

Too Wise to Woo

by Lady Apythia

The war is over and the last of the Death Eaters have been rounded up and sent to Azkaban. Moved by the spirit of celebration and blissful in their own new-found contentment, Hermione Granger's friends begin to wonder if the never-ending battle of wits between she and Severus Snape isn't a hint of something more. When they decide to test their theory with a little matchmaking scheme, their meddling puts Snape in a position to save Hermione from a debilitating evil. But how far is he willing to go to help her?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

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Author's Notes: This story was written in response to the SSHG_exchange on Live Journal. The prompt was: Set several years after Hermione has left school in which Severus has already been exonerated. For story inspiration, look to Shakespearean comedies, but update the story for today.

Disclaimer: I am obviously neither J.K. Rowling nor William Shakespeare. Anything you recognize is their property.

"What on earth were they thinking going off like that? No Aurors! Not telling anyone! They could have been killed!" Molly Weasley was livid with the four missing men who had been found at last and were now at St. Mungo's. "It's a good thing they are alive so I can kill them myself!"

"Harry and Ron are always going off without thinking," said Hermione Granger, who had emerged from the loo looking like someone who was trying to hide the fact that she had been crying. "But Remus and Snape should have known better."

"War heroes or not, it was stupid of them to go after the Lestrangle brothers alone. Honestly!"

Molly was on a roll. Tuning out her ranting, Hermione lost herself in the flames dancing along a log in the fire. She was angry, frustrated, hurt, worried; she had wanted to be there with them, at the hospital, at the confrontation. She should have been facing the Death Eaters as well. It had always been the three of them; the Trio always stood together in the face of danger. But this time, they had left without her. They hadn't even told her that the Lestranges had been found. She knew they were only looking out for her after what happened the last time. Absently running a finger down her sternum, she quickly withdrew it. The lightest touch sent stabs of pain through her chest.

Damn Lucius Malfoy!

"Hermione, are you feeling well? You're looking pale." Molly's concern cut through Hermione's thoughts.

"I'm fine," she said, flashing a small smile. "I just wish I could see them."

"They'll be here soon enough," Molly said, giving her a hug. Hermione bit her lip so as not to gasp in pain as Molly squeezed her tightly.

Everyone knew that she had been hurt by the final curse Lucius bit off before Kingsley Shacklebolt Stupefied and bound him. But no one knew the extent of the damage. She had requested that the details of her medical condition not be shared with anyone else, and the doctors at St. Mungo's had honored her wishes. There was nothing they could do for her other than treat the symptoms. Lucius had been given the Dementor's Kiss before the doctors realized that he would be the only person who could reverse the curse, and now he couldn't even hold his wand, let alone heal her. Now she was left suffering with a wound that not only wouldn't heal but was also getting progressively worse.

The pain lessened some as Molly released her.

"Don't worry, dear. Why don't you go and have a rest before they arrive? I'll get started on dinner," Molly suggested.

Hermione nodded and went up to her room. She, Harry and Ron had moved into Grimmauld Place after their sixth year, using it as a headquarters of sorts while hunting for the Horcruxes. It had taken a nearly a year and a half of grueling legwork to find and destroy those parts of Voldemort's soul.

It was in no small thanks to their former professor that they did so. Severus Snape, who had disappeared the night of Albus Dumbledore's murder, had begun sending anonymous clues to Hermione, not just about the Horcruxes, but also about Voldemort's plans in the war. Though she had been hesitant to trust such information at first after it had repeatedly proved to be reliable, she took the sender's word as truth, and that information helped the Order win the war. Though she had her theories, it wasn't until the Final Battle that Hermione had discovered for certain who her informant had been.

Curses were flying in the Great Hall as students and faculty fought against the masked Death Eaters. The Trio led the fight with the Order and Dumbledore's Army at their backs. She had been cornered by a revenge-seeking Dolohov. As he raised his wand, the Killing Curse starting to fall from his mouth, he was struck from behind and fell onto Hermione. She pushed him off, wand reflexively pointed at the Death Eater behind him.

"Careful, Miss Granger. I'd hate to lose my contact now," the familiar silky voice sneered.

"Professor?" Her mind reeled. The man responsible for killing the Headmaster was the one helping her? *Why?* Hermione had always believed wanted to believe there was something else about that night that they didn't know. But no matter how hard she had looked, she'd found no evidence to support her belief that Professor Snape's hand had been forced. Hermione looked at the man before her, not knowing whether to thank him or kill him.

"Get down!" he yelled, pushing her aside as a blast of yellow light flew toward them.

By the time Hermione had struggled to her feet again, Snape had disappeared in the sea of duelers. She shook all thoughts of him from her head and dove back into the battle, making her way toward Harry who was circling Voldemort in the middle of the room.

A crash echoed through the Great Hall as the doors shattered, reduced to mere splinters as the Aurors finally arrived. The Death Eaters were finally outnumbered. Hermione had managed to reach Ron's side just as Harry began to chant. Hermione and Ron clasped hands and pointed their wands at Harry. They recited the incantation she had discovered in an ancient book in the attic of Grimmauld Place. It permitted them to send the energy of all the love they felt for Harry, their friends and their family to him, allowing him to channel it with his own and force it into Voldemort. Such feelings of humanity literally began tearing the Dark Lord apart. Suddenly, she jumped as a hand touched her shoulder. Snape stood by her side, adding his power to hers. All around them, members of the Order and Dumbledore's Army had joined in. An overwhelming burst of white light surged forth from Harry's wand, blinding them all. When they could finally see, all that was left of Voldemort was a powerless, mortal thing writhing on the ground. She watched as Harry drew the Sword of Gryffindor and plunged it into the creature's heart, saving the wizarding world once again before all went dark around her.

When Hermione awoke, she had been in the hospital wing. She had survived. And against the odds, so had those she loved most: Ron, Harry, Ginny, Neville, Remus, Tonks and Headmistress McGonagall. While St. Mungo's had been overflowing with those injured in the fight, the death toll for the victorious side during the Final Battle had been amazingly low: two. Hagrid and Firenze had died heroes, trying to keep Voldemort's wicked hordes from crossing the gates of Hogwarts.

The Death Eaters, Snape included, had been rounded up and sent to Azkaban to await trials.

With the fall of the Dark Lord, Dumbledore's portrait finally had finally spoken. It had directed Minerva to a secret room in his old study that held a Pensieve full of all the memories of the events leading up to the night on the Tower. There had also been a sealed, signed document in which Dumbledore had declared that he had been dying due to a curse received while destroying the ring Horcrux, and it had been his decision to call upon Severus Snape's life debt to him to do whatever it took to keep Draco Malfoy from becoming a murderer and to keep his own place as a spy in Voldemort's camp, even if it meant Dumbledore's own death. He had written that he had given Snape no choice, not even when Snape had offered his own life instead.

Hermione always thought it was the sight of that single tear that Snape, her proud, stoic professor, hadn't been able to blink back as he sat before the Wizengamot, with regret, grief and utter hopelessness flying across his usually blank face as Dumbledore's admission had been read that had finally swayed the wizarding world in his favor. He had been acquitted of the murder of Albus Dumbledore, and, against his will, declared a war hero for risking his life time and again to pass information to the Order, both now and seventeen years ago.

In the two years and countless duels since, Harry and Snape's mutual hatred had slowly transformed first to mutual respect and then a begrudging acquaintanceship as they chased down those Death Eaters who managed to remain free. They would never be mates, but the fact that they could now be in the same room without drawing blood was a huge improvement. The rest of the Order had followed Harry's lead and offered a tentative hand of friendship to the ex-spy.

Hermione didn't know how to define her relationship with Snape. She wouldn't go so far as to call them friends, but she did take great pleasure in their verbal sparring. With sharp tongues and slicing barbs, they used their intelligence to keep each other on their toes. Both seemed to revel in their battle of wits, even if it sent others running for cover.

But now Snape, Harry, Ron and Remus were once again in hospital beds, and she was too weak to go to them. She slid open a drawer and removed the potion a Healer at St. Mungo's had given her and took a dose of the painkiller, sighing as the stinging was reduced to a dull ache. She was careful to ward the drawer again; it wouldn't do for her friends to find out there was anything more than residual tiredness left of the curse. She curled up on her bed and closed her eyes. Saying a silent prayer for her friends' speedy recovery from their injuries and their stupidity, she fell asleep.

A/N: I'd like to thank Zafania and Tjwriter for their help with the first draft of this story and my beta Logical Quirk for the quick turnaround.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

There is much rejoicing as the men return from St. Mungo's and Hermione and Snape begin their battle of wits.

Hermione, feeling much better after her nap, entered the living room just as the flames in the hearth turned green and Minerva McGonagall stepped out.

"Minerva! How are they?" Molly immediately began to question the prim professor who emerged from the fireplace.

"They will be fine. Just a little more patching up and they will be returning here," said Minerva, taking the proffered cup of tea from Molly with a curt nod.

"They are so lucky! Anything could have happened to any of them " Molly stopped and took a breath. "They need to have some sense knocked into their thick heads!"

"Well, when I left, Tonks was giving them a lecture that would rival one of yours, Molly," Minerva said with a hint of pride in her eyes.

"Good!"

"Are they really okay?" Hermione asked, afraid the older women were holding back on her account.

"Truly, Hermione," Minerva assured her. "Harry admitted that they all took some Felix Felicis that Severus brewed before they left. That is how they managed to capture the Lestranges and suffer nothing worse than a couple of bumps and bruises."

"They did what?" bellowed Molly. "Just you wait until they get here!"

Hermione decided to cut off Molly before her rant hit full stride. "Are you sure that Snape is okay, Minerva?"

"Of course." She looked at Hermione questioningly.

"It's just that the last time we talked, I deprived him of most of his wits, and I wondered if the curse he had received today had left him with enough to keep him warm on those cold, lonely nights in Spinner's End," she said tartly.

Molly burst out laughing. "Well, you are definitely feeling better!"

"Concerned for Severus, are you, Hermione?" Minerva asked.

"Hardly," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "But if he were to die, then who would I sharpen my tongue against?"

"Are you two still at each other? I would have thought that by now you would have allowed him to be in your good books," Minerva said.

"If he did, I would have to burn down my library, and I'd dearly hate to part with my books." Hermione shuddered exaggeratedly. "No, it's much better if he keeps his big nose out of my books altogether, thank you!"

Minerva let out a sigh of exasperation and shook her head as Molly laughed. The door opened and the hallway was suddenly crammed with people: Ginny entered with arms firmly around Harry's waist; Remus was leaning on Tonks, limping slightly; Luna and Ron's hands were clasped tightly; and Snape took up the rear, alone and, from all outward appearances, unscathed. The house was alive with noise as the rest of the Weasleys and several Order members emerged from the hearth or Apparated just outside the front door. Congratulations were mingled with chastisements as people helped themselves to elf-made wine and Firewhisky to mark the impromptu celebration.

Hermione made her way into the sitting room to find that Snape had taken the corner seat that looked out over the gardens. It was her seat and he knew it. *That git!* She scowled and then schooled her face into a pleasant façade before sauntering coolly over to him.

"So I see you are still living," she said, her voice heavy with mock disappointment.

He looked up at her and smirked. "How could I die when you give me such a reason to live? It is my duty to wizardkind to prove to you that, despite your belief to the contrary, you do not in fact know everything. A task I take great joy in."

"Admit it, Snape," she said with a teasing grin, "you love me."

He looked affronted. "To love implies I have a heart. I assure you, that is not the case. The Great Git has no heart and therefore cannot love anyone."

"However shall womankind survive such a loss?" She sighed dramatically. "Maybe I should start a support group. How about W.U.S.S Women Under Snape's Spell?"

"Don't you have some young man yet to bestow such affections on or am I to continue to be granted the privilege of being the sharpening stone for your dull wit?"

"My wit is as sharp as yours. And unlike some women here," she glanced at Ginny who kept touching Harry as if needing reassurance he was there and then to Tonks, who was apparently trying to examine Remus' tonsils with her tongue, "I would rather fly starkers over London on a Thestral than turn into that!"

"Then I think the men of the wizarding world can likewise rejoice for not having to face a hell cat like you. They'd not survive without a scratched face."

"Oh, but scratches could only improve a face such as yours," she said sweetly, batting her eyes.

"If only Potter's wand had the speed of your tongue, then maybe he wouldn't have set off the wards, and we would have avoided the trip to St. Mungo's," he said blandly.

"Harry is " she started, indignity making her put all games aside.

Snape held up his hand. "Enough! I believe Molly is about to serve dinner, and I could use another drink." He gave her a nod and walked away, leaving her in a huff behind.

I hate that! She fumed. *Why must he always run off when I am obviously winning?*

~*~

Dinner was a festive affair as everyone had their fill of wine and food. Even with the slight twitching of his left arm from a curse, Snape found himself in a good mood. With the Lestranges now in Azkaban, all known Death Eaters were now accounted for. Most were dead or had received the Dementor's Kiss, so fear of escape was minimal. The world could be at peace, finally. *Until the next Dark Lord decides to rise,* he thought. *But, Merlin willing, that would be a war for the younger generation.* He had been involved in enough battles to last twelve lifetimes. For the first time in his adult life, he found himself free of all masters and all debt. As of today, his life was truly his own, and the past could be buried. He drained his Firewhisky and poured another glass before following the others back into the living room.

"Hey, Snape! You coming to Luna's birthday party tomorrow night?" Harry yelled across the room.

Snape tried not to roll his eyes. He knew Potter wanted him there only because he knew how uncomfortable it would make him; it had nothing to do with *their* friendship. He was about to decline when a sharp elbow dug into his ribs. He looked down at Minerva who glared back expectantly. "I suppose I have no choice," he sighed. *Really! What was it about his former teacher and coworker that always made him feel the need to obey her?*

Before he could lose himself in thoughts of how to escape going to the bloody masquerade ball, Lupin leaned over to whisper, "Isn't she something?"

Snape was about to answer regarding Minerva when he realized Lupin's eyes were following Tonks as she made her way over to Hermione, Ginny and Luna.

"Something is one word for it," he said, wanting nothing to do with this conversation. He thought Lupin was making a fool of himself with such a younger woman. The sound of glass shattering as Tonks tripped and dropped her cup made him amend that to "younger, clumsy woman." He repressed a chuckle at the thought of how awful it must be to bed someone so accident-prone. And here was Lupin, practically drooling over her. In fact, he looked around the room to find nearly all the men had women attached to their sides. He shook his head. Chalking up the sudden relationships as a reaction to the war and being faced with one's own mortality, Snape was glad that he didn't feel the need to pair off and multiply. He had given up on that path long ago; spying and relationships weren't necessarily compatible.

Lupin was relentless however. "Come now, Severus," he chided. "Even you can appreciate a beautiful woman. Tell me, what do you think?"

"What does it matter what I think? I am not the one sleeping with her." The "thank God" went unsaid. *See! I can be civil*, he thought.

"Is it just her or do you not like women in general, Severus?" Lupin chided.

His sexuality called into question, Snape reacted like most men would. "She's a loud, messy, purple-haired, adlepedated, butterfingereed blunderer. The only thing going for her is that she is a Metamorphmagus," he said with a leer.

"You really can't appreciate her beauty at all, Severus?"

"Are you dating her or trying to sell her, Lupin?"

"Could the world buy such a jewel?" he said almost dreamily.

Snape sneered. "Yes, a whole Gringott's vault-full in fact. I can give you directions to a place in Knockturn Alley where you can get a good deal, even if you are a werewolf."

Lupin was too lost in his argument to convince Snape of Tonks' worthiness to react to the half-hearted insult. "She is the sweetest thing I've ever seen," he positively gushed.

"I can see perfectly fine, yet I see no such thing," Snape huffed before pausing to consider that maybe Tonks slipped Lupin a lust potion or put him under the Imperius. What else could explain the sloppily besotted man beside him? He expected this sort of behavior from Potter and Weasley, but Lupin was a grown man, for Merlin's sake! "Are you really going to marry her?" he asked contemptuously.

"If she'll have me. I'm thinking of asking her tomorrow night at the party."

Bill Weasley strode over to them, leaving his young, pregnant wife in the hands of Molly.

There's another one! Snape thought. *Can these men really find no woman in the world their own age?*

"I have to know what discussion is causing such a reaction in Snape. What did you tell him, Remus?"

"He is in love with Tonks!" Snape spat out as if that explained everything.

"Well that's not exactly new," Bill said, eyeing the other men. "You're considering proposing, aren't you?"

Lupin grinned. "If she'll have me."

"Of course she will!" Bill said, giving Remus a light punch in the shoulder.

"I suppose she would," Snape agreed, sneering at Lupin. "After all, who else would have either of you?"

"Are you just anti-marriage, anti-women or anti-Tonks, Severus?" Lupin asked.

"Do I have to choose just one?"

Bill laughed. "You should watch what you say, Snape. Someday, there will be a witch who will catch your eye, and we shall all see you a fool for love."

"I may make a fool out of myself in anger, hatred or even fear, but never love," Snape swore adamantly. "I would rather die than be love's jester!"

"We shall see, Severus," Lupin said. "We're still relatively young and the years may hold many things."

"They may bring war, pestilence and the invariable new crop of Weasleys, but they shall never bring Severus Snape, the Married Man. I trust no woman that much. You can lose more blood to a woman than to war, Lupin. It would serve you well to remember that, especially if you plan on marrying one so graceless as Miss Tonks."

As if on cue, the violet-haired woman tripped and, if it weren't for Hermione, she would have ended up sprawled on the floor yet again.

Author's Notes: Any of the biting wit that you may recognize are lines inspired by/modified from Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing."

Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Chapter 3

Both Hermione and Snape plot to out snark the other at the ball.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling and any quotes you may recognize are those of William Shakespeare.

Ever-so-slight warning: As this is following a Shakespearian plot, please be forewarned: There will be some examples of small spontaneous OoC-ness in the form of costumes in this chapter.

"You are coming to the ball tonight, and that is that!" Minerva glared at Severus, daring him to contradict her. He, of course, did.

"Have you lost your bloody mind, woman? When have you ever seen me in a costume? Dancing?" Snape questioned, feeling he had a very strong argument. "Besides, people won't even notice if I am not there."

"Severus Snape, you exasperate me!" she said, throwing her hands in the air.

"Maybe if you left me alone, you wouldn't have this problem," he kindly pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

"Severus, it's time to let go, to move on. You've given up so much of yourself to this war that you scarcely know who you are anymore. Don't you want to get out there and reclaim your life?"

"And how is dressing in a ridiculous costume and twirling around a floor reclaiming my life?" He knew he was just goading her now, but it was too much fun to stop. While he appreciated that he could still count her as a friend after all that had happened, he did sometimes wish she would remember that he had a mother, and it wasn't her.

"It's not about the dancing or the costume, Severus," she said calmly before taking his hand. Much to his own surprise, he let her. "It's about rejoining the world you blocked out in order to survive your spying years. You are too young to waste away the rest of your life in your lab or library."

He was touched by her caring, but he would never let her know that. "Minerva, if you are expecting a few social engagements to turn me into some sort *ofice*," he spat out the word as if it left a bad taste in his mouth, "man, you will be sorely disappointed."

"I'm not expecting a miracle," she assured him, "just an appearance."

"If I agree to make an appearance at the blasted ball, will you agree to get out of my house so that I may finish my potion in peace?"

"Slytherins," she rolled her eyes, "always wanting quid pro quo."

"Nothing comes for free," he reminded her. "Now get out of my lab," he ordered sternly, but the affection peeked through in his voice.

~*~

Hermione Apparated a few yards away from the banquet hall Luna's father had rented, wanting to take a leisurely walk in the cool spring night before entering what she was sure would be a hot and crowded ballroom. Everyone would already be there. She had gotten caught up in her research at the Ministry and ended up getting home just as the others were leaving.

She didn't mind arriving alone. In fact, as she hadn't told anyone what her costume would be, she was hoping this would work to her advantage. Tonight might be a good night for a little fun at Snape's expense. *A hell cat, hmm? I'll show him.* Her smile widened as she walked inside.

Scanning the room, she laughed out loud when she spotted him in a corner, alone. Dressed as pirate. He had obviously tried to cast a glamour to look like someone else, but the waist-length, curly hair, goatee, and tanned skin wasn't fooling her; she would recognize his stance and demeanor anywhere. She wondered what Minerva had done to convince him to leave his house while wearing black leather pants, a white shirt with ruffles and an eye patch. And, *oh my, is that eyeliner? Oh this is going to be fun!*

"That's a lovely dress, Hermione!" Luna came to greet her, dressed as, well Hermione wasn't really sure what, but it involved lots of layers of chiffon.

"Happy birthday, Luna!" Hermione said, hugging the girl. "How did you know it was me?"

"I recognized your laughter," Luna said. "Are you dressed as Lethifold attacking a vampire?"

"Huh?" Hermione looked down at her costume and then removed her black traveling cloak. "Ah, no. Queen Elizabeth."

"The Queen was a vampire?"

Hermione was spared an explanation as a sequined-adorned body appeared before them.

"Hermione, is that you?"

Hermione nodded and hugged her friend. Ginny Potter was simply glowing, as she had been ever since her wedding two months ago. She was dressed as Jessica Rabbit, ample evidence that introducing the Weasleys to DVDs was a mistake. Hermione was sure nothing but magic was keeping Ginny's dress in place.

"Wow, Gin! You weren't kidding when you said you were going for an exact replica," Hermione said.

"Harry likes it," the redhead responded with a wicked grin.

"I am sure he does," she said, looking for him in the crowd. He and Ron were easy to spot in their non-descript Muggle suits and black sunglasses. "Wizards in Black" was how they had been referring to themselves as they offered to Obliviate people who had seen the notorious Crumpled Horn Snorkack. Yet another example of Hollywood corrupting the Weasleys.

"Good lord! Is that Tonks dressed like Little Red Riding Hood?" Hermione said giggling and pointing to the woman in a red robe carrying a basket.

Ginny shrugged. "She said it was a Muggle fairy tale."

"It is, and it's perfect for her," Hermione assured her. "Only this time, I think the Big Bad Wolf has other things on his mind than Grandma."

The other two just stared at her. She shook her head. "Never mind. Muggle reference."

"I'm surprised you didn't choose something a little more revealing, Hermione."

"That's never been my style, Gin."

"But tonight is all about being something you're not," Ginny insisted. "Besides, how do you plan on attracting a man if you don't show them what you have to offer?"

"Ginerva Potter! Women have more to offer men than their bodies!" Hermione snapped. "Besides, who says I even want a man?"

"Come on, 'Mione. Everyone wants to be with someone," Ginny persisted.

Hermione felt anger begin to well inside of her. She never was a girly girl, and she never thought she needed a man to feel fulfilled, and she hated when people implied otherwise. "I am not *everybody*."

"No. You are a war hero. A young war hero who is incredibly powerful and intelligent. And who has a good body, if she'd ever decide to show it."

"What do you propose I do? Strip down to my Skivvies and say I'm a lingerie model?" Her sarcasm was wasted on Ginny who was looking at Hermione like she just solved all the problems of the world. Hermione glared.

"Well, it was a thought." Ginny shrugged. "Really, Hermione, if you don't learn to loosen up, you'll never stand a chance at finding someone to marry."

"If I could only be so lucky!" Hermione sighed.

"Mark my words. Someday you will find a man and fall madly in love with him and want to get married and have lots of babies!"

Hermione looked truly horrified. "Babies? Husband? Not until men are made of some other substance than earth."

"Maybe we shall just have to trick you."

"My eyesight is very good; I can spot a church just fine."

~*~

Snape watched as Hermione walked toward him. When she had first entered the room, he had caught his breath at the sight of such an elegant woman. He may not be a man of love, but he was definitely not above lust. But then he realized who was behind the mask, and the allure quickly dissolved. He was still smarting from her last barb about his looks. That was part of the reason he allowed Minerva to talk him into this ridiculous getup. He was hoping that Hermione might find his new appearance attractive so that he could drop his glamour at the end of the night and show her just who she had been flirting with. *Improved face, indeed!*

"Hello, milady," Snape said softly but silkily. He didn't want his voice to give him away.

"Captain," she said with a nod, allowing him to take her hand as she flashed him what he was sure she thought was a brilliant smile. *this is going to be easier than I thought!*

They chatted amicably about inane things such as the weather, the decorations and the costumes of the others. *No wonder she's single*, Snape thought, smirking to himself. *She's an utter bore*. Deciding taunting her was more fun than tempting her, he changed is tactic for the evening.

"I must say," he interrupted her. "You truly are not the obnoxious know-it-all I was led to believe."

She paused, appearing caught off guard at the sudden change of topic. "And who told you that?"

"I don't know the gentleman's name, but he was quite adamant that I should avoid you, because you were quite insufferable, constantly correcting others and spewing forth information that no one wants to hear."

"An insufferable know-it-all, hmm? It had to be Severus Snape. Though I would think after all these years, he'd come up with a better insult than that."

"Who is this Snape?"

"I am sure you know him," she said, flashing that grin again, a knowing look in her eye. "His name is, after all, known throughout the wizarding world."

"Really? I don't believe I've met anyone by such a name."

She looked at him oddly and then grinned evilly. "Severus Snape, war hero he may be, is the most caustic, unsociable, nasty man you're likely to meet. The poor thing prides himself on his snarky comments and sharp tongue. But the truth is, we all just pretend to be intimidated in hopes that he'll go away and bother another. Oh, and he tends to spit in your face when he's angry. It's most uncouth." She searched the sea of people. "I am sure he is here somewhere."

Snape was taken aback. Did she really see him that way? "If I meet this man you speak of, I'll be sure to tell him what you said."

"Oh, please do!" she said before walking away with a laugh.

Snape stared at her receding back in wonder. Did she recognize him? *Uncouth? Me? Hardly*. He downed his Firewhisky as he watched her accept that imbecile Neville Longbottom's offer for a dance. *This isn't over, Granger!* he thought, already plotting for their next encounter.

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Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione makes her thoughts on marriage known, prompting her friends to start scheming.

Snape made his way over to the bar wondering why the bloody hell he was still at this birthday party. He didn't even particularly like the Lovegood chit, and the leather pants were beginning to chafe. At least the girl's father had the foresight to include an open bar in the rental agreement. Snape intended to take advantage of it, drinking shots of Firewhisky until Minerva finally loosened the leash and allowed him to leave.

Speak of the banshee, he thought as the Headmistress made her way to him.

"What on earth did you say to Hermione?" she asked. "She is quite bothered by your comments. Really, Severus, do you have to wrong her every time you speak to her?"

"Wrong her? She's the one insulting me!" Snape said indignantly. "She stood there, thinking she was talking to someone else, and threw barbs at me. And they hurt. She is not the only one with feelings."

"Are you sulking?" she asked with a small smile.

"If her breath were as horrid as her words, there would be no standing near her," he continued, ignoring her.

"Don't be petulant, Severus. You'll ruin your image."

He turned to glare at her, but before he could snap back, she gave him a wide grin as she looked over his shoulder. "Oh look! Here she comes," she said in a voice he thought was just a little too happy.

"I beg of you, Minerva. If you have a heart in you, you will release me from this horrid obligation and allow me to leave. I would rather face a month of detentions with first year Gryffindors rather than be forced to stay and speak to that harpy!"

He turned around with intent of storming out, only to find himself face to face with said harpy, who was rolling her eyes.

"As if I came to speak to you, Snape," Hermione said with attitude.

"You knew it was me?"

"Of course," she said with a smirk. "Do you really think me stupid enough not to notice the charms?"

Having had enough of her tongue, he glared at both women before storming off toward the exit.

"Was it something I said?" Hermione asked Minerva innocently as she watched the retreating figure of Snape.

Minerva sighed. "I do believe you have injured his pride with your slurs, Hermione."

"If I hadn't struck first, then he would have done the same to me, without mercy, as he had countless times before."

Before Minerva could counter, the music suddenly stopped, and the clinking of glass demanded everyone's attention. The women turned to the center of the room, which had cleared except for Ron and Luna. Hermione studied the couple before her. Luna really was a better match for Ron than she ever was. Hermione and Ron had had a short-lived tryst that lasted all of three months before they conceded that best friends didn't always translate into great lovers. Ron wanted what his parents had. Hermione was not interested in marriage or children then, or now. Her sights were set on her career, and she wasn't in a rush for so-called domestic bliss. That's why Luna was a better choice for Ron. They seemed to want the same thing and were happy together; Hermione was pleased for them.

So, it was no shock then to watch as Ron professed his love to Luna before their families and friends and asked her to marry him. Nor was she surprised that Luna immediately gave a breathy "Yes" in response. Hermione cheered with the rest of the crowd. While it wasn't a path in life she was ready for, she would support this couple, just as she did Harry and Ginny. Seeing her friends happy was really all that mattered. After offering her sincere congratulations to the couple, she made her way to the bar, definitely ready for a stiff drink.

"And there goes another into wedded bliss." She raised her glass in salute to no one in particular before downing the Firewhisky, fighting not to make a face. She never was one for such strong libations, but it didn't stop her from requesting another shot from the barkeep as Remus appeared next to her, sent to get a red currant rum for Tonks.

Hermione nodded to her friend, who was dressed as the Woodsman. "Not playing the Big Bad Wolf tonight?"

"I do that often enough," he said with a shrug. "I thought I'd try something different tonight. I'm the guy who gets the girl."

Hermione decided not to point out that *girl* was the operative word in that sentence. Apparently Tonks had told him a slightly modified version of the tale. Who was she to ruin his fantasy?

"But you already have the girl," she said nodding toward Tonks who was oohing over Luna's new ring. "I suppose it is just a matter of time before you and Tonks get hitched. Why haven't you asked yet?"

Remus gave her a conspiratorial grin. "I was going to do so tonight after the party, but now with this," he gestured toward Ron and Luna, "I think I'll wait. But soon. Very soon."

She smiled at him. He had always been someone she liked and respected, and, given his difficult life, she would not begrudge him a single moment of happiness. She only hoped that her research would pay off one day and that his lycanthropy would be nothing more than a bad memory.

"But what about you?" he asked. "Any prospects in your future, or are you still anti-marriage?"

"I am not against marriage, in general," she clarified. "I think people do stupid, spontaneous things after a war, and marriage is one of them. So many people are looking to recreate a sense of family that was lost to war that they give themselves over to the illusions of solid bonds and a life of stability. I just don't see the need to rush into it. I want to establish my career before I even consider settling down."

Remus looked at her sadly. "Who else was there, Hermione?"

"I beg your pardon?" She had the odd date now and then after all, she may have been anti-commitment, but she was no nun but she didn't know what Remus was going on about.

"I know your relationship with Ron didn't live up to your expectations "

"That was a mutual conclusion "

"And certainly Krump did not make you this bitter," he continued, ignoring her interruption.

"I am not bitter; I am just practical," she asserted. "And really! Why must a man or his actions be the reasoning behind my decisions? Couldn't a woman my age simply decide not to marry yet? I see no reason to rush into anything. I've spent so many years focusing on the war, and now, for the first time, I can focus on me and my own goals, like keeping you from going furry every month."

She really liked Remus, but, sometimes, he was just as bad as the others. She figured that as advanced as the wizarding world may be in some areas, others such as

views on single, career-oriented woman seem to be decades behind Muggles.

"You really are something," he said.

She couldn't identify the tone in his voice, so she simply spoke her mind. "I won't apologize for my life decisions or my feelings."

"I would never expect anything different," he said soothingly. "I meant my prior remark as a compliment, not a judgment. It is your life, and you must live it as you see fit."

"Thank you," she said softly, leaning over to give him a friendly kiss on the cheek before excusing herself.

Remus carried a tray full of drinks back to the table where Tonks, Minerva, Harry and Ginny sat. He gestured toward Hermione who was exiting the ballroom. "She can't stand to hear talk of love and marriage, can she?"

"Not in the least," said Harry. "Sometimes, I think she is just too smart for her own good. She'll never let her emotions rule over her logic. And love is nothing if not illogical."

"Hey!" Ginny said, elbowing her husband.

"I didn't mean it like that, Gin," Harry started apologizing, but she let him off with a laugh.

"You know," she said conspiratorially to those at the table. "She and Snape really would make an excellent couple. They deserve each other actually."

"You may be on to something there, Ginevra." Minerva agreed. "They both look so happy when they are taunting each other."

"Please," Remus said with a laugh. "Within a week of dating, they would die of blood loss from their barbs or else drive each other mad."

"Or end up shagging like Kneazles," Tonks offered as the occupants of the table dissolved into laughter.

As the laughter died down, there was a glint in Ginny's eyes. She surveyed her companions and grinned wickedly.

"I say we undertake a challenge far greater than just trying to get Hermione to date," she said. "We should play matchmaker for her and Severus!"

Harry looked a little ill at thought. "They will never agree," he said in a way that sounded as if he was trying to reassure himself more than anything.

"No, not if we approached them outright," Tonks said, joining Ginny in plotting. "However, there is no denying all that jesting is just another form of their sexual tension."

Harry blanched but his objections were overruled as his friends considered the situation.

"But if we just nudged them along," Minerva suggested, "we could make them think they were coming to their own epiphanies and finally see what it is we all know."

"Do you really mean to play cupid?" Harry looked at them as if they had gone mad. "Hermione will hex you into next week if she finds out."

"She won't find out, will she, though, Harry?" Ginny looked at him pointedly.

Harry looked to Remus for support, but Remus just shrugged.

"It's as Shakespeare said, Harry," Remus told him. "Some cupids kill with arrows, others with traps."

Author's Notes: Any of the biting wit that you may recognize are lines inspired by/modified from Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing."

Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

The scheme is set into motion. First victim: Severus Snape.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling and any quotes and plots you may recognize are those of William Shakespeare.

The Burrow was stuffed with well-wishers who had come to celebrate Ron and Luna's engagement. Once again, Snape found himself forced to be congenial. Sighing, he longed for his days as a spy where he could be as antisocial as he wanted and was never expected to attend functions such as this. But then, of course, that would mean he would still have to answer to Voldemort; that thought was enough to make him shudder. The Weasleys and the Trio were loud, annoying and rowdy, but at least they weren't apt to torture him physically on a whim. No, their torture was of a different sort. Unable to deal with the noise and the crowd, he slipped unnoticed out the back door for the solitude and silence of the garden.

The young Weasley engaged, he thought with a smirk. *Since Potter was already married, it would now only be a matter of time before the last member of the Trio followed suit and succumbed to domestic bliss.* He shook his head. He didn't understand the fascination with falling in love and pairing off for all of eternity. Being in love did nothing for a man but turn him into a fool and would eventually break his heart. Besides, why would any man want to spend the rest of his life tied to the same woman when there were so many out there to sample? He was content having meaningless affairs when the mood struck. Sharing a bed with a woman was one thing; sharing his life with her was out of the question. He couldn't fathom the existence of The Perfect Woman, a woman so exceptional, possessing all the qualities he desired in the opposite sex wrapped up in such an exquisite package that he would toss out all his existing beliefs and throw himself at her feet, professing his love to her for all time. And until he discovered that such a creature existed, he would continue to live life as he had been, content in his bachelorhood.

He looked up and spotted a group of men heading toward the door. Not wanting to socialize, he ducked into the shadows of the shed.

Remus, Harry and Ron paused at the door as Remus looked around and then whispered something to the younger men before they strolled out into the garden.

"I think I am going to be sick," Ron said, his hand clutching his stomach.

"Me too, mate," Harry agreed.

"Is it really a surprise? I mean, look at the way they fight," Remus said with a shrug as they walked closer to where Snape was hiding.

"But Hermione? In love?" asked Harry, sounding as if someone just told him Santa Claus doesn't exist.

"With Snape?" Ron looked even more peaked.

Snape barely stifled a surprised gasp at that revelation. He slid deeper back into the shadows and listened to the conversation.

"You're certain that's what Tonks said?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Remus assured them. "I was stunned at first as well. It isn't as if Hermione ever showed any outward signs of feelings other than enjoying the one-upmanship that is their twisted friendship."

"Are you sure she wasn't drunk?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Quite the opposite," Remus insisted. "In fact, Tonks said that Hermione was quite upset after Luna's party. Whatever Snape said to her that night had her in tears. She admitted that she cared very much for him, but that she would never say anything about her feelings for fear of being ridiculed and scorned."

"And with good reason," Ron said.

"If Snape ever found out, there would be no end to his mocking and sneering. It would become a sport to him, and he'd do nothing but torment her with no concern for her feelings at all," Harry said, sounding angry at the thought of Snape hurting his friend.

"That's why Tonks said Hermione never spoke of her feelings before," Remus continued. "And she swore Tonks to secrecy."

"So naturally she told everyone," Harry said with a laugh.

"Not everyone," Remus answered. "Just me. But we thought you should know so that you'd lighten up on teasing her for being single for a while. Give her some time to get over this."

From his vantage point, Snape could see that Harry and Ron looked properly chastised.

"I hope this doesn't get around to Snape," Harry said, watching a garden gnome run through the roses. "I would hate to have to kill him now that the war is over because he hurt Hermione."

"Who would ever tell Snape that?" Ron asked. "Besides, he wouldn't believe it if he heard."

"That's why Tonks told Hermione to get over it," Remus explained. "Hermione is better off with someone else, a man who would appreciate the emotions she was offering. I have known Severus a long time, and never once has he said anything favorable about romance, marriage or love."

"Mione should be with someone who would love her the way she deserves to be loved," Ron declared.

"And not cut her to shreds every time he opened his mouth," Harry added.

Ron sighed. "I don't get it. What could she possibly see in Snape?"

"He's a challenge. And some women are attracted to the tall, dark and snarky," Remus said with a shrug. "I hope Ginny, Luna and Tonks can talk some sense into her this weekend."

"Maybe we can try to set her up with Percy," Ron offered. "They seem to both have an affinity for the rules."

"I think he may be a little too pompous for 'Mione," Harry said. "But you may be on to something, mate. Maybe she just needs to be shown that other men find her interesting."

Remus nodded. "Yes, maybe that is just the diversion she needs to help her put her feelings for Snape in perspective."

"I think it's time to start making a list of our single mates," Harry said.

"Let's talk more about this tomorrow," Remus suggested. "We better get back inside before our women begin to suspect we are up to no good."

"Aren't we?" asked Ron with a grin.

The three laughed as they walked back inside.

Snape walked out from his hiding place, staring at the door. He couldn't believe what he had just overheard. His first reaction was to think that it was a trick, but upon reviewing the events, he didn't believe it was staged. After all, none of them were in the kitchen when he decided to come outside for a respite from the crowd, so they couldn't have known he would overhear them.

Leaning back against the shed wall, he thought over what was said. *Hermione? Loves me? Why?* What would someone like her want with a man like him—a reviled ex-Death Eater who murdered Albus Dumbledore? Granted he had been exonerated, and she had never held his past against him. Nor did she judge him for it. But he was not the type of man to inspire love in anyone, especially someone as brave, intelligent and beautiful as her. *Beautiful?* Yes, it was true. She had grown out of teenage awkwardness into a confident, attractive woman. A woman who apparently thought him so callous as to vow to never bare her soul to him for fear of his reaction. Her friends were afraid he would scorn her if he found out. *I probably would*, he admitted. But it would be because of his own lack of comfort in dealing with emotions, and not because of the woman confessing them. *She would rather suffer in silence than tell me. Am I really so cold?* While he had no intention of ever turning nice, he thought that Hermione understood that their battles of wit were his way of extending an offer of friendship, or the closest thing to friendship he was capable of, toward her.

But do I want her to love me? He enjoyed their sparring matches, and they worked well when brewing or researching together. She didn't annoy him as much as most people, probably because she was more level-headed and intelligent than most of her counterparts. *But love?* He didn't know if he could say he felt anything close to that. He cared about her, that was true; it wasn't as if he wanted harm to come her way, but that was still a long way off from love. A picture of her in that dress from Lovegood's party flashed in his mind, and he remembered the initial attraction he felt when seeing her. *All right, so it isn't love, but lust is a start*, he thought. Maybe he would suggest dinner and explore the possibilities. Of course, this meant he'd have to rein in his snideness toward her. And, most likely, take some ribbing from the likes of Lupin and Bill Weasley for his earlier comments.

When I thought I would die alone, I didn't think I would live long enough to be married, he justified with a shrug.

And speak of the lioness.

He watched as Hermione crossed the yard toward him. Giving her an appraising glance, he found that since she had progressed from her teens, she had grown into her body and moved with a grace and confidence that had been lacking in her school days. True, her hair was still as bushy as ever, but who was he to criticize in that department? Her skin was flawless and pale, but from natural coloring more than lack of sunlight. The Muggle clothing she wore showed womanly curves he hadn't taken notice of before when she was just Miss Granger, Sparring Partner, and not Hermione, Potential Date. But more than anything, it was her eyes that drew his attention. They were the eyes of someone who understood suffering, loss and sacrifice because she had been through it too. Though at times, they sparkled with laughter or glinted with mischief, he had noticed that they dulled with some unmentioned feeling when she thought no one was paying attention.

It was that, more than anything else, that made him decide getting to know her on some other level might be worthwhile, if for no other reason than to learn the cause of such sadness.

She stopped before him. "I know that you would rather be surrounded by first years than eat with the Weasleys, but Molly sent me to tell you that dinner is ready."

He studied her for any signs of her affections, but she was doing a good job at keeping her emotions hidden. He decided to encourage her.

"As true as that may be, I thank you for your pains nonetheless," he told her.

A look of confusion crossed her face. "My pains?"

"Your effort," he said, trying not to sound too impatient. He thought her smarter than this.

"I know what it means," she snapped. "I just have no idea why you said it. After all, if it would have been painful, I wouldn't have done it," she assured him before turning and heading back inside, slamming the door behind her.

Author's Notes: Any of the biting wit that you may recognize are lines inspired by/modified from Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing."

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Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

Part two of the plan is enacted. Target: Hermione.

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Dinner was finally over, and Hermione was ready to take her leave. Snape had been acting rather strangely tonight, and it unnerved her. Instead of trading their usual insults, he had thrown her by almost, well, not complimenting her, but coming as close to it as he ever had. She was vexed that she couldn't uncover what he was up to now. Still, she stood her ground, not falling for any of his comments, feeling most assured that they were a trap of some kind. The game had left her exhausted and longing for her bed.

She walked up the stairs of the Burrow to Ginny's former room to say goodnight. Just as she reached the landing, she overheard a conversation that gave her pause.

"Are you sure Snape has a thing for Hermione?" Ginny's voice carried softly through the cracked door.

Surprised by the comment, Hermione moved closer, spotting Ginny, Tonks and Luna all piled on Ginny's old bed. Flattening herself against the wall to remain hidden from the sight of those inside, she listened with curiosity.

"So says Remus," Tonks assured the redhead.

"Are you going to tell her?" Luna asked.

"Hell no! Would you?" Tonks responded. "All she does is take jabs at him. Snape may not be the best of men," laughter drifted out, "but no man deserves to be scorned so openly for his feelings."

"Hermione would rather be forced to ride a broom daily for the rest of her life than date Snape!" Ginny said. "Could you imagine how she would torment him if she ever found out?"

"That's why I told Remus to tell Snape to forget it," Tonks told them. "Hermione is not looking for a man, and, even if she were, it would definitely not be Snape."

"Maybe we should tell her, just to hear what she says. After all, they do have a lot in common," Luna suggested.

"No!" said Ginny and Tonks at the same time.

"Hermione is so anti-man and anti-marriage that she would only taunt him, using it against him until he was in tears," Ginny said with certainty.

Hermione bristled with indignity but kept quiet.

"On second thought," Ginny continued with a tone that let Hermione know she was up to no good, "maybe we should tell her. I wouldn't mind seeing her make Snape cry."

"Snape might be a bastard, but he deserves to keep what little pride he has left," Tonks countered. "Hermione would cut his heart out with a spoon and serve it to him for breakfast rather than accept it as her own."

"I can't believe I feel sorry for Snape," Luna sighed.

Hermione heard someone coming up the stairs and quickly ducked into the twins' old room next door. She left the door slightly ajar so she could peer into the other room.

"Ladies, there you are," Remus said, pulling the door to Ginny's room open. He walked over to Tonks and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I am sorry to break up the party,

but we'd better hurry or we shall be late for the concert. The Weird Sisters wait for no one."

Tonks got off the bed and wrapped an arm around Remus' waist, resting her head on his shoulder. "We were just talking about how lucky we are to have the wonderful men love us that we do," she told Remus before clasping his hand in hers and allowing him to lead her out of the room.

Hermione quickly ducked back in the room. Quietly, she walked over and sat down on one of the beds.

Can this be true? Do my friends really think so little of me to believe I would be so disdainful to a man simply for being interested in me?

But Snape?

Maybe this is just some sort of joke. It would certainly explain his earlier behavior. Yes, that must be it. Snape doesn't feel that way toward anyone.

But what if he does? That annoying part of her brain that second-guessed everything piped up. What if he had developed some sort of feelings over the years? After all, who else does he share his wit with?

She thought it over and concluded that it was true that she had a friendlier camaraderie with Snape than most, but that was a long way from love. She really didn't think Snape was capable of acknowledging love. The man had more walls around his emotions than China had on its borders.

Considering her sources, she figured they were exaggerating, as they were prone to do. But even if it wasn't love, could Snape possibly be interested in her?

Do I want him to consider me for anything more than friendship?

She couldn't deny that she loved their verbal battles almost as much as she enjoyed the all too few times they collaborated on a potion or research. Time spent with him passed easily because he treated her like a colleague, an asexual being. The fact that she was a woman and he was a man was immaterial to their relationship.

But what if it wasn't?

Snape wasn't handsome, but then again, she had dated Victor Krum, and she didn't consider herself beautiful, so they were even there. Looks aside, he was incredibly intelligent, witty, and shared her interests. She shook her head. *I can't believe I am even considering this! The man is spiteful, mean-spirited and antisocial.*

But not to you. The pesky voice was back. *Besides, a man like Snape isn't going to be interested in a woman whose goal in life is to breed a Quidditch team. He would expect nothing less than a woman with a life of her own.*

While she couldn't say she had any deep feelings for Snape, she could see herself testing the waters with a date or two. He was an intriguing man, and sometimes a date was just a date, nothing more. She ran her hand through her hair and sighed. She could just imagine the reaction from her friends if they found out that she — "Miss I Don't Need A Man" — was considering dating, let alone who.

Author's Notes: Any of the biting wit that you may recognize are lines inspired by/modified from Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," except for the spoon line, which I am sure you all know is from "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves."

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Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

The situation turns serious as Severus learns the truth about Hermione's injury.

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Snape Apparated outside of number twelve, Grimmauld Place the next afternoon and knocked, still not sure what he was doing there or what he would say. He was about to forget the whole thing and Disapparate when Ginny Apparated next to him. "Mrs. Potter," he said with a nod.

"Severus." She greeted him with a grin as she lowered the wards. "Would you like to come in?"

He was thrown by the huge smile decorating her face; she was never this happy to see him. He assumed her mood was due more to the ring on her finger than his presence at the door. "Is Miss Granger home?" he asked, trying to sound stern, but he could hear the hope in his voice and silently cursed.

Her smile widened. "I think so. She was upstairs in her room when I left." She stepped aside, holding open the door. "Third floor, second door on the right."

He glared at her as he walked inside. Hearing her try to stifle a laugh as he headed up the stairs, he resisted the urge to hex her.

Pausing outside Hermione's door, he took a deep breath and knocked. In his haste to speak to her, he opened the unlocked door before she could reply and then froze. Her back was to him, but he could see her reflection in the mirror. Her hand was tracing a vicious looking cut that started above her breasts and traveled down to her belly button, which was exposed by her unbuttoned trousers.

Her gasp unfroze him; he reached instinctively for her as she reached for her shirt. "I didn't know anyone was here," she muttered.

Unfazed by the fact she was topless before him, he turned her toward him swiftly to examine the wound. He gently touched the angry, red skin next to the abrasion, and she let out a groan of pain. It was then that he noticed the jar of balm in her hand. He took it from her and sniffed it. Recognizing the smell from personal experience, he knew that it was a strong healing balm with a numbing agent included. He raised his eyes to hers. "What happened, Miss Granger? Who did this to you?"

She shrugged out of his grip, and he let her go, his eyes never leaving the line marring her pale skin until she pulled her shirt over it, blocking his view. Emotions raged in him: he was angry that someone dared to hurt her, concerned for her well-being, curious as to why she was keeping this a secret, and fearful that something serious was

wrong with her. The woman rumored to love him was hurt, and he wanted to pull her to him and swear he would make it all right, to protect her from anything wrong ever happening again, to avenge her. The sudden intensity of his feelings threw him, but he pushed all emotion aside and concentrated on the woman before him.

She still wasn't looking at him. Gently placing his fingers under her chin, he tilted her head toward him. "What is it, Miss Granger?" he said softly.

He watched, feeling helpless, as tears welled in her eyes. Without thinking, he gathered her in his arms, careful of her wound. Her composure completely crumbled within his embrace. He lightly rubbed her back as he whispered reassurances to her. With his other hand, he wordlessly warded the door; he didn't want any interruptions. There was obviously a reason for her to keep such a thing a secret.

When her sobs quieted, he offered her his handkerchief. "What happened, Hermione?" It was the first time he addressed her by her given name.

She looked up at him, her red-rimmed eyes widened in surprise, but she said nothing. Raising a shaky hand, she picked up the jar from the bed where Snape had set it. He watched her toy with it for a minute as if deciding something. Then she surprised him by removing her shirt once again, offering him a weak smile. "Sorry, Severus; it hurts. I need to put this on." She nodded to the balm.

Shocked by hearing his given name fall from her lips and seeing her standing so vulnerable yet strong before him, he couldn't deny that he cared for her as something more than just a sparring partner. But to what extent, he didn't know. He only knew that he wanted her well again, and then they could figure out the rest. He stilled her hand. "May I?"

She held the jar out to him. He dipped his fingers into the cool cream, and with the lightest touch he could manage, he began to apply the salve. He felt her tense with the initial pain of contact but then relaxed as the numbness set in. He focused on the wound, making sure it and the surrounding irritated skin were well coated before helping her pull on her shirt once again.

"Thanks," she said, sitting heavily on the bed, as if what was on her mind was physically weighing her down.

He had to know what happened. Kneeling before her, he took her hands in his. "Talk to me, please, pet." The term of endearment slipped out, but he let it go, not wanting to call attention to it.

"There is nothing you can do, Severus. There is nothing anyone can do." She sighed wearily before finally looking at him. "The only person who can reverse the curse is now nothing but a shell of a man in Azkaban."

"Lucius!" Snape spat.

She nodded.

Swearing, he gently squeezed her hand. "Tell me all of it, Hermione."

"There isn't much to tell. He hit me with some unknown hex, and the healers at St. Mungo's have been unable to close the wound. The only hope was to interrogate Lucius to find out what he did. But that is no longer possible."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" he asked, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles.

"Why? So everyone can feel sorry for me? Try to protect me?"

"Maybe we could help you?"

"No one can help me," she said. Looking away, she mumbled something he didn't hear.

"What was that, pet?" *Damn!* He'd done it again.

"The only way to help is to kill Lucius," she said flatly.

"What?" Surprise filled his voice.

"While trying to find the hex, I discovered a Dark Arts spell that, when performed while killing an enemy, will reverse all the hexes that person cast. Either Lucius dies, or I spend the rest of my years in pain, until the curse spreads enough to kill me."

"Spreads?"

"The original curse scar was only about three inches," she said offhandedly.

He was horrified. "You've been dealing with this all alone for nearly six months? Oh, Hermione."

His emotions, running far ahead of his thoughts, guided his lips to hers. His mouth brushed her lips in the tenderest of kisses, meant to siphon off her pain. He was surprised to feel her hands move to his shoulders as she opened her mouth in invitation.

It was a kiss unlike any he had ever experienced. All the unspoken emotions welling up in both of them poured forth into each other. It was not about lust or sex, but about something more. He gently ended the kiss and pulled back to look in her eyes.

"I will do whatever it takes to heal you," he swore to her.

"You would kill Lucius for me? Perform Dark Magic?" she asked, her voice carefully neutral as if she didn't want to influence his answer or betray her own thoughts.

He tried to keep his features schooled; he didn't want her to know just how much he despised what she was asking of him. He gave her a single nod.

"Oh, Severus!" She threw her arms around him and kissed him, hard.

This time it was she who broke the kiss. "Thank you," she said with a small smile. "But I cannot, will not, ask that of you."

"Hermione, I ... I care for you," he admitted. "I swear by my hand," he clasped her small hand in his, "that I will do whatever I can to help you heal."

"Use those wonderful hands for something other than swearing, Severus. Maybe if we work together, we can come up with a potion or some other way to heal me." She slid onto the floor in front of him. "But don't make a vow to me. I daresay you have made enough of those for one lifetime."

"Hermione, if it is the only way ..."

"Then I will deal with it," she said firmly.

"You cannot mean "

"Shh!" she brought a finger to his lips. "Let's not talk of this anymore. Tell me, what brought you here today?"

"I," he started and then stalled, his initial intent long lost in the midst of the revelation. "I came to see if you would like to have dinner with me tomorrow."

"I'd like that, Severus." She graced him with a smile.

Even with tear-swollen eyes and blotchy skin, he found her beautiful and brave. He owed Lupin and his annoying cohorts for bringing to his attention the truth about the amazing witch before him. Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed the inside of her wrist. "Will you be all right?" He gestured toward her wound.

"The balm will keep me numb for a few hours."

He stared at her, trying to decide if she was telling the truth or putting up a brave front. Not wanting to disrespect her by invading her privacy, he resisted the urge to use Legilimency to find out and took her at her word.

"Until tomorrow, then," he said standing.

At the door, he paused and turned back toward her. "If you should need me or any other potion to help with the pain, please don't hesitate to owl."

She smiled her thanks and he left the room, feelings of anticipation for tomorrow warring with the injustice that had befallen the young woman who had broken through his barriers. After all these years, he had finally found someone to care about, only to discover he may very well lose her. He thought of Malfoy, and anger roared to life in him.

She will not die, he swore.

Author's Notes: As you can see, we've entered the Serious Arc of the story, a plot point that deviates from Shakespeare. I was never fond of the Claudio/Hero subplot in "Much Ado," and I wanted to keep this story centered on Hermione and Snape. But fear not, Shakespeare and snark will make a comeback.

The swearing by the hand lines are from "Much Ado About Nothing."

Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

Severus makes a trip to Azkaban, and the couple have their first date.

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling, and any quotes you may recognize are those of William Shakespeare.

The icy wind blew across the water, chilling Severus despite his repeated application of warming charms. Nodding to the guard, he opened the door and willed himself to enter Azkaban, a place he had been trying to avoid the better part of his life.

As required, he relinquished his wand at the security desk before he was escorted to the cell. The heavy iron door clanked closed, locking him in the dank oubliette. The dim light from a lantern he had been handed barely illuminated the three feet in front of him. He slowly walked toward the huddled form in the corner.

"Lucius," he sneered.

There was no response.

He raised the lantern in front of him; its soft rays did nothing to blunt the shock of what he saw before him.

Lucius Malfoy, once as proud as he was arrogant, lay a mess in tattered rags that barely covered his near-skeletal body. His once luxurious hair was limp and dirty, with patches gone from the scalp.

Snape stared at the shell of the man he had once called friend. But the time of friendship had long passed. The man before him was the one responsible for Hermione's suffering, and he intended to do something about that.

~*~

Severus stood outside of Ambrosia, the newest restaurant in Diagon Alley. Lupin had mentioned to him how much Tonks raved about it when they went last week. Brushing imaginary lint off of his frock coat, he tried not to allow doubts due to past let downs enter his mind. As much as he knew his date with Hermione was not a ruse, he still felt on edge. They had agreed to meet up here because Hermione had thought it was silly for him to fetch her at her office. Relief seeped through him when she materialized before him with a pop.

"You came," he said softly.

"You did invite me." She flashed him that brilliant smile. "Shall I go?" she asked playfully as she turned to walk away, but he reached out and caught her arm.

"No, stay," he urged. He stared at her for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. He was not affectionate by nature, yet he wanted to take her hand, but he worried she might see that as a sign of possessiveness. He was well aware of her stance on the opposite sex, and he felt pretty certain that whatever emotions she may have for him wouldn't change her fundamental principles.

She made up his mind for him by standing on her toes and brushing her lips gently against his.

"Hello, Severus," she said, stepping back.

Tucking an errant tendril behind her ear, he whispered his greeting before offering his arm, which, to his relief, she took without hesitation.

As they approached the restaurant door, Colin Creevey, photographer for the *Evening Prophet*, rushed them, snapping pictures, momentarily blinding them with the flash.

"The last of the war heroes pair off. This photo is going to get me a raise," Colin said excitedly, trying to wave down the reporter who was currently interviewing the establishment's owner.

Snape ushered Hermione into the foyer and excused himself as he set off toward his former student, who was still clicking away.

"Mr. Creevey, a word," Snape said as he dragged the young man out of the restaurant.

Snape returned shortly with a smirk, knowing he had instilled a fear only the former Potions master was capable of into the heart of Creevey and those photos would not see publication.

"You seem pleased with yourself," Hermione noted as they were seated.

"If you can't take pleasure in the little things ..." he shrugged.

She laughed. "What did you do? Hex the camera?"

"Nothing transpired between Mr. Creevey and myself other than a few civil words and an assurance that the photos would not be printed."

"I doubt Colin would describe it that way," she mused.

He raised his eyebrow, and she laughed. It was good to hear her laugh. He realized it had been some time since he had heard it.

Watching her as she perused the menu, he noticed that though she looked beautiful, he could see the shadows under her eyes that the charms didn't completely hide. There was also a tiredness behind the twinkle in her eyes. He reached out and took her hand.

She looked up and offered him that special smile of hers that he was quickly becoming addicted to.

"How are you?" he asked, concern evident in his deep voice.

"I'm fine," she assured him.

Before he could counter, the waiter appeared to take their order, disappearing quickly back into the kitchen. Alone again, he claimed her hand once more.

"Seriously, Hermione," he started.

"Seriously, Severus," she interrupted. "I am fine. I swear."

He gave her an appraising look. "No you're not," he said decidedly. "But you will be," he added with certainty.

"What do you mean?"

"I went to Azkaban today."

"Oh, Severus! You didn't —"

"No, I didn't harm Lucius," he assured her, hoping to wipe the worried look off her face. "I simply wanted to see if I would be able to get any information through Legilimency."

"And did you?" He could tell that she was trying to sound unaffected, but hope was evident in her voice.

"Yes. I know what the curse was, and there is a counter potion. You were right; it does require use of the Dark Arts to work, or more specifically, one ingredient." He pulled out a black, glass vial from his pocket and set it before her. "Blood of the caster, forcibly taken."

She opened her mouth to respond but said nothing as she picked up the vial and held it tight in her hand. "How?" she finally asked, looking down at her closed fist.

"He no longer had the mental capacity to consent. A small cut to his forearm provided all the blood we need, and I was able to heal it immediately after. He is unharmed, and you will have your cure. We can brew it tonight if you wish," he offered.

After a moment of silence in which he began to wonder if he had done something to offend her, she looked up at him, tears trailing down her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered.

His eyes locked on hers, and he found himself drowning in her tears. "I swore to you that I would do whatever was in my power to heal you."

This time, it was she who reached for his hand. "You did." Her stare penetrated him with such sincerity and feeling that it stole his breath away. "You always were a man of your word, Severus."

The remainder of dinner passed amicably enough, but the promise of a cure being only a potion away occupied both of their thoughts to the point that they skipped dessert and left their half-eaten meals behind in favor of his potions lab. They Apparated to his home at Spinner's End and set about preparing to brew.

Author's Notes: Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

Severus and Hermione brew the cure, but will it work?

Disclaimer: All characters belong to J.K. Rowling.

Working tirelessly well into the night, they took turns preparing ingredients, stirring the potion and reciting incantations. The solution took five grueling hours of chopping, crushing, mixing and chanting continuously before it could be left to boil for another three hours. When the potion was sufficiently bubbling, Snape placed a lid on it and set a timer spell. The clock from his sitting room chimed, telling them it was a quarter past one.

"You must be exhausted," he said, offering an arm to her as they left the lab.

"No," she answered with a shake of her head. "The possibility of finding a cure has me too on edge for sleep."

He nodded, understanding, but he still wished she would rest. Although he was certain the cure would work, it was Dark Magic, and, as such, the healing would most likely come at a price. He didn't want her to wear herself out before they finished.

"Would you like some tea?" he offered.

"That would be lovely," she said, following him into the small kitchen.

He set about mixing various tea leaves and herbs together to create the perfect brew when her stomach growled.

"Sorry," she said, looking embarrassed.

"Don't be," he assured her. "You hardly touched your dinner."

"I was just too ..."

"I was not chastising you," he said gently. "I know you were thinking of the potion, as was I. But there is no reason for you not to eat something now."

Knowing her stomach was probably unsettled from nerves, he made her some buttered toast and then watched as she nibbled on it.

"This will work, Hermione," he assured her.

"I don't doubt you," she said with a sleepy smile.

Her belief in him always mystified him. Watching her hide a yawn behind her small hand, he wondered if he would ever stop being amazed at the faith she had shown in him since the end of her first year.

He had purposely chosen a blend of tea to promote peaceful rest ... not a sleeping draft ... just some chamomile, lavender and valerian to help her relax. He figured her body would do the rest. Sure enough, her eyes seemed to flutter shut, only to snap open again.

"There is a guest bed you may use to take a nap," he offered. "We still have a long wait until the potion is ready for the final step."

She looked like she was about to object when another yawn issued forth.

"Come," he said, standing up and offering his hand. "You shall rest, and I will wake you when it's time."

She took his hand and allowed him to lead her upstairs. He showed her into a small room with a comfortable bed. He watched her look longingly at it and then back to him. Before she could voice her objection, he promised once again to wake her when the potion was ready. Without warning, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

"Thank you for everything," she muttered into his chest.

Gently stroking her back, he kissed the top of her head. "You are welcome, pet."

She pulled back a little so she could look in his face. "Sorry I've been a disappointing date."

"There is nothing disappointing about you," he assured her. "Now into bed with you."

He waited until she was under the covers before snuffing the candles and closing the door.

~*~

When he was certain the potion had been reduced as much as possible, he doused the flame and stared at the brownish-green salve. It appeared perfect, but it wasn't as if one had much to go on other than gut instinct when dealing with ancient Dark potions. But up until this point, there was nothing particularly Dark about the brew before him just another mixture of plants and animal parts. *At least it will be until this* he thought as he placed the vial of Lucius' blood on the tabletop. He closed his eyes and let out a deep breath, praying to any deity who would listen for this to work before heading upstairs to wake Hermione.

He knocked gently on the door and waited for a response. After a moment passed, he tried again. With still no response and concern growing, he slowly opened the door, wand out.

She was sleeping soundly, curled up on her side, long hair fanning out behind her. Her face was relaxed; all the tension and hidden pain it usually possessed was gone. Without being able to see into her knowing eyes, she looked so young. *Too young*, he thought. He briefly wondered what he looked like when he slept. Was he as peaceful and angelic? He nearly laughed out loud at the thought and blamed the lateness of the hour and the potion fumes for even having such an inane thought.

With a little awkwardness, he reached out and gently touched her arm. "Hermione," he whispered. "It is time."

She was instantly awake and upright in bed, her wand drawn, before her mind and eyes caught up with her body's trained response to an unknown touch.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, lowering her wand. "Old habits and all."

Though he was impressed with her reaction, and if he were willing to admit it ... which he wasn't ... a little fearful he had been about to be hexed, he simply assured her that it was fine and that they should return to the lab.

She stood up and stretched, and he noticed her dress rose slightly up her legs as she did so. His mind was brought back to the task at hand when she locked her arm in his and said, "Let's go."

He followed her back down into the lab, taking a place across the table from her. Watching as she slowly uncapped the vial, he once again said a silent prayer as she drizzled the dark red liquid into the waiting cauldron. Her face was intense as she muttered the last incantation while stirring the required thirteen times. The mixture had thickened to a gel state, and she was having trouble churning as it continued to congeal. He wanted to help, but it was important that the person cursed be the one to complete the potion. With the use of both hands, she completed the last circle and lowered the stirrer to the counter.

Expecting her to want to try the balm immediately, he was surprised that she just stared at it.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

"What if it doesn't work?" she whispered.

He was immediately at her side, taking her hands in his. "It will work," he assured her. "Why don't you try it?"

She glanced down at the potion, which was now a fairly innocuous mint color, then back to him. With shaky hands, she began to remove her dress. He turned around to give her privacy.

After a few moments, he heard her sigh with relief, and he began to relax. His ease was short-lived. When a scream tore from her mouth, he turned to find her doubled over. He rushed to her side and was frightened to find what looked like black fog seeping out of the very top of the wound where she had applied the salve.

"It hurts. It hurts," she was chanting as tears welled in her eyes and her body shook.

He pulled her to him. He feared something like this. No Dark cure came easy. "It's the toxins of the curse leaving you," he told her. "The potion is working. But you need to apply the rest."

"I ... I can't. Not by myself." She looked to him, her eyes begging for his help.

He removed the cauldron from the lab table, which he quickly transfigured into a small bed. "Lie down," he urged her gently.

She did as he instructed, and he sat next to her on the edge of the mattress and began to apply the potion as gently as he could as she thrashed beneath his hands. Her wails of agony slashed through him as he continued to torment her with the treatment, batting her hands away as she tried to claw at the cut and the mist rising within it. Once he was certain the entire wound and the surrounding tissue were well coated, he straddled her legs, using his weight to hold them still as he pinned her arms to her side, afraid she would hurt herself if left free. He wasn't sure if using magic on her would interfere with the potion; besides, putting her in a body bind seemed wrong and cold, even to him. And so he held her, releasing her arms only to apply more balm as needed as the hours of night drained away into the twilight of morning.

The sun was shining brightly by the time all of the potion had been applied, and the black vapor no longer rose from the wound. Hermione, voice long hoarse from hours of screaming, only whimpered now and then in her state of unconsciousness. She had passed out about forty minutes into the process. Snape thought it was a blessing for her.

He himself was beyond exhaustion, but there was one thing left to do for her. He summoned some water and a flannel and began to gently wash away the remains of the potion before inspecting the wound, which now resembled any other cut.

Standing, he pulled a glass jar from his pocket. He had done some brewing of his own while Hermione slept. The book he had consulted after his visit with Lucius confirmed the detoxing potion and also included a healing potion. As with the first brew, it was an innocent mixture of herbs and oils, except for the last ingredient. He bared the skin of his left forearm and sharply drew a blade across it, gathering the running blood into the jar. He watched transfixed as the clear liquid turned pink. "Blood of a friend, freely given," he whispered. Corking the bottle, he gently swirled the contents thirteen times clockwise before pouring it into Hermione's injury.

The effect was instantaneous. The skin began to knit itself together as the surrounding area was soothed, and the angry red color receded. He continued to trickle the potion over her until all traces of the wound were gone, and all that remained was flawless, pale skin.

He sank onto the floor beside the bed and laid his head on the mattress. It was over. She was cured.

Author's Notes: Shakespeare and snark make a comeback in the next chapter.

Many thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, who suffered through the first draft, and to Logical Quirk, who made sure I didn't make more mistakes.

Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

Now that Hermione is cured, the couple look to the future.

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"So tell me, with which of my nasty bits did you first fall in love?"

Hermione nearly choked on her tea. After a few coughs to clear her airway, she gave Severus a wicked smile. "Who said anything about being in love?"

They had been involved for the better part of a year, ever since that night they spent brewing the cure for Malfoy's curse. Of course, they had tried to keep their relationship as under wraps as they could, but it wasn't long before the others caught the smoldering looks that accompanied their usual banter. Hermione had never thought verbal sparring could be such incredible foreplay before she invited Severus into her bed.

She looked at her lover the term "boyfriend" had never seemed fitting for him and saw a small flash of hurt flicker across his eyes. Even after all this time, he still seemed uncertain of their relationship, even if he would never openly admit it. She clasped his hand in hers. "I fell in love with all of your nasty bits together," she answered. "For it's a total package that is so bad, it would never allow any good to intermingle. But for which of my good parts did you first suffer love for me?"

Severus smiled. She loved his smile because, just like his laughter, it was a treat for her alone, something the rest of the world rarely saw.

"Suffer love, now there is the truth," he said. "Loving you has always been painful because I do so against my will."

"Despite your poor heart," she said with a smirk.

"And a poor heart it will be if you keep insisting on spending so much of my gold at Madame Malkins," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"It wasn't that much, Severus, and I paid for it myself," she said. "Besides, I thought you would want me to look my best when I was at your side today."

"Are you absolutely certain that it is necessary for me to attend this dreaded event?"

She laughed at his pout. If anyone would have told her a year ago that Severus Snape pouted, she would have told him to lay off the Firewhisky.

"Yes, I am certain," she said, rising from her chair and walking to him. She settled herself in his lap. "It is Ron and Luna's wedding, and we have to be there."

"You are their friend. I despise the Weasley boy."

"No, you don't," she said, taking his face in her hands. She found him incredibly adorable when he was being petulant, but she was smart enough to never voice that thought. Instead, she leaned toward his ear and whispered, "I promise to make it worth your while to go."

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

"The dress has matching lingerie."

"Is that so?"

"You'll just have to wait and see." She gave him a quick but passionate kiss. "It's time to get ready, or we'll be late."

"Oh, I think we will most definitely be late," he said, gathering her up in his arms and carrying her to the bedroom, her laughter trailing behind them.

~*~

At the reception, Hermione and Severus were seated with Harry, Ginny, Tonks and Remus, all of whom were well into their cups.

"So when is your big day?" Hermione asked Tonks, gesturing to the diamond sparkling on her finger.

"We're thinking in the spring," Tonks said, wrapping her hand around Remus' waist and leaning her head on his shoulder.

"It's about time someone put a leash on that wolf," Snape said, though without any real bite. While he would never be nice he shuddered at the thought to Hermione's friends, he attempted to be civil, and for him, that meant spewing a little less vitriol. He didn't really think it mattered much because, much to his chagrin, her friends seemed to have become immune to his insults over the years.

As if to accentuate the point, Lupin smiled. "A leash, there is something we haven't tried," he said to Tonks.

"I don't know," Tonks said coyly. "I'm kind of partial to using our old school ties."

Snape blanched. He really didn't want to know anything about the sex life of the Metamorphmagus and the werewolf. He was sorry he even made the insult in the first place.

"So what about you two?" Ginny asked.

"What about us?" Hermione answered.

"When are you going to make an honest woman out of her, Snape?" The Boy Who Lived to Annoy Him asked.

"Yes, Severus," added Lupin. "When? Or are we going to have to lead the two of you to altar as well?"

Tonks elbowed Remus in the ribs hard enough to make him grunt as Ginny and Harry shot him an evil look. Snape immediately knew something was amiss. But it was Hermione who put the puzzle together first.

She turned to him and asked, "Severus, when did you first realize you cared for me?"

He felt uncomfortable talking about emotions in public, and Hermione was well aware of that fact. Before now, she had never pushed him to openly declare his love, show any signs of public affection or make any of their private lives public. But as he looked into her eyes, he knew this was an important question to her. He leaned over and whispered into her ear. "I knew I cared about you as more than an ex-student that day in your room at Grimmauld Place. I knew I ... I loved you when I would have done anything to ease your pain when we cured your wound."

She ever so lightly brushed her lips against his. "I love you," she whispered back before looking at Tonks and Ginny. Her eyes darted between the two women as she asked him, "So you didn't have these feelings for me the night of Ron and Luna's engagement dinner at the Burrow?"

"No, I ..."

"Well then, Tonks, Ginny and Luna had been much deceived because they had sworn you were helplessly in love with me that night."

The menace in her voice triggered Snape's own memory of that night and the conversation he had overheard in the garden. "When did you first love me?" he asked her.

She focused her attention on him, making him feel as though he was all that mattered. He loved that she could make him feel so special to her.

"When you found the cure."

"What cure?" Harry asked.

Snape ignored the interruption and glared at the boy.

"Then, Remus, Harry and Ron had been much deceived, for they had sworn you had professed your love for me to Tonks at Miss Lovegood's birthday party."

"What?" Hermione practically screeched.

"They swore you were almost sick with love for me," Snape continued, enjoying the indignation dancing across the face of his beloved, especially since her anger wasn't going to be directed toward him.

"They swore you were well-nigh dead for me!" she countered.

The couple turned to glare at their table mates.

"Uhm, so we may have given you a little push," Tonks confessed.

"It's not like you two wouldn't have figured out what we all saw on your own sooner or later," Lupin said with a shrug.

"We just thought you were both too stubborn to make a move on your own," said Ginny.

"And you, Harry? You thought it would be fun to play with my emotions as well?" Hermione asked icily.

Snape tried not to smile at the fact Harry was about to face the full brunt of Hermione's anger. *The prat is lucky I don't hex him. He deserves it for upsetting her,* he thought

as he reached out for her hand.

"I'm sorry, 'Mione. I really am," Harry pleaded. "But does it really matter how it happened? You are together and happy; isn't that all that matters?"

"I am very happy with Severus, Harry. Very happy." Snape felt her hand squeeze his as she pulled their joined hands to her lap. "But you shouldn't have tried to manipulate us. Any of you. You should be ashamed of yourselves. Just because we may be a little less emotional than the rest of you, doesn't mean our feelings are fodder for your entertainment."

Though he would blame it on the alcohol later, Snape couldn't stop himself from lightly brushing his lips across her cheek. She was eloquent and beautiful, and she had the rest of the table sitting as chastised as his first-year Potions classes used to be. He decided to have some fun at their expense.

Knowing Hermione would catch on, with a heavy, put-upon sigh, he turned to face her. Holding out his hand, palm up toward her, he said, "Come, I will have you for a wife, but by this light, I take you for pity."

Not disappointing him, she placed her hand upon his. "I would not deny you, but by this good day, I take you partly because of great pressure." At this, she shot a glare to those around the table. "And partly to save your life, for I fear you would suffer death by fallen pride otherwise."

"Since you never seem to know when to stop your mouth, I shall do it for you." He leaned over and surprised her by kissing her passionately before all those present.

When he withdrew, he grasped her hand and pulled a ring from his pocket. "Then say you will be mine, to bind me or undo me, I am not sure which."

He held his breath and watched the emotion fly across her face. Though he did intend to ask her to be his wife, he meant to do it in some private moment meant just for them, but he was so caught up in her that he decided he didn't want to wait another moment to be able to claim her as his own. When he saw the tears, he was frightened he had made a mistake.

But then she smiled.

"Of course!" she said, throwing her arms around him. "I love you, Severus."

She pulled back to meet his eyes. "And it would be my pleasure to bind you. I am not too sure about undoing you afterward though. I quite like the idea of you tied up at my mercy."

Severus did something that shocked all who were present even more. He threw his head back and laughed, long and hard, before sweeping Hermione up in his arms and carrying her out of the hall, leaving a stunned crowd behind.

Finis

Author's Note: Judging from past reviews, I know some of you are probably not too happy with me for ending this so soon and not showing the development of the relationship. The truth is that while I might be good at writing sexual tension and smut, I don't do so well with the romance/love story aspect. I didn't want to bore you and ruin the story with my mediocre relationship-building skills.

This was my very first Harry Potter fan fic. Thank you for coming along for the ride and for the wonderful, kind, supportive comments; they were greatly appreciated.

Big thanks to Zafania and Tjwriter, with their red pens and patience, for helping me and to my beta, Logical Quirk.