

Snape, A History

by Kailin

When Hermione Granger-Weasley's marriage fails, she turns to a new pastime to relieve her stress.

Something to Hold On To

Chapter 1 of 22

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Chapter 1: Something to Hold On To

Ron slumped on the sofa, long legs stretched out in front of him. He clutched his Chudley Cannons jersey in his hands and twisted it as though he wanted to wring the life out of it. That, along with the scowl on his face, left no doubt as to his mood.

"Hello!" Hermione spotted her husband the moment she closed the front door behind her. She quickly shrugged out of her robe and hung it on a clothes tree there in the foyer, then headed directly down the hall towards the kitchen. "I'll have dinner going in a flash. How was practice? I didn't think you'd be home yet. Did you finish early? Are you playing on Sunday, or can we still do dinner with my parents?"

Question piled up on top of question, and Ron left them hanging there in the air, unanswered. Finally, Hermione poked her head around the corner of the kitchen door.

"Ronald? Did you hear me?"

"Of course I heard you, Hermione."

"Is everything all right?"

"No."

"No?" She'd been about to return to her meal preparations when his answer stopped her.

"No."

"What is it?" Hermione crossed the dining room to join her husband in the lounge.

"I've been dropped from the team," Ron said quietly.

"Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry. But we rather expected that to happen this year, didn't we?" At thirty, a good Quidditch player was just entering the twilight of his or her career while a mediocre Quidditch player such as Ron Weasley was already at the end of the line. He had managed to land a starting position only two years out of twelve, spending the rest of the time as the perennial back-up player. Without Hermione's Ministry job in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, they never would have managed.

"Yeah. Of course, we also expected that I was at the top of the list for the coaching position."

Hermione felt a growing uneasiness. "They didn't say anything about the coaching job?" she probed carefully.

"Oh, they said something about it, all right. Said they'd hired Jack LaChance for it. And that they'd lured Douglas from the Nottingham Knights to fill the scouting vacancy. And Denny Pitts from the Tornadoes for the Player Development slot." Thus far, Ron had yet to meet Hermione's eyes. Now he gazed directly at her, his face a mask of anger. "Where does that leave me, you may ask? Out on my arse in the cold, apparently."

"Oh, Ron..." Hermione sank into an armchair, her hands clasped. "What are you going to do?"

"Bloody nothing, it would seem." Ron scowled at the toes of his trainers. "Work for my rich, entrepreneur brothers, I suppose."

Hermione said nothing. More than once over the last several years, Fred and George had tried to coax Ron into giving up Quidditch and managing their string of novelty stores. Privately, Hermione thought that the twins had a better grasp of her husband's Quidditch talents and future prospects than Ron himself and that they were gently providing him with a dignified way out. But Ron had dismissed their each and every offer out of hand: he had pinned his hopes on a life in sports, wanting to move from player to coach to manager and possibly, some day, to owner.

"I'm sure something will work out," Hermione ventured finally.

Ron didn't even bother to look up. "Yeah," he muttered.

Six Months Later

"I'm so sorry, Hermione." Molly Weasley genuinely meant it, to judge from her defeated posture to the tone of her voice. "I can't say I'm surprised, though. It's been apparent for a long time that you and Ron weren't happy."

"It's just so utterly stupid, Molly." Hermione fought back tears. "We're not together anymore, even when we're physically in the same room. It's as though he went east and I went west, and neither of us was even aware that it was happening."

"I know. Perhaps it would have been different if you'd had children..." Molly's voice trailed off as if she sensed that this was dangerous ground upon which to tread. "Well," she continued, her eyes watery now, "people do grow apart. Let's hope some time away from each other will do the trick."

Hermione wanted to tell her that the separation would, in all likelihood, not do the trick, but it was pointless. Molly Weasley thrived on hope; it was what had kept the woman going through two Wizarding Wars and their aftermath.

"I hope so," she said with as much conviction as she could muster.

"Well, that's it, then." Molly glanced at the sack of food Hermione clutched in her hands. "That should do you for at least four days. I'll bring another bag on Friday."

Hermione had to laugh at that. "I'm not likely to starve, Molly. I can cook, you know."

"I know you can, dear." There was the tiniest hint of doubt in Molly's tone, suggesting that Hermione's culinary skills fell far short of her own, even after ten years of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. "Still, it's difficult to cook only for oneself."

"Of course." Hermione wondered when was the last time that Molly had cooked for anything less than a horde of people.

"I'll be off, then. See you later, dear." Molly pulled her daughter-in-law to her and, with a quick peck on the cheek, was gone.

Hermione closed the front door of the flat, just as the loud crack from the hall affirmed Molly's departure. She looked down at the sack of food in her arms and sighed. It was good of Molly to remember her this way. Another woman might have taken the news that her son and his wife had separated with much less sympathy and a considerable amount of ire. But not only had Molly been quite decent about it, she was also the only one who had seen the breach coming. *Even before Ron or I saw it* Hermione thought sadly. But wasn't that often the case? That the people most intimately involved were the last to know?

It was the blow to Ron's ego the end of his Quidditch career that had started the entire mess, Hermione thought now as she dumped Molly's food donation onto the kitchen table. And strangely enough, it was the natural generosity of his family that had aggravated things beyond the breaking point.

Fred and George immediately offered Ron a position. To say that the twins had made a success of their joke shops was an understatement; they could easily afford to take on Ron at a decent wage without appearing to be giving him a handout. But Ron resisted, determined to find a job on his own.

Arthur encouraged him to apply at the Ministry, hinting that he could probably guarantee him a job. Ron could only picture a work environment where he would always be known as 'Arthur's son' or worse yet 'Hermione's husband'. The fact that he would be hired into a position ranking far below his wife and, earning considerably less, didn't help.

Ron finally found work at Quality Quidditch Supplies. The salary was less than stellar, but it managed to provide him with a few perceived shreds of dignity. It wasn't that he had been a horrible Quidditch player, he told Hermione one rainy night, it was simply that his skills were so hideously undistinguished. In a way, it was worse than failing outright. She remembered then what Harry had told her once: that Ron had constantly battled to live up to the accomplishments of his older brothers, falling short more often than not. Even little sister Ginny outshone him by doing nothing more than snagging *The Boy Who Lived* for her husband.

Hermione slumped into a kitchen chair and stared miserably at the wall. She could barely remember a time when she hadn't adored Ron Weasley. It extended all the way back to a certain Halloween and a particular mountain troll, and she knew for a fact that Ron's infatuation with her could be dated to their third year at school. Once they had finally acknowledged their mutual attraction something which had caused much eye-rolling, since everyone at Hogwarts knew about it but the parties involved it was obvious that the two of them were meant to be together.

They had married two years to the day after Voldemort was defeated. It was a fairy tale wedding: certainly more than she'd ever dreamed of, for who could have imagined that bushy-haired-but-brilliant Hermione Granger would make such a beautiful bride? Hermione was certain that day that happiness was hers on a platter, the just reward for helping to liberate the wizarding world from the terror that was Lord Voldemort -- as it was Harry's reward when he and Ginny Weasley were wed several weeks later.

Those early years of marriage were happy ones: Ron pursuing his Quidditch dreams while she began steadily climbing the ladder of success at the Ministry. But then came the first hitch, when their attempts to start a family never came to fruition. Initially, Hermione wanted to wait, then Ron had wanted to wait, and by the time they decided that the Time Was Right, the babies never came. When five years had gone by and Hermione had yet to become pregnant, she and Ron became the unwilling recipients of all sorts of advice from well-meaning friends and family Molly, in particular.

"You two just need to relax," she told them with calm assurance. "It's the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps you need a holiday."

But the holiday in France failed to produce anything but bills. Hermione went to St. Mungo's for a fertility evaluation and was given a clean bill of health. She fully expected that Ron would be eager to be tested next and was stunned when he refused outright ("It can't be me. Look at the rest of my family. Just relax, like Mum said.").

Yet no matter how much they relaxed, the Weasleys remained childless. It seemed to Hermione that she and Ron were stuck in an endless cycle: Ron always hoping to improve his game, always looking toward next season, while she spent her days toiling away at the Ministry. And then came Ron's release from the Cannons, and an oppressive despair which affected the both of them.

It was Ron who, after months of depression and endless advice from his family, finally announced yesterday that he'd reached his limit and needed some time alone. That in itself didn't surprise Hermione; what stunned her was when he told her that the 'time alone' excluded her, as well.

"But I'm your wife," she mumbled, hurt beyond measure. "Don't you need me to be with you?"

"I just can't think straight, Hermione." Ron's eyes were moist, and his voice cracked in a way she hadn't heard since second year. "It's not just you, it's everybody. I'm always trying to measure up to someone's expectations, and yours are just as hard to reach as anyone else's."

"Expectations?" she repeated weakly, not believing what she'd heard. "I don't have some grand expectations of you."

"Well, maybe that's part of the problem. You don't have them because you think I can't measure up anyway."

"What?" Anger replaced shock and grief. "That's ridiculous, Ron!"

"Perhaps. But I need to see what I can do without a constant audience."

"Where will you go?" Hermione asked tearfully.

"For now, I'm going to move into the rooms above Fred and George's Diagon Alley shop," Ron told her, indicating the place where his brothers had stayed while first launching their enterprise some fourteen years earlier. "See? I can't even move out of the damned house without help from my family, but I'll start looking for a flat of my own soon."

And that had been that. Within the hour, Ron had packed his bags and left. Hermione stayed up most of the night, wracked with guilt as she tried to discern what part she'd played in the whole mess. Had she not been loving enough? Supportive enough? She couldn't even bring herself to entertain the notion of another woman; the mere thought made her ill.

"Bloody stupid, idiotic prat," Harry muttered when Hermione told him about it that morning. "I can't believe he did this. And no, there's no one else at least, I never had any suspicions whatsoever on that account. With Ron, I always know if he's trying to cover something up."

Hermione was minimally relieved by Harry's reassurances, but it still did nothing to assuage the guilt. And now, tonight, she was looking at what would be another few hours of troubled sleep. She decided that she would take a Sleeping Draught if she was unable to doze off within a reasonable period of time, but first she would try other things.

After soaking in a hot bath until her skin wrinkled and sweat broke out on her forehead, Hermione pulled on her nightgown and hunted for something to read. She stood in front of her bookshelves, her hand hovering here and there over possible titles. It wasn't until she spotted *Hogwarts: A History* and felt the flood of warm, happy memories that came with the well-worn book that she knew she'd found her bedtime reading material.

Hermione fixed herself a cup of herbal tea, then curled up in bed and began to read.

If You Want a Thing Done Right, Do It Yourself

Chapter 2 of 22

Hermione looks for updated information on the war; Harry makes a suggestion.

Chapter 2: If You Want a Thing Done Right, Do it Yourself

Hermione spent the better part of two weeks leafing through *Hogwarts, A History* at bedtime, reveling in the comfort it brought her.

The consensus among the extended Weasley family remained that Ron was a moron of the First Order, although she'd managed to convince everyone that there were deeper issues involved and not a simple case of stupidity. Harry had gone to talk to him and reported that Ron was physically well but emotionally floundering. Hermione's first thought was to attempt to convince her husband to visit St. Mungo's, then remembered that she'd probably have no more success with this plea than when she'd asked him to go for fertility testing. Arthur was frankly embarrassed and apologized to Hermione for his son's behaviour. Hermione would have none of it.

"It's not your fault, Arthur. You need not apologize."

"He's acting like an irresponsible adolescent," Arthur pointed out, clearly upset by his youngest son's actions. "You don't deserve to be treated like this, Hermione. Ron loves you, I'm sure of it."

"Ron loves all of us," Hermione said gently. "He's only trying to find his way right now." And having said that, she realized that she truly believed it. It was the first step in finding her way out of her own emotional morass.

What if, she thought one night as she crawled beneath the covers, Ron finds his way, but it doesn't include me?

It wasn't a happy notion, but she was able to push it aside when she opened her book and began to read.

* * *

"Excuse me."

The elderly clerk at Flourish and Blotts jerked his head upright at the sound of Hermione's voice. "Yes, madam?"

Hermione smiled politely. The man had been asleep behind a stack of books, obviously not expecting someone to interrupt his solitude. "The lady at the front desk said that you might be able to help me."

"Of course. How may I be of assistance?"

"I'm looking for the latest copy of *Hogwarts, A History*."

"It should be on the shelves in the history section."

The man gave every appearance of wanting her to leave so that he could resume his nap. Hermione's smile became a little more pained.

"I know. I've just come from there. You see, the copies on the shelves are the same edition as the one I have at home. I wanted to buy a more up-to-date version."

"Which edition do you own, madam?"

"I believe it's the twenty-third or twenty-fourth. It was published in 1929."

"Ah. That is the latest edition, then."

"It is? Why?" Hermione was aghast. Considering the fact that the British wizarding world had been through numerous upheavals since 1929, how could the publishers have neglected to update it?

"It's updated every century, madam. You may expect the next edition in the year 2022." The gentleman returned his attention to the books in front of him as if hoping she'd take the hint and leave him alone.

"But that's irresponsible!" Hermione spluttered.

The elderly man looked up once more, clearly affronted by this charge against the literary world. "I'm terribly sorry," he said, not meaning a word of it.

Hermione pursed her lips in annoyance. "Thank you," she said stiffly. She walked back to the history section of the bookstore, muttering inwardly that the Muggle sector definitely had the upper hand in this instance; such laxness would never be tolerated there. Annoyed, she hunted for and found *Modern Magical History*, a book she'd read prior to her first year at Hogwarts. She leafed through the first few pages and found 'Sixty-Eighth Edition, printed 1989.'

Nineteen-eighty-nine?

Hermione cast the book aside and immediately hunted down *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century* and discovered that both books ended with the infant Harry Potter vanquishing Lord Voldemort.

"Excuse me."

The elderly man lifted his head, displeased to find an annoyed Hermione Granger standing in front of him once more.

"Yes, madam?"

"These books have not been updated in quite a while, sir." She held them out accusingly.

The prospects of a good nap faded into thin air. The man contemplated Hermione sadly. "Perhaps madam would have better luck finding what she wants in the archives of *The Daily Prophet*?"

"Look, Mister ah "

"Blotts."

"Blotts?" Hermione echoed faintly. "You're one of the proprietors?"

"The sole proprietor, as Eugenia Flourish-Digsworth passed on some sixty years ago." Mr. Blotts rose to his feet.

"Oh." Hermione was torn between chastising the man for stocking outdated books and praising him for operating, what had been to her, a little piece of heaven.

"Am I to understand that you believe our selection to be less than current?"

"Well... yes," Hermione admitted. "Quite frankly, I'm astounded that these books have not been re-edited to include information on the wizarding war of the last decade."

"Wizarding history is generally best viewed over a broad canvas. While the late unpleasantness with that Dark Lord --" Blotts hesitated, looking as though he would rather be hexed senseless than say the name.

"Voldemort," Hermione supplied through gritted teeth.

"Quite so," he said, relieved at not having to pronounce the name personally. "While it is certainly noteworthy, only time will tell as to its impact on history as a whole."

Hermione's jaw dropped abruptly. "Noteworthy? Excuse me?"

Blotts was beginning to appear desperate. "Madam?"

"I lost friends in that war, and you call it noteworthy?"

Her voice was loud enough to attract the attention of several nearby customers. Blotts fell back into his seat, grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill, and scribbled something upon it.

"Here," he said, thrusting the paper towards her, "is the name of the publishers of the books you mentioned. Perhaps you would care to speak with them directly?"

And leave me alone, Hermione finished for him. "Thank you," she said, taking the parchment and glancing at it before tucking it into a pocket of her robes. She strode out of the bookstore, certain that old Mr. Blotts was quite relieved to have gotten rid of her.

Hermione used the Public Floo to return to the Ministry, feeling as if she'd wasted a good portion of her lunch hour for nothing. Instead of taking the lift to her office in the International Magical Office of Law, she took the stairs down to the Second Level and Auror Headquarters.

"Oh, good, you're in." With only that as preamble, she dropped into the spare chair in Harry Potter's cubicle.

Harry, who had just taken a large bite of a roast beef sandwich, regarded his friend with mild surprise. "S'up?" he mumbled.

"I've just come from Flourish and Blotts," Hermione announced.

Harry finished chewing, swallowed his food, and washed it down with a sip of tea from a large mug. "Earth-shattering news," he stated. "Imagine that: you, of all people, going to Flourish and Blotts."

Hermione ignored his sarcasm. "Refresh my memory, Harry... Were we, or were we not, involved in a wizarding war during our time at Hogwarts?"

"Sounds familiar," he said dryly, leaning back in his chair. "Is there a point to all this?"

"The point," Hermione said, her voice brimming with indignation, "is that the war may have made the papers, but it didn't make the books."

It was the righteous anger that Harry had seen her display a million times before the same righteous anger that usually meant Hermione Granger was making a mountain out of a molehill. The same righteous anger that meant that Hermione Granger was about to take on a Project. "Enlighten me, would you?"

"I've been re-reading *Hogwarts, A History*. And don't say, 'What else is new?'" she warned him. "I've been so upset about Ron that I've not been sleeping well, and I didn't want to take potions if I could help it, so I thought that perhaps some light reading at bedtime might --"

"Hermione..."

"All right, fine," she snapped. "Anyway, I decided to drop by Flourish and Blotts and pick up the latest edition. It turns out that it's only updated once a century. Then I looked for some of the other books I'd read on wizarding history, and they've not been updated, either. They all still have you as a baby with a mysterious scar."

Harry regarded his friend benignly for a moment, then said, "Mind if I keep eating my lunch?"

"Of course not, but Harry, here's the thing," Hermione persisted. "I spoke with old Mr. Blotts himself, and he referred to the war as 'the late unpleasantness with the Dark Lord.' We were nearly killed on more than one occasion, and he's acting as though it was something you could sweep under the rug!"

"But that's always been the attitude, Hermione," Harry reminded her. "That whole thing about not saying Voldemort's name. No one wanting to believe that he had returned. Most people wanting to hide out rather than fight. That's how most of the wizarding world has approached anything ugly: sweep it under the rug, put it into a dark cupboard, pretend it's not there. That's why this whole department is so bloody huge," he said, waving his arm in a wide arc. "We handle the stuff that's been swept under the rug so that witches and wizards all over Britain can go to sleep at night and pretend that it doesn't exist."

Hermione scowled. "I suppose so. But it's still not right."

"No. It's not." Harry bit off another piece of sandwich.

"What bothers me is that it's as if we risked life and limb for nothing."

Still chewing, he raised an eyebrow in response. Hermione continued.

"It's an insult to everybody who fought in the war. I don't care about having my name in a history book. And I know they handed out medals and citations immediately afterwards. I just want everyone to get the respect that he or she is due. Not bothering to update the history books is sort of a slap in the face."

Harry swallowed his mouthful of sandwich. "Why don't you do something about it? Write an article to the editors of the *Daily Prophet*."

Hermione was thoughtful. "That's good for a start. And Mr. Blotts gave me the name of the publishers of the books. I think I'll write them a few letters, too."

"Good idea." Harry raised his mug to take a sip of tea, then paused, a grin on his face. "There were no books about me, huh?"

"I didn't check the Biography section. I can't imagine there would be, after that horrible business with Rita Skeeter."

At the war's end, Rita had announced her intention to write a biography of Harry Potter. When Harry had flatly refused to cooperate, the reporter retaliated by writing a book of her memoirs, which focused heavily on past interviews with The Boy Who Lived, as well as interviews with other unprincipled opportunists (primarily Slytherins who had known Harry at Hogwarts). There had been an ugly few months of mud-slinging when the book came out, finally ending when Rufus Scrimgeour was caught with his hand in the till at the Ministry, providing the wizarding world with a different scandal on which to focus.

"Glad to hear it."

Hermione chewed on her lip. "We all gave some interviews, didn't we? To the newspapers and the like?" The British press had wanted to talk to them, as had representatives from foreign wizarding papers and magazines.

Harry nodded. "I think they tried to talk to all the people who looked as if they had a hand in Voldemort's downfall. I even recall seeing somebody interviewing Filch, of all people. Why do you ask?"

"I just don't understand why someone hasn't written an accurate history of the war. Wouldn't you think someone would want to read it? There's that old maxim about 'those who don't heed history are doomed to repeat it' and all. We were part of history, for heaven's sake. Doesn't it matter? It's an absolute insult to Albus Dumbledore's memory if we allow this to go on, Harry!"

"True." Harry leaned back in his chair and studied Hermione thoughtfully. "Why don't you write it?"

"What?" Stunned, she sat bolt upright in her chair. "You're joking, right?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Am I? You're right in that someone should take it upon themselves to write an accurate account of the war. It should be someone who was intimately involved in it so that the truth can be known. You don't want a revisionist historian trying to make Voldemort look like a victim because of his horrific childhood or something."

"But Harry, I've never I mean, I've written papers for work, but --"

"You interview the people involved and summarize their stories and string them all together. How hard can that be?"

Hermione was looking as dazed as if she'd been hit in the head by a large object. "Me... write a book...?"

"Why not? You love to read. Seems to me that the two are connected somehow."

"Harry," she began, laughing nervously, "that's that's "

"That's what? Possible?"

She stared at him wonderingly. "I don't know. Let me think about it, all right?"

"Fair enough." Harry rested his elbows on his chair, steepling his fingers as he regarded his friend. "You know that you're capable of doing anything you set your mind to, Hermione."

It felt like a gust of fresh wind was blowing through her soul. Hermione felt her skin tingle with anticipation. "All right, then. I'll let you finish your lunch then," she said, climbing to her feet. "And... and I'll think about it."

"Have a good afternoon," Harry said, winking at her.

A silly smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I think I just might."

* * *

She accomplished virtually nothing that afternoon. Hermione's current work assignment had her dealing with a trade agreement with Italian wizards, yet try as hard as she

might, her mind kept wandering back to Harry's suggestion. Finally, when her department head left early for the day, Hermione pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and a fresh quill.

And sat staring at it. How in the world did one start a book?

When she'd spent fifteen minutes immobilized into inaction, Hermione decided to simply make notes about how she might proceed.

1. *Write detailed timeline of war*
2. *Determine key figures in war*
3. *Interview participants*
4. *Each interview as chapter?*

She stared at her list, pleased with her progress so far. Key figures... Who were the key figures in the war? Harry, of course... herself... Ron... nearly all of the Weasleys... Dumbledore, except he was dead...

Hermione made a face. The most likely persons to speak for Dumbledore would be McGonagall and Snape. It would be pleasant talking to Minerva again, but Snape... Chances were good that the man would flat out refuse to cooperate, so there was little point in worrying about him. Anyway, Hermione thought, she had no idea where to find him. As far as she knew, no one had heard from him since the trial.

The main thing Hermione recalled from Snape's trial was Harry. When the verdict of 'Not Guilty of Treason by Way of Extenuating Factors' was announced, Harry had leapt to his feet, demanding to know why justice had been perverted. It had taken both Weasley twins, along with herself and Ron, to remove him from the courtroom. Outside, the press pounced on them, and Harry left no doubt in anyone's mind that, in his opinion, Severus Snape should have received the same life sentence as every other Death Eater who'd been tried thus far.

Perhaps Minerva could provide her with the information she'd need. Perhaps she wouldn't need to talk to Snape after all.

Snape Found

Chapter 3 of 22

Hermione throws herself into her new project. She also learns of Snape's whereabouts - as well as Ron's.

Chapter 3: Snape Found

"How is your research coming, if I may ask?" Minerva McGonagall leaned back into the depths of the Headmistress' desk chair and took a sip of tea.

"It's quite amazing, really." Hermione replaced her teacup on its saucer, freeing one hand to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "There are so many different views of the war. I assumed that everybody saw it the way I did."

Professor McGonagall arched an expressive eyebrow at her former student. "I believe that as you go through life, my dear, you'll find that no one sees things exactly as you do."

"So I'm discovering."

"Who's left to be interviewed?"

"Percy Weasley, for one. We've never been able to find a mutually agreeable time to get together."

Minerva gazed out the tall windows of her office. Spring was in the air, and the trees were clad with the bright green of first growth. "How are the Weasleys? I know your separation from Ron must make things a tad difficult."

Hermione smiled. "The Weasleys have been marvelous. I can't complain."

"I don't suppose there's any hope for reconciliation yet?"

"No. Ron's in southern France, managing a Quidditch team there the *Toulouse Torpilles* and doing well, apparently. The newspapers there refer to him as *Ronald LeRoux*."

"Ronald the Redhead," Minerva translated with a wry smile.

"Exactly. They're quite taken with him, apparently. His team is doing well and he's happy, from what Bill Weasley tells me."

"The *Torpilles*... I'm not sure I know "

"Torpedoes." It was Hermione's turn to translate.

"Ah. Southern France sounds delightful. Is there any chance that you could join him?" Minerva rose to her feet and crossed to one of the light-filled windows, tugging it open to allow some fresh air to fill the room.

"I haven't been asked." It hurt to admit that.

"Oh. I am sorry, dear."

Hermione shook her head. "Don't be. I don't know what's going to happen, Minerva, but I think the separation has been good for both of us." It was her new philosophy: give Ron a good six months' breathing space, and then he would come home and life would go back to normal.

Professor McGonagall, who apparently lacked Hermione's optimism, looked increasingly uncomfortable.

"Well. We were talking about interviews, weren't we? Have you interviewed Severus Snape yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"Oh, you *must* interview Severus. His view of the war encompasses both sides, you know."

Yes, Hermione thought dryly, *we all know that*. Aloud, she said, "I'm not quite sure where to find him. He's not listed in the Directory of Wizards for the British Isles."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me in the least. I can't imagine the man making his Floo available to just anyone. But surely there are other ways of finding him."

"I thought perhaps you might have his address." In truth, Hermione hadn't tried very hard yet to locate her former Potions teacher. She suspected that he would be neither pleased to see her nor inclined to cooperate.

"No, I don't. Why don't you try the most recent census records?"

Hermione nodded, taking another sip of tea.

"I think it's wonderful that you've tackled this project," McGonagall said, settling herself into her chair once more. "I'm quite proud of you. Imagine, seeing your own book in print some day!"

A blush crept across Hermione's face. "I'm nowhere near that point yet," she reminded the older woman. "I'm not sure I'll be able to find a publisher, given the fact that no one's even remotely interested in updating the existing history books."

Minerva shrugged, as though publishing was a foregone conclusion. "Submit it to one of the magazines, then. They'd come at it from a different angle, of course, but at least the information would be there for everyone to read. Or," she added, a definite gleam in her eye, "you could always submit it to *The Quibbler*."

Hermione burst out laughing. "I could, couldn't I?"

"How is Miss Lovegood rather, Mrs. Longbottom, isn't it?"

"Doing well, last I heard." Hermione paused to contemplate the older woman. "It's really a pleasure for you, isn't it? To see the hundreds thousands, even of students pass through here, and then watch them take their places in wizarding society?"

"It's the best part of teaching," McGonagall said softly, a small smile playing on her lips. She studied Hermione appraisingly. "You know, I always thought that you would make a fine teacher."

"Me?"

"Absolutely. You love learning, and people like that tend to be able to inspire their students."

Hermione managed to mumble her thanks. No one had ever broached the subject of teaching with her before, and she was torn between feeling surprised, flattered, and rather smug. Minerva continued.

"I know how you always loved your copy of *Hogwarts, A History*. I can just picture you some day "

"What?" Hermione prompted.

McGonagall merely waved a hand at her. "Nothing. Just a thought. You'll think it's silly."

"No, what?"

"Well... I was just thinking that if Professor Binns should ever retire, perhaps you..."

"You mean, if he should finally realize that he's dead?" Hermione quipped, trying to cover her amazement. Surely Professor McGonagall wasn't suggesting

"You'd make a fine History of Magic teacher," Minerva pointed out. "Of course, you'd make a fine teacher of just about any course in this school. It's just that you were always so taken with Hogwarts itself. A result of your Muggle upbringing, no doubt."

"I'll keep the idea in mind," Hermione said faintly. The History of Magic course was one of those mandatory studies that everyone suffered through and no one liked. She found herself wondering how the dry-as-dirt content could be enlivened to make it interesting for the students, and finally decided that such a thing was probably not even possible.

An hour later, she sat in the Three Broomsticks and nibbled on her lunch, still mulling over Professor McGonagall's words. Becoming a teacher had truly never occurred to her before. Open teaching slots at Hogwarts the finally curse-free Defense position included were as rare as hen's teeth. While it was tempting to entertain the notion, even if only for a brief moment, such an occurrence was highly unlikely.

Hermione had almost finished her lunch when a pair of familiar faces turned up at her table.

"Look who it is, George. I think that the lady's been saving these seats just for us." Fred Weasley pulled out one of the chairs at Hermione's table and sat without waiting for an invitation.

"Awfully sporting of you, Hermione." His twin brother grinned and straddled the third chair.

"Isn't it?" she remarked dryly, watching her two brothers-in-law take over her lunch table. "Please, make yourselves at home."

"Don't mind if I do," Fred said, helping himself to a slice of bread that remained in the breadbasket.

"Starving men here," George announced loudly, waving a hand in the air. "We could use a little assistance."

Madam Rosmerta wound her way through the lunch crowd at once. "My two favorite businessmen," she crooned. "What'll it be for you boys?"

"Soup and sandwiches, Rosie," Fred told her. "Whatever's the Special for the day. We're easy to please."

"Actually," George said, eyeing the older woman appreciatively, "we're downright easy."

"You're also married men," Rosmerta pointed out at once. "Do you want to eat, or do you want to be tossed out into the street?"

George sighed. "She drives a hard bargain, doesn't she? Very well, if you put it that way, we'd like to eat."

"A good choice. Anything else for you, dear?" the woman asked, glancing at Hermione before going off to place the orders.

"I'm fine, thanks. Just the bill." Hermione shook her head.

"So," Fred said as Rosmerta left the table, "what brings you to Hogsmeade? More research for your book?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I wanted to speak with Professor McGonagall."

George exchanged grins with his brother. "Hard to imagine. We always tried to *avoid* speaking with Professor McGonagall, didn't we, Fred? Guess those silly marks make a difference after all."

"And how is Marvelous Minnie?" Fred wanted to know.

"Just fine," Hermione said. "Unchanged. A Hogwarts fixture."

"Wouldn't have it any other way. Did she have any new pearls of wisdom for your book?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing other than encouraging me to interview Professor Snape."

Fred whistled in amazement. "She really wants you to take your life in your hands and talk to Snape?"

"Well really, Fred, I can't have a complete story of the war without including Snape, now can I?"

"Nope."

"The trouble is, I don't know how to contact him. I don't even know if he's still in Britain."

"Oh, he's still in Britain, all right," George put in. "Lives outside Manchester."

Hermione stared at him, open-mouthed. "How do you know that?"

"Because he brews the lion's share of the potions we use for our products."

"You're joking."

"Me? Joke?" George looked affronted by the accusation.

"Actually, it's true," Fred announced, resting elbows on the table and hunching forward. "Snape may have landed on his feet after the trial, but that doesn't mean he got off Scot-free."

Hermione's forehead creased in a frown. "What do you mean?"

Fred glanced around to see if anyone was listening, then lowered his voice as he began to speak. "Word is, he was shunned by most of the wizarding world and couldn't find work. I get the impression that he scrapes together a living by brewing the harmless, basic mixtures that most big manufacturers don't want to bother with."

"Oh?" Hermione hadn't given much thought to Snape's existence. To the best of her knowledge, the man had withdrawn from the world immediately after the trial probably to devote himself to research, or something else that didn't involve teaching adolescent dunderheads. "So you've seen him, then?"

"Seen Snape?" George looked surprised by her question. "Not at all. He has an assistant who delivers the goods every week."

"How did he end up working with you two?" Hermione's curiosity was piqued.

The twins exchanged grins. "Request came down through the Ministry," Fred said. "You know the Social Welfare bunch?"

Hermione nodded. One of the major developments at the end of the war was the reorganization of the Department of Social Welfare at the Ministry of Magic, specifically retargeted to assist people whose lives had been upended by the war. The scope of practice ranged from job placement to housing subsidies, and everything in between. It was the sort of social activism of which Hermione heartily approved, and she had high hopes that eventually issues such as werewolf intolerance and house-elf welfare would be addressed. More than once, she had scanned the Job Openings notice board at the Ministry and been tempted to request a transfer.

"Evidently old Snape was on the dole for a while," Fred continued. "I could never prove it, but I think the Ministry Welfare folks drummed up whatever potions business he has. They're the ones who approached us in the beginning."

"Not that they're still doing that," George put in. "I mean, Snape does a good job on everything we buy from him. I don't know who else buys from him, but I suppose they're satisfied customers. Still, there can't be a lot of money in the type of stuff he produces."

"So you'll give me his address?" Hermione prodded.

"Yep. Soon as we get back to London," Fred assured her. "Say, that was great news about Ron's team, wasn't it?"

"What news about Ron's team?" she asked blankly.

"About the Torpedoes making the playoffs," George explained helpfully. "Didn't he mention it the last time he wrote to you?"

"No." Hermione's mind was racing as she tried to recall how long it had been since she'd received a letter from her husband. "When did you hear from him?"

"Last week, I think it was," Fred answered. "Why?"

"Oh. I suppose I'll be getting his owl any day, then."

Fred and George exchanged glances.

"Just out of curiosity, when was the last time you heard from our miserable excuse for a little brother?" George asked, his expression darkening.

Hermione blinked, her mind racing. "Uh about a month ago, I think."

"A month!" George exploded immediately. "He hasn't written you for a whole month? That little git... I swear, if Mum knew that, she'd go absolutely spare!"

"It's not important, George. I expect the reason you've heard from Ron was because he knew that you'd be interested in the Quidditch team news. Everyone knows that I couldn't care less about Quidditch."

"Yeah, but still..." George looked like he wanted to launch into another tirade about his younger brother, but apparently chose to keep it to himself. "So how long is this separation going to continue, Hermione? It's been what, four months?"

"Five," she admitted, then added, "I expect that Ron will be back as soon as Quidditch season's over."

Fred and George exchanged dark glances once more. "He told you that?"

"No," Hermione said, trying hard to make it sound as if Ron Weasley was inconsequential to her life. "It makes the most sense, though."

There was a brief silence. Once more, George muttered "Git!" while Fred uttered an oath that would have sent Molly into an immediate diatribe.

"Maybe," George suggested tentatively, "you should consider going to France to see him. Remind him that he has a wife and obligations, and all."

On more than one occasion, Hermione had contemplated doing just that, but had yet to summon up the energy. It seemed easier to leave Ron up to his own devices for now. "I've thought about it," she confessed, then shrugged in a gesture of defeat. "Soon, maybe. Meanwhile, please don't mention anything to the rest of your family, would you? About him not writing lately? I don't want a horde of angry Weasleys descending on Ron just because he's terrible at writing letters."

"Sure," Fred agreed with some reluctance, just as Madam Rosmerta appeared with two plates of food. "Hey, smells good, Rosie."

"As if the two of you are such discriminating customers," the woman sniffed, but she was smiling as she did so. "Enjoy your lunch. Anything else for you, Hermione?"

"No, thanks." Hermione reached in her pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, ten of which she held out to Rosmerta. That done, she put down her napkin and scooted her chair away from the table. "Let me know about Snape's address, okay?" she asked Fred and George.

"You bet." Fred already had his napkin in his lap and knife and fork in hand. "Sure you don't want us to write a nasty note to little brother for you?"

"No, thanks," Hermione said dryly, climbing to her feet. "I'm perfectly capable of writing those myself."

But as she prepared to Apparate back to London, Hermione couldn't help but wonder if she needed to make that visit to France.

The Man Who Lived on Spinner's End

Chapter 4 of 22

Hermione approaches Snape about helping with her book.

Chapter 4: The Man Who Lived on Spinner's End

The neighborhood was the sort that Hermione tended to avoid: run-down, although probably not dangerous. It was solidly working class, yet it spoke more now of 'out of work' than 'securely employed'. Her upper middle class upbringing helped her to understand the reason for neighborhoods such as this, yet it failed to grant them a spot within her comfort zone.

Hermione paused in front of the shabby little house to double-check the address. This was it. She reminded herself that she was a Gryffindor and therefore possessed of great courage, then turned into the path that led to the door. There was a small, well-kept garden on her left, a remarkable contrast to the neglected house. The reason for the orderly garden, to Hermione's practiced eye, was obvious: the plants growing there were not merely decorative, but were used in various potions. Snape might care little about his dwelling, but the garden was certainly tended with care. She climbed the few crumbling steps to the door and knocked.

After a few moments, the door opened abruptly, and Hermione found herself face-to-face with a young woman whose stringy brown hair and pimpled face made for a less than stellar first impression. It was unexpected; Hermione had been certain that Severus Snape himself would answer the door.

"May I help you?"

"My name is Hermione Granger-Weasley. I have an appointment with Professor Snape."

"Professor!" the woman repeated, giggling. "Wait here."

She disappeared into the house, leaving Hermione to wonder as to her identity. Surely the woman, who was all of nineteen or twenty, couldn't be Snape's wife, could she? Physical appearances aside, she didn't look the type to command the attention of a man like Snape. In fact, the harder she tried, the less Hermione could imagine what sort of woman would command Severus Snape's attention.

"Yes?"

The one-word query was almost growled at her. Hermione started, just as a figure loomed out of the darkness and into the doorway.

Except for the instantly recognizable scowl, Severus Snape looked little like the man she remembered from her days at Hogwarts. A stained brown leather apron covered a dingy white shirt, its sleeves rolled up over the elbows. Dirty trainers peeked out from the worn bottoms of black trousers that had clearly seen better days. It was a startling change from the teacher who was always so impeccably dressed. But more incredibly still, the greasy Snape mane—a trademark of the man himself—had been chopped to a variety of lengths by an apparently blind barber. Hermione tried not to stare.

"Professor Snape," she ventured tentatively. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Madam Granger-Weasley." The cold voice, at least, seemed unchanged.

Hermione had hyphenated her surnames since her marriage, yet they had never sounded as ridiculous as when they rolled off Severus Snape's tongue. "May I come in?" she asked politely.

Wordlessly, Snape stepped back and gestured her into the house.

The parlor was small, its furnishings old and threadbare. It was only the walls of overloaded bookcases, catching Hermione's eye immediately, that lent any saving grace to the atmosphere.

"Am I too early for our appointment? I seem to have caught you in the midst of working." She wrenched her eyes away from the books.

"You're exactly on time, as I'm sure you are aware." The voice dripped with cold indifference.

Hermione gestured towards the sofa. "May I?"

Snape looked as if the idea was nearly unbearable, yet he nodded.

"I appreciate your taking the time to speak to me, Professor. Do you have any questions about what I'm trying to do?" she asked, settling her briefcase on her lap.

"You're writing a book about the war. What would I not understand about that?" he asked in disdain, sitting down in a somewhat rickety-looking side chair.

It was remarkable, Hermione thought, this ability of Snape's to inject sarcasm into just about any sentence. She ignored him and busied herself by removing a handful of parchments from her bag and smoothing them out with extreme care. "As I mentioned in my letter, I find it offensive that no one has written about the war, and I've taken it upon myself to do so. I am attempting to talk to everyone who played a role so that the story is as complete as possible."

"Everyone? Surely you're aware that 'everyone' is not alive," Snape drawled. "How do you plan to deal with that problem?"

Bastard, Hermione thought viciously. It was no wonder that she had saved this encounter until the last.

"Perhaps I misspoke," she said stiffly. "I am talking to *survivors*, as you know quite well."

"I believe that I already told you in my reply to your letter... I will not grant an interview. Not to you, nor to anyone else."

"Yes, sir, I'm aware of that. I was hoping that, possibly, you had changed your mind." Hermione had held out faint hope that Snape would relent. There were alternatives, but hearing him tell the story from his point of view would have been ideal. On the other hand, she was beginning to believe that the less time she spent with the man, the better.

Snape shifted in his chair. "If you are that desperate to learn the sordid details of my life, I suggest that you read the transcripts from my trial. They are public record."

"I've already done that."

"Then I don't know what more I can do for you." Snape placed his hands on the arms of the chair, as if preparing to rise in dismissal.

Hermione remained firmly planted on the sofa. "While I suspect that you are a book in your own right, Professor Snape, I'm not the one to write it," she snapped. "And I completely understand your desire for privacy. If you choose not to be interviewed, I will not force the issue. That is your prerogative. I do, however, have another request for you."

A suspicious scowl. "A request?"

"I've talked to forty people thus far, gathering information about the war from various points of view. When I looked back at all the data, an amazing pattern began to appear."

"And what would that be, Madam Granger-Weasley?" Snape asked in a bored tone.

There was the ridiculous sounding name again. Hermione made herself look Snape directly in the eyes. "You are the center of it all."

"Excuse me?" Snape blinked.

"Everything hinged on you, Professor. You were the key, not Harry. Oh, Harry was the instrument needed to vanquish Voldemort, but without the role you played, it could never have taken place."

Severus Snape regarded Hermione for a long moment, the fingers of one hand drumming an uneven staccato on the chair arm. "You don't say," he said dispassionately.

"I do say, Professor."

A flash of pure annoyance crossed his face. "Quite obviously, I am no longer teaching. Please do not refer to me by that title."

"I'll stop calling you 'professor' if you'll stop calling me 'Madam Granger-Weasley'," Hermione retorted.

"I believe that's how you signed your letter."

He had a point; Hermione chose to ignore that and move back onto the topic at hand. "You worked as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. You provided Voldemort and his followers with enough shreds of information to lead them to believe that you were still on their side. You made an Unbreakable Vow to Albus Dumbledore to end his life when the situation required it, sparing Draco Malfoy in the process. You essentially gave up seventeen years of your life to fight Voldemort, working at a job you hated. You

"Enough!" Snape snapped, the scowl more pronounced than ever. "I did what I had to do. It was a question of survival, nothing more. You make it sound as though I were a martyr for the cause. I guarantee you, there was not a single moment that I was guided by selfless, humanitarian thoughts, so kindly don't depict me in that light. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"Which brings me to why I'm here." Hermione handed three sheaves of parchments to Snape.

"What's this?" He glared at them as though they might erupt into flames at any moment.

"The summary of my interviews thus far. I would appreciate it if you would review it and make comments in the margins."

"You would appreciate that, would you? And what if I don't wish to do that, Madam Granger?"

"Then we are finished," Hermione agreed flatly. "But if you're the linchpin of the war, as I believe you to be, then your input is extremely valuable."

Snape studied her, his eyes narrowed appraisingly.

"You want my opinion, nothing more?"

"Yes, sir."

He hesitated, frowning as though thrown by this turn of events. Hermione decided that it was time to play her trump card.

"This project means a great deal to me. I find it odious that we gave so much to the war effort, only to receive so little recognition. It's certainly not about medals or citations of valor. It's about being acknowledged for the roles we played. Why should the history books not be updated immediately? Why should recognized war heroes be discounted to the point where they are forced to work in menial positions? A friend of mine fought valiantly during the war, yet she has been continually rebuffed by the Ministry in an attempt to obtain a better-paying position."

"And does your friend deserve this better-paying position?"

Snape was hunting for holes in her story. Hermione chose her words carefully.

"She is working far below her potential, all because someone is holding an old wartime grudge against her."

It was a lie, of course. She wanted Snape to take the bait, to consider what he might gain by being portrayed in a different light. Cooperate with her, and he might be able to shed the role of pariah. Regarded with greater esteem by the wizarding world, Snape the Hero could look forward to a brighter future.

All it would take was a little cooperation.

Severus Snape observed Hermione through narrowed eyes. For a long moment, he said nothing, then: "Fine. Leave the parchments."

Hermione congratulated herself for making a copy of the summary before leaving her house. Knowing Snape, she wouldn't put it past him to toss the parchments into the fireplace before the front door had closed behind her. "Thank you, sir. I would like to pick up your comments in a week, if that is satisfactory to you."

"There is no need. I will send them in the post."

In other words, Hermione thought, so I don't have to let you back in my house again

"Thank you. I truly appreciate it."

Snape's only response was a grunt. Hermione cast around for something pleasant to say, now that negotiations were over.

"I understand that you make potions for my brothers-in-law."

"Yes." His tone implied, *What of it?*

"You have quite a library here," she said, trying another tack.

"Don't drool, Granger. It's not flattering."

There was a limit to how much abuse Hermione was willing to take in one sitting, and she'd just reached it. "I'll be on my way, then," she said, standing abruptly. "Thank you for your time, Pro Mr. Snape."

Suddenly there was a crash from the direction of, Hermione assumed, either the kitchen or Snape's potions lab.

Snape leapt to his feet, cursing. "Idiot girl," he muttered.

Hermione remembered the stringy-haired, pimply-faced woman then. It didn't seem likely that Snape would refer to a wife that way, but she wouldn't put it past him. Just then, the swinging door to her left opened, and the girl backed into the parlor, bearing a tray loaded with a teapot and two cups and saucers.

"That won't be necessary, Nora." Snape made a move toward her.

"But it's polite," Nora said, undaunted. "That's what my mum does when we have company."

Seized by an irrational desire to spite Snape by having a leisurely cup of tea, Hermione sat back down. "I'd love some tea," she said, smiling encouragement at Nora.

The girl took this as approval, even if it didn't come from Severus Snape himself. "Sugar or milk, madam?"

"Neither, thank you." Hermione ignored her host who looked ready to throttle her and crossed her legs and rested her hands in her lap, in what her grandmother would have called 'a lady-like position for tea parties and other social events'.

Snape looked mutinous, but for some reason, he allowed Nora to pour two cups of tea.

"I'll take "

"I know how you take yours," Nora said flatly, not bothering to look up. She held out a cup to Hermione, then to Snape. "Company first," she stated, as if parroting something her mum had taught her.

"Thank you." Snape bit off the words. "You are excused. Please return to the lab and finish what you were doing."

Ah. Not a wife then. Probably.

"Nora is your assistant?" Hermione inquired politely when the girl had gone.

Snape nodded, then, as an afterthought, "She is a Squib, Scrimgeour's great-niece. She is unable to find suitable employment elsewhere."

Hermione wondered if Snape had magnanimously offered Nora the job, or if she'd been foisted upon him from up high. Snape apparently discerned which way her mind was headed.

"I was asked to take her on," he said flatly, putting an abrupt end to any speculation that he was capable of generosity of spirit.

"I'm sure it's very helpful to have an extra hand about," Hermione said, sipping her tea.

Snape grunted. "At least she's less of a menace about the lab than she used to be."

Hermione nodded, thinking that for a man of Snape's intelligence and skill, being saddled with a Squib for an assistant had doubtless been a low blow. She studied him over the rim of her teacup, her eyes resting on the ridiculously shaggy mop of hair. Whatever had possessed him to chop his hair off in that way?

"Are you currently involved in any research, Pro Mr. Snape?"

"Research is a luxury I'm currently denied," Snape said, with more than a trace of bitterness in his voice. "My work allows me little time for that sort of thing."

She'd overheard Snape once, years earlier at Grimmauld Place, lamenting to Molly Weasley that his idea of paradise was a state-of-the-art potions lab and endless time to do research. His intent at the time, of course, was to decry his minimally adequate facility at Hogwarts and the obligation to teach the endless stream of dunderheads, but the message was clear enough.

"I work for the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Hermione said. "Sometimes, there are foreign potions that the developers are trying to introduce into Britain, but otherwise I don't keep up with the latest in that field."

Snape looked at her then, with something akin to hunger in his eyes. "Foreign potions?"

"Di Locelli in Italy has been trying to market a new hair tonic abroad, but the Ministry is skeptical about the efficacy of his products."

The mention of hair sent Hermione's eyes unintentionally back to Snape's scruffy mane. A faint tinge of pink appeared in his cheeks; the familiar scowl settled over his features.

"Kindly stop staring at my hair, Granger," he snarled.

Hermione blushed. "I beg your pardon. I didn't intend "

"There was a mishap in the lab. I had no choice but to cut away the damaged hair."

"Of course."

Silence settled in as they both sipped their tea. Hermione kept her eyes riveted upon her cup. She was about to announce her departure when, surprisingly, Snape spoke up.

"How is Mr. Weasley?"

"Ron? He's ah in Toulouse, France, managing a Quidditch team."

"I see."

He didn't, of course, and Hermione wasn't about to share the details of their marital woes. If Severus Snape was entitled to his secrets, so was she. She put down her teacup on the table and rose.

"I must be leaving. Please tell Nora that the tea was delicious."

Snape climbed to his feet and nodded. "I will return your parchments within the week."

? Toulouse

Chapter 5 of 22

Hermione goes to France to see Ron and finds that the situation is beyond repair.

Chapter 5: À Toulouse

The offices of *Les Torpilles* were located on the Rue de Saint Hippolyte in Toulouse. Although the sign read *La Ministère des Égouttes*, Hermione had no trouble seeing that it was a Muggle-misdirecting ruse; as soon as she stepped close to the door, the letters shimmered and changed. Instead of announcing the Ministry of Sewers, the sign now clearly advertised *Les Torpilles de Toulouse: Les Vainqueurs du Quidditch*. She opened the door and went inside.

"Oui?"

The room was dim compared to the brilliant afternoon sunshine outside, and it took a moment for Hermione's eyes to adjust. She found herself facing a young woman sitting behind a large wooden desk. The woman had long hair black, clearly from a bottle and was clad in a bright pink robe.

"Bonjour," Hermione began, smiling and extending her hand. Pink Robe stared at her as though she had two heads. When it became obvious that the girl wasn't going to take her hand, she hastily withdrew it. "Je voudrais ah voir Monsieur Weasley."

"Vous avez un rencard, madame?"

"Pardon?" Her primary school French was failing her fast. Hermione was tempted to ask what *rencard* was, but the explanation was likely to plunge her further into ignorance. "Je suis Madame Hermione Granger-Weasley."

The woman blinked in uncertainty. Hermione added helpfully, "Monsieur Weasley est mon mari."

"Monsieur Weasley n'est pas ici. Il est au stade de Quidditch."

"Où est le stade de Quidditch?"

Pink Robe sighed as though she'd expected this. Instead of answering, she rifled through a desk drawer and pulled out a sheet of blank paper. Picking up a pen, she began sketching a map. Thirty seconds later, she was finished. "Vous êtes là," she said, pointing to an X on the map. Moving the pen to another spot that looked to be a fair distance away, she repeated, "Monsieur Weasley est au stade de Quidditch."

"Oh." The map might as well have been a drawing of the canals on Mars, Hermione thought. "How *comment* - ?"

As if dealing with a child, Pink Robe pointed bluntly to the fireplace in the corner. "Par cheminette," she said with a marked absence of patience.

"Merci." Hermione crossed to the fireplace and climbed in, frankly glad to get out of the office. She seized a handful of Floo powder, cast it down, and said, "Le stade de Quidditch!"

There was the usual spinning, the blurring, the strange grates. Then there was bright sunlight and a blast of summer heat. Hermione stepped out of the fireplace, looking around to catch her bearings. Ron's voice, full of incredulity, was the first thing she heard.

"Hermione?"

She turned to see her husband striding toward her down a long, stone corridor, his jaw hanging in amazement.

"Ron!" Hermione flung her arms around his neck as Ron clutched her to him in a bear hug.

"What in the world are you doing here?" he demanded in bewilderment.

"I came to see you," she said. "Fred and George told me that your team's doing well, and since it had been a while since I've heard from you "

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that. You know what a bad writer I am." Ron held her at arm's length. "You look great."

"Thanks. You, too." Hermione felt suddenly awkward. This was her husband, yet the display of affection was no more than he would have given another member of his family.

"So how long are you staying?" Ron wanted to know.

"I don't know. It's the weekend, so I could stay until Sunday night, I suppose."

"Great. You can see us play this evening."

It was typical Ron. Hermione's first reaction was to become indignant; she hadn't come to France just to see a Quidditch game. Her second reaction was that this was Ron Weasley, so naturally Quidditch would be involved. There would be plenty of time to catch up after the game.

"Harry and Ginny and the kids send their love," she told him.

"Ginny Floo'd me last week. Doesn't Samantha have a birthday coming up soon?" Ron took her arm and steered her down the corridor. "Here, let's head for my office."

"I would have sent you an owl to let you know that I was coming," Hermione said, "but it was sort of a spur of the moment decision."

"No problem."

The corridor was lined with wide archways; through these, Hermione could see the green of the Quidditch pitch beyond.

"This is a big place," she commented.

"Yeah. Lots of rabid fans here. We almost always sell out."

"That's great."

Eventually the stone archways vanished. Ron led Hermione to a doorway on the right. Ahead of them was what was clearly a sports locker room. To the left, a door was marked with a sign that read *Directeur d'Equipe, Ronald Weasley*.

"In here," Ron told her.

"Nice office," Hermione said kindly. In truth, it looked like a great many old offices: a rather battered desk, several chairs, a couple of filing cabinets. A miniature of the Quidditch pitch sat on a table off to the right. There, a handful of miniature players bobbed up and down on brooms in mid-air, evidently waiting to be magically put through their paces.

"We've got the newest Play Planner," Ron pointed out proudly when he saw which way she was looking. "All you have to do is tell the players what to do and you can create all sorts of fantastic new plays. Beats chalk on a board any day. Of course, it is a lot more complicated than it looks..."

"I'm sure."

"Here, take a seat. I can't believe you're here!" He perched on the edge of the battered desk.

Hermione sat in one of the chairs. Immediately, a brief silence fell.

"This is a bit awkward, isn't it?" she said, smiling faintly. "I really should have told you that I was coming."

Ron shrugged, grinning. "Really, it's okay. It's really great to see you."

Really great to see you Hermione could picture him saying the same words to Harry. Or Fred and George. Or anybody, really... She was spared from replying when the office door opened and a woman burst in. At first glance, the woman looked to be in her thirties, but her sleekly styled blond hair and artistically applied makeup seemed an obvious attempt to camouflage a good ten years, if not more.

"Rhonnee, ce soir je voudrais ah, pardon. Tu as une invitée."

Ron hopped off the desk at once. "Georgette, I'd like you to meet my wife, Hermione. This is Georgette Meneau, the owner of the team," he said to Hermione.

"Bonjour, Hermione. Bienvenue a Toulouse." The woman graciously extended a hand, yet Hermione couldn't help but notice the look of surprise in her eyes.

"Merci," she replied, shaking Georgette's hand. It was bedecked with a number of rings, all of which looked genuine and quite expensive.

"We adore your husband," Georgette continued in heavily accented English. "Rhonnee is just what our team 'az needed We are going to ahles championnats."

"The Championship Finals," Ron translated.

"That's great," Hermione said, suddenly aware of how many times in her life she'd been required to drum up some enthusiasm for a Quidditch team's success.

"Rhonnee is a fabulous manager," Georgette announce, casting an adoring glance at Ron. "Il est magnifique!"

At no time during his association with British Quidditch teams, whether Gryffindor or Chudley Cannons, had Ron Weasley ever been referred to as 'magnificent', Hermione thought. No wonder he liked it here.

"He loves the game," she said lamely.

"Oui I mean, yes," Ron said, the tips of his ears going pink. "Georgette, did you need something?"

"Ah, oui. Au sujet de la soirée plus tard..."

The woman launched into a spate of French, leaving Hermione's attempts at translation in the dust. And Ron's, too, from the look of it, Hermione thought. He appeared to be catching about every third word, yet he nodded vigorously at regular intervals. Georgette finally switched to a mélange of French and English, and Hermione could tell that the conversation had something to do with the level of play now that a berth in the Championships was already secured. There was something more regarding a wealthy sponsor and an after-game function, and finally, Georgette flashed a brilliant smile, patted Ron's cheek, and departed with a cheery "Au revoir!"

Ron was even redder than before. "Hermione, that pat on the cheek, she does that all the time. That's just Georgette's way. I don't want you to think that she and I "

"Of course I don't." Hermione wanted to sound reassuring, but it only reinforced the fact that her life and Ron's life were very different now. "So, you have a party or something after the game tonight?"

"Oh," he said blankly. "Yeah. I expect I do. I'm really sorry. We could try to get together after that if you like."

"Don't be ridiculous." She cringed as she heard herself say the words: there was *theridiculous* business again... "What about tomorrow morning? Breakfast, maybe?"

"Yeah." Ron brightened. "There's a really good café I know. Where are you staying?"

"The Veraduc."

"Oh, good. That's really close by the restaurant. It's called Le Bon Pain."

"I saw it, I think. What time?"

"How about nine o'clock?"

"Great." Ron moved to the rear of the desk and pulled open a drawer. "Look, let me give you a pass for the game tonight. VIP section, and all."

The last thing Hermione wanted to do was to sit alone at a Quidditch game in a foreign country, but she had the feeling that Ron was making a last stab at trying to remain connected to her. Makes sense, she thought: he always assumed that Quidditch was the common ground for everybody, even when it wasn't.

"Great," she heard herself say. Moments later, after a hug and perfunctory kiss on the cheek, she was walking back towards the stadium Floo. There was a gnawing in her stomach that had little to do with food and everything to do with the realization that she and Ron were farther apart than ever.

Hermione spent the afternoon sightseeing in Toulouse, trying to put her mind off the situation with Ron and onto more pleasant matters. Finally, she ate a solitary dinner at the hotel and returned to the Quidditch stadium.

Ron had been correct about selling out of tickets, Hermione thought as she joined the press of fans finding their seats. The VIP section was not nearly so crowded as the rest of the place, it seemed. She found her solitary seat and tried to concentrate on the game. The opposing team, the *Salauds de St. Lâ*, apparently had a bone to pick from past meetings with *Les Torpilles*, and play was mean and physical. At least with Ron as manager, Hermione thought, she wasn't required to sit in the stands and watch him getting beaten up any longer. She'd never had much stomach for the brutality that often went with professional Quidditch, and the referees of tonight's game were being sorely tested by deliberate ramming, blocking, and outright attacks. When what seemed like the millionth penalty was called, Hermione finally stood to stretch her legs.

She walked to the refreshment stand and found long lines there. Resigned, Hermione picked what she hoped was the shortest line and waited. She was trying to study the menu when it became obvious that a man in the next line was ogling her with frank admiration.

"Bon soir," he said, finally catching her eye.

"Bon soir." She tried to indicate a polite disinterest.

The lines crept forward. Sleaze Man, Hermione found to her displeasure, kept pace with her.

"Ça va?" He tried again.

"Ça va bien," she muttered, thinking too late that she should have simply pretended not to hear him.

The lines moved a bit once more.

"Vous êtes seule ce soir?" *Are you alone this evening?*

It struck Hermione then that she was accomplishing absolutely nothing tonight. "Oui," she said. "Tres seule."

Very alone.

She dropped out of line and left the stadium.

From the volume of people eating at Le Bon Pain, Hermione could see that they must make a fortune if they had crowds like this every day. There was now a line of people waiting to be seated, and she felt guilty for tying up a table. Ron was late forty-five minutes late, to be precise and her stomach was growling with hunger. Hermione had put off the waiter as long as she could, ordering a cup of tea and requesting two refills, but her server was looking on the verge of telling her to order or go, that there were customers waiting to spend a lot of Euros if they could only have her table. She was just about to break down and request an omelette when Ron arrived.

"Hello," Hermione said, fixing a smile on her face while the unspoken question of *Why are you late?* loomed in her eyes. She'd had a lot of practice at it.

"Sorry, love." Ron leaned over to kiss her briefly on the lips before sliding into his seat. "Late night last night."

"Your after-the-game party?" she asked. Now that she had a closer look at her husband, Hermione could see that Ron looked much the worse for wear.

"Yeah. Sponsors..."

"I don't remember you having to deal with all that when you were with the Cannons."

"Well, I wasn't the manager then, was I?" Ron began to scan the menu.

Hermione was silent for a moment. She'd had ample time to read the menu twenty times over, and she took the opportunity to watch Ron scan the bill of fare.

"You seem to be doing quite well speaking and reading French," she observed.

"Who, me?" Ron looked up and snorted. "I get by, that's about it. As long as I can make the Quidditch plays clear, I don't care much about the rest."

"Madame? Monsieur? Vous êtes prêts?" *The garçon*, who had already introduced himself to Hermione as Michel, hovered at Ron's elbow.

Hermione glance at Ron in uncertainty, but he merely nodded.

"Go ahead. I already know what I'm having."

"Je désire une omelette à fromage, s'il vous plaît."

"Très bien, madame. Et vous, monsieur?"

"Same thing. Mêmes choses," Ron replied in a ridiculous accent, handing the menu back to the waiter.

Hermione wanted to correct him, to tell him that he should say *la même chose*, that the French didn't drop articles as English-speakers did, but stopped herself in time. The very reason that she and Ron were sitting here in France, instead of in their flat in London, was partly due to the fact that she tended to point out his shortcomings on a regular basis.

"So," Ron went on, "how are you? Sleep well?"

"Fine, thanks."

"Great morning, huh? We've got practice at eleven, so the weather should be perfect for it. I what's wrong?"

Hermione felt tears prickling the corners of her eyes. Ron looked, for all the world, completely oblivious to the fact that they, who had been friends and lovers for so many years, were discussing the weather like a pair of strangers.

"We're talking about the weather, Ron. For pity's sake!"

"What?" He was dumbfounded by his wife's reaction.

"Is that all we can manage, to talk about the weather?"

Ron's jaw wobbled a few times as he tried to come up with some sort of appropriate reply. He eyed Hermione suspiciously. "Is it er that time of the month, or something?"

She wanted to haul her arm back and smack him in the face as hard as she could. Truth be told, it *was* that time of the month, but it had nothing to do with the fact that Ron was treating her as he had in their first few years at Hogwarts. Shouldn't he have missed her desperately, if they were still in love? Shouldn't he have offered to skip the post-game party and take her to his flat instead? Shouldn't he have been on time this morning, if he still cared?

Hermione pressed her lips together to stop them from trembling. "We're finished, aren't we?" she managed.

Ron stared at her blankly. "Huh? Finished? What are you talking about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about, Ronald Weasley! This is not how two people who are supposed to be deeply in love behave!"

She expected him to make a joke. *We're not finished, Hermione, we don't even have our food yet...* Instead, Ron's face fell, and he swallowed hard. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "I think so."

They both fell silent, as if waiting for someone anyone to come bursting into the restaurant and announce that they were both mistaken. Finally, the silence became so thick that it threatened to smother Hermione. She drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"I never thought it would come to this," she gasped.

"Nor did I."

"Look, I do love you, Hermione." Ron reached across the table to grip her hands. "I always have. You know that."

"I know." It was surreal, Hermione thought, ending a marriage in a crowded French restaurant while patrons surrounded them, all sipping their *cafés au lait* and munching their *pâtisseries*.

"Look I'll tell the family if you want," Ron offered. "They'll go ballistic most likely, you know Mum. You shouldn't have to deal with that."

"I consider them my family, too," she argued, but the air seemed to be gone from her lungs again.

"Doesn't matter. It's not right. You tell your folks, and I'll make a quick trip home to tell mine."

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no point in you coming back to Britain just for that." Hermione meant it kindly, but the pained expression on Ron's face as the word 'ridiculous' left her lips spoke volumes. She'd exhorted her husband not to be ridiculous far too often, she thought, and a wave of panic seized her. "Ron, I'm sorry. You're not ridiculous. I must have been sounding like a harpy for years now. I never meant to hurt you. I didn't!"

"Hermione..." A hint of a pained smile twisted the corner of his mouth. "It doesn't matter, love. And you were never a harpy. You were just...you."

She suspected that he'd meant that to be a comforting statement, yet Hermione could barely see it as such. She'd been herself, and as a result, she was about to become a divorced woman.

Allies in Unexpected Places

Chapter 6 of 22

Hermione tries unsuccessfully to deal with her failed marriage. Meanwhile, she has unexpected company.

Chapter 6: Allies in Unexpected Places

Hermione dropped her overnight bag just inside the front door of the flat, the sound echoing through the empty rooms. She shut the door behind her and sagged against it and wondered dully if there was anything as depressing as a house that was no longer a home. Reminders of Ron were everywhere here: photographs, his favorite chair, his special coffee mug. These things had been present for the six months of their separation, yet they'd never been as glaringly obvious as they were right now. The question *Now what?* beat a repetitious pattern in Hermione's head, but to answer it required thought, and thought was something she wished to avoid just now. What did one do after deciding to get a divorce? Wash the dishes? Go to the movies? Do a bit of laundry?

She kicked off her shoes and wandered to the bathroom, seized by a sudden need to dispense with whatever grime had accumulated during her brief trip to France. When Hermione had washed her face and blotted it dry, she paused to stare at her reflection in the mirror. Was this what a divorced woman looked like? Her parents had been married for thirty-four years; what would they say when they learned that their perfect daughter was getting divorced? Both Julia and Lawrence Granger adored Ron and all the Weasleys. Her mum had been thrilled when Hermione married into such a large family; it helped make up for the diminutive Granger line, Julia confided once. Telling Mum about the separation had been difficult enough. The thought of announcing a divorce was positively chilling.

The bleak mirror image stared back at her. "It's times like this I wish I drank," she muttered with a vicious stab of anger.

The occasions that she'd uttered those words, usually during a particularly horrendous stretch at work, Hermione had always meant it tongue-in-cheek. She had never developed much of a taste for alcohol. At special events, Hermione had been known to drink a glass of wine, but she had never been anywhere near what one might call 'drunk'. Wasting time by living life in a stupor had never struck her as something to be desired. And yet, if she'd ever been tempted to drink herself to distraction, this was the day for it. Throwing caution to the winds, Hermione headed to the kitchen. There, she rummaged through the refrigerator for the wine left from when?

Doesn't matter. What do I have to lose? I'm a big girl, I can do this if I choose... Hermione grabbed the bottle and a glass and settled herself on the sofa in the lounge.

Three glasses later, she tried to decide whether or not she was drunk. Definitely relaxed, Hermione decided. Definitely. And thoughts of Ron were at the fringe of her consciousness now, not tearing at her heart as they'd done earlier. She was in the midst of congratulating herself on her experiment in self-anesthetizing when there was a knocking at the front door.

She shot bolt upright in panic, and immediately the room swam and her stomach began to churn. What if it was one of her parents? Or Molly, or Arthur? Hermione stumbled unsteadily to her feet, then lurched from one piece of furniture to another, clutching at them for support in order to cross the room. She recalled all too clearly now why she never bothered to drink to excess.

"This was not one of my better ideas," Hermione muttered aloud, then called out, "Who is it?"

"Severus Snape."

Snape? She fumbled for the lock, found it, turned it, and stared in amazement at the figure standing before her.

"Professor Snape?"

"That's *Mister Snape* to you, Granger. May I come in?"

She started to say *No, this is a terrible time*, but her voice failed her and Snape took the hesitation as a yes. He strode in the room, gave the flat the briefest of appraising glances, and turned to face Hermione once more.

"I'm returning the summary notes you left with me," he said coolly.

"Now?" she blurted.

That earned her a withering scowl. "As I have them in my pocket, the answer to that would be 'yes'."

"Of course. Thank you."

Snape hesitated, as if still questioning what he was about to do. Then he reached into his coat pocket, pulled out the rolled-up parchment she had left with him, and handed it to her.

Hermione unrolled the parchment and glanced over it, and immediately an eerie sense of *ôdèjà vu* settled over her. How many times had she had homework returned to her, covered in the same red scrawl? Immediately, she was engulfed in memories of schooldays and of Ron, and the air seemed to vanish instantly from her lungs.

"This is just what ah I needed." She tried to smile, yet it felt horribly out of place. Hermione had a hunch that she resembled a ghostly, grinning jack-o-lantern just now.

Snape peered at her closely. "Are you drunk?"

The simple inquiry broke the dam. Hermione was suddenly aware of two things, the first being that she was making a fool of herself, and the second, that she was about to vomit in front of Severus Snape. She gulped for air.

"Excuse me I I'm going to be ill "

As if shot from a cannon, Hermione dropped the parchments and bolted for the bathroom, arriving just in time. She dropped to her knees in front of the toilet and retched, emptying the contents of her stomach. That done, she sat back on her heels and took in great shuddering breaths, her eyes shut and sweat beading on her forehead.

Just when she thought she couldn't be embarrassed any further, Hermione heard footsteps coming closer.

"I'm fine," she gasped, hoping to deter Snape from coming in. "I'll be out in in any time now "

A shadow loomed over her.

"Idiot girl. Why, in the name of Merlin, are you drunk at two o'clock in the afternoon?" Snape took a flannel from a towel rack near the sink and turned on the cold water tap. He soaked the face cloth for a few seconds, then wrung it out vigorously and handed it to her.

"Thank you," Hermione mumbled, wiping her face with the flannel while Snape filled up a nearby cup with cold water. When he passed the cup to her, she rinsed her mouth, spit the water into the toilet, then took a long, slow drink.

"Better?" Snape asked finally.

Hermione nodded. "I'm so sorry about this. I've just returned from France," she offered by way of explanation.

There was a pause, and then, "I was under the impression that French cooking was better than that."

Had Severus Snape just made a joke? Hermione raised her head to stare at him, regretting it when the motion sent her equilibrium spinning once more. "I went to France to see Ron." She swallowed, then added, "We've decided to get a divorce."

"I see." Snape's expression was enigmatically blank.

There was no hint of sympathy in his voice, but neither was there blatant condescension. It surprised Hermione; the Snape she knew from Hogwarts would have been unable to pass up a chance to insult Ron Weasley. She struggled to her feet, noting that while Snape had been thoughtful enough to provide her with the face cloth and glass of water, he evidently drew the line at offering her a hand in getting up off the floor.

"I'm afraid that the reality of it all struck me rather hard when I got home," Hermione told him, pushing damp strands of hair out of her face. "I drink hardly at all, you see. I thought that maybe, just once, I deserved to get totally, completely drunk."

"Well," he said dryly, "you accomplished it."

"Yes, well, the more fool I. You can be sure that I'll never try it again. And I do apologize that you had to be here to see it."

Snape arched an eyebrow. "I was a Head of House, Granger. I've seen more than my share of vomit among the Slytherins. Not to mention the times in class when a second year and there's always one decides that slicing into a Pufferfish eyeball for a Swelling Solution is not his or her cup of tea. Nor the times when someone used one of your brothers-in-law's products to get out of class."

The Puking Pastilles, Hermione remembered and smiled in spite of herself. And the Swelling Solution they'd worked on that the day she'd stolen the Polyjuice ingredients from Snape's private stock.

"You're feeling better, then?" Snape inquired, spotting the smile at once.

"Much."

"Your relief is only temporary, I'm afraid. There'll be hell to pay in the morning."

"Thanks for the encouragement," she said wryly. "Would you care to return to the lounge, or shall we continue our conversation here in the loo?"

Snape grimaced at her sarcasm, but turned on his heel and exited the room. Hermione followed, wondering why he was allowed to indulge in sarcasm but find it distasteful when used by others. She paused when Snape stooped to pick up the parchments that she'd dropped on the floor, inwardly grateful that he was the one to retrieve them. Bending over was something she didn't want to tackle just now.

"Here," he said, offering them to her. "I'll consider assisting you if anything there needs clarification."

"Thank you. I truly appreciate your help."

Snape nodded, then left the flat without a word.

Hermione unrolled the parchments. It soon became obvious that her mind could process very little in her current state, but she absorbed enough to see that reading the parchment was almost like looking through a window into Severus Snape's soul. No doubt the man harbored volumes more information, but for an intensely private man, what he'd written was quite revealing. Most of the comments were simple enough: *Yes, Very much so, Not relevant*. Others were pure Snape snide remarks disguised as feedback:

"Your conclusion is so blatantly obvious that any idiot should have picked up on it."

"No one in his or her right mind would agree with this."

"Are you mad? Of course Dumbledore intended that."

Eventually, the words began to blur. Without bothering to remove her clothes, Hermione crawled into bed and soon fell into a troubled sleep.

Some time during the night, Hermione managed to peel off her clothes and find a nightgown. She didn't feel too bad, she decided; perhaps Snape was wrong. But the next morning, when she opened her eyes, Hermione awoke to a massive headache. There was no point in complaining: she had it coming to her, she decided, a painful souvenir of her lone attempt at altered states of consciousness. And brewing anything to counter the hangover required a lot more time and energy than she was capable of expending just now. Hermione was on the verge of Flooing the Ministry and telling them that she'd be in late, when she heard someone knock on her front door.

Her first thought was, *Again?*, closely followed by *At six in the morning?* No one, not even her mother, would call at that hour. Hermione pulled her dressing gown about her, grateful that she had to deal only with a headache this time and not a spinning room.

"Who is it?"

"Severus Snape."

Hermione opened the door, frankly surprised that the man would darken her doorstep twice in sixteen hours.

"Good morning," she said, squinting against the sunlight that poured in from the hallway windows. It sent a fresh wave of pain across her forehead.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Snape asked, looking as if he already knew the answer.

Hermione winced. "I've been better, thank you."

Snape withdrew a vial from his pocket and handed it to her. "I thought you might need this. It's Ogden's Morning After Draught."

She was confused. "Ogden's? The same people who make the firewhiskey?"

He nodded. "A rather smart business move on their part. I suggest you take it with a cup of black coffee."

It occurred to Hermione then: Snape was actually being kind. She never would have believed it possible.

"Please come in. I was just about to make some coffee."

Snape hesitated, then crossed the threshold.

"Have a seat," Hermione told him, then hurried into the kitchen. She filled the coffee maker with water and measured out the grounds, and as soon as the appliance began to burble its intent, Hermione returned to the lounge. She found Snape sitting stiffly on the sofa, his eyes darting from her overflowing bookshelves to the now-aged Crookshanks, who matched Snape stare for stare from his perch on top of her telly.

"The coffee will be ready shortly," Hermione told him.

"You use a Muggle coffee device?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"Yes. I know it's slower, but I prefer the taste." Hermione seated herself in the armchair next to the sofa. She couldn't help but notice now that the surprise of his arrival had worn off that Snape's apparel today was a great improvement over the threadbare, messy clothing he'd worn at his house. It was reminiscent of his elegant attire at Hogwarts; outside of the hair, which still stuck out at odd angles and lengths, he looked more like the Severus Snape of old. It also occurred to her that she'd been too drunk to notice what he'd worn the day before.

Her eyes lingered on him a moment too long.

"Do you still find my hair that fascinating?" Snape snapped.

"No," she blurted. "It's just that I'm not accustomed to seeing it in that style." *Or lack thereof...*

An awkward silence descended. Hermione hunted around for a topic of conversation while the coffee pot chugged away. "I understand that you have your own potions business. You make the potions required for products that Fred and George Weasley sell."

"Ah, yes. Explosives and illness-inducing elixirs. It's quite the professional challenge."

"But you have other customers, don't you?" Hermione inquired.

"Yes. Fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, primarily."

She understood Snape's scorn. Anybody who had left Hogwarts with a N.E.W.T. in Potions could do the work he was doing now.

"That's a waste of your skills." Hermione meant it to be encouraging and complimentary, yet it came out sounding rather condescending.

"What you're saying is that it's beneath me, and of course it is," Snape retorted in his *that should be obvious to anybodytone*. "I do what I do to make a living. And before you ask why that is because I know you will I have been blacklisted since the end of the war. I am no longer welcome in the first circles of the Potions world."

"That's grossly unfair," she said quietly.

"I killed Albus Dumbledore. No one is willing to let that slip by unnoticed."

"But "

"Get off your soapbox, Granger. I am viewed as untrustworthy and immoral. Why should I possibly be welcomed with open arms?"

"But -"

"I made my own bed and now I am lying in it. It's as simple as that. And if you say 'but' one more time, I shall take back your precious parchment," Snape muttered, nodding toward the parchments that sat on the coffee table in front of them.

"You were exonerated after the war trials," Hermione pointed out.

"Kindly do not use that word. I was vindicated, perhaps, but not exonerated. That, I'm afraid, I could never be." There was the briefest flash of pain in Snape's eyes, and then it was gone.

His words dropped into a pool of awkward silence.

"I'll check the coffee," Hermione said, climbing to her feet. "I believe it's almost ready."

Snape rose as well. "Never mind the coffee. I should be on my way. I just thought you might find the Ogden's useful."

"I will. Thank you."

"Please let me know if the information on the parchments requires further clarification. I'm quite sure that you will have further questions."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because you always have questions, Granger." There was the briefest hint of a crooked smile which vanished almost as quickly as it arrived. "I must warn you, however, that there is one issue that I will refuse to discuss. So if you have decided to ask me how it felt when I murdered Albus Dumbledore, then you can think again."

The question hadn't been on the list of issues Hermione wanted to discuss with Snape. She wasn't sure that she wanted to hear the answer.

Snape walked towards the door and paused, his hand on the doorknob.

"Consider yourself fortunate that you were on the side of the light, Miss Granger. Lord Voldemort did not care for people who asked questions."

Pasta con Reality

Chapter 7 of 22

Hermione has to break the news of her divorce to her parents.

Chapter 7: Pasta con Reality

The Ministry Dining Area was crowded at nine in the morning. Since the inception of Flexi Time a notion blatantly stolen from Muggles, Hermione knew, yet accredited to Rufus Scrimgeour the room was busy at almost any hour of the day as witches and wizards came and went. She was faced with either talking loudly over the buzz of conversation, or casting *Muffliato* if she wished to avoid being overheard. Hermione chose the latter.

"You're joking." Harry stared at her, a disbelieving frown on his face. "Snape was actually nice to you?"

Hermione nodded. "Believe it or not."

It was yet another bitter pill for her friend to swallow, she thought. Harry hadn't been pleased when she came to him with the results of her research and proclaimed Severus Snape to be a war hero. His long-ingrained dislike of the Potions master was not something with which Harry Potter would easily part.

Harry looked as though he were hoping to discover that Hermione was teasing. When that failed to materialize, he managed a humorless laugh. "Next you'll be telling me

that he's vastly misunderstood. You sound just like Hagrid, swooning over a herd of dragons."

"I don't suppose that your view of him is colored just a bit?"

"My parents are dead because of Severus Snape, Hermione. Do you honestly expect me to run up and give him a hug? Or maybe ask that a statue of him be erected somewhere in Diagon Alley?"

"Oh, honestly, Harry! All I did was say that he was kind to me when I was "

"hung over, yeah." Harry couldn't resist a grin. He'd been incredulous to learn of Hermione's experiment with alcohol and told her flat out that she'd deserved what she got.

"Anyway, that's all over with. I'm never overindulging again," Hermione told him, her cheeks flaming.

"So what did Snape write in his comments, anyway?" Harry apparently decided to have mercy on his friend and drop the subject.

Hermione had been toying with her tea cup, and now, startled by the abrupt question, she pushed it aside. "I can't tell you that, Harry. It's private."

"Private? He wrote comments that you plan to publish in a book, and you consider them to be private?"

"They're not something I would publish as-is. I would have to incorporate the information in various places in the book," she said, waving her hands about for emphasis.

"Then," Harry said with exaggerated patience, "were there any bombshells that you would have to incorporate in various places? Any heretofore unknown revelations?"

"I can't say."

"You're not going to tell me anything, are you?"

"Harry, there's nothing to tell. I only meant that I have to re-read everything Snape wrote, and a lot more than just one time."

Harry shrugged. "I just wondered if there was any good dirt."

"You're just looking for more reasons to hate him."

"I don't need more reasons to hate Severus Snape, Hermione. I have more than enough already."

Hermione glared at her friend. She rose swiftly to her feet and turned to go. "You're being unreasonable, Harry."

"Why are you so eager to defend him? What's in it for you? Just because the man didn't turn tail and run when you were throwing up your socks, he's suddenly eligible for sainthood?" Harry stood as well.

She started to tell Harry that he was being a total idiot, but something stopped her. Why did she suddenly feel empathy for Snape? Hermione struggled to find a response.

"I don't know. Maybe... maybe because he made the wrong choices and has tried to correct them. Maybe I'm a little more sympathetic to people who make the wrong choices now."

Harry's mouth was set in a thin line. "If you're trying to equate the choices Snape made with your marrying Ron, you can forget about it, Hermione. Besides, you two loved each other, and you know it."

Her eyes were suddenly moist. "Yes. We loved each other. But it wasn't enough. And I don't know why, Harry."

"What about your parents? What did they "

"I haven't told them yet," Hermione admitted sadly. "I'm going to their house for dinner tonight. I was planning on it then."

* * *

Lawrence Granger was the cook of the household. Several years earlier, a broken wrist had knocked him out of his dental practice for two months. He'd spent his recuperation period watching cooking shows on the telly and becoming inspired to attempt Great Things. Julia Granger was more than willing to let him have the run of the kitchen. For her, cooking was a necessary evil, something one did to stave off starvation. In Julia's considered opinion, there were two groups of people those who loved to cook and those who preferred to eat and God had placed restaurants on the earth to allow the former a place to indulge in their passion, thereby benefiting the latter. She was the first to admit that her kitchen skills were barely passable and that Hermione had survived from infancy by purely magical means.

"Hello, darling." Julia and Hermione exchanged hugs just inside the front door of the Granger home.

"Hi, Mum."

"How's work?"

"Busy."

"Oh? What's the latest project?"

It had not escaped Hermione's attention that her mother, out of long-standing habit, had glanced behind her, as if expecting to see Ron standing there. "I'm working on a trade agreement with China," she said. "Chinese wizards are not accustomed to dealing with our import restrictions."

"Bureaucracy is a wonderful thing, isn't it?" Julia's interest was fully back on her daughter once more.

"I suppose. What's for dinner? Is Dad experimenting again?"

"Yes. An Italian dish... He even made the pasta himself with that machine I gave him at Christmas."

"I'm sure it will be delicious." Hermione slipped her arm around her mother's waist, and the two women walked down the hallway to the kitchen.

"There she is!" Brandishing a spoon, an apron-clad Lawrence Granger leaned away from the stove to kiss his only child on the cheek.

"Hello, Daddy. It smells good in here." Hermione perched on one of the stools at the breakfast bar, across from where her father was working. She glanced around the kitchen of her childhood home, trying to resurrect memories as her eyes swept the room. The old dining suite had been replaced two years ago, most of the appliances, within the past twelve months. Everything suddenly struck her as very modern, very professional, and very foreign. *Change*, she thought unhappily. *Everywhere I look, there is change...*

"Thanks, sweetheart. It'll be ready in ten minutes or so." Lawrence stirred a pot of sauce with the spoon he'd been holding. "How are things?"

Julia affixed him with a meaningful glare, and Lawrence added lamely, "At work, I mean?"

Hermione nearly smiled. Her parents were evidently trying to avoid probing into the situation between her and Ron. It was kind of them, but unnecessary, given the news she needed to break this evening. "Look, before we sit down to dinner and everybody tiptoes on eggshells and dances around the issue, I need to tell you this right off: Ron and I have decided to get a divorce."

Her mother opened her mouth and closed it again, while her father simply went back to stirring his pot.

"I went to see him in France over the weekend," Hermione continued. "He's very happy there, and well we decided that we wouldn't be getting back together."

"I see," Julia murmured.

"Whatever you think is best," Lawrence said evenly.

Silence fell, and the only sound was that of the spoon scraping the sides of the sauce pot. Hermione looked from one parent to the other. She'd expected a deluge of criticisms and unsolicited advice, and was prepared to argue her case against all sorts of objections. This quiet acceptance was unnerving.

"Is that all you have to say?" she demanded in amazement.

Julia regarded her daughter with a look that said Given her druthers, she'd be happy to accommodate her by arguing the point. "You're an adult, Hermione. If this had happened five years ago, things might be different. When you and Ron separated, your father and I discussed the possibility that this could be the outcome, and we decided to trust you to make the right choice. If you believe that this is the right course for both you and Ron, then so be it."

"You were expecting us to fight it, weren't you, darling?" Lawrence put in.

"Well, yes, but "

"But what?" her father prompted gently. "Do you want us to tell you that you've made a horrible mistake?"

"Have I?" Hermione looked beseechingly at her father.

"You tell me, love."

She crumpled inside. There had been no need, during the war years, to look for comfort and direction from her parents when making choices. As Muggles, Julia and Lawrence would have been offering blind advice. They had taken her heavily edited revelations with equanimity, always encouraging Hermione to use her instincts and her intelligence. But this was about marriage, a topic with which they were intimately familiar. Surely they could provide her with something...

"You two have been married for so long," she pointed out, her voice quivering. "Why did it work for you and not for me?"

Julia and Lawrence exchanged glances.

"I don't know the answer to that," Lawrence said quietly, leaving his pasta sauce and leaning on the counter with both hands. "Maybe there isn't one. Not a tidy one, at any rate."

Her mother took the stool next to hers. "People change, Hermione. Whether married or not, people change. And sometimes they go off in totally different directions."

"I know that, Mum, but do you really think Ron and I have changed all that much?" Hermione argued.

"Maybe," Lawrence said, "that's the problem."

Hermione frowned at her father, puzzled. "I don't understand."

Lawrence Granger was silent for a moment. "Hermione, I don't quite know how to say this without it sounding a bit insulting. We love Ron, we always have. He's wonderful, always treated you well. It's just that I've sometimes wondered what you two had in common. He's a sports fanatic, you're not. His reading is pretty much limited to the sports page in the newspaper, while you read anything and everything you can get your hands on. You're involved in high-level negotiations between your government and foreign countries while Ron is "

"a simpleton?" Hermione finished, scowling.

Her father cast a beseeching glance at his wife, and Julia leapt into the fray. "Not at all, Hermione. You know your father didn't mean it in that sense."

"In what sense did you mean it then?" Hermione demanded.

Lawrence's shoulders tensed as he fixed his daughter with a direct gaze. "You're very bright, love. Very bright. Ron is not, although he's talented in his own way. The two of you are so very different, that if it hadn't been for the fact that you and Ron were good friends for so many years, we would have thought that you'd chosen to marry the wrong man."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione sputtered. "Just because our interests are varied, that doesn't mean that we have nothing in common."

"Of course it doesn't," her father continued. "But are seven years of shared school adventures enough on which to build a marriage? Perhaps if you'd had children, things "

"Please, not again. Don't say 'things would be different'."

"But they would," Julia interjected. "Parenthood bonds the husband and wife together, by nature of the fact that it's a shared experience. What has bonded you and Ron together during your ten years of marriage?"

Hermione opened her mouth to say that plenty had occurred to create a bond, but the painful truth was that her parents had a good point. The greatest link that she and Ron shared was their time at Hogwarts. She buried her face in her hands. "I don't want to think about this any more. Can we just have a pleasant meal without second-guessing the past?"

"Of course." Lawrence returned to his pot of pasta sauce.

Julia donned an apron. "Shall I make the salad?"

Hermione watched her parents buzz around the kitchen, intent on their tasks. She had to hand it to her father, she mused; the man wasn't reluctant to speak his mind. Lawrence Granger's frankness had allowed him to ask the hard questions when her Hogwarts letter came, and he hadn't retreated in fear as some Muggle parents did. His own openness had given Hermione the courage she needed to enter the world of magic unafraid.

Had she and Ron always been so very different that it hadn't mattered until now?

There was, Hermione knew, a tiny corner of her mind that admitted to occasionally bemoaning the fact, over the years, that Ron Weasley wasn't her intellectual equal. It was by no means an indictment of Ron's intelligence; it was simply an established fact, going all the way back to their first year at Hogwarts. If she had to choose again

presuming that eventually, she might find someone and remarry what sort of man would she choose?

"How's the book coming?" Julia's voice interrupted her daughter's thoughts.

"Fine. Professor Snape returned his comments on my summary," Hermione said, wrenching her thoughts back into the present.

"I thought he wasn't going to help you with it."

"He wasn't willing to be interviewed. He did agree to review it for me."

"That's nice," Julia commented. "What is he doing now?"

"He's self-employed, but I don't think he earns much money," Hermione told her, trying to put the best spin on Snape's circumstances. "And he's been made into a pariah of sorts. I'm hoping that perhaps my book might bring him greater acceptance in the wizarding world."

Her mother smiled at her then, a self-satisfied sort of smile that spoke of pride in her daughter's efforts to make the world a better place.

"How soon will you be sending it off to a publisher?" Lawrence wanted to know.

"Oh. I don't know. I still have a lot of work to go."

"Well, one of these days I expect to attend your first book-signing: Hermione Granger-Weasley, renowned " Lawrence halted in mid-sentence, his face reddening. "Damn it all... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to "

"It's all right, Dad," Hermione said, trying to smooth things over.

"Will you be dropping the 'Weasley' from your surname?" Julia looked almost embarrassed to ask the question.

"I suppose. I hadn't really given it much thought."

Lawrence seized the saucepan, gave it one final stir, and emptied it over a large bowl of pasta. "All right, ladies, no more long faces this evening. We are going to have a first-class meal tonight, eh?"

"Yes, Dad," Hermione answered obediently, a small smile on her face.

"I've almost finished here," Julia said, then glanced up sharply from the salad to her husband. "Lawrence, you were planning on serving that Cabernet Sauvignon with dinner, weren't you?"

"Glad you reminded me." Lawrence Granger wiped his hands on his apron and headed for the refrigerator. "Hermione, a glass of wine with your dinner?"

"No!" she blurted. "I mean I really don't care for any. Just water, please."

"Are you feeling well?" Julia inquired.

"Fine, Mum. It's just that I overdid it with some wine not long ago, and I'm really not too anxious to repeat the experience." Hermione felt her cheeks begin to flame.

Lawrence chuckled. "Overdid it? You? I've scarcely ever seen you take a drink."

Hermione turned even redder. "I was depressed over Ron, and I thought I'd try to get drunk, just to see what it was all about."

"Learned your lesson, did you?"

"A very painful lesson." Hermione recalled Snape, handing her a flannel, a glass of water. Snape being kind.

"Well, experience is the best teacher, I always say," Lawrence announced, carrying the bowl of pasta towards the dining room. "All right, ladies dinner is served!"

Dinner at the Pub

Chapter 8 of 22

When is an interview not an interview? Hermione has a plan.

Chapter 8: Dinner at the Pub

Hermione knocked on Snape's door exactly at seven o'clock. He wouldn't be able to fault her for being early or late for their appointment unless, of course, he decided that his own clocks were set correctly and hers were somewhat off.

Tonight, she had a plan. Severus Snape might refuse to give her an account of his part in the war and indeed, it was his right to do so but there might be ways around that. Collect enough information related to his wartime actions, Hermione reasoned, and all Snape would have to do eventually was provide yes or no answers about his own history.

The door opened, and Snape nodded curtly. "Granger."

He was better dressed than at their last meeting, Hermione noted. There were no dirty trainers, no stained white shirt, just a simple dark top and trousers. The hair, however, was just as bizarre. She smiled politely. "Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Snape."

Snape looked for a moment as though fighting the urge to say *Fine, I've seen you, now go away*. Instead, he motioned her into the small sitting room, where Hermione took the same seat on the sofa as before.

"I'm afraid my assistant is gone for the day," Severus announced as he seated himself in the spindly chair across from her. "If you wish to have tea on this visit, you shall

have to make your own."

Hermione ignored this. "I don't care for any tea, thank you." The second part of her plan had to do with dealing with Snape's favorite weapon. Sarcasm only worked when the victim paid attention to it, and therefore, she had decided to disregard anything that smelled the least bit derisive.

"You have questions, Granger?"

"I do." Hermione pulled a Muggle writing pen from her bag and smoothed out a spare piece of parchment.

"I have not changed my mind," Snape reminded her coolly. "I will not discuss my role in the war."

"Yes, I understand that. I would like you to tell me about Voldemort."

"Voldemort?" Severus repeated warily.

"Yes. First of all, "

"First of all, please bear in mind that I was not the Dark Lord's confidant, right hand man, or best mate." He said it through clenched teeth. "Don't tell me that you are one of those people who assume that I was privy to his deepest thoughts."

He was baiting her, and Hermione ignored it. "Why, in your opinion, did Voldemort fail to see his own shortcomings?"

Snape's eyes narrowed as he searched her face evidently looking for a trap, she thought. Finding none, he spoke up.

"That is a ridiculously simple question, Granger. The man believed that he was invincible. If you are all powerful, you are invincible. If you are invincible, you have no shortcomings. His belief in himself was his greatest weakness; he did not see that he was in any way vulnerable."

There was a brief silence while Hermione scribbled notes on the parchment. Snape's eyes followed her motions.

"Why," he wanted to know, "are you using a Muggle quill?"

"Because I didn't want to risk spilling ink all over your parlour," she said, not looking up. Then, "Was Voldemort the world's greatest Legilimens?"

"I cannot say whether he was the greatest Legilimens. What he failed to realize, however, was that there is always a stronger Occlumens."

Hermione looked up. "You were able to Occlude him?"

"Another ridiculous question. I would not be here if I was unable to Occlude him." Snape crossed his arms across his chest and regarded her scornfully.

"Good point." More scribbling. "Did Voldemort trust anyone?"

"No. Trust is not a word he understood."

"He didn't even trust the Lestranges?" Hermione asked thoughtfully. "I was under the impression that he relied heavily on an inner circle." She failed to add that Snape was believed to have been a part of it.

"Voldemort had an inner circle, yes. But he trusted no one."

"He couldn't control anyone's actions," she ventured, "and therefore, he could trust no one."

"Of course. Voldemort ruled his followers by intimidation, but he did understand that threats of pain and torture work only up to a certain point; if those methods failed, then said followers were removed permanently."

"But how can you stage a counter-movement in society when your followers run the risk of being eliminated every day? Wouldn't your numbers constantly be diminishing?" Hermione posited.

Snape glared at her. "The Dark Lord was a brilliant man. Having said that, however, you may assume that he did not possess an abundance of common sense."

"Did everyone in the ranks believe that he intended to create a better wizarding society?"

"Some did. The majority served him to gain either a reward or power each a self-serving goal. It hardly makes for a cohesive group."

"There must have been a great deal of sycophantic behaviour taking place whenever he called the group together," Hermione reasoned.

"There are cruder ways of putting it, but let's just say that the displays were rather sickening," Severus admitted with a shrug.

Hermione tapped the ink pen against her chin thoughtfully, then wrote more on her parchment.

"Was Voldemort's plan to get rid of Albus Dumbledore related to his desire to kill Harry?" she asked finally. "Or was it simply that he wanted to get rid of such a powerful wizard?"

Snape stared at Hermione for a long moment. He was likely to be suspicious of her motives now, she thought, probably wondering if she had arrived at the forbidden topic of Dumbledore's murder.

"Voldemort and Dumbledore had a very long history," Snape answered, choosing his words carefully. "Surely you knew this."

"Yes."

"Having Dumbledore killed was as much personal vendetta as it was clearing the way to eliminate Potter."

"Why did Voldemort think that Draco Malfoy would be successful at murdering Dumbledore when he, himself, was unable to accomplish that at the Ministry?"

Another long stare. Hermione waited patiently.

"I already told you that Voldemort regularly lacked common sense," Severus replied. "Assigning that task to Draco was a way of initiating the boy into the ranks, not to mention the fact that once that Dark Lord controlled Draco, he controlled Narcissa as well."

"But did he honestly think that Draco would succeed?"

Severus snorted. "Not really. It was merely an exercise, a way to test his mettle as well as bestowing revenge on Lucius for his failure to retrieve the prophecy."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "And then his mother came to see you, "

"and we made an Unbreakable Vow, and the rest is history? Is that what you want to hear?" Snape asked, his voice icy. "I told you, Granger, I will not discuss my involvement in this!"

"I understand that. I have no intention of asking you about the Vow." Hermione tried to sound reassuring, but inwardly she was furious with herself for drifting too close to the limits of acceptable conversation. "May we discuss something else?"

"Such as?" Snape demanded.

She was fumbling around for a safe topic when her stomach rumbled aloud suddenly, unmistakably, thunderously, rumbled. Hermione's face suffused a deep red. "Excuse me," she blurted. "I haven't had dinner yet, and I "

"Tell me, Granger," Severus drawled, "does my presence always induces violent gastrointestinal reactions in you?"

"No, of course not. I -"

"Then shall we continue our conversation, or do I need to feed you five-year-old biscuits from a tin?"

Hermione felt her face redden even more. Suddenly, she was a fifteen-year-old girl again, intimidated and belittled by a man whom no-one liked. "Mr. Snape," she said coldly, "was there anything that you enjoyed about teaching besides the chance to be intentionally cruel to your students?"

"Yes," he snapped. "I enjoyed my summer holidays and the occasional opportunity to encounter a mind such as yours. Other than that, the job was despicable!"

Her jaw dropped, and Hermione tried to come up with a coherent reply. Somehow, Severus Snape had just given her a backhanded compliment.

"Would you like to get a bite to eat?" she blurted.

"What?" It was Snape's turn to look startled.

"I said, would you like to go out for a bite?" Hermione repeated weakly, but she had no idea why the offer had left her lips in the first place. All she could think was that she was starving and that, just possibly, Snape might be more likely to talk if the conversation took place on neutral ground.

Severus was eyeing her as if she had just descended from another planet. He was trying to gauge her sanity, Hermione guessed, and she didn't blame him. She wasn't too convinced of it herself.

"Very well," Snape said finally. "You're buying. If you think that I have the money to waste on you, you are very much mistaken."

Hermione rose to her feet, thrusting parchments back into her bag. The words *What did I just do?* clanged through her head over and over. "Where are we going?" she asked, trying to get her belongings sorted and together.

"There is a pub 'round the corner from here. The food is decent." Snape was already up and moving towards the door. "Well? Are you coming?"

* * *

Judging by the crowd, the Plaid Pony was a popular place. The pub was dimly lit, crowded, and very much a working man's pub. There was no pretense at being anything more than what it was, no artifice in an attempt to draw an upscale clientele. It was also, much to Hermione's surprise, Muggle. She asked Snape about it as they approached the counter.

"There is no wizarding pub nearby," he said, shrugging. "It's reasonably priced, and the food, as I said before, is decent enough."

"Of course." Hermione nodded, uncomfortably aware that a beefy man nursing a beer at the next table was eyeing her with eager speculation.

"Were you wanting something different? One of the places that caters to tourists who are looking for 'the real Britain'?"

"No. Don't be ridic " Hermione bit off the last part of the word. There it was again; had she always been in this habit of calling people 'ridiculous'? "If you say the food is good, that's good enough for me."

They placed their orders, only to be faced with the problem of making conversation until their food was ready. If Snape was uncomfortable, he wasn't showing it, Hermione thought. Then again, this wasn't his idea...

"So," Snape said, his face impassive, "how is your friend?"

"My friend?" She stared at him blankly.

"Your friend at the Ministry. The one who has been denied advancement because of her involvement in the war."

He knew. Hermione could read it in his eyes. For the second time in the last half hour, her face turned beet red. She opened her mouth to speak, but words failed her.

"Really, Granger," Snape went on, "did you honestly expect me to believe that silly story? 'I have a friend from the war who could do so much more, but the Ministry refuses to give her a promotion...' Admit it, you wanted my help, and you thought that might sway my decision."

Hermione was tempted to deny the accusation, but the old belief that One Didn't Lie to One's Teachers even Former Teachers reared its head. "Did it?" she asked in a hopeful voice.

"Oh, yes. I'm certain that your little book will make my life ever so much easier. The Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers will be camping out on my doorstep any day now, begging me to rejoin their ranks." Annoyed, Severus took a sip of the ale that had just been placed in front of him. "I'm glad that your skills at subterfuge weren't this feeble during the war, or we'd all be serving tea to Voldemort while we painted his toenails."

She stared at him. The famous Snape sarcasm, even though it was directed against her, suddenly struck Hermione as absurdly funny, and she found herself dissolving into helpless laughter. The tension she had felt since first approaching Snape two weeks ago vanished into thin air. "Then I've done the world a public service," she gasped, wiping away a tear that had collected in the corner of one eye. "I can't imagine anything worse than painting Voldemort's toenails!"

Severus sighed and shook his head in disbelief, the corners of his mouth curving into the bare bones of a smile.

"Granger, you are "

"very sorry for misleading you, yes," Hermione managed. "I only thought that if you saw some benefit to helping me, you might seriously consider it."

Snape was silent while the last of her whimpers of laughter died down. "My primary hesitation," he said finally, "was that you would immediately run off to Mr. Potter with whatever revelations I gave you. I had no intention of giving the two of you your laughs for the week."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I would never do that."

The look Snape gave her clearly indicated that he thought otherwise. "How far along are you with your writing?"

"I think that another month or two should do it. I've already sent out inquiries to the three wizarding publishing companies."

"And if your book is published, do you think that the public's mind will be swayed? Will they be more appreciative of our efforts during the war? We are taken for granted, Granger. We had our moment of heroism, and now it is over."

"Why does it have to be that way?" Hermione demanded. "Yes, our moment of heroism is over, but why does it have to be ignored?"

Snape shrugged. "The Muggles glorify their wars," he said quietly. "They build statues, they declare holidays, they idolize their heroes. The wizarding world celebrates for a day, then returns to business as usual."

"But Harry was idolized," Hermione pointed out. "He was 'The Boy Who Lived.'"

"And is he now 'The Boy Who Defeated Voldemort'? His moment of fame is over as well. He is a civil servant in a lumbering bureaucracy, as are you."

"And you're a brilliant wizard who should be doing greater things than manufacturing basic potions for gag gifts. You should be preparing Class Five potions for St. Mungo's. Or doing research and being published in potions journals."

She'd gone too far. Hermione knew it as soon as she saw the ice crystallize in Snape's eyes.

Severus' face settled into an all-too familiar scowl. "Congratulations, Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley. You've made me into one of your causes, haven't you? It's rather a hopeless one, I'm afraid. I will always be known as 'The Man Who Killed Albus Dumbledore.' And here's an exclusive for your book: killing him was absolutely the worst moment of my life. And for a life filled with worst moments, that's saying something."

A/N: I owe MUCH in this chapter to the fabulous Harry Potter editorials and essays on Mugglenet and The Leaky Cauldron. I applaud the time and effort these writers spend in putting forth their various arguments. Special recognition goes to Arthura Weasley, who wrote "Faithful Snape" in The Leaky Cauldron's Scribbulus section; much of what Snape told Hermione came from her.

Birthdays and Courage

Chapter 9 of 22

Hermione decides to spend her birthday in an unexpected way.

Chapter 9: Birthdays and Courage

September always reminded Hermione of Hogwarts. Despite the fact that she had been out of school for twelve years now, the arrival of fall made her long to pack her trunk and face new challenges head on. The challenge this year, however, was not one Hermione relished; this year, she would be relearning how to live as a single woman. She would have preferred to deal with lessons requiring quills, books, and parchments.

The law required that she and Ron live apart for two years before a divorce could be granted. Although Ron had left seven months ago, the first six months were the trial separation; it was only during the past month, after the decision to divorce was made, that Hermione had begun to realize that it was time to think about do restructuring her life. The flat, for example: it was so much a part of her life with Ron that Hermione began to wonder if she should keep it, redecorate it, or even move on.

And while Ron had taken most of his belongings when he'd left, a goodly portion remained, haunting the closets and drawers of the flat. Hermione was faced with the emotionally charged task of packing the rest of Ron's things and sending them off to France. Even though the most recent owl from Ron suggested that she simply toss the lot, Hermione knew that there were items, souvenirs of the past, which he would surely miss. Harry volunteered to help with the project, and the two of them spent a rainy afternoon going through the remainder of Ron's things, alternately laughing at good memories and commiserating over the sad ones.

"Bloody stupid git," Harry muttered under his breath at one point.

Hermione shook her head. "You might as well call me a stupid git as well. I'm just as much to blame as Ron for the way things have turned out."

"Fine. You're a stupid git, Hermione."

Harry sounded as though he were teasing, but something in his eyes suggested that he was not.

"I'm really sorry, Harry," Hermione said, slumping onto the edge of the bed and propping her feet on Ron's old Hogwarts trunk. "This must be miserable for you. You're my friend and you're Ron's friend as well. You must be furious with both of us, and I don't blame you."

"I am, sort of," Harry admitted, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "We were good together, weren't we? And now that's all gone."

"But it hasn't been the three of us for some time. It's been you and Ginny, and Ron and me... Well, it was Ron and me..."

"I know. It's just that I don't want to see either of you hurt."

Hermione looked up quickly. "It's not like one of us was cheating, you know. We both chose this path. No one person's to blame."

"It still feels like someone died," Harry muttered.

"Ron has opportunities in France that he never had here. He's finally a success in Quidditch, and he's happy. Genuinely happy."

"What about you? Are you happy now? What do you have?"

There was no answer to that question. Hermione climbed to her feet, ignoring Harry completely. "Let's get finished, shall we? I think the last regular owls go out at six, and if we hurry, we can get all this stuff to the post office before then."

What do you have? The question haunted Hermione for the rest of the evening, long after she returned from the wizarding post office. Finally she was forced to sit down

and tick off the list on her fingers:

1. *Loving family (Mum and Dad, as well as the Weasleys and Potters)*
2. *A prestigious, well-paying job*
3. *A book in-progress*
4. *A loyal pet*

She knew, when the elderly Crookshanks made the list, that it was time to reevaluate her life. At least the book was going well, Hermione reminded herself. If nothing else, writing was a way to keep busy when the lonely evenings threatened to become oppressively quiet. Another few months should see the end of it; already, she was composing her letters of inquiries to the three wizarding publishers in Britain.

The interview with Severus Snape barely disguised as a discussion concerning Lord Voldemort had gone surprisingly well. Hermione had collected some new material, although her primary goal was to encourage Snape to open up about himself. And he *had* opened up... somewhat. Hermione was encouraged by this; while she knew that her little ploy to get Snape talking by discussing Voldemort's foibles didn't fool him for an instant, it had at least been rather effective. They had spent the better part of an hour and a half in the charmless pub, moving from the topic of the war to the new potions coming out of the States, to the snail's pace advancement of wizarding innovations. Hermione found herself appreciating Snape's quick mind and the entertaining discussion.

September was halfway gone when the phone rang one evening.

"Hello, darling," Julia Granger said on the other end.

"Hi, Mum. What's up?"

"I seem to recall that someone is having a birthday on Thursday."

Oh.

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose and grimaced; she was long past the age of being excited over approaching birthdays. "I forgot that it was so close," she admitted.

"I thought perhaps we might have a little do for you," Julia continued. "I could invite a few of your friends over to celebrate."

"No, Mum, please. Don't bother with it."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, really. Please."

"What about just you, then?" Mothers never gave up hope.

"I'd rather stay home and work on my book. Would you mind terribly? Maybe we could get together this weekend," Hermione countered. Julia meant well; she'd no doubt imagined her daughter alone and miserable on her birthday.

"Of course, dear." Julia Granger accepted the verdict gracefully. "What night will work for you?"

They settled on Saturday night. Hermione hung up the phone, staring at it for a long moment before taking her hand away. Her birthday... She *had* forgotten that it was coming up. Well, it wasn't as though she and Ron had celebrated madly each year. It wasn't as though a long-standing tradition would fall just because they were now separated.

Hermione managed to ignore the upcoming birthday until she returned home from work on Thursday and rifled through her assortment of Muggle and owl post. Her parents had sent a card, as had elderly Great-Aunt Elsa. There were cards from Harry and Ginny, from Arthur and Molly, from Minerva McGonagall. It was only when Hermione realized that none of the cards were from Ron that reality struck her square in the face.

She pulled out an assortment of leftovers from the refrigerator and made a supper of sorts, wishing now that she'd allowed her mother to have her small celebration tonight after all. It would have hurt nothing: Julia would merely have invited the Potters and a few Weasleys, served a too-fattening cake, and been satisfied that she had spared her daughter a few hours of heartache. Instead, Hermione sat alone, munching on a cold chicken leg and remembering the trendy new restaurant she and Ron had tried on her birthday the year before.

Even working on her book provided little distraction. Accustomed as Hermione was to ignoring distractions while working on a project, it was proving to be a daunting challenge on this evening as images from past birthdays paraded through her brain. She should have worked harder all those years to spend more time with Ron and less on work, she decided. But they had each been so involved in pursuing a career, the drifting apart had been so gradual... Hermione finally gave the writing up as an impossible job this evening and decided to go for a walk. She could go nowhere tonight without appearing pitiful and needy. Her parents would know why if she turned up there, as would Harry and Ginny. Everybody would think *Poor Hermione, alone on her birthday without Ron...*

...unless she went somewhere where *everybody* did not go.

* * *

Later, Hermione was to decide that she would have given anything to preserve the look on Snape's face when she showed up on his doorstep. To say that the man was startled was an understatement. But he hadn't survived years as a double-agent by being slow to react, and in the blink of an eye Snape had carefully re-schooled his expression.

"Did we have an appointment this evening, Granger?"

"No," Hermione said, already regretting the impulse that had brought her here to Spinner's End. "I ah was wondering if you would like to go to the Plaid Pony."

"Now?"

"Yes. If you had no other plans, that is."

Snape opened his mouth briefly, looking for all the world as though he wanted to launch into a diatribe about people who dropped in unannounced. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Did you want to discuss Voldemort again?"

"Not necessarily, no."

Another silence. Hermione shifted nervously from one foot to another, ready to open her mouth and apologize profusely for the intrusion.

"Very well," Snape said curtly. "Wait here."

He disappeared back inside the house, leaving Hermione to stand there alone in the end-of-summer chill. Moments later, Snape returned, pulling on a black leather jacket as he pulled the door closed behind him. Hermione tried not to stare. The clothes he had worn to the pub on their last visit were ambiguous: neither fish nor fowl, passable in either Muggle or wizarding world. The leather jacket, however, was clearly Muggle. It was jarring to see Snape dressed like this, Hermione thought. It made him appear more human somehow.

The Plaid Pony was not as crowded as on the previous occasion. Hermione again watched the leather jacket as Snape removed it this time, tossing it onto the empty chair beside him.

"Well?" he asked, settling back into his chair. "What do you want?"

Yes, *this was a really bad idea.* "Nothing. Just nothing."

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that?" Snape raised an eyebrow.

Hermione struggled briefly with herself, then blurted, "Fine. I'll tell you so that you can have your little fun with me and be done with it. It's my birthday, and I don't want to be alone."

Incredulous, Severus sat up straighter in his seat. "You don't want to be alone on your birthday? Sweet Merlin, Granger, what sort of insanity is this?"

"You heard me," she muttered. "It's my birthday. I really thought I'd be all right with this, but it's my first birthday alone without Ron, that is and if I spent the evening with anybody else I know, they would be feeling rather sorry for me."

"You must be feeling very sorry for yourself indeed if you were driven to seek out my company," Snape quipped dryly.

Hermione turned bright red. "I wanted to spend the evening with you because I knew you wouldn't feed me false platitudes in order to make me feel better. And also because I enjoyed our dinner here the last time."

The stare that Severus fixed upon her was unnerving, but Hermione refused to shrink under its intensity. Finally, he blinked. Snape shook his head, the corners of his mouth curling up into a grudging hint of a smile.

"Granger, you are an infuriating woman, do you know that?"

"I've been told that upon occasion," she admitted, smiling in faint response.

"Then may I have a beer while I'm not feeling sorry for you?"

Hermione nodded, relieved. Snape rose from his seat.

"May I order something for you?"

"Just a sparkling water."

"Of course." There was an evil glint in Severus' eyes. "Still not drinking?"

"No." She shot him a furious look.

Snape returned shortly with their drinks. Hermione seized the water and took a very large gulp.

"No wonder you were inebriated," Severus commented as he took his seat once more. "Has no one taught you to sip a drink?"

"I happen to be thirsty," Hermione muttered.

"Kindly use some discretion with your sparkling water. I do not wish to carry you out of here."

She glared at Snape. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Probably not. Tell me, Granger, what part of my sordid life would you like to uncover this evening?"

"I don't intend to discuss the book tonight. Besides," Hermione added, "you made it quite clear that I am not allowed to interview you."

"Of course, I forgot that last visit was because you wanted information about Voldemort, not me."

"What you're saying is that I have all the subtlety of a dragon."

"I didn't say you weren't subtle, Granger. Just transparent."

"Thanks a lot," Hermione said bitterly.

"Then I can presume that you don't need any further information from me?" Severus asked loftily.

"Just because I don't want to talk about the book tonight doesn't mean that I'm finished with our --" She broke off, the word 'interview' clinging to the tip of her tongue.

"Our what?"

"Our conversation," Hermione finished triumphantly.

The corners of Snape's mouth twitched into a full fledged smile. "If we don't hold a conversation, then this will be a very quiet evening indeed."

Hermione groaned aloud. "I give up. You win. Slytherins..."

"What does being a Slytherin have to do with this, pray tell?"

She shook her head and closed her eyes. She was not, Hermione decided, in any shape tonight to hold her own with Snape's verbal sparring. One had to be rested and in top form for that, and just now she was neither.

"Why," Snape went on, "do you still feel the need to flaunt house prejudices this long after leaving Hogwarts? Haven't you learned by now that the bloody hat puts us where we want to be, not because there is some mystical personality matching that takes place during the Sorting? People enter a house and *then* take on its character. How else would you explain the fact that Neville Longbottom has an Order of Merlin medal in his sock drawer?"

Hermione stared at him, openmouthed. Severus continued.

"Did you honestly believe that every student in Slytherin House sat up nights, plotting diabolical schemes? Or that everyone in Gryffindor was a hero in the making? I regularly found it necessary to issue low marks to Ravenclaws, and if you think everybody in Hufflepuff was loyal to a fault, then you have not been forced to listen to a sobbing Slytherin whose Hufflepuff boyfriend had three other girls on a string. House rivalries are juvenile, hormone-fueled, and a waste of time, Granger. Surely you should have realized this by now."

She could only sit in silence and try to catch her breath. Severus Snape, the bigoted Potions professor, making sense? Hermione managed a smile.

"You do like to lecture, don't you? Even if you did despise teaching as a career..."

Snape took a sip of his beer and placed the mug on the table. "Adolescents are the most intense, hot-blooded of creatures. Everything to them is 'the worst' or 'the best', black and white, good and bad. Being so young, they have no points of comparison with which to moderate their beliefs. They fail to see the subtleties that are life itself. Are all Gryffindors brave, all Slytherins evil? Of course, legend says it is so. Unfortunately, legends make no allowance for human choice."

* * *

Hermione thought about Snape's words as she lay in bed that night, staring at the ceiling and unable to sleep. Their conversation had moved on to a discussion of the topics in that morning's edition of the *Daily Prophet*, but it was the comments about house rivalries that still commanded her attention. As Snape had said, there wasn't a Hogwarts alumnus alive who hadn't been blinded to the good and bad traits of others, based on house loyalty. But just now, Hermione could see that the vaunted Gryffindor courage was only one type of bravery.

For there was another type: the quiet courage that allowed one to face up to the past and acknowledge responsibility for his or her actions. The bravery that allowed one to accept the consequences and voluntarily make restitution for his or her mistakes.

Hermione Granger found herself, despite all his flaws, in sudden awe of Severus Snape.

A/N: I need to acknowledge another fabulous writer at Mugglenet for her insight into Slytherin actions: Desdemona Black and her editorial "In Defense of Slytherin: A Different Kind of Courage".

Facing the Festivities

Chapter 10 of 22

Hermione faces her first Christmas without Ron. Worse yet, she needs a date for a party.

Chapter 10: Facing the Festivities

By the end of November, Friday nights at the Plaid Pony had become the norm. Hermione wasn't quite sure how it had happened, exactly; neither she nor Severus she'd begun to think of him as Severus, instead of Snape had deliberately intended to make a routine of it. Snape still refused to give Hermione a proper interview, and it was beginning to be something of a standing joke between the two of them. But then, the very idea of using the word 'joke' in connection with Severus Snape was rather remarkable, she thought.

Not that Snape was suddenly charming and polite. Hermione had the feeling that he rarely had a chance for an intelligent conversation with a peer, and that she was therefore bearing the brunt of all his comments, both good and bad. As a result, she ignored the acerbic remarks, buoyed by the knowledge that Snape seemed to accept her as an equal and not a useless former student. Hermione looked forward to Fridays, finding their talks stimulating, wide-ranging, and far from dull.

Harry, when he heard of the Friday night dinners, was incredulous. "You've been seeing Snape?"

Hermione blushed a violent shade of red. "I haven't been *seeing* him, Harry! We've only been going to a pub!"

"Every week?"

"No, not every week... Well, almost, but not every week."

"And this is all research for your book?"

"Well, yes. More or less. I mean, it started out that way, but he's not willing to talk about himself much."

Harry leaned back in his desk chair in the Auror Section of the MLE, crossed his arms over his chest, and eyed his friend with undisguised suspicion. "I can't believe that you're doing this."

"Doing what, Harry?" Hermione demanded in frustration. "You're acting as though I'm having an affair or something."

"Oh, please, do not put that image in my head," Harry groaned. "Merlin knows what Ron would say to that!"

"Ron? What does Ron have to do with this?"

"Nothing. It's just... absurd, Hermione. To go from Ron Weasley to Severus Snape is the most preposterous thing I've ever heard."

Hermione was almost shocked beyond words. "Have you listened to a thing I've said? I'm not going from Ron to anybody!"

Harry sat back upright and the chair tilted forward. He planted his elbows on the desk and rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Hermione. Really. But the idea of you and the Greasy Git..." An expression of utmost disgust spread across his face.

"If you're going to act the idiot, I have better things to do." Hermione was halfway out of her chair before Harry reached over to grab her arm and tug her back down.

"Come on now, don't go away angry. I just can't imagine why you'd want to spend any more time with Snape than necessary."

There was no point in trying to persuade Harry that those Friday nights were anything but an exercise in sheer self-torture, Hermione knew. Severus Snape was the Devil incarnate in Harry Potter's eyes, no matter how much proof showed the man to be firmly on the side of the Greater Good all those years. Their mutual loathing went so far back that nothing would ever dislodge it.

"Can we change the subject?" she asked. "I've written my letters of inquiry to the publishers, and I want you to look them over."

"Me?" Harry repeated, startled. "Since when do you need my input on anything you've written?"

"This whole book thing started with you, so it seems appropriate somehow," Hermione pointed out as she pulled four envelopes from her robe pocket. "See what you think."

Harry quickly read through the four nearly-identical letters. "They seem fine to me."

"Really? Do you think that perhaps they're too stiff, too formal?" Hermione looked worried.

"Hermione, I'm not a literary expert, all right? They're not too formal. They're just short and to the point. Besides, you're trying to write books, not letters."

She felt vaguely disappointed that Harry could find no way of improving on them. "All right, then. I want to stop off at the post office in my lunch hour."

"The post office?" Harry asked, his face blank. "Why? You can put them in with the outgoing post here."

"You know we're not supposed to put our personal mail in with the business post. Besides I want to make sure that they -- they --"

"-- don't get lost in the mail?" Harry finished dryly.

Hermione blushed once more, a sheepish smile on her face. "I'm sorry. I know it's silly..."

"It's not silly. It's very you." He grinned in encouragement.

When noon came around, Hermione Floo'd to the wizarding post office in Diagon Alley. She found herself virtually trembling with anticipation as she handed her letters to the postmaster, visions of flat-out rejection alternating with dreams of *The War as We Saw It* topping the wizarding best-seller list.

"Are you all right?" the postmaster asked in alarm as the letters quivered in front of him.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "It's just that I'm really hoping for a positive response from these."

The man glanced at the addressees on each letter, then winked at her. "I'll put my best owls on it," he said reassuringly.

Hermione could scarcely keep her mind on work the remainder of the afternoon. When she returned home, green flames lit in the fireplace almost immediately. Heart in her mouth, she raced to the hearth, only to be keenly disappointed when Molly Weasley's head appeared.

"Hermione, are you quite all right, dear? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

She could only chuckle feebly in response. "Sorry, Molly. I sent off my letters to the publishers today, and when I saw the flames, I thought perhaps one of them was so impressed that they couldn't wait to talk to me."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure you'll hear soon," Molly said bracingly. "I just realized that it's nearly December, and I wondered if you had made plans for Christmas."

Christmas? Hermione couldn't even conceive of what the festive season would be like this year; she'd taken somewhat exaggerated care to avoid thinking about it.

"Ah well, no, I hadn't made plans yet."

Molly brightened. "Wonderful! We were hoping that you might be able to join us as usual."

"We'?" Hermione repeated warily. Surely she didn't mean Ron...

"Well, Arthur and I," the older woman amended hastily. "We just wanted you to know that you'll always be part of our family, Hermione. You should be here for Christmas."

"That's lovely of you, Molly, really. But it wouldn't be right."

"Why wouldn't it be right?" Molly demanded, lifting her chin defiantly. "You're still my daughter-in-law. It's not as though you and Ron parted on bad terms."

"I know. And I'll certainly drop round for a visit. It's just that I'd better become accustomed to Christmases away from the Burrow."

"When you visit, you must bring your delightful parents, of course. You know how Arthur loves to talk with them."

Hermione knew all too well how Arthur loved to talk to her Muggle parents. Both Julia and Lawrence Granger had been cornered on more than one occasion and pelted with all manner of questions.

"Of course. Let me talk to Mum and see what day would work for them."

They chatted a few more minutes. Charlie and his wife were expecting their fifth, and Fred and George were thinking about expanding their stores onto the Continent and then the fireplace went cold. Hermione sat staring into the gray bricks for a few moments. The sad truth was that divorcing Ron meant that she was divorcing his family as well. Hermione fervently hoped that she and the Weasleys would always be on warm, friendly terms, but for now, it was time to back off.

* * *

The approaching Christmas season also meant a spate of official parties, something that Hermione dreaded this year more than most. The Department of International Magical Cooperation went all out at Christmastime, hosting an annual party for foreign dignitaries, as well as sending its employees out to represent the Ministry at other affairs. Hermione, who had attended countless diplomatic functions over the years, had lost her fascination with them long ago. Ron had usually accompanied her on these occasional forays into the glamorous side of international wizarding relations, and while he had never embarrassed Hermione, it was clear that he was far from his element at those times. And now, he wasn't even around.

She would have to go alone this year, Hermione thought unhappily. While attending alone was perfectly allowable, there were perks to having an escort. It meant that there was always had someone to talk to in the event that the other guests were less than chatty. It also was a surefire way to discourage anyone who might take an unacceptably keen personal interest in her after a few too many drinks. She found herself wondering whom she could round up to go with her.

The idea struck her suddenly, out of the blue.

Snape.

Snape? Hermione immediately burst out laughing at the thought. The man would probably hex her ten ways from Sunday if she even suggested it. Still, he could hold his own among the wizarding elite or had done so at one time, anyway and would probably be content to loiter in the background while she did the necessary handshaking

and political schmoozing.

On the other hand, Snape probably no longer owned a dress robe or even a decent pair of shoes. Then there was the matter of that hair, which had not improved one whit over the last four months. Severus had mentioned only once that he was intending to let it grow out, but the re-growth had not begun to take place as far as Hermione could tell. There was still the odd variety of lengths, the ends frizzy and damaged. Privately, Hermione thought that he would be better off to shave his head and start from scratch.

She spent a week searching out another option, trying to find an available male to keep in her pocket for the holidays. The trouble was, most males she knew were married, and the unmarried ones seemed to have holiday plans already. If she was lucky, Hermione decided, she might be able to beg off all the parties save the one sponsored by her own department. But by the time December was underway and the invitations began arriving, she had yet to find a date.

Hermione checked the calendar at work and noted that the annual DIMC party was scheduled for the twentieth of December. And decided that perhaps she should give serious thought to how one went about asking Severus Snape on a date.

* * *

Snape froze, the glass of ale nearly to his lips, the look in his eyes one of sheer disbelief.

"You want me to what?"

"I would like you to go with me to a Christmas party."

"Granger, have you completely lost your mental faculties?"

Hermione had braced herself for this. "No," she said quietly. "I knew when I walked into the pub that you wouldn't agree, but I was hoping that you might give it some consideration before you flat-out refused."

Severus lowered the glass to the table with an audible thunk. "You want me to accompany you to a Christmas party," he repeated, incredulous.

"It would only be for a couple of hours," Hermione put in. "The party is given every year by the Department of International Magical Cooperation. It's a tradition. Madam Phyfe-Duncan invites dignitaries and leading businessmen from other countries. It's actually a 'working party,' if you catch my drift; it's not the sort that's limited to employees and spouses."

"What a relief. I was afraid that I might have to marry you," Snape snapped.

For some reason, his words stung. Hermione pushed past it and decided to play her trump card.

"There would be ample opportunity to talk with the foreign Potions manufacturers. If," she added lamely, "you were interested in that sort of thing."

Snape finally raised his glass and took a long drink of ale. "Do you feel that I need to speak with foreign Potions manufacturers?" he asked finally.

"Of course not." Hermione felt her cheeks blush red. "I only thought that you might enjoy that aspect of the evening."

"Did you?"

It was too much to expect that Snape would make this easy for her, Hermione decided. "My point is that there would be something at the party that you might enjoy. You won't be required to dance with me or do anything else that might make you uncomfortable."

Severus gazed at her, his eyes narrowed. "I see."

Hermione thought that she might as well blurt out the remainder. "I realize that you probably don't have dress robes, and I'd be happy to arrange those for you."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

Unfortunately, Hermione's eyes strayed to Snape's hair just at that moment. It did not go unnoticed.

"Give me one good reason why I should help you with this, Granger," Snape snapped.

She slumped in her seat. "Frankly, I can't think of one," Hermione admitted. "I mean, you certainly could make some contacts with the foreign potions people, but other than that..."

"Other than that, your Madam Phyfe-Duncan would love nothing more than to have a convicted murderer at her soirée."

"A convicted murderer who happens to be a war hero."

Severus sighed, shaking his head as though trying to dislodge some cobwebs that wouldn't quite go away. "I'll think about it," he said flatly.

"The party's next Friday," Hermione noted.

"I'll let you know."

And he refused to discuss it further.

Assuming the Worst

Chapter 11 of 22

Hermione learns that making assumptions can be a very treacherous thing.

His message was cryptic and mystifying: *I'll meet you at the party.* It was straightforward enough, yet Hermione wondered if Snape was intending to back out at the last minute. What had happened to the original plan of meeting at her flat? She wouldn't put it past him to be a no-show, leaving her to stew about it all evening...

Hermione was still amazed that Severus had consented to accompany her to the party. Had she been prone to place a wager on it, she would have been kissing her money good-bye even now. Other than her flat-out request, what had motivated Snape to agree? Not only was he inclined to distance himself from British wizarding society, the man detested everything that went along with a party: the small talk, the one-upmanship, the excess of food and drink.

She checked the midnight blue gown Hermione had worn it to last year's party and was determined to get one more use out of it in her full-length mirror once more.

"You'll be the belle of the ball," the mirror gushed in matronly tones.

"Oh, please," Hermione grumbled, and switched off the bedroom light.

* * *

Berkley Berenger, Head of Foreign Trade Relations for the Ministry, had married into money. His wife's family tree included a smattering of Bodes, Robards, and Peasegoods, but it was the Mockridge branch that had made its killing in timely, shrewd investments. Delicia Mockridge Berenger was a social butterfly who fancied herself the maven of wizarding parties. She was fortunate that her husband had ended up in his position in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, because his status allowed her to indulge in her hobby on a regular basis. Any time a foreign dignitary visited Britain, Delicia insisted that the formal reception be held at Mockridge Manor. In truth, nobody minded; there simply wasn't a room in the Ministry of Magic that lent itself to entertaining on a grand scale, nor did anybody else own such a fine, large house. As a result, Mockridge Manor was the locale for numerous Ministry functions.

Hermione Apparated to the grounds, then walked into the Manor's huge foyer where a disinterested-looking house-elf took her wrap. She looked about, wondering if Snape had already arrived.

"Excuse me," she said to the elf, "I'm supposed to meet my escort here Severus Snape. Would you know if he has arrived?"

"Master Severus Snape is in the ballroom," the elf intoned dolefully. Bowing low, he waved a hand toward the doorway behind him.

"Thank you." Hermione started toward the door, paused in front of the framed mirror next to it in order to pat a stray curl into place, then walked in.

The Berengers' ballroom was packed. Ornately decorated Christmas trees stood in the corners of the large room, while the middle of the space was taken up by a circular table, heavily laden with food. The periphery was filled with dozens of chattering witches and wizards, colorfully garbed in their Yuletide best. Hermione couldn't help but notice that Delicia's special touch this year was a reindeer ice sculpture, which reared on its hind legs every few seconds. With Delicia, there was always something unusual.

Hermione couldn't even begin to imagine what Snape would look like tonight. He had summarily dismissed her offer to provide him with dress robes, and when her eyes had strayed once more to the chopped mess that was his hair, Snape had told her coldly that he was perfectly capable of grooming himself for the event. She suspected that he would merely transfigure his ordinary clothes into something suitable; transfiguration was a reasonable short-term solution as long as the spell caster remembered to reinforce the charm at regular intervals. The dorms at Hogwarts had always been rife with rumors involving transfiguration, the primary variant always involving transfigured clothing vanishing into thin air, leaving the victim in his or her underwear while a delighted audience looked on.

"Hermione!" Edwina Phyfe-Duncan swooped to Hermione's side. "I'm so delighted that you could come!"

Hermione managed a weary smile; she always attended the Department's Christmas party, a fact that seemed to escape her superior year after year.

"I wouldn't miss it, Edwina."

Madam Phyfe-Duncan was a large woman with a flair for rather flamboyant clothing, a combination that Hermione found perpetually amusing. In addition, Edwina's iron-gray hair perpetually out-curved and out-bushed Hermione's own, providing a continual source of comfort.

"Are you unescorted this evening, my dear?" the woman inquired solicitously. "I'm sure that this Christmas season must be extremely difficult for you, what with your pending divorce from Ronnie."

"It hasn't been too bad," Hermione said reassuringly. She craned her neck to peer around. "And I do have an escort tonight. He asked that I meet him here, although I don't believe that I see him..."

"It is rather a large crowd tonight, isn't it? A bit warm for my tastes. I was just speaking with the Chief of the Italian Wizarding Council, and he was fanning himself nonstop as we talked." Edwina tilted her head conspiratorially in Hermione's direction. "My dear, the garlic odors!"

Hermione burst into laughter. Another of Edwina's talents was the ability to be utterly outrageous. All in all, it kept the department rather lively.

"All for the cause, Edwina." She paused, taking a moment to scan the room once more. Just then the crowd shifted, and Hermione spotted a familiar face across the room.

And she stared.

Snape was leaning against a pillar near the rear of the ballroom. He was clad in gray and black dress robes that were, even from a distance, obviously finely tailored and quite expensive. Even more startling, however, was the hair: it was neatly trimmed and layered, the jagged ends and assorted lengths gone. Hermione's jaw plunged indecorously towards the floor.

Edwina followed her gaze.

"My gracious! Is that Severus Snape? I haven't seen him for years! He more or less vanished from sight after the Wizengamot acquitted him."

"Yes," Hermione managed, unable to tear her eyes away from the transformed Snape. "He's my escort tonight."

"Snape? You don't say!" Edwina's eyes were wide with amazement. "I had no idea that you two were close."

"We aren't that is, we're friends." *Of a sort*, Hermione failed to add. "Please excuse me, Madam Phyfe-Duncan. I should let him know that I've arrived."

"Of course."

Hermione moved towards Snape, fully expecting to blink and find that the New Severus was an illusion. Snape, who spotted her when she was halfway across the ballroom, regarded her with cool aplomb.

"Good evening, Hermione."

"Severus." Somewhere in the dim recesses of her brain, it occurred to Hermione that the two of them had just called each other by their given names for the first time. "I barely recognized you. Forgive me for staring. It's just that..."

"Yes?" Snape arched an eyebrow.

She fumbled for the words. "You look very nice this evening."

"Thank you." It apparently struck him a moment later that he was expected to return her compliment in kind, because he added, "As do you."

"Thank you." Hermione wanted desperately to inspect the robes and the haircut critically from all directions, but it was scarcely a thing one could do under the circumstances.

"From the dumbfounded expression on your face, I take it that you expected me to look like a ragamuffin tonight," Snape said dryly.

"Well uh yes, actually."

"I do recall how to dress for an occasion, you know."

"I'm sure you do. I just didn't expect "

" that I could afford it?"

Hermione blushed a deep crimson, but said nothing. She didn't want to begin the evening by antagonizing Snape; things would only deteriorate once they started down that thorny path. Curiosity was gnawing at her, but she didn't dare pursue it now.

"Shall we attack the buffet table first?" Hermione asked politely.

"Of course." Severus removed himself from the pillar and followed her.

They picked up serving plates and silverware and moved slowly around the large table. Their plates were only half-filled when Hermione could no longer contain at least one question.

"What happened to your hair?" she blurted.

Severus carefully placed a slice of roast beef on his plate and returned the serving fork to the platter. "If you must know, a Muggle stylist named Conrad happened to my hair."

Hermione looked at him quickly to determine if he was joking, but quickly decided that he was not. "Conrad?" she repeated faintly.

"I have not decided whether the look suits me," Snape replied, looking over the selection on the bread tray. "I have not worn a shorter style for many years, as I'm sure you are aware."

"It's very flattering," she managed.

"I shall perhaps have to accustom myself to it. Since the accident, my hair has grown only slightly. I may be forced to keep it at a shorter length whether I like it or not."

"It's remarkable that you weren't injured."

"Who said that I wasn't?"

Hermione, about to select a dinner roll, shot Snape a sideways glance. "Were you injured?"

"Would it matter if I was?" Severus asked rhetorically.

She fixed him with a measured look this time. "I would find it distressing if you were badly hurt."

The corner of Snape's mouth quirked upwards. "Whereas a minor injury would not trouble you. You can save your sympathies, Granger. My hair was the only casualty."

She had no idea how to respond to that. Hermione finished filling her plate and moved toward a pair of empty chairs. She settled herself and began to nibble, torn between speculating about Severus Snape's exterior renovation, and trying to decipher his comments. The man was maddening, she decided, although this was hardly a new development. Snape, for his part, seemed content to eat rather mechanically as he watched the shifting crowd.

They were almost finished eating when a Spanish wand designer, whom Hermione had met at a trade conference a year earlier, descended upon her to discuss his latest creations. Severus eventually took her empty plate, along with his own, and disappeared.

She saw him a few minutes later, talking with a woman whom Hermione knew vaguely from the Ludicrous Patents Office. This surprised her; she had expected Snape to be reclusive this evening, almost to the point where she would need to coax him into mingling with the other guests. Hermione was even more surprised when, shortly after, she spotted Snape and a wealthy Chinese businessman having an apparently earnest discussion on the far side of the room.

"Something wrong, dear?" Edwina caught Hermione's arm as Hermione brushed past her, deep in thought.

"What? Oh, no. Not at all." It occurred to Hermione that she was spending more of her evening monitoring Snape's activities than enjoying the festivities.

"Lovely party, isn't it? I know you're missing your Ronnie, but are you having a good time?"

Hermione found Edwina's propensity for referring to Ron as 'Ronnie' more annoying than usual, but she put on a polite smile. "I am, thank you," she said, pulling her arm gently away from her supervisor's grasp. "Would you excuse me?"

She was wondering whether to simply ignore Snape obviously, he didn't need her help in socializing or interrupt his conversation to see how he was faring. The decision was taken out of her hands when Snape caught her eye and motioned her over.

"Hermione, may I introduce Mr. Chang Ma Li?" Snape nodded toward the man clad in ornate Oriental robes. "Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley, Mr. Li."

Chang Ma Li extended a hand. "How do you do, Madam Granger-Weasley," he murmured in completely unaccented English.

Hermione shook his hand. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Li. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"Only good things, I hope."

"Absolutely. I work in International Cooperation, and I've been corresponding with some of your people about import regulations."

"I do try to employ the best people. I hope they are being cooperative," Li murmured pleasantly.

"I'm certain that we'll be able to reach a consensus soon," Hermione assured him. "You are wanting to enter the textile market in Britain, are you not?"

"That is my intent, yes." Li nodded accordingly.

"If your textiles are anything as spectacular as what you're wearing this evening, we'll be importing quite a bit."

"I must say," Li continued, "that I'm delighted to find Mr. Snape in attendance tonight."

"Oh?" Hermione glanced at Snape, whose face was impassive.

"Indeed. Textiles is but one of my industries, you see. One of my companies specializes in the production of explosives. I'm sure you are aware that the Chinese are renowned for their expertise; our history with those products goes back thousands of years. But Mr. Snape, here..." The corners of Li's eyes crinkled as he grinned broadly. "His products are equal to, if not superior to, the best my own factories can produce. Considering how many centuries my people have worked to perfect incendiary products, it really is quite remarkable. I understand that you've virtually cornered the market here in Britain, Snape."

Severus tilted his head deferentially.

Hermione stared at him. Chang Ma Li continued.

"Tell me, Mr. Snape, what are your expected profits for this year? I can't imagine that you would be able to top last year's output."

"Surprisingly, I'm already a bit ahead, although that's typical for the period following Bonfire Night," Severus told him.

"Of course," Li chuckled. "Do you have plans for expansion?"

"Not at this time. I'm afraid that the success of my business has rather taken me by surprise."

"I shall sleep much better tonight. I was afraid that you would want to begin exporting to us!" Li slapped Severus jovially on the back.

Hermione watched, incredulous, as Snape managed a pained smile. Just then, another man walked up to Li and murmured something in his ear. Li grimaced and excused himself, leaving Severus and Hermione standing alone in the middle of the room.

Just when the silence became unbearably thick, Hermione could stand it no more. "Would you mind explaining what that was about?" she hissed.

"I believe," Snape said with a shrug, "that Mr. Li was complimenting me on my product line."

She shook her head as if to dispel a thousand cobwebs. "I don't understand. I thought that you "

"Were poverty-stricken? That I barely make ends meet?"

Hermione nodded helplessly. "Well... yes.

"And where did you get that idea, Granger?"

"I..." She tried desperately to think. "Er Fred and George Weasley were saying that they bought products from you. Said that you were on the dole, that the Ministry had sent work your way..."

"Over ten years ago, yes."

"I see," Hermione said, nonplussed. Embarrassment was creeping over her inch by red-faced inch, along with outright indignation. "Well, that's that's wonderful."

"Is it? You don't sound as if it's wonderful," Severus pointed out, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "You sound almost disappointed."

"That's ridiculous. Why should I be disappointed?"

"Because your little project to improve my image is no longer necessary?" he asked pointedly.

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't have " Hermione stopped in mid-sentence, angry with Snape for being correct, and angrier with herself for calling yet another man 'ridiculous'. She took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly. "All right, perhaps I was under the wrong impression. You could have corrected me, you know."

"Could I?" Snape asked, amused. "Should I have just blurted it out over dinner at the Plaid Pony? 'No need to appear so smug, Granger, I'm not nearly as indigent as you think?'"

"You let me pay the bill!" she said accusingly.

"Only twice."

Hermione regarded him stonily. "Are you going to tell me about your business?"

"Right here in the midst of a party?"

"Why not?"

She had her hands on her hips, and Snape marveled that Hermione hadn't yet begun to tap her foot impatiently. He shrugged.

"Very well. In a nutshell, my products are concentrated and easily shipped. For that reason, they sell quite well."

"What?"

"The explosives that are used by your brothers-in-law are not complex ingredients to make. Nor are the bases used for fertilizers and pesticides. The problem has always been in transporting them. They are largely unstable, easily combustible. I devised a patented method of concentrating them so that they can be shipped large distances without danger. I also," Severus continued smoothly, "own the patent for re-dilution as well."

"I see. That's very clever." Hermione still felt wronged, taken in, and more than a little hurt. And there wasn't a bloody thing she could do about it.

"I thought so." Snape took a sip from the flute of champagne that he held.

"When did you obtain your patents?"

"Three years ago next month."

Now recalling albeit vaguely a comment made by Fred Weasley a year or two earlier, something to the effect that his life was made easier by the newer chemical compounds they were using for some of their products, Hermione gritted her teeth. When the twins had announced that they knew Snape's whereabouts, along with the revelation that they bought explosives from him, she had failed to make the connection. She tried to think whether there had been any clues along the way that things were not as she believed them to be. But as usual, Severus Snape had been a master of revealing nothing that he didn't want her to know.

"You really should have said something," Hermione said icily. "I thought that we had achieved some level of trust."

"We did." Snape's face had acquired an all too-familiar sneer. "It's not my fault that you were led astray by your own assumptions."

Hermione glared at him, livid.

"Excuse me," a pleasant male voice interrupted, "but may we take your photograph for the *Daily Prophet*?"

* * *

Hermione absent-mindedly stroked Crookshanks with one hand while she scanned the morning paper, spread out in front of her on the kitchen table. The pictures from last night's party took up a full page on the inside of the newspaper, and her heart sank when she spotted the one of herself and Snape. Why, with all the film shot by the photographer, had their photograph been included? She peered at the picture more closely. As expected, Severus was looking pleased with himself while she appeared Hermione moaned inwardly positively shrew-like.

'Festive party-going couple Severus Snape and Hermione Granger-Weasley enjoy the Berengers' hospitality', the caption read.

She wasn't at all surprised when, by noon, a half-dozen people had Floo'd to tell her that they had seen the picture.

Happy Christmas to Me

Chapter 12 of 22

Hermione receives an unexpected Christmas present from Snape.

Chapter 12: Happy Christmas to Me

Hermione sank down onto the sofa, disappointment twisting her stomach into painful knots. This wasn't how she'd pictured it. She was supposed to be thrilled to fits right now. She was supposed to be dancing around the room in excitement.

She was supposed to be a published author.

Instead, the letters she clutched in her hand said otherwise:

"Thank you for your inquiry. Please resubmit your suggestion at a later date."

"While we appreciate your efforts, we cannot consider your offer at this time."

She had been so sure, so certain that her book would be embraced as a much-needed revelation. Hermione wondered briefly if it would do any good to go in person and beg a publisher to read her manuscript. Of all the contacts she had made in the wizarding world, none was involved in publishing, and she mentally kicked herself for failing to do any networking in that direction. It would have been invaluable just now to be able to drop a note to someone, some person with the right connections.

Above all, Hermione told herself sternly, she would not cry. It was tempting: on top of this disappointing news, Christmas Day was tomorrow. While her parents were determined to keep her occupied in other words, to prevent her from dwelling on Ron she still felt his absence deeply; this Christmas was different, and no amount of Yuletide entertainment would change that. In addition, what had amounted to a budding friendship with Severus Snape had been shattered at the Ministry Christmas party.

It had not been a good year.

Hermione glanced at her watch. It was only six o'clock, and she was expected at Harry and Ginny's at seven. Not that she felt very festive now that she'd checked her mail: the idea of soaking in a hot tub, then climbing into bed and pulling the covers over her head sounded rather pleasant. Or, she could go to her parents' house tonight instead of waiting for the morning, forget that she was a grown woman and hope that her mother would baby her a little...

"Don't be stupid," Hermione said aloud. She'd never been one to allow herself to be babied, or to run to her parents for comfort, for that matter. She would change clothes and go to the Potters' and have a lovely time.

It was not a thought that inspired enthusiasm just now. Hermione spent several minutes trying to convince herself to simply get off the sofa. She had just climbed to her feet when there was a knocking at the door. To her surprise, she found Severus Snape standing there.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening," Hermione replied cautiously. Cautiously, because she hadn't seen him since the night of the party. Cautiously, because just after their picture was taken for the *Daily Prophet*, Hermione had stormed out in disgust.

"May I come in?"

The last thing she needed just now was a dose of Snape's sarcasm. On the other hand, Hermione had been regretting her juvenile behavior for days now, and this was an unexpected opportunity to clear the air.

"Of course," she said.

Snape crossed the threshold to stand in the middle of the lounge. Hermione motioned to an armchair.

"Please, sit down. I'm afraid I don't have any mince pies to offer you. I didn't do any baking this year. Would you like some coffee? Or tea? It would only take a moment."

Severus shook his head. "I won't be staying. I merely wanted to give you this." He reached into his cloak and pulled out a flat package, wrapped with a red ribbon.

Surprised, Hermione took it from him and stared at it for a long moment

"You may open it," he pointed out impatiently.

"In a moment," she said, wanting to apologize and be done with it. "Look, Snape Severus I behaved rather immaturely at the party, and I need to apologize."

"Oh?" An eyebrow arched.

"You were correct. I made the mistake of assuming certain things. It was stupid of me, but there was no reason in the world for me to get my nose out of joint." Hermione paused, then: "That's not something I normally do. I'm sorry for behaving like an idiot."

Severus considered this. "You are normally well-informed in whatever you undertake," he conceded. "And over the past few months, I have tried to avoid discussing myself, as you well know. Still, I could have mentioned the change in my circumstances. I rather enjoyed watching your righteous indignation, I'm afraid."

Hermione managed a hint of a smile. It was likely the closest Severus Snape would ever come to an outright apology.

"Are you going to open that?" Snape pressed, watching her absently rub the gift with her thumb.

"Oh. Of course." Hermione paused once more, looking slightly guilty. "But I didn't get you anything..."

"I'm shattered. Open the bloody present."

The retort was classic Snape. The awkward moment past, Hermione broke into a grin, then made short work of the wrappings. She found a stack of parchments inside. "What's this?"

Snape said quietly, "It's my recollection of the war."

Hermione stared at him. "Your recollection of the war?"

"It's what you wanted, isn't it? My point of view?" He looked ready to snatch the parchments back, if need be.

She blinked. "Yes, but "

"You have proved yourself trustworthy these past few months," Severus stated. "I feel that you will use the information in an appropriate manner."

Hermione felt her stomach plunge abruptly. "You know that I already submitted the manuscripts "

"Of course. But surely you will be allowed to make amendments, if necessary. In any event, the information is yours to do as you will with it."

"Oh," she said in a small voice.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Is something wrong?"

Hermione retrieved the two letters from the day's post and handed them to him. "These arrived today," she said miserably.

He scanned them quickly. "I see," he murmured, emotionless.

"Look, under the circumstances..." Hermione inhaled deeply and held out the parchments, "you may have these back. I appreciate it so much, you have no idea. But I won't be needing them now."

Snape hesitated before taking them from her. "Are you giving up then?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose. It's not as if I can print the book myself and sell it on the street corners."

"Have you no other options?"

"Other than badgering the publishers? No. Thus ends the writing career of Hermione Granger." Her smile was less than sincere, and her voice cracked just a hair. Hermione had not intended to allow her disappointment to show so plainly; then again, there was little likelihood that Snape would feel sorry for her.

"You might try the wizarding periodicals," Severus suggested, his tone neutral. "While they are not all shining examples of pristine journalism, one or two might be receptive to your story."

The idea had previously occurred to Hermione as a potential last resort, but buoyed by the confidence of the unwary, she had not given it much consideration. Frankly, the prospect seemed no more intriguing now.

"I'll think about it," she said, flashing a none-too-convincing smile.

Abruptly, Snape glared at her. "You were never a quitter, Granger."

"No," she admitted. "I wasn't. I mean I'm not."

"Then perhaps you should hang onto these." He held the parchments out toward her once more.

Hermione looked from the parchments to Snape, to the determined expression on his face. It occurred to her then: not only was he expressing his confidence in her, he was making himself known to her in the most impersonal way possible. There was no telling yet how revealing his reminiscences were, but for Severus Snape, any private information willingly shared was priceless.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I'll take good care of them."

They regarded each other for a moment, then Snape tore his gaze away.

"I must go. I'm sure that I'm interrupting your plans for the holidays."

Hermione was struck by a sudden, absurd desire to invite Severus to go with her to the Potters'. Then sanity returned, and she said simply, "I'm going to spend Christmas Eve with Harry and Ginny."

The look of revulsion in Snape's eyes was unmistakable. "Of course," he said. "I'm sure that you'll have a pleasant time."

He turned to go, and Hermione blurted, "Tomorrow, I'll be going to my parents' house. Would you like to go with me? If you have no other plans, that is?"

Severus stopped dead in his tracks, startled. A mélange of emotions crossed his face before he finally shook his head.

"I appreciate your offer, but no. Tomorrow is your day to be with your family. Please enjoy it."

Hermione was sorely tempted to ask what his plans were, but chose to keep silent and leave Snape's dignity intact. She suspected that he had no one and no plans, but then again, she'd been wrong about Severus Snape before.

"Thank you. I will." She followed him to the front door.

Severus opened the door and started out into the hall. "I bid you a Happy Christmas, Hermione."

"You, too, Severus." Hermione started to close the door, then paused. "I was wondering..."

"Yes?" Snape paused, regarding her with suspicion.

"Do you have plans for New Year's Eve? Perhaps we could have dinner."

He studied her face, looking closely for motive and intent.

"That would be... satisfactory."

"Very well." Hermione smiled. "Good evening, then."

* * *

Christmas was about as Hermione had expected. Everyone, from Harry and Ginny, to Julia and Lawrence Granger, seemed to bend over backwards to avoid the subject of Ron Weasley. It was the Elephant in the Room; Ron's absence was glaring and obvious, and everyone tiptoed around it as though it wasn't an issue. Presents were exchanged, compliments given, and emotional land mines dodged. It was exhausting, and by the end of Christmas Day, Hermione was ready to scream.

She awoke on Boxing Day, grateful beyond belief that yesterday's awkwardness was past, but wondering what to do with herself now. Several months ago, when she was regarding her writing skills with a much greater degree of optimism, Hermione had scheduled the rest of the year off work in order to talk to publishers. That, of course, was sadly unnecessary now. Then it came to her: why not consider Snape's suggestion? She could spend the next few days investigating the wizarding periodicals published in Britain.

Her enthusiasm had always been for books. Magazines struck Hermione as lightweight entertainment, and as a result, she had tended to disregard them. She knew that the number and variety of Muggle periodicals far outweighed those in the wizarding world, and was already familiar with a handful of titles. *Witch Weekly* - Molly Weasley's favorite - had been around for years, and Hermione had seen numerous copies floating around Hogwarts. A low-class rag called *Teen Witch Today* had made the rounds of the girls' dormitories; as a prefect and then Head Girl, she had personally confiscated more than a few of those. Of course, there was the *Quibbler*: it had saved Harry that time, but Hermione was loath to tempt fate once more by going down that particular path. Then there was the copy of *Hotwitch* that Ron, blast his hide, had hidden from her one time...

There were reputable magazines out there, of course, including a large number of trade journals. Hermione couldn't imagine how her book could possibly be used by a publication such as *Transfiguration Today* or *Ars Alchemica*. There was only one general interest magazine in the wizarding world - *This Week in Wizarding Britain* - and she already subscribed to that. It was mostly hard news, and try as she might, Hermione couldn't recall any first-person stories ever being included.

She set out for Diagon Alley and headed immediately for Flourish and Blotts. The street was packed with shoppers - the post-Christmas sales always drew an enormous crowd of determined bargain-hunters - and Hermione found the shops just as crowded. The bookstore had been almost a second home to her for all these years, but this was the first time that Hermione had limited herself to the periodicals section. Glancing over the racks of magazines, she was heartened to see that there was more of a variety than she had expected.

Recipe Favorites: From Grandmums to Houses-elves offered the best dishes from around Britain. The cover of *Genealogy for the Next Generation* caught Hermione's eye with an article entitled "Mixed Genes: Why Pure Blood is Overrated"; it had been twelve years since the war, she thought unhappily, and still the issue of race continued. *Fabulous Fix-Ups: Be a Wizard at Home Improvement* promised to turn anyone's home into a castle. *Financial Times* insisted that everyone could learn to handle their Galleons, Sickles and Knuts like a professional: "Outthink the Gringotts Goblins", it advertised. There was even a periodical for collectors of Muggle artifacts, and Hermione wondered briefly whether Arthur Weasley subscribed. She had a brief mental vision of Arthur poring intently over every page, and was struck by a pang of sadness. No matter how well she maintained her relationship with the Weasleys in the future, Hermione would miss having Arthur as a father-in-law.

She went through magazine after magazine, to discover that most were - as she had always suspected - fairly lightweight reading. Trade journals took up most of the rest of the shelf space. Only a quarterly periodical called *Our World* and a magazine known as *The Thinking Witch and Wizard* looked remotely like candidates for Hermione's story. She bought the two and headed for the Leaky Cauldron, intent on reading both over a warm lunch.

"Hey, Hermione."

Hermione looked up at the mention of her name and discovered that she had almost walked past Harry without even seeing him. "Harry! Hello! Sorry I didn't see you. I was deep in thought."

"I could tell. You were in another world," Harry teased, shifting an armful of boxes from one side to the other.

"Going to all the big sales?" she teased.

"Ginny is doing all the big sales," he pointed out immediately. "I am merely the beast of burden, as you can see."

Hermione laughed. "Obviously. How was Christmas Day at the Potter household?"

"Wonderful. We loved every minute of it."

She knew that as a result of his deprived childhood, Harry insisted that his children know all the delights of the Christmas season; according to Ginny, he was as big a kid on Christmas morning as their two daughters.

"You're shopping as well?" Harry continued.

"Not exactly. I wanted to see what magazines are in circulation. Possibly send my story to one. Maybe it could be published that way." Hermione made a face.

"I can't believe that none of those publishers would work with you. What's wrong with those people?"

"It doesn't matter, Harry. It just wasn't meant to work out that way. When Severus suggested that I submit it to a periodical"

"Whoa." The pleasant expression fled from Harry's face. "Severus? You're on a first-name basis now?"

"Well - yes, more or less." Hermione glared at him. "This is the twenty-first century, you know. People are less formal. He doesn't want to be called 'Professor Snape,' and it sounds silly to call him 'Mr. Snape.'"

"And does he call you 'Hermione'?"

"Sometimes. What exactly are you implying?" Her indignation was hampered by the blush rising in her cheeks.

Harry sighed, readjusting the stack of boxes in his arms once more. "Nothing. Look, forget about it, okay? It's just that I can't imagine why anyone would want to spend time with Snape."

Hermione couldn't help but grin. "You and Severus couldn't spend five minutes in one room together without hexing each other into oblivion."

"My point exactly."

"Look, I was just heading for the Leaky Cauldron for a bowl of soup or something. Would you and Ginny like to join me?"

"If I knew where Ginny was, that might be possible," Harry pointed out wryly. "I'm not even sure which shop she's buying out right now."

Hermione laughed. "Well, if you two need a break, come and join me, all right?"

Old Year, New Year

Chapter 13 of 22

Hermione and Severus spend New Year's Eve together. They discuss bed linens, among other things.

Chapter 13: Old Year, New Year

We are not going out together. We are not going out together.

The words pounded through Hermione's brain as she dressed for dinner with Severus. Going out together involved romance. Candles. Hand-holding, at the very least. This was simply dining with a friend, going to a concert, nothing more. She told herself that this was all Harry's fault: he was the one who had insinuated a deeper involvement with Snape. Now the thought sat on her mind and refused to budge.

It continued, even as Hermione turned up the snow-covered walk on Spinner's End. Snape's assistant, just leaving the house, greeted her enthusiastically. Hermione was surprised by this; she wasn't expecting the girl to remember her.

"He's waiting for you," Nora told her cheerfully, pulling up the collar of her cloak to fend off the icy wind.

"Thank you, Nora."

"He likes you, you know."

"Excuse me?" Hermione paused in mid-step.

"I said, he likes you."

"He does?" Hermione was instantly bemused.

"Oh, yes. And that's rather odd, you know."

"Odd?" Crimson, rising in her cheeks for several reasons...

Nora burst into a fit of giggles. "Not that there's anything wrong with you. It's just that Mr. Snape doesn't have many friends. Especially lady friends." She pulled gloves out of her pockets and tugged them on. "Downright cold tonight, isn't it?"

"Very. How do you know that Mr. Snape likes me, Nora?" Hermione asked, cutting the weather conversation short in favor of learning more about Snape's behavior.

"Well, usually it doesn't take much for him to throw a wobbly, but he's much nicer on the days he meets you at the pub. And he's been paying a lot more attention to his appearance. Used to look right scary, he did."

It was hard to disagree with the latter, Hermione thought, smiling encouragingly at Nora. "What else?"

"He hums."

"Hums?" Hermione repeated blankly. "As in... singing?"

Nora's giggles returned. "Well, he doesn't actually *sing*, but aye, he hums on occasion."

"Granger?" The door to the house opened, and Severus stood there, scowling as though the sight of the two women talking offended him somehow.

"Better go," Nora murmured.

"Do you have plans for the evening?" Hermione wanted to know.

The girl grinned. "I do, thank you for asking. I'm off to the pub with my Tony."

Hermione hoped fervently that said pub was not The Plaid Pony. "Well, I hope that you and Tony have a good time," she said. "And Happy New Year to you."

"Yes, Miss Granger. You, too."

"Good evening, Severus." Hermione climbed the final few steps to the door.

"It's freezing out there," he pointed out.

Hermione pushed past him to enter the house. Snape's simple statements frequently left room for conjecture. Did he mean, 'it's freezing out there, you'll catch your death' implying that he might be concerned for her welfare or, 'it's freezing out there, get inside before all the warm air escapes the house'? Or was he merely commenting on the weather? Annoyed that she had begun to speculate about Snape's intentions due not only to Harry's implications, but now Nora's as well, Hermione tried to shove it all into the recesses of her mind.

"It certainly is," she agreed, stepping into the small sitting room of the Spinner's End house and unwrapping the scarf from around her neck.

"I suppose we're going to The Plaid Pony as usual?" Severus asked.

"Would you rather go somewhere else? We could go to a wizarding pub, if you like." Hermione mentioned the option, certain that Snape would decline. During the few months they had been *eating out*, she reminded herself forcefully in an attempt to quash the words going out. Severus had steadfastly refused to enter a wizarding pub.

"No, thank you. The Plaid Pony will do just fine."

"You're determined not to set foot in a wizarding pub, aren't you?"

"Astute as always, Granger. No wonder you were such a successful student."

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell me why."

"Frankly, no."

Hermione had expected no other answer. "I have a surprise for you, by the way," she told him.

"A surprise?" Snape echoed suspiciously.

"I read in your notes that you and Albus frequented the Glasgow Chamber Orchestra. They're performing tonight, and I bought tickets." Hermione watched closely for his reaction. She'd bought the tickets on impulse and had been second-guessing herself ever since. It was far too easy to envision Snape grabbing her by the throat and snarling at her for her impudence.

But Severus merely stared at her for a long moment. "I see," he said finally. "What time is the performance?"

"Eight," Hermione said, exhaling in relief.

"Then we should be on our way to dinner. Being as it's New Year's Eve, I suspect that the pub will be crowded."

* * *

The Plaid Pony was indeed busy. Severus and Hermione had to wait a while for their food, and even then the pub was too noisy for a reasonable conversation. Hermione was frankly relieved when they could leave the raucous atmosphere behind. They took the Public Floo to Glasgow, finding even more snow and cold there.

"Why," muttered Hermione through chattering teeth, "does New Year's have to be in the dead of winter? Why couldn't the year begin in July, for heaven's sake?"

"If New Year's fell at a comfortable time, it's unlikely that people would be motivated to make their typical resolutions."

"And why would that be?"

"Because we resolve to make changes in our lives at a time when we are the least comfortable when the world is dark and cold, and we long for transformation," Snape told her as they hurried down a city street.

"And what about the people who live in warm climates?" Hermione pointed out. Her question earned her a scathing glare.

"It's still dark, no matter how warm the temperature."

"Is it true," she asked suddenly, "that your quarters at Hogwarts were decorated in black and green?"

Severus stopped dead in his tracks. "Sweet Merlin, Granger, where in the world did *that* come from?"

"I just wondered. That was always the rumor," Hermione said with a shrug.

"I lived in a bloody dungeon! Why would I want to make my living space even darker than it already was?"

"As I said, it was only a rumor."

"Rumors..." Snape grumbled, charging forward once more at a rapid pace. "The truth is never entertaining enough, is it? For your information, Hermione Granger, my walls were whitewashed, although my furniture was made of the usual dark wood found all around the castle."

"And your bed linen?" she prompted, scurrying to keep up with him.

"*My bed linen?* Don't tell me that people speculated about my bed linen!"

"They did, actually."

The muscles in Snape's jaws worked furiously. "Let me guess: green and black as well?"

"Green and black satin," Hermione amended.

He rolled his eyes and muttered something unintelligible. "They were white, just like all the sheets in the school although my blanket, as I recall, was a rather putrid shade of blue. Are you satisfied?"

"Completely." Hermione grinned impishly.

"Is there a Hogwarts alumni association, and should I inform them so that the rumors can mercifully be put to death?" Severus demanded sarcastically.

"No need. I'll be sure to mention it when I adapt my book for a magazine printing."

He peered at Hermione closely as they passed through the light cast by a street lamp. "You are joking, of course."

She sighed, her happy mood fading. "Of course. Since I don't know yet whether I'll have any better luck being published in a magazine, it's a moot point anyway."

"Have you investigated the periodicals?"

Although Snape hadn't added the words *as I suggested*, Hermione could hear them loud and clear. "Yes. That's how I spent Boxing Day. I've narrowed the field down to two: *Our World*, and *The Thinking Witch and Wizard*. Are you familiar with either of them?"

"I rarely make it past *Ars Alchemica* and *European Potions Digest*."

"I'll drop off a copy of each so that you can have a look. They seem the most likely candidates, but I'd be interested in hearing your opinion."

By the time they reached the concert hall, both Severus and Hermione were both frozen. It took little time for them to shake off the effects of the cold, however. The small hall, while intimate and acoustically blessed, was crowded and overly warm. As a result, Hermione found herself on the verge of dozing off during Haydn's String Quartet in F minor.

"Do try to stay awake, Granger," Severus hissed to her at one point.

"I'm trying," she whispered back, annoyed. It wasn't that the concert was boring; the problem was that she'd had a nice meal, was sitting in a comfortable seat, and was being lulled into a trance by the pleasant music.

It was nice, Hermione thought, to just relax and let the music flow over her, simply allow her mind to wander...

She awoke to find her head resting solidly on Snape's shoulder. Hermione tried to ease herself upright with a minimum of fuss, knowing full well that Snape probably had the world's widest smirk on his face at her embarrassment. A quick sideways glance confirmed her fears.

"Relaxed, are we?" Severus quipped sotto voce.

"Sorry," she whispered, her cheeks burning. Hermione was suddenly, acutely aware of Snape's physical proximity to her. Considering how many times the man had loomed over her shoulder in Potions, she thought that his presence shouldn't faze her. Then there were their dinners at The Plaid Pony when they'd shared a table or a booth; certainly, his nearness there had failed to distress her.

By the time the string quartet had moved from Haydn to Shostakovich, Hermione decided that the fact that Snape was sitting next to her as compared to opposite her was the factor causing her increased awareness of his presence. They had never been seated like this before, side by side, arms occasionally brushing against each other, sharing an experience together. They were no longer face-to-face, wary of each other.

Hermione found the notion oddly exhilarating.

When the concert ended, she expected Snape to make a sarcastic comment about her inability to stay awake. Instead, as they filed out of the hall, he made a comment or two about the quartet's performance, then lapsed largely into silence.

"Sorry for dozing off." Hermione finally felt compelled to mention the incident.

"It was rather warm in there this evening," Severus replied with a shrug. "And I doubt that you were the only one."

She wondered if she should apologize for making liberal use of his shoulder without permission before deciding that perhaps the topic should simply die of neglect.

"I'm going to the Burrow tomorrow," Hermione volunteered instead.

"Oh?"

The disinterest in Snape's voice was not as mocking as it might have been, leading Hermione to believe that it was his version of good manners.

"Molly had invited me for Christmas, but I begged off and suggested New Year's Day instead. Christmas Day... it just wouldn't have been proper, given that Ron and I are separated."

There was a slight hesitation, then: "Give my regards to Molly and Arthur," Severus said faintly.

"I'll do that."

"Ronald Weasley is --"

Exactly what Ronald Weasley was never became clear because at that moment, they stepped outside into the throngs of people filling the streets of Glasgow. There was raucous laughter and singing; most people held bottles of beer or other beverages, while policemen standing nearby kept a watchful eye on the partying. Suddenly, the crowd began to chant down the seconds until the new year:

" nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, happy New Year!"

Then their words were lost in cheering and a cacophony of noisemakers while several off-key voices began to struggle through Auld Lang Syne; somewhere nearby, a string of firecrackers went off. Hermione glanced up, a smile on her face, ready to wish Severus a happy New Year. The look on his face stopped her abruptly.

"What's wrong?"

Snape was regarding her with an intense, puzzled expression. His mouth moved slightly, as though he started to speak, yet no sound emerged. He raised his right hand to the level of her cheek, where it wavered in an anguished uncertainty.

"Granger," he began.

Had Harry been right? Was this more than an unlikely friendship? Hermione realized that she was holding her breath, waiting to see what would happen. When the moment threatened to turn into an eternity, a surge of adrenaline lifted her to her toes. Hermione rested one steadying hand on Snape's shoulder and abruptly placed a tentative kiss on his lips.

Severus stiffened, on the verge of taking a step backwards. "This I can't we can't do this."

Hermione blinked, then came to her senses. "Of course. What was I thinking? I'm still legally married to Ron."

It took a moment for Snape to understand. "That's not it," he said at once, clearly uneasy with the direction things were going. "You don't want to become involved with me. I'm not a nice person, Hermione. I don't know how to give affection or receive it, for that matter."

For a man who had displayed cold-blooded courage during the war, Hermione could have sworn that there was a twinge of fear in Snape's dark eyes.

"I'm not asking for either," she said, her voice steady. "I'm enjoying being your friend, and I hope that you find my friendship meaningful as well. As to what could happen in the future... I enjoy your company enough that I'm willing to see what happens."

Snape was silent, measuring her every word, her every nuance.

"I do find your friendship to be pleasant," he said, choosing his words with the utmost precision. "I would not care to lose it. But to look for more than that is foolhardy in the extreme."

The boisterous crowd had spotted the pair, and began to call out invitations to join in the celebration. Severus' expression darkened.

"We should leave here," he said flatly, and taking Hermione's elbow, steered her around the group and in the direction of the Public Floo.

They returned to the vicinity of Spinner's End, walking together in silence now. Hermione could not imagine Snape inviting her into the house and decided to end the

evening before any uneasy questions arose.

"I'll be going, Severus," she announced as they rounded the corner onto the lane. "It was a nice evening. Thank you."

Snape stopped walking. "Will you be Apparating directly to your home?" he wanted to know.

"Yes. I've had enough adventures in the snow and cold for one evening."

"Very well, then. Good night, Hermione."

"Morning," she corrected.

"Excuse me?" He stared at her.

"Morning. It's New Year's Day, remember?"

Severus nodded. "Good morning, then." He started toward the path to his house.

Hermione watched him go.

"Severus..."

"What?" He turned to look at her.

"Friendship is a form of affection."

He contemplated this. "Happy New Year, Hermione," Snape said quietly.

"Happy New Year, Severus."

Family Ties

Chapter 14 of 22

Hermione spends New Year's Day at the Burrow. Harry's angry; Ginny is curious.

Chapter 14: Family Ties

The Burrow never seemed to change, Hermione often thought. The house still looked the same as the first time she saw it in other words, as though a stiff wind would finish it off but inwardly, it was the strongest home that she had ever known.

The reason, of course, was the Weasley family. Arthur and Molly had built a virtual fortress of love and warmth within the Burrow's drafty walls, and Hermione was constantly in awe of the strength of her parents-in-law. Not a single Weasley child had fallen through the cracks, although it was certainly a daunting parenting task given the number and variety of personalities involved. A trip to the Burrow always brought with it a spate of happy memories; even though her relationship with the Weasleys would be forever changed when her divorce went through, Hermione knew that she would always be welcomed there.

As usual, Molly met her with the normal effusive greeting: *Been so long since we've seen you... You seem a little pale... Looks as though you've lost a bit of weight, are you eating enough?* Hermione had learned long ago that it was pointless to do anything until Molly had been allowed her traditional fussing. When the woman finally paused, Hermione assured her that she was just fine.

"Wonderful!" Molly beamed, then abruptly pulled Hermione into an enormous, crushing hug.

It felt as if her ribs would crack. Hermione found herself counting the seconds until she could breathe once more.

Molly finally released her, only to grasp her by the hand and tug her into the lounge. "Everybody's gathered in here, dear."

The definition of the word 'everybody' was highly fluid at the Burrow. Hermione knew it to mean 'every person who was supposed to be there at any given time', not 'every Weasley, Weasley spouse, and Weasley grandchild'. For that reason, one never knew who to expect to find on any given visit. On this New Year's Day, only the Bill Weasley family and the Harry Potter family had congregated there.

"Hermione, hello!" Arthur rose from his seat when he spotted her. His smile wavered when he realized that she was alone. "Your parents aren't with you?"

"I'm afraid not, but they send their regrets." Hermione was apologetic, although she knew that her parents had long tired of the novelty of being grilled about their Muggle ways. "They had an opportunity to spend New Year's Eve in Rome. They'll be home tomorrow."

"Do tell them hello for me, will you?"

"Of course." Hermione moved on to greet Harry and Ginny, and Bill and Fleur. "Where are the kids?" she asked, noting the relative quiet in the room.

Bill grinned. "Upstairs, playing dress-up. Mum dragged an old trunk down from the attic, and last I saw, Lily and Samantha were putting on old clothes as fast as Marielle and Patrice could dig them out."

Ginny, who sat next to her husband with his arm around her shoulders, added, "If I know Lily and Samantha, we'll have a fashion show shortly."

"Be prepared to ooh and aah," Harry advised Hermione and gave his wife a fond squeeze.

"You men," Fleur Weasley grumbled. "No wonder you 'ave no idea of style. Thees ees how little girls learn to become women. You thenk it ees play, but eet ees the way we learn."

"That must be why I'm so fashion-impaired," Hermione quipped, taking the seat Arthur indicated next to him. "I spent my childhood reading instead of playing dress-up."

"Same here," Ginny agreed. "Except my spare time was spent stealing my brothers' brooms so I could practice flying when Mum wasn't looking."

"You are most likely correct," Fleur said, nodding vigorously. "Zat ees probably what 'appened."

No one bothered to be surprised by Fleur's rather rude declaration. Over the years, everyone had become accustomed to her biases, and now Bill and Harry merely exchanged knowing glances while Hermione and Ginny smothered their grins. It was an accepted fact that Fleur Delacour Weasley believed British style to be so far below the French that it barely registered in the Grand Scheme of Things. Ginny and Hermione had the misfortune of being born on the wrong side of the English Channel and were, therefore, hopelessly lacking.

"I'm sure the girls will have a wonderful time with those things," Molly said, bringing a tray of snacks from the kitchen and placing them on the coffee table. "That trunk belonged to Great Auntie Muriel. There are all sorts of lovely old styles in there."

"What have you been up to, Hermione?" Arthur wanted to know. "How is your book coming?"

Hermione grimaced. "I'm afraid it's not. I couldn't interest any of the publishers."

"What?" Molly cried, looking personally affronted by the news. "From what I read, I thought it was wonderful!"

"Thank you, Molly, but they just didn't see it that way. Actually, I'm thinking about submitting it to a couple of magazines. See if I can find any takers that way."

"That's a smart idea," Bill put in. "Which magazines?"

"I found two that looked like good possibilities: *Our World* and *The Thinking Witch and Wizard*"

"I don't think I've ever heard of either one," Molly said, frowning.

"Nor had I," Hermione said. "I think they're fairly new. *Our World* is a quarterly, and *The Thinking Witch and Wizard* publishes six times a year."

"Well," said Bill, "if you do get in print, let me know. I have a friend who works for the WWN, and I bet he could arrange for you to be interviewed."

"Really? That would be great, Bill."

Fleur, meanwhile, seemed rather annoyed. "I cannot believe zat zee weezarding publishers 'ere take so little interest in keeping their heestory books current. In France, I believe zat zere ees a mandate for all books to remain current, or else zey are taken out of ze circulation."

There was thoughtful, appeasing nodding all around. Another lesson learned long ago was that skirting debates and arguments with Fleur was much preferred to an explosion of Gallic temper.

"Hermione, I saw your picture in the *Daily Prophet* recently, didn't I?" Arthur asked suddenly.

Hermione managed a pained smile. Of all possible topics, did Arthur have to bring that up? "Yes. It was taken at the D.I.M.C. Christmas party."

"Did you have a good time?"

"As good a time as one could have at those sort of affairs," she said with a shrug. With luck, that might quell the discussion...

...but no.

"Professor Snape was in the photograph with you, wasn't he?" Harry asked, his face the picture of innocence.

It was impossible to miss the accusation behind the query. "That's right. He was."

"Poor man," Molly sighed. "He's had a difficult road, hasn't he?"

Harry rolled his eyes and was rewarded by a barely noticeable poke in the ribs from Ginny.

"It turns out," Hermione said, "that his circumstances are far better than I was led to believe."

"Oh?" Arthur said.

Hermione described Snape's potions business and the patents he held. Arthur looked impressed.

"You don't say! I knew that he supplied Fred and George, but I had no idea that his business was so lucrative. Of course, he's a very intelligent man, so I've no doubt that he's capable of doing quite well."

"Given his lack of people skills, I'm amazed that Snape has any customers at all," Harry pointed out flatly, looking directly at Hermione as he spoke.

"He has no problem behaving in a civil manner," Hermione said defensively.

"You would know. After all, he was your escort that night."

Hermione felt her face redden as an awkward silence descended on the room. What in the world was Harry up to? "I needed an escort for the evening. Did you expect me to ask you?"

Ginny glanced from her husband to Hermione and rose immediately to her feet. "Hermione, let's go upstairs and see how the girls are faring. I haven't seen the insides of Great Auntie Muriel's trunk in years."

"Yes, let's." Hermione followed suit, grateful for the chance to escape.

Molly looked at the two of them, then sprang to her feet. "More snacks, anyone?"

Ginny led the way up the stairs, but instead of climbing to the third floor and the sound of giggling little girls, she stopped on the second landing.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. Harry's being a real bear today about you and Ron."

"Why?" Hermione asked, mystified. "I thought he'd been taking it in stride. Even that day he helped me clear out Ron's things, he was all right with it."

"He was until last night."

"What happened last night?"

"Ron was here." Ginny hesitated, as if weighing her words carefully. "He brought his new girlfriend with him."

The impact of Ginny's words hit Hermione like a lead cauldron. She'd known that Ron had every right to look for love elsewhere when the divorce became final. She had accepted the notion that he might possibly find it beforehand, even though it was a legal and moral gray area. But hearing Ginny's report brought on a fresh wave of grief for her marriage.

"I see," Hermione said, trying desperately to keep her face neutral. "Is she French?"

"Yes. Her name is Celeste Thibault. She's twenty-five, has long blond hair, and works in Promotions for the Torpilles." Ginny scowled now. "I just can't believe he brought her here. Mum went absolutely spare."

That explained Molly's wildly enthusiastic greeting today. "I can imagine."

"Harry was really angry with him. I think he sees it as an insult to you. And on top of that, there was that picture of you at the party with Snape. You know how he feels about Snape..."

"But he never said a word about it when I was at your house on Christmas Eve," Hermione pointed out in bewilderment.

"That's because Harry didn't see that issue of the *Prophet* when it first came out."

"Then how did he--"

"I mentioned it to him several days ago, and he dredged up a copy to have a look." Ginny looked vaguely guilty.

"So now Harry's angry with me as well?"

"He didn't say as much to me before now, but it certainly seems that way."

Hermione sighed and sagged against the wall. "Ginny, this is so hard. You know, when Ron first moved out, I thought that would be the most difficult adjustment. But then when we decided to divorce, it was just as awful. We're still legally married, which makes it a sort of a No Man's Land. You want to go forward and yet you really can't, and you can't go back, and it's just difficult."

Ginny regarded her curiously. "Are you siding with Ron?"

"I'm not siding with anybody. It's just that when you're one of the parties involved, the answers don't come easily."

"I think you should talk to Harry."

Hermione nodded. "You're right."

"So..."

"So what?"

"So what's really going on with you and Snape?" Ginny asked, an odd light in her eyes.

There was something in the way she asked the question that caught Hermione completely off guard so much so that she found herself stammering out an answer.

"There's nothing why would you what do you mean?"

"I just wondered."

"We're friends," Hermione said lamely. "I asked him for help with my book, and he agreed. Not at first, of course, but he's been cooperative lately, and we've had dinner a few times because of it. And last night, we went to a concert..."

Her voice trailed off as she recalled suddenly, vividly, their midnight kiss well, her midnight kiss really since Severus had been less than enthusiastic.

"Hermione," Ginny said softly, "is there something you're not telling me?"

"No. Really!" Hermione felt vaguely trapped. Was there something so obvious, so blatant, that she didn't see it?

Ginny regarded her steadily, then nodded. "I believe you. As I said, I just wondered."

Hermione realized that her heart was pounding more rapidly than the situation demanded. What if she did fall in love with Severus? Would he be greeted as coldly as Ron's new girlfriend while she was the target of everybody's anger?

"You know," Ginny continued when Hermione failed to respond, "you're a grown woman, Hermione. You can take up with whomever you want."

"So can Ron," Hermione blurted, feeling a lot more sympathy for Ron just now than she had earlier.

"True, but his timing was lousy. Look, believe it or not, I don't dislike Snape. I'm not wild about him, but I don't hate him the way Harry does."

Hermione smiled. "Nobody hates him the way Harry does."

"No kidding. The thing is, Hermione, Snape may be a war hero and a successful businessman, but he's still damaged goods. Can you honestly see yourself taking him home to your parents? Or having children? Or--"

"Stop it, Ginny!" Hermione felt a small frisson of panic at her friend's words. There was more truth in there than she cared to admit, and the question was, why did it bother her? "Severus and I are friends. Full stop."

"Okay." Ginny's smile was disarming. "Enough about Snape. Listen, do you want to go back downstairs and watch Harry be childish, or do you want to go on up and see what the real children are doing?"

"Upstairs." *And maybe, Hermione thought tiredly, it would be a good idea to make this visit to the Burrow a short one.*

The Offer

Chapter 15 of 22

Hermione receives good news about her book. Maybe.

Chapter 15: The Offer

Although Molly Weasley had never heard of *Our World* magazine, it was well-known to at least two of her offspring. Fred and George, when they heard that Hermione was planning to submit her story to that publication, were impressed.

"Very far-thinking, Hermione," George told her. "Forget the old establishment. Go with the progressive bunch."

"The 'progressive bunch'?" Something in the tone of his voice made Hermione uneasy. "What do you mean by that?"

"They're not, ah, counter-cultural or anything," Fred hastened to assure her. "They aim at a younger crowd. It's not your parents' type of magazine."

"I'm quite certain of *that*," she said dryly.

"Well, they're not *our* parents' type of magazine then. You know what I mean."

"I've only examined one issue. It didn't seem disreputable..."

"It's not," George guaranteed. "It's... you know. Young. Hip."

"Then why have I never heard of it before now?" Hermione asked blankly.

Fred and George exchanged looks. "Not that you're not young and hip, Hermione," Fred told her. "It's just a little more cutting edge than that."

It was one of those conversations best left unfinished. Yet watching Darius Billingsley rise from behind his desk now, Hermione could see what they meant. The man seemed to be her age, yet he appeared much younger. He wore his wavy black hair long and interspersed with the occasional plait, and was clad in the latest must-have fashion for wizards: satin-trimmed, dragon-hide robes.

"Madam Granger. I'm delighted to meet you," he murmured as he shook her hand firmly.

"How do you do, Mr. Billingsley." Hermione smiled pleasantly as she tried to keep her nervousness under wraps. This man, one of the editors of *Our World* magazine, was her last chance to be published after *The Thinking Witch and Wizard* had turned down her manuscript.

"Please, have a seat." Billingsley sat back down in his chair while Hermione settled into hers. "So," he said with a disarming smile, "you're one of the heroes who helped rid the world of that nasty piece of work Voldemort."

Hermione found herself blushing. It was a very long time since anyone had labeled her a hero, and if there was anything she'd learned in the writing of her book, it was that her war contributions were only a few among many. And although she desperately wanted to learn whether this man would put her words in print, it seemed prudent to ease into the discussion.

"Just one of the heroes, Mr. Billingsley."

"Call me Darius."

"Did you attend Hogwarts, Darius? It seems as though we surely would have known each other at school."

Billingsley threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Dad married a very strong-willed woman. My mother is Basque, and I ended up attending her alma mater, the *Academia de Magia*."

"I see." So much for small talk. Hermione tried to relax, but it wasn't easy when her pet project was on the line.

"I must say, I'm quite impressed. This is quite an endeavor," Darius said, sliding her manuscript from where it lay at the desk's edge to sit squarely in front of him.

"Thank you. It was a labor of love, actually."

"It shows. So you've had no takers among the hardcover crowd?"

Hermione translated 'hardcover crowd' into 'book publishers'. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Pity. This is good stuff."

"You've had a chance to read through it, then?" she asked, her fingers mentally crossed.

"Yes, although I need to run it past Barry Vance, my co-editor. Since I wasn't in Britain when all this --" Darius waved briefly in the direction of the manuscript "-- went down, I want someone else to take a peek."

"Of course." Hermione couldn't help but feel vaguely disappointed. She was hoping that Billingsley would be so awed by her story that he would demand the publishing rights immediately.

Her disenchantment must have shown because the man reacted at once. "Let me put you out of your misery, Madam Granger. I would love to publish your story in my magazine."

Hermione hesitated, expecting to hear the caveat 'however' issuing from Billingsley's mouth. When it didn't, she allowed herself to feel the first glimmer of hope.

"You would?" she repeated faintly.

"One can never learn enough from the past. To let the details be lost is a crime."

"That's it exactly," Hermione said, excitement bubbling up from within. "And that's why I wrote it. I didn't want anyone's efforts to be forgotten."

"You were certainly thorough," Billingsley pointed out, an enigmatic smile on his face.

She felt a frisson of panic, a throwback to her years at Hogwarts and the dozens of long-winded essays she had handed in. "Is it too long? I know that you're limited, space-wise, in a magazine, but I can pare it down --"

Darius waved a finger at Hermione as if she were a naughty child. "Editing is my department."

"Oh. Of course. I'm sorry, I'm not used to having someone do that."

"Even with the editing process, I'm envisioning a year's worth of material here, Madam Granger. May I call you Hermione?"

She nodded at once.

"As I said, I believe that it would take a year to do your work justice. We only publish quarterly, as you know, but twelve months would be about the proper time frame. Would you have a problem with that?" Billingsley raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. I mean, no. That would be fine." Perhaps, Hermione thought now, this would work better than having her material published in book form. Newly-published books held the public's interest for only a short time, while a serialized version over a solid year would keep readers coming back for more. Suddenly all those rejection letters didn't seem quite so bad in retrospect.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please forgive my nervousness. I was afraid that no one would ever want to read this."

"I'm certain that it will be quite well-received." Darius leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Let's discuss payment, shall we?"

Hermione nodded, her cheeks flushing once more. Her primary purpose in writing the book hadn't been about money. In fact, when Bill Weasley asked her one time how much she expected the book to earn, she had been rather taken aback. Still, she wanted to be compensated for her time and effort, and if the book managed to do well, so much the better.

"I realize, Darius, that by having my material published in this fashion, I won't be earning royalty checks and such. How does it work exactly? Do I receive a lump sum payment?"

"That's correct." Then, without preamble, Billingsley said, "I'm prepared to offer you five hundred Galleons for your book."

"Five hundred Galleons?" Hermione repeated, merely wanting to confirm the fact that she would not become a wealthy woman this way.

Darius Billingsley shifted in his seat, evidently taking her reiteration as displeasure at the terms. "It should be more, Merlin knows that. You should be in hardcover and earning royalties and rave reviews. The sad fact is, you're not. My problem is that *Our World* is still in its start-up phase. We've only been publishing for a little over a year now, and we can't afford large payouts yet. But..." he straightened up in his chair at this point, "you will receive exposure and publicity. It's entirely possible that after that, the demand for your story to be printed in book form will follow."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. That aspect had never occurred to her. "Do I have to sign a contract?"

"Not a contract per se. There is an Agreement to Print form that you'll need to sign. It simply gives us permission to edit your work and publish it. You still retain ownership of your manuscript, of course."

"I see."

Darius reached for a calendar and began to flip through it. "Let's set up another meeting. When Barry gets back in town, I'll have him read through your work, and then we can get together to discuss it. Two weeks from now okay?"

Hermione racked her brain to think if there was anything pending on her schedule. When nothing presented itself, she nodded agreement.

"*Bueno*. I'll be in touch."

* * *

"Madam Granger!" Nora broke into a broad smile when she opened the door.

Hermione returned the smile. "Hello, Nora. Is Mr. Snape at home?"

"He is, and hard at work in the lab just now. Don't stand there in the cold, come in, come in!" Nora waved Hermione into the parlor of Snape's house.

"I don't want to disturb him. I've just received some very good news and thought I'd let him know. It won't take but a moment." Hermione removed her gloves and stuffed them into the pocket of her cloak.

"All grins, you are, so the news must be good. Let me find him for you." Nora turned to go and discovered that she needn't bother. Severus was standing directly behind her, and she literally bounced off him. "Oh. Sorry, Mr. Snape."

Snape sighed, and Hermione had the impression that Nora found it necessary to apologize to him any number of times each day.

"Make yourself useful in the kitchen, Nora."

"Yes, sir. Tea?"

"If you must."

He was wearing the frayed trousers and filthy trainers that she had noticed on her very first visit. They were his work clothes, Hermione realized, and understood why she had mistaken the dirty lab clothes for poverty. And then she remembered the abortive kiss of New Year's Eve and was suddenly tongue-tied.

"Well, Granger? To what do I owe this honor?"

Ouch. She'd hoped to be greeted more enthusiastically or at least be called by her given name. Hermione pressed forward regardless.

"I received some good news today. *Our World* magazine wants to publish my story." She was beaming, despite herself.

"Do they, now?" The corners of Snape's mouth turned upwards in the faintest hint of a smile. "Then congratulations are in order."

"I wanted you to know because you've been so helpful."

"I was?" Severus raised a dubious eyebrow.

"Well... yes. I mean, not at first, but then you helped quite a bit." Hermione felt her cheeks begin to burn.

"When will you be in print?"

"I don't know yet. We have to meet once more. Darius Billingsley is one of the editors, and he wants to run the book past his associate first."

"Then it's not official yet?"

"No. Well, yes. It is, but I haven't signed their forms."

"How much are they paying you?" Snape inquired.

Coming from anybody else, the question would have been a rude intrusion. "Five hundred Galleons," Hermione admitted, feeling far less triumphant.

"Five hundred Galleons? For all the work you put in?"

"They can't afford any more because the magazine has only been publishing a short time. But," she added with more enthusiasm, "the book will be serialized over twelve months. And Darius said that by that time, a book publisher might be interested in it."

Snape looked as though he wanted to tell her to stop believing in fairy tales, Hermione thought, but to his credit, he did not.

"That would be... a good outcome," he said carefully.

"Yes," she agreed.

There was a brief silence. Finally, Severus spoke. "Thank you for sharing your good news with me."

"I didn't mean to interrupt your work," Hermione said at once. "I know you must be very busy. I'll just go..."

"Don't be ridiculous. Nora's making tea. There's no point in what?" He scowled, puzzled by the sudden flash of amazement that crossed her face.

*You said that I was being ridiculous, just as I said the same thing to Ron time after time..*For some reason, Hermione wasn't upset by the realization at all. Instead, she found it comforting in a strange way. Perhaps there were similarities between her and Severus after all...

"Nothing," she said, fighting back a smile. "Tea sounds good."

"Very well. While Nora is making the tea, perhaps you would care to see my lab?"

"I'd like that," Hermione said honestly and followed Snape down a short corridor leading off the parlor. Ahead was the kitchen, where Nora could be heard preparing the tea.

"Nora!" Severus barked, and the girl peered around the corner. "We're going down to the lab. We'll be back up shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Snape turned left into a doorway that led to a narrow, steep flight of stairs. "The stairs are rather treacherous. Watch your step."

Hermione nodded automatically, even though Snape didn't bother to see if she had heard him.

The narrow stairway took them to the basement, which, to Hermione's surprise, was not the dark, cramped space she'd expected. The room was easily five times the width of the small house and immediately brought to mind some of the magical expansions she'd seen Arthur Weasley perform on various tiny spaces at the Burrow. It was also brightly lit, displaying a U-shaped grouping of tables filling the room. Although Hermione had little experience with commercial potions laboratories, she had no difficulty in recognizing that what Snape had here was no make-do, home basement operation.

Severus pointed at the nearest tables on the left, which were filled with a variety of scales and measuring devices. "The preparation area," he told her, a clear note of pride in his voice. "Production is beyond that."

Hermione looked towards the next set of tables; they held what looked like fifty cauldrons of various shapes and sizes, and almost all were bubbling away. "You don't need to monitor them?"

"The substances are all stable at this point. As long as the flames remain steady, they will be fine for another forty minutes. Beyond that," Snape said, indicating the bottom part of the U-shaped arrangement, "is the distilling and concentration table. And along the right side, we package the products and ready them for shipping."

It was the perfect potions assembly line, Hermione thought. Nothing was out of place, there were no wasted spaces, no clutter, and even with the system up and running, no spills or messes. No wonder Snape was proud of this. And no wonder his business was profitable.

"SP, Incorporated," Hermione read aloud, eyeing the boxes stacked on the right. "Is that the name of your business?"

"Short for 'Snape Potions,'" Severus said, shrugging. "I was not likely to gain any business using my name on my products."

"You mean no one would buy from you because of..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape snorted. "Would you want to do business with a murderer?"

"I suppose not."

"Of course not, when you consider the fact that I was blacklisted by virtually every wizarding establishment in --" He broke off abruptly, as if realizing he'd said too much.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Blacklisted?" she repeated faintly.

"You wondered why I go to the Plaid Pony, a Muggle pub? I'm not allowed to go in a wizarding pub."

"But it's unofficial, surely..."

"Of course it's unofficial," Snape snapped. "You don't think that the Ministry would be that insensitive, do you? No, this was entirely a voluntary move by my fellow wizards. I'm fortunate that I can even obtain the supplies to make the products I sell."

"I'm sorry," Hermione blurted out of sheer polite reflex, then realized that it was probably the worst thing to say to Severus Snape.

"So you're back to pitying me again?"

"Not at all," she said, lifting her chin in defiance. "I think you've made the most of an untenable situation. I'm only sorry that it was necessary."

Snape studied her intently, then muttered, "Well, I hope you're satisfied with the Plaid Pony because the chances of going elsewhere are nil."

Hermione smiled. "I like to think that I'm flexible."

"Tea's ready!" Nora's voice floated down from the hallway.

"Shall we?" Snape gestured toward the stairway.

Hermione nodded and started back up the steps. Midway up the narrow stairs, her foot slipped, causing her to stumble. A strong hand gripped her arm from behind, preventing her from tumbling any farther. Still, she ended up twisted sideways on the steps, staring Snape directly in the face.

And her heart seemed to falter for a very long moment.

Snape wore the same puzzled expression that Hermione recalled from New Year's Eve. Yet this time, he wasted no time, displayed no reluctance. He leaned forward and cautiously, tentatively kissed her.

It was the first stumbling steps, the initial voyage of discovery, the original testing of the waters. Hermione could sense his curiosity competing with his hesitation and wondered briefly which would win out. Then she reached out to touch his cheek found the beginnings of stubble there and was suddenly at the mercy of her own inquisitive nature. She was lost in the kiss, wanting to think and examine, yet completely unable to do so.

Severus pulled away, but his eyes were fixed on Hermione's face. "I don't know what to do with you," he murmured.

I know the feeling. "Neither do I," Hermione whispered.

The moment, thick with tension, seemed to hang forever, then...

"I said, tea's ready!" Nora bellowed from somewhere above.

It was like being drenched in cold water.

"We'll be right there!" Snape bellowed angrily, and Hermione didn't blame him. She wanted to bellow at Nora herself just now.

But the moment was gone. After fifteen awkward minutes spent drinking Earl Grey, Hermione took her leave. As to future visits, Severus said nothing.

Company

Chapter 16 of 22

Unexpected company. Twice.

Chapter 16: Company

The dream was vivid and memorable.

Ginny Potter made a special trip to Hermione's office for the sole purpose of reminding Hermione that Severus Snape was 'damaged goods'. As if to reinforce the point, *Our World* magazine came out with a special issue, dedicated to The Top Ten Social Misfits of the Year; Snape made the list at number five, causing Hermione to wonder who filled spots one through four. And more bizarre still, Ron showed up to announce that he was renaming his Quidditch team; instead of *Les Torpilles*, they would be henceforth known as 'Ronnie's Ruddy Raiders'. It was little wonder that Hermione awoke with a splitting headache.

At work, she glanced up every so often from her desk, expecting to find Ginny actually there to issue her warning. But there were no visitors, and Hermione plodded through a mound of paperwork and tried not to think about yesterday's visit to Spinner's End.

I don't know what to do with you, Snape had said.

Join the club, Severus, she thought dully as she stared, unseeing, at a Request for Export form. No matter how much she'd nattered on about friendship, what crossed Hermione's mind more and more was that she was actually attracted to her former Potions professor, and that he was apparently attracted to her as well.

And it also occurred to her that a good many people in her circle of friends might not look favorably on such a thing.

Hermione's plan for the evening was to re-read Snape's account of the war years. In the three weeks since he had given her the information, she had delved into it as deeply as the busy days of Christmas and New Year's would allow. What Hermione found, to her immense surprise, was that's Snape's recollections of the last Wizarding War were rather boring. Absent were any lurid details of Dark Revels, senseless slaughter, or outright debauchery. The entire twenty-page document was heavy on Who'd Been Jealous of Whom, Who'd Been the Most or Least Trusted, and Voldemort's untiring obsession with Harry. There was almost nothing of Snape's feelings not that Hermione was surprised by this. She could picture Severus carefully keeping the lid on his emotions slammed shut as he wrote.

Although she had been disappointed at first by the surprisingly lackluster narrative, it was increasingly gratifying as her feelings for Snape warmed. Hermione was frankly relieved at the dearth of grisly, incriminating details; it would have been a rude awakening to find that just when she was beginning to appreciate the man, Snape's bad side was worse than she had imagined. Tonight, her intent was to see what feelings a re-reading of the memories would evoke.

As soon as she returned home, Hermione heated up a tin of tomato soup and made a sandwich, then spread out the parchments Snape had given her. She began to read, taking care not to drip any soup on them. But before she could make it through the first page, there was a knock at the door. Hermione cast a regretful eye at her barely-touched meal and climbed from her chair. When she opened the door, she was stunned to find her estranged husband standing in the hall.

"Ron?" she gasped.

"Hi, Hermione." Ron Weasley produced a tentative smile.

"What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in for a moment?"

"Of course!" Hermione blurted, completely flustered by Ron's sudden appearance. "Ignore the mess. I was just settling down to do a bit of reading."

"This is not a mess," Ron assured her, glancing around the lounge. "I seem to recall that my messes far surpassed your messes."

"I certainly can't argue that point."

"Am I interrupting your dinner? I could come back another time."

"It's only soup and a sandwich," Hermione said, plucking several old issues of the *Daily Prophet* from the sofa and tossing them onto the coffee table. "Please sit down, won't you?"

Ron sat, his long arms propped on equally long legs. "I'm sorry that I missed seeing you at Christmas."

Hermione settled into the armchair. "Well, it's always a bit crazy around then, isn't it? Harry told me that you were in Britain."

"Yeah." Ron's smile faded slightly. "I understand that you heard about Celeste."

Your girlfriend? Hermione started to ask, but found that she couldn't quite bring herself to utter the words. "Ginny mentioned that you'd brought a friend to the Burrow for New Year's Eve."

Ron colored. "Phrased it like that, did she?"

It was Hermione's turn to blush. "Not exactly."

"I figured as much. Ginny never was one to beat around the bush. Look, Hermione, I'm really sorry. I wanted to be the one to break the news. I just didn't get around to it in time."

Same old Ron. "I understand."

"I hadn't planned on finding someone so soon. It just sort of... happened," Ron finished lamely, scratching the back of his neck.

"It's all right, Ron. Really." Hermione couldn't quite find it within herself to condemn him when Snape was constantly on her mind these days.

"Celeste is really nice. Believe it or not, I think you'd like her."

"More importantly, will your mother like her?"

Ron grimaced. "Let's not go there. Mum's pretty steamed about it just now."

"I know."

"Hermione, I wanted to stop by for a couple of reasons. First, I wanted to apologize for you having to find out that way. And secondly, I uh suppose that we can proceed with the divorce. There's no reason to wait another year, is there?"

It was a virtual admission that Ron and Celeste were more than mere friends. Hermione shook her head, thinking that it was the final, painful nail being driven into the coffin of their marriage.

"No, no reason. I'll see to filing the papers."

Ron nodded, looking frankly relieved. After a brief, awkward moment, he said, "So, how's your book coming?"

"I'm talking with a magazine editor right now. No one was interested in publishing it as a book, but he'd like to serialize it for his magazine."

"That's great. What magazine? When will it come out?"

"The magazine is called *Our World*. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"It's only been publishing for about a year and a half. Fred and George tell me that it's popular with the younger crowd."

"Younger crowd?" Ron repeated, puzzled. "Younger than us?"

"We're not that young any more, Ron," Hermione reminded him. "I think *Our World* is primarily aimed at twenty-something singles."

"Hunh..." Ron contemplated the notion that there was another generation creeping up behind him.

"I could owl you a copy when the article comes out," she volunteered.

"Good. I'd like that." Another silence. "I should go, I expect."

"I appreciate your apologizing in person, Ron. I really do," Hermione said earnestly.

A sheepish smile crept across Ron's face as he climbed back to his feet. "You know me. I never had the best timing."

Just then, another knock sounded at the door, and Hermione started in surprise. She rarely had company; to have one visitor was unusual enough, but two in one evening?

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Maybe my timing's not that bad after all."

Hermione crossed to the door. "I can't imagine who this could be. I wasn't expecting anyone."

"Of course, you weren't expecting me, either," he reminded her, shrugging.

She opened the door and stared in amazement at the figure of Severus Snape.

"Good evening, Hermione." Snape spoke quietly. "Might I have a word with you?"

The phrase *when it rains, it pours* sped, unbidden, through Hermione's brain. "Of course," she said faintly.

Snape crossed the threshold, then stopped in his tracks as he spotted Ron. "You have company," he said to Hermione in an accusatory tone.

Ron looked equally stunned. "Professor Snape?"

Severus' withdrawal into himself was abrupt and almost a tangible thing. "I'll come back another time," he said stiffly.

"I was just leaving," Ron told him, moving hastily toward the door. "Good to see you again, Professor. Uh Hermione, I'll I'll be in touch."

Well, she thought as Ron pulled the door shut behind him, at least Snape's arrival spared them from eulogizing their failed marriage one final time. Hermione forced a pleasant smile on her face and turned to Severus.

"What brings you here tonight?"

"I did not mean to interrupt," he said as the crack of Ron's Disapparition sounded through the closed door.

"You didn't. Ron just stopped by to... ah..." Hermione took a deep breath before completing her sentence. "To tell me that we can proceed with our divorce."

"Oh?" Snape loaded the one word with a multitude of questions.

"He... found someone in France." Hermione chose her words carefully.

"I see. Then this is probably not a good time for us to talk."

"No, it's fine, really." She returned to the armchair, tucking her legs beneath her. "As long as you're not here with fifty absurd reasons why we shouldn't be friends, that is. Sit down, Severus."

Snape still looked reluctant, but he took a seat on the sofa anyway. "I wanted to talk to you regarding your visit yesterday."

Time for a preemptive strike, Hermione decided. "I was quite impressed by your laboratory. You have quite an efficient operation, from the look of it."

"Thank you, but you know very well that's not what I was talking about."

She was tempted to say *What, then?* but decided not to press her luck. "Do you have a problem with what happened yesterday?"

Snape's expression was guarded and leery. "The problem is that I don't know how to do this. Surely you have guessed by now that I have had no success when it comes to romantic liaisons."

"One kiss doesn't make a romantic liaison," Hermione offered quietly.

"Be that as it may, I am utterly abysmal at that sort of thing."

"I'm not exactly that great at it myself."

Severus shot her a disbelieving look. "You were are, for that matter married, Granger."

"And look where I am now," Hermione pointed out.

That gave him brief pause. "Still, it proves that you are capable of basic intimacy with another human being. What do you want from me? Sex? An escort to your Ministry functions?"

Her eyes darkened. "Do you think I would stoop to using you for convenient sex?"

"No," Snape admitted.

"Thank you. And as far as escorts go, I could certainly dredge up another male from somewhere if I chose."

"Why, then? Why me?"

"You really think that you are so hideous a man that no one would want to be with you?"

"You are a woman possessed of an uncommon amount of good sense. The answer to that should be ridiculously easy." Looking somewhat self-satisfied, Snape leaned back in his seat.

Hermione stared at him, eyes narrowed. "I frighten the living daylights out of you, don't I? Is the thought that I might like you that hard to bear?"

Snape's smug expression died an early death. "Ten points to Gryffindor for your keen powers of observation. I have seen the worst sort of dark evil," he grumbled, "and quite frankly, I find this more terrifying. I don't suppose that you'll desist in this friendship business?"

"Do you want me to?" Hermione asked simply.

Severus studied her for a long moment. "No," he said. "I find that I enjoy your friendship and your company."

"My feelings exactly. Although, if it would make you feel better, perhaps we should avoid situations where physical contact is likely."

"Such as concerts and climbing basement stairs?"

"Absolutely." The corners of Hermione's mouth twitched. "Stairways can be exceptionally hazardous."

Snape sighed. "You're going to be the death of me, you know."

"I doubt it. You've managed to survive this long. I don't see how having me for a friend could accomplish what the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and the entire Wizengamot failed to do."

"Then I shall possibly be the death of you."

Hermione merely smiled. "We'll see."

Severus looked briefly mutinous, but failed to mount any further objections. Finally, he spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Very well. Would you care to go to the Plaid Pony Friday night?"

"That would be lovely, thank you."

"Lovely?" Snape repeated faintly.

"Sorry. How about 'tolerably entertaining'?"

He shook his head in disbelief, yet there was a hint of a smile on his face. "I am curious about one thing."

"What's that?"

"It's been almost four weeks since I gave you my recollections of the war, yet you've said nothing about them."

Hermione waved towards the dining room table. "I was planning to re-read them tonight. I'd just begun when Ron showed up."

"And what did you think of them?"

This was tricky; given how much she'd begged and pleaded for Snape's help with her book, she didn't want to sound terribly ungrateful. "They were insightful," she said, knowing immediately that he hadn't been fooled.

"You're a bad liar, Hermione Granger. What you wanted were my deepest personal reflections. What I gave you was barely more than what was contained in the official trial transcripts."

"To be honest, I'm grateful that you provided me with anything."

Severus frowned slightly, studying his hands in his lap. "What would you like to know?"

"Excuse me?" she said, not sure that she'd heard correctly.

His dark eyes fixed on her lighter ones. "I said, what would you like to know? This is your chance. You may ask me anything you wish."

She stared, unbelieving. "Just like that?"

"Do you mean to say that you have no questions? One of the constants in this world is that you, Hermione Granger, always have questions. Hurry up with it before I change my mind."

The only thing Hermione could think was, *I'm blowing this big time*. Aloud, she blurted the only thing that came to mind.

"Why?"

Snape glared at her. "Could you possibly be more specific? If I'd known your questions were going to be this vague, I might have cooperated a long time ago."

"Why did you join Voldemort?" It wasn't the foremost question she might have posed, given ample opportunity to organize her thoughts, yet Hermione had speculated about the issue for years.

"I suspect you can guess the answer to that with little problem, can't you? I didn't fit in at Hogwarts. Voldemort accepted me and made me feel that I was appreciated for who I was."

With painful clarity, Hermione suddenly recalled her first two months at Hogwarts, and how lonely she'd been. "What else? Did you truly believe in what Voldemort stood for, or were you attracted to the aspect of Dark Magic?"

"While it's true that I was interested in Dark Magic, I did not join the Death Eaters in order to indulge in that particular sport. I simply found the subject fascinating. As for Voldemort's beliefs... I think that if one is looking to belong, it's easier to disregard certain aspects that might otherwise make one uncomfortable." Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest and scowled at her. "Shouldn't you be writing this down?"

"Of course." Hermione quickly leapt from her seat to fumble on the coffee table for a Muggle pen and one of the old copies of the *Daily Prophet*. She settled back in her chair, folding the newspaper so that she could make notes in the blank margins. "Which of Voldemort's beliefs, in particular, made you the most uncomfortable?"

"The pureblood superiority issue. My father was a Muggle, and although I could not dredge up a shred of fondness for the man, it is true that I would not be here were it not for him. People who are so consumed by issues of racial purity rarely recall that bloodlines are weakened, not strengthened, by separation. And since Voldemort himself was not a pureblood, I found his obsession particularly ironic and completely nonsensical."

Hermione tapped the ink pen against her lips thoughtfully. "I saw your parents' wedding announcement in an old copy of the *Daily Prophet*."

Severus raised an eyebrow in surprise. "And how did you manage that?"

"I just happened onto it when I was doing some research," Hermione said, deciding that even the passage of time might not have dulled Snape's suspicions regarding Harry's Potions text.

The answer seemed to satisfy Snape. He began a discussion of his disillusionment with Voldemort ("The man was mad as a hatter. What's not to understand about that?") and progressed on to the Dark Lord's convoluted tactics ("He was brilliant only up to a point, and that point was when his ego got in the way of his intelligence"). An hour later, Hermione had covered the margins of several *Daily Prophets* with notes, her hand cramping from trying to keep pace with Snape's comments. Finally, she asked the question that had paraded around the fringes of her mind for years:

"Why do you hate Harry so?"

Severus, by this time, had stretched his legs out in front of him and was leaning back tiredly on the sofa. He shot Hermione a look of pure annoyance that quickly faded to resignation.

"The answer to that is... complicated," he said wearily. "You know that Harry's father and his friends made a continual practice of baiting me when we were in school."

"Yes." The revelation was the one thing, Hermione recalled, that had tempered Harry's near-adoration of his late father.

"There was never any love lost between us," Snape went on, "but his mother, Lily, was often kind to me. As usual, I managed to destroy a friendship before it even developed, and soon Lily despised me also."

"Were you... attracted to Lily?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Snape snorted and jammed his hands into his trouser pockets. "Everybody was attracted to Lily. She was just that sort of girl. No, it has more to do with seeing my own shortcomings and being poorly equipped to deal with them."

"I don't understand."

"Harry was only a symbol, Granger. A symbol of everything that I might have had if only my life had evolved differently. I would look at Harry Potter and see his father, taunting me. I could see his mother, turning her back on me after I'd treated her rudely one time too many. I could look at Potter and see that his life was one constant path of successes, while mine was one long, pitiful decline." Severus managed a crooked smile. "That way, if anyone thought of me after I was dead, at least they could say that while I may have been a useless bastard, at least I died in a dignified manner."

Snape's discourse over the course of sixty minutes had left the room charged with an emotional electricity, Hermione thought. She found herself alternately annoyed with Severus Snape, saddened by his plight in life, and heartened by his attempts to make his life count for something over the decades. When she climbed to her feet

desperate to use the loo by now the spell was broken. Snape stood as well, making the usual comments about staying far too long, and how he should really be on his way.

He didn't seem as much embarrassed by sharing personal information as exhausted from it, Hermione decided. She walked him to the door and thanked him profusely for his assistance.

"You trusted me with your private thoughts," she said, clasping one of the folded wizarding newspapers to her chest. "I appreciate it, Severus. I really do."

Snape merely nodded. "I suppose I shall see you Friday night at the Plaid Pony, then."

"Yes." Hesitantly, Hermione reached out to take one of his hands. Startled, Severus looked down at his hand, clasped in hers.

An odd expression passed over his face, then he gently tugged her closer to him and kissed her. It wasn't the awkward, cautious kiss of yesterday's visit to Spinner's End. It was a tender expression of affection, of longing, of hope.

And just as abruptly, Snape pulled away. He tried to speak, but had to clear his throat first.

"I need to go," he managed.

"I understand." Hermione nodded her head.

Severus reached out to take her hand this time and just held it, regarding Hermione's fingers with a perplexed look on his face. He could only shake his head in amazement.

"I know," she said, smiling. "You don't know what to do with me."

Severus looked her in the eye, his mouth twisting into a half-smile of amusement. "True, but I believe I'm beginning to get some ideas."

Making a Choice

Chapter 17 of 22

Hermione lunches with the publishers and finds herself in an unexpected bind.

Chapter 16: Making a Choice

The Gilded Galleon was the newest restaurant in Diagon Alley. During the six months since its opening, it had gotten rave reviews in the *Daily Prophet* and *Witch Weekly*. It was *the* wizarding place to see and be seen, which was why Hermione was only now visiting it at the invitation of Darius Billingsley.

"May I help you?" The young woman who was the restaurant hostess piped up as Hermione surveyed the lunch crowd.

Hermione noted that the woman was elegantly clad in a black velvet gown, leaving her to wonder how the staff dressed for dinner if the lunchtime attire was this fancy.

"I'm Hermione Granger. I'm meeting Mr. Darius Billingsley and his associate."

"Right this way, Madam Granger." At once, the hostess beckoned her to follow. They crossed the main dining area to a series of private rooms. The woman stopped before a cubicle, pulled back a green velvet curtain with one hand, and waved Hermione forwards with the other.

"Hermione!" Darius Billingsley climbed to his feet, and a blonde man who looked vaguely familiar rose as well. "Come in, come in. Right on time! This is my associate, Barry Vance."

Hermione shook the other man's hand, trying to recall where she might have seen him before. "How do you do, Mr. Vance?"

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance," Vance said, frowning as he released Hermione's hand. "Am I correct in thinking that you are married to one of Arthur Weasley's boys?"

Ah. The answer was technically 'yes, but not for much longer'. Hermione merely nodded. "Ron Weasley," she answered cautiously.

"Ron, of course. I should have remembered. I left Hogwarts the same year as Charlie. I think I may have met you before at Charlie's wedding, possibly."

"I believe you're right." That was it. She and Ron were engaged at the time of Charlie's wedding, and Hermione vaguely remembered being introduced to an endless sea of people after the ceremony.

Vance smiled and leaned back into his seat. "How is Ron doing?" he wanted to know.

"He's well, thank you for asking." It crossed her mind that if she intended to do business with this man, sooner or later she would have to admit that the marriage was on the rocks. Otherwise, a lot of awkward situations were likely to arise.

Darius Billingsley spoke up then, sparing Hermione from tiptoeing further around the topic of her soon-to-be ex. "You'll be pleased to know that Barry has read your book, Hermione, and is just as excited about running the story as I am."

"That's great news!" Her eyes lit up.

Barry Vance nodded. "I'm sure you're aware, Madam Granger, that any book-length piece is, of necessity, heavily edited for a periodical. I wish that it didn't have to be that way, but we publish a magazine, and there's simply no room for an entire work such as yours."

"I understand. Do I..." She hunted for the right words. "Rather, do you allow me to see the edited version prior to publication?"

"I'm afraid not. The Consent to Print form, which you'll sign, gives us permission to edit at will." Darius smiled at Hermione in sympathy. "I understand, really I do. Handing

over your work to someone else to play with is a scary thought. But we simply pare down what you've written to make it adequate, lengthwise."

"And we certainly don't add things that aren't there to begin with, if that's one of your concerns," Vance put it.

"I'm sure you don't," Hermione answered hastily.

Vance fished around in the inner pocket of his robe and brought out a roll of parchment, which he handed to her. "This is the Consent form, which you'll want to read through carefully."

"Good day, sirs and madam. May I take your orders?" One of the wait staff appeared at the entrance to their private dining room.

Billingsley turned to Hermione. "Have you been to The Golden Galleon before, Hermione?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"May we order for you, then? We're rather familiar with the menu, and everything they serve is excellent."

The rather cavalier action irked Hermione somewhat, yet she told herself that the two men were doubtless pressed for time and weren't interested in letting a first-time author puzzle over the menu for half the afternoon. "I'm open to suggestions, of course," she said politely.

Darius Billingsley ordered calf and lamb skewers for each of them, then turned to Hermione. "Red wine?"

The notion of calf and lamb skewers was bad enough, Hermione thought, but red wine on top of it? She still remembered, all too vividly, throwing up in front of Snape. "If you don't mind, perhaps I'll just have a small salad and tea."

"Not a calf and lamb girl?" Barry Vance asked with a grin.

Not a calf and lamb woman, you moron. Immediately, Hermione kicked herself mentally. These men were her ticket to being in print. Just because their tastes in food differed from hers the ability to make an offhanded sexist reference notwithstanding was no reason to take offense. Yet.

"I'm afraid not," she demurred, unrolling the contract and beginning to read.

"There is one thing that troubles me about your piece, Madam Granger." Barry Vance spoke quietly.

Hermione looked up at once. "I beg your pardon?"

"As you know, Darius was at school in Spain during the war. One reason that he delayed offering you a contract was that he wanted me to read through your work. I was here during the war, so he thought I would have a better feel for the piece."

"And do you?"

"I believe so."

"What concerns do you have, Mr. Vance?"

"Please, call me Barry. We're informal at *Our World*." The man folded his hands in front of him on the white linen tablecloth. "Your book is quite good. I found it fascinating. I lost family during the war, so it's especially meaningful for me."

Hermione remembered the late Emmeline Vance and nodded. "Thank you," she said tentatively, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"For starters, I wish that you had added more information about the war trials. I think the story would have been more complete had you done that."

"It's a collection of memories of the war," she reminded him. "In my opinion, the war trials are a completely separate issue. One could write a book about that alone."

"Of course, but many people have vivid memories of the trials as well."

Hermione counted to ten inwardly. "What else, Barry?"

"Your story seems to have a few glaring omissions."

"Omissions?" she echoed, suddenly wary.

Vance shrugged. "Your story seems heavily biased in favor of those who fought against Voldemort."

"That's the point."

"But there's no controversy."

"No controversy?" Hermione truly had no idea where Vance was taking this. Had he expected her to go to Azkaban to interview the remaining living Death Eaters? They'd be halfway along the road to insanity by now, if not already arrived. "I'm afraid you've lost me completely."

"Take Severus Snape, the former Potions instructor at Hogwarts. He was still there when you were at school, wasn't he?"

"Yes..." *Where is this leading?*

"You didn't include him at all. Where are his memories? The son of a bitch murdered Albus Dumbledore, yet he managed to walk free."

The polite expression that had taken residence on Hermione's face froze. "Mr. Snape preferred not to be interviewed."

"I'll bet he did," Vance snorted with a smug smile. "Darius, you really missed it by attending school on the Continent. You can't imagine what Snape's classes were like. I never could stand that bastard. Detested him at Hogwarts, detested him even more when I learned that he killed Dumbledore."

"He had a magical contract," Hermione began, her voice sounding very unlike her own.

"That's a convenient excuse, isn't it? It automatically absolves someone of cold-blooded murder. I wish I could have seen the bastard swing, I really do."

Hermione looked to Darius Billingsley, silently beseeching him for help. But Billingsley looked clueless. Of course he's clueless. He wasn't in the country during the war.

Vance continued. "So Snape would give you nothing?"

"He did give me a little, but "

"Great! What do you have? Can you include it?"

Words failed Hermione. Barry Vance looked like he was ready to salivate at the idea of gritty, incriminating information, while she suddenly wanted nothing more than to turn and run. "Is it really necessary?"

"Necessary?" Vance hooted with laughter. "This is the kind of stuff that sells magazines! I mean, what you've written is all very nice, but it needs a bit more kick to it if you want it to sell! You give me a chapter on Snape, and we've got a deal!"

The breath went out of Hermione in one silent, deflating swoosh. She looked once more from Billingsley to Vance, then at the contract unrolled in front of her. Tonight, she was supposed to meet Severus at the Plaid Pony to celebrate the contract signing which would make her a published author. How, exactly, was she supposed to explain this to him?

* * *

Hermione stood in her mother's conservatory and watched Julia Granger as she re-potted a Chinese evergreen. Gardening was supposed to be therapeutic, and she wondered if she might give it a try. But then, she'd never truly enjoyed Herbology, never took pleasure in working with her mother outside in the garden, never understood why Julia insisted on all the houseplants dotting the Granger home. Right now, Hermione would have dearly loved to dig in some soil, preferably to hurl it in Barry Vance's face.

"So they wouldn't agree to print your story unless you added information on Professor Snape?" Julia commented as she patted the dirt around the stem of the Agleonema.

"That's right."

"What's the problem? I thought you told me that he had given you some of his recollections."

"He did, but that wasn't really what they were looking for. They wanted the ugly sensational stuff that would sell more copies of their precious magazine." Hermione toyed with a spade that lay on the potting bench in front of her.

"And you wouldn't give it to them?"

"Of course not, Mum! If it was simply a question of putting together a blurb from the written material Severus gave me, I could have done that easily. He gave me more than that, though. He shared some very personal memories that I wouldn't dream of publishing."

Julia glanced out her daughter out of the corner of her eye and smiled. "You're rather indignant about this, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't you be?" Hermione countered.

"Yes, I would." Julia paused before asking, "Is this a question of journalistic integrity, or is it something more?"

Hermione met her mother's brown eyes, so like her own, and sagged visibly. "Something more," she admitted miserably.

"So you've fallen in love with him."

"Yes, I think so."

"He's not like Ron at all, is he?" It was more comment than question.

Hermione laughed nervously. "Not in the least."

"You never cared for him much when you were at school, as I recall," Julia pointed out.

"No."

"Are you certain that you're not rushing where you ought not go?"

"I'm not rushing anywhere, Mum. I like him, I don't know why. I wouldn't call him a likeable person. But the more I get to know him, the more I care for him."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "You will give this time, won't you?"

"I said I wasn't rushing into anything, didn't I?" Hermione said testily.

"Sorry. What did he say when you told him about the editor's demands?"

"I didn't tell him."

"Hermione!" Julia stared at her daughter, amazed. "You say you care for this man, yet you won't explain to him why you refused to let your story be published?"

"I told him that I wouldn't meet their demands," Hermione said defensively. "It's true."

"What would he say if he knew your reasons?"

"I don't know." Pulling up a nearby stool, Hermione perched on it, sighing deeply. "Severus would either tell me that I was being far too noble and Gryffindor, or he'd think me an idiot for refusing my chance to be published."

"Are you sure that he wouldn't be grateful for your silence?" Julia asked pointedly.

Hermione made a face. "He might be grateful, but he'd never admit it."

Her mother stripped off her rubber gloves and surveyed her plant. "There. Aggie looks much better, doesn't she? Much more room to grow."

"If you say so, Mum."

Julia gave her daughter a fond hug. "Is there anything your father or I can do to help, dear?"

"I don't know." Hermione rested her head on her mother's shoulder and wished, not for the first time, that Julia could solve her problems as easily now as when she was small.

The Test, Part I

Chapter 18 of 22

Hermione and Severus pay a visit to the Grangers. Of course, things do not go smoothly.

Chapter 18: The Test, Part I

Hermione stepped up to the front door of the attractive Georgian home and knocked briskly. She could virtually feel the waves of tension coming from her dinner companion, yet there was no way around this. It was a necessary next step, something that could not be avoided or delayed any longer.

It was time.

Her own palms were sweaty, she realized as she waited. One glance at Severus told her that he would rather be just about anywhere but here right now. Given the deeds of his own past, it was remarkable that he should find this so intimidating.

Remarkable, but not surprising.

There was the sound of a lock being turned, and the front door of the Granger home swung inward. Julia stood there, smiling graciously, extending her hand.

"Severus, I'm so pleased to finally meet you. Come in, won't you?"

Snape hesitated for a fraction of a second, but disguised it as chivalry by allowing Hermione to precede him. "Thank you, Mrs. Granger."

"Please call me Julia. I still think of 'Mrs. Granger' as my mother-in-law."

"Very well... Julia."

Severus' face was impassive, his voice cool. If Hermione didn't know better, she would have thought him distant and disinterested, and she mentally congratulated herself on forewarning her parents. Julia waved in the direction of the kitchen.

"Lawrence is just finishing up. That's one reason we remodeled; we wanted to have plenty of space for entertaining while we cook, so go right on back."

"While 'we' cook?" Hermione echoed, looking amused.

Julia grimaced. "What my daughter means, Severus, is that my job has more to do with laying the table and less to do with the actual meal preparation. Lawrence is a wonderful cook, and I mainly try to stay out of his way. May I take your... coats?"

Her mother had paused to determine if the couple was wearing wizarding cloaks or their Muggle equivalent, Hermione noted as she handed over her coat. Severus shrugged out of the black leather jacket and allowed Julia to hang it in a hall closet.

"This way," Hermione said, leading Snape down the hallway to the kitchen.

Lawrence Granger glanced up from the stove, where he was transferring some cutlets from a skillet to a baking dish.

"Hello there," he said. "I'm afraid Julia was a bit optimistic on the timeframe. I'm running behind, but not by much. This dish cooks rather quickly."

"And we're probably a few minutes early," Hermione admitted with a wry grin. "Dad, this is Severus Snape. Severus my father, Lawrence Granger."

Lawrence hastily put down the platter he held and extended a hand to Snape. "How do you do, Severus?"

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Granger."

Severus maintained his usual cool demeanor, the same stilted reserve. Hermione glanced from one man to the other, trying to read expressions and nuances in a split second.

"Please, make it Lawrence."

Snape nodded. "Lawrence."

"What are we having, Dad?" Hermione climbed onto one of the counter stools and motioned for Severus to do the same.

"Pork tenderloin with Dijon-Marsala sauce and Japanese spinach with sweet Sesame seeds." Lawrence took a final cutlet from the skillet and placed it on a baking sheet, then popped the baking sheet into the cooker.

"It sounds... quite interesting," Severus ventured.

Lawrence Granger chuckled. "Thank you for phrasing it politely. That's not how my wife referred to it when I told her what tonight's menu would be."

"I believe I said it sounded rather bizarre." Julia came through the kitchen doorway. "I didn't actually mean it as an insult."

"I'm simply never appreciated around here," Lawrence chuckled. He shifted the skillet back and forth while a dab of butter melted over the heat before commenting, "I understand that you own your own business, Severus."

"Yes. I manufacture various products, primarily explosives."

"Is there really that large a market for explosives?" Julia inquired.

"A lot of them are rather mild, to be used in gag gifts and toys."

"You remember Fred and George's shop, Mum," Hermione reminded her.

"Of course." Julia began to put silverware around the places at the dining table, looking wistful. "I love those boys. They're adorable, aren't they?"

Severus looked as though he wanted to differ, but said nothing. Hermione turned pink. Not only were Fred and George no longer boys, they were also on tonight's list of Topics to Be Avoided. That list included all Weasleys, Potters and Albus Dumbledore, along with a smattering of other issues that Hermione had put forth. Right now, her

mother was dancing perilously close to the edge.

Lawrence had paid closer attention to his daughter's instructions. "Hermione said that you do all the manufacturing yourself. How in the world do you manage? Isn't that rather tricky with something like explosives?"

"The potions themselves are rather simple, but I use a patented Stasis Charm to prevent any problems with shipping. And I have one assistant, as well," Snape added.

"What makes your charm different?"

"It's self-limiting. I place it on the products as soon as they're packed; once the boxes are opened at the receiving end, the charm dissipates."

Frowning, Lawrence measured out a cup of wine and added it to the sauce he was preparing. "Forgive me for asking this I'm sure it's ridiculously obvious to your fellow witches and wizards but what makes that spell of yours different?"

Snape smiled tolerantly. "It's actually not ridiculously obvious. Other stasis charms halt a chemical reaction in progress, and once the charm is lifted, the reaction resumes where it left off. Needless to say, that could result in a bit of a nasty surprise for the buyer of an explosive. My charm renders the product inert until used for its intended purpose."

"Very impressive. I --" Lawrence broke off as his mobile phone began chirping beneath the apron he wore. "Oh, damn. Now what?"

Hermione sat up straighter in apprehension. The one thing about the evening that she couldn't control was an emergency related to her parents' dental practice. While true emergencies were generally rare, it was the mere possibility of something cropping up that had worried her. She watched her father take the call and tried to piece together some idea of events from the one-sided conversation. Her mother, she noted, was doing the same.

After a few moments, Lawrence said, "I'll meet you there in ten minutes, Jack. Really, it's no problem. Just make sure she keeps the tooth submerged in some milk, all right?"

Oh, no... Hermione's heart sank. She exchanged a dark look with Julia, who was regarding her with sympathy.

"Dad, do you *have* to go in?" she demanded as soon as her father ended the call.

"Jack Tucker's daughter Jenny fell off her bike and knocked out a front tooth. I'm sorry, honey, but I have to go in." Lawrence began to remove his apron.

"Why don't I go?" Julia stepped forward at once. "You're right in the midst of cooking dinner."

Lawrence grimaced and spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Jack's my golfing mate, Julia. It wouldn't be right. Look, I'll just let turn off the stove and let things simmer here. Nothing's ruined. I'll be back in less than an hour."

Severus placed a quieting hand on Hermione's arm.

"Perhaps I could get things ready," Julia volunteered.

There was a brief look of alarm in Lawrence's eyes as he tossed his apron on the counter. "Just leave it, Julia. It'll be fine. Hermione," he said, leaning over to kiss his daughter on the cheek as he passed by, "I'm sorry, love. I'll be back as soon as I can. Severus, forgive me for running off like this."

"I understand," Snape said.

There was the jangle of keys in the hallway and the sound of the front door opening and closing. Julia sighed and walked over to the stove, surveying the assortment of bowls, pots, and pans that her husband had spread all over. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

"It's all right, Mum." Hermione managed a smile.

"I wish we'd thought to make some appetizers. You'll both be starving by the time your father returns."

"It's no problem," Severus assured her.

"Perhaps I could find some biscuits or something." Julia leaned over to open a lower cabinet, and as she did so, knocked a cleaver off the counter. Out of pure reaction she grabbed for it and unfortunately caught it by the blade. Julia shrieked and the knife clattered to the floor; blood began to drip from her hand immediately.

"Mum!" In an instant, Hermione had slid off her stool and raced to her mother's side.

"How stupid can I be?" Julia muttered, leaning against the kitchen cabinets as she cradled her bleeding hand. "Why didn't I just let the thing fall?"

Hermione grabbed a tea towel from the counter and pressed it against her mother's hand. "Here, Mum. Hold your arm over the sink," she murmured, steering the older woman in that direction.

"*Tergeo.*" Severus was behind her, using his wand to clean up the blood droplets that had puddled on the floor. "How bad is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hermione began, just as Julia pulled the tea towel away. Blood continued to pour steadily from a cut that ran almost the width of her mother's palm.

"Here." Snape turned on the tap, grasped Julia's arm and held it under the stream of cold water.

Julia winced in pain. The blood mingled with the water swirling down the drain, but before it began to well up again, it became obvious that the cut was deeper than anyone had imagined.

"I'll need to visit the Emergency Clinic," Julia groaned. "There may have been damage to the tendons. Of all the stupid things to do!"

Hermione flashed a brief, questioning glance at Severus. While she knew that her mother would not object to the use of magic to heal her hand, Hermione suspected that her own magical first aid skills weren't up to the task if the damage was as deep as Julia suspected. Snape hesitated, speculating, then shook his head.

"We could staunch the bleeding a bit, but it would be best if she went to the Muggle clinic," he agreed.

"I'll drive you, Mum," Hermione announced while Severus pulled out his wand.

"And when was the last time you drove a Muggle car?" Julia looked up suspiciously.

"A long time ago, but I'm sure it's like riding a bicycle." Hermione could see a puzzled expression pass over Snape's face as he bent over Julia's hand, and she made a mental note to explain the phrase to him later. "Where are your car keys, Mum?"

"On the table in the front hall."

Hermione started off in search of the keys, then called back over her shoulder, "Do you want to stay here or go with us?" she asked Severus.

"I'll stay here. Perhaps I can salvage dinner or something."

Hermione nodded. Minutes later, her mother was ensconced in the passenger seat with her hand wrapped in a tea towel, and the Grangers' second car lurched out of the driveway and down the street. Snape watched them go, certain that Muggle vehicles didn't usually travel in such a jerky, irregular manner, and hoped that Hermione would make it to hospital and back without crashing the thing.

He'd not been in a purely Muggle house since forced to go on a handful of Death Eater raids years earlier, and he felt no fascination with the Grangers' house now. Still, this had been Hermione's childhood home. Snape found himself wandering through the lounge, studying the family pictures that dotted the bookshelves and mantel. There were a number of Muggle photographs of Hermione, many of them taken before she'd ever darkened the doors of Hogwarts. In quite a few of them, Hermione was posed with a book in her arms or her lap, and Severus had to smile at that. The wizarding photographs showed Hermione as a familiar teenager: in one, she wore her Hogwarts robe, adorned with a shiny prefect's badge; in another, she was clustered with Potter and Weasley, laughing and waving like the troublesome trio they'd been back then. Then there was the wedding photograph—Hermione looking radiant in a white robe, Ron Weasley clutching her to his side.

The wave of jealousy that washed over him caught Snape completely by surprise. For a marriage that was merely awaiting the official document to declare it legally dead, why should he feel so threatened by that photograph? And the truth occurred to him then: he wanted Hermione to look so radiant, so happy, because she was with him, Severus Snape, former Death Eater, murderer and friend to no one.

* * *

"I'm back!" Lawrence Granger's voice sounded from the front hall. "See, I told you it wouldn't take long."

As footsteps neared and the man appeared in the kitchen doorway, Snape looked up from the Sesame seeds that he was grinding with a mortar and pestle. "Welcome home," he said calmly. "Dinner's nearly ready."

Lawrence stopped short at the sight of Severus performing the cooking chores. "What happened? Where are the women?"

"Your wife accidentally cut her hand just after you left, and Hermione had to drive her to the Emergency Hospital."

"Hermione? Drive a car? Did she even remember how?"

"From the way the car was veering about as they left, I'd say no."

Lawrence stared at Snape for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Poor Hermione. She wanted this evening to go smoothly, and this is how it turns out."

It crossed Severus' mind to ask why Hermione wanted the evening to go smoothly, but he decided that it was a question best posed to her instead of her father. "It's certainly been my experience that life doesn't usually work that way."

"You've got that right," Lawrence said, still chuckling. "How did it happen?"

Snape nodded toward the butcher knife lying on the counter. "As I said, it was purely accidental. She knocked the knife off and instinctively tried to grab for it."

"Poor Jules. For someone who's so skilled at working in other people's mouths, she's an absolute disaster at home sometimes." Lawrence rolled up his sleeves. "Okay, what do we have here? I see you peeked at the recipe for the Japanese spinach."

"I saw the mortar and pestle, and I was curious..."

"The Japanese don't call them mortars and pestles. They're 'suribachi' and 'surikogi'. You see, the sweet flavor of the roasted Sesame seeds is more intense when they're ground."

Snape regarded him sideways. "You quite enjoy cooking, don't you?"

"I do indeed." Lawrence smiled broadly. "It's very therapeutic. Tell you what... It looks as if you have a handle on the spinach, so why don't you finish that, and I'll go back to the pork tenderloin?"

The two men worked in companionable silence for several minutes. Finally, Lawrence spoke up.

"Tell me about you and Hermione, Severus. Are you merely friends, or are you romantically involved?"

Snape, who had been concentrating on the instructions in the cookery book, felt his nerves snap to attention. He carefully hunted down the right words before speaking. "We've only just realized that we... harbor feelings for each other. At present we're tiptoeing rather cautiously around the subject."

"I see. It must seem strange to you to think that she was once your student."

Severus shook his head, his eyes still on the cookery book. "If you know anything about my past, then you know that was another lifetime ago. I don't think of it at all."

"Of course. But then, Hermione has always been very mature for her age."

"Does the difference between our ages bother you?"

"Not really. I'm rather surprised that she didn't marry an older man to begin with. Oops..." Lawrence grinned. "I'm getting close to disallowed topics for this evening. Julia and I were absolutely forbidden to discuss the Weasley family, among other things."

Snape looked up at that. "Hermione gave you instructions on what not to talk about?"

"She's rather headstrong and determined on a number of counts, as I'm sure you're finding out."

"Were you and your wife disappointed by Hermione's decision to divorce Weasley?" Severus asked out of curiosity.

"We didn't raise a squawk, if that's what you mean," Lawrence told him. "We loved Ron, of course, but you could see where the two of them had grown apart over the years. They were merely going through the motions for a good while, I believe. If I recall correctly, she expects the divorce papers to arrive any day now."

There was a brief silence while Snape digested this. "Your daughter is... uncommon," he ventured. "I've suspected that the two were something of a mismatch."

"I'm assuming... you have no children, correct, Severus?"

Snape shook his head. Granger continued.

"When you have a child, you believe anything is possible. Your child could be Prime Minister, or the next Stephen Hawking, or Bill Gates. And then, when your child's abilities begin to point one way or another, you begin to narrow your hopes a bit. You just want her to land a good job in a field she loves and find a wonderful man to share the rest of her life. Then comes the worst part, though: a phase where you're positive that she's made the worst possible choices, and that all your hopes are gone. But if you're smart, you realize that you were hoping she'd take your path instead of her own. And that's the good part, if you're blessed with a child like Hermione. Your little girl turns into a wonderful woman who's blessed with brains and talent and common sense and outright decency, and you wouldn't trade her for the Prime Minister or anybody

else."

Severus didn't quite know what to say. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was sixteen years old, waiting for a girl to descend the stairs for an evening out while her father issued thinly veiled threats regarding appropriate behavior.

"Hermione has those traits you mentioned in abundance," he said finally.

"You've got that right," Lawrence chuckled. "Take that book business. Once she got it in her head that the people who fought in your war weren't getting all the credit they were due, she went at it like a ball of fire."

"She is not lacking for determination."

"I know she was disappointed when those magazine guys turned the tables on her, but she stuck to her guns. When it comes down to questions of integrity, Hermione digs her heels in and simply won't budge."

The phrasing struck Severus as odd, given what Hermione had told him about the collapse of the magazine offer. "I didn't think that the money would be so pivotal an issue for her," he said.

Lawrence looked blank. "Money?"

It was Snape's turn to appear at a loss. "She told me that the editor had reneged on their offer. Is that not the case?"

Granger sighed heavily and shook his head. "Nuts. I think I'm back in restricted conversational territory again."

"You might as well explain," Snape said dryly. "I'll be asking Hermione about it if you don't."

"Damn. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, I suppose. Here's the thing, Severus: they wanted information about you. All the dirt, all the gossipy stuff, from what Hermione told me. And she wouldn't give it to them."

Severus stared at Lawrence Granger as the realization sank in. Hermione had given up her final shot at being published in order to protect him.

The Test, Part 2

Chapter 19 of 22

Hermione receives mail; Severus is not a happy man.

Chapter 19: The Test, Part II

In the end, no one ate dinner.

Hermione phoned with the news that Julia would require rather delicate surgery to repair several tendons and ligaments. Lawrence drove to the Emergency Clinic at once, and Severus Apparated home.

The telephone woke Hermione the next morning. She opened her eyes and made the distressing discovery that her pounding head was not part of a dream. Hermione stumbled toward the ringing phone, one hand pressed on her forehead and the other, shielding her eyes from the early morning sun streaming in the window.

"Hello?"

"Hello, dear," Julia Granger said.

"Mum, how are you?" Hermione clutched the receiver and made her way back to bed, wondering for the millionth time why she never thought to *accio* the phone instead of physically crossing the room to retrieve it.

"Fine. Just a twinge of pain from the stitches. The reason I called is that I wanted to apologize for the way things turned out last night."

"It's not your fault, Mum. It just...happened."

"I know, but still... Have you spoken to Severus this morning?"

"No, not yet," Hermione answered, wondering if Julia had expected to overhear Snape rustling about in her daughter's bed.

"I hope he's not too distressed by last evening," her mother went on.

Hermione was quite certain that of all the things that might have distressed Severus Snape over the years, a failed dinner with the Grangers was not among them.

"I doubt it. Look, Mum, I woke up with a wicked headache, and I need to take something for it. Can I call you back later?"

Julia agreed, and moments later, Hermione was standing at the bathroom sink, downing a measure of Soothing Potion.

It was, she decided as she stared at her reflection in the mirror, a tension headache born of sheer frustration. Hermione had wanted last evening to go well, simply because there was so much that could go wrong. She knew that she could count on her parents to provide Severus with a gracious and courteous reception at least until they realized that he was fast becoming more than a friend to their daughter. Snape was in no way cut from the same mold as Ron Weasley, and Hermione couldn't imagine that Julia and Lawrence would exactly welcome him with open arms. The best-case scenario was one in which her parents assured her that they trusted her good judgment, then quietly accepted whatever path she chose even if that path included Severus Snape.

On the other hand, Hermione had been on pins and needles, wondering just how Snape would react *toward* them. It was entirely possible, she had reasoned, that he might put up one of his defensive walls and spend the evening behaving in an icy, unapproachable manner. Severus understood the reason for becoming acquainted with Lawrence and Julia; it was a necessary step if this fledgling relationship was to move forward. But depending on his mood, it was not out of the question that he could easily have

sabotaged the entire dinner.

And then, just as it looked as if things were progressing smoothly, disaster had struck. At least her mother wasn't badly hurt.

Hermione returned to bed and stretched out to stare at the ceiling. Of all the men in the world, why was she attracted to Severus Snape? She wondered idly if a long-term relationship with the man was even remotely possible, given the fact that not a soul she knew would approve her choice. Hermione could only imagine what it would be like to throw a dinner party some day, an unfortunate event in which Snapes, Potters and Weasleys all spent the evening glaring at each other with thinly-disguised hatred.

She had just begun to drift back to sleep when there was a repeated tapping at her window. Hermione groaned inwardly. The insistent tapping meant that the post owl intended to wait for a reply to some part of the mail, instead of merely dropping it off for her to read at her leisure. And why did the bloody mail have to be delivered so early on a Saturday morning? She crawled out of bed once more and discovered, to her dismay, that the headache was still there.

There were several pieces of mail mostly the ubiquitous junk mail that was no less of a problem in the wizarding world than the Muggle realm. Hermione found an envelope addressed to her in Snape's now-familiar script, and it was while holding this letter that the owl repeatedly prodded her hand. This, then, was the piece of mail needing the immediate reply, and she put aside the rest of the post to read it.

Severus was asking her to meet him at the Plaid Pony for lunch, as there was something he wished to discuss with her. On the surface, it appeared to be a benign request, yet for some reason, Hermione sensed something disquieting about it. It was almost, she thought, as though she could detect a note of coldness in Snape's voice as he put quill to parchment. Had last evening been *that* bad?

She scribbled an answer and sent it back with the same owl before examining the remainder of her mail. At the very back of the junk mail, Hermione found an official-looking envelope from the Ministry of Magic, Division of Deeds and Records, and at once her spirits sank.

It was her decree absolute.

She sat on the side of her bed, stared at the parchment that legally dissolved the marriage of Hermione Jane Granger and Ronald Bilius Weasley, and allowed the tears to flow.

I'm a divorcée, she thought miserably, and the dated terminology did little to improve her mood. Hermione swiped at her wet cheeks, surprised at finding herself so distressed at this moment. She and Ron had divorced by mutual agreement; it wasn't as if either of them was embittered or disillusioned. And she'd been expecting the final decree for weeks now, so it could hardly be said to have arrived out of the blue.

Still, there was something about it that proclaimed her to be a failure possibly the only thing at which she'd ever truly failed, Hermione thought without a trace of conceit. Perhaps she and Severus were alike in that respect: he'd had no success in romantic relations, and now Hermione could say the same of herself. A niggling little voice of common sense prodded her heavily at that point, reminding her that she done perfectly well with Ron for many years, and that she was currently being overly dramatic and self-absorbed. It was true, but it was still difficult to shake the gloom that now descended upon her.

Hermione threw the decree aside and crawled back into bed for a while before showering and Apparating to the Plaid Pony.

* * *

It took only one look at Snape's face to confirm that something was wrong. At once, Hermione began to sort through last night's events, trying to hunt down whatever might be responsible for his displeasure.

"Hello," she said brightly, pulling out the chair next to Snape's and hoping against hope that a happy greeting might take care of everything. "How are you today? I'm so sorry about the way things turned out last night."

"How is your mother?" Severus asked, calmly deflecting both question and apology.

"Quite well, thanks. She'll be unable to work at the dental clinic for a month, unfortunately that's the bad part. And she'll have to work one-handed with her plants for now. But there's always a chance that she can find a new hobby. That's how Dad became interested in cooking, you know."

"Your father and I had a very pleasant conversation," Snape said coolly before taking a sip of his ale. "He and I talked as we finished preparing the meal. I think it would have turned out to be rather tasty."

"What did you and Dad talk about?"

A shrug. "Various things."

Hermione waited, alarm bells beginning to clang throughout her head.

"I was quite interested to hear the truth of how your magazine contract fell through," Severus continued.

She grimaced, massaging the bridge of her nose; the remains of her headache had taken up residence there.

"Oh. That. I just couldn't bring myself to tell you the truth."

"Really?" The word was framed in icicles.

He's actually angry about this, Hermione realized. In her mind, it had been the tiniest lie of omission when she led Snape to believe that the luncheon meeting with the publishers ended in wrangling over money and editing rights.

"It was I just "

"You lied to me."

The flat-out accusation caused Hermione to laugh. Theoretically, the results of her meeting with the publishers were none of his business. "That's a bit of over-exaggeration, isn't it?"

Snape said nothing, merely met her with an icy stare. Hermione's smile wavered and vanished.

"Look, they wanted to hang you out to dry. I simply couldn't tell you that."

"Why? Did you think that my feelings might be hurt? Do you honestly believe, after all I've been through, that two upstart magazine editors would actually frighten me?"

It was a rather laughable idea, but Hermione didn't find it humorous in the least. "I didn't intend to lie to you. I just couldn't..."

"...tell me the truth?"

She felt her face suffuse a deep crimson. "Severus, that's not fair! If it had been any other day..."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?" he demanded darkly.

"Look, we planned to meet here for dinner that evening to celebrate the contract, remember? What was I supposed to say? That I nobly sacrificed my dream in order to protect your image?"

"You could have simply said that you refused to supply the information they wanted."

"Right. And then you would have called me a foolish, overly-sentimental Gryffindor," Hermione snapped.

Severus studied her above the rim of his glass. "I see. This is about you, then. You chose to avoid the truth because you were afraid that I would call you names."

She wanted to toss the glass of ale in his face except that that sort of thing only worked well in the movies. Hermione gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

"Not only was I not concerned that you would call me names, I am not a foolish, overly sentimental Gryffindor. If anything, I would expect you to compliment me on my decision to lie that being a rather *Slytherin* trait."

"Actually, you're wrong about that. Slytherins find lying to be self-serving. I'm afraid that your lofty motives on my behalf cancel it out."

Hermione stared at Snape, scarcely able to believe that he was so incensed about the whole thing. "Are you saying that I should have agreed to provide them with all the incriminating, filthy details that you shared with me in strictest confidence?"

"No, I'm saying that for someone who purports to care for me, you display it in odd ways."

"Damn it, Severus!"

Her voice was louder than usual, and heads turned to look. Hermione was infuriated with herself she never cursed, and he'd provoked her to this point and it seemed that regardless of what she did, she couldn't please the man. She willed herself to take a deep breath and calm down.

"I wouldn't cooperate with Darius Billingsley and Barry Vance because what they wanted and what I wanted were two different things. *My* goal was always to provide recognition for everyone who fought so hard in the war. *Their* goal was to make money by carving you into a hundred different pieces for all the world to see, and I wouldn't do it!"

"Thereby deliberately forfeiting your one chance to make it into print."

"Yes. Fine. I deliberately gave it up. It was my bloody Gryffindor sense of honor!"

"Whereas Slytherins have no sense of honor?"

Hermione thought to remind Snape that he'd personally denounced such House stereotypes right here in this very pub, but at the moment she wanted badly to revert to her twelve-year-old self and proclaim Slytherins as cold, calculating, and ready to turn over their own mothers if it was to their advantage.

"What is it that really bothers you about this, Severus? That I tried to protect you, and it hurt your big male ego? That some people are still after your hide twelve years after the war? Or is it because you trusted me, and now you're not so sure if I'm trustworthy after all?"

Snape's expression changed just enough for Hermione to recognize that she'd hit the nail on the head. "I believe," he said, his voice dangerously quiet, "that I've had enough of this conversation."

He slapped a few Muggle coins on the table and climbed to his feet while Hermione watched in disbelief. Without saying good-bye, he wove through the lunchtime crowd and departed.

By the time Hermione had pushed through the crowded pub to follow him outside, Severus was gone.

* * *

Hermione spent Sunday replaying Saturday's argument over and over in her head. For a man who was so well-acquainted with the many shades of gray in life, she thought that Snape was being utterly unreasonable.

It was true that by editing her account of the failed magazine deal, she *had* been protecting him. When Billingsley and Vance insisted that a detailed account of Severus Snape's malleasance be part of the publishing deal, there'd been no choice but to turn down the offer. Hermione cared about Snape; she would no more write damning things about him for public consumption than she would have written a sidebar on the darker side of Harry Potter. If that was being a foolish, overly-sentimental Gryffindor, then so be it.

And it wasn't as though she had deliberately chosen to lie maliciously. It was one of those convenient little white lies, the type that made it possible for humankind to exist with a minimum of upheaval except that Severus had seen it as a major betrayal. Didn't he know by now that she was on *his* side?

Or did he even want her on his side?

There was no immediate answer for that, and by the time Monday morning rolled around, Hermione was in foul spirits. She spent the morning closeted in her office, barely looking up from her stack of papers until she heard a knocking at the door. For a brief, shining moment she wondered if perhaps it was Severus; that moment was quickly replaced by reality when she found Harry standing there.

"Hi, Harry. What's up?"

"Not much. Just thought I'd drop in to say hello." He dropped into the chair next to her desk.

Hermione watched Harry glance briefly around her office, and smiled inwardly. It was one of life's little injustices that she, Hermione Granger, had a real office while the Savior of the Wizarding World rated only a cubicle. She was certain that Harry didn't care beans about that fact, although she always found it mildly amusing.

She saw then that Harry had That Look in his eyes, the one that said what came out of his mouth was in no way related to the reason he was here. Hermione raised an eyebrow a Snapeism she had picked up and waited.

"I hear that your divorce is final now," Harry said finally, looking as though he hated pronouncing every word of the sentence.

"That's right."

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I really am. I'd hoped that maybe, at the last minute, something might happen to change your mind."

"My mind?" Hermione echoed.

"Or Ron's," Harry amended quickly. "It just doesn't seem right."

She sighed. The divorce was final, the deed was done, and she was tired of people pining for the past. "Life doesn't work that way, Harry."

"You'd think I would know that by now, wouldn't you?" Harry muttered, grimacing.

Hermione gave a half-hearted laugh. Harry was a good friend, even if he did want to rearrange the world to suit him. "It's all right, Harry. Really."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Ready to go on with the rest of my life. Thanks for asking, though."

"That's what friends are for," Harry smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I take it that you heard from Ron. How's he doing?"

"Okay. He was a little upset when the papers came through. Called from the fireplace Saturday night. I think he just wanted to chat a bit, make sure he wasn't a complete failure at things," Harry said.

Hermione felt somewhat reassured by that. "Did he? I was a bit of a wreck myself on Saturday. I suppose it's inevitable. It's as if someone's validated the fact that you've made a mess of your marriage and you're holding the evidence right there in your hands."

"That's what Ron said, basically."

"Is he still I mean, does he still have his girlfriend?"

"Celeste? Yes." Harry looked at Hermione appraisingly. "You still seeing Snape?"

She tried to look nonchalant, but it took an extreme amount of effort. "To be honest, I don't know. I'm afraid I've messed up there as well. We had a big row on Saturday"

Harry shot her a dark glance. "I'm sure that if there is any 'messing up' in a relationship with Severus Snape, Hermione, *you* didn't do it."

"You'd be surprised."

"I don't need the details, okay?" he said, a pained expression on his face.

Hermione laughed. "Okay," she agreed, just as a letter shot from a slot in the ceiling into her In Box, causing a brief flurry of papers. She sighed. As much as she loved the Wizarding World, she couldn't help but envy her parents' Muggle computer with its quietly efficient e-mail.

"I'll let you get back to work," Harry told her, climbing to his feet. "I just wanted to check up on you."

"Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it." Hermione waved her friend from the office, but not before promising to call him at once if she needed a shoulder upon which to cry. She then turned her attention to the latest letter to fall into the In Box, and saw that it was addressed to her in Snape's tidy, slanted scrawl, just as Saturday's note had been.

Could you meet me outside at the Muggle entrance at noon? Please let me know if this is convenient for you.

Severus

Hermione read the message two, three times. It wasn't convenient, frankly. She had a twelve-thirty meeting scheduled, which meant that lunch would have to be done in a hurry. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was now ten-fifteen.

She jotted a reply and dropped it in her Out Box. Immediately, the parchment flew up through the ceiling slot and out of sight.

For the remainder of the morning, Hermione speculated on the reason for Snape's note. If he was planning to end their friendship, which she had convinced herself was the likely scenario, the street seemed an odd venue. Why not simply break up in a letter? Or come to her office, if he was making the trip to London? As with all things Snape, Hermione realized that his motives were shrouded in mystery, and there was nothing to do but wait until twelve.

At one minute before noon, she stepped into the Muggle phone booth elevator. This earned her a few odd looks from her fellow Ministry employees; it was rare for any of them to leave by way of the elevator, since everyone routinely used the Floo grates for travel. As soon as the booth deposited her at street level, Hermione discovered another reason for the puzzled glances.

A cold, steady rain was falling. Only an idiot would choose to be out in it.

She spotted Snape across the street immediately, a figure dressed in black and watching from beneath an umbrella. Hermione pulled her cloak closer around her hurried over.

"You couldn't have picked a drier day for this, could you?" she commented, trying to sound much cheerier than she felt.

"I don't control the weather," Severus reminded her, shifting the umbrella to cover both of them.

"Why didn't you just come to my office?"

"Because I refuse to set foot inside that bloody building."

"It's only a dreary bureaucratic maze," Hermione pointed out reasonably.

"Not if you'd been jailed and tried before the Wizengamot there. I assure you, you would think twice before setting foot inside it again."

"I see your point." Hermione's breath hung as a white puff in the chilly air. She hugged herself tightly to ward off the piercing cold.

Snape inhaled deeply. "How are you?"

"Well. You?"

"Fine. How is your day?"

"Perfectly boring. Did you really come all the way to London to ask me that?"

He scowled at her, then stared off towards the Ministry building. "If I have learned one thing in my life, it is that allowing disagreements to fester benefits no one. I behaved abominably on Saturday. You did not lie to me because of any malicious intent. I reacted badly, and I apologize."

Only the sound of the rain hitting the umbrella punctuated the silence that followed. An immediate, outright apology from Severus Snape? He wasn't here to end their

relationship? Hermione fumbled for words. "Thank you, Severus. I know that I should have explained the real circumstances to you, but I simply couldn't bring myself to tell you. I'm sorry as well."

Snape nodded, finally risking a glance back in her direction. "I fear that past experience has taught me to assume the worst when someone lies. I cannot recall a time when someone was concerned about sparing my feelings."

"Well, someone is concerned about you now," Hermione said simply. Within, an ember of hope and happiness reignited.

A faint smile quirked the corner of Snape's mouth. "At any rate, I am responsible for the death of your writing career, and I apologize for that as well."

"The time just wasn't right. I'll try again in the future."

"Do you really believe that, or are you merely spouting platitudes?"

"Do I normally spout platitudes?"

"Not at all."

"Then there's your answer. At any rate, I'm finding your good favor more desirable than fame and fortune just now." Hermione couldn't help the broad smile that had spread over her face. Her day, her week, her world, had just re-righted themselves.

"I thought you weren't writing for the fame and fortune," Severus pointed out, his tone light.

"Then it's a very good thing, don't you think?"

Snape looked at Hermione, an unreadable combination of expressions on his face. "Would you care to have lunch with me?"

Her happiness vanished at once. "I can't. I have a meeting coming up at twelve-thirty."

"I see." Severus merely nodded, but Hermione could see the obvious disappointment in his eyes.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" she ventured. "I'm not a very good cook, and it certainly wouldn't be as good as Dad's, but it might not be too terrible."

"Tonight would be fine," he said at once, and the look of relief on his face spoke volumes. Could Snape have come here, expecting that she would refuse his apology? Hermione's breath caught in her throat.

"Say, seven o'clock, then?" she said.

He nodded.

On impulse, Hermione rose on tiptoe to kiss him. The kiss began as gentle, assuring, tender. Moments later, as each of them gave up all illusions of mere friendship, it erupted into much, much more.

Just a Typical Saturday Morning

Chapter 20 of 22

The title says it all: coffee, the newspaper, Harry Potter...

Chapter 19: Just a Typical Saturday Morning

Severus poured himself a cup of coffee, knowing that sooner or later he would have to admit to Hermione that her Muggle coffeepot really did an excellent job. He had braved the device by himself this morning, as Hermione had finally beaten him to the shower for a change.

A new routine had evolved over the last three weeks. Every Friday afternoon, Severus temporarily closed down his cellar laboratory, something he had never bothered to do before. Then again, he had never before spent weekends away. After Friday night dinner at the Plaid Pony, Snape now spent Saturday and Sunday at Hermione's flat. When Sunday evening arrived, he Apparated home. It was an arrangement that suited each of them just fine.

This was Snape's first serious, romantic involvement, and it had been an eye-opening experience for him. It was completely unlike the teen hormone-fests he'd seen on a daily basis at Hogwarts. Hermione was not the clingy sort, and any concern that she would publicly drape herself all over him evaporated quickly. Nor was she demanding to be entertained all the time; while they had spent a fair amount of time visiting museums, galleries, or attending the occasional concert, Severus could admit that Hermione had not once dragged him shopping for clothes, insisted on going to trendy restaurants, or sat him down to discuss their 'relationship'. In short, they had continued much the same as they always had, but with a physical facet now as well.

That was another surprise for Snape. While Hermione might claim only one past sex partner, she'd still had a vast deal more sex than Severus had ever had. It was mildly intimidating until he realized that Hermione genuinely wanted him and him alone, and that he needn't bring any sexual credentials to the table. As a result, he'd received an education in tenderness and caring, while the more exotic mechanics of sex things he thought were expected or required were virtually ignored. Hermione seemed completely satisfied with their sex life thus far, and Severus could only conclude that either she had low expectations, or else he was a fast learner.

They shared a closeness that Snape could honestly say he'd never experienced with anyone in his life. It made him realize what he'd missed for so many years, but before the thought could depress him too deeply, Severus acknowledged that Hermione would never have been available to him before now. And the idea of sharing this same intimacy with any other woman was unthinkable.

Was he a better man for their relationship? Snape thought so, if only because Nora told him one day that he wasn't nearly as insufferable as he used to be. The girl was lucky that he hadn't hexed her senseless, yet it was a sign of the change within him that his hand hadn't reached automatically for his wand. Severus smiled at the memory as he began to scan the front page of the *Prophet*.

Normally, he was the first to arise. By the time Hermione managed to straggle out of bed, Severus was typically already showered and dressed. Today, however, she had awakened uncharacteristically early, and Snape had played the gentleman and graciously allowed her first crack at the loo. As a result, Hermione was presently in the

shower, humming in an endearingly off-key soprano.

Severus was distracted from a newspaper article about Rufus Scrimgeour's fluctuations in popularity by Crookshanks, who was repeatedly winding in figure eights around his ankles. When the cat had brushed against him long enough to make his leg hair crackle with static electricity, Snape gave up any attempt at reading and threw down the *Prophet* to glare meaningfully at Hermione's pet. The animal gave a prim *meow* and went to sit placidly by the front door.

This was a typical morning event, he had learned. Hermione had told him that ever since the final year of the war, Crookshanks insisted on performing a morning patrol wherever his mistress was staying. The animal would spend twenty minutes checking out hallways, stairways, nooks and crannies and, finally content that the surroundings were safe, would settle down for a day-long nap. Severus sighed. If there was any glitch whatsoever in his relationship with Hermione Granger, it was putting up with her miserable familiar.

Annoyed, he pushed back from the table and went to let Crookshanks out. As soon as he opened the door, the cat trotted out happily past a pair of feet standing in the hallway. Snape's eyes swept upwards.

And found himself staring into Harry Potter's stunned face.

Harry was regarding Snape with an expression of utmost horror. Severus pulled his dressing gown more tightly about him and took a deep breath.

"Mr. Potter," he said coolly. "What can I do for you?"

It was a moment before Harry's mouth ceased to move like a gasping fish, before he finally found his voice.

"Snape!" he blurted.

He looked as if he wanted to say quite a bit more possibly elaborate on the name with a few choice expletives but was once more reduced to the fish imitation. Severus was tempted to congratulate him on his skills of recognition, but decided that he would take the moral high ground instead.

"I assume that you're here to see Hermione. She's in the shower at present. Please come in," Snape said calmly, then stepped back to give Harry space to enter.

Harry stared at him, incredulous. "No, that's all right. I can come back another time."

"Nonsense. I'll let her know you're here." Severus headed straight for the bathroom, ignoring Potter's protestations. He couldn't help but grin inwardly; while he knew that Hermione had told her friends that the two of them were seeing each other, he suspected that they preferred not to dwell on the possibility that sex was involved. Snape rapped lightly on the bathroom door. "Hermione..."

"What?" Her voice sounded over the noise of running water.

"Your friend Potter is here to see you."

"What?" There was dead silence. Then, as it sank in that violence in her lounge was a real possibility, "I'll be right out!"

Severus returned to the lounge, only to find that Harry had barely crept inside the front door. The-Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-A-Constant-Annoyance stood there and glared, looking poised to sling accusations, threats and mud in every direction.

"Sit down, Potter. Hermione will be out shortly."

"I'll stand," Harry said darkly.

"Suit yourself. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"No."

Snape reminded himself that he held the upper hand. "I suspect, Potter, that you and I will never be friends. I also suspect that you would dearly love to draw your wand on me for no other reason than the fact that I'm here. However, unless I am very much mistaken, Hermione would doubtless prefer that we behave in a sensible and civilized manner while in her home. Now, will you have a seat until she's finished in the shower?"

Harry glowered at him, then reluctantly sat down on the sofa.

"You're certain that you wouldn't like some coffee?"

For a moment, Harry opened his mouth for another flat refusal, Severus was sure then closed it again.

"Yes, please," Harry said through gritted teeth.

"Cream or sugar?"

"No."

Snape nodded briefly, then went to the kitchen to pour another cup. He returned momentarily, handed the mug to Harry, and went back to his place at the dining room table. Severus slid his reading glasses back down on his nose and spoke without looking up.

"Would you care to read the *Daily Prophet*?"

"I've already read it," Harry snapped.

Severus smiled to himself and went back to his reading, satisfied that he had done his part in making the polite gesture. After a minute or two, there was the sound of the bathroom door opening abruptly, and Hermione hurried into the lounge, clad in a dressing gown and dabbing frantically at her wet hair with a towel.

"Harry! What brings you here?"

Harry leapt to his feet, nearly upsetting the coffee. "Nothing important. I had some errands to run, and Samantha made me promise to give you this in person." He fished in his pocket for a folded square of pink paper.

"What's this?" Hermione took it from him and unfolded it.

"It's an invitation to Samantha's dance recital." Harry motioned toward the paper. "She decorated it especially for you."

Hermione grinned. "I see," she said, admiring the hand-drawn hearts and flowers along with the words *Dear Aunt Hermione, could you please come to my dance recital? Love, Samantha Potter.* "Of course I'll be there. Will you tell her, or shall I owl her a note?"

"Oh, owl her, by all means. Sam thinks getting her own private mail is the most wonderful thing."

"I'll do it today then." Hermione followed Harry's eyes to where Snape sat reading the newspaper. "Can I interest you in some coffee, Harry?"

"I've already..." Harry's voice trailed off, and he gestured helplessly in the direction of the dining table. "Snape brought me a cup."

"Do you have time to stay for a while?" Hermione asked brightly. "I have some pastries in the kitchen."

"No!" Harry blurted at once. "I have... other errands to run."

"Oh. All right, then."

"I'll see you later." Harry beat a rapid retreat to the door, then hesitated. "Good to see you again, Snape."

"Good day, Potter." Severus didn't glance up from the front page of the *Daily Prophet* as Hermione ushered Harry out of the flat. Inwardly, he added, *You lie through your teeth.*

Hermione closed the front door quietly and walked over to where Snape sat. Standing behind him, she slid her arms around him and rested her chin on his shoulder. "That was nice of you," she said softly.

"What was nice of me?" Severus' eyes remained on the newspaper, but he reached up to cover one of Hermione's hands with his own. "Giving Potter a cup of coffee, or refusing to destroy your lounge by dueling to the death?"

"Both," she said, smiling into his neck. "The landlord and I appreciate it."

"Hunh," he muttered noncommittally.

"And that," Hermione added, straightening up abruptly, "is why I love you."

Severus jerked upright to stare at her in amazement.

Hermione, who had begun angling back to the bathroom, saw his expression and halted in mid-step, waiting.

He tried to find words. For a man who enjoyed the nuances, the cadence, the flow of the English language, Snape found himself struggling to put together a coherent sentence. "You said... you love me..."

"I did, didn't I?" An impish smile appeared on her face, and Hermione flounced smugly away to the loo.

Snape watched her go, stunned.

It was the first time the word *love* had been brought up. Severus had avoided it, afraid of proclaiming his newfound feelings only to discover that they weren't being reciprocated. It wasn't that he believed Hermione's sentiments to be shallower than his own; it was simply his usual pattern of self-preservation, of not daring to hope that he might actually be enjoying that what so many took for granted.

And frankly, Snape wasn't sure that he would recognize love if it hit him in the face.

Was this it? This caring for the brilliant woman who had refused to give up on him? How could he know so much about so many things and yet be virtually ignorant on the subject? Of course, he'd never had the opportunity to learn about love firsthand, Severus reminded himself.

But now that Hermione had used the word, it was out there, and there was no way to ignore it and go back to the way things had been before. He would have to ask whether it was a simple slip of the tongue or if she meant it, and Snape had no faith whatsoever that Hermione Granger would accidentally blurt such a thing. Besides, she had looked far too pleased with herself as she marched back to the bathroom.

Severus heard the bathroom door close, and he looked down at his newspaper and cup of coffee. And for the first time, he realized that his life would never be the same again.

Hooked on a Feeling

Chapter 21 of 22

Hermione has a revelation at a dance recital; Severus decides to protect his reputation.

Chapter 21: Hooked on a Feeling

Hermione congratulated herself, not for the first time, on being a very patient, practical person. In the fortnight that had passed since telling her Severus Snape that she loved him, she had waited, curious, to see if the man would return the sentiment. Inwardly, she knew for a fact that Severus loved her, if for no other reason than he would not have hesitated to inform her if he did not. His actions, his expressions, all betrayed to Hermione exactly what she needed to know. Given that the man had suffered grievous emotional abuse all his life, it would have shocked her to hear 'I love you' tripping glibly off his tongue.

Nor would it have been convincing. While her own parents had bandied the words about as far back as she could remember, Hermione doubted whether Severus would ever be the type to do so. She was certain that he had a considerable amount of baggage through which to weed, and there was no way that she could lessen the load without adding to it.

Molly visited her one Monday evening, bringing a cake and announcing, rather apologetically, that Ron had remarried.

It wasn't news. Harry had been to the weekend wedding and told Hermione about it at the Ministry that day.

"Harry broke the news this morning. That's wonderful, Molly!" Hermione genuinely meant it. With Severus in her life, it was far easier to be pleased for her ex-husband.

"It was a very quiet affair in France," Molly assured her, as if a grand wedding would have somehow insulted Hermione's memory. "I know how it must look to you, though Ron getting married only a month after the divorce goes through, —"

"It's all right, Molly. I'm glad Ron is happy."

Molly nodded her head, but she bore an odd expression. It led Hermione to ask, "What about you and Arthur? Are you pleased?"

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "Celeste is a lovely girl. But I'm still sorry that things turned out this way for you and Ron."

"Molly —"

"I know, don't say it. I'm being ridiculously sentimental, but there you have it." Molly held up a hand as if to ward Hermione off. "Anyway, I hear that you and Severus Snape are seeing each other."

"That's right." Hermione smiled politely and waited. Each time that she had acknowledged the fact to various people, the reactions ranged from bland indifference to outright revulsion.

"He was always a decent person. I hope that he'll be able to enjoy a bit of happiness now," Molly said in what was clearly a well-rehearsed line.

"I hope so, too."

That over, Molly launched into a new direction. "Will you be going to Samantha's dance recital on Sunday afternoon?" she wanted to know.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Samantha sent me a special invitation," Hermione said.

"I believe Ginny and Harry are having a special do at their house afterwards, did they tell you?"

"Oh, yes. I plan to be there."

"Will... will Severus be coming as well?"

Molly looked so worried that Hermione nearly laughed aloud. "No," she assured the woman.

"Oh, dear, that came out all wrong, didn't it? I was only curious. Certainly he is welcome if he wishes to come..." The words tumbled out in profuse, embarrassed apology.

"Molly, can you honestly picture Severus Snape at a little girl's dance recital? Or at a party at Harry and Ginny's?" Hermione asked, exasperated.

"Well, no."

"Samantha invited me. Anyway, I believe Severus has other plans for Sunday afternoon." She didn't know what plans they were, but Hermione was certain that Snape would have recoiled in horror at the notion of attending Harry Potter's daughter's dance recital.

"I've never been to a dance recital before," Molly admitted.

"They're a rite of passage for a lot of little girls, as well as their families," Hermione said. "I took lessons for about six months, when I was younger than Sam."

"Did you have a recital as well?"

"I'm afraid I never reached that point. Ballet was not my thing. I was constantly sitting in the corner, reading, when I should have been practicing my pliéés."

"Ginny was more sports-minded, of course. And since she was the only girl in the family, the issue never came up. There simply aren't many witches and wizards who go in for dancing, other than the partnered kind, of course."

And even if Ginny had been interested, Hermione thought, the Weasley budget would surely have not allowed for such an extravagance.

The two women chatted for a few more minutes until Molly insisted that she needed to return to the Burrow. Hermione escorted her to the door, still unable to shake the feeling that there was more on her former mother-in-law's agenda.

"Molly, is there anything else? It seems as if there's something else that you're wanting to say."

Molly Weasley tried to look innocent and startled, and failed miserably. "Well, yes, but it's I mean, it's not very important, and it's certainly none of my business, you see—"

Exasperated, Hermione shook her head. "We've known each other for twenty years, Molly. What is it?"

"Are you *really* happy, dear?"

Patience, Hermione took the woman's hands in her own. "Yes, Molly. I'm *really* happy. I am not under *Imperius*, I know my own mind, and I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

"All right then. I'll be off."

Hermione closed the door behind Molly, wondering how long it would take before people stopped assuming that she'd lost her marbles.

* * *

She did not expect to find Severus puttering about her kitchen late Sunday afternoon. As far as Hermione knew, he had planned to return home at the same time she left for the dance recital.

"Still here?" Surprised, Hermione tossed her cloak over the back of the sofa and wandered into the kitchen.

Severus glanced up as she entered. "I started reading and the time got away from me, I'm afraid. I thought I would make myself a cup of tea before I go. Aren't you home early?"

"I didn't stay very long at Harry and Ginny's. I still need to work on that report for work tomorrow," Hermione said, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"How was the dance recital?" he inquired politely, stirring the tea he'd just poured for himself.

"About as expected. Several dozen little girls of various ages and various stages of coordination, an abundance of sequins and tulle, and doting parents taking photographs and home videos. Any tea left?"

"Of course." Snape *Accio'd* another cup and tapped the teapot with his wand. A stream of amber liquid poured into the bone china. "Did the Weasleys and Potters enjoy themselves?"

Hermione smiled. "About as much as you'd expect. Arthur was all over the place with his camera, Molly was beaming fit to burst, and Harry and Ginny were simply over the moon."

"All over a silly little dance recital?"

She nodded, cradling the teacup Severus handed her and staring into its depths as though the answer to Life Itself was buried there. Snape frowned, watching her.

"Too strong?"

"No." Hermione shook her head absently. "It's just fine."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. Maybe."

Severus gave her a look that would have shot chills down the spine of a Hogwarts first-year. "Ten points to Gryffindor for your use of all possible answers in one breath," he muttered sardonically.

Hermione managed a heartfelt grin this time. "Once a teacher, always a teacher."

"What a horrifying thought." Severus put down his cup long enough to don the leather Muggle jacket he always wore. "Will you be sharing your concerns with me, or shall I just finish my tea and go?"

"Sharing, I think."

"Oh." He looked wary, but took the jacket back off.

"Why don't we sit?" Hermione suggested, gesturing toward the kitchen table.

"This," Severus said, pulling out a chair and sitting down, "is the part that tends to make men nervous, or so the magazine articles say. Should I be worried? Have the Weasleys convinced you that I'm not worth your time and trouble?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "You've been reading magazine articles about relationships between men and women?"

"One article. *One*," Snape repeated, eyes narrowing. "Do not take it as a sign of anything other than self-defense."

"You can't fight what you don't understand?"

"You can't understand what you don't understand."

"Clear as mud," Hermione declared, her eyes sparkling as she sipped her tea. She took a deep breath, and then: "Here's the thing, Severus. I love you, and I suspect that you feel the same regard for me. Even if you never learn to say the words, I know your intentions."

"It's about that, then?" Snape's tone cooled somewhat.

"No, actually." She hesitated, while Severus eyed her cautiously from the other side of the table. "Did I ever tell you that Ron and I were unable to have children?"

"No." Severus gripped his teacup a little tighter. Any details of Hermione's marriage had thus far been sketchy at best. He did not want to hear how he measured up or failed to measure up to Ron Weasley in any way.

"Let me rephrase that. When the months and years went by and I never became pregnant, I went for testing. The healers found no problem on my end. I even went to my mother's Muggle gynecologist to confirm it. Which meant," Hermione went on, a pained expression on her face, "that the problem was with Ron, although he refused to acknowledge it."

Snape's stomach dropped smartly away. Was Hermione trying to tell him that she was pregnant? They'd used a contraceptive potion, so there should have been no problem... "Why are you telling me this?" he asked delicately.

"I just wanted you to know." Hermione sighed. "Severus, I want to have a child."

He felt his mouth go very dry. "And you arrived at this conclusion... how?"

"At the recital." She looked at him beseechingly. "Please don't blow me off on this, will you? Just listen?"

When it was apparent that Snape wasn't going to begin screaming in her face, Hermione hunted for the words to explain. "It was a silly dance recital with all sorts of uncoordinated little girls, most of whom had no talent whatsoever in that respect. It wasn't about how marvelous they were or how they'll be dancing with the London Ballet some day. It was about the parents."

"The parents?" Severus echoed, with absolutely no idea where she was going with this.

Hermione nodded fervently. "I wish you could have seen them, Severus. The whole lot of them, not just Harry and Ginny, and Arthur and Molly. Every last parent there was watching the stage as if he or she was mesmerized. People who surely complain about how awfully their children behave were watching them as though they were the most beautiful creatures on the face of the earth. They were ridiculous about it, of course, taking photograph after photograph and doing the video cameras and so forth, but still... Each of them was utterly, completely, in love.

"I know that I'm not overwhelmingly maternal, and I don't know that I would make a halfway decent mother at all, but here's the thing: I would do anything to have that same look on my face someday. I could go through life happily without children, I think, but I don't want to. I think that having a child is something that I don't want to miss out on."

Hermione took a quick sip of tea, beginning to be slightly concerned that Severus' blank expression remained unchanged. He should have snorted, risen to his feet, and stormed out by now, she thought. The fact that he hadn't gave her a glimmer of encouragement.

"I would like to go through the experience with *you*. I would like to have a child with you, and raise that child with you, and and I know you think me an utter idiot, but there you have it." Having had her say, Hermione stared into the depths of her teacup once more. She couldn't bring herself to look Snape in the eye just now, just as he was on the verge of calling her a naïve simpleton and worse.

Severus cleared his throat. "Did you want to do that before or after the benefit of marriage?"

Hermione's head jerked up at once to find that Snape was merely regarding her quizzically, and that he didn't appear poised to deliver the most withering, abusive speech of his life. Was that a good sign?

"Up to you," she said, swallowing hard.

"Up to me?" he echoed in startled amusement.

She nodded wordlessly.

"Then I choose to do so after benefit of marriage. If you think I spent all those years patrolling the corridors of Hogwarts to keep the teen birth rate at from rising sky-high for nothing, then you obviously don't know me very well. I have a reputation to consider. We will select rings tomorrow."

Dazed, Hermione nodded.

Epilogue: Flourish and Blotts Redux

Chapter 22 of 22

Hermione's big day.

Epilogue

Flourish and Blotts Redux: Two Years Later...

It seemed as though the line would never end.

She had spent a restless night, certain that no one would show up today. Hermione didn't know if there had ever been a book signing where no one came, but if there hadn't, then hers would be the first. Around midnight, Severus had told her to stop being ridiculous and go to sleep (*How was that for irony*, she thought dryly), yet Hermione had continued to stare at the ceiling until the wee hours of the morning.

As a result, she was now sleep-deprived, exhausted, exhilarated, enthralled, and if there was a better day than this, Hermione couldn't think what it might be.

An elderly woman in a bright green robe thrust a copy of *The War as We Saw It* under Hermione's nose. "Here, dearie."

Hermione smiled graciously, taking a moment to flex the tired fingers of her writing hand. "To whom should I address it?"

"Name's Audra," the woman said emphatically. "Lost a son in the first war, I did, and it simply broke my heart the way the Ministry behaved afterwards. Acted as though the entire affair should be forgotten. How could I forget my Davey?"

"You shouldn't," Hermione said kindly. "No one who fought against Voldemort should be forgotten."

Audra looked momentarily shocked at Hermione's use of the name, then relaxed visibly. "Bless you, dearie," she whispered.

It was not the first time she'd heard those sentiments today, Hermione thought as she wrote, *To Audra, your Davey will never be forgotten... Hermione Granger-Snape*. If anything, it only reinforced her belief that she'd done the right thing by self-publishing her book.

She'd been reluctant at first to attempt such a thing, thinking it the height of arrogance. It was Severus, with his business connections, who had encouraged her by establishing Grape Publications, Limited. After that, all it took was for a few requests to be made and favors called in. Hermione had not only a published book, but a book-signing as well.

"I would like *my* copy signed, if you please," a familiar voice said.

Hermione looked up to find Minerva McGonagall standing in front of her, beaming with pride at her former student.

"Minerva! I'm so glad you could make it today." Hermione rose to give the Hogwarts Headmistress a warm hug.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, you know. This is a wonderful thing you've done, Hermione."

"Thank you. It means a lot to hear it coming from you."

"Have you had a good turn-out?"

"Good? It's been astonishing, although I was afraid no one would come," Hermione admitted.

Minerva sniffed disapprovingly at the notion. "What a perfectly silly idea. I'll have you know that I'm buying several copies for the Hogwarts Library, as I've asked Professor Binns to spend a full semester focusing on wizarding events of the twentieth century. I don't intend to allow history to repeat itself as a result of ignorance."

Would the History of Magic students find the topic more interesting with the addition of timely material? Hermione doubted it, but aloud she enthused, "That's a wonderful idea, Minerva."

The older woman peered around the store. "Is Severus here with you?"

Hermione inclined her head toward the back room, where Snape could be seen pacing, a fidgeting, dark-haired bundle in his arms.

"He's trying to soothe Mairin. She's teething, I'm afraid."

"Poor lamb." Minerva smiled, her eyes still on the unlikely pair in the shop's back room. "I never thought I'd see the day when Severus would be so utterly taken in by a female. Not to belittle your own charms, Hermione, but he *is* smitten, isn't he?"

"Beyond his wildest dreams. I don't think he had any idea what fatherhood would be like. Not that I was terribly certain of motherhood either, but it's been quite a turnaround for Severus."

Even as she spoke the word, Hermione realized that 'turnaround' was a mild understatement. Once her husband had finally accepted the notion that he could love and be loved in return, the changes in his life had come fast and furious.

She had been shocked by Snape's abrupt proposal of marriage. Hermione had intended to soak in a hot tub following the fateful dance recital, wanting to mull over her sudden epiphany about parenthood. She had not expected to find Severus still at her flat, yet there he was. Knowing full well that he would likely bolt for the door as soon

as she broached the subject of babies, Hermione blurted her feelings anyway. It still amazed her that Severus not only failed to laugh in her face, but had filled in the blanks and proposed marriage as well.

In retrospect, Hermione could see that she had unwittingly given him the perfect opening to bring up the subject. A traditional, romantic proposal would have required Severus to bare his soul, something that he could never have managed, and while Hermione was certain that he loved her, such a premeditated act would have taken him years to attempt. In short, he saw his opportunity and ran with it.

And although the two of them had more or less backed into marriage, their union was working out quite smoothly. No one was more surprised by that than Severus Snape himself. By the time he had decided that marriage suited him, Hermione was pregnant and he was faced with the prospect of fatherhood. When Mairin was born, Snape did the minimum required of him, distancing himself from his infant daughter as much as Hermione would allow. It wasn't until two months later that Mairin flashed her father an adoring, toothless smile and melted the layers of permafrost that still lined his soul.

Minerva's eyes misted over suddenly. "Albus would have dearly loved to see this, you know. He always regretted that Severus led such an unhappy existence."

"Have you told his portrait?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, of course. It's just that I'm quite certain that Mairin would have had a special place in his heart. Is she a daddy's girl, then?"

"Absolutely. I'm only around to provide nourishment. Whenever Severus walks into the room, she simply lights up when she sees him, and so does he. It's quite wonderful to see."

"I'm sure."

"In fact, I mentioned something the other day about Mairin going off to Hogwarts, and Severus had a fit. I'm not sure that he'll allow her out of his sight for that long," Hermione said, grinning. "He said something to the effect that if any randy adolescent male touched his daughter, he would tear them limb from limb."

"I can imagine," Minerva said dryly. "I do not envy the poor man who asks for Mairin's hand in marriage some day. Can you imagine Severus as a father-in-law?"

The two women laughed at the notion. Glancing over her shoulder, Minerva saw two more customers waiting patiently for their books to be signed. "Well," she said, "I suppose I need to be going. I just wanted to offer my congratulations on a job well done."

"Thank you, Minerva. Will I see you at the house later on?" Hermione asked, taking her seat again.

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it."

Professor McGonagall turned to go, and Hermione turned her attention to the next customers in line. Moments later, she heard McGonagall greet Molly and Arthur Weasley somewhere near the front of the store. Hermione smiled involuntarily; Molly had promised that the family would turn out in force today.

Suddenly, Hermione was aware of someone standing at her elbow. She glanced up to find Ron standing there, looking more self-assured and mature than she could ever remember.

"Hi, love," he said, a tentative smile on his face.

"Ron! Oh, wait just one moment... Here you are," she said, handing a book to a waiting witch and climbing to her feet once more.

Ron gave her a massive hug. "You're looking great," he told her.

"So are you. It's so wonderful to see you!"

"You don't think I would miss this, do you?"

"I hoped that you would be here," Hermione said frankly.

"Yeah. After all, I *do* have my very own chapter in the book."

"Professor McGonagall was just here. Did you see her? She said that she bought several copies for the Hogwarts Library."

Ron chuckled. "If that's not fitting, I don't know what is." His eyes strayed to the open doorway behind Hermione, then darkened. "Is that...?"

"Mairin, yes," Hermione said, her tone indicating plainly that she would tolerate no unsavory comments about her husband.

He watched the baby, whose head lolled drowsily on her father's shoulder. Severus, his back turned to the door, had not seen Ron.

"She's cute, Hermione. I should have known that she'd end up with dark hair like that."

"She *does* have my curls," Hermione pointed out.

"She doesn't have Snape's nose, does she?" Ron asked, craning his neck to get a closer look.

"Ron!"

He flashed her a grin. "Just teasing. I'm sure Mairin will be a great beauty. And brilliant, to boot."

"I'll settle for happy and healthy," Hermione said softly. "How's Celeste?"

"Good. She's here somewhere. With Mum and Dad, probably."

"I'm looking forward to seeing her. Everything going all right?"

"Yeah. Fine."

His reassurance came a bit too quickly. Hermione frowned. "You don't sound too convincing."

He shrugged. "No, really, it's fine. She well, we thought we'd start a family, but we haven't had any luck yet."

Ron was having a hard time meeting her face now. Hermione reached out to squeeze his arm.

"I'm sure things will work out for the best, Ron."

"Yeah."

He nodded vigorously, and Hermione couldn't help but feel sorry for Celeste. Evidently, Ron had failed to share the information about their problems in that area.

"I've missed seeing you," she said, changing the subject. "I wish we could have gotten together the last time you were in Britain."

"Me, too."

"We're having a small party at the house after the signing; did your mum tell you?"

"Uh yeah," Ron began uncertainly.

"You'll be able to come, won't you? Harry and Ginny will be there."

Ron glanced from Hermione's hopeful face to the open doorway behind her, where Severus Snape stood, now watching them guardedly. He grinned.

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it. Now, you'd better get back to your signing, or no one else will buy your book."

"Great. See you later then." Hermione gave him one last hug.

As Ron moved off, she turned to regard her husband and sleeping daughter. Smiling with deep contentment, Hermione took her seat again as the line of eager book buyers moved forward.

A/N: *I couldn't possibly end this story without crediting J.K. Rowling for her wonderful characters and her generosity in allowing us to play with them. Nor could I finish without thanking my beta and Brit-picker extraordinaire, GraceHasVictory. She patiently changed my whiches to thats and likes to as-ifs over and over again, and since she is not a Severus-Hermione shipper, she was gracious enough to put up with my pretense that they do make quite a wonderful couple. I also want to thank my other lovely beta, Keladry Lupin, for her fabulous assistance and encouragement. She is a wizard in her own right when it comes to the 'squee-factor' in a story, and she always knew when I was on target and when I wasn't. And I simply have to thank everyone who read and reviewed. Those reviews mean more than you could possibly know!*