

Soul Searching

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A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape. Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 6

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Krishna watched as the worshipper placed her offering at his altar. The small wooden bowl held two succulent mangoes, ripe and juicy. Although he remained perfectly still, the flickering flame that illuminated his brass statue sprang up just a little higher on its wick. However, his devotee didn't notice. Kneeling on the plush cream carpet, her head bowed and hands pressed together, she began to whisper her daily prayers, the ones which could be more comfortably said in her home to her ancestor's portrait over the fire. But Krishna knew why she was at the temple, why she had been there every day for some time now, braving cold and misty mornings to kneel before him, each day bringing a new treat to place at his gleaming brass feet.

Do not be confused: Krishna is a benevolent god. He loves those who love him, and his faithful will always feel his love. But unfortunately and it would pain any god to admit this it is the unfaithful who are hardest to control. He is omniscient, yes, and all powerful, certainly, but human nature, man's greatest weakness, might be his as well. Thus, the redheaded man, the one with the power to fulfill his follower's wish, remained a nagging problem.

As he watched the young woman take her leave, Krishna let out a sigh. Reaching out one foot and then the other, he stepped out from the confines of his solid-statue state and onto the pedestal where his likeness stood. He rarely revealed himself to followers these days. Modern technology had made revelations a nightmare, and more than likely, the only thing he would accomplish would be sending one of his most faithful to an asylum, a far from illuminating experience.

Jostling a few colorful garlands draped over the ledge, he made his way down to the stone floor of the temple, stretching his cerulean-hued arms above his head, his joints making an audible crack.

Glancing down at the bamboo flute clutched in his left hand, Krishna was half-tempted to break it in half and set fire to the pieces. Yes, he was a benevolent god, but not an infinitely patient one. And to be perfectly honest, the harmonious melody of his flute had never failed him. But after weeks of playing his song, *the song*, the one that had both sheep and shepherdesses following his every command, that thick-headed ginger had managed to ignore every single note. No matter; Krishna would just play *louder*, because though he was benevolent, he would not be ignored. Perhaps a slight prickle of pain might entice some obedience as well...

Pressing his lips to the mouthpiece, his fingers poised, Krishna prepared to finally lure the boy to the temple. And when that foolish boy finally deigned to show his face, Krishna would be... *benevolent*.

Swish and flick.

Ron watched as the report rose higher and higher, his wand steady, his eyes focused.

Swish and flick.

This was child's play, the first charm he had ever learned. Even the words, perhaps one of the most meaningful incantations he had learned while at Hogwarts, were completely unnecessary as he watched the report float above his desk, then above the walls of his cubicle, its corners wrapping downwards as its centre reached for the ceiling. Those corners trembled in the dead air as the report fell again, permanently curled.

Swish and flick.

Aimless, they sometimes said. Wandering, others preferred. He felt he was neither. Mostly, he felt nothing, and as far as he was concerned, he was content with that.

Swish and flick.

If he concentrated properly, he could have several of his desk implements floating, dancing in the air above his cubicle. Scrap parchment, desk calendar, and spare quill all rotating around a sun-like inkwell, round and sparkling in the fluorescent light of the Ministry building.

Swish and...

The sound was piercing, melodic but piercing. Alluring, even, as it slowly wrapped itself around Ron's head, suffocating like a thick wool scarf. He couldn't breathe or think; he could only feel as the music insinuated itself into a corner of his mind, familiar and commanding. Ron listened for the message, but the words, the notes, just weren't loud enough.

"Ron?"

"Shit!"

The inkwell reached the wooden desk first, a hard *thump* announcing its landing. Magically reinforced, it cracked rather than shattered, ink seeping through the narrow fractures. The quill was next, bouncing twice against the desk's surface before rolling right off, followed by the fluttering sheets of scrap, landing this way and that. However, the calendar did not have such a direct flight plan, finding itself on the other side of the cubicle wall.

"Bloody hell, Ron!"

Ron was soon met with the sight of an irritated Harry holding his *Flying Brooms of the Last Century* desk calendar in one hand while rubbing the top of his head with the other. Slightly embarrassed, Ron slipped to the floor, gathering the scattered parchment, equal parts meeting minutes and bored doodling.

"Sorry, mate," Ron replied sheepishly, grabbing a piece of parchment that had slipped under his desk. Moving to reveal his head again, he continued, "Just startled me, I guess. It's been empty here all afternoon."

"No cursing toilets or ear-shriveling hats, then?" Harry asked with a smirk.

Ron smiled back as he returned to his seat. "Not a one. Might have a word with George about it later."

"Care for a cuppa at the canteen?"

Ron made a show of standing up and looking across the two rows of cubicles. At his height, he could practically see over the walls from a seated position, but in truth, he was looking in vain. He already knew that out of the twelve employees working in the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, he was the only one not out to lunch, including his own father.

"Well, it looks like everything's under control," he remarked, tossing the gathered papers onto his desk. "Shall we?"

Watching the steam rise from his cup, Ron vaguely listened to Harry go on about his latest Auror exploit. It wasn't that Harry was uninteresting; it was just that the song had returned with notes so delicate his ears couldn't quite catch them. It had been like this for weeks now, becoming louder, more insistent, but still utterly incomprehensible. Even the buzzing of bees might have been preferable. Though he had often attempted to pursue the source, a lingering thought always told him not to bother, and lately, that thought always seemed to be the loudest.

"Ron, are you all right?" Harry asked, his tale clearly complete.

Giving his head a shake to displace the long red fringe partially covering his eyes, Ron refocused on the outside world. "Nah, it's nothing. Just, er, thinking about something."

Harry's brow furrowed slightly, but to Ron's relief, he didn't press for details. "So, nothing new in your department, I take it?" he asked, a smile pulling at his lips again. "Unless you were trying your hand at inventing some new enchantments? Starting a Dark army with your quill and parchment?"

"Merlin knows I wouldn't be using them to write a report," Ron replied, smiling as well. "Honestly, it's been quiet. Even Dad's been twiddling his thumbs. If some barmy wizard's out there charming tea cosies to attack Muggles, we haven't heard about it."

"Yeah, things have been a bit slow around the Auror Office too, but I guess it's like old Moody used to say, right? 'Constant vigilance,'" Harry said, imitating the old Auror's haggard grumble.

"Right. I'll keep that in mind the next time I'm using a tea cosy," Ron replied wryly before taking a sip of his tea.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. No, not tea cosies, you berk," Harry added when he met Ron's raised eyebrow. "Things seem to be pretty slow where you are, and there's an opening in the Auror Office. Seems like they finally got Lewis to retire; the bloke was down to a single limb anyway."

"Again with this..."

"You've got the training already, two years' worth at that. C'mon, Ron, you can't really enjoy chasing down possessed furniture and the like. Don't you miss the action?"

Ron bristled. So he wasn't rushing out into harm's way, chomping at the bit to lose a limb or a vital organ. He had seen enough danger, thank you. These days, an Auror's job mostly consisted of breaking up pub fights anyway.

But before he could say any of this to Harry, Ron found himself distracted again. It wasn't the incoherent sound that had been haunting him for weeks; it was her. It was never just *her* though, was it? He couldn't quite remember when she had adopted a glow, literally an ethereal outline around her being. She actually shimmered to him, but no one else seemed to notice. The nearer she came, the brighter it became, nearly blinding. And though he was sure it was all in his head, Ron had to look away.

"Oh, I'm so happy I ran into you two," Hermione greeted brightly. Ron caught a glimpse of her lime-green robes brushing against the table, but couldn't bear to look any

higher.

"Yeah, it's been a while," Harry agreed, throwing Ron an exasperated look.

"A few weeks, yeah," Ron reluctantly agreed as well, pointedly glancing down at his hands.

This is bloody ridiculous, Ron inwardly fumed. It had been years, *years*, and he still had trouble looking his ex-fiancée in the eye. But lately, it had just been painful. Not emotionally; no, that had certainly passed as far as he was concerned. It was physically painful, a strange piercing sensation in his chest that was more bothersome than debilitating. If he weren't so sure he was slowly going mad, he might have mentioned it to someone.

"Yes, well," Hermione continued awkwardly. Ron could envision the discomfort in her bay-coloured eyes, the small arched crease between her two dark brows.

He wanted to say something, but he seemed only able to expel low breaths.

"Here for a meeting?" Harry inquired, probably noticing that Ron was incapable of holding up his end of the conversation.

"Yes, you know, just a bit of regulatory work," Hermione replied, her tone light, her hands pressed into the tabletop. Ron managed to catch sight of her shortened nails and reddened fingertips. She was chewing them again.

"A barrel of laughs, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yeah, a good time," Hermione replied. The smile in her voice was at full volume, irresistible. Ron had to look up.

Even at their engagement party, her floral dress cinched at the curves of her waist, her curly mass of hair tamed into an elegant twist, she had still been Hermione to him. But now, some ten years later, her posture was a little straighter, her hair more disciplined. She had even managed to dab on a bit of lipstick, maybe a swab of mascara. She was a woman. But just there, smiling, he saw her again, eleven years old and eager, eyes sparkling, hair wild.

And then there was *pain*.

"Oof!" Ron exclaimed, trying not to dramatically grab his chest as well.

"Ron?" Hermione questioned, placing a light hand on his shoulder.

Her touch was the opposite of pain. That was the only way Ron could describe it: balm-like in the way it banished the sharp prickling in the left side of his chest.

"Just a touch of indigestion," Ron managed to say. "Have to cut out the chips at lunch."

Neither Hermione nor Harry appeared to believe him if the look they shared was any indication, but Ron couldn't explain what was happening to himself, much less to them.

"Right," Hermione said, removing her hand again. "I should be going. Padma's going to think I'm skiving off."

"We'll catch up later," Harry said.

Ron gave a small wave, clenching his teeth. The sharpness was back.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked, Hermione having safely exited the canteen.

Ron shook his head again, trying to organize his thoughts into something sensible. At least the pain had ebbed.

"Have you noticed lately how she... well, she kind of glows, doesn't she?"

Harry was silent for a moment. To Ron's surprise, he didn't look the least bit perplexed; rather sympathetic actually.

"You know, it's been a few years, Ron," Harry began quietly.

Blimey, he has no idea what I'm talking about

But Harry wouldn't give Ron a chance to explain, holding up his hand at Ron's sputtering.

"Look, I thought you would have moved on by now..."

"Damn it, Harry, I have!"

"But lately you've been acting so strangely around her. We've all noticed..."

"Really, but you haven't noticed the way she's quite literally lights up a room. You know, with the glowing light coming from her body."

"And don't get me wrong. Ginny and I would be over the moon if you and Hermione found some way to make it work, but it might be time to try seeing someone new..."

"Is that... Do you hear a sort of a high-pitched ... Kind of a melody.... Really, Harry, do you hear that?"

"Which is why Ginny and I were thinking you might stop by for dinner tonight. One of her old teammates is coming by, and Ginny thinks you two should meet. I don't like to meddle like this, you know, but you've seemed really.... I don't know, maybe aimless might be the right word?"

"Right, yeah, that's me, without direction. Really... you can't hear that, Harry? Kind of a... *doo do doo*..."

"Ron, are you even listening to me?"

Ron felt blinded by the music, as ridiculous as that sounded. He just couldn't focus on anything else. Any stray thought that might have fought for his attention was soon steamrolled by the wall of sound filling the space between his two ears. And though there were no lyrics, Ron strongly felt as if it carried a message, a message he just could not ignore.

"Look, I really have to follow this music, Harry. I think... I think it might be speaking to me."

And with that, Ron pushed his chair from the table, stood up, and left. He vaguely heard Harry saying something, but the whispering notes were becoming much clearer, and the message was that he should leave the Ministry at once. So with haste, Ron exited the canteen, took the lift to the first floor, and walked directly into the closest free Floo grate.

If he were to describe it later, he might say it was much like when he had consumed Romilda Vane's love potion. While he was loosely aware that his actions weren't his own, he was simply in no state to fight them.

Well, that went brilliantly.

Gathering her hands in her lap, Hermione sat on one of the benches scattered around the Ministry's lobby, her leather briefcase by her feet. She had told the boys that she had to hurry back to St. Mungo's, but in truth, she just couldn't handle watching Ron squirm any longer. Not that things had ever gone back to "normal" per se, at least not after the engagement had ended, but he had looked particularly pained by their encounter a few minutes ago. It seemed that "normal" was no longer a possibility between them.

Hermione's thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Ron practically skittering across the slick black tiles of the lobby. She couldn't help noticing how purposeful the movement looked, his direction diverted only narrowly, preventing him from walking right into the gushing fountain at the center of the room. Clipping its concrete border slightly, Ron seemed to barely notice, his pace unaffected by the slight detour. And thus she nearly missed his exit, his form disappearing into the green flames of the Floo before she could even wonder to where he was rushing.

Reflecting on the last ten minutes, from the canteen to the lobby, it was clear that something wasn't right. But she remained seated, if for no other reason, because she was paralyzed by the thought that she might only make the situation worse.

"Oh, hello, Hermione. Did you see where Ron went?" Harry puffed breathlessly as he stood beside her place on the bench, scanning the crowd. His characteristically wayward hair looked positively windswept.

"I saw him use the Floo, but I couldn't hear where he was going," Hermione replied, feeling rather useless.

Harry sighed and sat next to her on the bench. "Don't blame yourself. He's been acting strangely for weeks now. Said something about following some kind of music."

"Has he?" Hermione asked, her curiosity piqued. She glanced back at the now empty Floo grate. "He said it was indigestion earlier, but do you think it's something more serious? Do you think he's ill?"

Harry shook head, leaning forward on his elbows. "No, I think I just spooked him. He needs to move on, but he refuses. Tried to set him up with one of Ginny's old teammates, and the next thing I know, he's bolting from the table."

It was Hermione's turn to sigh. Most girls would be jealous of such devotion, but Hermione found it all to be rather burdensome. She never could quite find her footing on the pedestal on which Ron had placed her so many years ago, but to him, she still hadn't made a misstep.

If only he knew.

"Well, we can't force him," she said, leaning back slightly. "It's something he'll have to come to on his own. Though, from the way he acted in there, I'm not so sure that he's still hung up on me."

"I don't know," Harry countered, his head turned up to look at her, his glasses askew. "He kept going on about how you were 'glowing' or something."

"Glowing," Hermione repeated thoughtfully. She just couldn't shake the feeling that this was all more than Ron's undying affection for her. Looking over at Harry, she wondered if he was thinking the same thing, a look of concentration fixed on his features. This made his next statement a bit of a bludger to the head.

"You haven't really dated either, have you?"

"W-what?" Hermione managed to stammer.

"I haven't seen you with anyone serious since you and Ron called it quits," Harry pointed out.

"Well, no, but you know I've been busy. I mean, you don't win 'Potioneer of the Year' without neglecting your social life a little." Or, if she were truthful, a lot. Actually, if she were truthful, maybe even that wasn't enough to win, not without that extra push.

Not without *him*.

"Right, I guess you have had your nose to the grindstone the last couple of years," Harry agreed, moving to stand. "But, really, try and have a little fun, too. Ginny and I have missed you around the house. So have the boys and Lily."

Hermione gave Harry a small smile. "I'll try to stop by soon. I promise. Things have just been hectic. Padma and I are so close to a breakthrough."

Harry nodded. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to wait until then." Though he departed with a smile, Harry still looked slightly dismayed.

Maybe he's just realized that his two best friends have both gone mad Hermione reflected sullenly.

As soon as Harry had boarded the lift, Hermione slumped in her seat again. She couldn't seem to refocus on her worries about Ron.

His specter batted them away as it settled in her mind.

In the last couple of weeks, the thought of *him* had become incessant. In every journal article and every book she touched, his name seemed to appear bolded in the text, either in actuality or in a memory of the time they had shared. She couldn't help it; he was just impossible to forget. But it was clear he had long forgotten her. After every article, every award, the smallest part of her would stupidly expect at least a note, spiky handwriting scrawled across poorly ripped parchment. She was, after all, a credit to his tutelage. But his silence remained unbroken. And though she realized that she should hate him for what he had done, she found that her bewildering attraction to him could not be diminished.

If only she had felt that way about Ron.

A/N: Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Given the specificity of the prompt, I will wait until the last chapter to reveal it. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included designr - the amazing

alpha/beta/cheerleader combo - as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and Britpick.

Chapter 2

A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape.

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Time ticked by, almost in step with the impatient taps of Krishna's sapphire-colored right foot. Somewhere in London, a resident or two might have felt the rhythmic vibration under their floorboards, but Krishna's jittery movement was unconscious. Leaning against his heavily adorned altar, Krishna's arms were crossed over his chest, much in opposition to the portrait hanging above him, his likeness in a seated position with his legs crossed and his hands supporting his famous flute to his lips. He had long ago tossed aside the wooden instrument, his lips chapped and fingers cramped. He certainly couldn't produce the tranquil smile on his portrait's lips.

Despite his impatience, Krishna knew Mr. Weasley would appear soon, much like he knew many things: the Carson family would welcome a baby girl tomorrow at half past noon; it would rain this evening for approximately 54 minutes in central London; and, at this very moment, a fender bender was occurring on the A3. These and other little things...lost teeth, broken bones, and first kisses...were like tiny pinpricks across his being, hardly noticeable unless he concentrated. And thus, with all of his concentration focused on young Weasley's body hurtling through the Floo Network, he barely batted an eyelash as the man stumbled out of the nearest fireplace, tumbling onto the floor with uncontrolled momentum.

Covered in ash and dust from his travels past half of London's fireplaces, Ron coughed from his position on all fours, his red hair shadowing his face as he crouched. Wiping his mouth and pushing back his hair, he glanced around the room from his place on the stone floor. Possibly shocked by the gilded walls or the unfamiliar portraits of religious scenes, he blinked, his one-track stupor finally lifting.

Where the bloody hell am I?

Though the thought went unspoken, Krishna heard it as if it were shouted. Tempering his concentration on the man, he tried not to allow an amused smirk. After all, Mr. Weasley had certainly kept him waiting.

"Language, Ronald Weasley," Krishna chastised.

Judging by the way his eyes widened, he had finally noticed Krishna standing only a few feet away. His efforts to escape were thwarted by his inability to stand up properly, forcing him scramble clumsily in the other direction, practically crab-walking. He seemed unable to control his jaw, the mandible flapping uselessly, his chin nearly dropping to his heaving chest.

"I... you... who? "

Since he failed to hear any other thoughts coming from the crustacean-like human, Krishna assumed that he was properly gobsmacked. *Good.*

"I believe you would like to know who I am," Krishna interpreted, finding it increasingly difficult not to laugh at the young man's pitiful state.

"Uh-huh," the ginger managed to say, his head nodding and his jaw still unclenched.

"Very well," Krishna said, taking a gentle step forward. "I am the Object, the Origin, the Maintainer, the Shelter, and the Goal."

"Right, okay," Ron managed thoughtfully. "So that would make you..."

Krishna refrained from rolling his eyes, if only to maintain some shred of his dignity. This was exactly the reason he avoided non-believers.

"I am Krishna, a higher being. *The* higher being. It's actually a bit more complicated than that... but that's all beside the point! I have summoned you for a reason, Ronald Weasley."

"You're a ... a... god, then?" Ron asked, still appearing flummoxed by the situation he found himself in.

"Yes, I am," Krishna answered evenly. He was more concerned that Ronald focus on the problem at hand. "And as I stated, I have come to you with a mission, one that has dangerous consequences should you fail to complete it. Do you understand?"

The man's jaw no longer flapped uselessly, and his blue eyes were focused on the glowing being before him. Krishna could hear the whispers of thoughts rocketing around his mind, too scattered to follow. Despite the disarray, Krishna could sense something he had come to detest in Ronald Weasley: stubbornness. This trait was radiating off him as his right hand reached for his wand.

"Why should I believe that you're a god?" Ron asked from his place on the floor, clenching his wand in his fist. "I've seen my fair share of disfigured blokes who claim to be all powerful, and I haven't seen you do anything particularly amazing."

Krishna sighed. Theoretically, he could just cause lightning to strike him down or some other catastrophe to occur; it was all well within his power. But he wasn't a malevolent god, so instead he waved his hand, prompting the lighting to brighten as flames rose up on their wicks and torches and artificial light filled the room.

Bloody anyone can do that, Ron reflected skeptically as the room brightened.

Hearing the thought, Krishna grumbled, "*Not that*," nodding towards the lights up above. "*These*," he continued, his hands fluttering in different directions.

Krishna watched carefully as the redhead's eyes fell upon the portraits and the statues, the copper and pewter and silver, the bright garlands and succulent fruit. And there among it all, a constant theme, was depiction after depiction of Krishna, appearing no differently than he did in person.

Oddly, it was Krishna's turn to be surprised when the man finally spoke.

"You knew what I was thinking," Ron said, his eyes wide. When Krishna raised an eyebrow, he continued, "You didn't use Legilimency. I would know if you had. I would have felt it."

"I could simply be a master of it," Krishna reasoned, wanting to combat any possible arguments.

"No," Ron muttered, looking down at the ground, his face scrunched in thought. "I've been through the gamut at Auror school... in the war... You're not using Legilimency."

"That is correct. I do not need mortal means to see what is in your head or what is in your heart. It lays open to me."

Ron opened his mouth, but shut it again. He may have had an argument prepared, but he remained silent, contemplating the temple's stone floor.

"Are you ready to hear your mission?" Krishna asked.

"I suppose, yeah," he replied, looking up again.

Ronald still appeared defensive, a tight grip on his wand, but he looked as if he would hear Krishna out, and for Krishna, that was enough. The rest would work itself out.

"Dangerous magic is afoot," Krishna began, ignoring Ronald's skeptical snort. "Yes, I know, you are very experienced with this brand of danger. However, I believe I am correct in saying, none that threatened to tear apart your soul."

Ronald's skeptical look transformed minutely. Krishna had his full attention.

"Yours and the soul of another close to you are threatened if you do not approach this mission with the utmost diligence..."

"Wait," Ron interrupted. "Whose soul? Who else is in danger? I swear, if it's Harry again, I'm going to..."

"Not Harry Potter," Krishna replied quickly. "I think we can *all* agree that Mr. Potter has suffered enough."

"Then who?" Ron asked again.

Krishna considered the question. He hadn't planned on revealing the other soul in danger. In these situations, as frustrating as it was for those entrusted with a duty, less information always seemed best. But perhaps this time was different...

"Hermione Granger," Krishna finally answered.

"Hermione," Ron whispered. His brow furrowed and then arched, a look of realization forming.

"You understand the importance, then?" Krishna asked, relieved with the young man's reaction

"Yes," Ron responded quietly. "Please, tell me what you need me to do."

"First, I must warn you, Ronald Weasley, that what I will ask of you will not be easy. Not in a physical sense, but intellectually and possibly spiritually. What I ask of you may cause you to question many things you know and believe."

Krishna paused, allowing all of this to sink in.

"To save your soul and the soul of Hermione Granger, you will need to bring her together with a past mentor. You will need to reunite her with Severus Snape, and though not immediately, you will ultimately need to unite them in marriage."

Ronald's mouth lay open, agape horror painted on his countenance. Of the many emotions Krishna had watched spread across the man's face, this was perhaps his favorite. Not because he took any pleasure from his horror, but because there was no denying, even by a benevolent higher being such as himself, the humorous quality of young Weasley's bulging blue eyes.

"You... no... that's... I can't... I mean, what do you even mean by... What?"

Fearing that the man's brain might soon leak out of his red-tipped ears, Krishna stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. The effects were instant, Ronald's muscles relaxing, his unconsciously heavy breathing steadying.

"I cannot explain the intricacies of this now," Krishna confessed. "All I can say is that you will find the answers you are looking for in time. It is not my place to reveal them. You must discover them on your own."

"But I don't understand. Why Snape of all people? Why me? I don't even know where to begin with all of this," Ronald said desperately. "Aside from the fact that I'm not Snape's favorite person, I'm not even sure why he and Hermione aren't in contact anymore. I didn't even know they needed... reuniting!"

"Then, Mr. Weasley, the first part of your journey is clear," Krishna replied calmly.

"But..."

"I have told you what is at stake. Two souls, yours included, are threatened. Now, off you go."

Ronald raised an eyebrow in protest. "Wait, that's it? You tell me that I have to hook my ex-fiancée up with her mentor, who is also our ex-school teacher, old enough to be her father, and kind of a git, by the way, or our souls will be... what? Destroyed? What does that even fucking mean?"

"Language," Krishna warned.

"With all due respect, Mr. Higher Being, I'm having a little trouble swallowing all of this at the moment."

Krishna smirked at this. "So you ask for more, Ronald Weasley? I'm afraid that you'll just have to trust me, and perhaps even more, trust in your own abilities."

And with that, Krishna turned to take his leave, his message delivered.

"Wait," Ron called out again. "There's someone else, isn't there? Neither me nor Hermione are followers. There's someone else involved. Is it Snape? Did he pray to you or something?"

Krishna continued walking, but turned his head to reply, "All will be revealed, Ronald Weasley. The truth is waiting for you to discover it."

Turning his head forward again, Krishna's delicate red lips formed a familiar smile, pleasant and serene. Though it wouldn't be easy, all would be well with Ronald Weasley, of that he was certain. As a second thought, he paused to pick up his forgotten flute on the floor. Despite his confidence, Krishna knew *friendly* reminders of his observation wouldn't be remiss...

November 3rd, 1998

Hermione's paper was bleeding, practically dripping with red ink. It would appear that Professor Snape had found nearly every word, even the conjunctions, the prepositions, and the articles, reprehensible. It was a simple paper on Pepperup Potion, a summary of the ingredients and how and why they worked. It was all a bit elementary for a Potions apprentice, but he had insisted that that was the point; no true potioneer would be successful without knowing and understanding every property of the ingredients they handled.

Admittedly, Hermione had originally found the idea intriguing. She craved that kind of knowledge, that kind of command over her brewing. But another glance at her bloodied paper, and she was less than enchanted.

Breathing deeply, Hermione grabbed her parchment and approached Professor Snape's desk. It was ridiculous that he insisted on sitting at it even now. She understood they weren't equals, but it was strange being his only pupil, his apprentice, and still having the table of power between them.

"How can everything be wrong?" Hermione asked, too frazzled for niceties. She had been biting her tongue for far too long.

Professor Snape peered up from his newspaper, his long fingers steepled. "You claimed that increasing the ratio of bicorn horn to mandrake root would increase the reaction time. With that mistake, you have rendered the use of the other ingredient inaccurate as well."

"But why?" Hermione asked, voicing the one question she had been bottling up all of these years.

"Why what, Miss Granger?" he returned acidly.

"Why is it a mistake? While I realize the directions call for only one part crushed horn for two parts mandrake root, I see nothing in its properties that say that increasing bicorn horn will serve to overpower the other ingredients."

Professor Snape raised a single eyebrow, and then bent down to slide open a desk drawer. After rifling through it for a second or two, leaving Hermione to wonder if he was just trying to torture her, he produced an aged leather-bound book.

"Read this for next week," he said, handing it to her. "It may address your question more fully than I can in the time we have today. Be ready to discuss it then."

Flicking his paper back open, he indicated that the conversation was over.

Returning to her seat, Hermione carefully ran her hand over the cover. Peeling it open to the first page, she noted writing in the margins. Flipping through the pages, she realized every page was covered with notes, all in the same spiky handwriting that had assaulted her paper.

Professor Snape had given her his personal book.

Directing her glance at the dour man behind the desk, Hermione wondered what had prompted him to trust her with his own property. Perhaps he wasn't as cold as she had imagined.

Hermione was supposed to be focusing on the numbers: reaction times, dosage amounts, ingredient ratios, stirring counts, digits and decimals and commas. But they were no more than inscrutable symbols to her at this moment, because instead she was thinking about Severus Snape. *Again.*

This was not her. Hermione Granger, or at least the version of herself she had come to recognize, was not distracted by men or fashion or even, at times, proper hair care. She was not fussy. She was academic. She did not waste away hours wondering how she was thought of by that someone special. Well, there was that one time in sixth year... but she had maintained high marks even then!

And now as a full-grown woman with burgeoning eye wrinkles and dressed in a faded, lime-green lab coat and too-long slacks, Hermione found herself daydreaming about the adorable way ink would sometimes smudge Severus' nose when he leaned too close to the parchment as he took notes.

Honestly, she didn't know which was worse: how adorable she found it that Severus Snape clearly required prescription eyewear or that she found Severus Snape adorable at all. That was not the worst of it, however. She had only just snapped out of a daydream about Severus' hands. *His long fingers, delicate as he drummed them against his chin in thought; his callused palms, roughened from stirring, and chopping and working with his hands; the way that combination would feel as they intertwined with her own, or perhaps cupping her cheek, or against her bare waist or...* No, she would not allow herself to finish that thought. It was almost lewd the way she couldn't stop thinking about him, the manner of ways she kept imagining him. There might have been a time where thoughts like those may not have been... completely inappropriate, but not now.

Not after what he'd done.

"Hermione? Hermione!"

Though she remained inside her locked office, Hermione recognized Ron's desperate call immediately. She moved to stand, but instead retook her seat. She couldn't see him right now. She was guilty enough. Luckily, Hermione's lab partner was outside in the lab to greet him.

"Would you stop yelling like an idiot?" Padma asked.

Oh, boy, Hermione thought, her office chair squeaking as she settled in.

Unsurprisingly, Padma was not Ron's biggest fan. Throughout their ten-year partnership, Hermione had honestly found Padma Patil to be kind, generous, intelligent and open-minded. She had been there to pick up the pieces after... well, *after*. And aside from the occasional argument about who was hogging the better quills or the actual benefits of bat spleen, they hardly squabbled. This all boded well for their experiments, not only because the duo was now world-renowned, but also because Padma seemed to be very capable of holding a grudge.

Closing her eyes, Hermione listened to the conversation. In her mind, she pictured Padma's hands raised in exclamation, her elbows tucked closely to her torso. It was about an hour from packing up, so the baby hairs along her temple were most likely standing straight up from the fumes, as if attempting to escape from her scalp, and the rest of her long dark hair lank from the lab's humidity. She also tended to press her full lips together when provoked, as if she were preventing her true thoughts from escaping.

"Look, I just want to know where Hermione is. I really need to talk to her!" Ron responded.

Yep, she loves when you ask about me, Hermione thought grimly.

So maybe there was that *little* chink in their partnership. And it wasn't about Ron brooding over her through the entire Yule Ball. They had been fourteen after all, and since then, Padma had dated many more attentive men. It was the *after*. How Hermione had continued to defend Ron after they had ended things. How Hermione hadn't exactly corrected her when she had assumed that it had been Ron's fault. How she wouldn't just shut Ron out. So Padma, being a loyal, though misguided, friend, had taken it upon herself to do it for her.

"It's pathetic, you know," Padma said. "It's been a decade and you're still not over her. She's moved on."

"Oi, it's not about that," Ron argued.

Her eyes still closed, Hermione imagined his hands were now raised in exclamation. Funny how they both did that.

"I... I can't explain what it's about," he continued, obviously frustrated. "But it involves the two of us, *Hermione and I*, and I need to... to discuss what it means."

"Well, she isn't here," Padma lied, sounding unconcerned. "I'll let her know that you stopped by."

"Fine," Ron muttered.

Hermione heard as his footsteps retreated, but then paused.

"Damn it, enough with the bloody woodwinds!"

To say this was a strange utterance might have been putting it lightly. Hermione quietly walked towards the office door and silently unlocked it. Peeking through a crack in the doorway, Hermione watched as Ron stood frozen at the lab's door, his head in his hands. Padma stood a few feet from him, also frozen.

"Ron?" Padma asked, her tone softer.

"It's nothing," he grumbled, reaching for the door handle. But he didn't take it. "Padma, did Hermione and Snape have some sort of falling out?" His gaze seemed to wander toward the office door.

Hermione felt her heartbeat jump, her hands slick against the metal door knob.

Padma snorted. "Really? You came to ask about that old news?"

"So they did. Did they have a fight or something?"

"Or something," Padma answered, left eyebrow raised.

Ron nodded. He went to reach for the doorknob again, but abruptly stopped.

"Have you... Have you ever heard of someone named... Krishna?" As he asked the question, Ron nervously pushed back the long hair falling into his eyes. If she hadn't been so focused on the interaction, Hermione might have affectionately reflected on how long he kept it now.

"You mean, Lord Krishna? Or just someone named Krishna? Because it's a pretty popular Indian name."

"No, the Lord one," Ron confirmed, meeting Padma's gaze. "Blue, kind of tall, not a lot of clothes from the waist up but a big fan of the gold jewelry."

"What about him?" Padma asked slowly. She looked as perplexed as Hermione felt.

Ron's mouth opened and closed several times before he finally replied, "Nothing. Er, yeah, I don't know. I should just go." This time, his hand gripped the doorknob securely and turned it. Shaking his head and mumbling, he walked out of the lab, the door closing behind him.

Deeming it safe to come out of her office, Hermione delicately stepped out from behind the door.

"So that was strange," she said casually as she walked into the lab.

Padma startled slightly before turning to face Hermione. Leaning against an empty black lab table, she uncrossed her arms and took hold of the table's edge on either side of her body.

"Has he been okay?" Taking in Hermione's questioning look, Padma continued, "Look, I know I'm the last person to be asking, but he had a bit of a crazed look in his eye. And the question about religion, where did that come from?"

Shrugging tiredly, Hermione took a seat on the opposite table. "I don't know. He *has* been acting strangely. He wouldn't even look at me when I ran into him and Harry in the canteen earlier, and I saw him leaving the Ministry in a weird huff a couple of hours ago. And now he's asking about Severus..."

"Yeah, about that," Padma said. "Why didn't he know what happened between you and Severus? I thought you two were still talking back then. And it was pretty big news."

It took choking on her own saliva and the entirety of the resulting coughing fit for Hermione to remember that Padma didn't have the entire truth either. Managing to regain her voice before Padma Summoned a glass of water, Hermione croaked, "He's not exactly up on the goings on of the Potions world. It's not really on his radar."

"But still," Padma insisted. "I would have thought you might have told him."

Hermione shrugged. "It didn't seem that important."

Both women seemed to know that was a lie, even if one of them wasn't completely sure why. But neither addressed it, instead sitting silently as a cauldron bubbled in the background.

A/N: Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Given the specificity of the prompt, I will wait until the last chapter to reveal it. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included the amazing alpha/beta/cheerleader combo, designrl, as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and britpick.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 6

A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Ron kicked a stone as he climbed the overgrown banks of the murky, nearly stagnant river. When he found it in his path again, he kicked it even harder, watching as it rolled away, this time altering its path as it slid back down the inclined surface. He considered diverting his own steps slightly as well, but aimed a kick at a large mud clod instead. Or at least, that was what he had thought until the toe of his shoe made contact with a rather solid brick, camouflaged in slimy mud.

"Blimey... fucking... bollocks... grr... ahh!"

He was incoherent with anger and exasperation and indignation and every other synonym for feeling as if his blood was boiling and he might come out of his skin.

If he were completely honest, this level of agitation was, well, slightly thrilling. *Which*, he reminded himself, *is completely ridiculous*. It wasn't as if he hadn't been angry before. He was infamously hotheaded, loved to jump to conclusions, and combining the two often led to fairly embarrassing scenes.

However, Ron had not created such a scene in years, a decade even. It was as if he was waking from a long emotional hibernation. As he looked at the row of abandoned brick houses spread in front of him, he wondered how it would feel to throw that muddy brick at one of those windows. The shatter of the glass would be thrilling, wouldn't it?

Ron bent down, feeling around the riverbank for the brick, and then bolted up again. It always began softly, but even at its lowest decibel, he could feel it. That damn flute. That damn deity. His damn mission. The reason he was feeling so damn aggressive at the moment.

Fuck it, he thought irritably, returning to his task. Of course, the music only became louder, echoing in his mind, vibrating beneath his skin, causing his stomach to clench. Groaning, Ron stood upright again.

"Fine, I'm off! Just, please, stop it with the flute! If I'm manic, it's your own bloody fault, you demon!"

FFFFFFFFFFFFTHHHHH!

Ron's outburst was rewarded with a rather staccato, completely off-key note, possibly one beyond the normal range of human hearing, causing him to grip his head in pain. But then there was silence, and suitably chastised, he continued on his way, making sure to disturb every stone in his path.

Finding himself on the main road, Ron glanced up, taking in the cracked asphalt and uprooted pavements. The dilapidated brick houses continued on either side, no longer red, but nearly gray with mold and soot and possibly despair.

Right, he thought, taking in the emptiness and the quiet. *This would be where he lived*

Shoving his hands in his pocket, he continued forward down Spinners End. It felt much like a march to the gallows, but fearing the return of the music, if one could honestly call it that, he tried to focus on why he was there: *Hermione*. Something had happened between her and Snape, though no one seemed inclined to tell him exactly *what*, and it was now his job to fix it. Otherwise, some untold doom would occur. Well, he had been told, but 'soul destruction' remained a rather abstract concept in his mind.

Counting the houses as he went, Ron tried to remember the house number he'd seen in the file. *Was it 17... or 19... or...*

Ron paused. The house he stood in front of was no different than the others. Perhaps it was a little less decayed than the rest, but not in a manner that was immediately noticeable in passing. He just sensed it. Not the way he could sense Hermione, her ethereal glow obvious behind her locked office door, but more a magical signature of sorts. Specifically, Ron could feel the light waves of protective spells, warding against his entrance. Those perceptible from the pavement were light, like the warning growl from an irritated dog. So naturally, Ron crossed them, untangling them quietly with silent waves of his wand.

The closer he was to Snape's front door, the more the dread set in. His legs felt heavy, as if weights were tied to his ankles, and he couldn't seem to focus on moving forward. Alternatives to forward motion began popping up in his head, the loudest of which was simply turning around. But he didn't want to... but he did.

Before he could consider his contradictory thoughts further, Ron reached the doorstep. Faced with the looming door, scuffed, scratched and discolored, he tried to consider his next steps. Knocking was the obvious first, but what exactly was he supposed to say to Snape? *Oh, you know, just in the neighborhood. Happened to glance at an Auror file listing your address. So, care to share why you and Hermione aren't speaking?*

The voice demanding that he turn back was still sharing its opinion, echoing loudly over potential conversation starters. It was seductive, not only because it offered the least painful option, but also because it felt comfortably familiar. Soft and warm; enchanting.

Hermione...

And then pain. Not the usual chest pain, though. This time, the pain was the result of being thrown from Snape's doorstep by a rather irate Severus Snape. Looking up at the man in dark trousers and an overcoat, dark hair shadowing his contorted features, Ron decided that the seductive voice was clearly the only one looking out for his best interests. Also, he decided that he would file away his worries regarding the multiple voices in his head for a less stressful situation.

"Weasley."

The single word statement left Ron floundering on the overgrown grass. He hadn't shouted it or anything, but there was clearly a lot of venom behind it. Never had his surname sounded so vile.

Snape's thin lips curved minutely at their corners as he leaned forward, casting his shadows over Ron's fallen body.

Ron swallowed, feeling ever fifteen and caught out of bed after hours.

"To what do I owe this visit?"

Right, pleasantries first, Ron thought, willing his mind to continue functioning.

Instead he blurted out, "Hermione!" Watching those Snape's lips settle back into their straight line, he quickly added, "... is in trouble. Hermione's in trouble!"

Snape's slate-colored eyes examined Ron silently.

Feeling naked, Ron attempted to explain, eyes averted. "There's this thing with her soul... and mine. I don't know what exactly, but it's not good. And I... well, I need to know what happened between you two."

Snape was slow to answer, but when he did, it was obvious he didn't like the request, given the way he grabbed Ron by the collar, pulling the man's face closer to his.

"Are you drunk, Weasley?"

"What...? I.... No..."

"Just trespassing on my property on a lark? Thought you might come and show off like some idiotic peacock?"

"I'm not sure that you understand the situation here..."

"Just come all this way to, what? Rub my face in it? Has she returned to you, then?"

"Erm... who?"

Snape paused, still gripping the front of Ron's shirt, locking eyes with the man underneath him.

The halt in activity gave Ron time to pat his coat pocket, ensuring that his wand was still on him. Not that he thought that it would be much help against a deranged Severus Snape. Unfortunately, for both of them really, his wand seemed to have other plans.

Snape's displacement appeared to result from the loud bang emitted from Ron's wand. Though that didn't seem right, Ron had no other explanation for how Snape had been pulled away, losing his grip on Ron's collar. He also wasn't sure how the wand had insinuated itself into his closed fist. But he did have enough sense to run, and run he did.

"I'm going to *kill* you, Weasley," Snape yelled after him as Ron took the small fence at the corner of his front yard with a running leap.

Ron's wand did not like this, firing back unknown hexes at Snape, all of which were blocked with finesse by the older man. He had nearly reached the riverbank when he finally decided to look back. Seeing no Severus Snape on his heels, he dropped to his knees in the long grass and leaned forward onto his hands, vomiting.

Wanting to lie down, but judging it not worth the risk, Ron sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth. Casting a glance at the wand in his right hand, he hastily threw it aside, as if he were accidentally holding hands with a stranger. It was more than that though; he felt like he was being controlled by a stranger, perhaps several. Maybe he was just cracking up? Years of mild-mannered paper pushing had built this illusion in his head, and here he was acting recklessly, blaming his idiocy on other forces.

But then the wand rolled back to him, and as he watched it make its way, he knew it wasn't just the wind or gravity or the nature of the Earth revolving around the Sun. It was a purposeful roll, an otherworldly roll.

Someone or something else was in charge.

Angry, confused and tired, still kneeling on the banks of the stagnant river, the putrid smell of his own vomit wafting up, Ron began to call out, "Krishna!" He repeated the call until he was hoarse, the sound of his voice taking flight in the open air with no surface to bounce on.

The god appeared with little fanfare, his arms crossed and his flute slipped into the loop of the orange fabric cinched around his waist.

"You called, Mr. Weasley," Krishna said, a knowing smirk quirked his ruby red lips.

"I did, yeah," Ron said, taking in the blue god beside him. He was tempted to reach out and touch him, his cobalt foot bare in the swaying blades of grass. He just needed proof; he needed to know this was all real.

"Oh, it is real," Krishna responded to Ron's unuttered thought.

Glancing up at Krishna's face, he saw the god was smiling kindly now. Ron sighed, feeling spent.

"Were you the one controlling my wand, then?"

"No, that was definitely you."

Ron stared at him, perplexed. "But I didn't *do* anything. I don't even know how my bloody wand got in my hand. I was just feeling for it and then..." He paused to consider the situation. "The, whatever, soul destroying thing, is that what's causing this? Is any part of my life currently in my control, or is it just you and this... curse or whatever?"

Krishna's smile dimmed slightly, but he gave Ron a sympathetic clap on the shoulder. "It is very important that you seek out Hermione Granger. You must complete this mission soon."

"But why?" Ron asked. "If my life is going to be continually turned upside down, I want to know why! I was fine, you know, avoiding Hermione and doing my job and staying out of trouble. It was quiet and... and relaxing. I was... relaxed."

"Were you?" Krishna questioned calmly. "Were you relaxed or were you numb?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Were you truly content or were you settling, Mr. Weasley? Were you fulfilled or were you scared?"

"I was fine!" Ron exclaimed.

"But wasn't it ever stifling, sitting in a cubicle, pushing papers, sorting out disturbed furniture and harmless pranks? Weren't you ever angry about where you were? Angry at Hermione for what she did?"

"No, it just didn't work out! We didn't work out! Why are you asking me all of these questions?"

"Why haven't you asked them yourself?"

The last question hung in the air unanswered. The smell of his expelled lunch was becoming overwhelming. Standing, he kicked the dirt petulantly, but said nothing.

"Go see Hermione," Krishna instructed quietly. "See her tomorrow. That is the only way you shall find your answers. The only way you will save her soul."

Ron nodded silently. Perhaps it was time to ask questions.

January 28th, 1999

"It worked, Professor! Can you believe it?"

Hermione was skipping, yes, skipping, down the hall next to a rather bemused Severus Snape.

"You do remember that you've been brewing Pepperup since your third year?" His tone was demeaning, but Hermione could swear she saw the corners of lips turn upwards. She almost wanted to kiss them. Purely due to her happiness, of course.

"Yes, I know. But I've never actually administered it to anyone. Before it was only the right color, but now I've proven that what I've brewed is not just properly made but can heal. Oh, I want to have this feeling every day!"

She knew she was nearly shouting, but she couldn't help it. It was a rush to concoct something that actually healed someone, even if it only offered relief from the common cold.

"We should celebrate! My first successful venture into medicinal potions."

Severus snorted, but replied, "Fine, we can have tea before I have you gut that shipment of toads."

"I'll take it," Hermione agreed with a laugh.

Upon reaching the dungeons, the pair passed by the door to the laboratory and went through the next. Familiar with Severus' sitting room, Hermione immediately took a seat in her favorite arm chair, which was ivy green and overstuffed. Severus continued into the kitchen, where the sound of running water and clattering cups emanated.

Joining her again, Severus took a seat in the wingback leather armchair. To say he gravitated to the sinister almost seemed like an understatement when he was perched there, clad in heavy black robes.

"How are the wedding plans proceeding?" Severus asked in a tone that betrayed little interest.

It was Hermione's turn to snort.

"You really want to hear about white dresses, flower arrangements, and dinner menus?"

Severus gripped the arm of the chair and gave a small nod.

"Well, they're overwhelming. So much is expected now that two 'heroes' of the war are getting married. Half of the time I'm not even sure why I'm bothering with it."

The pressure had been immense since the engagement had been announced. She half-expected the papers to demand to accompany them on their honeymoon. Her small piece of solace was the engagement ceremony, the small event she had devised as a sort of pre-wedding, something just for her and Ron and their close friends.

"Because you love Mr. Weasley," Severus suggested silkily.

"Yes, of course," Hermione replied. She honestly couldn't see herself with anyone else. Besides... no, there was no one else who knew her like Ron did.

"I do wonder, though," Severus began, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee, "what it is that has brought you two together."

It was an odd line of questioning for Severus. He rarely showed any interest in Ron, or really any part of her life outside of the classroom and her apprenticeship.

"We've just known each other forever," Hermione answered, fidgeting in her own chair. "He's kind and loyal. He's comfortable."

"Like a brother?" Severus asked.

"No. Not like a brother, like a friend, a best..."

"But," Severus interrupted, "do you two honestly have anything in common?"

"Of course we do," Hermione insisted. "We have nearly ten years in common."

"Indeed."

They were quiet, staring across the room at each other. Hermione had always felt a tad warm under his eyes, like a rabbit caught in headlights. However, his look that day was not predatory, though something similar lurked in the shadows.

"Your hair looks well-kept today."

Was it a compliment or an insult? She couldn't decide, but something about the way his eyes lingered over her made her blush.

And then the kettle whistled and the moment was over.

Hermione felt like doing a cartwheel as she made her way along the third floor of St Mungo's. Refraining for a multitude of reasons, least of which was her lack of knowledge on how to actually perform one, she settled for a slight skip in her step. There really was nothing more thrilling than watching your potion successfully heal someone. Even the memory of administering her first dose of Pepperup could still put a smile on her face on her more trying days. Although the challenge of brewing - the precision and instinct - kept Hermione on her toes, it was helping suffering patients and bringing hope to their worried families that kept her going.

Bursting through the lab doors, she could only wait a few steps before exclaiming, "It worked!"

Padma looked up from her cauldron, one hand on her waist. "What did I say about sudden shouting in the lab? I could have overturned something!"

Hermione laughed. Padma couldn't even hide her smile as she scolded Hermione for her outburst.

"I thought you would be relieved. You were the one who was up in arms about the dandelion root."

"And rightly so," Padma countered, though her lips had formed a full grin. "You know that if you had put too much in, it would have counteracted the goosegrass. We were trying to reduce the boils, not increase them."

"Yes, well, it worked. Our patient is boil-free, his temperature and color have improved, and the nerves in his hand are reacting to stimuli."

"And the dragon?"

"He still needs a bit of convincing, but I think a visit from our friends at the Ministry could encourage him to sign it over. After all, it's only going to grow bigger." Healing patients was fun; dealing with their proclivity for dangerous behavior was not.

"Are you off, then?" Padma asked, returning to her stirring.

"Yes, I have another grant meeting with the Minister's Advisor on Social Services. Lucky me," Hermione replied before popping into her office to grab her briefcase.

"Well, someone has to secure us the big money," Padma teased as Hermione came out with her briefcase in tow.

"And why does it always have to be me again?"

"Because," Padma reasoned, "you're Hermione Granger, war heroine and Snape protégée, and I'm Padma Patil, often confused with Parvati."

"Oh, Padma. At least you're good at stirring."

"Har har, I thought you were leaving."

Hermione laughed again. "I'm going, I'm going," she assured with a little wave before exiting the lab again.

In truth, Hermione didn't mind going to a meeting today. She was in high spirits. She hadn't even thought of Snape once (save for that moment right there). No, nothing

could deflate her now... save for running into her ex.

Seeing no escape readily available, Hermione braced herself for impact as Ron walked purposely towards her.

"Ron? What are you doing here?" she asked with concern. "Is something wrong?"

"No... well, actually... could we go somewhere and talk?"

Clearly they both felt awkward about meeting. Poor Ron couldn't even stop blinking. Actually, it seemed like he was looking right past her. Something was clearly wrong, and her meeting could wait a few minutes for her to figure it out.

"Of course. There are a few empty benches over there," she answered, pointing to an empty hall to her right.

"Great," Ron replied, sounding none too thrilled as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

The pair shuffled over to the empty bench, both wary of making eye contact.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Hermione asked as they sat down.

Ron finally looked up at her, squinting heavily. "It's... The thing is... Do I look differently to you?"

What? "You're wearing your hair a bit longer lately," Hermione replied, trying to puzzle out why he had come all the way to St. Mungo's just to fish for compliments. "And, well, I'm assuming you couldn't possibly be taller at this point."

Ron smiled slightly and then grimaced. "Yeah, right, I was just wondering... so, uh, what exactly happened between you and Snape?"

Ronald Weasley, Champion of the Non Sequitur.

"What? Why do you ask?" Hermione questioned warily.

It wasn't that she didn't want to be truthful; it was just a strange line of questioning. Yes, that was the problem...

"Oh, well, I don't know," Ron rambled. "You two were close, right?"

Hermione's chest tightened just a little. "We were master and apprentice," she answered simply.

"Yeah, of course," Ron hurriedly agreed. "But you loved that apprenticeship. It was all you could talk about. And weren't you guys working on some miracle elixir? What ever happened with that?"

Suddenly feeling backed into a corner, Hermione stood up. "Nothing. Nothing happened," she responded, wanting very badly to end the conversation. "Look, I have a meeting in fifteen minutes at the Ministry, so if this isn't an emergency, I'm afraid we'll have to catch up later."

Before Ron could even reply, she was walking. She heard him call after her, but she kept going. If she didn't have that meeting, she would have settled things right then and there. It was just too complicated to explain in such a little time. And why was it any of his business anyway?

Hermione found that if she could manage to stick to that script, avoiding the issue in her mind at all costs, she could possibly get through the upcoming meeting and maybe the rest of the afternoon. She could easily dispel any thoughts of *him*, as long as she remained properly focused. It was only once she arrived home in the evening, her day done and her tasks complete, that she would have to think about what had really happened.

How *he* had broken her heart, and how, if she were completely honest with herself, she most likely had brokered *this*.

Ron was certain he had hit rock bottom as he raised his fist to knock on the wooden door in front of him. A square of frosted glass was cut into its top half, *Experimental Potions Lab A* printed on the textured surface. He could hear her humming from inside, accompanied by the occasional scrape of a stirrer on pewter. It made her seem less caustic somehow. It was with that hopeful thought that his fist finally made contact with the door.

"Come in," Padma called from inside.

Here we go, Ron thought tiredly as he turned the handle.

Padma greeted him with an eye roll. Not exactly the start he was looking for.

"She's still not here," Padma said, her attention returning to her cauldron.

"I know. I mean, I just talked to her outside." Catching Padma's look of alarm, he continued, "I didn't corner her or anything, if that's what you're thinking. She actually ran off before we could really discuss anything. Said she had a meeting."

Padma stopped stirring again. Appearing almost disgusted with herself, she replied, "She wasn't lying, you know. She really did have a meeting." It was an olive branch. A trampled one, but still more than Ron had hoped for.

"Thanks," he said, though he was not quite sure why he was thanking her. Maybe because she hadn't hexed him yet. "Can we talk?"

Padma hesitated, then pulled her wand from the pocket of her robes and adjusted the flame under the cauldron. Seating herself on top of one of the black tables, she said, "Okay, let's talk."

Sighing with relief, Ron leaned against the table across from her. "Look, I don't know what Hermione said about me when everything fell apart. I guess I'm not even sure why everything fell apart. But I'm not here to try and resurrect whatever she and I were. I just need some answers."

"Ask your questions," Padma said. Although she was direct, her tone was softer, less hostile.

"What happened between Snape and Hermione? Maybe I'm an idiot for not knowing, but I don't care, I *need* to know."

"You really don't know?" Padma asked, surprised. "Okay, okay," she continued, catching Ron's look of irritation. "Do you remember the elixir they were working on? The one that could immunize children against Spattergroit?"

"Yeah, I think so," Ron replied thoughtfully. Sensing she might roll her eyes again, he added, "If she said I was a horrible listener, she was lying. I just didn't understand half of the things she was talking about."

To his surprise, Padma actually laughed. It was full and melodic, and, for once, she looked relaxed.

"Duly noted," she said, settling again. "Well, it was definitely a breakthrough, one that saved lives and was fairly lucrative, to say the least. And then Snape sort of stabbed

her in the back and took full credit."

"What?" Perhaps he was being naïve, but out of all of the possible disagreements, from her asking too many questions to that annoying way she sometimes hovered, Ron hadn't even considered anything like this. "But how could he do that? They were working together. She was his apprentice. Wouldn't she automatically get credit as well?"

Padma laughed again, but this time she sounded slightly bitter. "Unfortunately, that's not how it works in the Potions world. As an apprentice, you forfeit all rights to innovations made while working with your master." A thoughtful look graced her features. "It's just strange, because it sounded as if Snape was ready to name Hermione as the co-author of the paper. But then he published it, and there was no mention of her or her contributions. It really crushed her. Didn't help that your engagement had ended only a few weeks before."

Ron sat up. Dots were connecting, light bulbs were flashing, and finally something, something in this crazy situation he found himself in, was beginning to make sense. And he was struck once more with the intense need to vomit.

So that was that. Hermione and Snape weren't talking because Snape had reneged on their agreement. Snape had betrayed Hermione's trust. And ignoring the implications of the timeline, something Ron was really, really trying to do at this moment, he was now faced with an uphill battle to even get them in the same room. He needed an ally; he needed to let someone in on what was going on. He needed Padma's help.

"So this might seem random, but just out of curiosity, how much do you actually know about Krishna?"

A/N: Written as a gift to bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Given the specificity of the prompt, I will wait until the last chapter to reveal it. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included the amazing alpha/beta/cheerleader combo, desigrl, as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and britpick.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

"I don't know why I have to get dressed up for a simple donors' meeting. They know I'm a Potions mistress, don't they?"

Hermione flinched as Padma tugged on her hair. She had claimed that she was going to style Hermione's hair into something a bit more presentable than her usual frizzed-out mass, but it felt like she was just loosening her scalp.

"Stop moving!" Padma commanded, giving Hermione's mane a twist. "I've almost contained your hair, and if you squirm one more time, I'm going to stab you with a bobby pin. And yes, they know you're a Potions mistress, but that doesn't mean you have to show up with Bubotuber pus smeared down your robes."

Glaring at the empty space in front of her, Hermione argued, "It was just a small spot. They would have thought it was..."

"You really don't want to finish that sentence," Padma cut-in, her fingers combing through Hermione's wayward frizz. "Oh, Hermione, is this a lacewing fly? Do you just throw the ingredients up in the air and hope they fall in the cauldron?"

"Yes, I do, actually," she replied sarcastically. "And it's that technique which has won us *three* Golden Stirrers. And your contributions were...ouch!"

"Oops, was that your scalp?" Padma asked innocently. "Anyway, I'm done, so go ahead and take a look."

Hermione stood from the wooden stool at the center of their office and made her way to the cloudy mirror on the wall. Placed at eye level, it was obvious from the nearly opaque edges that the small square mirror was neither maintained nor used very much. However, for once, Hermione actually smiled when she saw her reflection.

"Wow. My hair actually looks good for once." With a few loose tendrils framing her face and running down the back of her neck, the rest of her hair was fastened into a loose bun of sorts, looking contained but not completely tamed. It was a comfortable compromise.

"Well, don't sound so surprised. Just because Parvati is considered the more fashionable twin, doesn't mean I don't know a thing or two."

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, turning to give her lab partner a hug. Noting that she was still clad in lime green, Hermione continued, "Now were you going to dress up or am I going to be the only idiot in a dress?"

"Yes, yes, I'm going to change. And at least I'm not wearing any of today's ingredients," Padma replied over her shoulder as she pulled a vinyl garment bag from their shared closet and made her way to the office door.

Hermione settled into her office chair, her mid-length red dress feeling slightly itchy and restrictive. It had been a while since she had dressed in anything other than lab robes or a suit. But Padma had insisted neither was appropriate for the dinner meeting they were attending. She couldn't fathom who these important donors could be or why all of her other preferred outfits were all either too formal or too informal for the occasion. In fact, Padma hadn't been very forthcoming with any of the details. But she couldn't think of any reason Padma would purposely keep something from her. What was there to hide?

Only fifteen minutes after she had left, Padma reappeared at the office door. Her long black hair was full and shiny, the top layer held back by an ornate clip. She also wore a satiny black dress with an A-line bodice cinched at her waist. It was simple, almost nun-like, but somehow Padma's beauty shone through. They were certainly going to be the best looking potioners at the restaurant.

"Oh, Padma. You look..."

Padma left her little time to finish, Summoning her clutch purse and shrug while motioning for Hermione to approach the door with her free hand.

"No time! Our meeting is in five minutes."

And before Hermione could protest, Padma had already grabbed her hand, the familiar squeeze of Apparition taking hold.

Ron checked his watch reluctantly while standing a few feet from the maître d' podium. Two minutes. He paced a few steps, glanced at the entrance to the restaurant, and checked his watch again. Still two minutes.

"Get a grip," Ron muttered to himself.

After all, what was the worst that could happen? *Snape and Hermione could hex each other into oblivion. The restaurant could suffer severe damage, collapsing in on itself and endangering hundreds of people. The Obliviators would be changing patrons' memories for weeks.* And having explored *that* scenario, Ron, unsurprisingly, felt no better. Luckily, a distraction appeared none too soon.

Hermione and Padma stood at the door of the restaurant, both anxiously scanning the room. Ron swallowed involuntarily, unmoving as he watched Hermione. Her dress, red and sleeveless with a delicate lace overlay, only served to jog his memory, reminding him of how she looked at Bill's wedding. He could clearly remember how it had felt to hold her close as they danced that night, the light smell of berries intoxicating him as their cheeks touched. Even now he was mesmerized by her, though that might have had more to do with her now usual otherworldly glow.

It didn't take long for Hermione's eyes to meet his across the room, and even at that distance, he could immediately see the confusion and apprehension creeping into her expression. The look only intensified as her eyes moved past Ron to the man dressed in black seated at a table in plain view.

"Padma..." Hermione began, backing out of the restaurant slowly.

Padma, however, quickly grabbed her arm. "No bolting just yet. Sorry for lying, but I didn't know how else I would get you here."

Hermione's eyes moved from Padma to Ron to Snape in quick succession, her lips moving wordlessly.

"Did Severus organize this?" she finally managed.

"Not exactly," Padma replied.

Sensing this was his opening, Ron stepped closer to the pair, clearing his throat. "Erm... That would be me. I mean, I was the one who organized this."

Hermione's confusion quickly turned to anger as she too stepped closer.

"Why? Why are you doing this, Ron?" she questioned in a furious whisper. "Is this some kind of belated revenge? Are you still so immature that you have to embarrass me like this?"

Ron's posture stiffened. "I'm doing this *for* you, Hermione," he said coolly, a difficult task when the familiar smell of berries was detectable at this distance. "I know what happened between you two. And I know that you need to resolve it before it's too late."

"Too late for what?" Hermione asked testily.

Yeah, for what? Ron asked himself. It didn't seem like the right time to spring the whole soul destruction thing on her, given her level of anger and his current level of cowardice. Making a quick decision, he replied cryptically, "You *know* what."

To Ron's surprise, this statement did not elicit more ire, but calm. Hermione looked down at her feet briefly, seemingly admiring her shiny patent pumps, before meeting his gaze again. She looked determined.

"Maybe you're right. It's time."

"Great," Padma agreed hurriedly. "Should we find our table then?"

"Right, about that," Ron said, suddenly finding his own footwear rather captivating. "I thought we, you and I that is, would give them a little privacy. You can go ahead can go ahead and join Snape, Hermione."

Both women raised an eyebrow, but Hermione finally nodded and hesitantly entered the restaurant. With her departure, Ron turned to Padma sheepishly.

"Er, shall we?"

Though she still appeared perplexed, Padma nodded and followed Ron to the maître d's podium, and then to their seat, remaining pointedly silent the entire time. However, left alone with their menus and thoughts, Padma ventured a comment.

"So, are we just going to spend another evening sitting in silence while you stare at Hermione?"

"W-what?" Ron asked before another memory surfaced. "Oh, right. I never did apologize for that night."

"No worries," Padma said as she opened her menu, though her tone signaled that Ron should. "We were children then. Though I couldn't help noticing the way your eyes are still drawn to her."

Ron groaned internally. *Who suggested that Hermione and Snape might need some privacy? Oh, yeah, Krishna, my bloody good luck charm* Deferring to the god's judgment completely, which honestly seemed like a good idea in any situation, had prevented him from remembering that he and Padma were not exactly best friends. Not even close.

He had of course told her about the ether that seemed to follow Hermione these days, but that didn't seem to blunt his obvious attraction, especially given their history. It only seemed to add insult to not-quite-healed injury.

"I'm considering the fish," she said in a bored tone, not bothering to glance up from her menu.

Instead of replying, Ron stared mutely at his unhappy date. Besides the color of her dress and perhaps an inch or two to her height, it was almost like he was fourteen again, sharing a meal with the same pouting Padma. This time, however, he saw something he had failed to see through his previous pubescent brooding.

Possibly feeling the weight of his stare, Padma tore her eyes from her menu to return Ron's glance.

"What?" she asked tiredly.

Shrugging slightly, Ron replied, "I just noticed how beautiful you look tonight." Responding to her quirked eyebrow, he added, "You looked beautiful the night of the Yule Ball, too. I guess I just had my head shoved too far up my arse that night to notice. Sorry about that. I was an idiot."

"Like I said, no worries," Padma said, though her lips did quirk into a small smile.

Relieved, and a bit pleased with himself, Ron turned to his own menu, smiling as well.

"So, how did you lure Snape here?" Padma inquired, still browsing her menu.

"I'm not entirely sure," Ron responded, turning a page. "I mean, I went to his house again, and he looked ready to murder me, but then something in his expression changed and he agreed."

"That's strange."

"Yeah, you're telling me. Actually, I think a blue friend of mine might have had something to do with it."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Padma suddenly exclaimed, putting aside her menu. "I did some research."

"And?" Ron asked hopefully.

Padma's pressed her lips together and then let out a breath. "I'm not really coming up with anything. Most magic related to attraction comes in the form of lust potions, but even then, none are so far reaching that they affect your soul. Perhaps your increased attraction to Hermione and the mission handed down by Krishna are completely separate issues."

Ron shook his head. "It's not just about Hermione. I've been feeling, well, all of these emotions. It's weird. I just haven't felt angry, or really anything in the longest time. And I don't know... it's hard to explain."

Padma considered this for a moment. "Does it feel like waking up from an enchantment? Like perhaps your decisions haven't been your own? How is your memory? Has anything happened that you don't remember doing?"

"Possibly all of the above?" Ron answered uncertainly. He honestly couldn't remember when this malaise had started, only when he had felt like he had finally woken up.

The day Krishna came into his life.

"Right, I suppose it's back to the books then," Padma said returning to her menu.

"Wait," Ron said softly. There was something about that day, something that happened. "I think I might have a clue..."

Before responding, Padma reached for her purse and pulled out a small notepad and self-inking quill.

"Well, we have more than a bit of time to hash this out. Start from the beginning."

And as he went over the details of the last couple of days, and even events that had occurred before that, Ron couldn't help reflecting for a moment that he might just have a thing for intelligent women.

Hermione had been completely wrong. Neither she nor Padma was the best-looking potioneer in the restaurant. He was in fact sitting across from her, casually leafing through the thick wine list. As discomfiting as it was to watch him flip the pages without so much as a glance her way, it did give her an opportunity to give him a good once over.

Severus Snape had aged, but only in small ways. His jet black hair had peeking strands of grey; his forehead was slightly lined, from aggressive scowling, no doubt. She almost self-consciously reached for her own forehead, halted only by the realization that no amount of smoothing or pulling would erase her own infant wrinkles. Padma always said she was mad when she bemoaned them, but Hermione knew all too well that few things escaped Severus' critical glare.

She couldn't help giggling her leg under the table, her nerves quickening her pulse as she waited for acknowledgement. He had barely glanced at her since she had arrived at the table, remaining silent as she seated herself across from him.

I'm acting like an idiot, Hermione scolded herself, bunching the cloth napkin in her lap. She was an adult, not his swotty little apprentice. *Just say something!*

"Severus!" His name had popped out of her mouth before she could think to contain it. Mortified, she picked up her menu, zeroing on the words 'chicken piccata' and breathing deeply.

"Yes, Hermione?"

There was that familiar baritone rumble that had always given her an extra tingle up her spine. Although it didn't carry the warmth of those days, it still made her toes curl and, apparently, lower her guard. Well, her menu, at least.

"You look good," Hermione managed, meaning it sincerely. She wanted to grab his hand, cup his face, and kiss his nose. She wanted to be *closer*. Crawl into his lap, hang her arms around his shoulders, bury her face in his neck. Put simply, she was *crazy*, or at least that's how she felt.

"Glad to hear it," Severus replied sardonically. He began to reach for his menu again, his unspoken signal that he would not be aiding her attempt at conversation.

Okay, Hermione, time to form coherent thoughts and communicate them through speaking. Remember, you are an expert at this 'talking' thing. If tested, you would at least receive an 'E.'

"Congratulations on your recent award. Your use of belladonna was inspired." *Well, that's a start.* Grasping the thick stem of her glass, she brought it to her lips hastily, swallowing several mouthfuls of water.

"Thank you."

And with that succinct response, Hermione's heart fell a little further in her chest. *What now?*

"The chicken piccata looks good. I might order that. And you?"

"Hmph."

That was it. No words, just a noise. It was... well, infuriating.

"Did you see my article in *Elixirs and Draughts*?" Questions seemed to be the only weapon left in Hermione's arsenal.

"I don't subscribe to that particular periodical, I'm afraid." Cool as a cucumber, Snape took a roll from the lined wicker basket at the center of the table, delicately tearing it into pieces with his long fingers.

Hermione decided she too could play that game, snatching a roll from the basket and tearing it in half.

"That's too bad. You would've read about how Padma and I have managed to reduce both the number of doses and the average healing time required when administering

Pepperup for the common cold."

Though she could sense an eye roll coming, Severus simply buttered the pieces of bread assembled on his plate.

Hermione stabbed her butter with the blunt blade of her butter knife.

"And to think," she said, working to keep her voice even, "you insisted all those years ago that increasing the amount of bicorn horn and alternating the heat would do nothing but cause a boil-over."

Severus placed down his knife with a bit of a clunk, quickly stuffing a piece of bread in his mouth.

Hermione held back her smirk.

"Of course, everyone knows the more bicorn horn, the better," she added. She might have been goading him. Maybe.

"I cannot fathom why you would continue to say that, even after all of these years of practical experience, two of which I spent crossing out every suggestion of it in your papers!"

Oh, hello, Severus. Welcome to the party.

"I remember," Hermione agreed, leisurely spreading the cold butter over every nook and cranny of the roll's exposed underbelly. "My assignments looked like a murder scene. Red ink everywhere."

"Besides, your article, if it could even be called that, left many questions unanswered. Just a bunch of shoddy research and grasping assumptions. The fact that it was even published confirms that *Elixirs and Draughts* has lost all of its standards." He had abandoned his bread to stare at her instead, his gaze irritated, but not cold.

Hermione nearly bit the insides of her cheeks to prevent a smile. "So you read the article?"

"I did."

Hermione's toes definitely curled. She had missed this. This exchange of ideas and the heat of the debate. She had missed the way he rapped the table with his fist when she refused to concede and pinched his temple when she gave a ridiculously detailed explanation. She even missed his derisive snort, his raised eyebrow. She had missed him terribly and had ever since he left her engagement party without a word.

"I'm sorry." The apology spilled out of her lips without a second thought or regret. "I didn't handle things properly that night. On many levels. I was horrible to you."

Pausing to gauge his reaction, Hermione found Severus watching her steadily, his dark eyes softer than they had been all evening.

"I'm not sure how or why I let things unravel the way they did. And then, after it was all said and done, I was just so hurt and confused by how you reacted." Biting her lip and then releasing it, she finally asked the question that had nagged at her all this time. "Why, Severus? Why did you leave my name off that paper?"

As silence settled over the table, Hermione began to think she would never get her answer, but then Severus spoke.

"Because you broke my heart."

It was as if he had knocked the breath out of her. "You never gave me a chance to explain. You left before I could say... "

Snape's eyes seemed to ask the question Hermione's brain did not want to acknowledge. *Say what?*

"Don't you understand? I told you that I loved you, Hermione. I came to you emotionally naked and you said nothing."

Hermione found her napkin in her lap again, twisting it into knots.

"It was hard for me too, Severus. I was breaking things off with one of my best friends. I couldn't possibly articulate how I felt right then. All I knew was that I was about to hurt almost everyone who meant anything to me."

"Can you say it now, then? How you feel?"

It wasn't a gentle question or a soft prodding. It was a challenge. Severus was asking her to prove to him that she wanted their friendship back, that she wanted him.

"I... I..." She should have been ready for this. After all, hadn't this been what she had been daydreaming about all along? A second chance?

"You can't say it," Severus said with disgust. Pushing out his chair, he stood, readying to leave.

Desperate to keep him there, Hermione managed to spit out, "I love you, Severus. But you hurt me."

"Well, I suppose we're even then."

Still unconsciously scrunching the cloth napkin in her lap, Hermione watched as Severus left the restaurant. She barely noticed when Ron appeared at her table minutes later, attempting to lead her out as well.

A/N: Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Given the specificity of the prompt, I will wait until the last chapter to reveal it. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included designr - the amazing alpha/beta/cheerleader combo - as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and Britpick.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape.

Chapter 5

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Hermione was absolutely fine. Severus had just up and left her at the restaurant and she was fine. Or rather, she was *tipsy*. Well, perhaps not tipsy, maybe she was...

"I'm drunk," Hermione stated matter-of-factly, sloshing around the Merlot in her glass. She had the stem pinched between her thumb and first two fingers, the bowl wobbling as she swished.

Ron sank down next to her on the loveseat in her apartment. "You aren't drunk, you're tipsy. I know you aren't a big drinker, but trust me. Remember that Holyhead Harpies game?"

Hermione's brain navigated the light fog in search of the memory. Ginny's first game, the bone-crushing boredom, the beer too many. He was right; she was *not* drunk.

"You know everything about me, Ron," Hermione stated thoughtfully as she turned to eye her friend. "More than Harry. More than my parents. More than Severus, evidently. You *know* me. Why didn't you know we weren't in love? That I wasn't in love with you anymore?"

No, she wasn't drunk, but she was tipsy enough to poke the elephant in the room, regardless of its tusks. They had ignored it the entire way back from the restaurant, and even in the twenty minutes they had sat silently in Hermione's apartment as she enjoyed a glass of wine... or three. But she was ready to jab it in the ribs, kick it in the shins.

"Because I was in love with you," Ron replied with a shrug.

Hermione gulped down the remaining wine in her glass and rose to get another, only to be pulled back down by Ron.

"You aren't drunk *yet*," he reminded her, taking the glass from her hand and placing it on the end table beside him.

Hermione's right hand now empty, she grabbed Ron's left, braiding her fingers with his. "This would probably be a good time to apologize then."

She halfway expected him to snatch his hand away, possibly stand up and leave even, setting fire to random furniture on his way, punching a wall, overturning a table. She hadn't known him to be that aggressive, but she wouldn't blame him all the same.

Ron's fingers remained braided with hers.

"You don't need to do that," he replied calmly. "It was all a long time ago. I should have noticed..."

"No, don't do that!" Hermione turned towards him again, wanting to shake him. "Don't make me feel worse by acting as if I did nothing wrong. I will admit that there was never anything... physical. But I know I had emotionally checked out long before our engagement party. Aren't you at least angry about that?"

Ron turned towards her as well, giving her hand a small squeeze. "I want to be. I want to be angry enough to hex you or, I don't know, smash your wine glass. I know I should be. But I can't."

"Just can't bring yourself to care?" Hermione asked coldly.

"No! I just *can't*," Ron growled. He had finally snatched his hand back, turning away and folding his arms. "Are you happy now? I'm angry about not being able to be angry at you."

Hermione studied Ron's profile carefully. Even in her compromised state she could reflect on Ron's strange behavior throughout the week: the references to religious figures, random appearances and disappearances, his desperation to know about her and Severus and what had come between them.

"Ron, what's wrong? You've been acting strangely all week, and I don't think you've suddenly become Severus' biggest fan, so what's going on?"

Ron remained silent, contemplating the wood flooring below them. This only caused Hermione to worry more. After all, why was he being so tightlipped about it?

And then he sighed. "I've just been feeling strangely for the last couple of weeks. Haven't you been? Any weird visions or strange instrumental music stuck in your head? Anything at all?"

"Well, there's been Severus." When Ron appeared to tilt his head in confusion, Hermione explained, "He's just been on my mind incessantly. I won't lie; I haven't stopped thinking about him since we parted ways, but certainly not this often, this obsessively."

"Maybe your thoughts aren't your own," Ron commented cryptically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Severus Snape did not *bewitch* me! Not in the manner you're implying, at least."

"That's not what I meant!"

Hermione watched as Ron's frustration boiled over. He had abandoned the loveseat all together and began to pace the limited length of the cream-colored sitting room, muttering under his breath. Although she couldn't catch a word of it, it seemed that Ron had finally been able to get angry about Hermione and Severus.

"You want me to react? Fine!" Ron had stopped his progression to eye Hermione. "When were you going to let me in on your little secret? Because our engagement party seems very last minute. You know, other than waiting until our wedding."

Hermione squirmed slightly in her seat, trying to remember why exactly she was so insistent that he react.

"I was confused," she pleaded. Then she threw up her hands, equally frustrated. "Oh that's a lie. I was a coward. I love you, Ron. I still do. But not the way I loved him."

"Why? Why him?"

It was the question she had been waiting for, and yet still, the one she was least prepared for.

"It's difficult to explain," she began, folding her hands in her lap, studying the tips of her fingers. "He loves the things I love: books, and brewing, and quiet conversation. All of the things that bore you. He challenges the way I think and the things I believe. He smells like sandalwood and has this oddly compelling tone to his voice. And for some reason, all of those things make him incredibly attractive to me."

"Then why wait so long to do anything about it?" Ron asked, his arms raised in typical exclamation. "You've made a fool out of all three of us."

Because I was scared.

"I should have broken it off. I know that. I just didn't know what he was thinking." Tiredly closing her eyes, she continued, "There were moments, like when we would share a cup of tea after a long day, or he'd lend me one of his beloved books with his comments in the margins, that it seemed like we were on the same page, but I wasn't sure. And I wasn't entirely sure that I wasn't still in love with you ... At the very least, I cared enough about you that I didn't want to hurt you."

Ron just exhaled, his arms dropping back to his sides. "I suppose I can appreciate that."

Taking that as her opening, Hermione rose from the loveseat and approached Ron slowly. When he didn't flinch away, she wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head against his shoulder.

"I wanted to choose you, I really did. I wanted to want you more than anything."

She felt as his arms circled her own waist, one hand stroking her back.

"I know."

Pulling away gently, Hermione picked up her wine glass from the end table and started towards the kitchen.

"Don't worry," she called over her shoulder. "I'm just going to fix myself a cup of tea. Would you like one?"

"Please," Ron agreed, looking spent.

After sitting her wine glass in the sink, she filled her kettle with water, placing it on the stove to boil. Leaning on a nearby countertop, she voiced a thought that had been eating at her since she had first spied Severus in the restaurant hours ago.

"You know, I had built it up in my mind that I was tirelessly researching, making all of these discoveries, doing everything so that I could show him that I was above what he did to discredit me. Show him that I wouldn't allow his rejection to hold me back."

Ron, who had found a spot at her kitchen table, looked up from his game with the salt and pepper shakers. "And that wasn't why?"

"Not entirely," Hermione admitted, smiling to herself. "Of course, there will always be parts of me that will want to be top of the class, prove to everyone that a Muggleborn is just as capable. But it was also a way of remaining closer to him. Maybe if he saw my name, he wouldn't forget how he felt, just the way I'm reminded when I see his. I wouldn't just be some apprentice with whom he nearly had a fling."

Ron shook his head. "Believe me; you can see it in his eyes. He hasn't forgotten you."

The kettle whistled, causing them both to jump. As Hermione tended to it, Ron revealed something of his own.

"You know how you asked why I was acting so weirdly? If something was wrong?"

"Mhmm," Hermione replied as she fished in her cupboard for the sugar.

"Well," Ron hesitated. "I had a religious experience, of sorts."

Pulling back from the cupboard, Hermione gave Ron a look. "I didn't realize you were interested in that sort of thing."

"It's not exactly what you think," Ron explained. "Someone just sort of showed me that I haven't been living. And maybe it wasn't entirely my fault, but I was comfortable. I didn't want to... deal with anything. You know, feel."

"Hence the lack of anger," Hermione said, as she approached the table, a mug in each hand.

"A bit, yeah. Thanks," Ron added when Hermione placed his tea before him. "But not anymore. I'm not letting anyone or anything run my life. I'm going to stop hiding and fight it."

"Bravo, Ron," Hermione said kindly, raising her mug in solidarity. "But what exactly is it that you're fighting?"

Ron stopped mid-motion, his mug an inch from his lips. "I dunno."

"Oh. Then do you need help figuring out what it is?"

Ron clunked his mug down on the round wooden table. Hermione flinched, almost spilling her tea.

"No. I already know who knows the answer. And he's going to tell me."

Ron sounded defiant.

Taking a quick sip of her tea to prevent overflow, Hermione watched as Ron stood up from his chair, his tea still untouched.

"And you're going to go find out right now?"

Ron's blue eyes had taken on the same possessed gleam she had seen days before in the Ministry, and it was worrying to say the least. But before she could even try to reason with him, his long legs had taken several strides towards her fireplace.

"I'll owl you tomorrow, okay?" He had already grabbed a handful of Floo powder and was in position to leap into the green flames.

"Ron, shouldn't we talk about this? I really could help."

"I have to do this alone. I've only just realized it, but it's the truth. I promise I'll find you in the morning."

And with that the redhead jumped into the green flames.

Glancing around her empty apartment, Hermione drank her tea. Tears rolled down her cheeks, dripping on to the table cloth, on to her dress. She felt overwhelmed, but after seeing Ron, she decided it was just nice to feel. Things would probably be worse before they were better, but she was ready too. She was ready to face Severus again.

"Krish-naa!"

The yell was feeble at best. Ron sat on a faded red rug in the middle of his sitting room, his knees bent and his arm spread out on either side. He had been calling and calling, his voice raspy from his failed efforts to summon the deity. He wasn't sure how long he had been at it, only that it felt as if his throat might bleed from further efforts. It had never taken this long for Krishna to respond to his call. It often felt as if the god was following him, only waiting for the right moment to materialize.

Near to the point of exhaustion, Ron allowed his arms to give way, collapsing backwards. Lying flat on the thin, yarn-like fibers, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Exhaling, he allowed his eyelids to flutter open again. And there was Krishna, standing over him like one of the brass statues in the temple.

"You called, Mr. Weasley."

It wasn't a question, but a statement of exasperation.

Ron nodded sheepishly, still spread out on the rug. "Yes, I called. And called, and called. What took you so long?"

Krishna crossed his cerulean arms, which suddenly appeared particularly muscular in the light of Ron's apartment, prompting Ron to quickly sit up. Though he had only known him a few days, Ron could already read Krishna's body language, and what he read was that his face was dangerously close to being stepped on.

"You do realize that there are many who seek my help across the globe."

"Yeah, I know," Ron replied, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "Sorry."

Krishna exhaled and smiled with an effort, but still. "All is forgiven, Mr. Weasley. Now, please, why have you summoned me?"

Ron scrambled to his feet. With his chest slightly puffed, he said, "I just wanted you to know that I'm ready."

Krishna raised an eyebrow.

"I apologize, but ready for what?"

"The truth, the secret, you know, the thing that's going to tear my soul apart," Ron relayed. "I'm ready to face it."

Krishna studied the man's face carefully, as if he could see through his skin and bone and into his mind.

"I see," he finally replied. "And how have you come to this decision, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron sucked in his lips in slightly, stuffing his hands into his pockets. The time he had spent fruitlessly hailing Krishna had given him an opportunity to consider the answer.

"I realized that you were right," Ron admitted. "I haven't been taking control of my life. I've been letting whomever, or whatever, run it. I've been hiding, in my dad's department, behind my failed engagement, reveling in my numbness." He paused to exhale. "But this thing, whatever it is, won't win. I'm Ron Weasley. I wear my emotions on my sleeve, I enjoy a good adventure, and I am *not* still in love with Hermione Granger. And this, this thing will not convince me otherwise."

Krishna nodded solemnly before a satisfied smile spread across his full lips.

"Well done, Ronald. It is often most difficult to defeat one's personal demons. It is only once one steps back and reflects that they recognize the roadblocks they have erected for themselves."

Although Ron too had begun to smile, his face froze as he considered Krishna's word. "So, there isn't any soul destroying ... thingy that's threatening Hermione and me?"

"Yes, of course there is, Mr. Weasley. But that does not render your personal success any less powerful."

Are you bloody kidding me? Ron fumed internally while staring incredulously up at the half-dressed being.

"No, not at all," Ron agreed sarcastically. "At least not until I'm soulless. Then I think all of my personal growth is pretty much a loss, don't you?"

Krishna clucked his tongue. "Such an impatient young man. Things will resolve themselves, of that I am certain. But you must remain on the path you are on. *Trust your destiny*. The next step will appear very soon. Her face will be the beacon of hope."

"*Her?*"

Just as Ron had managed to utter the question, a familiar voice echoed out of his fireplace.

"Ron, are you there? I think I know what's going on! Could I pop by?"

Padma, Ron realized with a jolt. He wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or kick Krishna (though he did realize the latter would be a poor decision).

"You're not serious," Ron exclaimed in a loud whisper, throwing Krishna an accusing look.

"Yes, of course I am," Padma said, sounding as if she was at the bottom of a well. "Do I really seem like the type of person who makes late night prank Floo calls?"

Barely containing a groan, Ron threw Krishna one more look before calling out, "No, no, of course not! I wasn't, I mean, yes, come by. Now."

It took Padma only a matter of seconds to step over the fireplace grate and into the sitting room, still dressed in the flattering black dress she had worn to the restaurant. Her hair hadn't fared as well and was now sticking up in clumps. Ron imagined she had spent the hour they were separated trying not to pull it out.

"You still have that dress on," was his brilliant greeting.

Now he just wanted to punch himself.

"And you're still wearing a tie," she pointed out, still stationed just outside of the grate. Her eyes swept the room curiously. "Were you just talking to someone before I arrived?"

"No, I wasn't, really," Ron rambled, his eyes making their own sweep. And as he had assumed, Krishna had done a bunk. "Well, maybe to myself, you know. Hard night and all."

Really, if he didn't punch himself, he'd be fine if she did it. Someone had to shut him up.

"Sure..." Padma agreed, her dark brows furrowing. "Anyway, the reason I'm here is that I think I have a working theory, but before I explain that, do you still have the engagement ring you gave Hermione? Or did she keep that?"

Why was Ron's heart suddenly in his throat? He could just feel it there, pulsing. "Yeah, I have it... somewhere. Not too fussed about it though. I'm completely over it."

"But you can find it?" she asked with concern.

"Yes, sorry," Ron quickly answered, deciding that stepping on his own foot might at least be more discreet than taking a swing at himself. "I'll go get it."

Dashing off into his bedroom, he couldn't help watching over his shoulder several times, as if to make sure she didn't leave. As he dug through his sock drawer for the not-so-forgotten ring, he began to wonder when Padma had turned into *Padma*. She was just standing there, in his sitting room, in that dress. The thought of it gave him indigestion, or was it that sharp pain from before?

Returning to the sitting room and out of breath, he immediately noticed that Padma had moved. Luckily, it was only to the couch. Joining her, he plopped down hard enough that Padma sprang up a little.

"Here," he said as he dropped the ring into Padma's outstretched palm.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed as the ring made contact with her skin. Her sudden flinch caused it to jump out of her hand and onto the nearby rug.

Bending down to retrieve it, Ron asked, "Are you okay?"

Padma shook out her hand and then examined it. "I'm fine. The ring just burned me."

"Really?" Ron responded, rolling the small metal loop between his fingers. "It feels perfectly fine to me."

"Well, that just confirms my suspicions," Padma said. It was only then that Ron noticed she had lugged an extremely large briefcase with her. After extracting a notepad and quill, she inquired, "When exactly did Hermione break things off?"

Ron snorted, leaning into the couch cushion. "In the middle of the bloody ceremony." Shifting his head to watch her, he asked, "Don't you remember? You were there too."

Padma didn't bother to look up from her notes.

"I know it was during the ceremony, but what was the exact moment? I remember you did some old-fashioned ritual."

Ron rubbed his stubbly chin thoughtfully with his thumb and forefinger. "Yeah, it was a binding spell. Kind of a preliminary to the wedding. Something Hermione had dug up in some ancient tome," he answered slowly, the memories filtering back. "She said she borrowed it from you."

Padma stopped scribbling and placed her quill flat against the notepad.

"She did borrow it from me. Oi." The latter was said with a look of regret. Turning her body slightly to face Ron's, she asked, "Can I start off by apologizing for that?"

"Well, I think we both know she was going to break things off, regardless."

Shaking her head sadly, she insisted, "Yes, but everything that's happening right now, it's from that book."

Perplexed, Ron leaned forward on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Is it cursed or something?"

"No," Padma answered carefully, "but you might be."

Ron opened his mouth several times, no sound coming out.

"The spell she found, it's an engagement enchantment, Indian in origin," Padma explained, practically covering her face in her hands. Sighing, she settled her hands in her lap and continued. "The myth is that it was created by the god, Kamadeva. In mythology, he's a bit like the Hindu version of Cupid, bow and arrow and everything. The thing is, it's meant to bind together those who are truly in love. Except..."

"Hermione wasn't in love with me anymore," Ron finished, pushing back the ginger fringe tickling his forehead.

"Exactly. She didn't even take the vow, did she?"

"No, I said my part and she said, 'I can't do this,' and ran out of the room."

"Well, that's it then," Padma reasoned. She was scribbling on her notepad furiously. "You're bound to her and she isn't bound to anyone. And like you said at dinner, it's been exactly ten years. The spell is probably itching to complete the process. It's incredibly unsatisfying to do these things halfway."

Ron felt deflated. He really had gotten in his own way.

Staring straight ahead to the bare wall in front of him, Ron muttered, "So the ethereal glow, her voice in my head, my inability to move on ..."

"All side effects most likely," Padma replied. "I think the first two might have been last-ditch efforts to force you to complete the ritual, but the latter..."

"I allowed it to go on too long."

Abandoning her notes, Padma place a hand on his shoulder and tried to offer him some comfort. "Honestly, with this type of spell, it only becomes harder to fight it the longer you submit. In the first couple days, had you say, burned all of her possessions and developed some vitriolic hatred of her, you might not be feeling anything at all now, might even have moved on."

"But instead I've just been waiting around like an idiot," Ron grumbled. He wanted to shake off her hand, but resisted, even if he didn't deserve her pity. "I honestly thought I was completely over her, but I guess some little part of me is still in love with her."

"I'm guessing some little part of you always will be, Ron," Padma said quietly. "That being said, it shouldn't stop you from moving on. Allowing the enchantment to keep its hold is probably what's 'destroying' your soul, Hermione's too."

"Probably," Ron agreed. "She did say something about thinking about Severus a lot, so I guess it's affecting her as well."

Padma scrunched her nose and then relaxed it. "Sorry, still getting used to that. He's brilliant and all, but not exactly my type."

"I'm right there with you," Ron replied before quickly rephrasing the statement, his hands raised in a surrender-like fashion. "I mean, in general, men aren't my type, but, you know, even if they were, you know, in some far off universe..."

"I get it," Padma assured him with a smile. Her hand had slid from his shoulder to wrap around his elbow. "So it seems like the only way to shake this will be for you to let go. Declare that you're not in love with Hermione and that you no longer want to be bound to her, but really mean it. I'm assuming that's why Krishna asked you to reunite Hermione with Severus. It's the ultimate act of moving on."

Ron nodded in agreement, leaning back into the couch cushion again. He could feel Padma lean against him, their shoulders touching and her arm caught in the crook of his. He ached to wrap it around her shoulders, but he satisfied himself with brushing her hand with his.

"Who would have thought ten years ago that I would be hooking Hermione up with Snape?" Ron wondered aloud.

Whether it was nerves or stress or the sheer absurdity of the situation, Ron wasn't certain, but something triggered Padma into a fit of giggles, one that had her trembling in her seat, her arm still wrapped around his.

Ron began laughing as well, the two of them practically tearing up as the true cause drifted away, leaving them laughing just to laugh.

Of course, everything seemed to be pretty fluid these days, so it probably shouldn't have been too surprising when the fireplace flashed again with green flames.

In Ron's mind, it really was only a matter of time before Severus Snape showed up to murder him.

A/N: Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Given the specificity of the prompt, I will wait until the last chapter to reveal it. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included designrl - the amazing alpha/beta/cheerleader combo - as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and Britpick.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 6

A case of divine intervention forces Ron to take on a challenge he never imagined: reuniting Hermione with Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize is not mine.

Padma was the first to move, untangling herself from Ron and slinking off the couch awkwardly.

"I should probably leave you two to talk," she said calmly as she carefully smoothed out the ends of her dress. Despite this seemingly casual attitude, she made eye contact with Ron, and the look clearly said, *Do you need me to stay?*

Before Ron could form a response, verbal or otherwise, Snape said, "Thank you, Ms. Patil. Mr. Weasley and I certainly have much to discuss."

Ron swallowed hard, sinking further into the couch. He and Padma shared one last look before she stepped into the fireplace. Her dark eyes were warm and encouraging, and Ron tried to convey a similar confidence with his own wide baby blues, but pure terror was all he could manage.

"Er, good night then, Professor. Ron." The green flames crawled up her legs, engulfing her torso and head, and seconds later she was gone, leaving Ron and Snape completely alone.

Feeling vulnerable on the couch, Ron moved to stand, only to be halted by Snape's raised hand.

"Please remain where you are, Mr. Weasley."

"You, er, you can call me, Ron, you know," Ron said in a weak attempt at reducing the tension.

"I am aware of that," Snape replied, acknowledging the invitation and simultaneously crumpling it.

Silence took hold again, Ron still paralyzed on his couch and Snape cool as a menacing cucumber as he stood in the center of the sitting room. The older man gave the room a once over, his nostril flaring at the Quidditch memorabilia and the lopsided armchair. However, this reprieve was only momentary.

"It is my belief, *Mr. Weasley*, that you have involved me in something without sharing all of the facts."

How does he know these things?

"How did I guess? Well, it was certainly clear something was afoot when Hermione appeared completely surprised by my presence this evening. Any idiot could see she was not the one who orchestrated the event."

Ron's cheeks colored. He couldn't decide if he was angry or embarrassed, but he did know that all of it was displayed on his overly-expressive face, so he turned decidedly away from the hovering Snape.

"You're right," Ron admitted, avoiding eye contact. "She had no idea you would be there. I knew she might not show up otherwise, so I asked Padma to tell her it was a meeting with donors."

A moment of silence followed the admission, during which, Ron assumed, Snape was either disgustedly examining his framed collection of Quidditch cards or trying to determine the best way to get rid of his dead body. Both seemed equally plausible.

"Is this all in an effort to shame both of us?" Snape asked tiredly. "You're even thicker than I thought if it took you this long to recognize that she and I were... involved."

Careful not to grab his wand, lest he do something he would truly regret, Ron snarled, "I did this ~~for~~ you two. I was trying to reunite you."

This idea alone seemed to tickle Snape, his laugh cold and incredulous.

"You would honestly have me believe that you *approve* of Hermione and me?"

It was Ron's turn to laugh coldly.

"Of course not. It's just... It's strange. But you're what she wants, and well, it's what needs to happen for both of our sakes."

Snape's eyebrows furrowed in consideration. "What do you mean for both of your sakes?"

"It's what's best for Hermione and me..." Ron hesitated. "Don't you remember what I said on your doorstep? About Hermione's soul being in danger?"

If he was puzzled, Snape's face didn't express it, save for a small tilt of his head.

"Explain," Snape commanded, folding his arms.

Ron folded his own arms and then dropped them, suddenly restless. Should he tell Snape *everything*? It's not like it involved him... but it did. Ron exhaled in defeat.

"The short story is Hermione and me, well actually just me, but she was there and I think it's affecting her too..."

"Spit it out, Weasley!" Snape barked.

"Sorry," Ron apologized quickly, brushing back his encroaching copper fringe. Sitting up straight, he continued, "At our engagement party, Hermione and I took part in this ancient ritual that is meant to magically bind two people in love. As it turns out, Hermione wasn't in love with me and ran off before we could finish it, but not before I said my part of the incantation."

"You're bound to her," Snape concluded, suddenly looking the slightest bit flustered. His arms had dropped to his side, hanging uselessly as he stared Ron, as if waiting for him to reveal that it was all a lie.

"The good news is," Ron continued, using Snape's momentary shock to stand, "the solution is fairly straightforward. Just have to get you two crazy kids together. So, actually, I guess it's only straightforward in theory."

Snape remained silent, standing quite still in the center of the sitting room rug. He was glaring at the floor, possibly to avoid glaring at the young man across from him.

"Maybe we should move this to the kitchen," Ron suggested cautiously. "I could make us some tea, or we could just sit at the table, instead of standing here... like this."

To his surprise, Snape managed to grunt, "Fine," following him to the tiny rectangular kitchen table. The room was hardly a kitchen, but a kitchenette, just off the main sitting room. The small size of the table made for close quarters, causing both men to sit sideways in their chairs to avoid jamming knees under the table. No request for tea was voiced, so the pair resumed their awkward silence.

"I really shouldn't be surprised that Hermione and I seem to be fated," Snape commented quietly, his baritone voice almost a husky whisper.

"Well," Ron replied, scrunching his nose, "'fated' might be an overstatement of the situation. I mean, it didn't necessarily have to be you that she was in love with. Could have been anyone, really. Besides me, apparently."

"That is true," Snape agreed, his demeanor less aggressive and more pensive as they conversed. "However, I do remember leaving that evening and feeling the slightest bit of relief that she hadn't declared her love. I was... am more acclimated to the role of the jilted."

Ron smiled wryly. "To think you and I might actually have something in common."

Snape managed to snort at the notion. "Perish the thought."

Deciding he might as well wade out into the deep end, Ron asked, "So, if you were relieved, even slightly, why did you leave Hermione's name off that paper?"

"Because I can be ridiculously spiteful," Snape grumbled, his countenance souring. "I never thought I deserved her, but I didn't want her with anyone else. I was angry with her, but angrier with myself for allowing such a fantasy. That kind of anger generally results in doing something idiotic, and I sent the paper off that night."

"You have another chance, though," Ron pointed out. "Tonight might not have gone so well, but I think she's ready to try again."

Snape gave another mirthless laugh.

"I'm not even sure what she sees in me. Granted, I wasn't sure what she saw in you either."

"Oh, the feeling is mutual," Ron replied, standing and giving a little stretch. Snape looked as if he might stand as well, but remained where he was, his hands resting on his knees. "I think the tea's out, but how about some Firewhiskey? I have a bottle somewhere..."

As he dug through the cupboards for the bottle, he heard the chair groan as Snape stretched out his long frame. If he wasn't comfortable, he clearly wasn't leaving, either.

"Right, here we go," Ron said as he surfaced from the cupboard, the bottle of cheap Firewhiskey gripped in one hand. Returning to the table with the bottle and two glass tumblers, he poured them each a glass, ready to dull the frustrations of the day.

"Shall we toast?" he asked, raising his tumbler in the air.

Snape made a noise but similarly raised his glass.

"Right, to Hermione and... whatever it is she sees in either of us."

Clinking glasses in midair, the pair downed their dose in several gulps. Pouring again, Ron decided he probably should try to refocus this pity party on the mission at hand.

"I think you know how you need to fix this," Ron said as he slid Severus his refilled glass.

"Perhaps," Snape replied. He examined the contents of the glass before taking a sip, suddenly more cautious.

"You like the same things she likes," Ron said, taking a sip of his own drink. "That was one of the things she likes about you. Also that you're challenging and... smell like sandalwood?"

Snape looked up from his glass. "Is that all?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "She finds your voice 'compelling'. Need more?"

Snape reacted with a raised eyebrow. Contemplating his glass for another second, he finished his drink and placed the glass down on the small table. Standing up, he gave Ron a nod, and then made his way to the fireplace.

Ron watched as Snape disappeared into the green flames, still nursing his drink. With any luck, his mission might finally be complete.

Krishna leaned against a sink, watching his devotee at work. She was quickly chopping mandrake roots into carefully measured segments, her arm in constant motion. He hadn't seen her very much at temple as of late, but he knew she was keeping up her daily devotions at home, running off to work after saying her morning prayers. Although he generally only checked in on her during her temple visits, and sometimes at moment of extreme crisis, this morning seemed important enough that he had placed himself in the corner of her lab, prepared to watch what unraveled next. He had, after all, worked very hard for this moment.

As if on cue, the lab door opened, a tired-looking Hermione slogging through.

Placing down her knife, Padma glanced over at Hermione, a look of surprise stretching her features. "You came in?"

"Don't sound so surprised," Hermione grumbled, tossing her briefcase on one of the black lab tables. "I had to do something to get my mind off things. Also, I think there's a bit of hangover reliver in my desk."

"Oh, Hermione, you didn't," Padma said, untying her apron. Laying it over her workbench, she walked over to her beleaguered friend, wrapping her up in a quick hug. "You almost never drink. Where did you even find the alcohol?"

"Healer Thomas gave me a cheap bottle of Merlot for Christmas," Hermione muttered. Plopping down on a free bench, she leaned forward, holding her head. "Happy Christmas to me."

Padma sighed and took a seat next to her.

"You know, I really should be cross with you right now. How could you not tell me about you and Severus Snape?"

Hermione groaned.

"Because there was not much to tell. I ruined the whole thing before it even began."

Padma patted Hermione on the back. "I know it's not looking good right now, but I think there's still a future there. That is, if you both want it."

Hermione groaned again and sat up. Gingerly rising from the bench, she waddled over to the office.

"I'll be out in a second. Just need to grab a dose of the reliever."

Padma remained on her bench, studying her hands.

Meanwhile, Krishna waited impatiently for the ginger's arrival. The man had a knack for waiting until the last second.

"I went over to Ron's last night," Padma called out to the office door.

"Really? Why?" Hermione shouted from within the other room.

Biting the inside of her cheek, Padma responded, "Well, to see Ron."

"Of course, but why..." Hermione's thought trailed off. However, it was quickly followed by Hermione bursting out of the office. "You and Ron? Are you two dating?"

"Wow, that hangover reliever really is fast-acting," Padma muttered as Hermione bound over to her.

"Padma, that's wonderful," Hermione said, giving her hands a squeeze. "I think you'll be really good for him."

"Well, nothing officially happened," Padma quickly countered. "I'm not even sure how he feels about me and..."

The door banged open, effectively cutting off the rest of her statement.

Finally, Krishna thought as he watched Ronald Weasley enter the lab.

"Oh, hi," he greeted nervously, holding a manila envelope close to his chest.

"Speak of the devil," Hermione said, smirking at Padma.

Padma's cheeks reddened, and as if in response, so did Ron's.

Watching between the two of them, Hermione began to move towards the office again. "Maybe I should give you two a moment alone."

"No, wait!" Ron hurried over to Hermione, thrusting the manila envelope into her hands. "I actually came to deliver this."

Fingering the envelope, Hermione looked over at Padma, who shrugged.

"Just see what's inside."

Nodding, Hermione carefully lifted the envelope's flap and reached her hand inside. Pulling out a bound periodical, she slowly opened the journal to the flagged page. Her eyes seemed to scan it several times in disbelief before a tear rolled down her cheek.

"I can't believe this," Hermione whispered, brushing the page with her hand. Gently placing the journal down, she picked up her briefcase and turned to the door.

"I have to go now. There's something I've been meaning to say to someone and it's incredibly overdue."

Although her eyes were watery, Hermione couldn't hide the smile spreading across her face. Reaching the door, she looked back at Ron. "Thank you for doing this."

"It's what's meant to be," he replied, returning her smile.

As the door closed behind Hermione, Padma reached for the journal, flipping it open to the same page.

"He reprinted the article," she said. Putting it back on the table, she turned to Ron. "I don't understand; he could have done this years ago."

"That would have required him to swallow his pride," Ron said quietly. "I think this is his way of telling Hermione that he's ready to start over."

Padma smiled to herself. "So I guess this means you're..."

"Free?" Ron supplied.

"Yes, free," Padma agreed as Ron sat on the bench next her.

"I am. In fact, I'm free next Thursday if you'd like to take me out then."

"Aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves?" Padma asked.

"Not at all," he responded, pulling her hands into his lap. "I'm just trying to be assertive."

"Well, luckily for you, I like assertive men," Padma replied, scooting down next to him.

Still standing in the back of the room, Krishna's ruby red lips stretched into his trademark tranquil smile as Padma laid her head on Ron's shoulder.

Hermione stared at Severus' front door. She had mucked up her first two chances, and she refused to allow this one to slip through her fingers. With this in mind, she inhaled deeply and knocked on the door.

As it swung open, Hermione exhaled. She could already see it on his face, in his eyes, in the way his free hand clenched at his side. He had been waiting for her.

"I love you." The words left her lips unrushed. She wanted him to hear every syllable as she tried to imbue them with all of her emotions, all of her love.

He swallowed silently, his Adam's apple bobbing. Then he stepped aside, leaving room for Hermione to walk over the threshold and back into his life.

Accepting the invitation, Hermione moved through the front door, stopping at his side. She reached for his hand, her own trembling with anticipation. Bringing it to her lips, she kissed it before braiding her fingers with his.

And as it turned out, holding hands with Severus Snape was even more thrilling than she had previously imagined.

One Year Later...

Hermione lightly touched the back of her hair. It felt as if it was a wig, sleek and twisted within an inch of its life. It felt foreign. But she would need to show her face in less than a minute, so there was no time to fix it now.

Oddly, she was okay with that. Even an ill-planned hairstyle couldn't dampen her spirits today. Turning to check her reflection in the mirror one last time, she dabbed at her lips and then dropped her hands.

Well, this is it.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione pulled open the flaps of the tent and walked outside. There, centered between two sets of filled chairs, lay a long strip of white cloth, one which ended at an ivory-colored archway and the handsomest potioneer in the room. That thought alone kept Hermione smiling as she slowly progressed down the aisle, a bouquet of Queen Anne's lace gripped between her two hands.

Arriving at the pathway's end, Hermione looked upwards, meeting the fathomless eyes of Severus Snape. Breathing in, her nostrils filled with the smell of sandalwood and old books, a strangely pleasing mixture. Her eyes never left his, not as she repeated the vows, not as he slipped a ring on her finger, not even when she was jolted by the slight pain of the official sealing the bind.

Officially husband and wife, Severus leaned forward, one hand cradling her head as his lips hovered over hers.

"Hermione," he whispered, leaving her in anticipation. "What have you done to your hair?"

"Had a bit of a mishap," Hermione admitted, biting her lip. "It's awful, isn't it?"

"It merely requires an adjustment," he responded. And before she knew it, Severus had untwisted her supposedly elegant hairstyle, leaving equal parts frizz and curls to land on her shoulders.

Leaning away to admire his work, Severus commented, "Much better," before sweeping her into a breathless kiss.

Ron watched this scene unfold from his seat in the second row. His left arm was wrapped tightly around Padma's shoulders as she leaned over to kiss his cheek. Turning to meet the gaze of his beautiful fiancée, Ron had only one thought:

Mission accomplished.

Prompt: In order to redeem his soul, Ron Weasley must bring Severus Snape and Hermione Granger together... preferably in the holy estate of matrimony... then live with the consequences.

A/N: Written as a gift for bardsdaughter1 for the 2012 SSHG Exchange. Thank you to my awesome editing team, which included designr - the amazing alpha/beta/cheerleader combo - as well as ofankoma, quaffswinegaily, and wildmagelet, who all stepped in at various points in the project to help edit and Britpick.