

Winter Bivouac

by Minerva

While working undercover in Geneva, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape get dumped in the middle of the Alps by a malfunctioning Portkey.

One shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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Their initial relief that Snape's old emergency Portkey had worked despite the fact that their attackers had managed to get their wands turned to dread when they realised quite where it had dumped them. Hermione dared not to let Severus' hand go as it was pitch dark, and around them was snow, a lot of it; the temperature was well below zero (in degrees Celsius no less). She couldn't even say whether they were upside or not as they had landed in a tangle of limbs.

"Keep still, Granger, and try to find out to where your saliva flows."

The hissed comment from her reluctant comrade made sense. As much as their assignment did. Initially, neither had been pleased to be drawn away from research, but the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, had made a compelling argument. Ten years after the fall of Voldemort the intelligence of a possible Death Eater resurrection from Geneva was not without cause. Someone had been causing heavy disturbances in the worldwide wizarding economy, obviously using Arithmancy to do so. As Gringotts was Hermione's chief customer as an Arithmancy Mistress specialising in finance she had been in no position to say no when the bank's board had approached the Minister of Magic with their concerns.

Severus Snape had done several bouts of intelligence work since the war while seemingly working off a two-decade-long backlog of Potions ideas. He patented a new or improved one every six months or so.

Both had invented individual reasons for travel as they still were quite famous in Britain and had checked into a small Muggle B&B as heavily glamourised Muggles. Their first two days of playing tourist had passed quite amicably. Hermione bowed to Severus' greater experience in reconnaissance work and kept her questions to a minimum. The Potions master obviously viewed her as a comrade in arms.

So far Severus' suspicions had proved to be true. He had from the first war remembered a Lestrangle cousin whom he had never met but who was rumoured to be an Arithmancy prodigy, studying in Alexandria and Switzerland. The very same Romuald Lestrangle headed a broker firm in Geneva with a wizarding and a Muggle front. Whether he was behind the economic disturbances was yet to be determined.

They had been really careful. Snape had only talked about strategies in open, public spaces; far away from anywhere an eavesdropping-spell or a microphone or someone lip-reading could catch them. Anywhere else they were a pair of tourists, armed with guides, sketch books and even a Muggle camera. In Hermione's opinion they had

been rather convincing. Severus she was calling him that in her mind already was interested enough in architecture, politics and culture and a compelling dining companion, even if they could not discuss magical theories.

But someone must have got suspicious. They had been ambushed near their hotel after a late evening stroll through Geneva's centre, completely taken by surprise and captured with Stunning spells and a magically enforced Muggle net. Thankfully, their glamours held, and their on-duty-wands only gave up the magical signatures of Mr and Mrs Brian Conolly, their aliases. The situation would have been a lot more serious if their attackers would have realised that they had captured Hermione Granger and Severus Snape.

Hermione had been nearly sick seeing her partner being tortured with Crucio, but of course he had not told them anything, and when the villains had wanted to switch to her Severus had used the distraction, grabbed her hand and activated an emergency Portkey.

Unluckily, it had been an old one, made for use within the British Isles. Which was why they were now being dumped in what had to be the Alps. Hermione waited a while, felt for where in her mouth her saliva gathered in her left cheek and then grabbed Severus' hand, directing it to where was up.

Fighting their way out of the snow the cold hit them even worse. Severus' sigh summed it up nicely. If they did not find shelter they would freeze to death soon.

The snow reflected the light of the half-full moon, which was enough to make out a rectangular shape to their right. It was only a stone throw away, but they had to swim through the snow. The shape proved to be an alpine cabin, rather small and of course uninhibited at this time of the year.

"Severus, look! It says Neue Thueringer Huette, 2212 m, DAV! I think that means Deutscher Alpenverein, German Alpine Association. We are in Germany!"

The man in question looked around him, taking in the absolute bleakness of their surroundings and the temperature.

"I don't think so. There are cabins of the DAV in Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Slovenia as well. It is too high and too remote for Germany, we cannot even see the light halo of a settlement on the horizon. We are really quite in the middle of the Alps; my guess would be the Dolomites, High Tauern or the Swiss Alps. But these cabins should have emergency bivouacs. Let's go look for it."

They found the bivouac at the lee side of the cabin. Severus busied himself with making fire without a wand while Hermione finally remembered her Muggle mobile. Of course she hadn't any reception. The bunk beds each sleeping three - looked comfortable, but right now the temperature inside was still below zero. Happily, she found some teabags and a tin of sugar, and soon the temperature inside the windowless bivouac rose, not to comfortable heights but to a level that ensured their survival at the moment.

Slowly stirring a lot of sugar into his cup, Severus addressed her.

"Put as much sugar into your tea as you can stomach, you will need the energy to keep warm. We will take the upper bunk as heat rises. It may not be to your liking, but we have to stay as close as possible under the blankets. I cannot rely on myself to stay awake to keep the fire going, not after the Cruciatus."

"I have some inkling of basic survival rules, thank you." Hermione tried to lighten the mood. "I will keep my scarf on so that you have a chance not to be suffocated by my hair."

He snorted at this. Soon after the Potions master fired the ancient stove up as high as he dared. They made a nest of blankets in which they snuggled together, Hermione tucked safely into Severus arms, his chin resting on her scarfed head. It was warm enough and the young woman drifted off to sleep, when a thought occurred her overstressed mind and made her tense.

"Severus, aren't there bears in the Alps? That door doesn't look very sturdy!"

"Go to sleep, Granger. Bears hibernate." He tightened his arms momentarily and soon after ladylike snores and not so ladylike snores could be heard in the bivouac.

At first, Hermione did not know what had woken her up. Warmth from the stove was still in the air; she could not have slept for very long. Severus had turned in his sleep. The young woman's thoughts were still fogged; therefore she did not immediately realise how tense her companion had become. He was rigid, and trembling.

"Severus?"

Only a low moan, followed by a piteous whimper was her answer. His breath was coming in short gasps, interspersed with incoherent, desperate pleading. Hermione had shared a tent with Harry Potter for a year and had been witness to his visions from Voldemort, but even her friend's most violent nightmares did not come close to the bleak and hopeless desperation Snape exuded during his. The young woman's heart nearly broke at the thought that the ex-spy had to suffer through something like this on a regular basis. She turned around, spooning him and without thinking burrowed as closely to his back as possible, putting her arms around him. Her murmured calming words had no effect. Hermione wanted to rage and cry at the injustice of it.

This man, who had given nearly twenty years of his life, who had shed a lot of blood, sweat and tears during that time, who had suffered terribly and still had found the courage to return to Voldemort, this man was not even allowed to sleep two or three hours. She scarcely had time to realise that her magic was rising, was gaining power. It discharged with an almighty 'whoosh' that should have shaken the foundations of the cabin but instead filled the bivouac and its inhabitants with an incredible warmth and calm serenity. Severus settled down with a little sigh, and Hermione succumbed to sleep soon after, too exhausted to analyse what had happened.

The next morning Snape woke first. He piled all available blankets on his companion and put the kettle on. Then he made tea, stirring three generous spoons of sugar into each of their mugs. Carefully opening the door the Potions master slipped outside and closed it behind him quickly. The sight was breathtaking. The snow was glittering under a clear blue sky. The sun was behind the cabin, which told Severus that they were facing north now where a valley ran as far as they could see, with no signs of civilisation. Turning to the South, he saw even higher mountains and a glacier. As beautiful their surroundings were, the view confirmed Severus' fears. They were in the High Tauern, the highest part of the Alps in Austria. Narrow valleys, formed by mostly vanished glaciers ran from the mountain range towards the Salzach valley. They were uninhibited between September and May because their steep inclines made them very prone to avalanches. Now and then a lone wanderer on skis braved of the ridges between those valleys, hence the winter bivouacs. They were necessary because the next proper road was at least 12 kilometres away. Not much of a distance really, but impossible to trek without skis and the skill to use them properly. With a sigh he returned to the cabin.

"Good morning, Severus. Tea's just about drinkable. Do you have an idea where we are?"

"I do. Do you know how to ski in deep snow?"

"I have never tried. I am able to get down a slope without falling down too often."

"Just as I thought. As an apprentice, I did a year in Salzburg and went hiking and skiing quite often. But not in the last twenty-five years or so. Come outside for a minute, I'll show you what we would be facing."

Hermione drew on her cloak and followed Severus outside.

"Right below the cabin the valley is too steep for us to get down safely. We have to trek back to the valley end and get down there. Then, we have to go for at least ten kilometres. The snow in the valley below will be about three metres high, impossible to walk without skis or snow shoes. A kilometre will take about half an hour at least. Our best chance is to break into the cabin proper and look for skies and snowshoes. Or a radio set to call mountain rescue."

"How will we explain being here?"

"I can manage a wandless Confundus. That is because I am a strong Occlumens. I can't do wandless Transformations, unfortunately."

"Me neither."

He turned to go back inside.

"Severus?"

"Mhm."

"Our situation is quite desperate, isn't it?"

Hermione appeared rather calm, considering her assessment. Facing her, he answered, "Yes, it is rather bleak. We might find some tinned food inside. Someone with a radio or a GPS transmitter might pass. But I do not think that we will be able to get down into the valley without accidents -- only very accomplished skiers would in these conditions. If, by a miracle, we both do, then there's the long trek back to the Salzach valley. Up here an avalanche might get us any time and below the tree line the woods will slow us down to a crawl, making it quite impossible to reach civilisation within a day. And it is too cold for a night outside."

She reached out to touch his arm and went back into the bivouac. Severus followed and looked around for something to break into the cabin. Armed with a poker, he braved the backdoor, which didn't prove challenging. Together with Hermione he searched the basement. They found some more firewood but nothing much that would sustain them while they waited for help. On the plus side there were two pairs of skis, skiing boots that fit more or less and clothing more suitable for their plan than their own cloaks. Over a dinner of beans and crackers they decided to start around four in the morning when the moon would give them some light.

The next day their luck held. There were no clouds obscuring La Luna, and therefore they were off as planned after leaving a note for the cabin hosts. Hermione proved to be an able skier as long as the terrain was friendly, and Severus soon remembered a long forgotten skill. When they reached the end of the valley, the rising sun was already tinting the surrounding mountains pink. The slope downwards was really steep and while both fell several times they got down without injury. They rested for a while drank tea from the borrowed thermoses and ate some chocolate bars. Severus knew that they weren't out of danger, but he dared to hope a little bit.

The trek through the ravine proved as arduous as feared. The more narrow the ravine got the slower they could go, needing much more than the half hour allotted to a distance of one kilometre. Still, they were nearing the tree-border some time after midday. The sun had risen, and they were no longer cold. Severus could tell that Hermione had not a lot of strength left but trudged on nonetheless. During their assignment, she had been an agreeable companion, and he even planned to incorporate some of her Arithmancy-based ideas into his research. They could collaborate on some projects, had made tentative plans even, before their abduction.

A sound like a gunshot followed by a low rumble disrupted the Potions master's musings. It grew darker quickly as the avalanche brought snow dust with it. Hermione sought his eyes, resignation in hers. They would die here within the next minutes. Severus reached for her, his intention to provide comfort when he felt something wild and desperate stir within. Thinking only of getting them somewhere safe, he felt a sensation somewhere between Apparition and flight. When Hermione's left ski banged against his hip he tried to focus his conscious magic while not losing his connection to the accidental magic he seemed to perform right now.

They were flying at top speed towards the Northern end of the valley, towards help and civilisation. Severus concentrated on the feel of unaided flight and tried to slow them down while directing them to fly lower. From this height, if he couldn't maintain whatever he was doing, they would plummet to death. Hermione was screaming in sheer terror, clinging to Severus. The flight was a terrible drain of his magic, and he only could make out a huge mound of snow towards which they were heading before he lost consciousness.

The impact managed to make Hermione lose her breath for a moment. Severus had landed on top of her and must have injured himself, judging by how heavy he was. With her last strength fuelled by adrenaline, a lot of swearing and puffing she managed to wriggle out from under her companion. Their limbs were tangled and stuck in the snow because the bindings of the skiers hadn't opened. It was a small miracle that their impact had caused her no injury, broken bones or torn tendons. Hermione managed to get the skies off herself first and then off Severus. He was breathing deeply and his pulse was steady. Looking around the young woman guessed they had landed on a mound of snow at the parking lot of High Tauern national park. As it was a dead end street the snowploughs had amassed the white dust, much to their luck.

Severus was stirring while Hermione tried to get the skiing boots off his feet in exchange for his dragon-hide-boots. After stowing their skiing equipment behind the ranger's hut beside the parking lot she managed to get him going. Thankfully the lights of a tavern were already visible.

Hermione had got some hot chocolate and chicken soup into Severus before he slept like a log. She'd made contact with Kingsley via phone. Tomorrow temporary wands, money and a credit card would be delivered to the tavern. After a hot shower she started to write down her report, regularly checking on her companion. His bout of what must have been some sort of accidental magic had got them to safety but had left him terribly drained. As he seemed to be unharmed otherwise, sleep and sustenance were the only things that would help right now.

Struggling to be awake, Severus noticed the warmth and the comfortable bedding. As he stirred, his muscles protested and some bruises made themselves felt. He made his way into the loo and back and felt exhausted already. Hermione had left a thermos with chicken soup on his bedside table, which the Potions master forced himself to eat before falling asleep again.

When he woke up the next time, he was able to stay awake long enough for a shower, application of Muggle bruise balm and a full meal. He noticed that his companion held herself back from fussing too much and was grateful for this. After three days, Severus had recovered enough for them to travel to Salzburg where they would find a Portkey waiting. The former spy had not added a lot to Hermione's report for Kingsley, merely some additional observations about their attackers.

After a debriefing, they parted ways in London with a vague promise to contact each other to do research together.

At first, she hardly noticed the signs: constant fatigue, aching joints and a dwindling appetite. When she did notice them she put them down to too much work after being away for a while and maybe an impending flu. When the flu never came, she resorted to Pepperup and other potions. Those helped for a while as did reducing her workload. Until the day Hermione Granger collapsed during a meeting at Gringotts.

Ginny Weasley-Potter looked at her sleeping friend with sorrow. The healers were unable to pinpoint the reason for her slowly diminishing health and stamina. The best curse-breakers Gringotts could produce had looked her over and had found nothing. Dark Arts experts from the Unspeakable Department also could not find a reason. Harry had written to Severus Snape and given him a detailed description of Hermione's symptoms, but the Potions master could not name any poison that might cause them. Mr and Mrs Granger had arranged a thorough check-up with Muggle specialists that had also rendered no results. Sighing, Ginny adjusted Hermione's bedding and left.

Gideon and Gwendolyn, George's and Angelina's newborn twins had commandeered Molly Weasley's attention for the first two weeks. Therefore she had not visited

Hermione at St Mungo's yet. Taking in her appearance lacklustre hair, greying skin tone, reduced muscle tonus, dull eyes - she was about to call for a healer and berate him or her severely for their incompetence. To Molly it was clear what ailed Hermione at first glance. That got the Weasley matriarch thinking: the young Arithmancer was the best-read person of her acquaintance. It seemed inconceivable that she would not know why she was in this state. Therefore some talking was in order before she called the healers.

"Hello, Hermione!"

"Mrs Weasley-"

"It's Molly as you well know."

The patient managed a weak grin. Molly sat down and looked at Hermione in a way that made her uncomfortable because it reminded her of the fact that this was the woman who had raised Fred and George without going mad and who had bested Bellatrix Black in a duel.

"Hermione, do *you* know why you're in such a state?"

Averting her eyes the younger woman took her time to answer. "I cannot be sure until I have done further research. I will not base anything on something Lavender Brown told me as a teenager."

"For all her good heart Lavender is a bit flighty, but if you're alluding to her talking about bond-mates she got it right. Hermione, you are Withering! If you do not find whomever you bonded with and get him here or her, for that matter then you will grow weaker and weaker, in body as well as in mind."

"The healers told me that they could keep me like this with potions for a long time. If I reduce my travelling and my workload I can go on into my eighties. I will not force him into anything!"

"Hermione, he could be in the same state as you are! Or worse! What is your problem? Is he married?"

"I won't tell you, Molly. Are you sure that it is Withering? It is rare, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But all Purebloods know about it. It was not uncommon that someone in an arranged marriage was Withering because of an innocently formed bond. It only takes a large amount of magic on behalf of the other person. Most of the time childhood-playmates were affected because of accidental magic. If it happens a second time the other way round the bond is completed. There are socially accepted interactions for such situations, dancing for example. Bond-mates have to be bodily close, it need not be a sexual situation."

"I will think about it. Molly, please do not tell anyone else."

"I will give you a week, then I will talk to Arthur about it. I think that your mate has a right to know about the bond."

The visit had rocked Hermione's equanimity severely. She had been convinced firmly in her belief that it was for Severus' best if she did not tell him about it. The first half of the bond must have been formed when he had had that terrible nightmare, and she had extended a great bout of calming magic. As she had not talked to him about that night he had no way of knowing. She had not wanted to subject the Potions master to yet another yoke. Not after what he had suffered under his two former masters.

But if what Molly said was true that close proximity for a period of time might appease the bond then she was risking the health of both of them for nothing. Severus and she had planned to meet regularly for a project that combined Arithmancy and potions anyway. Hermione penned her letter.

Dear Severus,

Please come and see me at St Mungo's.

Yours etc,

Hermione

The Potions master was surprised when a St Mungo's owl found him at Spinner's End. He had delivered the potions for the hospital just yesterday. He had thought of visiting Granger but had turned around when he had seen Molly Weasley going into her room. Potter's letter about poisons had not alarmed him unduly. If the fellow Order-member used a letter instead of a Patronus the situations was not dear.

But maybe it was, if Hermione's message was an indicator. It was nearing 10 pm but the Potions master put down his cup of tea and, after retrieving his emergency satchel of potions, Floo'ed to the wizarding hospital.

The lights were already dimmed by the time Severus reached Hermione's room. Not wanting to disturb her if she were already sleeping he approached the bed as quietly as he could. She seemed to sense his approach because she opened her eyes and tried to sit up in the bed. The Potions master could not really say in the poor light, but safe for her hair, which was hanging uncharacteristically limp, she seemed unchanged.

"Hello, Severus, thank you for coming so quickly."

"I was here yesterday, but you already had a visitor."

"Yes, Molly. She confirmed my suspicion of what ails me, and that is what I have to talk to you about."

"But I watched Pensieaved memories of nearly all our trip a few times after Potter contacted me. I don't think I would have missed it had you been cursed or poisoned."

"It is neither. Severus, what do you know of Withering?"

He appeared to be rather clueless. "Romantic drivel?"

"That's what I thought as well. But Molly told me that it only takes two opposing bouts of benevolent magic on behalf of the other to form a bond."

"So our flight at the end would count as one. You confirmed Lucius' story of where to find my body, which convinced Poppy to accompany him. Therefore you are in a way responsible for my survival. I have not felt a life-debt settling, but maybe that was enough for a bond."

"No, I don't think so. Didn't you feel different the last few weeks?"

The man looked away, seemingly debating with himself. Then he faced her again and continued, "Yes, I did. But then I was severely depleted. I put it down to my life catching up with me, to getting old."

"Severus! You're forty-eight! You're barely out of your youth in wizarding years!"

"There were some years where only ulcers and Potions kept me together, and anger and fear kept me going. Such a lifestyle is bound to bring repercussions sooner or later."

"I do hope later. I think I know about the first half of the bond. When we spent the first night in the cabin you had a terrible nightmare. I couldn't wake nor calm you even though I wished with all my might to be able to. Then there was kind of a `whoosh', I got really drowsy, and you were sleeping quietly again."

"Accidental wish-magic, from the sound of it. You must have really meant it. For how long have you suspected our bond?"

Now it was Hermione's time to look away. Severus' mien fell as ugly suspicions entered his mind.

"Well, Miss Granger, that is answer enough! Couldn't stand to be bound to the Greasy Git, could you? Rather waste away one of the finest minds in centuries than that!"

He turned away to leave the room when a crash from behind arrested his movements. In her haste to prevent him from leaving, Hermione had tried to stand up. In her weakened state she managed two steps before crashing to the floor, taking the visitor's chair with her. Snape was at her side in one big stride, scooping her up and depositing her on the bed. The young woman held onto his lapels lest he would leave again.

"Severus Snape, you bloody great oaf! Spare me the melodrama! You're worse than any Weasley on a good day! Will you listen before you jump to any conclusions?"

"Unhand me, woman! You have five minutes."

He was towering above her, arms crossed, every inch the nasty, black-hearted teacher of her childhood.

"Severus, please sit down."

Reluctantly he rightened the chair and sat down with a sigh.

"I didn't wait a minute: finest mind in centuries? That's a big compliment coming from you!"

"I spoke in anger!"

"I wonder what you'll say if you're in a benevolent mood towards me? Maybe call me pretty?"

"Stop fishing for compliments, that is beneath you!"

"All right. I suspected something, but only because I remembered hearing about Withering from Lavender Brown in the dorm at Hogwarts. I didn't want to put too much stock in her utterings, but could not ask around for books on that topic without showing my hand. I do not know whether you follow the *Prophet*, but I can't buy carrots or ask somebody to check the drains of my flat without Skeeter writing them up as my love-interest. Some orderly would earn an extra Galleon with the news that I am reading up on bonds; patients cannot ward their belongings here. Sending for Kingsley and asking about this would put you on the spot. And I didn't want to do this before knowing more. Not because I can't stand being bonded to you, but because I do not want to encroach upon your freedom unless absolutely necessary. I do not want to be the cause of you feeling obliged to bow to a third master this bond in your life."

Snape tried for a while to school his features and gave up finally. He sat there slack jawed. "Most would say second master, wouldn't they?"

"Do not tell Harry, but I am quite disenchanted with Dumbledore."

"I can't afford to anymore, being the cause of his death. It feels unseemly to me."

"I am glad you didn't call yourself a murderer."

"Oh, but I am, just not of Dumbledore."

Hermione looked ahead, saying nothing for a while. She pondered that the Withering must have affected Severus' Occlumency shields for him to be so uncharacteristically open. His outward appearance, while tired and a bit dishevelled, was nowhere near as bad as hers. Although she felt a slight improvement in her condition since the start of his visit.

"As to the bond: if Molly's right and activities like dancing satisfy it, then we need not change a lot in our lives. We wanted to meet anyway to discuss combining Potions and Arithmancy."

"I am not sure it is as easy as this, but we will find out." He was toeing his boots off and had started on the buttons of his frock coat.

"Severus!"

"Quiet. You want to be out of here as fast as possible, don't you? And we've slept in the same bed before without you endangering my virtue. I trust your restraint."

During the last few words he had broadened her bed slightly and had slipped under her blanket. Hermione followed her instinct and burrowed closer. A wave of his wand applied a glamour to his face, making it appear rounder with a button nose, blue eyes and a short beard.

"Was that beard necessary?"

"I forgot about your hair; it is a glamour I use often. Now go to sleep."

"Night, Severus."

"Mhm. I do not like Boogie Woogie, but I am partial to Lindy Hop."

"Lindy what?"

"Sleep, Granger."

Luckily the first person to enter Hermione's room in the morning was her attending healer. And upon seeing her patient dramatically improved and an unknown man sleeping next to her she realised her and St. Mungo's mistake in not diagnosing Miss Granger's illness as Withering. Fearfully of the repercussions for the hospital's reputation, she did everything to keep the truth becoming known to the public, which served Hermione and Severus well. After raiding Hogwarts' library and the one at Malfoy manor respectively, they met at Spinner's End for research, Hermione starting a bit later because of the need to reassure her friends and family. She had to promise to reveal all at the next Weasley Sunday dinner.

Severus had duplicated his desk but more often than not they sat on his old, sagging sofa, reading quietly. Because of the sagging in the middle touch was inevitable, but not unwelcome. After lunch they usually took a walk along the riverbank, which was much improved from Severus' childhood. If they held hands during such walks it might have been because Hermione often forgot her gloves. In the evening they discussed their findings, put down in writing of how long and in what manner skin on skin or with clothes - they had touched and applied scans on each other to gauge the effect of these touches. It soon became obvious that skin on skin was the most effective, which led to them sleeping with nothing but briefs on Severus' side and knickers and a tank top on Hermione's.

Friday night she could not sleep and after turning and tossing for a seemingly long time she addressed her concerns. "Severus, are you sleeping?"

"Ungh."

"How do I find out what is the bond and what are my genuine feelings?"

"Mhm."

"Please, talk to me!"

He sat up with a sigh, drawing her to lie against his shoulder and arranging the blanket around them.

"I haven't slept this well in years; I am not questioning whether that's the bond or the novelty of having a woman twenty years my junior sleeping with me."

"It's nineteen years, hardly any concern when we're 120 and 101."

"Hermione, even when we were only comrades on an assignment you extended wish-magic just because I had a nightmare. When we were about to die because of the avalanche you tried your hardest to stay calm, you didn't call for your mother or Potter or Weasley, but you looked into *my* eyes and accepted our common fate. That was before any bond had formed. No one has cared that much about me since my early childhood. We are together in this, and I accept whatever form our companionship will take because it is so much more than I have grown to expect from life."

"But won't this bond prevent you from finding somebody to truly love?"

"What about you?"

"I haven't enjoyed myself nearly as much with any other man than during those evenings in Geneva when we were talking about politics and art. And I was really looking forward to talk to you about magical theories as well."

"That's your answer, isn't it?" He tried in vain to keep the wistfulness out of his voice.

Hermione heard it well, but still could not relax. "What about Lily?"

"What about Weasley? Do you still pine after that lost love? Do you cringe when thinking about being together with another man? Lily's memory and the guilt I felt about her death kept me going through very dark times, but even in my twenties I had realised that we wouldn't have worked out as a couple. I feel I have done my duty by her son and while I wish I had never told Riddle of that blasted prophecy I put the blame for her death where it belongs: to that monster of a Dark Lord and the traitorous rat."

"Ron and I were attracted to each other, but we are too dissimilar to last as a couple. I did not date a lot, but not because of his memory. Most men who approached me did so because of me being part of that infamous Golden Trio. After a while it got really bothersome to weed out the glory hounds and those who were after a story to sell to the Prophet. I'd much rather solve an intricate Artihmancy problem."

"And I'd much rather kiss you now."

"Oh."

Molly had extended a standing invitation to Severus Snape to her Sunday dinners a long time ago, but she was surprised when he took her up on it. He arrived at the same time as Hermione. The girl looked radiant, much to the relief of all her friends. That should have been clue enough. Then, under the pretence of helping her, Hermione cornered Molly in the kitchen.

"Molly, I am bonded with Severus. It happened during a secret assignment for Kingsley on the continent. We talked it through and found a way to deal with it, but I'd much rather give us both a little more time to get used to the situation. Today I would just tell them of the assignment, and that we triggered ancient magic, which is not even a lie."

"Of course, I understand. And I'm happy for you! Though Ginny might guess what kind of ancient magic you're talking about."

"Thank you, Molly."

Hermione proceeded as planned and, as used as her friends were to her having all the explanations, no one questioned her further. And no one realised that she and Severus left together as well.

Back at home how quickly the old two-up-two-down had become home to her Severus demanded to be rewarded for his good behaviour during the Weasley Sunday bash. The young woman dreamed already of many more such afternoons and complied readily.

23 June 2011

With tired amusement, Hermione Granger-Snape thought back to a time when she had questioned the veracity of her love for her husband while she watched him walking their colicky infant daughter. They complimented each other in a lot of ways, and she loved him and little Emma Eileen to pieces. It did not matter to her in the least whether their love had been prompted by a bond or whether a bond had grown out of their mutual love.

The End

Note: Many thanks to my beta Dreamy_Dragon!