-colored eyes never left his face. "I could never... I got a letter from Ronald this morning."

Ah, Weasley, Snape thought acidly. Too good to be true, Severus. She's come to say her goodbyes. Weasley has begged her to come back to him, and she is going. It's exactly what you feared. She's waltzed back into your life and drudged up all those old feelings. Now she's leaving you again, taking your heart with her this time. There'll be no handing it back in pieces. She's leaving you with nothing but a few happy memories of her in your arms.

Snape winced outwardly at this and mumbled softly, "But what sweet memories they'll be."

"Severus? Have you heard a word I've said?" Hermione was closing in on his desk as she spoke. She was near enough that he could smell the welcome scent of her. A soft hand reached out to him. "Are you alright, Severus?"

The sound of his name drew him from his thoughts. He looked up to find her coming around his desk, a concerned look in her warm honey eyes. "Yes, Hermione, I'm fine. Now, what did Mister Weasley's letter say?"

Hermione's smile returned, perhaps even brighter than before, and she perched herself on the edge of his desk. "Ronald wrote to say that he's getting married."

Snape's heart began pounding again at this. His mouth went dry; he felt as if he couldn't breathe. "Really," his voice was cracking miserably, "to whom? Do I know her?"

"I doubt it. I just met her at Harry's wedding. Some tart named Yelina Karstoff. She was drop dead gorgeous; straight black hair, legs for days, more boobs than I'll ever have," she mumbled jokingly. She stared down at her own body, suddenly convinced that her breasts were miniscule compared to Ron's new fiancée. "You know, I thought about visiting a Muggle doctor after a graduated. A plastic surgeon, to have this," she gestured along the length of her body, "mess straightened out."

Severus coughed a bit to clear his throat before he tried to speak. "I'm glad you didn't. I like your 'mess' exactly as it is. You are beautiful, Hermione. Every part of you is perfect, those I have seen and those I haven't." He looked away from her at those words, heat rising in his cheeks. Hermione giggled and smoothed her robes across her lap.

"Am I mistaken, or do I see Severus Snape blushing?" She laughed softly and reached out to lift his face toward her. His black eyes looked like velvet as he gazed up at her. Her smile was so beautiful, so full of life that he felt as if he could die at that moment. "You'll take me as I am, Severus?" she asked soberly.

Severus brought his hand up to the side of her face and stroked her cheek with his thumb. Her hand clasped his own, her honey eyes closed contentedly. "I will take you as you are, little one, because I love you just as you are. The question is, will you have me as I am?"

She smiled again, that smile that never ceased to melt his heart. "I wouldn't want you any other way, Severus." She turned her head, and kissed the palm of his rough hand gently. "Why do you want someone like me?"

He slipped his hand from her grasp and pulled her down into his lap. He smiled as she snuggled against his chest and settled into the feel of his arms around her. Placing a kiss on her hair, he sighed happily. "Because there is no one else for me, little one. I could never love anyone as I have loved you. I hoped every day that you would run back to me someday. Sooner or later, I hoped that you would want to live again, that you would want to go back to what we could have had."

"Could have?" she mumbled against his chest, wrapping one arm around his neck and burying her fingers in his hair. She looked up suddenly, fear etched on her features. "It's too late, isn't it, Severus?"

Smiling indulgently, Severus pulled her back against him and tucked her head beneath his chin. He stroked her back soothingly as her arms came around his neck again. "No, little one, it's not too late. I've told you I would wait until you felt you were ready. I would have continued waiting, even if we hadn't met that night at the Three Broomsticks. We've lost three years, Hermione. There are so many things that we could have done in those years, but we have the chance now."

Hermione stroked her fingers against his scalp and hummed happily. "Where do you think we'd be now, Severus, if I hadn't been so foolish that day?'

How often he had thought of that very thing, Severus could never tell. It was all that kept him going during those years without her, those thoughts of her smiling at him every morning as she made breakfast, of her round and happy with their first child, of her teaching a toddler his numbers and letters. He smiled broadly at the remembrance and grasped her more tightly against him.

"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."

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

"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? Hermy? '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.

Severus slipped his fingers from her and brought them to his lips. He lapped at the juices coating his fingers, longing to taste her firsthand. The knowledge that she was a virgin ran through his lust-fogged mind as he held her close. "Are you alright, little one?"

Hermione nodded against him limply. She had never felt anything so spectacular in her life, not even when she had tried this herself. A new feeling of desire washed over her when she felt his hard cock against her thigh. "Severus, are you...?

He smiled down at her when she turned her face upward. "Yes, little one, I am. But I'll take care of that later. You've had enough for one day," he murmured sweetly. "One step at a time. Hermione."

A soft, sated smile washed over her face. She pressed her lips to his in a tender, chaste kiss. "I... um... I love you, Severus."

He expelled a long breath and kissed the tip of her nose. "And I you, little one. And I you."

A/N: This is my first attempt at writing smut, so please forgive it if it's really bad. Suggestions are welcome! Thanks to everyone who reviewed. This wasn't the way this chapter was supposed to go, but after reading a few of the reviews I thought I'd explain Snape's nickname for Hermione and why she's been so shy. House Points to whoever figures out what Ron did, the stupid prat! As with the previous two chapters, Clay Aiken brought the original bit of this one out. You can find the lyrics here: http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/clayaiken/whenyousayyouloveme.html

The Music of the Night

Chapter 10 of 14

Severus makes a special request of Dumbledore and has a surprise for Hermione.

CHAPTER 10: The Music of The Night

Albus Dumbledore was desperately trying to hide the grin on his face as the normally detached Severus Snape standing in front of him looked as if he would blush at any moment. The man looked much better these days since he had taken to spending a good deal of time with Hermione Granger. His complexion was still pale, but it seemed to have lost its sallow appearance. He looked as if he had begun to take a bit better care of himself, although his shoulder length black hair still had a greasy sheen to it. The haircut he had gotten in Hogsmeade added a little body to it without taking away any length. He could still make it hang in front of his face like a curtain if he wanted. The boy looked good; he looked happy.

"What can I do for you, my boy?" Dumbledore asked jovially, popping a few lemon drops into his mouth. He gestured to the chair sitting in front of his desk.

Snape folded his long frame into the chair and stared across the desk at the older wizard. The past few weeks had been the best he could remember. Hermione had developed a habit of staying with him later and later in the evenings after she mustered the courage to ask him to touch her. He smiled as he remembered her warm curves settled against him as he sat in her expanded armchair and held her in his lap as she read to him. There were times he would tell her the happier stories of his childhood, of his mother bringing him books or entertaining him by making his toys fly across the room. A vision of Hermione with a child appeared to him again, making his heart ache for such a joy.

Reaching out and grasping a handful of the sweetly sour candies on the desk, Severus said, "I would like to have Hermione and myself excused from our duties from six p.m. Friday afternoon to the same time on Sunday. I would also like to have permission for the two of us to leave the grounds for the duration of this time." He gave Dumbledore a grin that rivaled his own and dropped several of the candies in his mouth.

Dumbledore chuckled and nodded his head. "Good for you, boy! I think we can run the place without the two of you for a couple days. You two go and enjoy yourselves. I'll arrange for your rounds to be covered while you're away."

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Hermione's nerves were as frayed as humanly possible. She wished Severus would hurry; they were supposed to leave soon. Her overnight bag was sitting on the sofa with her toiletries, a skirt, a pair of capri pants, some comfortable jeans, several pale blouses, some comfortable flats, and the closest Hermione Granger would ever come to a little black dress. Severus had explicitly asked her to bring an evening dress, although he was being irritatingly secretive about why. Perhaps he planned on taking her out to dinner at a stylish restaurant in Muggle London. That's where they were going; he'd told her that much.

She was twirling a stray curl around her finger when there was a knock on her door. "Hermione, are you ready to go?" It was Severus. By the sound of his voice, he was nervous too.

"Yes, give me just one second, Severus!" she called back. She quickly made sure she had everything she needed before casting a few wards over her Floo connection and her potions cabinet. Her wand was slipped into a small pocket on her skirt before she picked up her bag and headed for the door. The sight that met her eyes was enough to make her breath hitch.

She had never seen Severus in anything other than his teaching robes. And yet, there he stood in a pair of nicely fitting black dress pants and a light gray button down shirt. His own overnight bag was hanging off his shoulder, and a black jacket was draped over his arm. He'd pulled his hair back with an elastic, the shorter portions at the front swinging against his cheeks. He looked positively gorgeous, delectable even. *This weekend might turn out better than I thought* she mused.

Merlin, but she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen he thought happily as he glanced over her form. She wore a pale blue sleeveless blouse and cardigan with a darker hued skirt that fell below her knees. A pair of simple Mary Jane's adorned her feet. Her small overnight bag was hanging from her fingers as she stared back at him, her mouth gaping open slightly. Severus was almost positive his own was doing the same.

"Do close your mouth, Severus, before something flies in," she giggled, perching on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. She smiled as his mouth popped shut and a faint trace of pink rose on his face. "You look..."

"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."

Hermione smiled and turned to kiss his hair. "Thank you," she murmured breathlessly. "You look stunning yourself, Severus."

This time Hermione was sure she caught him blushing as he pulled away from her and rose to his full height. He was smirking smugly as he ran his hands along her arms. "As enjoyable as this is, I believe we are on the verge of being late." He took his jacket from the floor, dusted it off, and slipped it on before retrieving their bags. Hermione took her own and reached out for his hand. Severus laced his fingers with hers and brought her hand to his lips. "Come on then: we'll miss our reservation."

With that, Severus led her quickly from the castle to the Apparation point outside the gates. He gathered her into his arms and kissed the top of her head as he Disapparated them away.

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They reappeared in an alley in old Muggle London a few moments later. Severus laced his fingers into Hermione's and led her from the shadowed alley. He smiled happily as her eyes lit up at the sight of the quaint building. The sign over the door read *The Dickens Inn.* She squeezed his hand softly, hoping like hell that he didn't notice her nervousness

Wordlessly, Severus led her to the entrance and held the door open for her. Hermione felt almost identical to the way she had felt as she entered Hogwarts for the first time. Her gaze was everywhere at once, taking in the Victorian décor of the lobby. Her honey eyes were glowing with adoration as she let Snape lead her to the desk.

"Good evening, sir," said the elderly woman behind the desk. She smiled softly at the couple. Don't they look sweet, she thought as she watched the young girl stare around the room while the gentleman with her smiled indulgently. "How may we be of service to you?"

"Ah, yes. I have a confirmed reservation for the weekend. Snape would be the name," Severus replied nervously. Hermione was still oblivious at his side, taking in the bust of Charles Dickens on the desk.

The woman searched quickly through an open ledger before her. "Here we are, Mister Snape. If you will follow me, I'll take you to your room." She stepped out from behind the desk and waited for Severus and Hermione to follow her.

"Oh, Severus, this place is beautiful!" Hermione exclaimed as they climbed the staircase to the upper floors. "You didn't have to do this."

"It's for you, little one. Everything I do is for you. I am giving you fair warning now, get used to being adored," he murmured as the woman opened the door to their room on the third floor.

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"Hermione, we are going to miss our dinner reservations!" Severus called exasperatedly through the bathroom door. "You've been in there for hours!"

"Have not!" she called back playfully. "Five more minutes, Severus. I promise."

Severus groaned and sank down onto the edge of the queen-sized bed. He smiled as he thought of Hermione sleeping next to him the night before. She seemed so nervous, standing at the end of the bed in her cream, knee-length nightgown, her curls spilling over her shoulder as she worried her bottom lip. He had already gotten into bed in his gray pajamas and was sitting against the headboard reading the complimentary Dickens novel that was on the nightstand.

"Is there a problem, little one?" he asked, glancing over the top of his book. His eyes were drawn to her lips, the bottom one nicely plumped. Her face was flushed a bit, and her hands were toying with her curls.

"Just give me a moment, Severus. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the thought of sleeping with you," she mumbled, her eyes closed. She looked terribly nervous and sexy at the same time.

He chuckled lightly, causing her eyes to pop open at the sound. He grinned lopsidedly and turned the covers back on her side of the bed. "I've told you before, not until you are completely ready, little one. We will merely be sleeping in the same bed for the weekend."

It seemed as if a bit of her tension eased when he said this. She moved toward the head of the bed and slid beneath the covers. "What were you reading?" she asked, moving a bit closer to him. She sighed contentedly as he put his arm around her and held her close to his side. She rested her head on his shoulder as he turned the cover toward her.

"Great Expectations. Pity I won't have the time to finish it." He had closed the book then and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. They settled into bed in the darkness, her head still on his shoulder and her arm thrown over his stomach. He stroked her back and arm lightly until they both drifted off to sleep.

The bathroom door opened and drew Severus from his thoughts. Hermione was standing in the doorway looking more beautiful than he could remember. She had twisted her hair into an elegant up-do with curls framing her face. She wore very little makeup, just a little mascara and sheer gloss, and yet her face was positively glowing. The black dress she wore fell just above her knees in a rustle of soft fabric. The neckline revealed a glimpse of the swells of her breasts, accentuated by the pendant dangling around her neck. She smiled at him as he rose to take her hand.

I must be the luckiest man alive he thought as he brought her hand to his lips. "You look ravishing," he murmured, lacing his fingers with hers. "I'm glad I know where you will be sleeping tonight."

Severus had taken her to dinner at an Italian restaurant near Hyde Park. He had made reservations there as well, and apparently he had made them in Italian. Hermione had stood completely in awe as he conversed with their waiter in rapid, flawless Italian. It was amazing, the things she was learning about this man each day she spent with him. Not only was he an outstanding potions maker, he was well read, much more gentle and kind than she could ever have thought, and a linguist. She snickered into her napkin as he handed their menus back to the waiter with thanks.

"What's so funny?" he asked incredulously. He felt his heart melt when she gifted him with one of her gorgeous smiles. "Do you find me amusing, Hermione?"

"I find you extremely interesting, Severus. I've never realized how little I know about you. I had no idea you spoke Italian."

He smirked. "I also speak French, Spanish, and a bit of German," he replied smugly. "I've tried my hand at Gaelic but have never had the time to really study it."

Dinner had passed with pleasant conversation and good wine. Hermione asked him a myriad of questions about his interests and objects of study. She found him to be intrigued by Arithmancy and an avid student of Astronomy. The more he talked, the closer to him she felt. Perhaps it was the fact that they had shared a bed the night before. Perhaps it was the way his voice wrapped around her like cool silk and drew her into a place of warmth. Perhaps it was simply the fact that he made her feel loved for the first time in a very long while.

When they left the restaurant, Severus pulled her into an out of sight area. He pulled something from the pocket of his jacket and handed it to her. "Wear this, Hermione."

Confused, she stared at the cloth in her hand. It was a black silk scarf. "A scarf, Severus? It's not even that cold."

He chuckled and smiled indulgently. "As a blindfold, little one. Our next stop for the evening is a surprise." When she looked at him with a bit of apprehension, he pulled her into his arms and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "It's nothing. I promise. You don't have to."

Noting the slightly disappointed air of his voice, Hermione pulled back and tied the scarf around her eyes. "I'm trusting you to make sure I don't kill myself walking blindly, Severus. Are we understood?" she asked, trying to sound stern between giggles. It felt wonderful to make someone happy, to have someone else want to make her happy.

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.

As he carefully removed her blindfold, he leaned to whisper in her ear. "Surprise, my Hermione." His hands came to rest on her shoulders, the silk scarf dangling from his grasp to tickle her back, as they stared up at the marquee above the theater.

"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?"

He smirked as he offered his arm to her to lead her inside. This weekend had been a wonderful idea. The whole thing had been worth the look of wonder and glee that Hermione had worn since they arrived at the inn.

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The slight *pop!* of Apparation startled a few birds outside the Hogwarts grounds as Severus and Hermione reappeared at six o'clock Sunday evening. They took their time strolling up the sloping lawns toward the castle, both unwilling for their weekend to end. It had been wonderful for both of them, getting to know each other in a new setting. Most of all, Severus regretted having to go back to his own bed. It felt so right to have Hermione in his arms, holding her close and protecting her as she slept. The next few nights were going to be terribly lonely.

Severus pulled her into a warm embrace at the door to the castle. He rained gentle kisses over her forehead, her cheeks, and her nose before capturing her lips. His tongue dueled with hers in a languid kiss and he held her close, trying to memorize the feel of her body against him. When he released her, they were both breathless.

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

He felt her smile before she answered. "I had a wonderful time, Severus. I love you," she whispered before she turned and disappeared toward the dungeons.

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.

A/N: I hope this chapter doesn't seem too choppy. I thought about drawing it out into a second part but thought I'd leave it as is. Needless to say it was a nice get away for the two of them. This chapter picks back up with the Phantom theme. You can find the lyrics that inspired this chapter here:

http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/880992941/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/Music_of_the_Night

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

The Point of No Return

Chapter 11 of 14

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

CHAPTER 11: The Point of No Return

Spring was one of the most beautiful Severus could remember in his time at Hogwarts. His office window was almost always open to let the sweet breeze waft through the room. As much as he had felt at home in the dungeons for all those years, Severus was happy to have a window and rooms that weren't so terribly stuffy. Of course, he did miss the dungeons. It wasn't because of the lab. He used it regularly as it was now. It wasn't the seclusion from the rest of the castle. He was still able to hide himself away with little effort if he wanted to badly enough. No, he missed the dungeons because it was where his heart had been since Hermione Granger walked back into his life.

Thoughts of her drifted lazily through his memory. Their weekend away together had been almost a month ago, and yet he could still feel her lying next to him at night. Sometimes he even thought he could smell her lavender perfume on his sheets. One day her scent would be there without any illusions. One day he would wake up each morning to her chestnut curls spilling across his crisp white pillows, her warm breath on his chest, her soft skin against his own. How he longed to have his Hermione by his side every minute of every day for the rest of his life.

"Hermione Snape," he mumbled, rolling her name on his tongue. It sounded like music to his ears. His name suited her well, what with that passionate nature hidden beneath her scholastic exterior. "Hermione Jane Snape. Hmm... soon."

The clock on his mantle chimed the quarter hour. He was supposed to be at Hermione's chambers at half past seven for dinner. She had insisted on fixing the two of them dinner the Muggle way. With the end of the Spring Term coming up fast, they had had very little time to be alone together. There was grading to be done, quizzes to write, and exams to prepare. They were both a bit cranky lately as well, seeing as neither were getting very much sleep. The increasingly warm temperatures seemed to have the students in an uproar, and extra patrols were needed to keep the daring out of trouble. Tonight would be the first time they were able to spend together since they served Hogsmeade duty together last weekend.

Severus summoned the bottle of wine from his chambers and tucked it in his robes for safekeeping before stepping up to the fireplace. He grasped a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the dying flames. They burst forth and glowed bright green as he stepped into them calling, "Hermione Granger's chambers," as he went.

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"Table's set, bread's warming in the oven, pasta's draining, fettuccini sauce is ready, and the chicken's almost done. Dear Merlin, what am I forgetting?" Hermione mumbled as she bustled around her makeshift kitchen, wringing her hands in her apron.

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.

She turned the chicken and vegetables in a pan, sprinkling a bit of lemon juice and spices over them. Wiping a stray curl from her forehead with the back of her hand, Hermione shook the pasta over the sink to keep it from sticking. She had just bent over to check the bread in the oven when her fireplace roared to life across the room. Green flames crackled for a moment before a tall form stepped out, dusting soot off its shoulders.

"Watch where you're shaking that stuff, you'll get it on the table!" she snapped, not paying attention to what she was doing. As she stared over her shoulder to make sure Snape didn't shake soot on the table, she stuck her hand in the oven and grabbed the bread pan. Wrenching her hand away, she practically screamed. "Fuck Merlin's arse!"

Severus snickered under his breath as he sat the wine on the table and hung his cloak by the door. "Might I suggest the use of an oven mitt," he chided as he walked over toward her. He took her burned hand in his own and examined the shining, red skin. He reached over her and removed the pasta from the sink before turning on the cold water. "Put your hand under there, Hermione."

Nodding, she did as she was told while he stood behind her, massaging her shoulders. As soon as the cool water ran over her blistered skin she relaxed and felt him slip his arms around her waist. "Ah, thank you. That's much better," she breathed, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back on his shoulder. "I really am a good cook, Severus. I just get distracted when you're around."

"I guess I'd better stay out of the delivery room then, hmm," he murmured against the curls piled on the top of her head. He tensed for a moment when he realized what he said, but chuckled when she didn't seem to notice. He kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear before trailing light touches down her neck to distract her. "It smells delicious. Chicken fettuccini?"

She nodded and turned around in his embrace. "That's okay, isn't it? I mean, I remembered you ordered it when we went to London together, so I thought I'd try my hand at it. Mum owled the recipe to me this morning."

He smiled at the nervous look on her face. It was terribly sweet and innocent, but undeniably enticing at the same time. Kissing her gently on the forehead, he mumbled, "It's perfect, Hermione. Although I think it might be a good idea to turn that chicken before it burns."

Severus chuckled at her exclaimed, "Oh, shite!" as he made his way to the table. He poured them each a bit of wine and waited for dinner to be served.

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Quarter to eleven found them on the sofa in her sitting room, curled beneath a fleece blanket, staring at the fire in the hearth, and sipping what remained of their bottle of wine. Hermione giggled as he placed lazy kisses along her jaw and latched onto the sensitive spot behind her ear. She traced her fingers along his collarbone as she relished in the feeling of his warm breath against her skin. His left hand traced over her arm in light touches as his right kneaded her hip firmly.

Hermione pulled away from him to sit her empty wine glass on the coffee table, dislodging the blanket as she did so. Her face was hot with a beautiful flush brought on by the wine, the fire, and the delicious touch of the man wrapped around her. She smiled as he leaned forward to capture her lips with his. "Mmmm..." she mumbled as he cupped her face with his hand. She pulled back from his kiss and rested her forehead against his. "I've a terrible crick in my neck, Severus. You think we could move?"

Severus looked up into her honey eyes to find them dark and smoldering. The cool air of the dungeons nearly knocked the wind out of him as she removed herself from his lap. She was grinning down at him coyly, waiting for him to move to follow her. He took her offered hand and allowed her to lead him wherever she had a mind to. His breath hitched in his throat as she pushed open a door he remembered quite well. It had once been the door to his bedroom. Now it led to hers.

"Hermione..." he began, the situation taking a few moments to work through his wine addled brain. She was standing in front of him, her eyes turned lovingly up toward him, her hands settled over his ribs. He could see it in her face, the look he had longed to see for almost five years now, the one he had caught a fleeting glimpse of that day in his office. "Are you sure, little one?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to his chest.

She stood on her tiptoes and pressed light kisses to his neck and jaw in response. "I am," she murmured against his throat. She began to undo the buttons on the front of his white button down as his hands stroked lazy patterns across her back. "I think I've always wondered what you were hiding beneath your robes, Severus."

He smiled as she pulled his shirt from his trousers and attacked the last few buttons. He undid the cuffs of his sleeves behind her back before Hermione started pushing it off his shoulders. Her warm hands glided over his skin like a whisper, sending shivers down his spine and straight to the growing erection pressed into her stomach. With his shirt disposed of, Hermione pulled his head down for a kiss while his fingers began to expertly free the buttons of her blouse. The tips of his fingers tickled along her sensitized skin, dragging a feline-like purr from her throat.

Her blouse joined his shirt on the floor as she toed off her heeled sandals and began working the buttons of his trousers. Severus trailed soft kisses along her throat as he divested himself of his dress shoes and kicked them out of the way. The zipper of her skirt was undone, and the soft material fluttered to the floor along with his trousers. His arms went around her and pulled her to him as they stepped out of their clothes, all the while nipping at the soft flesh of her neck and shoulder.

Severus ran his palms up her back until his hands slid over her shoulders. He licked a path across her collarbones to the pulse point at the base of her throat, causing her to arch against him and tip her head back. Her curls tickled against his arms, and the small of her back as she swayed into his touch. He sucked at her throat enough to mark it and growled at the redness that appeared.

"Hermione," he hissed as she pulled away from him. Her hair tumbled down her back in wild abandon as her eyes blazed dark and enthralling. He felt drawn to her as she backed toward the four-poster, releasing the clasp of her bra behind her back as she went. He bit back a groan as the slip of silk was tossed aside, revealing her soft breasts, their taunt nipples begging for his attention. "My Hermione."

His erection was quickly reaching the point of being painful as she crawled onto the bed, her eyes beckoning him to join her. There was nothing he could refuse her at this point, with her dark eyes burning through him and her cream white skin calling for his caresses. He joined her on the bed, crushing his mouth against hers, their tongues dueling as he lowered her onto her back. Softening the pace of his kiss, Severus let his hands trail along her sides before cupping one breast in his palm.

"Oh, gods," he breathed, pressing kisses along her sternum to the valley beneath her breasts. He measured the weight of one with his palm as he took the nipple of the other into his mouth. He flicked his tongue at the rosy bud while rolling the other between his fingers.

Hermione moaned and tunneled one hand into his raven hair as he moved his attention to her other breast. Her hips bucked upwards as he nipped lightly at the underside before soothing it with soft kisses. Goosebumps rose on her flesh as his hands snaked lower over her abdomen and hooked into the waistband of her knickers. His body followed as he eased the fabric from her legs and tossed them over his shoulder. He eyed the curls at the apex of her thighs and felt his cock throb in anticipation.

Opening her eyes, Hermione saw the hungry look on his face and snapped her legs closed. As much as she wanted to feel him thrusting into her, bathing her in gentle kisses, she was frightened of the blatant desire scorching in his eyes. "Severus..."

He shook his head slightly and pressed gentle kisses on her knees as he stroked her hips and thighs reverently. "I will do my best not to hurt you, little one. It will hurt for a moment, but it will pass soon enough," he murmured against her skin. His touches were as soothing as his words while he gently urged her legs open. "Are you sure?"

In answer, Hermione opened her legs a little more and smiled reassuringly at him. The smell of her arousal set his blood boiling as his desire to taste her nearly knocked the breath out of him as he lowered himself back to the bed. He breathed deep of the musky feminine scent of her before he began to tease her with his lips and tongue. He lapped at her with long, languid strokes before suckling her clit and slipping a finger into her depths. She bucked up against him as his tongue danced and flicked over her clit and a second finger joined the one already thrusting into her.

"Oh... gods... Severus," she moaned as he teased her higher and higher until the wave washing through her began to crest and break. Her voice dipped low and dripped with seduction as she cried out his name with her release. Her walls clamped around his fingers, making him groan as he rode out her orgasm.

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.

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

Seasons of Love

Chapter 12 of 14

The morning after. Severus does some thinking and askes 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 distain 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

with their child. He knew instinctively that she would be a good mother. If she can get past being so distracted when I'm around he mused with a grin. He let his mind drift over thoughts of their child as he rubbed soothing circles over her abdomen with his thumb. He closed his eyes and thought of her.

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Hermione sat cross-legged on the rug in front of the fire, her swollen stomach resting on her folded legs as she wrapped Christmas presents. Her curls were twisted in a braid over her shoulder and tied with a green ribbon at the bottom. Her face was awash with a beautiful glow as she wrote Professor McGonagall's name on the tag. The twinkling fairy lights on the Christmas tree in the corner flickered in the honey pools of her eyes.

"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.

She turned her face toward him and smiled happily. "For the same reason you insist on being so stubborn. This was always my favorite part of Christmas when I was a little girl. My mum and I used to... Oh!" Fantasy Hermione's eyes went wide as one hand massaged her stomach. "He's lively this evening. Come here, Severus."

Fantasy Severus discarded his book on the sofa and joined her on the rug. He sat behind her, his back against the sofa as he eased her against him. She pulled his arms around her and rested his palms on her belly. He could feel the tiny bumps and thumps as the child growing in her stretched and pushed. Real Severus felt his throat tighten at the thought and flexed his fingers lightly over her flesh as if he could feel the child moving beneath his palm. A son. Severus had always wanted a son, even when he railed that he despised children of all shapes and forms.

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"Gerard Snape, what have I told you about playing with Daddy's marking quill?" Fantasy Hermione admonished as she stared at the four-year-old boy with soft raven hair and shining chocolate eyes who was currently covered in red ink. Her hands were on her hips, but it seemed she was fighting a smile. Their son looked up at her through long lashes and grinned.

"I'm sowwey, Mummy," the little boy mumbled sweetly, setting his father's quill and ink back on the desk.

Real Severus felt his heart melt at the image of Hermione kneeling in front of the little boy and kissing him on the tip of his red-streaked nose. She conjured a washcloth and began scrubbing the evidence of the ink from her son's figure.

"You have to leave daddy's desk alone, okay, Gerard? But, we won't tell Daddy about this time, huh." They giggled as the washcloth vanished, and the little boy embraced his mother, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

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"What book do you want tonight?" Fantasy Severus called through the door that separated the library from the bedroom he shared with Hermione.

There was mumbling and giggling from the bedroom before an answer came. "They want *Alice in Wonderland*," Fantasy Hermione's voice called. Fantasy Severus collected the book and made his way into the bedroom.

Real Severus stopped and leaned against the doorframe, watching Hermione as she arranged two children in the four-poster with her. The little boy he'd imagined earlier looked around six years old now as he curled up against his father's side as Fantasy Severus climbed onto the bed with them. A little girl snuggled to Hermione's other side, her black curls held back by a red ribbon. She looked to be two or three. The little girl rubbed her tiny hand over her mother's swelling stomach and smiled.

"Bwandon," she whispered as she planted a kiss on Hermione's belly. "I wuv you, bwuther."

Dear Lord, Real Snape thought as he watched the scene. Three! Hmm, been busy, haven't we? Gods, she looks beautiful with the children with her and her stomach swollen like that. I'd give anything to have this with my Hermione, to curl up at night with her swollen belly between us, to hold a child in my lap and read to them, to watch her as she nursed. I'd give anything...

Real Hermione stretched languidly as she emerged from that hazy limbo between dreams and consciousness. She could feel the warm sunlight shining through the enchanted window and smiled. Hermione straightened her legs and felt a twinge of soreness. Her eyes fluttered for a few seconds before she was fully awake. It was then that she became aware of the warm, soothing weight of Snape's palm on her stomach.

Hermione was about to speak when Severus dipped his head and pressed soft kisses to the buttercup sheet covering her stomach. He had such a wistful look on his face, such a longing in those ebony eyes that she felt as if she could cry for him. She rested her palm on the back of his head and stroked his unruly tangle of raven hair.

"Is everything okay?" she asked quietly as he continued to caress her abdomen. "Severus, what's the matter?"

Severus turned his head toward her, resting his cheek against her belly, and stared up into her concerned honey eyes. He drew in a lungful of her sweet lavender scent and closed his eyes at the peace it brought him. "We didn't use a contraceptive charm or a potion, Hermione. I don't know if one would work if we used it now."

Hermione smiled at him and released a breath she hadn't known she was holding. "It's okay, Severus. There's very little chance of my conceiving right now, anyway. It's just after... well, that time." She blushed a bit, not quite ready to come out and say it in front of him yet. She was puzzled for a moment when she caught sight of the disappointed look in his eyes. "I want to be a mother someday, Severus. The mother of your children."

"Do you mean it, Hermione?" he asked, righting himself in relation to her. He brushed a curl from over her eyes and stared into her eyes, looking for the answer to the myriad of questions buzzing through his mind. "You would want a family with me?"

She nodded and kissed the tip of his nose before wrapping her arms around him. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Severus. I want anything and everything that we could have together. I want to make you happy, she thought.

Severus rolled onto his back, pulling Hermione with him. She tucked her head beneath his chin and entwined the fingers of her left hand with those of his right. "How many children would you want, little one?" he asked.

Hermione was silent for a moment as she pondered the question. "I suppose I'd like at least two. I was an only child growing up. I think I missed a lot of things without siblings. I think that's why I always enjoyed staying at the Burrow. There were so many people in the house, so much love inside those walls. I want to have that." She was careful not to mention Ron. She didn't want him; she just wanted her children to have the closeness the Weasley children had. She wanted to have with Severus what Molly had with Arthur. "How many children do you want, Severus?"

"As many as we happen to have," he answered, stroking her hair. His stomach rumbled and Hermione giggled. "There went the moment," he grumbled. "Come on, let's get your study set right and clean ourselves up before breakfast."

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"Albus," Severus murmured later that morning at the High Table. He tried to keep his voice low so that none except he and the headmaster could hear their conversation. "I

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

All I Ask of You

Chapter 13 of 14

Severus has a gift that is burning a hole in his pocket, and some of Hermione's past doubts come back to haunt her.

Beware of Lemons!

CHAPTER 13: All I Ask of You

Two months. Severus had been sneaking off to Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and Muggle London for two months looking for a jeweler who would meet his standards. Professor Dumbledore had suggested one in Diagon Alley, but Severus couldn't stand the wizard's incessant chatter. McGonagall sent him to a small shop in Hogsmeade where she bought and sold her own jewelry. That wouldn't do either; Severus refused to give his Hermione anything other than the absolute best. Second hand jewelry wouldn't suffice for her. There were a few shops in Muggle London that struck his fancy during his initial search, and he spent one afternoon going back for a closer look. Severus had arrived in London with the impression that he would be spending the entire afternoon in half a dozen jewelry shops looking for the perfect ring for Hermione. He couldn't have been more wrong.

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.

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Hermione was beginning to doze off in front of the dying fire. She was wrapped in a warm, fleece blanket over her Muggle trousers and blouse. Her bare feet were tucked under the edge of the blanket as a heavy book began to slip from her grasp. It was late evening, after a dinner that Hermione didn't attend, and she was beginning to think Severus had forgotten about her.

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.

Her thoughts came unbidden into her dreams. She was standing in the yard of the Burrow in an ivory wedding gown, her curls dangling over her shoulders. Professor Dumbledore stood with her, the both of them looking expectantly into the blank distance. She was tense and terrified, although she couldn't explain why. There was a lonely feeling like cold lead sitting in the pit of her stomach and tears prickled her eyes. The sorrow and misery she had felt for so long came crashing back over her in an instant, intensifying the swelling cloud of dread over her.

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 dumpy, 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.

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

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 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.

He teased her gently down from the height of her orgasm before sliding back up her body. Severus brought his fingers up to his lips and was startled when Hermione grasped his wrist. She pulled his hand to her and drew his fingers into her mouth, gently lapping her essence from his skin. Severus felt his eyes drift closed at the feel of Hermione sucking on his fingers. He felt his cock grow even harder at the thought of her sweet-tasting mouth wrapped around his cock, sucking until he wept with the pleasure of it.

Hermione pressed gentle kisses to the pads of his fingers and his palm before twining her fingers with his own. She eyed his clothed figure and frowned. "You've far too many clothes on, dearest," she grumbled, her eyes dark and hungry.

Severus grinned mischievously and waved his hand. His clothing disappeared only to reappear in a crumpled heap next to hers on the floor. Hermione nearly groaned as his warm flesh came in contact with her own when he settled himself between her thighs. She lifted her hips slightly and opened her thighs as wide as she could in invitation. She was burning to have him thrusting into her again, to hear him grunt softly with each thrust, to feel his hot breath and soft lips against her face.

Hermione tipped her hips upward again. "Please," she panted, her patience with his tempting wearing thin. "Stop teasing, Severus. I can't... oh, gods!" The air seemed to rush out of her lungs as he filled her with one long, powerful stroke.

To hell with going slow, he thought as he began thrusting into her rapidly. Hermione tipped her hips up against him each time he thrust downward, taking him in as deep as she could as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He continued to hit that sweetly sensitive spot inside her, the tip of his cock hitting against her cervix every few strokes, his pelvis pressing against her clit as they ground against each other. Hermione felt as though she were burning from the inside out, the sensation starting from where they were joined together and spreading out through her entire body. White stars crackled on the backs of her eyelids as her head fell back, her body arching off the bed as she clamped her walls around his thrusting cock and screamed her release. Severus panted against her shoulder, trailing soft nips and kisses along her flesh before sucking gently on the base of her throat. He thrust into her with abandon as her legs went limp around his waist. He spilled into her a second later, throwing his head back and growling her name.

Collapsing onto her, Severus kissed her neck and shoulder gently, savoring the salty taste of sweat on her sweet skin. "Did I hurt you?" he mumbled, flicking his tongue out to taste her.

Hermione let her hands glide over his back, enjoying the way their sweat streaked bodies stuck together slightly. Severus had wormed his hands beneath her body, his palms resting beneath her shoulder blades. She shook her head, her curls tickling against the side of his face. "No, actually... actually... actually. I liked that quite a bit," she whispered, blushing a bit with embarrassment.

"As did I," he replied smugly, rolling away from her. He pulled himself up to the head of he bed and rested against the mahogany headboard. A grin turned up the corners of his mouth as Hermione sat beside him cross-legged; her tousled curls draped over one shoulder. She tilted her head to the side as she stared at the ring on her finger.

Honey eyes regarded him for a long moment before she spoke. "I want to get married, Severus," she said matter-of-factly.

He looked back at her, a confused look on his face. "Yes, I gathered that much, love," he retorted, raising an eyebrow at her.

She pulled a face and stuck her tongue out at him childishly. He chuckled heartily and pulled her down to his side. "I mean that I don't want to have a long engagement. I want to have you as my husband as soon as possible."

Severus kissed the top of her head and smiled. "How's the first day of the summer holiday sound? There'll be Snape teaching Potions next year..."

"And perhaps a baby soon, too," Hermione whispered as she drifted off to sleep, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Severus pulled the buttercup blankets around them and dropped off to sleep soon after the woman in his arms.

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Dear Ronald, Harry, and Ginny,

I hope everything is going well for the three of you. Ginny, I'm terribly sorry that I had to run out on the wedding. I promise I will make it up to you.

How are you doing in the Auror office, Harry? I've heard wonderfully good things about you from Albus and Minerva. They are terribly proud of you, as am I. You have turned into such a fine young man, Harry. Ginny is a lucky girl.

I hear the Cannons are doing well this season, Ron. I'm sure it is due to your excellent managerial skills. I've started keeping clippings about the Cannons in a scrapbook, as well as anything in the Prophet about Harry or Ginny. Please send my regards to Miss Karstoff, and be sure to let me know when you have set a date for the wedding.

Now, on to the real reason why I am writing. It seems it is a year of marriage for the bunch of us, doesn't it? I am writing to invite the three of you, as well as the whole of the Weasley family, to my wedding on the first day of the summer holidays. Although Severus and I haven't yet decided where to hold the ceremony, I would like nothing more than to have all of you in attendance. (Ginny, will you be my Matron of Honor, please????)

I hope to hear from all of you soon. I love you all!

Love always,

Hermione (the future Mrs. Hermione Jane Snape)

A/N: Only one more chapter left, I'm a bit sad to see it end. The entire story after chapter 5 is a deviation of my original plan, but I love the way it turned out. I'm terribly sorry about the long time between updates. I hope to have the final chapter up in the next few days. Finals are going good (I got a B in Statistics!!!) and will be over in two days. YAY! Here's what Hermione's ring was based on: http://www.real-florida.us/antique11.htm. The title of this chapter came from the Phantom of the Opera, whose lyrics you can find here: http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/121485/Phantom_Of_The_Opera/All_I_Ask_Of_You

Finale B (No Day But Today)

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."

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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?

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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."

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"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

priorities than she had been. She always made sure that the children were fed, bathed, and happy, that their chambers were clean, and that he was comfortable and had everything he needed.

"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?"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed a few times without uttering any sound. A puzzled look came over her face as she stared at her husband. She blushed shamefully and dropped her gaze to the floor. "No," she whispered before she began to sob.

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."

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"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.

At the High Table, Headmaster Severus Snape looked on with pride as the last of his children entered Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He looked out over the assembled students in the hall and sought each of his children in turn. He met the eyes of his oldest son, Gerard, a tall and handsome seventh year Ravenclaw. Rachel, who looked more like her mother the older she became, sat trying to hide her tears with her fellow sixth year Gryffindors. Christine, with her straight black hair and honey eyes, sat a little way down the Gryffindor table with the second years.

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).

"Oh dear," Hermione murmured as she grasped Severus' arm a bit tighter. Severus will be devastated if at least one of the children isn't sorted into Slytherin. Brandon is our last chance. Severus was so angry when the girls were both sorted into Gryffindor. Hermione tried to stifle a giggle as the Sorting Hat opened the wide tear at its brim and spoke.

"SLYTHERIN!"

Remus pulled the Sorting Hat from Brandon Snape's head and watched as the boy slipped off the stool. He turned toward his parents and grinned when he saw their proud smiles before bounding off to join the Slytherin table. Two young boys with mischievous grins welcomed him; they were Harry and Ginny's twins.

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.

"Yes, I believe you owe me five Galleons, Madam Snape. I shall need them to pay Remus." Severus nodded slightly to the man as he took his seat at the High Table once the sorting was over.

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

Severus looked at his wife with love and laughter in his ebony eyes. "I had a bit of a wager going with him as to which House Brandon would be sorted into." Hermione waited a moment for him to continue, all the while trying to ignore the amused chuckle she heard from Remus Lupin. "I said he would end up a Gryffindor."

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.

"I love you, my little one," Severus murmured in her ear. He twined their fingers together and kissed the back of her hand.

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."

THE END

A/N: 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. 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.