

# Enraptured

by sshg316

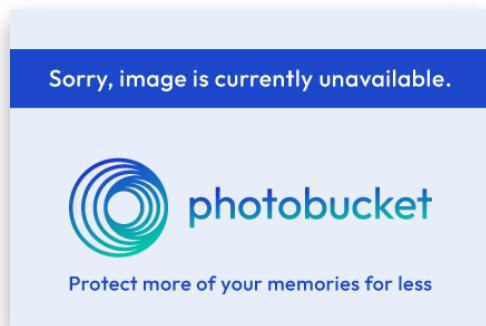
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## Luna's Musings

Chapter 1 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

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Chapter One

Luna's Musings

Luna Lovegood sat at the long, age-worn table in the basement kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, waiting for the Order meeting to begin, her silvery grey eyes dreamily roaming over the crowded room. She knew that no one was paying her any mind; she was often forgotten about, and she was grateful for it, in truth. Luna was an observer, though no one noticed, and she discovered the most fascinating bits of information about people when they didn't realise anyone was watching.

Toying with one radish earring, she smiled as Neville Longbottom accidentally knocked over his cup of tea. She serenely removed her wand from its tucked position behind her ear and, with a murmured *Evanescio*, vanished the spilt liquid from the table. Neville offered a shy smile and a nod of thanks before returning to his conversation with the Weasley twins.

Most people didn't notice that Neville had matured greatly after the War ended; he now exuded a quiet confidence in himself that had previously been absent. He may not be as confident as a female Crumple-Horned Snorkack during mating season, but he was now more aware of his strengths as well as his limitations; he was currently working for the Ministry, where he was able to contribute greatly in the Botanical Research Department.

Luna tucked her wand behind her ear again for safekeeping and resumed waiting. It had been almost four years since Voldemort's defeat during the summer after her sixth year at Hogwarts. The War had ended in a brief and bloody battle on the grounds of Hogwarts with casualties high on both sides.

The Order continued to meet once a month under the guise of discussing the status of renegade Death Eaters. In reality, it was a thinly-veiled excuse for getting together. The Order of the Phoenix this strange confederation of people had strategised, fought, and for some, even died, side-by-side. Those who were left were considered family, and these monthly meetings allowed everyone to stay abreast of the happenings in each other's lives.

As she did at every Order meeting, Luna took a moment and closed her eyes to remember those who had been lost: Hagrid had been killed by Rabastan Lestrage, but avenged moments later by his half-brother, Grawp, who literally ripped his killer limb from limb; Professor Trelawney had been hit by a stray hex and died from her injuries; Mad-Eye Moody apparently had not been vigilant enough, hit by an *Avada Kedavra* from behind, the bloody cowards! Hannah Abbot, Zacharias Smith, Lee Jordan, Cho Chang, and Terry Boot were all lost. Also among that number was Fleur Weasley, who had been killed by Bellatrix Lestrage, but only after she had exacted her revenge on Fenrir Greyback for what he had done to her beloved husband. Of course, Luna could never forget the man whose death had affected all of them the most Albus Dumbledore.

Having completed her monthly ritual, Luna opened her eyes, then returned to watching and waiting.

Seated on Luna's left were her friends Ginny and Harry Potter. They appeared to be discussing the outcome of the last Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match. Luna wondered if perhaps the headmistress might ask her to be a guest commentator sometime. That would be nice. Ginny was currently finishing up a short-term Healer's apprenticeship at the school under Madam Pomfrey, whilst Harry had taken on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position two years ago. The two were inseparable and obviously head-over-heels in love.

Glancing around the room, Luna's eyes rested for a moment on the silvery blond head of Draco Malfoy as he spoke in quiet tones with Remus Lupin. Luna alone had been unsurprised to learn of Malfoy's defection from Voldemort's camp. For years, she had seen something in the aristocratic young man a melancholy and a growing despair regarding what was being expected of him. She had been as happy as a Pygmy Puff when he had proven her instincts about him correct. The information Malfoy had provided had been invaluable, especially given the then absence of the Order's only other link to Voldemort's operation.

Luna's thoughts were interrupted when the kitchen door swung open to reveal the arrival of Ron Weasley. Her eyes widened comically, and she had to smother an amused gasp as Ron let go of the door, causing it to swing back into the face of his girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Mere centimetres before the door smashed into Hermione's nose, it was stilled by the hand of Severus Snape, former Death Eater-spy-professor, who was following Hermione into the kitchen. Hermione murmured her thanks to her employer whilst glaring at her careless boyfriend.

"Honestly, Ron! Would it be too much to ask for you to hold open the door?" she scolded, her annoyance clearly written on her face.

Ron had the grace to look sheepish as he muttered an apology before making his way through the room to sit at the table across from Neville.

Hermione, followed by Snape, also went to the table to sit down. As they reached their seats, Snape pulled out the chair next to Ron for Hermione, allowing her to be seated before elegantly seating himself in the adjoining chair.

"I am certain that your mother taught you how to respect a lady, Mr. Weasley," the Potions master intoned. "Do try to remember your manners."

Ron's face flushed. He was about to retort when Hermione placed a hand on his arm and warned, "Don't. Severus is correct, although he really should learn to be more tactful." Ron's mouth snapped shut, whilst Snape nodded his head in deference to her reproof, his dark eyes showing his amusement.

Luna hid a smile behind her hand, catching Hermione's eye. Hermione smiled slightly as she shook her head at Ron's antics. Luna and Hermione were both well aware that Ron did not intend to be inconsiderate; he was just being Ron. Luna acknowledged both him and her former professor before greeting her dearest friend.

She was always happy to see Hermione. She was grateful for their friendship, as she knew full well that Hermione had not always liked her as she did now. When they first met, Hermione had considered Luna to be a complete nutter.

Luna sighed; such fond memories she had of those days!

When Hermione's parents had been killed during the war, her grief had almost consumed her. She had locked herself in her room at headquarters, eating little food, and neither Ron nor Harry had known how to help their best friend. In a misguided attempt to conform to her wishes, they had left her alone. Luna knew everyone had been shocked when it had been she who was granted admittance into Hermione's room. Luna had first-hand knowledge of the death of a beloved parent; she knew all too well what Hermione was going through. After many conversations and tears, a bond had formed, and the two were now as close as any sisters could ever be.

"Hi, Luna," Hermione greeted her warmly. "How was your day?"

Luna grinned at her friend. "Just fine, thanks. Yours?"

Hermione smiled softly, her brown eyes shifting to look at Ron for a brief moment. "It was fabulous, actually."

"That's nice. Daddy was wondering if you were still coming for tea on Tuesday."

The friends laughed together. Every week Luna's dad would ask if Hermione was coming to tea, even though he was well aware that the young witch would never miss Tuesday tea with the Lovegoods.

After catching up a bit more with Hermione, Luna excused herself to fetch a drink of water. She was dying of thirst; it was so hot. She blew at a strand of hair that stubbornly continued falling into her eyes as she leisurely made her way to the sink. She took a cup out of the upper cupboard and filled it with water. Turning around, she leant against the counter as she sipped the cool liquid.

Her mind wandered to Snape for a moment. What a fascinating man, really. Luna had grown to like the sardonic Potions master during the war. He looked much healthier now than he had right after they had secured his release from Azkaban. It had taken the Order six months to convince the Wizengamot to free him. The headmaster had left evidence hidden in his office. When his portrait had finally "woken up," the very first thing Professor Dumbledore's likeness had said was, "Minerva! Find my Pensieve. You must continue to trust Severus." The memories in the Pensieve had shown that Albus Dumbledore had already been dying that night on the Astronomy Tower and that he had sacrificed himself to save Snape's position as spy. Poor Professor Snape had been forced to kill the headmaster. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place ...

Luna saw that Ron had joined the conversation with his brothers and Neville, whilst Snape and Hermione sat talking quietly, most likely discussing business. Snape had bought the apothecary in Diagon Alley after the war, and Hermione was working there part-time as a brewer whilst she completed her Potions mastery at the Magical University in London. Ron and Harry had not been pleased, to say the least, at Hermione's choice of employer, but Hermione had been adamant, and one did not refuse an adamant Hermione Granger unless one wished to be hexed most severely. Luna assumed the young men had decided they liked their dangly bits just as they were since

their objections had been quickly withdrawn at the first sign of Hermione's ire.

The kitchen door swung open again, and at last, Minerva McGonagall entered the room. "Good evening everyone! Please, forgive my lateness; it could not be helped. Well? What are you waiting for?" A wave of her wand and the kitchen table was magically enlarged so that everyone in the room could be seated. "Find a seat so we can get this infernal meeting over with and get on to more important matters Molly's cooking!"

Laughter and murmurs of agreement followed her words, and there was a general shuffling of people as everyone took their place around the table. Luna quickly returned to her seat between Ginny and Neville.

"Ginny, my dear, would you mind taking notes this evening? Thank you.

"It appears as if we are all present and accounted for. Let us begin. Kingsley, could you please give us this month's update on ..."

Luna stopped listening at that point; if anything was said that was vitally important, someone would gasp or yell, thus alerting her to pay attention. Yawning, she glanced over at Ron and Hermione. She cocked her head as she surreptitiously watched them. She wondered about their relationship. It was an odd one, that. They were dating, to be sure, but Luna had never seen that special spark between them like the one between her own parents, Ginny and Harry, Tonks and Remus, and even Molly and Arthur. She sensed more of a friendship between them than anything else. She shuddered at the thought of the two of them so much as kissing. Ew. It would be like kissing a sibling. At least she assumed so; she didn't have any siblings, so she didn't really know what it would be like to kiss one, but surely it would be disgusting ...

Her musing was interrupted by Minerva's voice. "Ginny, did you get that last bit about Greengrass? Good. Now, then, I'm told two of us here have happy news to share. Ron? Hermione?"

Luna's eyes were drawn to Ron as he stood, pushing his chair away from the table, a goofy grin lighting up his features. He took Hermione's hand was she blushing? Luna couldn't tell behind the curtain of hair and after taking a deep breath said, "Er, yeah. Hermione and I ... we're getting married."

The room was eerily silent for a moment. Luna thought perhaps she was not the only who found this announcement bizarre and then exploded with well wishes and congratulations.

Dazed, Luna saw Snape hastily remove himself from the table to avoid the onslaught of people wanting to congratulate the newly engaged couple.

Luna sat stunned for a moment. This was her dearest friend, marrying a man who Luna knew was not the one for her. As Hermione's friend, she could do only one thing.

She stood and leant over the narrow table to offer her congratulations. She embraced Hermione, whispering in her ear, "I hope you'll be happy, dearest. I love you."

She felt Hermione squeeze her tighter and return her sentiment. As they released each other, Luna felt dizzy for a moment, swaying slightly on her feet.

"Luna?" she heard Hermione's concerned voice ask. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so ..."

Luna suddenly stiffened inexplicably, her eyes rolling back in her head as she began to speak in harsh tones so unlike her own ...

*"It comes to pass ..."*

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*A/N: This story is completed in ten chapters and will be posted as the queue allows. Thanks to the world's best beta team, Subversa, Deanna, and Elfarren. My undying gratitude to LettyBird for Brit-picking, and to ubiquirk for giving the entire thing a final pass. You are all wonderful! And thanks to Somigliana for making the lovely banner. I love it!*

## A New Prophecy

### Chapter 2 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

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*A/N: Continued thanks to the fabulous betas!*

Chapter Two

A New Prophecy

*"... after the light has overcome the darkness."*

A stunned Hermione Granger watched as Luna stopped speaking and slumped back down into her chair. Neville steadied her, his hands darting out to catch her so that she would not slide onto the floor.

Concerned, Hermione quickly made her way around the table to kneel next to Luna's chair. She held her friend's hand in both of hers as she looked anxiously at Luna's face. "Luna! Look at me, love. Are you all right?" she asked, moving one hand to stroke a pale cheek. Her concern faded somewhat as she noticed Luna's eyes come back into focus and a pink tinge return to her cheeks. Relieved, Hermione squeezed Luna's hand and offered a wan smile. It was only then that Hermione noticed the eerie silence in the room.

The typically noisy, boisterous group sat quietly as each person pondered the meaning of what they had heard. Hermione had been mentioned specifically but who could the other person be, and what exactly did it mean?

Hermione shivered slightly, the mood in the room sending a chill down her spine. She took in the pensive faces around her, her forehead wrinkling in confusion. Surely they weren't all taking this seriously?

Being the know-it-all that she was, Hermione had realised the implications of Luna's words immediately. It couldn't be true. She wasn't sure what had just happened, but she did know this: she loved her flaky friend as a sister, but Luna was no Seer.

Hiding her face behind her mane of hair, Hermione sneaked a glance across the table at Ron. He was visibly shaken, his freckles standing out against the unnatural paleness of his skin, and his hands were clenched into fists. His expression was stern almost angry. For the first time in a long while, Hermione was unable to tell what Ron was thinking, and that unnerved her even more than the reaction of the others in the room.

Hermione struggled to maintain her composure whilst her mind whirled with possible interpretations of Luna's words. She ruthlessly pushed aside thoughts of Ron she would shut down if she continued to focus on him, and she needed to think.

The silence was broken when George Weasley, or maybe it was Fred, said, "Blimey! It looks like our little Hermione has a secret lover," with a wink intended for everyone to see.

"Why didn't you tell us?" the other twin exclaimed in mock indignation.

"It makes everything so much more interesting."

"Not to mention poor ickle Ronniekins," they went on, deliberately attempting to rouse Ron's temper.

"Looks like you're about to take the back seat, little brother."

"You can't say we didn't warn you she is a feisty one . . ."

Muffled laughter could be heard; even the ever-dignified Malfoy couldn't help but snigger. Hermione, on the other hand, looked mutinous and was fingering her wand.

"That is quite enough, boys." Arthur Weasley's voice was firm, his tone commanding. This was serious, indeed; the last time Arthur had spoken with such authority, he was barking out orders at the final battle.

Molly caught her husband's eye, then nodded. "Right, then. Shoo, the lot of you! Get out! This is a private conversation. Shoo!"

"But, Mum ..." George and Fred protested.

"No. Go on with you. You'll be of no help here. Out. Now!" One look at Molly's stern expression had them scampering out, as if they were three years old rather than almost twenty-three.

"Cheeky little buggers," Molly muttered under her breath.

"Mum!" Ginny exclaimed, both amused and mortified at her mother's language.

"Well, they are!" Molly responded primly, a slight blush staining her cheeks. She smoothed the front of her robes with her hands and said, "Oh, hush. We've more important matters to discuss."

Quickly, people began to file out, the sound of their whispered speculations following them through the door.

Hermione glanced around the room to see who remained and who had left. Ron, Ginny and Harry sat at the table, and in a far corner stood Arthur, Remus, Tonks, and Minerva. Molly was busily shooing the twins out of the door. Luna, of course, had stayed behind as well; she was still sitting at the table, her hands shaking, her face ashen and eyes wide.

Then, out of the corner of one eye, she spotted a blur of black moving toward the door.

"Severus."

He halted mid-step.

Slowly, Hermione turned her head to look at him. "Don't leave."

"I do not see any possible reason my presence would ..."

"Please," she interrupted swiftly, her eyes pleading with him to stay. Hermione had spent many hours with the taciturn man over the last few years and now considered him her friend, as well as her mentor and employer. She knew if there was one person who would be objective in his observations, it was Severus Snape. She valued his opinion, and she needed his forthright manner to keep her grounded.

Severus sighed, then nodded his acquiescence, and was about to return to the table when Draco attempted to edge past him. Severus quickly grabbed the blond man's arm.

"You stay," he murmured quietly. "I will not be left here alone in a room full of Gryffindors and one crazy Ravenclaw."

Draco stared at his former Head of House as if he had gone completely around the bend. "Me? No, I don't think so," Draco said before attempting to pass once more.

"Remember that day in June almost five years ago when you were arse-deep in trouble?" the Potions master hissed. "I saved that arse; sit it in a chair. *Now.*"

Draco grumbled, "I don't suppose this will fulfil that life debt I owe you."

"No." He considered a moment before allowing, "Perhaps. It depends on how the evening goes."

Gripping Draco's arm, Severus physically shoved him into a chair. He then took his own seat adjacent to Hermione's now empty chair, which separated him from Ron. He leant back, his legs stretched out, arms crossed upon his chest and his expression neutral; he was the very picture of indifference.

Arthur cleared his throat before saying, "Well, then. Why don't we all take a seat and discuss what we've just heard."

Luna's face showed her confusion. "What are you talking about?" She squeezed Hermione's hand tighter, obviously frightened. "What's happened?"

"Don't you remember, Luna?" Hermione asked, a feeling of deep unease overcoming her. She took a deep breath and then rose up to take the seat next to Luna that had previously been occupied by Neville. She closed her eyes as if to block out her thoughts. *If Luna doesn't remember what just happened, then maybe it was a true prophecy. No. That's impossible. It can't be true ...*

"Remember what?" Luna asked, her puzzlement apparent to all.

"You were just standing there," Ginny explained as the others sat down at the table, "and your eyes ... they rolled back in your head, and then you ... you said some things.

But it wasn't you, or rather, it wasn't your voice ... exactly." Ginny faded away as she became lost in her own thoughts regarding the meaning of what Luna had said.

Luna, however, immediately brightened. "Really? I did that? Am I a Seer? How wonderful! Daddy will be thrilled, of course. Think of what this could mean for *The Quibbler*! I could write a daily column with my predictions and ..."

"Luna!" Hermione interrupted loudly, causing the other girl to jump. Lowering her voice, she continued, "Has this ever happened before?"

Luna looked thoughtful for a moment. "No, I don't believe so. Why?"

Ron leant across the table, looking intently into Luna's grey eyes. "'Cause how else will we know if what you said is a real prophecy or not? Did you eat something funny earlier? Been feeling a bit off lately? Or, erm, more off than usual?"

"Ron! That was uncalled for!" Hermione exclaimed, offended for her friend.

Ron slumped down in his seat, his ears as red as his hair. "Doesn't mean it isn't true," he grumbled under his breath, turning his face away when Hermione glared at him.

"That's enough of that. We will discuss this prophecy like rational adults," Molly admonished.

Ron's eyes snapped to his mother's face, his own visage incredulous. "You mean you're taking this seriously?" He looked around the room, surprised to see all the solemn expressions. "You are!" he scoffed. "Bloody hell! This is crazy! Luna's no Seer no offence, Luna. How do we know this whatever it is she said is for real?"

"Let's just discuss it, first, Ron," Arthur said. "Then we will decide what, if anything, to do with the information it contains. First we should discuss the evidence for and against the possibility of what we just heard being a prophecy."

Hermione agreed with Ron, but she also knew that even if she were to drag him out of the house right now, he wouldn't be able to let it go. It would eat at him until he figured out what Luna's words meant and she had no idea *what* he would do then.

Ron was about to protest again when he felt Hermione's hand clasp his. "It's all right, Ron. Let's just talk about it, and then we can leave. Okay?"

He could feel her hand trembling and realised she was as upset as he was. Ron turned his hand in hers, entwining their fingers together. "Okay, Hermione. Okay." After a brief squeeze of his fingers, she released his hand. "So, Dad," Ron began, "where do we start?"

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A quarter of an hour later found the small gathering of friends, family, and two Slytherins in reluctant agreement that it was *possible* that Luna was a Seer and had just given her first prophecy. Harry had personal experience with prophecies, and his recollection of the one given by Sybill Trelawney in his third year at Hogwarts coincided with what they had all witnessed that evening. The eyes, the voice, Luna's lack of memory ... all were evidence of a true prophetic experience.

Hermione was not looking forward to discussing the "prophecy" itself; she knew what it implied. She didn't believe it for a moment, but did worry that the others might especially Ron. Hermione sat in her chair, her hands clasped tightly together, her head bowed. She would not contribute to this discussion; let them figure it out for themselves. Then they would see how ridiculous this was.

"Now that we have that settled, let's discuss the meaning. Do you have any thoughts, Hermione?" Minerva asked shrewdly.

Startled, Hermione's eyes swung to her former professor's. She did not want to talk about this. "I don't really remember ..."

"Here, Hermione," Ginny responded, sliding a piece of parchment in front of the unsettled young woman. "As soon as I heard 'It comes to pass' ... well, I already had a quill and parchment, so I thought it might be a good idea to write it down."

Hermione attempted to smile at her future sister-in-law, but managed only a slight grimace. With trembling fingers, she picked up the dreaded parchment and silently read the words.

*After the light has overcome the darkness, the sun of the phoenix will shine upon the lioness. Heart to heart and mind to mind, they will speak only to the other. The dragon saviour will enrapture the brightest of the age. Her heart will be his reward. Separate, there is discord. Together, there is harmony. The sun of the phoenix will shine upon the lioness after the light has overcome the darkness.*

She had hoped that by some miracle the words on the page would be different from those she had heard Luna utter earlier in the evening, but unfortunately Ginny had managed to capture the entire prophecy exactly as Luna had spoken it. Hermione shook her head slightly, not trusting her voice to remain impassive.

Wordlessly, she passed the parchment to Ron. He immediately handed it to his mother without even reading it, as if doing so would admit it held some grain of truth.

Molly was obviously troubled by Hermione and Ron's reaction, but then she cleared her throat and read the words aloud, so all in the room could be reminded of what the prophecy stated.

The room was silent once again as its occupants each pondered ways to interpret the meaning.

"We can all agree that the 'lioness' and 'the brightest of the age' must indicate Hermione, particularly given the time frame 'after the light has overcome the darkness,'" Minerva said, sliding a glance at Hermione.

The murmur of agreement in the room was silenced when Hermione exasperatedly cried, "How do we know that means *now*? Professor Trelawney's prophecies came true, yes, but the first one took almost twenty years to be entirely fulfilled! How do we know this isn't for some other 'brightest of the age' twenty years from now?" She looked at Ron, attempting to smile encouragingly. "We don't know for certain that it's me."

It was Remus who explained. "Prophecies are certainly tricky things, but as far as I know, they are always revealed at the most prudent time. From the wording, it would be my opinion that this prophecy definitely refers to you, Hermione."

"There are *no* known instances of a prophecy being given well in advance of its needed time?" Hermione asked, hoping against hope that Remus was wrong.

Tonks immediately spoke up. "Sure there are! There's a whole room of prophecies in the Department of Mysteries! They haven't been fulfilled yet and some of them have been there for centuries."

Hermione latched onto Tonks' logic. "Yes, that's right! We saw hundreds and hundreds of prophecies in that room!"

Draco glanced at Severus and rolled his eyes. Hermione noticed and irritably snapped, "What?"

"That they were still in the room only indicates that no one had come to claim them, not that they had not yet been fulfilled," Draco drawled in his typical superior manner.

Hermione visibly deflated. Draco was right about that. She sneaked another look at Ron. He was not speaking; for once, he seemed to be holding his temper in check, but she could see that he was listening very carefully.

"Still," she said, "surely not all of those have been fulfilled? Doesn't anyone keep record of this type of thing?"

"I'm afraid not, Hermione," Minerva responded. "Many prophecies are never even registered with the Department of Mysteries, and though it may be surprising, no one is interested in keeping record of whether or not a prophecy is fulfilled. It is assumed in our world that when a true prophecy is spoken, it *will be* fulfilled. There is no reason to question that."

"I see," Hermione said as she struggled to maintain her composure. This was not what she wanted to hear.

"Regardless, my dear," Minerva told her, "what we need to decide this evening is whether or not this particular prophecy could refer to you, as well as who the other person mentioned might be, and what that could mean for ..." Minerva paused as she caught sight of Ron's stony expression. "Well, what it could mean for all of the involved parties."

Hermione thrust her hands into her mass of curly hair, tugged in frustration, then threaded her fingers at the nape of her neck.

"Fine," she said through clenched teeth. "I will concede that it could *possibly* be referring to me, although I am not saying I believe that it is." She loved Ron; she would hold onto that love with everything within her.

Concerned glances were exchanged throughout the room, but Hermione was unaware. Her attention was solely focussed on the table in front of her. She would not break down not here; not now.

Hermione raised her head and looked around the room. Her eyes finally fell on her employer and friend. He had no vested interest in this matter; she could trust him to be objective.

"Severus, tell me, please. Do *you* believe this prophecy is about me?"

Severus had been quietly observing the discussion, only offering his opinion when directly asked. Hermione found herself drawn into his intense gaze as his dark eyes bore into hers, his index finger tapping a steady rhythm upon his arm. Her breathing quickened; she knew this look she had known him since she was a child, after all and she recognised it as an indication that what he was about to say was of the utmost importance.

"Yes, Hermione, I do," Severus stated, his voice devoid of any mockery or disdain.

Hermione sank back into her chair; her only thought was that this could not be happening to her.

Molly noted Hermione's growing distress and decided to move the discussion along.

"Why don't we discuss the rest of it now, dear," Molly said soothingly. "Interpreting the rest may shed some light on the matter don't you agree?"

After a moment's hesitation, Hermione nodded. She was ready for the discussion to be over; she wanted to go to her room, curl up in her bed with her cat, and sleep for a week.

"Fine, dear. Now then what was that line about hearts and minds? Oh, yes," Molly said, looking at the words on the parchment, "'Heart to heart and mind to mind speak only to the other. Apart there is discord. Together there is harmony.' Sounds to me as if it's talking about ..." Molly abruptly stopped speaking, a peculiar expression on her face.

"Sounds like what, Molly?" Remus asked, voicing the thoughts of several others in the room.

The Weasley matriarch shared a significant look with Tonks before answering, "Soul mates."

Molly was clearly uncomfortable now. Inwardly, Hermione allowed herself to feel a small amount of satisfaction. *Now, you don't want to know any more either, do you?* She thought.

Ron snorted and averted his eyes from the group, staring at the wall. He was otherwise silent, but again, Hermione knew him well enough to know that he was thinking, mulling over everything being said in the room.

Harry, however, had come to the erroneous conclusion that this latest revelation was a good thing.

"The other person it talks about has to be Ron, then," Harry concluded. "Right, mate? You're getting married it has to be talking about you."

Draco couldn't help himself; he rolled his eyes once again and said, "It would be helpful if we actually looked at what the bloody prophecy says rather than making useless assumptions."

Harry glared at the pretentious pure-blood prat until his wife thrust her elbow in his ribs.

"Draco is right," Ginny pointed out. "The first line says 'the sun of the phoenix will shine upon the lioness.'"

"What the bloody hell does 'sun of the phoenix' mean?" Harry asked without thinking.

Ginny's elbow connected once again with her husband's ribcage. "That's about the Order, you dolt! It's obvious!"

Harry rubbed his sore ribs and said, "Oh. Well, that's good, right? Ron's a member of the Order. See? It makes sense."

Ron seemed to perk up a bit at that, hope overcoming the stony exterior he had been projecting since the discussion began.

Hermione's inner voice, however, was whispering all her misgivings concerning her impending nuptials. *Yes, but if this is true I don't believe our hearts and minds speak only to the other ...* She immediately shoved the thought out of her head. She and Ron were to be married. Everyone had always known they would be married they were perfect for each other. Certainly they bickered a little all right, a lot but what couple didn't? Obviously they had differing interests, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. *After all, she thought, opposites attract, and all that rot.*

Her thoughts were interrupted when Remus began speaking.

"So we have an Order member. What was the other line? Oh yes. The dragon saviour."

Ron's head popped up instantly, searching out his father's eyes. "Charlie," he rasped. "Charlie saves dragons all the time, and he's a member of the Order." His eyes closed as if to protect himself from the painful thought of his brother and fiancée as soul mates.

Hermione had known from the moment she'd heard the words spoken that this would be the conclusion everyone would reach. To hear it said aloud made it real and it made her angry.

"Ronald Weasley! You honestly believe that Charlie could be my soul mate? Charlie *yourbrother?*" Hermione said distastefully. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! I barely know the man, much less speak to him 'heart to heart' and 'mind to mind.' We have absolutely nothing in common!"

Ron struggled to suppress his anguish and his temper. "Neither do we, Hermione! Name one thing, besides magic, Harry, and Voldemort, that we have in common. One thing!"

Hermione sputtered, desperately trying but failing to think of one thing *just one thing* that she and Ron shared in common that didn't fall under one of the categories he had mentioned. Unable to think of something anything she glared at her fiancé and retorted, "Don't be childish, Ron!" hoping that he had not noticed her hesitation.

Once again it was Harry who, in hopes of distracting everyone from the thought of Charlie, only succeeded in making matters worse. "Wait a minute, now. We don't know this means Charlie. I mean, 'dragon' could be talking about Draco! Draco means dragon, right?"

Draco's eyebrows shot up, his eyes wide with shock. "Whoa! Just a minute, Wonder-Boy. Don't drag me into this!"

At the mention of Draco's name, Ron's tenuous hold on his emotions snapped. His breathing was audibly strained, as if someone were sitting on his chest. Hermione watched in morbid fascination as his jaw clenched and unclenched. Abruptly, Ron stood, knocking over his chair in his haste.

"I have to go ... now. I can't stay here."

Hermione leapt to her feet, shaking her head in denial. "Please, Ron. Don't do this," she begged. His face was etched with a grief so profound it broke her heart.

"I can't ... I'm sorry, Hermione." He stormed from the kitchen, the door swinging behind him. He hadn't even looked at her.

Hermione stared, watching the door sway back and forth until it finally came to rest. As she collapsed into her chair, her face crumpled, and she dissolved into tears. The dam burst, and the feelings she had been keeping in check all evening finally broke free.

Molly and Luna were by her side in an instant, each wishing to offer comfort, but at the moment, comfort was the last thing Hermione wanted. Her emotions rolled over her in waves, and right now anger was at the forefront.

Hermione glared at Harry. "You had to go and mention Draco, didn't you?" she accused. "What were you thinking, Harry? And Charlie, too? Do any of you really think either of them could possibly be my soul mate? I certainly don't!" she screeched, her voice rising in intensity with each word.

Molly continued her attempts to console the overwrought young witch, rubbing Hermione's back in slow circles. "It will be all right, Hermione," she soothed, softly repeating the words over and over.

Hermione had finally had enough. "No. It is *not* all right. I walked in here this evening engaged to be married to the man I love, and I'm leaving without him. How the *fuck* is that all right?"

"Hermione!" was gasped by more than one person in the room; Hermione rarely cursed.

"I don't care," she seethed. "First it's Charlie, then it's Draco." Her eyes fell upon the dark-haired man seated across the table. "Next you'll be claiming it's Severus!" she exclaimed, gesturing in the man's general direction. "This is ludicrous!" she choked out before bursting into loud, messy sobs once more.

Abruptly, Severus stood up, his chair audibly scraping against the stone floor.

"My presence here is obviously no longer required. I have no desire to witness any more of the Weasley-Granger soap opera," he spat, his voice dripping with disdain. He swept across the room toward the door, his black eyes as cold as ice, and his fists clenched at his sides. With a dramatic swirl of his robes, he was gone.

Hermione hiccupped; her weeping had come to an immediate stop at Severus' words. For the second time that night she found herself staring at the kitchen door she had thought he was her friend. How could he mock her suffering?

A fresh wave of pain washed over her and her eyes overflowed once more. Hot tears fell down her cheeks, leaving salty trails in their wake. This time, she allowed herself to find solace in Molly Weasley's motherly embrace.

*Up next .... What does Severus think of all of this?*

## Renevatio

### Chapter 3 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

### Chapter Three

#### Renevatio

Diagon Alley was not typically busy in the early evening, particularly on a weekday, but it was an unusually warm spring day, and more than a few families and shoppers were milling about. Some were enjoying dinner at a café's outside tables, and several families were heading to Florean Fortescue's for an after-dinner ice cream. It was a beautiful evening, perfect for window shopping and strolling down the winding cobbled street.

A loud *crack* disrupted the idyllic scene. Gasps and strangled screams were heard as Severus Snape, Death Eater-turned-spy, Apparated into the middle of Diagon Alley, his countenance positively livid. Customary sneer affixed to his mouth, he stalked toward his apothecary, his terrifying expression causing people to scurry out of his path as he approached. Inwardly, Severus smirked; it was good to know he could still intimidate the masses.

Severus was so angry he could barely think beyond going home and pouring himself a stiff drink. His long legs quickly took him to Renevatio Elixirs and Apothecary.

Emblazoned on the wooden sign above the door was the shimmering symbol of a phoenix, which perpetually burned in a burst of blue flame, only to rise from the ashes again. He watched the magical logo, entranced by the movement, and allowed its symbolism to calm him. *Renevatio*. Truly, the shop was his renewal, his second chance at life. Feeling himself relax slightly, Severus removed his wand from his sleeve to check the wards he had placed prior to leaving for the meeting at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Satisfied that no one had attempted entry during his absence, he waved his wand at the blank wall next to the entrance to *Renevatio*. A door materialised, and after Severus determined that the ward on this door had also not been breached, he entered, climbing the narrow staircase to his flat above the shop.

As Severus crossed the threshold, he felt the tingle of magic indicating his wards recognised his magical signature. Home. Thank Merlin. Anger and resentment still coursed through his veins but were tempered somewhat now that he had arrived in his sanctuary.

A red blur sped out the doorway to his right, causing Severus to raise his arm to provide his feathered friend a place to land. "Hello, Fawkes," he said to the scarlet phoenix, running his left hand over the bird's plumage. Fawkes trilled a greeting as he rubbed his head against the Potions master's hand and then flew to his perch in the far corner of the sitting room.

Severus removed his light-weight robes, hanging them on the coat stand in the small hallway. His long fingers lingered a moment on the fine material. After so many years of wearing teaching robes, he had decided to continue the custom. In the beginning, it had been much like wearing a costume, but the billowing robes had become a part of him a part of his teaching persona that he did not wish to forgo. He admitted to having a bit of a flair for the dramatic he was a Slytherin, after all. These robes, unlike those he had worn as a professor, were of the finest quality he could afford. Severus had lived a sparse existence for much of his life, with very little in the way of creature comforts. One corner of his mouth lifted slightly; he certainly did not have to live in such a way any longer.

Leaving the hall, he stepped into the sitting room, stopping to take in the masculine elegance of the room. After his Spartan quarters at Hogwarts, these were lavish in comparison. The flat was not excessively large, but suited his needs. There was a small eat-in kitchen, a bedroom with an en-suite bath, and the large sitting room he was currently standing in.

The sitting room was his favourite room, and where evenings often found him reading before the fire whilst Fawkes rested on his perch in the corner. In front of the marble fireplace was a large, midnight blue sofa, which anchored an intricately woven Persian rug and was flanked by two saffron-coloured winged-back chairs edged in a deep blue. A mahogany table sat behind the sofa; on it was a rectangular sterling silver tray upon which sat three expensive crystal decanters, two matching crystal glasses, and a bottle of gin. The room was tastefully done Severus had selected the furnishings himself with warm walls in the same colour as the chairs, mahogany bookshelves, and curtains of midnight blue and gold. Having spent most of his life surrounded by Slytherin green, he had no desire to have that particular colour here. No, here he had been able to make a true home for himself one outside of his family, outside of Hogwarts.

After twenty years of blood, sweat, and yes, even the occasional tears not to mention six months in Azkaban he had paid his debt to wizarding society for his foolish teenage mistakes. Severus nodded to himself. He might never be able to fully pay for his complicity in Albus' death at least not to his satisfaction but he had sacrificed much of his adult life for this world. He had no desire to punish himself further, especially if said punishment involved living in that ramshackle house in Spinner's End.

Content that everything was as he had left it, Severus began viciously rolling up his shirtsleeves, muttering under his breath about foolish, idiotic dunderhead Gryffindors who couldn't see beyond the tips of their own wands. It was definitely time for a drink.

Severus made his way to the table behind the sofa; he dismissed the port immediately and considered the brandy for a moment before reaching for the decanter of firewhisky. Picking up one of the heavy crystal glasses from the tray, he poured himself two fingers, then reconsidered and added another finger; he had a feeling he would need it before the night was out. After replacing the stopper, he walked around to the front of the sofa and waved a negligent hand toward the fireplace, igniting the fire with a nonverbal *Incendio*. He eased himself down into the plush brocade of the sofa, loosened the collar of his shirt, then stretched out his long legs and leant back to contemplate the evening's events.

Everyone who had been in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, save for himself and perhaps young Malfoy, were obviously dead from the neck up. Merlin's hairy toes! Did they honestly believe Charlie Weasley could be Hermione's soul mate? Then Potter had felt compelled to drag in Draco Malfoy's name. They were idiots, every single one of them. The identity of the other person mentioned in the prophecy was as obvious as the prodigious protuberance on his face. Even Hermione Granger, know-it-all above all know-it-alls, had not come to the correct conclusion and worse, she had used him to show just how ridiculous she felt the prophecy truly was. That was what had angered him the most, he decided: her casual dismissal of even the *idea* of him being her soul mate. It was especially disconcerting given the identity of the soul mate in question. Oh yes, the other person in the prophecy was none other than Severus Snape himself.

It was readily apparent to him that no one in the room thought he was worthy enough to be considered for even a single moment. As for Severus, he had known the instant Miss Lovegood had spoken that it referred to him. In his mind, it was irrefutable if the prophecy were to be believed, he and Hermione were soul mates. The only question in his mind was *what to do now?*

Staring at the fire, Severus raised the glass of firewhisky to his lips and allowed himself a swallow. Hermione Granger. The insufferable, know-it-all Gryffindor. He snorted, and then his lips quirked up into a small smile. She had been more than just an annoying former student for a long time. She was, for lack of a better term, his friend one of only a few to have that privilege. Crossing his legs at the ankle and settling himself into a more comfortable position, Severus allowed himself to think back to how it all began.

The months immediately following Albus Dumbledore's death had been the loneliest of his life. He had thought he had known loneliness he had spent twenty years living as a caricature of a man, avoiding relationships of any kind but that had been nothing compared to the complete isolation he had experienced in those few months after he ... after Albus had died. No one had known his true loyalties, and he had found himself hunted by the Order and the Ministry, whilst at the same time reviled by the Death Eaters, who were angry about the half-blood who had managed to become second in rank to only the Dark Lord himself.

Following Albus' death, Fawkes had sung his final mourning song and then had left Hogwarts forever, flying to rendezvous with Severus, who had Draco with him, at a prearranged location. Two days of talking to the boy, helping him process through the happenings on the Astronomy Tower, had brought the desired result. Though it had been a wrench to lose the company of the only beings who knew his true agenda, Severus had sent Fawkes with Draco to the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix; Draco, for his protection, and Fawkes, to vouch for Draco's sincerity. Not even Potter would have been able to believe that Dumbledore's familiar would Apparate within headquarters with Draco Malfoy clinging to his glorious plumage unless the boy was innocent. Severus, then, had proceeded to the devil's lair.

He had struggled for weeks to stave off depression. His salvation had come in the unlikely forms of Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood.

To this day, he was not certain of all the events that had led to him being contacted by the two young women. His understanding was that Draco had been providing as much information to the Order as he could, but his knowledge had been limited. Albus had left some sort of evidence of the vow he had forced Severus to take a vow almost identical to the one Severus had made with Narcissa and apparently the two young women had convinced the Order to attempt to contact him.

Hermione had believed that Fawkes would know where to find him, no matter how deeply he was hidden inside Voldemort's camp. She certainly was a clever girl, for Fawkes had indeed known of his whereabouts. The phoenix had appeared in a burst of flame one evening, dropping a golden feather into Severus' lap an indication someone had a message for him. Soon thereafter, a meeting had been scheduled between himself, Hermione, and Miss Lovegood. The rest, as they say, is history.

After that first tense meeting, the odd trio had met as necessary at least once a month, and never in the same place twice to exchange information. His only contact with the Order had been through Hermione and Miss Lovegood. He had refused to meet with anyone else; each of the two young women had allowed him to use both Legilimency and Veritaserum to ascertain their trustworthiness. He had been pleased to discover that neither woman would allow his often biting words and infamous temper to faze them in the slightest. In fact, he had to admit that the exchange of sarcastic words between himself and Hermione that had invariably occurred at each of their meetings had been like a balm to his weary soul.

His lips twitched again into a brief smile as he recalled the meeting that had solidified his burgeoning friendship with Hermione Granger.



"What the bloody hell were you thinking, coming here alone, Miss Granger?" Severus ground out, his head throbbing in pain from the wound he had received during the brief skirmish that had occurred earlier in the evening.

"Luna couldn't come; she was needed at headquarters. Someone had to meet you! We need to know about that Horcrux!" the witch practically hissed at him.

Severus was aware that at any other time she would have been yelling at him, but that certainly wasn't appropriate for a clandestine meeting. He glowered at her as she approached him and was prepared to verbally eviscerate her when her eyes widened in concern.

"You're hurt!" she said, raising her hand to the gash on his forehead.

"I am fine, Miss Granger. Let me give you my report so we can both get out of here before we are discovered!"

Now it was her gaze that was narrowed at him. She placed her small hands on her hips, glared at him, and stated emphatically, "I am not leaving until I tend that wound. Sit down." She pointed to a wooden crate on the floor of the abandoned warehouse in which they were currently meeting.

Severus did not move. He was not about to be bossed around by this tiny, insignificant, little ...

"SIT!"

He sat, telling himself it was only to shut her up and not because he was intimidated in the slightest by the diminutive witch.

Miss Granger removed her wand from her sleeve, wielding it to stop the bleeding and heal the wound, all the while castigating him for not tending to the gash sooner. Did he care nothing for his own well-being? Severus countered by continuing to berate her for meeting him alone. It was too dangerous.

"Don't you care for your own well-being? Or are you being hypocritical?" he asked, his tone snide.

Her lips curled into a small smile as she leaned closer to him, running her fingers across his forehead to be sure the wound had healed properly. Severus closed his eyes as she leaned in, her breasts level with his face. When he was standing, the top of the petite witch's head barely reached his shoulder, but now that he was sitting .... If he were to turn his head just a bit, he could bury his nose in her warm flesh. He inhaled her scent and then cursed himself. It had been too long since he had been this close to a woman, and her proximity was playing havoc with his mind.

Apparently satisfied with her handiwork, Miss Granger moved away from him, and they exchanged the necessary information. After taking his report, she thanked him, and then prepared to Disapparate back to headquarters. She paused, however, lowered her wand, and looked at him, her eyes searching his for what, he was not certain.

"Please be careful, Mr Snape," she whispered, having learned long ago not to use his previous honorific.

Her concern caught him off-guard. She had never verbalised such a feeling before; he was instantly suspicious.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I am well aware of the importance of my efforts in this war. It would not do to lose your only spy at such a critical juncture, would it?" he retorted as he sneered at her.

If she was surprised by his bitterness, she did not show it. Instead, she cocked her head to one side, smiled sadly and said, "That may be true but I would miss our banter most of all."

Then she disappeared with a softpop, leaving behind a thoroughly bewildered, yet strangely warmed, Severus Snape.

Severus took another sip of the fiery liquid, relishing the burn as it slid down his throat. After that night, he had insisted that she call him Severus, an honour Hermione had clearly understood as she had immediately reciprocated by granting him permission to use her given name, as well. It was then that their unlikely friendship had truly begun. He was still amazed by it, by just how much he had come to cherish her friendship. He could not deny it, especially after his reaction at the battle of the Dark Lord's defeat.

As the dust cleared on the battlefield at Hogwarts, there was an unexpected moment of silence as the remaining Death Eaters realised their master had fallen to the wand of Harry Potter. In an instant, the fighting resumed as some of the Dark Lord's followers decided they would rather die, taking as many Order members and ministry Aurors with them as they could, than surrender.

Severus was injured, having taken a slicing hex to the leg when he had approached the place where Potter was duelling the Dark Lord, hexing Death Eaters along the way so no one could interfere. Now that it was over, he stood there, his leg bleeding profusely and his eyes on the pile of ash that had once been his so-called master. His thoughts, however, rested solely on one thing: where was Hermione?

He knew he would be taken to Azkaban at some point that day, but he'd be damned if it happened before he knew whether Hermione was alive or ... dead. She had not been with Potter or Weasley because the young men had insisted that she and Miss Weasley fight toward the edge of the battle. Too distracting, they had said. So Severus did not know where to begin looking for her. He noted that Potter and Weasley were essentially unharmed; Potter was kneeling on the ground, most likely overwhelmed with relief, and Weasley was jumping around like the idiot he was, making himself a prime target for a Death Eater's hex. Dunderhead.

He had just turned to begin his search when he heard Hermione calling out Potter's name. He looked in the direction of her voice and saw her and the youngest Weasley running toward them. Severus sagged with relief and then watched as Ron Weasley bounded toward the two young witches, embracing Hermione and swinging her off the ground to twirl her around.

Severus ignored the tightening in his chest at the sight; the Dark Lord was dead, and Hermione was safe. He was content.

Severus had lost consciousness from blood loss almost immediately after the trio's little reunion. He had awakened in Azkaban; it had taken six months for the Order to convince the Wizengamot of his true loyalties and to win his release. As loath as he was to be indebted to anyone, Severus knew he owed his survival and his freedom to Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood. Without them, the Order might never have contacted him, regardless of Albus' evidence.

By the time the first anniversary of the Second Fall of Voldemort had passed, Severus had bought and renovated the apothecary in Diagon Alley, renaming it Renevatio and using the phoenix as his logo in commemoration of his new life. Fawkes had appeared in his flat one evening and refused to leave. The bird must be a glutton for punishment. And so, Severus had acquired his first familiar.

Hermione had begun her studies at the Magical University in London and had needed a part-time job. So he had hired her as a brewer. It was a mutually beneficial relationship, and she, much like the continuing Order meetings, had provided him with companionship and friendship.

It had been Hermione's idea, of course, for him to attend the monthly meetings of the Order of the Phoenix. Severus had balked at first, stating he had no desire to attend and that no one but her, and perhaps Miss Lovegood, would want him there. The two young witches had insisted, however, that his presence was requested, and so, after much discussion, he had attended the first meeting. What he had found there were people who trusted him. They knew him; they knew what he stood for, the terrible sacrifices he had made, and whilst everyone might not like him, they respected him. He now attended each meeting without fail. That ragtag group of people were more of a

family to him than his parents had ever been, and although he would never publicly admit to it, he enjoyed the time spent catching up on each other's lives.

Overall, he was content with his life. There was only one small dark spot in the brightness of his days – Hermione's relationship with Ron Weasley.

Severus had not been surprised when, upon his release from prison, he had learnt that the two were seeing each other. He had been disappointed, certainly, but not surprised; the pair had been heading in that direction for years, after all. He had hoped Hermione would realise over time that she was completely incompatible with the young Auror, but obviously that had not happened. Instead, he had watched as the two argued their way through the next several years until this very evening when their engagement had been announced.

That had certainly caught him by surprise. When the announcement had been made, he had immediately left the table, afraid his shock and disapproval could be seen upon his face. Of all the stupid, ill-conceived ideas, this one had to take the Snitch. There was no way that Weasley could make Hermione happy, nor she him. The two had nothing in common but their friendship with Potter. They fought constantly over even the most trivial matters. A complete stranger could see that the two were merely very good friends, even if it was with "benefits." Severus scowled darkly at the thought of Weasley's hands caressing Hermione's unblemished skin ...

He looked into his now empty glass; he needed another drink. Standing to pour himself another firewhisky, he purposefully turned his thoughts to the other shocking event of the evening – Miss Lovegood's prophecy.

Settling himself back on the sofa with his drink, he considered the ramifications of the prophecy. So, he and Hermione were soul mates, their hearts, minds, and souls predestined to join together. His mouth tightened; he had never thought of her in those terms before, as more than a friend. He snorted into his glass. *No sense in lying to yourself now, old man. Oh, you've noticed her. How could you not?* Indeed. How could he not? He noticed her hands as they chopped ingredients whilst she was brewing. They were as meticulous as his own, and he had once suffered the insane thought that she had memorised the way he worked. He noticed the slender fingers as she gripped the chopping knife or the stirring rod. She had an adorable way of wrinkling her nose whilst chopping the more malodorous ingredients ... hell and damnation! Now the insufferable woman had him thinking words like *adorable!*

If he were to be completely honest with himself, Severus would have to admit that he noticed a lot of things about Hermione Granger. On more than one occasion, he had forced himself not to wonder what it would be like to have the dazzling smile she bestowed on the Weasley whelp focussed on *him*, to have those small hands held in *his*, her slim fingers entwined with *his*, to have those full lips kiss more than just his cheek, to have that petite body with its seductive curves melded to him rather than just the brushing of a friendly greeting.

Perhaps now he could ...

He shook his head, a lock of ebony hair falling into his eyes. No, it would not do to start thinking about *that* not yet, anyway. Sex was one thing, but the fact that they were soul mates indicated compatibility on a much deeper level; together, there would be harmony where there was once discord. Yes, this was more than just a coming together of flesh – this prophecy spoke of love.

Love. That was one emotion with which Severus Snape was not familiar. Oh, he had loved his mother, he supposed, and he had loved Albus more than he had his own father – but this was different. Could he *love* her? Was he capable of feeling such an emotion? The prophecy had not said anything about how he would *feel* about her.

He raked the fingers of one hand through his hair, set his glass upon his knee, and leant his head on the back of the sofa. His eyes gazed, unseeing, at the ceiling. Severus didn't know if he was able to fall in love, but he did know that if there was one person in the world whom he *could* love, it would be Hermione Granger. How could he not? She was perfection wrapped up in one petite, bushy-haired package. He might not have consciously realised it before, but now that he had heard the prophecy, he could see it – she was his equal in every way. He enjoyed that she stood up to him, that she could give as good as she got. No one had ever been able to keep up with him verbally the way she could. Hermione understood him in a way that not even Albus ever had done. She *knew* him – well, at least as much of him as he had permitted her to know.

He considered that for a moment. The prophecy said he would enrapture her, that they would speak to each other "heart to heart" and "mind to mind." If that were true, and he believed it was, then she would come to love him for *himself*, not some carefully cultivated persona. Could he do that – open himself to someone in such a way?

He needed to determine how he wished to handle this. His face twisted in renewed consternation as he remembered Hermione's reaction to the prophecy – she wasn't happy and was most assuredly in denial, most likely due to the impact such a revelation would have on her relationship with Weasley.

Severus sighed and closed his eyes. What a bloody mess.

Perhaps he should just tell her that the prophecy referred to him. No. She would either run screaming from the room – and his life – or, assuming she even believed in the prophecy at all at this point, she would come to him resigned to her fate. Neither scenario was acceptable to him. He wanted her to love him, not feel a sense of duty toward him.

Severus groaned as he realised his only option was to *woo* her. He had never courted a witch before, but after this evening of reflection, he believed he *could* do it. Hermione had similar interests to his, and that would simplify matters.

He lifted his head and finished off the glass of firewhisky. He could do this. He would wait until Weasley stepped aside, as he most certainly would; then, he would be her friend as she recovered from the dissolution of her engagement, and after a sufficient period of time had passed, he would woo her. He would show her all of who he was, she would come to love him, and then, her heart would be his reward.

Severus stood, placed his empty glass on the drinks tray, waved his hand to douse the fire, and walked to his bedroom, unbuttoning his fine linen shirt as he went.

He pulled the shirttail free from the confines of his trousers; a wave of his hand lit the wall sconces, the candles casting a warm glow. The room was cosy and inviting, its dark blue walls, mahogany furniture, and gold-coloured bedding a perfect complement to the furnishings of the sitting room.

Deciding to take a shower, Severus toed off his dragon-hide boots before entering the marble bathroom. He tossed his shirt into the laundry basket; unfastening the first few buttons of his trousers, he walked over to the shower, leant in to test the temperature, and adjusted it to his satisfaction. He finished unbuttoning his trousers, hooked his thumbs into the waistband, and pulled off his remaining clothing in one go, allowing it to fall to the floor. He banished the small pile into the laundry basket and then stepped into the steaming hot shower.

He stood still for a moment, his arms braced against the shower wall, and his head bowed under the pulsing stream as he allowed the water to wash over his pale form. After a few moments, Severus grabbed the bar of sandalwood soap and began to wash himself, first his arms, then his chest and stomach, before washing his legs and feet.

As he rinsed the soap from his body, he wondered again if he could really do it. Could he, Severus Snape – the greasy git, bat of the dungeons – actually enrapture the heart of Gryffindor's golden girl? Only time would tell for certain, but the prophecy indicated that he could – indeed, that he *would* win the love of Hermione Granger.

As the hot water beat upon his body, his mind full of the possibility of Hermione, his soap-slick hand went instinctively to his semi-erect penis. Severus closed his eyes, seeing her hands reaching for him – welcoming him – and gave himself over to the pleasure as he pumped into his fist, feeling instead the tight warmth of her body as it tightened in time to her cries, until his seed pulsed from him in a jerking stream, pouring over his fingers and onto the shower floor before swirling down the drain.

His body now both cleansed and sated, Severus stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel, briskly drying himself before wrapping the fluffy white fabric around his waist. He walked back into his bedroom and grabbed a pair of soft navy blue pyjama bottoms from his wardrobe, quickly pulling them on before sliding beneath the gold damask duvet.

"Nox," he said, extinguishing the candles as he pulled the bed covering up to his chest.

He closed his eyes and was drifting between sleep and wakefulness when a long-forgotten memory surfaced. It was of the year of the Triwizard Tournament, Hermione's fourth year, right after the incident with her teeth. Severus winced as he recalled his cruel words and her stricken face. He had been under a great deal of stress, his Mark had been darkening, indicating the Dark Lord was growing stronger, and he had lashed out at her reflexively. A few hours later, he had given his report to Albus.

As always, Albus had listened patiently as Severus relayed every detail of the episode between the Slytherin and Gryffindor students, including his own words to the female third of the Golden Trio. Rather than chiding him as he had expected, the headmaster had simply looked at him, his blue eyes serious as he had held Severus' gaze. The words he had spoken had seemed out of place at the time, but now Severus had to wonder if Albus had known something, even then.

"You should consider your words with the girl carefully, Severus," Albus had said, his tone thoughtful. "You will come to appreciate her, some day."

How could Albus have known that? Severus contemplated the memory for a moment before brushing it aside. The old man had always seemed to him to have some sort of omniscience; this was just another example.

Severus turned onto his side and burrowed into the warm bedding. For the first time in his life, he allowed himself the luxury of dreaming of a loving wife and a family he could call his own.

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A:N: *Up next ... Hermione and Ron. How are they dealing with the prophecy?*

*My continued thanks to the betas!*

## Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

Chapter 4 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.*

Chapter Four

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do

The small library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place had always been Hermione's favourite room at headquarters; with its large fireplace, comfortable leather furniture, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, she felt truly at home. It was definitely one of the perks of living in the old house. Hermione often spent evenings curled up on the sofa, surrounded by books and parchment as she completed her homework for her university classes. This night was no exception the only difference was that tonight she just couldn't seem to keep her mind on her work.

She stretched, her small cotton tee-shirt riding up briefly to expose her tummy, and then yawned as she twisted her back to the left and then to the right in an attempt to work out the kinks from sitting in one position for so long. Carefully, she picked up all of her parchments, organising them and then placing them in the rucksack that rested on the floor. She then stacked all of the books neatly, in alphabetical order by subject and title, so that she could put them away when she was ready to return to her room.

Her work finally complete for the evening, Hermione settled herself back onto the sofa, her back supported by the armrest. She wrapped her arms around her flannel-covered legs and rested her chin on her knees, her thoughts turning to Ron; she had neither seen nor heard from her fiancé since that fiasco of an Order meeting last week. She had tried contacting him by both Floo and owl, but he had not responded to any of her missives. She had even gone so far as to visit the barracks at Auror headquarters, only to be told that Ron had requested to go on personal leave for a few days; the person she had spoken with had not known when he would return. Even Harry had no idea where Ron had disappeared to.

Hermione was beside herself with worry; Ron had never been out of contact with her for more than a day. She was frustrated with him for hiding from her, but she was also keenly aware that the past seven days had not been without some benefit. She had spent the week mulling over the so-called prophecy, as well as her relationship with Ron, and had reached some unsettling conclusions.

She loved Ron, but she was not completely certain about their long-term compatibility as a couple.

Hermione had always believed that she and Ron were meant to be together, yet something had consistently niggled at the back of her mind. Along with Harry, he was her best friend, and she had assumed their friendship would be a solid foundation for their marriage. Hermione had often worried, however, over their utter lack of common interests. Her mother had once told her that being in love meant that you accepted a person exactly as they were without attempting to change them into who you wanted them to be. Yet, that was exactly what she had always done in her relationship with Ron forcing him to study, begging (sometimes even bribing) him to read more, insisting they stay in for a quiet evening on a Friday night rather than hit the town as he enjoyed. Ron did the same with her wanting her to take flying lessons to "get over" her fear of riding a broom, taking her to clubs when she would rather go to a museum, dragging her to Quidditch matches, certain that *this* time would be different, and she would come to love the sport.

Hermione sighed. The fact was, Ron had been right they had nothing but magic, Harry, and the fight against Voldemort in common. It wasn't that she believed she had to have *everything* in common with him it was good for a couple to have some interests of their own but they share ~~no~~ common interests and instead had spent the last four years attempting to mould each other into their ideal mate.

They weren't in love with each other they were in love with the *idea* of being in love with each other.

Feeling a headache coming on, she massaged her temples with her fingertips and then removed the bobble and clips that were holding back her hair, allowing the curls to tumble down her back. Reaching into her rucksack, she rummaged around until she found a headache potion. Immediately after she swallowed the foul-tasting liquid, she felt its effects as the pain receded. She idly made a mental note to work on brewing a better tasting headache remedy after she completed her Potions mastery that summer.

Hermione returned to her position on the sofa, her mind instantly returning to its prior train of thought. Her conclusion that she and Ron should not marry had not been as surprising to her as she might have previously expected. It hurt her to think that their relationship was doomed to failure, but it hurt her even more to think that her decision to call off their wedding might break Ron's heart and ruin the very friendship she so treasured.

She supposed she owed Luna's so-called prophecy a bit of thanks; although she didn't believe Charlie Weasley was the man for her, it had caused her to think about her relationship with Ron and avoid a potentially devastating mistake. Hermione was still shocked that so many who had heard the prophecy that night actually believed that she and Charlie were soul mates. She shook her head; regardless of what they thought, she knew that idea was preposterous. The more she thought about it, the less sense it made. She had no more in common with Charlie than she did Ron! At least she was friends with Ron she hardly even knew Charlie!

No, Hermione definitely did not believe the prophecy was true. She had always had a problem with the idea of Divination it all seemed so vague but she did learn something from that prophecy: she wanted the kind of relationship it had described.

She wanted a relationship with someone who spoke with her "heart to heart" and "mind to mind." She wanted to know what it felt like to be totally enraptured by a man, to only feel truly at peace when in his presence. She wanted the fairy tale; she wanted someone to be *the one*.

Hermione sighed again. Fat chance there was of that.

She stretched her legs out in front of her and rested the back of her head on the armrest, staring at the ceiling and allowing her thoughts to drift back to the other events of the week. University classes had gone well, as always, although work had been strange. Several times Hermione had caught Severus watching her, only to have him glance away quickly when he noticed that she was looking at him. She giggled a little. Each time, the look on his face had reminded her of a naughty schoolboy. She wasn't quite sure what that was all about, but it had been entertaining.

"You sound happy," Hermione heard a familiar voice say from the direction of the doorway.

Scrambling into a sitting position, her eyes sought out the owner of the voice; she found him leaning against the door frame, his blue eyes tinged with regret.

"Hello, Ron."

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Hermione and Ron stared at each other for a few moments before she rose from her seat to greet her fiancé with an awkward hug. They sat on the warm leather sofa, one at either end, each attempting to endure the uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Hermione turned her head to face him and spoke, keeping her tone neutral. "Where have you been? I tried to contact you several times."

Ron fidgeted a bit, the fingers of one hand pulling on a reddening ear. "Yeah, I know. I ... erm ... I went to see Charlie."

"Charlie!" Hermione exclaimed, her expression incredulous. "Why?"

"I had to see him! I had to *know*, Hermione!" he responded, his voice taut with emotion.

She shook her head and her nose wrinkled in distaste. "Don't tell me you honestly believe that rubbish about *soul mates*? Because that is exactly what it is, Ron rubbish."

He rolled his eyes. "Come on! You were there; you heard it! Luna is a Seer of course, I believe it!"

"Luna is *not* a Seer!" she screeched, her volatile emotions spilling over. She inhaled deeply, managing to rein in her temper. "I know Luna better than anyone, and I am telling you she is not a Seer. Surely you can see that?" she implored.

Ron glanced at her before turning his gaze to the fireplace. "I'm not so sure about *anything* anymore."

Hermione's eyes widened in mild surprise. "Ron," she breathed. "I don't know what to say to that except that I know how you feel."

It was his turn to inadvertently reveal the emotions lurking beneath the calm surface. "You do, do you?" he retorted angrily.

Hermione's heightened emotional state caused her temper to flare again. "Yes, I think I do! I'm ... I'm confused and upset! And you running off didn't help matters in the slightest! It was inconsiderate of you, leaving the way you did without telling anyone where you were going. I've been worried sick! You could have let me know you were leaving or at least responded to one of my messages, so that I would have known you were still alive!"

He looked as if he might return her angry words, but then he raked a hand through his ginger hair. Quietly, he said, "Mum knew where I was, if you had asked her. I had to know, Hermione. I had to ask Charlie about the prophecy. He told me it isn't him, but I can't shake the feeling that there's something he's not telling me."

Discussing Charlie was the last thing Hermione wanted to do. "I couldn't care less about your brother! And of course he said he it isn't him! That prophecy is total nonsense!"

Ron appeared unconvinced by her words. "Mum believes it. So do Remus and Professor McGonagall. Even Snape said it was possible! Why shouldn't I believe it? C'mon, Hermione you know how prophecies work."

She sighed; this was going nowhere. "It's Mr Snape and you know how I feel about Divination. Discussing this isn't going to change either of our minds; I don't believe it, and obviously you do."

There was another awkward silence for a few minutes until Ron apparently gathered up his Gryffindor courage and said, "I've done a lot of thinking this past week and not just about the prophecy either. I'm guessing by the look on your face that you have, too. Yeah?"

She nodded, startled by his unusual insight. "Yes, I have you, too?"

Ron suddenly stood, moving to stand in front of the fireplace, clearly offended by her question. "Of course I have! What did you think I was doing playing Quidditch with the dragons?" he asked loudly.

"Do not yell at me, Ronald Weasley!" Hermione demanded, her own voice having increased in volume.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he apologised sheepishly, "but this is affecting me, too, you know."

Hermione was suddenly overcome with the need to comfort him, and so she rose to embrace the man who had been her friend since childhood.

"I know this is affecting you how could I not?" she said, her eyes filled with understanding.

Ron shrugged. "You seemed rather put off that I didn't come running to your side the minute you called."

She pulled away and stared at him incredulously. "I seem rather put off that that you just left without telling you *fiancée* where you were you going! I was worried and I wanted to talk it through *with* you. You just left and then you ignored me! Of course, I'm put off!"

The uncomfortable silence returned yet again. Finally, Hermione whispered, "This isn't getting us anywhere, Ron. You're back now. That's all that matters."

Ron nodded, although he still did not look at her. "Do you want to know what I thought about?"

"If you'd like to share that with me, yes."

He sighed. "If I'd like to? I think I *need* to."

Nodding her understanding, Hermione said, "I have some things I'd like to discuss with you, as well. Erm ... why don't we sit back down?"

He agreed, and they returned to their seats on the sofa, each turned slightly to face the other.

Ron cleared his throat. "You know I love you, Hermione. I have since fourth year."

She smiled at him. "Yes, and I love you, too. I "

"Wait," he interrupted. "I need to get this out before I lose my nerve."

Hermione bit her lower lip as if the action would halt any words that might want to spill out, and then nodded, silently urging him to continue.

"When I was in Romania, Charlie and I had a long talk. He asked me what you and I do together that I enjoy the most ... you know, besides the obvious," he said, his ears turning red.

Hermione felt her own cheeks blush in response; that part of their relationship had never been an issue.

Clearing his throat again, he continued, "I couldn't name a single thing we do together that we both enjoy." His eyes were almost pleading with her to prove him wrong, to name something anything.

She couldn't, and she looked away, staring into the fire.

"I see," he said, his voice unusually devoid of emotion.

He stood and walked to the window, where he looked out into the night.

Hermione finally responded, her words carefully measured and deliberate. "I don't know what you want me to say. We've always known we don't like the same things this isn't exactly a new revelation."

He spun around to face her, throwing his arms toward her as if welcoming her words. "Right! So why are we together? Charlie asked me that, and I couldn't answer him. I just didn't have an answer."

Hermione's eyes drifted shut for a moment before she responded. "I've been asking myself that same question, and to be honest, Ron, I think it's because ... well, because we just think we *should* be together."

He quirked a familiar smile at her. "Just like my mum."

Laughing softly, she agreed, "Yes, like your mum. I think we've all just assumed that one day we'd get married, and so we sort of ignored anything that didn't fit with that assumption."

Ron nodded his agreement and then turned back toward the window. After a few moments, she heard him quietly say, "I feel a bit relieved, actually, that the prophecy didn't name me."

"You do?" she asked, shocked and a little hurt by that statement.

"I didn't right away, though, you know," he added quickly, spinning around to face her again. "I was angry at first, but after I thought about it for a while, I realised there's always been something that felt I don't know wrong, I guess, between us. Does that make sense?"

Hermione thought for a moment, and then nodded, deciding it was time to get to the crux of the matter. "Maybe it felt wrong because it *is* wrong. Maybe we aren't meant to be together in that way; maybe we're better off as just best friends."

Ron moved away from the window and crouched in front of her, his expression earnest. "You think so, too? You're not mad at me?"

"Oh, Ron. Of course, I'm not mad at you! I mean, I'm not happy with this at all I love you! But, yes, I do think that we would be better off as friends." Hermione shook her head ruefully. "We shouldn't get married we'd just end up resenting each other for not being who we want the other to be. And we'd lose a wonderful friendship one I cherish more than anything in the process. I couldn't stand for that to happen."

Relief flooded Ron's face, and he moved to sit on the sofa next to her, draping his arm across her shoulders. "I'm so glad to hear that, Hermione. Honest, I am and I feel the exact same way." He sneaked a glance at her from the corner of his eye. "Besides, you'll still be family someday." He squeezed her shoulder and pulled her closer to his side. "When you marry Charlie, you'll be my sister!"

Hermione shoved him away from her, inadvertently knocking him off of the sofa to the floor. She laughed, completely exasperated, yet happy their friendship appeared to remain intact. "Honestly, Ron! Don't be ridiculous! I told you, Charlie is not the man for me. Besides, you shouldn't be so anxious to see me with another man!"

He grinned cheekily as he brushed off his trousers with his hands and moved back onto the sofa. "Well, I think he *is* the man for you! And it wouldn't be so bad seeing you with another man." Her disbelieving look made him laugh; his jealous rages were legendary. "All right, I would hate it, but Charlie is the best, and I know he'll treat you right."

Hermione wondered how she could convince him once and for all that she was not interested in his brother. "I have nothing against Charlie he's a perfectly wonderful man but Ron, I have nothing in common with him! You and I just ended our romantic relationship less than two minutes ago, mind you because we have nothing in common. Why would I turn around and begin a relationship with *another* man I have nothing in common with? It makes no sense! Can't you see that is precisely why this prophecy is rubbish?"

"I know you believe that, Hermione, but I think Charlie is willing to give it a go. You should, too. He told me that he could see himself in love one day."

Hermione was utterly and completely gobsmacked. She struggled to gather her wits about her, until she finally sputtered, "What?! Charlie said he could see himself in love ... with *me*?"

Ron chuckled at her sceptical expression and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Well, no, not exactly." A raised hand stalled her interruption. "But he did say he could see himself in love. And the prophecy did talk about dragons and all that, so it has to be Charlie. He also told me that he's coming to see you soon. I think you should give him a chance."

She couldn't believe it this was so aggravating! "He said he's coming here to see me? All because of some stupid so-called prophecy." She stood, walking to the middle of

the room before continuing, her voice emphatic. "I do not believe that your brother is my soul mate. I do not believe this prophecy is real, and I will *not* allow it to dictate how I should live my life!"

Ron simply smirked at her, and she realised he had been deliberately provoking her ire.

"I knew you'd say that," he said, laughing as he stood and attempted to hug her.

"Ha ha. Very funny, Ronald," she said, pretending to pout and allowing him to embrace her. He hated it when she called him Ronald.

His deep chuckle reverberated in her ear. He grasped her shoulders, moving her away a bit so he could see her face. "Seriously, though, I think he is curious, and he might show up sometime. I just wanted to warn you."

Hermione ignored his statement for a moment, choosing instead to move back into his embrace. She had been terrified that ending their engagement would irrevocably damage their friendship. The fact that he could hold her like this showed that obviously was not the case; it was comforting to her.

Finally, she said, "Fine. I will deal with Charlie when the time comes, but I am telling you for the last time I am not interested in a relationship with him beyond friendship. He is not my soul mate."

Stepping away from her, Ron raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay," he said, laughing. "I can see I'm not going to convince you. Let's just agree to disagree, then. Yeah?"

She couldn't help but laugh, and she hugged him once again. "Well, that's nothing new for us, is it? Okay. We'll agree to disagree." Hermione tilted up her face to look at him, her gaze turning serious, before she whispered, "I'm glad we're still friends, Ron. I was so worried you'd hate me forever." Before she could blink it back, a lone tear escaped the corner of one eye to trail down her cheek.

Ron raised his hand to her face, his thumb wiping the tear away, his voice thick with emotion as he said, "Hermione. I'll always be here for you, you know that. Always." Tenderly, he placed a small kiss upon her lips, then rested his forehead on hers, rocking her gently in a comforting motion.

After a long while, he released her, grasping her hand as he explained, "I should go. I need to go to Hogwarts and see Harry." Grinning sheepishly, he said, "I didn't answer his messages, either."

Hermione could only nod, too afraid her emotions would overwhelm her if she attempted to speak.

"Will you be all right?" Ron asked, his blue eyes searching hers intently.

Somehow, she managed to steady herself and was able to answer, "Yes. It just ... well, it's going to hurt for a while, you know? Things will be different between us and it will take some getting used to, that's all."

He squeezed her hand in understanding before letting it go and then walked slowly to the door, opening it as he prepared to leave. Suddenly, he turned around to face her. "I love you, Hermione."

This time, she couldn't keep the tears from flowing her down cheeks. "I love you, too."

And then, he was gone.

As Hermione turned away from the door, she sagged to the floor, her knees buckling beneath her, weeping as she mourned the familiar notion of a life with Ron that now would never come to be.

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Only four people lived year round at Order headquarters: Hermione, Luna, Neville, and of all people, Draco Malfoy. For Hermione, it was convenient to the Magical University; the other three had jobs in London. Harry had insisted the four live at his house, claiming it was better that it be lived in than just left to sit empty for most of the year.

Ginny Potter had spent the previous night there because of an early morning meeting at St. Mungo's. Her alarm had awakened her bright and early; its shrill shrieking of, "Get up! Get up! Mustn't be late!" must have been Hermione's doing. Now freshly showered and dressed, Ginny left the bedroom to head to the kitchen for a spot of breakfast. She met up with Luna along the way, and the two friends chatted amicably as they made their way to the basement kitchen.

Ginny was laughing at some off-the-wall comment of Luna's as she swung open the door to enter the kitchen but immediately came to a stop at the sight before her. Sitting at the table, staring at the bottom of a cup of tea as if it held all the answers to the ills of the world, was Hermione. Rather than her typical purposeful posture, her shoulders were slumped, and her hair was a dishevelled mess, the wild curls sticking out in all directions.

"Hermione?" Luna asked, her concern audible in her voice. "Is everything all right?"

Hermione started at the sound of Luna's voice she must not have heard them enter the room and her head jerked up. Ginny was barely able to suppress a gasp at the look on Hermione's face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, as if she had been crying for a long period of time, and her face was pale as fresh parchment. Most troubling of all was the look of utter defeat upon her face, the sort of expression Ginny might have expected Hermione to have if she would have failed an assignment when they were at school. Failed? Oh, no. Ginny's eyes closed as she realised what must have happened. Ginny glanced at Luna, only to find Luna staring at Hermione, their faces now equally pale.

She swung her gaze back to Hermione just in time to see the older witch's lower lip begin to tremble as two large tears began to track their way down her cheeks. Instantly, Ginny and Luna converged on Hermione, wrapping their arms around her as she silently cried.

"Ron was here," Ginny stated quietly. She felt Hermione's nod. "The two of you have ... broken it off?" Another nod. Ginny felt like she might cry, as well; her arms tightened around her friend. "Oh, Hermione. I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, and Luna murmured her agreement.

Ginny and Luna simply held their friend for a few minutes until Hermione pulled away slightly to wipe her face.

"I'm all right, honestly. We're still friends, and we always will be. It's just ... well, it's the end of something, you know?"

Ginny looked at Hermione sympathetically. "Of course. Do you do you want to talk about it?"

Hermione sniffed and shook her head. "No. Really, I'm fine and I have to get ready to go to Renevatio."

"Oh, Hermione," Luna said, her eyes wide, "are you sure? Maybe you should take the day off. I'm sure Snape wouldn't mind."

"Mr Snape," Hermione automatically admonished, "and you're right; he wouldn't mind, but I'm not just going to sit around feeling sorry for myself. Ron and I realised we love each other as friends, but nothing more. This was the best decision for both myself and for Ron. It's just ..." She drifted off, clearly struggling to maintain her composure. "It's for the best. Honestly." She stood. "I'm going to go get ready for work." She pulled Ginny and then Luna into a hug and said, "Thank you, both of you." She gave each of their hands a quick squeeze and then left the kitchen.

Ginny stared at the door for a moment, her thoughts drifting between her friend and her brother before she turned to address Luna. She was stunned, however, to see Luna

was now the one with tears streaming down her face.

"Luna! What's wrong?" Ginny asked as she pulled her into a warm embrace.

"Hermione she's hurting, and it's all m-my fault!" Luna whispered; her quiet sobs were heart-wrenching.

Ginny's eyes filled with comprehension. "Oh, no, Luna, don't think that! It isn't your fault. You're a Seer you didn't do anything wrong. You couldn't help it," she explained in an attempt to comfort yet another friend.

Luna didn't answer, but continued to cry softly as she clung to Ginny. After a few moments, she quieted, and Ginny said, "Sit down a moment. I need to tell you something."

Luna hiccupped and looked at her curiously before sitting in a chair at the kitchen table. Ginny sat in the chair next to her, her body turned to face the blonde witch. She grasped Luna's hands in her own as she began to speak.

"You know Ron and Hermione have been friends for a very long time, since they were kids. They care for each other a great deal, and they always will. I love Hermione, and it would have been wonderful to have her as my sister-in-law if it wasn't for one thing."

Luna's eyes widened in surprise as she asked, "What?"

Ginny smiled sadly as she answered, "Didn't you hear what Hermione said? They just don't love each other that way. You're close to Hermione surely you saw it. They love each other, yes, but they aren't *in* love with each other. Hermione might be sad for a while it *is* a break-up, after all but trust me when I say that in the long run this is the best thing that could have happened, for both Ron *and* Hermione. It's much better that they ended it now than after a wedding, don't you think?"

Luna smiled a little and nodded her agreement. "I thought I was the only one who saw it, and you know me sometimes I don't always see things the same way as everyone else."

Ginny couldn't help but giggle at that, and soon Luna joined her, their combined laughter filling the small room.

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*A/N: Up next ... the aftermath and transitions.*

*My continued thanks to my fabulous betas!*

## Transitions

### *Chapter 5 of 10*

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

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Chapter Five

Transitions

Severus Snape leant against the counter of his apothecary, staring out of the window that overlooked the main street of Diagon Alley. The sky was blackened by a torrential rain, so the streets were mostly deserted no one wanted to be caught in this downpour. Severus considered closing the shop and retiring upstairs to his flat; a glass of brandy, a book, and a warm fire sounded extremely appealing. He saw his wall clock reflected in the glass and smiled inwardly. She would arrive for work at any moment. Hermione had to know that no one in their right mind would be out shopping on a day like this; however, she was never one to stay home from work, no matter the circumstance. An errant thought crossed his mind *Perhaps she just wishes to see me.* He snorted at the unlikely idea.

Severus walked around the counter and stood in front of the rain-soaked window, waiting for Hermione's arrival. It had been two months since she and Weasley had ended their romantic relationship. Severus had been relieved when he had heard the news although Hermione's tears had tempered the feeling of satisfaction somewhat. He had not enjoyed seeing her in pain. He remembered the day vividly.

*Severus was taking inventory when Hermione entered the shop. Her eyes were rimmed in red, her hair pinned up in a messy pile so unlike the severe, pulled-back style she usually wore when she brewed. Her typically meticulous work robes were dishevelled, as if she had just pulled them on without a care for how they appeared.*

*"Has something happened? Are you unwell?" he asked, worried by her unusual appearance. Instead of responding, Hermione practically ran to him, throwing herself in his arms, her small hands clutching at his robes as she laid her head against his chest and openly wept.*

*He had been concerned about her during the past week; loathe as he was to admit it, he knew that Weasley's disappearing act had to be affecting her, and so he had watched her closely, hoping for some indication of what she was thinking. Severus had apologised for his abrupt departure and hurtful words at the Order meeting by allowing her to help brew the current month's supply of Wolfsbane. She knew him well enough to realise it was a peace offering, and after staring at him just long enough to make him squirm, she had smiled and agreed. Throughout the week, she had seemed normal enough, if a little distracted, but he supposed that made a certain amount of sense; she did care for the young wizard, after all.*

*Now, as he held her trembling form in his arms an action he had dreamt of regularly over the past seven nights, although under completely different circumstances he knew what must have happened, but he had to ask.*

*"Hermione," he soothed, his voice smooth and deep in an effort to comfort her. He wrapped one arm around her waist, his long fingers splayed against her back, whilst his other hand went to the back of her neck, gently holding her head against his chest. "What is this about?"*

When she did not answer but continued to weep, he was certain; the Weasley-Granger romance was over.

Thinking quickly, he realised they could not continue such a private conversation in the middle of the shop. Deftly, he managed to remove his wand from his sleeve and waved it at the front door, changing the "Open" sign to "Closed."

"Come upstairs with me," he said gently. "We can talk privately there." Feeling her slight nod against his chest, he tightened his arms and Apparated them directly to the sitting room in his flat.

Severus guided her to the sofa and managed to sit them both down somewhat gracefully a difficult feat as Hermione would not release his robes. Not knowing what to say or do, he simply held her, one hand stroking her back repeatedly. He had previously thought he would be ecstatic at such news, but seeing her in such despair made his own heart ache. He rolled his eyes at the thought and wrinkled his nose in distaste; he was turning into a Hufflepuff.

Eventually, Hermione's tears gave way to sniffles and finally she pulled away from him. Severus Conjured a handkerchief, which she accepted gratefully. "Thank you," she said with a small hiccup. "I'm so sorry, S-severus. I've made a mess of your robes."

He looked down and noticed a large wet patch. Thinking perhaps she needed time to compose herself, he decided to give her a few moments of privacy.

"Yes, you have indeed. Wait here. I shall return in a moment, and you can tell me what has happened," he stated as he left the room. Once in the privacy of his bedroom, he quickly changed his shirt and robes.

Severus was about to re-enter the sitting room when he heard Fawkes. He watched as Hermione rose from the sofa to greet the phoenix. "Hello, Fawkes," she murmured as she ran her hand over his plumage. The bird must have sensed her distress because he began to sing softly to her, his serenade seeming to soothe her battered emotions. Hermione rubbed her cheek against the top of the phoenix's head and whispered, "Thank you, my friend." Severus felt the corner of his mouth lift briefly as he watched her, the light from the window casting an ethereal glow about her.

Clearing his throat to alert her to his presence, he walked into the room and raised a hand toward the sofa. "Shall we sit?"

Hermione nodded, and after stroking the phoenix one last time, returned to the sofa.

Severus sat next to her, close enough for her to feel secure, but not so close that she would feel ... uncomfortable. Hermione's head was bowed, and she remained silent. He realised that, for once, he was going to have to be the one to initiate a conversation with her.

"Tell me, Hermione. What is this all about?"

She raised her eyes to his, her lower lip once again beginning to tremble before she caught it between her teeth. He noted, with approval, that she was able to contain her emotions, swallowing back her tears as she choked out, "Ron and I we've called off our engagement."

He had suspected that this was the case, but after having it confirmed from her own lips, it was all Severus could do to maintain his typically impassive expression. "I see."

Hermione rose to stand at the window, staring unseeing down at the street below.

"This was decided upon mutually, then?" he asked, receiving a short nod in response.

Severus rose as well, walking to stand behind her and gently placing his hands upon her shoulders. He said nothing, simply comforting her with his presence.

After a long while, Hermione turned from the window to face him, dislodging his hands. Not wishing to crowd her, he started to step away from her, but she stopped him, wrapping her arms about his waist and laying her head upon his chest much as she done earlier but without the snivelling. Holding her carefully, as if she were made of spun glass, Severus closed his eyes to savour the contact.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I have done nothing of consequence, Hermione," he said stiffly, slightly embarrassed by her display of gratitude.

His response garnered a small laugh from her, albeit one tinged with sadness. "But you have. You've been a friend, and you knew what I needed so, thank you."

He nodded, although he knew she could not see him. They stood by the window for a few moments more before Hermione stepped back, tucking an errant curl behind one ear. She looked a bit awkward, as if she wasn't sure what to do now that the crisis of emotion had passed. Severus was bemused by this and so remained silent, curious as to how long she would be able to stand the silence.

It wasn't long barely a full minute before she blurted out, "Ron thinks his brother Charlie is my soul mate!"

Simultaneously, they both scoffed at the notion. "Hah!"

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. "You don't think he is, either?" she asked tentatively, once again catching her full lower lip between her perfect teeth.

Severus snorted. "Of course not. The idea is laughable." How anyone could confuse him for Charlie Weasley, Severus would never know.

Hermione appeared visibly relieved. "Thank Merlin! I was beginning to wonder if I was the only sane one!" Her brow furrowed in thought. "Didn't you say that you believed that the prophecy was referring to me?" she asked.

"I did, yes."

"But then ... if not Charlie, then who "

Severus quickly cut her off. "Does it matter? Are you going to allow your life to be dictated by a prophecy that may or may not be true that may or may not be referring to you?"

She straightened her shoulders, her chin lifting in that defiant way he had come to know so well over the years. "Of course not! In fact, it's funny you should say that. I said the exact same thing to Ron last night."

"I completely concur." Swiftly moving to change the subject before Hermione could ask more questions regarding his thoughts on the prophecy, Severus glanced at the clock on the mantle of the fireplace. "It is almost noon. Would you care to accompany me to lunch?"

As if on cue, Hermione's stomach growled, and two faint pink spots appeared upon her cheeks. She placed a hand upon her stomach. "I would love to! I didn't eat



breakfast, and now, I'm positively famished!"

"Shall we go?" he inquired as he offered her his arm. "We can eat at the Leaky Cauldron, or perhaps I can tempt you with the new Indian restaurant a few streets from here in Muggle London."

Hermione accepted his arm and enthusiastically agreed to Indian cuisine as they left the flat together.

They now went to lunch together every time she worked, usually four days out of the week, either dining out or having a simple meal in his flat. They had become much more relaxed around each other over the past two months, their friendship deepening as he made a conscious effort to be more open with her. Hermione seemed to have recovered from the dissolution of her romantic entanglement with Weasley, aided in part by the fact that the two had remained on friendly terms. Now Severus' only concern was that Hermione appeared to still see him only as her employer and friend, rather than as a potential lover. How in Hades was he going to get her to see him as a man?

The sound of the bell over the front door broke Severus from his reverie, and he turned his head to see a wet and bedraggled Hermione Granger enter the shop. The sight of her Muggle clothes clinging to her body caused the blood in his head to rush to his groin in a surge so powerful he was amazed he retained consciousness. He felt the immediate response and quickly moved behind the counter in order to hide his current physical state from Hermione.

"Merlin's beard, woman, why didn't you cast an Impervious Charm?" he grumbled, turning away from her as he discreetly adjusted himself.

"I love walking in the rain!" she explained, laughing whilst wringing out her wet hair, the dripping water forming a small puddle at her feet.

Turning back around to face her, Severus caught a glimpse of her long, untamed curls before she twisted them up into the severe style he was accustomed to seeing when she brewed.

"Lovely day, eh?" She smiled at him, her eyes shining as she pulled a handkerchief from her ever-present rucksack. She put her back to him to peer out of the window at the storm, unfastening the top three buttons on her blouse before running the small piece of cloth over her neck and chest in an attempt to dry the wetness from her skin.

Seeing her reflection in the window, Severus felt his breath catch and barely suppressed a groan at the sight of her stroking her own flesh.

"Miss Granger, you are dripping on my floor," he stated disdainfully, one hand pulling at his sleeve.

"Stick a sock in it, Severus," she retorted cheekily.

His muttered *Evanesco* was followed by the sound of her tinkling laughter.

"You are nauseatingly cheerful today."

"I am, aren't I?" she replied, turning to face him. "I suppose I could always return home ...." Her eyebrows furrowed as she tapped her bottom lip with her index finger, pretending to consider her options. "Oh! I know! You should dance in the rain with me!" she exclaimed, struggling not to laugh at the image that popped into her head of the saturnine man frolicking in such a manner.

Severus rolled his eyes in response and cast a Drying Spell. "I think not."

"I knew you were going to say that," she said with a dramatic sigh, her own eyes dancing with mirth.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Severus heaved a sigh of his own. "How much longer do you plan on exuding this level of exuberance?"

"Am I annoying you yet?" she teased.

He glared at her.

Laughing, Hermione said, "Fine, fine! I shall try to restrain myself. Happy?"

"You have no idea," he drawled. "Are you ready to brew now?"

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The brewing for the day had been completed in record time as no customers had interrupted their work. Severus was bottling the last of the Pepperup Potion whilst Hermione corked and magically sealed each bottle before affixing the phoenix-embossed label.

Once the potion was placed on the proper shelf in the front of the store, Severus turned to Hermione and stated, "I believe it is time for lunch."

Feeling hungry, Hermione readily agreed and, eyeing the continuing storm, suggested, "Let's eat in today."

"Agreed," Severus replied, leading her back to his private office after warding the front door. He tapped the stones of the wall behind his desk with his wand, causing them to shimmer and then disappear, revealing the hidden staircase to his flat.

They worked together in the kitchen as seamlessly as they did in the lab, passing condiments, bread, and ham back and forth until two mouth-watering sandwiches were made.

Hermione carried their plates to the table and sat down whilst Severus brought over two glasses and a bottle of wine. She raised her eyebrows in silent query they rarely drank alcohol during work hours but Severus only shrugged and poured the wine.

They ate in companionable silence; Hermione remembered the first time she had been in his flat, the day after her break-up with Ron. She had been impressed by the elegant furnishings and warm walls of the sitting room and with its large windows that allowed natural light to flood the room. She wondered if he enjoyed the light after so many years spent living in the dungeons of Hogwarts. Hermione had also noticed the lack of personal touches there were no pictures, no portraits, no signs of family or friends. Her heart ached for his lonely existence. Severus was a wonderful friend to her, but she was aware he preferred to keep to himself, and she now understood his continued attendance at Order meetings it was his only social circle, his make-shift family. His reason was much the same as hers.

Between work and their ongoing lunches, Hermione had been spending a great deal of time with Severus of late. Since that first day after her break-up with Ron, Severus had begun to slowly reveal more and more of himself to her, and she found herself intrigued by each new revelation. She now knew that he liked to play gobstones he had learnt from his mother, of course and that when he brewed alone, he had a tendency to hum. Granted, she only knew that because she had arrived for work early one day and caught him in the act. He had stood in front of her, his sallow cheeks flushed, one hand pulling on a sleeve, and proceeded to threaten to hex her if she were to ever tell anyone. Hermione smiled faintly at the memory.

"A happy thought?" Severus drawled, his voice interrupting her thoughts.

"Mmm," she responded, flushing slightly at being caught woolgathering. Feeling a bit flustered, she took a sip of her wine.

Severus' lips twitched, a sure indication that he was amused. "I was thinking of making an excursion to Muggle London on Saturday," he remarked suddenly.

Her curiosity instantly aroused, Hermione asked, "Really? Where in London?"

"Tate Britain."

Hermione's eyes flew to his in excitement. "You are? Oh, I love Tate Britain! My parents used to take me there at least once a summer it was tradition, you know and, oh, Severus, it's so lovely! All of the art and ..."

Before she could get too carried away, he raised a hand to stall her words, obviously pleased by her enthusiasm. "I would hazard a guess that you would not be averse to accompanying me, then? I have never visited a Muggle art gallery before, though I have wished to for quite some time.

"My mother often tried to convince my father to take me, but he was a ... difficult man. He felt museums, libraries, and the like were 'unmanly,' and I was forbidden from entering such places in the Muggle world. My mother attempted to compensate by smuggling me to wizarding museums." A small smile graced his face as he thought of his mother. "However, when my father discovered what she had been doing well, let us just say it did not happen again.

"After that, I was teaching and spying you know the rest. I have been preoccupied the past few years with Renevatio. I believe it is time to begin living my life as I see fit to enjoy the fruits of my labour, so to speak."

Hermione was shocked, to say the least. She didn't believe she had ever heard Severus say so much at one time outside of Potions lectures and whilst he occasionally would discuss his mother, he had never mentioned his father to her. Hermione was thrilled to hear that he wanted to begin enjoying his life and readily agreed to play tour guide for the day.

"What time will you be picking me up?" she said, smiling widely.

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*A/N: Up next ... the visit to Tate Britain.*

*My continued gratitude to my fabulous betas!*

## Something There That Wasn't There Before

*Chapter 6 of 10*

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.*

Chapter Six

Something There That Wasn't There Before

Hermione stood in front of the full-length mirror, critically eyeing the blue sundress she was wearing. It was sleeveless, with a high waist and full skirt that were both adorned with lace inserts. Turning to the side, she noted how the deep V neckline showed off her cleavage to its best advantage. She twirled around, the full skirt swirling around her calves, and nodded. It was almost perfect but not quite.

Dissatisfied with the shade of blue, Hermione picked up her wand and, with a swish and flick, changed it from a medium blue to a pale blue. Her nose wrinkled; her fair skin now looked completely washed out. Sighing, she swished again ... and again. Perhaps blue was not her colour today. Thinking for a moment, she remembered a blouse she had almost purchased simply because the colour had suited her so well. It had been a bright shade of green called lemongrass, and although the blouse itself had not fit her properly, the colour had been perfect. Another swish and the blue sundress was now lemongrass green.

Satisfied with her charm work, Hermione turned her attention to her hair. It was quite long, flowing almost to the small of her back, and was still completely unmanageable. Cursing her ancestors and their bushy-haired genes, she had begun to pull her hair back into its usual ponytail when she reconsidered. Instead, she allowed the unruly curls to fall freely down her back, pulling only the sides away from her face and securing the locks with a few clips. It looked different, but in a good way.

She decided a little make-up would be nice some eye shadow, a sweep of mascara, a little blush. Hermione was carefully applying her lip gloss when she suddenly stopped what she was doing. Why was she so worried about her clothes, her hair, and her make-up? "It's not like it's a date or anything," she mumbled to herself. The twinge of disappointment she felt surprised her. Did she want this to be a date? A date with Severus? It was absurd wasn't it?

Hermione heard the front door close and knew he must have arrived. She grabbed the small handbag from the bed and quickly slipped on her favourite brown leather sandals. One more glance in the mirror and a self-chastisement for doing so and she left her room to meet her *friend* downstairs.

She was halfway down the staircase when she glanced up and saw him. *Merlin on a mo-ped*, she thought dazedly, unable to move from her position on the stairs.

Standing on the landing was Severus Snape, a man she had known for most of her life, and yet, a man she had obviously never truly seen before. He was wearing Muggle clothing, of course, but it wasn't just the clothing Hermione noticed it was *him*. The crisp white linen shirt fit him as if it were tailor-made which it probably was the cuffs fastened at the wrists by a pair of silver cufflinks. His shirt was tucked into a pair of charcoal grey trousers that seemed to hug him in all the right places. Her eyes lingered upon the breadth of his shoulders and chest, then slowly moved downward, taking note of his lean hips and marvelling at the length of his legs. Who knew he was hiding that body under those voluminous robes?

What surprised Hermione most, however, was that his hair was pulled away from his face, held back by some sort of elastic or ribbon. The style did accentuate his hawk-like features, but Hermione was more interested in his eyes. He often hid his gaze behind his curtain of hair, but now she had an unobstructed view of what must certainly be his best feature. His eyes were dark, almost black, with thick lashes and right now, they were fixed firmly on her.

Hermione flushed with embarrassment at being caught ogling the poor man. She quickly looked away, her cheeks flaming and her teeth worrying her bottom lip. "I'm so sorry! I've just I've never Oh!"

"I see," Severus replied, his lips twitching as he struggled not to laugh at her distress; he most likely had never seen her at a loss for words. "I don't believe you have seen me in Muggle attire before. I am aware I look somewhat different." He gave a long-suffering sigh, extended his arms to the side and slowly turned around. "Look your fill, then."

Rather than look, however, Hermione closed her eyes, her mortification complete. When she opened them, he had finished turning and was watching her, a look of smug satisfaction firmly planted on his face. Her eyes narrowed, and she lifted her chin. He would not get the best of her today. Lips curled in a small smirk, and with a little extra swing her in hips, she resumed her descent down the stairs.

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Severus' eyes widened as Hermione's posture changed, and the embarrassed young woman transformed into a seductive siren. As she descended the stairs, he drank in her appearance. She was lovely, yes, and he was pleasantly surprised that she had obviously dressed with special care for their outing; however, he was mesmerised by the sight of her legs dear gods, she was not wearing stockings. He was instantly assaulted by the desire to run his hands up her bare calves to her undoubtedly silky thighs, and then continue up to palm her delectable derriere. He swallowed hard fighting back the impulse. It did not help matters in the slightest that she was wearing her hair down. He was used to seeing it pulled back, but now, it was natural and wild, and he wanted to bury his hands in it, to ...

"Have you looked your fill, then?" she asked, her voice filled with humour and a touch of triumph.

So she was playing his game, was she? *Touché, my dear.* He stepped toward her, then leant in to place a kiss upon her cheek.

"You look lovely, Hermione," he murmured, purposefully deepening his voice, his tone smooth as velvet.

He stepped back and noted with no small amount of satisfaction that she was obviously flustered. He was definitely starting to get under her skin.

Severus offered her his arm. "Shall we go?" She nodded, placing her hand on his arm, and they exited number twelve, Grimmauld Place together.

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Severus and Hermione arrived at the Ministry-designated Apparition point near the Houses of Parliament with a loud *crack*, the sound masked by the noise of the city. It was a bit of a walk to Tate Britain, but it was nice day, so they set out in the direction of the gallery, discussing Hermione's upcoming exams as they strolled.

As always, conversation came easily between the pair, and it wasn't long before they had arrived at their destination. As they climbed the stairs to the portico, Hermione informed him that when the building had first opened, several architects had declared the edifice to be an artistic disappointment, but Severus found himself impressed by the Corinthian columns and dramatic central dome. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, they entered through one of the main doors.

They made their way through the small lobby, walking toward the middle of the room, where Severus admired the three-story circular space with its pale stone walls and polished stone floors. A glass dome flooded the room with sunshine, and despite all the stonework, the room felt light and airy. Severus watched as Hermione placed several pounds into the donation box; she motioned to him to follow her and led him into a barrel-vaulted space with an octagonal area at its centre. Leisuredly walking across the stone floor, silently absorbing the atmosphere, they came to stand inside the eight-sided space.

"This is the Duveen Gallery," Hermione said quietly, "but most people refer to it as the octagon."

Severus turned to face her, knowing his expression was perhaps a bit more open than she was used to, but he had wished to visit this particular gallery for quite some time. That he was sharing the experience with Hermione had him feeling almost as giddy as a third-year in Honeydukes for the first time. Almost.

"Where shall we begin?" Hermione asked, her own enthusiasm evident in her voice as she turned in the direction of one of the galleries.

Severus watched as her smile faltered and pain filled her face, her gaze fixed at some point just behind him. Concerned, he followed her line of sight. Comprehension flooded him as he saw the small family a man and a woman holding hands with an enthusiastic little girl enter the octagon together.

"Hermione," he began, wishing to offer some comfort, but she shook her head.

"I'm all right. Please, excuse me. I'll meet you over there in a few moments," she said shakily, indicating an area down the hall.

Severus could do nothing but watch as she practically ran to descend the stairs to the lavatory, undoubtedly to compose herself.

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Hermione had known that visiting Tate Britain would be an emotional experience for her; the last time she had come had been with her parents. She missed them terribly and, at times, had to struggle to rise above the guilt she felt regarding their deaths. After all, if she hadn't been born a witch, they would still be alive.

Shaking off the feeling, she walked to the sinks and turned on the tap. After a splash of cold water on her face and a few moments of staring at her reflection in the mirror, Hermione felt she had mastered her emotions enough that she could exude some semblance of normalcy. She quickly repaired her make-up and, with a deep breath, opened the heavy door and walked out of the lavatory.

Hermione had been able to sense Severus' growing excitement, and she found it particularly endearing. She was anxious to show him the gallery. She had loved coming here with her parents as a child, and there were many favourite pieces she wanted to share with him. Anxious to do just that, Hermione quickened her steps.

She had left Severus in the area of the gallery which held historic British art, so she walked past the shop to the stairs near the special exhibition room. Reaching the top of the staircase, she turned and entered a small narrow room filled with medieval alabaster carvings. Intent on finding her companion, she paid the artwork little heed as she turned to her left, walking through the massive marble-framed doorway, her soft-soled shoes making very little sound on the room's wooden floor. Hermione was tempted to stay and look at the portraits of the Tudors and Stuarts, but continued on when she caught a glimpse of Severus in one of the adjoining rooms.

Although he looked different in his Muggle clothing, she would recognise him anywhere. Severus stood, his hands clasped in front of him and one knee bent slightly as he studied the portrait in front of him with the same amount of concentration she had many times seen him give his Potions work. His back was to her, providing her the opportunity to study him unobserved. As if giving in to a guilty pleasure, Hermione perused him from head to toe, her eyes lingering of their own accord on his arse, a portion of his anatomy she had never had the pleasure of viewing before today. Idly, she wondered how it would feel to run her hands over the muscled flesh of his bum.

She started when she realised she was checking him out again. Feeling a little overwhelmed by her seemingly sudden interest in him in *that* way, Hermione shook her head to clear her mind and resolutely ignored the throb she had felt at the thought of sliding her hands across his skin.

Severus appeared to be enthralled with the portrait of a pretty young woman whose thick brown hair was piled upon her head. Her flawless skin glowed, and her cheeks appeared slightly flushed. Her full mouth was lush and red with her lips parted slightly, and a vast expanse of unblemished flesh was exposed by the low décolletage of her filmy cream-coloured gown. Her wide, dark eyes seemed to Hermione to be full of hidden knowledge. *Lady Hamilton as Circe*. How fitting, given that Circe was known for her knowledge of herbs. Thankfully, Hermione knew a bit about the painting, or at least the model, and so in an attempt to push aside all inappropriate thoughts concerning her *friend and employer*, she immediately launched herself into full lecture mode.

"Here you are," she said as she approached him, inwardly cringing at her overly cheerful tone. From the corner of one eye, Hermione noticed him glance at her for a moment, but she kept her own eyes firmly focussed on the portrait. Once Severus returned to studying *Lady Hamilton as Circe*, she began to speak. Unfortunately, Hermione's words spewed forth in a torrent of trivial information as she dredged up everything she could remember concerning Lady Hamilton, her life, her husband, and

Lord Nelson, although she stumbled a bit after uttering the phrase *ménage à trois*. She could feel the heat of her blush on her cheeks, and she quickly fell silent, biting her lower lip in order to forcibly put an end to her inane babbling.

Severus turned his head to look at her. Hermione could feel his eyes boring into the top of her head. In her peripheral vision, she saw him nod solemnly before turning back to the portrait, studying it a few moments longer before he bodily turned to face her, murmuring, "Yes, she is lovely." Slowly, he moved to walk past her in the direction of the next room, his warm masculine scent enveloping her once again. His body brushed hers, and then he halted, lowering his head to whisper in her ear, "She reminds me of you."

Shocked, Hermione finally lifted her eyes to his. There was humour there, yes, but there was something else, as well—something Hermione had never seen before. No man had ever looked at her in that way. She found herself struggling to remember to breathe as her senses were overcome by the sheer maleness of him. Once again, a blush stained her cheeks, and she wrenched her gaze away from him.

Flustered, she began to walk past him into the next room. Gathering her courage now that she was no longer facing him, Hermione said, "I do hope you aren't referring to her love life, Severus."

Her quip was rewarded with a deep chuckle—she had never heard him laugh before. She shuddered in pleasure as the velvety sound washed over her in waves. Still laughing softly, Severus gently grasped her elbow to guide her into the room, the feel of his fingers upon her skin sending tingles along her spine once more. *Dear Merlin*, she thought, *what is happening to me?*

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Severus escorted Hermione into a room filled with British landscapes, praying she did not notice his rather stiff gait. By the gods, he should never have stood so close to her. When he had whispered in her ear, he had wanted nothing more than to bury his nose in her wild, fragrant curls and press his mouth to the delicate skin behind her ear.

Releasing Hermione's elbow, he allowed her to continue on ahead of him. As she gazed upon each painting, he gazed upon her. He could never tire of looking at her, studying her in the same manner in which she was currently studying the landscape in front of her. She was a living work of art, and he found himself entranced by the graceful way she moved, her delicate mannerisms, and the varied expressions of her face. Hermione Granger was slowly bewitching his mind and ensnaring his senses. The prophecy had said he would enrapture her heart, but in this moment he wondered if she was not the one enrapturing him. *Dear Merlin*, he thought, *what is happening to me?*

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Hermione and Severus spent the rest of the afternoon exploring Tate Britain, only occasionally encountering other patrons as most people were spending the sunny afternoon out-of-doors. They both enjoyed the room referred to as the Victorian Spectacle, as well as paintings from the Romantic period. Neither was particularly fond of the more modern art, but both were thoroughly enamoured of the Pre-Raphaelite works, Hermione being especially fond of Millais' *Ophelia*. Her mother had once shared with her an interesting bit of information regarding the painting, and Hermione decided to share it with Severus.

"Did you know," she began, "that the model for this painting spent weeks lying in a bath of water and became quite ill?" He turned to look at her, cocking an eyebrow in a silent query. Hermione nodded earnestly. "It's true! Apparently the lamps that had been placed under the tub to keep the water warm went out, and Millais didn't notice. The model spent quite some time in a bath full of cold water—the poor thing didn't want to break the pose."

Severus hummed in response, then asked, "This depicts the scene from *Hamlet*, does it not?" When Hermione nodded her agreement, he raised his hand, indicating the numerous flowers. "Look at the flowers Millais chose to surround her with. Some of these are mentioned in the play, whilst others are quite symbolic, befitting the scene. See here," he said, pointing at the flowers floating near the young woman, "are daisies, which represent innocence and are mentioned in the play. And see the weeping willow stretched above her head? That is a symbol of forsaken love."

Hermione was enchanted—she had never paid attention to the symbolic nature of the flowers before, but now that she was aware, she began searching for more examples. "Oh! You're right! And look here, the buttercups represent childishness ... and, oh! The poppy—that's an indicator of death! I've never noticed that before."

They spent the next few minutes analyzing Millais' use of symbolism with flowers and foliage in the work before Hermione saw Severus move away, his attention caught by a portrait of a small child.

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As Severus approached the painting of the sleeping infant, he read the title, *Study of a Dead Child*. Instantly, he realised the baby was not asleep but had been painted posthumously.

"Sad isn't it?" he heard Hermione whisper from behind him. "He was the artist's son."

Severus stood, mesmerised by the painting, a strange feeling overcoming him as he considered the profound grief with which the piece must have been painted, each brush stroke a loving memorial. For all the sorrow Severus had experienced in his life, he imagined nothing could compare to the loss of a beloved child.

He was momentarily shaken from his melancholic thoughts when he felt Hermione tuck her hand in the crook of his arm. Together, they silently mourned the child whose father had so obviously loved him.

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After another hour spent perusing the vast collection of art, they exited the gallery, walking down the entrance stairs to the pavement running alongside Millbank. It was a gorgeous late afternoon; the Thames was lovely this time of year, and there were several families walking about. Suddenly, Hermione nearly jumped in delight, startling Severus so badly that he stumbled. She grabbed his arm, all but squealing in excitement.

"Oh, Severus, look!" she exclaimed, her face alight with glee, her finger pointing in the direction of a white and blue van with pictures and words imprinted along its side. There were several people, mostly children, standing next to it, as if waiting for something.

"What is it?" he asked hesitantly, as if he were unsure if he truly wanted to know the answer.

"It's the ice cream van! Oh, I remember my parents bringing me here, and afterwards they would buy me an ice cream. It was always so lovely," she explained, her voice tapering to a whisper, and her eyes misting as she reminisced.

"It's a tradition, then?" Severus asked, rolling his eyes when she clung to his arm with both hands, her wide brown eyes instantly filled with hopeful anticipation. He motioned toward the van. "All right, fine," he acquiesced, shaking his head as she immediately dragged him toward the queue.

As they waited to purchase Hermione's ice cream, her mind was awash with questions. She had thoroughly enjoyed her day with Severus and had to admit she would love to do it again sometime in the near future. She was a tad worried about her newly discovered attraction to him, although her traitorous thoughts reminded her that she had been attracted to him for quite some time—she simply had not been in a position to do anything about it before ...

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Severus, meanwhile, was wishing the day would never end. He had stopped by Gringotts earlier in the day to exchange a few Galleons into Muggle currency with the intentions of inviting her to dinner. Now he was wondering if it might be too soon they had spent the entire afternoon together, after all or Hermione might wish to return home. He was still debating with himself when suddenly they reached the front of the line. Hermione ordered her treat, and Severus swiftly moved to pay the young man before she could open her handbag, pulling out a random note from his pocket.

It was obviously a mistake. The man inside the van eyed him curiously, and Severus looked at the note. Fifty pounds? *Dunderheaded goblins!* The man inside insisted he could not provide change for such a large amount. Thinking quickly, Severus looked at the line behind him and said, "Keep it. It should be enough to pay for the rest of the children in line, should it not?" The man assured him that yes, it would, and Severus nodded, leading Hermione away from the van. He saw the amused look Hermione was giving him, and with a slight sneer, informed her, "It was only to put a stop to the incessant whinging of all those children."

She did not appear to be convinced.

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They continued walking side-by-side toward the Apparition point near the Houses of Parliament, Hermione eating her treat as she considered her feelings regarding Severus. Did she want to pursue a relationship with him? What if it ruined their friendship? Was it worth the risk? Her rapidly melting ice cream dripped onto her hand, and she mindlessly licked it away, completely absorbed in her thoughts.

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Severus almost groaned aloud as he surreptitiously glanced at Hermione, only to see her delicate pink tongue emerge from between rose-coloured lips to lick a drop of the melting confection from the back of her hand. Good gods, she was going to be the death of him.

"Was this a date, Severus?" Hermione asked suddenly, surprising them both. He looked at her for a moment, but her eyes remained steadfastly on the ice cream she was holding. He had no idea how to respond to her. What did she want to hear?

"If you'd like," he finally answered, refusing to look in her direction.

Hermione was quiet as they continued walking. Suddenly, he felt her small hand slip into his, and she said, "I think I would like that, I mean."

He did look at her then; a small smile curved her lips as she continued to eat her treat. Severus' eyes dropped to their clasped hands. He interlaced their fingers and squeezed lightly. "As would I."

They strolled hand-in-hand along the Thames in companionable silence as Hermione continued to lick her ice cream, simply enjoying being together.

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A/N: Links to the artwork mentioned in this chapter:

*Lady Hamilton as Circe*

[http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large\\_img.jsp?workid=12742](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large_img.jsp?workid=12742)

*Ophelia*

[http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large\\_img.jsp?workid=9506](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large_img.jsp?workid=9506)

*Study of a Dead Child, the Artist's Son*

[http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large\\_img.jsp?workid=16264](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/large_img.jsp?workid=16264)

\*When I uploaded this chapter, the Tate Britain site was not working. Hopefully, they will have it up and running again, soon.

For more information on Lady Hamilton:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma,\\_Lady\\_Hamilton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma,_Lady_Hamilton)

Up next ... a party at the Burrow! Three people learn about the new relationship. How do they react?

My continued thanks to my fabulous betas!

## Conversations at a Party

Chapter 7 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.*

Chapter 7

Conversations at a Party

The music blaring from the Wizarding Wireless Network filled the Burrow, and combined with the brightly-coloured lanterns and party streamers, created a festive atmosphere. The small stone dwelling, with its haphazardly added stories, had been expanded upon since the end of the war; Arthur Weasley's status as a war hero had garnered him a higher position within the Ministry and with it a higher salary. Even so, it was a tight fit with all the people presently congregated within the Burrow's walls.

This evening was a special one they were celebrating the completion of Hermione's university studies. Hermione Granger was now officially a Potions mistress.

Hermione smiled to herself as she looked around the room at the people who had become her surrogate family. She had been pleasantly surprised by the Weasleys' offer to throw her a celebratory dinner, especially under the circumstances.

Molly and Arthur had been disappointed when she and Ron had informed them that their wedding was cancelled, but Hermione had been surprised at their level of understanding. A small part of her had feared that the break-up of her romantic relationship with Ron would also signal an end to her relationship with his parents, as well. After all, Molly had all but disowned her after reading Rita Skeeter's filthy lies about her and Harry during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. However, this time Molly had simply embraced her and let her know in no uncertain terms that she would always think of Hermione as another daughter, whether it was official or not.

And so now, she stood a proud recipient of her Potions mastery chatting and laughing in the midst of the lively party celebrating her achievement. The only thing that could possibly make it even more perfect would be if ...

The kitchen door opened and in walked Luna, who immediately located Hermione amidst the crowd. Hermione smiled as her closest female friend made her way across the room to embrace her.

"Hermione! I'm so sorry I'm late! There was a sighting of a herd of stampeding Griffleback Snorflunks and Daddy insisted that we investigate. Turns out they weren't stampeding but were more meandering," Luna said in a rush, her large eyes appearing even larger in her excitement, "but I came as soon as I could. I'm just so thrilled for you!"

Hermione laughed and returned the hug. "Thank you, Luna! I'm so glad you're here it wasn't the same without you. Have you eaten? Let's get you something to eat and grab some punch. I'm parched!"

The two friends manoeuvred their way to the table, and whilst Luna filled her plate with food, Hermione grabbed two glasses of punch. They chatted as Luna ate, Hermione laughing as Luna regaled her with stories about her "investigative reporting" duties for *The Quibbler*.

"So then," Luna said in her usual serene way, "I hid behind this really bushy tree I don't know what kind of tree it was, but it was unusually bushy, with really large leaves that had these strange brown spots with a red centre. I think it was red, it may have been more of reddish-purple colour ... well, that's not important, I suppose. Anyway, I was hiding behind this tree and I thought I saw something move and I heard this really strange sound 'wackawoo wackawoo.' That's the call of the Griffleback Snorflunk, you know. So I reached down to grab my camera it was around my neck only to find that somehow it had become tangled in the leaves of the really bushy tree and ..."

Luna continued to talk about how she had just missed getting a picture of the ever-elusive Griffleback Snorflunk, but Hermione was no longer listening. She had caught Severus' eye from across the room where he was speaking with Draco and Remus. He raised his glass to her, the smirk she knew so well gracing his lips lips she had yet to feel pressed against her own, although the bastard had teased her by kissing her cheek or the palm of her hand at every possible opportunity. She watched as the smirk eased into a small smile, and he cocked an eyebrow as she brazenly stared at his mouth. Realising what she was doing, Hermione blushed, inhaling softly and returning her gaze to Luna as she shook her head; she had blushed more in the past few weeks than in her entire life. She sipped the chilled punch, hoping it would cool her ardour as well as quench her thirst.

"So," Luna said, her tone nonchalant, "what's going on between you and Mr Snape?"

Hermione choked and sputtered, punch dribbling out of the corner of her mouth. Shocked at Luna's blunt question although she didn't know why, as Luna often exhibited an uncanny ability to see things that others did not Hermione wiped her mouth with a napkin, then grabbed Luna's plate and placed it on the table alongside her glass of punch. She pulled Luna by the sleeve into a vacant corner.

"I don't ... I mean we ... I've been ... Is it that obvious?" Hermione couldn't help but sneak another peek at Severus.

Luna giggled. "Probably only if someone were really watching you. How long has this been going on?" she whispered as both girls waved a greeting to Harry and Ron who were passing by on their way to the table of food.

"Not long," Hermione answered, her face aglow with happiness, "a month or so."

"A month!" Luna exclaimed softly, her silvery-grey eyes tinged with hurt. "You tell me right now what is going on, Hermione Granger. I can't believe you've been seeing someone for so long without telling me. *Me!*"

Hermione had the grace to look chagrined. "Oh, Luna, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you feel badly. Truly! I wasn't sure if anything was going to come of it, and well, with the prophecy and all, I wasn't sure how you would take my seeing someone other than Charlie. The very last thing I would ever want to do is hurt your feelings."

Luna sighed and then grasped Hermione's hand. "The prophecy does make it sound as if Charlie might be your soul mate, but whether he is or isn't, I'll be the first to admit that it could be years or decades before it comes to pass. Who am I to begrudge you whatever happiness you find in the meantime?"

Hermione's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Thank you. Thank you for understanding. I was so worried you would feel I was slighting you in some way."

"I know you love me as if I were your very own sister, and I feel the same about you. Nothing will ever change that. All right?"

Hermione nodded, clutching Luna's hand tightly as she sniffed, then composed herself. She hadn't realised just how worried she had been about offending Luna until now, and she was overcome with relief that her decision to ignore the prophecy did not bother her friend in the slightest.

With a speculative gleam in her eyes and with a nod in Severus' direction, Luna asked, "So ... is anything going to come of it?"

Hermione sighed dreamily and dared a quick glance at Severus. "I think so."

Luna giggled at the uncharacteristic expression on Hermione's face, then matter-of-factly commented, "You're falling for him."

"Oh, it's too soon for ..."

"You are! I can tell. Look! You can't stop staring at him!"

A becoming flush spread across Hermione's cheeks as a silly smile emerged. Wishing to keep the conversation private, she surreptitiously removed her wand and cast a quick *Muffliato*.

"All right; yes, I think I am. It seems so sudden, but when you take into account that we've been friends for almost four years well, it just *feels* right. When I'm with him, I feel completely at ease completely myself. I feel as if he accepts me just as I am, and it's wonderful!"

Luna smiled widely. "I'm so happy for you! You deserve nothing less, dearest." She paused a moment, her eyes taking on a mischievous glint. "So you've been going out like on dates?"

A large grin lit up Hermione's face. "Oh, yes! We've been spending quite a bit of time together. We haven't been able to go out all that often due to my exams, but we've been to the Muggle cinema, and last week he took me to a wizarding museum in Edinburgh. He even went on a picnic with me."

"He did not!" Luna gasped before bursting into giggles with Hermione as they huddled together in the corner.

"He did! I swear it! Not that he had much choice, really."

Puzzled by that remark, Luna asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," Hermione explained, "we've been going to lunch several times a week when I'm at work, you see and then a few weeks ago, he invited me to go with him to visit a Muggle art gallery in London. He agreed that I could pick the next outing, and I chose a picnic."

"And he actually ate whilst sitting on the ground?" Luna was struggling to grasp the concept of the rigid and proper man she had come to know sitting on a blanket in the middle of a field somewhere.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, he did. The point is he that didn't have to. He could have refused, and probably would have done if anyone else had asked him."

Luna nodded at that. "True. You had a nice time, then on the picnic?"

"Oh, yes. It was just lovely. I found an isolated spot at a beautiful tree-filled park it was perfect for a picnic and went ahead of time to prepare things as a surprise." Hermione laughed as she remembered the look on Severus' face when he had seen her "surprise."

"Here we are!"

*"A picnic." Severus sneered at the sight before him; a pale blue blanket was laid upon the ground, and a picnic basket was set off to one side, the dishes having already been removed. Cheese, fruit, bread, a variety of meats, a bottle of wine, and two glasses completed the picture.*

*"Yes, Severus. A picnic." She beamed at him in her excitement, obviously delighted with her little scheme.*

*"I do not eat whilst sitting on the ground."*

*"You will today."*

*He pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes closing in exasperation. "Hermione, I "*

*"You said I could choose the outing, Severus, and I have chosen a picnic. Of course, I could always choose Madam Puddifoot's for tea, if you'd rather," she offered cheekily.*

*His dark eyes narrowed. "Resorting to blackmail, Miss Granger? How very Slytherin of you," he murmured as he nodded his head toward her in mock approval.*

*She simply continued to smile at him as she seated herself on the blanket, demurely tucking her legs beneath her. "Come and eat with me. Please."*

*With a sigh, Severus acquiesced, carefully lowering his tall frame onto the blanket. He stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankle. His black attire stood out in stark relief against the pale blue of the blanket. Arching an eyebrow at her, he folded his arms across his chest and asked, "Happy now?"*

*"Inordinately," she responded, desperately trying to hold back her laughter at his obvious discomfort.*

*He rolled his eyes. "Go ahead and get it out of your system now."*

*She instantly dissolved into a fit of giggles, her hand covering her mouth as her brown eyes danced with mirth. Gasping for breath, she choked out, "I'm so sorry, Severus. It's just you look so ... so ... unlike you!"*

*"Yes, well, if you are quite finished, may we eat now?"*

*They continued to chat as they ate, and before long the food was gone; then dishes were placed back into the basket. The bottle of wine was half-empty, and the two companions were stretched out upon the blanket, each on their sides, elbows propped as they faced one another, talking about whatever came to mind.*

*Eventually, Hermione plopped down onto her back, her hands linked behind her head as she stared at the sky. Bemused, Severus followed suit and asked, "What are we doing now, Hermione?"*

*"Cloud-watching."*

*"Cloud-watching?"*

*"Yes. Look that one right there," she said, pointing to a large fluffy cloud, "looks just like a cauldron."*

*"A cauldron?" He glanced at her as if he thought she might be mocking him, but her attention was wholly focussed on the clouds.*

*"Yes," she answered, her tone solemn, but her face filled with humour. "Don't you think so?"*

*"Tell me, do you often resort to such pastimes?"*

*Her expression sobered as she considered her answer. "My mother used to tell me that I was far too serious. She often tried to get me to lie with her in the back garden and cloud-watch. 'Just forget the world for a bit, dearest,' she would say. Sometimes, she would manage to get me outside, but whilst she watched the clouds, I would sit there with my nose in a book," she said self-mockingly. "After she ... after my parents were killed ... well, let's just say I have a greater appreciation of her advice to enjoy the little things." A lone tear dropped from the corner of her eye, sliding down her temple into her hair.*

*"Such as cloud-watching," he murmured softly.*

*She turned her head to look at him. "Yes. Like cloud-watching."*

*They looked at each other for what seemed like an eternity, an understanding passing between them that neither had expected. She removed one hand from behind her head to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, then allowed her arm to fall by her side. She smiled tremulously at him before turning her head to look at the sky once more.*

*She wasn't at all surprised to feel his fingers wipe away the wetness at her temple; nor was she when his warm hand found hers. Lying side by side, fingers entwined, they watched the clouds together, the rest of the world forgotten.*

Luna sighed as Hermione completed her tale. "It's so romantic!" she declared, her own eyes even more dreamy than was usual for the eccentric witch.

Hermione nodded her agreement, her eyes once again seeking out Severus in the crowded room.

"And you're certain you have no feelings whatsoever for Charlie? You know, what with the prophecy and all? I mean, what if Charlie shows up and declares his love for

you?"

"For the last time, I have no interest whatsoever in Charlie Weasley," Hermione replied firmly. "Even if he were to appear this very minute and pledge his undying devotion, it would not matter one whit to me. He would only be doing it because of the prophecy. It would be absolutely mortifying to have a man show romantic interest in me only because he believes he's fated to do so." She waved a dismissive hand. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm with Severus now, and the more time we spend together, the more convinced I am that he's the one for me. I don't care what the prophecy says."

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Severus knew he was staring, but he was unwilling or unable to keep his eyes from her. Lupin and Draco had cornered him the minute he entered the room, wanting his opinion on some trivial matter that did not interest him in the slightest. Dragging his gaze away from the object of his newly-found affections, he attempted to concentrate on the conversation at hand, but soon he found himself glancing in her direction again.

Hermione. She was radiant this evening, her happiness readily apparent upon her face. Her hair was down again she had been wearing it that way more and more often and her casual Muggle attire allowed him an unhindered view of her seductive curves.

Suddenly, her eyes met his, and Severus raised his glass to her in acknowledgement. He smirked, realising that she was as unable to resist his presence as he was hers. He felt his mouth relax into a smile as he watched Hermione's eyes drop to his mouth and linger there for several moments before her cheeks reddened and she returned to her conversation with Miss Lovegood.

So, she was fascinated by his mouth. Good. Severus was well aware that he had been tempting his little witch, allowing himself only to brush his lips against her cheek or the occasional kiss in her palm. *Soon, my dear*, he thought, watching as she laughed with her friend. *Very soon.*

His thoughts were interrupted when Lupin grasped his arm as he moved to pass him, a peculiar expression upon his face. "I'll speak with you later, Severus when you aren't so distracted."

Severus glared at the back of the werewolf's head as he walked away, his mouth curling into a familiar sneer. He absentmindedly raised his glass to his lips, grimacing at the sickly-sweet taste of the fruity concoction.

"So," Draco drawled, "what's going on with you and Granger?"

Inhaling sharply, Severus aspirated his drink, causing him to cough violently. Draco began pounding him on the back, completely unaffected by the Potions master's glare, his own patrician features smug with the knowledge he had caught his former Head of House unawares.

Once he was able to breathe normally, Severus glowered at the younger wizard, his dark eyes narrowing dangerously. "What are you on about now, boy?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on, Severus. You know very well that those withering looks no longer affect me."

Severus' face relaxed and he snorted. "You have been keeping company with too many Gryffindors, to be so brave."

A deep chuckle escaped Draco before he schooled his features once again into their usual state of indifference. "Too true. Of course, I am not the only one fraternising with Gryffindors lately although you seem to prefer the company of one Gryffindor in particular."

The Potions master stared at his former student for several moments, then muttered, "You are either far too observant or I have lost my touch."

The blond wizard simply regarded him silently until Severus heaved a dramatic sigh. "Fine. Exactly what is it that you wish to know?"

Draco's stoic expression remained unchanged, but his grey eyes betrayed his feeling of triumph. "You have not been able to keep your eyes from her all evening, and as far as I can see, she can't stop staring at you, either."

Severus arched an eyebrow in response.

"You're interested in her."

A cock of the head.

"She's interested in you."

A twitch of the lips.

"You're *courting* her."

A smug smile.

"She's *letting* you!"

A feral grin.

"What about that prophecy and Charlie Weasley?"

Severus scowled. "Charlie Weasley is not a concern."

"He's not? But the prophecy said ..."

Lowering his voice and leaning slightly forward, Severus murmured, "I am well aware of what the prophecy said, Draco. As a Slytherin, you should know that Gryffindors often fail to examine all of the possibilities and jump to conclusions which lead them to *erroneous* suppositions."

Severus observed silently as the other wizard carefully considered his words, certain that the young man would be able to decipher his meaning. After only a few moments, Draco's grey eyes widened in surprise, his indifferent façade slipping as the implications of Severus' words became clear.

"You!" he whispered. "Does she know?"

"No. Not yet. I trust I can count on your silence in the matter." Severus fingered his wand, a silent threat that did not go unnoticed by the young Malfoy.

"Of course," Draco managed to respond, his voice low to avoid being overheard. "And you actually care for her?"

"I do."

"And she returns your sentiments even with the prophecy?"

"Hermione has decided to ignore the prophecy at this point in time a decision that currently works in my favour."



Draco appeared to be puzzled by that statement. "Why? Wouldn't it be easier to tell her that it's you and not Weasley?"

Severus glared at the younger wizard. "Do you think I want a woman to come to me because she believes she has no other choice? No. I will make her mine on my own terms, prophecy or no prophecy."

\*\*\*

Ron Weasley sat at the small table in the corner of the Burrow's new sitting room playing wizard chess with Harry. The party had started to die down, and most of the guests had either already left or were preparing to leave. Ron glanced across the room at Hermione, who was sitting with Ginny and Luna on the sofa. She seemed really happy, her face all aglow as she laughed and talked. He was glad to see her in such high spirits. Their break-up could have been a complete disaster, but the two of them had been friends for too long to let the end of their romantic relationship end their friendship, too.

"Your turn, Ron."

Ron turned his attention back to the chess board and looked to see which piece Harry had moved. "Hermione looks happy," he said as he considered his next move.

Harry looked in Hermione's direction. "Yeah, she does. That's good, right?"

"Oh, yeah. If anyone deserves to be happy, it's Hermione." Ron moved a knight and then sat back in his chair. He watched Hermione hug Luna and Ginny before walking toward him.

"Hey, Ron. I'm going to go say good-bye to your parents, then I'm heading home," she said, giving him a quick hug before turning to her other best friend. "Bye, Harry. I'll see you soon."

Harry nodded absent-mindedly, muttering a good-bye as he studied the board.

Hermione laughed and bent down to place a quick kiss on Harry's cheek. "Good luck with the game looks like you'll need it."

Harry responded with a two-fingered salute, sending Hermione and the other girls into peals of laughter. Ron's eyes followed the girls as they walked to the kitchen. It had been over three months since he and Hermione called off their engagement. He wondered if she was interested in meeting up with Charlie yet. There was only one way to find out.

"I think I'm going to go walk her to the gate. I'll be right back no cheating!"

Harry scratched his head as he considered his strategy. "Yeah, sure thing, mate."

Ron entered the kitchen as Hermione was speaking with his parents.

"Thank you both so much," Hermione said as she embraced Molly. "This meant the world to me."

"We're just so proud of you, dearie," Molly said, Arthur murmuring his agreement as he received his own hug from the young witch.

Farewells and hugs were shared all around, and the room cleared of all but Ron, Hermione and Luna. He waited as the girls said their good-byes and made plans to meet for lunch the next week. When Hermione appeared as if she were ready to leave, Ron moved forward; he had to talk to her about Charlie.

"Wait up, Hermione, and I'll walk you to the gate," he said, gesturing toward the door.

"That will not be necessary, Mr Weasley. I will be escorting Miss Granger back to Grimmauld Place."

Ron jumped at the sound of Snape's familiar drawl the man really did know how to sneak up on people.

"Thanks, anyway, Ron. I'll see you soon," Hermione said, standing up on her toes to place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"Uh, yeah, Hermione, sure. Bye." Ron's confused gaze swung repeatedly between Snape and Hermione.

Hermione gave a little wave as she exited the Burrow, Snape following close behind. Moving to the window, Ron watched the pair as they walked down the garden path to the gate. His brow furrowed in confusion as he saw Snape place his hand at the small of Hermione's back. Why was he touching her? And why was she looking up at him like that - like she *liked* him?

"And why is he taking Hermione home?" he wondered aloud, forgetting that Luna was still in the room.

Luna joined him at the window, watching as Snape, who was looking particularly pleased with himself, pulled a smiling Hermione to him and Disapparated. "They're seeing each other."

"What?!"

The blonde witch rolled her protuberant eyes, and enunciating clearly, repeated her explanation. "They're seeing each other as in dating."

"But the prophecy said she and Charlie ...." Ron gestured, waving his hand back and forth in front of him. "You know."

Luna shrugged. "Hermione said she doesn't intend to live her life waiting around for this prophecy to be fulfilled. You can't fault her for that. She has every right to seek out her own happiness. After all, 'love is a fruit that is always in season.'"

Ron stared quizzically at the loony witch. "Doesn't that mean ... never mind," he said, running a shaky hand through his bright red locks.

He was not swayed by Luna's words. Hermione was seeing someone, and not just any someone, either she was seeing *Snape*. "Bloody hell. We'll just see about that," he muttered under his breath. There was absolutely no way this could be allowed to happen. He turned back to the window, glaring out into the darkness. *She doesn't want to wait around for the prophecy to be fulfilled. Fine. I'll make sure it gets fulfilled right now.*

Pushing past a confused Luna, he left the kitchen and stormed into his father's new study. He yanked out a piece of parchment and a quill, grabbed a jar of ink, and began to write.

*Charlie,*

*Get your arse to London. NOW! The greasy git is trying to steal away your soul mate ...*

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A/N: The Gruffleback Snorflunk is a complete figment of my Dr. Seuss-influenced imagination.

Luna misquotes the phrase "Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within reach of every hand," by Mother Teresa.

Up next ... Hermione and Severus spend some time alone, and each has a realization about their relationship.

My continued thanks to my fabulous betas!

## In Every Sense

Chapter 8 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.*

Chapter Eight

In Every Sense

With a loud *crack*, Hermione and Severus appeared in the small, unkempt square near Order headquarters and walked along the pavement until they stood in front of numbers eleven and thirteen, Grimmauld Place.

Hermione concentrated, *The headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix is located at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.* Before she had completed the thought, the house materialised before her eyes. Unlike the first time she had seen it, the house now exhibited the evidence of Harry's pride of ownership. After the war ended, Harry had completely renovated both the interior and exterior of the house; the outer walls and front door had been brightened by fresh coats of paint, the windows cleaned until they sparkled, and the old worn steps had been replaced with new ones. The serpent-shaped knocker on the door had been torn off by Harry personally and replaced by a golden griffin.

Not yet ready for the evening to end, and wishing to spend more time with Severus, Hermione glanced up at him and asked, "Would you like to come in for a bit?"

Severus appeared to be surprised by the question, and Hermione realised she had never asked him in before. She was about to apologise for ... something, when he spoke.

"I would be delighted," he said, an odd smile upon his lips.

They walked up the stone steps, and Hermione tapped her wand on the door, allowing them to enter the house. The main hallway was dark, indicating that the other current occupants had not yet come home for the evening. With a wave of her wand, the gas lamps ignited, illuminating the long hallway and casting a warm glow along the neatly wallpapered walls and gleaming hardwood floors with their brightly-coloured rugs.

Hermione felt awkward for some reason now that it was just the two of them in her home. They had been alone many times at work and at his flat but this evening felt different. Now that she had him here, what should she do with him? *I can think of a few things I'd like to do with him* a little voice whispered in her head. If Severus noticed her reddening cheeks, he did not comment thank Merlin.

"Would you care to join me in the library for a drink?" she finally asked, her head bowed as she fiddled with a loose string on one sleeve.

Warm fingers closed over hers, lifting her hand to his mouth, and he pressed a kiss into her palm. Hermione lifted her eyes to his, expecting to find amusement but instead found herself drawn in by the same inscrutable gaze she had seen when they were standing in front of *Lady Hamilton as Circe*. She felt her breath hitch and her body hum with anticipation.

"Come," he murmured, placing her hand on his arm as he led her to the library.

Soon enough, they had settled themselves on the sofa in front of the fireplace, sipping brandy and discussing the recent *Potions Monthly* article on the properties and uses of moon dew. Hermione enjoyed the intellectual discussion, as Severus was as up to date on the most current research in the field as any of her University professors had been.

Eventually, the hour grew late, their conversation punctuated by Hermione's yawns. "I'm so sorry," she said, yawning once again.

Severus stood, offering his hand to assist her to her feet. "It has been a long evening for you. Whilst I have enjoyed our discussion immensely, I believe it is time for me to return home and for you to sleep."

Hermione nodded; she was feeling quite tired. "I'll walk you to the door," she said, accepting the proffered hand and rising from her seat.

Her hand still enveloped by his much larger one, they walked down the stairs to the main hallway.

"I will see you at Renevatio in the morning?" Severus asked as his thumb lazily stroked the top of her hand.

"Yes, of course," she affirmed softly, thoroughly distracted by his caress.

"I will see you tomorrow, then. Good night, Hermione."

As he lowered his head, Hermione prayed to every deity she could think of that this time he would actually kiss her mouth as opposed to her cheek. Apparently no one was listening because just as she began to think this was the moment, Severus moved his head to the right so that his lips would land upon her cheek.

Hermione almost groaned in frustration; after several weeks of chaste and friendly kisses, she was ready for more. Thinking quickly, she waited until the last possible moment, then minutely turned her head to the left, and finally his lips brushed against hers.

Severus immediately pulled back, the dim light of the gas lanterns partially casting his face into the shadows, making his expression difficult for Hermione to read. Even so, she could feel the intensity of his gaze. Was he angry? Upset? Horrified? The ensuing silence was nearly unbearable, until at last he spoke.

"With a little forewarning, I can do better."

He slowly advanced toward her, causing her to step back until she came up against the wall, his close proximity forcing her to crane her neck to meet his gaze. Her breath caught in her throat, and she was incapable of looking away from him.

He raised his hands, resting them upon the wall on either side of her head as he lowered his own, his hot breath wafting across her cheek as he moved to murmur in ear, "Shall I consider myself forewarned?"

She gasped, then whimpered when he lightly nipped her earlobe with his teeth.

"Y-yes!" she breathed, her eyes drifting shut.

"Good." He retreated from her slightly, causing her to cry out in desperation, but then his mouth was on hers, and she was lost in a wave of overwhelming sensation.

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Severus exulted in her surrender as he pressed his lips to hers once, then twice before removing his hands from the wall. She melted into his arms easily, her hands clutching the front of his robes as he drew her to him. Giving in to the desire that had plagued him for weeks or maybe it was years he plunged his hands into her hair, angling her head to allow him to deepen the kiss. He slipped his tongue in between her parted lips, slowly tangling it with hers. *Ambrosia*, he thought vaguely, the word somehow penetrating the fog of desire that was clouding his thinking. *So succulent, so sweet*. He wished he could taste her forever.

After several long, languid kisses, he lifted his lips from hers, a small smirk appearing as Hermione's mouth attempted to follow him.

"Hermione. Look at me."

She did as he asked, her gaze hazy and disoriented. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and pulled her closer to him, resting his cheek on her curly head, his thumb stroking the soft skin at the side of her neck. He breathed in her scent, burying his nose in her curls and enjoying the feel of her pressed against him. Finally, he pressed a kiss to the top of her head and released her from his embrace, cradling her face in his hands.

"I will see you tomorrow. Yes?"

"Yes," she whispered, her eyes still somewhat unfocused.

He couldn't help but grant her a soft smile before leaning down to brush his lips against hers once more. "Good night, Hermione."

Blinking, Hermione answered, "Good night."

Severus opened the door and left the house. Once the door had closed behind him, he had to restrain himself from bounding down the steps like a love struck fifth-year. As soon as he was under the cloak of darkness, however, he allowed himself a broad smile; things were definitely going according to plan.

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Hermione gently closed the door and then turned around, leaning her back against the wood as she pressed the fingers of one hand to her swollen lips. Suddenly, her face lit up in a bright smile, and she ran up the stairs to her room, unable to contain the squeal of delight that burst from her mouth, the joyful sound echoing off the walls of The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

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Severus cursed as he flung open the door to his flat above Renevatio. Hermione had taken the afternoon off, and it had been a long, hectic day. When he had finally closed up the shop, he had been more than ready to go home, have dinner, and perhaps take a nap in front of the fireplace, preferably with Hermione beside him. Unfortunately, in his haste to clean up the laboratory, he had spilt a phial of his most recent experiment down the front of his robes, the gelatinous, putrid liquid sticking to him as if it were glue. *Disgusting*.

Heading toward the bathroom, Severus began disrobing, anxious to rid himself of the odious clothing. Soon enough, he was standing in the shower, vigorously scrubbing away all traces of the malodorous substance. As he rinsed the soap from his body, he thought of all the changes the past few months had brought.

The shop had been particularly busy of late, his staunch dedication to having only the best and freshest ingredients paying off in the number of customers walking through his door. Of course, his status as one of the leading Potions masters in all of Britain did not hurt matters. As he had hoped, his new reputation was beginning to supersede his previous one well, at least now no one believed he was lacing his elixirs with poison. Most people considered Severus Snape to be an excellent Potions maker, a fine businessman, and a surly bastard and that was just fine with him.

The biggest change had been in his relationship with Hermione. Four months ago she had been his friend and employee, and now she was his ... what? He shuddered at the thought of using such an adolescent term as *girlfriend*, yet technically speaking they were not lovers yet. If she had been any other woman, he would have already had her in his bed, but Severus wanted more than a quick shag between the sheets; he wanted her heart, her devotion, her love. And so, he was waiting for a signal from her that she was ready to take that step in their relationship. Gauging by her enthusiastic reaction to his kisses, he was certain the right moment would come soon enough. In the meantime, he was enjoying the limited physical intimacies in which they currently indulged.

Stepping out of the shower, he briskly dried himself, then picked up his wand from the counter and Summoned a new pair of trousers. He pulled them on and buttoned the fly before turning to face the mirror. Studying his reflection, Severus was reminded once again that he was not a handsome man although apparently Hermione found him attractive enough. Shrugging, he was about to dry his still damp hair when he felt the wards shift, followed by the sound of Hermione's voice.

"Severus? Are you here?"

*Blasted girl*, he thought somewhat affectionately, *always has to be right on time, if not early*. "Just one moment," he called.

Walking into the bedroom, Severus grabbed a white shirt from the wardrobe, pulling it on but not fastening it, before he padded barefoot into the sitting room. He found her in the kitchen placing two bags upon the counter.

"You are early," he intoned.

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Hermione spun around at the sound of his voice, her breath catching at the sight of his unclothed state or at least as unclothed as she had ever seen him. She forced herself to meet his eyes rather than stare at the glimpse of bare chest his open shirt afforded her.

She rolled her eyes at his knowing smirk. "Aren't you going to ask me about my interview?"

Crossing his arms, he indulged her and asked, "How was the interview?"

"I think it went fairly well," she responded primly; then she grinned. "I got the job! You are now looking at the Ministry's newest Potions researcher."

His smirk transformed into a smile as Severus stepped forward to pull her into a warm embrace. Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist it was purely accidental, of

course, that she happened to find her way inside his shirt rather than out.

She felt him kiss the top of her head before he murmured, "Congratulations, sweet. You should be very proud of yourself I certainly am."

"Thank you," she said into his chest as she snuggled closer to him, inhaling his clean, masculine scent.

She felt more than she heard his brief laugh. "Did you just *sniff* me?"

Her cheeks flamed. Under normal circumstances she might have buried her face in his chest until her embarrassment faded, but given that doing just that was the source of her discomfiture, Hermione slipped out of his embrace and walked briskly into the kitchen.

"It isn't *my* fault you smell so good," she grumbled as she began to remove the foil take-away dishes from the bags she had placed on the counter.

She knew he was behind her even before his strong arms encircled her waist. "I smell good, do I?" he murmured as he nuzzled her neck. "So do you like sunshine and honey."

With a soft laugh, Hermione twisted around in his arms, allowing him to draw her to him once more. "Don't be silly."

Severus held her a moment longer before releasing her and gesturing at the bags she had been emptying. "What do we have here?"

"Dinner. I picked up an Indian take-away on the way here. I hope curry sounds good to you. I thought we could celebrate my new job," she said as she returned to the task of setting out their meal.

"That sounds perfect. I'll retrieve the beer."

After their hunger was sated by the delicious meal, they adjourned to the sitting room, Hermione reclining on the dark blue sofa as she read a book, her feet in Severus' lap. She might have thought him to be asleep; his eyes were closed and his head leant against the back of the sofa. She only knew he was awake due to the long-fingered hand slowly stroking her lower leg.

Hermione took advantage of the unguarded moment to study his face. He looked exhausted. It must have been a busy day at the shop, especially as she had not been there to help with the necessary brewing. Severus had been working especially hard of late, and she was concerned about the extra work her leaving would undoubtedly cause.

"You look tired," she said, laying aside the book she had been reading.

"Hmm? Yes, I suppose I am I was missing an extra pair of hands today, after all." One eyebrow arched mockingly although his eyes remained closed.

Ignoring his teasing admonition, she asked, "The shop has been gaining quite a bit of business. What are you going to do without me there, Severus?"

"I'm sure *Renevatio* will survive somehow," he drawled, the effect of his sarcasm ruined by a large yawn.

With an impatient huff, she replied, "Yes, I'm sure it will." Worrying her lower lip between her teeth, Hermione contemplated how she might help to alleviate some of Severus' work load. "Perhaps I could stop by the University and talk to a few of my old professors. There have to be a few excellent Potions students who are looking for part-time employment. Actually, considering how busy the shop has been lately, you may want to think about hiring two part-time brewers."

He was silent for a moment as he mulled over her suggestion. "An acceptable plan."

Grinning in satisfaction, Hermione removed her feet from his lap and sat up before sliding across the cushion to curl up against him, tucking her legs underneath her. Severus wrapped his arm around her back, pulling her tightly to his side, and Hermione rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes in contentment at being near him. She was about to drift off to sleep when a thought came to her.

"I have an idea," she said. "You've been working so hard lately, and I have two weeks before my new job begins. What do you say we take a holiday together? I have a lovely summer cottage in Dorset. We could go there for a few days and just relax." Severus opened his eyes to look at her questioningly. "It was my parents'. I sold the house and the practice, but I couldn't bear to part with the cottage." She cleared her throat in an effort to hold back the sadness she felt whenever she thought of her parents. "Anyway, what do you think about a short holiday?"

"An excellent idea, sweet. Perhaps a little time away will do us both some good."

Hermione shivered at the slightly suggestive purr to his voice. It really was not fair of him to call her "sweet" it completely turned her insides into mush but when he used that velvety, seductive tone ... dear Merlin, she wanted him more than anything. Happy that he had agreed, Hermione raised her eyes to his and lightly ran her fingers along his shoulder. "So ... are you going to snog me senseless now?"

His eyes darkened, glaring at her mockingly, before he hauled her into his lap. "I do not *snog*," he growled as he dipped his head. "I kiss." He gently pressed his lips to hers. "I taste." He nibbled on her bottom lip. "I *savour*."

He then proceeded to snog her senseless.

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"This is it!" Hermione exclaimed.

They had Apparated a short distance from the house into a nearby copse of trees in case a random group of Muggles happened to be walking past the cottage. It was doubtful, but one shouldn't take too many chances.

The cottage was much different than Severus had expected; it was a traditional brick structure with a thatched roof and a dry stone wall, which lined the front of the property. He noted several chimneys, indicating multiple fireplaces, as well as plenty of windows which allowed for excellent views of the rolling countryside. There was no other word for it it was enchanting.

Entering the house through the bright blue front door, he crossed the threshold into the light and airy sitting room. It was readily apparent that the cottage had been lovingly restored, and Severus was immediately at ease in the cosy space. As he explored the room, he heard Hermione performing several Cleaning Charms. *She must not come here often*, he thought, taking in the welcoming feel of the room with its cream walls and comfortable furnishings.

Walking to the fireplace, he noticed the mantle held several Muggle pictures of Hermione and her parents, as well as a few wizarding photos from her days at Hogwarts. He couldn't help but smirk as the eleven-year-old picture-Hermione saw him and scampered out of the frame before peeking around the edge at him, her eyes widened in trepidation. So she *had* been frightened of him; thankfully, that hadn't been the case for quite a few years.

Hermione's nervous babbling broke him from his reverie. "It's been a while since I've been here last summer I believe. Sorry about the bit of dust. Erm ... this is obviously the sitting room it is my favourite room in the house and the kitchen is through that door over there. There is a small study over this way, and up the stairs are two bedrooms."

Severus covered his amused smile with his hand as he listened to Hermione stumble over the word. Perhaps it was time to determine her expectations for this holiday.

"It is already three o'clock," he said. "Why don't we unpack and settle in a bit. We can go exploring tomorrow." He was careful to keep both his tone and expression completely neutral.

"Oh, of course! Yes, an excellent idea, really," she mumbled, fidgeting with her hands. She raised a slightly unsteady hand toward the staircase, her cheeks a lovely shade of pink, before she hastened up the steps and into the hallway, Severus following closely behind her.

"This is my room," Hermione said, indicating the door to his immediate right. "Across the hall is the guest room, and the other door is the loo."

Severus said nothing; instead he simply nodded, the ornery side of him wanting to see what she would say or do next. He was not to be disappointed.

"You may put your things in whichever room you like."

His lips twitched as she steadfastly looked anywhere but at him, the pink in her cheeks deepening to a flaming red. He needed to know more, however.

"Exactly what is it you want, Hermione?" he asked, intentionally deepening his voice to a devastating purr.

She appeared as if she wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. Her eyes were screwed tightly shut, and her blush spread down her neck to the exposed skin of her chest. She took a deep breath and straightened her spine; she then opened her eyes to resolutely meet his gaze.

"I want us to share a bed."

Well, that was better, if not quite specific.

Wishing to ease some of her discomfort, Severus pulled her into his arms, gratified at the ease with which she came to him. Stroking her back soothingly, Severus buried his nose in her hair and asked, "You wish to lie with me?"

He felt Hermione nod against his chest. With a small smile, he threaded the fingers of one hand into her hair, and with a gentle tug, tilted back her head. Tenderly, he kissed her. "I believe that can be arranged."

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After they had enlarged their shrunken luggage and placed their belongings in the bedroom, they walked back down the stairs to the sitting room. Severus ensconced himself in one of the comfortable red and white toile chairs to read a book whilst Hermione made them each a cup of tea. Safely hidden in the kitchen, she hastily pulled herself together after her bumbling request regarding the sleeping arrangements. Dear Merlin she couldn't have acted like more of a ninny if she had tried. It wasn't as if she were some shy, young virgin although around him she seemed to feel like one. Shaking her head at herself, she poured the tea and returned to the sitting room.

Hermione handed Severus his cup and placed hers on the table between the two chairs before seating herself. Once settled into the chair, she stared out of the window at the landscape she so loved as she sipped her tea. Summer in Dorset was beautiful, and she was thrilled to be able to share her favourite place in the world with the man who quickly was coming to be such an important part of her life. She smiled at the domesticity of the two of them enjoying a cup of tea and reading in her cosy little cottage.

Wrapping the tea cup in both hands, Hermione blew along the surface in a vain attempt to cool the steaming liquid. "I've always loved it here. I considered moving into the cottage after the war ended, but in the end, I opted to live at headquarters instead."

Setting his book aside, Severus turned to her and asked, "Why didn't you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I needed to be with people for one thing. I would have been lonely here all by myself, and the loss of my parents was still so fresh that I thought I would be better off closer to my friends, to people who care about me." She shrugged delicately. "And headquarters was closer to uni and to Renevatio. It all worked for the best really. Now that I've completed my schooling, maybe it's time to live here year-round. I could Apparate to London for work and to visit friends. It would be nice not to have to live in a place with people coming in and out all of the time. What do you think? Good idea?"

"Where you live matters little as long as I know where to find you."

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Hermione smiled at him, knowing her heart was in her eyes, but unable to hide from him. He watched her face, his gaze becoming more intense as his eyes drifted from her eyes, to her mouth, to her breasts, to her legs, and back up again.

"Come here," he said, holding out his hand.

She stood as if mesmerised, placing her hand in his and then moving to stand in front of him. Severus stopped her as she began to seat herself in his lap.

"Not yet, sweet. I wish to look at you."

Her eyes widened in surprise, and she desperately wished she had worn something a bit sexier than the tee-shirt and comfy skirt she had selected that morning. Severus, however, seemed content to simply look his fill of her.

He began at the top of her head. The day was hot, and she had worn her hair up in an effort to keep somewhat cool. "Take down your hair, please," he murmured, watching through hooded eyes as she pulled out the clips and bobble until the wild mass of curls fell almost to the small of her back. "Lovely."

Hermione snorted indelicately and rolled her eyes; although her cheeks had taken on a pinkish tinge under his scrutiny, she met his intense gaze with one of her own. There was the look, she realised with a start the one she had seen at the gallery and on the night he first kissed her. He longed for her for her ... love?

They stared at each other for several moments, each completely entranced by the other. Finally, Severus tore his gaze away, his eyes instead roaming over her face, appearing to memorise each feature her eyes, her nose, her mouth. She felt her breath quicken as he pronounced, "Beautiful."

His eyes lazily drifted to her breasts, the indentation of her waist, and the slight curve of her tummy, before sliding all the way down to her bare feet. "Delectable."

"Delectable?" Hermione asked with a small giggle. "Do you want to *eat* me?" The moment the words left her mouth, she recognised her unintended innuendo and flushed in mortification. "I didn't mean ... I ..." she stammered, closing her eyes and praying he would just forget her momentary loss of sanity. Why was it she was always blushing whenever he was near?

Severus tugged her hand gently until she tumbled blindly into his lap. With his mouth at her ear, he murmured, "Perhaps later, sweet."

Even without seeing, she could hear his smile. Suddenly, she realised that he really did care for her, that he wanted her, just as she was, imperfections and all. He *knew* her the real her and he cared for her, desired her. This was what she had been wanting ever since she had heard that stupid prophecy to finally be loved and desired, not in spite of who she was, but *because* of who she was. And with that realisation, she knew: she loved him, and it was true, and it was deep, and it was everything her mother had said it would be. She didn't want to change him; she didn't want to turn him into someone else. She loved *him*.

No longer willing to be a passive participant, Hermione decided it was time for her to take the lead. She wasn't ready to tell him of her newly-discovered feelings, but she could certainly *show* him. She placed her hands on either side of his face and drew his mouth to hers, instantly opening to him and deepening the kiss for several long moments.

Gentling her ministrations, she kissed his forehead, his cheeks, his neck, his mouth even his overly large nose, earning her a glare and a snort. Saying nothing, Hermione simply gazed at him, her eyes utterly serious as she traced the lines of his face, tenderly caressing his harsh features with loving fingers.

At last, she spoke her heart's desire. "Make love to me, Severus."

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Such simple words, plainly stated, and yet they took his very breath away. She had seemed nervous and somewhat jittery, but suddenly she was confident and unafraid. Pleased with the trust she was placing in him, he pressed his lips to hers, coaxing her with gentle kisses until her mouth relaxed once more, her lips parting slightly. He suckled her full lower lip, caressing it with his tongue before slipping into her mouth.

Severus had always been a man who rigidly maintained his self-control his life had often depended upon it but now, he wanted to lose himself in her, to find himself in her. In this moment, he simply wanted her, in every way, in any way, for always.

His hands began to move as if of their own accord, one stroking her hip, the other her back as he continued to explore her mouth with his. Wanting more of her, he helped her to move so that her knees fell on either side of his hips, straddling him. The long skirt bunched in between them, and Hermione pulled at it, tugging until the only thing between her sex and his hardening erection was a few scraps of thin fabric.

She clutched his shoulders, her fingers twining into the fabric of his shirt as he placed open-mouthed kisses down her neck before returning to plunder her mouth once more. Slowly, he slid one hand up her side until he reached the swell of her breast. He ran his thumb over her nipple once, then twice, before cupping her breast in his hand and squeezing gently. Severus smiled as she dropped her head to his shoulder, her breath coming in short gasps as he repeatedly stroked the hardened peak.

Without warning, Hermione began to move, pressing her centre against him as she rocked back and forth, and Severus felt his desire rise to a feverish pitch. As he had wanted to do the first time he saw her bare legs, he ran his hands up her calves, underneath her skirt to her shapely thighs, his thumbs skimming along the smooth, soft skin of her inner thighs, causing her to gasp. Avoiding the place where he knew she wanted his touch the most, he instead slid his hands around her hips to palm her cotton-covered arse. Hermione's breathing was coming in soft pants now as his hands slipped under her knickers to knead her flesh, and when he began to aid her efforts by guiding her hips as she moved against him, he delighted in her guttural moan.

Whispering into her ear, he said, "Come to bed, sweet."

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Later, in the privacy of her bedroom in the small country cottage, Severus lay above her; he entered her willing flesh and began to move, his slow, deep thrusts filling her again and again. Hermione could not tear her eyes from his; it was as if she were seeing his very soul. As they reached the pinnacle of their passion, she was filled with a sensation of utter perfection, of total completion. He was hers and she was his. They were one body, one mind, one heart one soul.

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Severus held Hermione tightly to him as she slept, his fingers stroking the silky skin of her arm. He was no novice; he had been in sexual relationships with women in the past, but nothing compared to the repletion he felt with her, as if he could be all that he was with no fear of ridicule or rejection. The prophecy had said that he would enrapture her, that her heart would be his reward and he had wanted that more than he had ever wanted anything. Now, as he held her in his arms, he knew it was *she* who had enraptured *him*, and his reward was not in gaining her heart, but in loving her. And so he would do for as long as she would have him.

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*A/N: Up next ... the return to London, confrontations, and the conclusion.*

*My never-ending thanks to my wonderful betas.*

## Revelations

### Chapter 9 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.*

Chapter Nine

Revelations

Hermione sat on the quilt-covered bed in the room she and Severus had shared for the past three nights, her hands clasped in her lap as she stared sullenly out the window. It was raining pouring, actually and that suited her mood just fine. They were leaving in a few hours, returning to London and to their regular lives lives that did not accommodate spending every moment with each other. Petulantly, she decided she did not want to go home she wanted to stay here in the little cottage in Dorset with Severus.

The past few days had been halcyon ones the best Hermione had ever known. Hours had been spent in conversation, ranging from the inane to the intellectual. They had taken long walks through the rolling countryside, along lanes flanked by fields of poppies and cornflowers, the air fragrant with the smell of wild garlic. She had enjoyed their leisurely strolls and talking with Severus about any little thing that came to mind. She now knew more than anyone about the typically taciturn wizard she wished to call her own and he had learnt about her, as well.

The evenings had been spent sharing meals at the small kitchen table before adjourning to the sitting room to read, talk, or simply relax in comfortable silence. Eventually, Severus would stand, offering her his hand to lead her up the stairs to the bedroom where they spent passion-filled nights revelling in each other until their desire was sated. Hermione would then snuggle next to him, her head upon his shoulder, her toes brushing against the bristly hair of his calves, until she drifted to sleep, only to see him in her dreams. Each morning she would awaken spooned against him, her back to his front, his heavy arm clasping her to him as if she might disappear if he let her go.

Hermione sighed; she wished they could stay here for a few more days maybe even forever although she supposed that wasn't practical.

The bed dipped suddenly as Severus sat down behind her. Resting his chin upon her shoulder, he waited a few moments before quietly asking, "What is the matter, sweet?"

Twisting to face him, Hermione buried her face in his neck, her hands clinging to him, but she remained silent, not wanting to make an utter fool of herself.

Gently, he comforted her, his strong hands stroking her back until she relaxed in his arms. She felt him attempt to crane his neck to see her face, but she simply turned her head, hiding her sulky expression from his view.

"Hermione. Tell me."

She sighed into his shoulder before turning her head to snuggle back into his neck. "I'm just being silly," she said dejectedly.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Let me be the judge of that. Now, tell me what is bothering you to the extent that you feel the need to hide from me."

Hearing the tinge of concern in his voice, guilt flooded her. Raising shocked eyes to his, she quickly began to explain. "I'm not hiding from you! Honestly, I'm not! It's just ... we're leaving today," she finished lamely.

Severus nodded solemnly, one corner of his mouth lifting minutely. "We are."

Looking everywhere but into his eyes, Hermione worried her bottom lip with her teeth for a moment before blurting out, "I don't want to go!" and throwing her arms around his neck, clasping him to her with all her strength.

"Ah. Now, I understand," he said as he stroked her hair.

She leant back to look at him at last. "You do?"

The small, soft smile she was quickly becoming familiar with appeared as he replied, "Of course I do. You are afraid that once we return to London and to our normal, everyday lives that what we have found here with each other will somehow disappear. Am I correct?" Hermione nodded sadly, and Severus smoothed her riotous curls away from her face before continuing, his voice soothing her overwrought emotions. "There is nothing to worry about. Whilst we obviously cannot continue as if we are on perpetual holiday, we will still see each other every day, if I have any say in the matter."

Relieved by his assurances, Hermione smiled, then kissed him fiercely. Severus responded with equal ferocity, lowering her to the bed and covering her body with his as he whispered, "You'll not be rid of me that easily."

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"Come on, Severus we're late!" Hermione admonished, rushing through the door of Order headquarters and swiftly moving toward the stairs to the basement kitchen.

They had Apparated directly to Grimmauld Place after realising that this evening was the monthly gathering of Order members. He was certain the meeting would not have yet begun, but his little witch was adamant that they hurry.

Severus rolled his eyes as he reached out to grab Hermione by the arm, tugging her toward him as she sputtered in indignation at his "high-handed behaviour." Ignoring her continued ranting about the need for punctuality, he placed his hands on either side of her head and lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her thoroughly before releasing her.

"Now we may enter 'the lion's den,'" he intoned, raising an arm toward the basement stairs.

Hermione stared at him blankly before asking, "What was that for?"

Pleased by her dazed expression, Severus smirked as he led her down the stairs to the kitchen. "So that you will be thinking of me and no one else."

She laughed, the delightful sound reverberating in the narrow hallway. "I don't think that will be a problem."

He raised a questioning brow. "No?"

Stifling her laughter, she replied, "Definitely not. Just being in the same room with you will ensure that my thoughts lie solely with you."

Feeling particularly smug with her response, Severus pushed open the kitchen door, holding it to allow Hermione to enter. As she walked past him into the kitchen, he whispered, "Perhaps later more than just your thoughts will lie solely with me."

Rather than the maidenly blush he expected, Hermione paused and brushed against him as she quietly murmured, "Perhaps so, if you are very good but then I already know how good you are."

Her suggestive tone shot straight to his groin, and he felt himself begin to harden. *Good gods*, he thought as he followed Hermione into the kitchen, *she really is going to be the death of me*. He only hoped no one would notice the rather obvious bulge in his trousers.

He needn't have worried; his ardour was immediately cooled once he saw the disapproving countenances of Molly Weasley and Minerva McGonagall. *Strange*, he thought. *Where is everyone?* Rather than a full Order meeting, it appeared only the Lupins, the Potters, Arthur, Molly, Minerva, Miss Lovegood, Draco, and the Weasley whelp were present. Curiously, it was the same group that had discussed the prophecy all those months ago. Was there some connection? Severus pushed aside the thought; it was merely coincidence.

The lack of regular chatter was disconcerting; he had never heard this group so quiet. Surprised by the chilly reception, Severus warily escorted Hermione to the chair next to Miss Lovegood, pulling it out and allowing her to be seated before lowering himself into the adjacent chair. Severus glanced around the room; many were either scowling at them or staring curiously. Sensing her anxiety, he raised Hermione's fingers to his lips to place a chaste kiss upon the back of her hand.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON, HERMIONE?!"

Severus was on his feet in an instant, wand in hand, glaring at the wizard who had dared to raise his voice to his witch.

Delicate fingers touched his wrist, urging him to lower his wand. Grudgingly, Severus did so, glaring at the red-faced young man who was now standing on the other side of the table.

Potter had jumped to his feet as well, placing a restraining hand on his friend's shoulder. "What are you doing, mate? You can't shout at her," he said, keeping his voice low.

Weasley tensed, his expression becoming uncertain for a fraction of a second before hardening again. "Yes, I can and I will, too, until she comes to her senses!" His eyes shifted to Hermione. "What the hell is going on between you and Snape? TELL ME!"

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione chastised her former fiancé as she too leapt to her feet. "Do not yell at me! What is your problem?"

Moving to stand slightly behind Hermione, Severus determined that she was the best person to handle the situation with the irate young man. Sensing that the youngest male Weasley was not the only distressed person in the room, he kept his wand in hand in case it should become necessary for them to make either a hasty retreat or fight. Given the amount of hostility being generated, he wasn't completely certain it would not come to that.

"You want to know what my problem is?" Weasley pointed an accusing finger at Severus. "*Him*, Hermione! He's my problem!" The ginger-haired young man folded his arms over his chest, glaring down at the petite witch. "How could you?" he accused.

Hermione gaped, her jaw dropping in surprise before she snapped it shut, her mouth tightening in anger. "How could I what?" she demanded.

Weasley ignored her question, throwing his hands up in the air and gesticulating wildly. "What are you doing with him? Bloody hell, Hermione. You're meant for Charlie! Or have you conveniently forgotten about that little thing I like to call a PROPHECY?!" he raged, his voice increasing in volume with each word.

Severus must have blinked because the next thing he knew Hermione had her own wand levelled at Weasley's face.

"I believe I told you not to yell at me," she stated pointedly, her tone cold.

Perfectly content to allow Hermione to hex the boy to perdition, Severus took another step back, allowing his witch plenty of room for any necessary wand movements. Minerva ruined the moment, however, by stepping in *damn busybody* and placing an interfering arm in front of Hermione, causing her to lower her wand although she continued to glower at Weasley.

"Miss Granger!" Minerva tartly admonished. "There will be no wands raised in this room. Is that clear?"

Keeping her gaze firmly on Weasley, Hermione said, "Pardon me, Minerva, but you are no longer my professor nor my leader, and if Ronald continues to raise his voice to me, I will not only raise my wand, I will *use* it!"

Weasley blanched at the blatant threat but did not relax his angry posture.

"Come now, children," Molly soothed, attempting to diffuse the situation, "let's sit down at the table and discuss this like reasonable witches and wizards."

Reluctantly, everyone returned to their seats, and Hermione laced her fingers with Severus', placing their entwined hands on the table, her eyes narrowing at Weasley as if daring him to comment. Weasley, however, slouched in his chair, refusing to so much as look in Hermione's direction. Severus squeezed her fingers in silent support; she might have appeared to be merely angry to the others, but he knew she was feeling confused and hurt by the vitriol aimed at her by one of her best friends.

"Right, then," Molly said. Her words were calm, but Severus clearly heard the underlying tension in her voice. "Now that we're all seated and ... erm ... somewhat calmer, let's discuss the situation at hand."

Severus couldn't remain silent any longer. "I beg your pardon, Molly, but exactly what 'situation' are you referring to?" he asked neutrally.

Molly slid her eyes to Severus, her lips tightening in reproof before she primly replied, "You know perfectly well to which 'situation' I am referring, Severus. Do not play coy with *me*."

Stiffening at her accusatory words, Severus flatly denied the witch's assertion. "Madam, I assure you, I do not know of what you speak; and furthermore, I am deeply offended by the manner in which you and, to a greater extent, your son have been treating Miss Granger and me this evening."

"Now, Severus," Minerva warned. "Let's not be so hasty. There is a point to this discussion a point that many of us agree you and Hermione are both ignoring."

"Spit it out, then, Minerva!" Severus snapped, irritated at being treated like some delinquent child.

Minerva opened her mouth to explain when Weasley angrily broke his silence. "She's supposed to be with Charlie! There's your 'point,' you bastard! That's what the prophecy says, that's why I gave her up to be with Charlie, not with a mean, sarcastic, greasy GIT!"

Hermione jumped to her feet, indignation rolling off of her in waves. "Leave Severus out of this, Ron! What you just said is an outright lie! You know perfectly well that we ended our engagement because we both realised we didn't love each other that way! And I have told you a million times Charlie Weasley is *NOT* my soul mate!"

"Did I hear my name?"

A collective gasp arose from the group in ordinary circumstances, Severus might have found it humorous as all eyes turned to the kitchen doorway.

Severus sat back in his chair, wearily running a hand over his face; things were about to get very interesting.

Charlie Weasley had arrived.

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Hermione could not remember a time when she had been angrier. Although no one but Ron had dared to actually say so, it appeared that most of the room believed the prophecy was true and that Charlie Weasley was her soul mate. Obviously, Molly and Ron were upset that she was ignoring the prophecy and seeing Severus; it seemed they were upset with Severus as well, probably blaming him for "stealing" her away or some such nonsense.

And now, Charlie had arrived. Hermione panicked briefly what if *he* believed the prophecy? What if he tried to take her away from Severus? Then she calmed, secure in her feelings for Severus and the knowledge that he would never let anyone force her to leave him. With a serene expression, she resumed her seat to observe the events as they unfolded.

"Charles Weasley," Molly scolded, rushing forward to hug her second-born. "Where have you been, young man? We've been sending owls for almost four months!"

The stocky redhead grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, I know, Mum. I got your first owl hey there, Hermione but after Ron left, I had to go out to the field, and we don't get owls out there. I just got back yesterday, saw the stack of letters on my desk, and figured I'd best get to London to see what's going on."

Molly gave him a chastising look before saying, "Well, at least you're finally here. This situation is simply a mess, and you have to sort it!"

Charlie eyed first his mother, then the rest of the room warily. "Sort what?"

"Honestly, Charlie," Molly complained. "Do try to pay attention! The prophecy, dear remember that? You and Hermione are soul mates, and now this ... this ... *interloper* is s-seducing her!" Molly cried, her cheeks reddening slightly with her words.

Running a hand through his red hair, Charlie sighed. "Calm down, Mum. No one is interloping anywhere." His mother made as if to protest, but he shushed her, calmly stating, "The prophecy isn't talking about me."

"Course it is," Ron said, visibly thrilled that his brother had arrived. He brandished the original written copy of Luna's words. "Here, take a look. See? 'Dragon saviour,' 'sun



of the phoenix' that's you! Read it for yourself."

Charlie took the piece of parchment and sat down at the table, discomfort evident in his manner. Hermione watched as a fine sheen of perspiration appeared on Charlie's brow as he carefully read over the prophecy. She had to admit, she was curious to hear his interpretation. When he was finished reading, he tossed the parchment to the table.

"Well, I'll admit it does *sound* like me " Hermione's face fell, whilst Ron's appeared triumphant until Charlie continued, "but it isn't."

"What?!"

"Now, Charlie "

"I told you!"

"I think you should read it again."

The room was now abuzz, everyone simultaneously offering his or her opinion. Hermione noticed that Minerva seemed to fall in line with the Weasley matriarch's and Ron's interpretation, whilst Luna, Ginny, Tonks, and to her surprise Malfoy appeared to be more sympathetic to her way of thinking, the latter going so far as to wink at her, which was actually a bit disconcerting. The remaining three men Arthur, Remus, and Harry seemed content to let their wives do the talking, watching observantly but not participating in the raucous discussion.

Finally, Molly's voice cut through the din. "Charles Arthur Weasley," she shrieked, "I cannot believe that you would deny this sweet, beautiful girl ..."

"Mum," Charlie interrupted.

"... How could you do such a thing?"

"Mum ..."

"I did not raise you to shirk your responsibilities in such a callous manner and furthermore ..."

"Mum! Please, listen to me. I swear to you it's not talking about me! It's impossible!"

Hermione's eyes widened. Impossible? She was on the edge of her seat in anticipation for what he would say next. Clutching Severus' hand tightly, she listened attentively.

"Impossible? What do you mean, Charlie? Of all the flimsy excuses I've heard in my life, this one takes the Snitch. You ..."

"I'm gay!"

That shut everyone up.

Molly was the first to recover. "W-what did you say?"

"I wasn't planning to ever say anything, Mum, but you've forced my hand. I'm gay. Is that proof enough that I'm *not* Hermione's soul mate?" he said, exasperated that he had been forced to disclose such personal information in front of a roomful of people.

"But you and Hermione ..."

Charlie stood and embraced his mother. "There is no me and Hermione, Mum, and there never will be. I realise you're disappointed in me ..."

"Disappointed in you?" Molly asked, genuinely confused. "I must admit, I am disappointed that you and Hermione aren't soul mates I really wanted her to be an official Weasley but I could never be disappointed in *you*. Why would you say such a thing?"

Bending to rest his forehead on his mother's shoulder, Charlie muttered, "I thought you'd be upset about having a gay son."

"Well, that is just ridiculous! You are my son, and I will always be proud of you," Molly said matter-of-factly, embracing him before releasing him to slap his arm. "Honestly! I would hope that you think better of me than *that*." She sniffed; then, with a far too innocent look, asked, "Are you seeing anyone?"

Charlie rolled his eyes and excused himself to go wash up for dinner, his mother following him out of the room, chattering on about which of her friends had sons he might want to consider asking out.

Silence reigned in the kitchen. Ron looked thoroughly baffled by the turn of events, as did most of the others in the room. Several minutes passed before he spoke. "Well, if it isn't Charlie, and it isn't me, then who is it?"

Hermione could have screamed. She had hoped Charlie's revelation would signal an end to all of this useless conjecture. She sighed; that would have been too easy, she supposed.

She was about to tell Ron where he could shove his speculations when Harry asked, "What about Malfoy? I was just kidding last time, but maybe it really *is* him!" He appeared horrified by the idea even as he voiced it.

Draco groaned dramatically. "Why must you insist on dragging me into this?" he whinged, casting a wary glance at Severus.

Even before Draco had finished speaking, Hermione was on her feet. "Let's go, Severus," she said. "I would like to leave." He seemed surprised by her request but stood to escort her from the kitchen.

"Hermione, wait!" Ron entreated. "You can't leave now we still have to figure out who your soul mate is!"

Something inside of her snapped. "Enough!" she shouted. "I don't care about whom *you* lot think my soul mate is. I don't care about what the prophecy says. I. Do. Not. Care! I am with Severus, and I am not interested in anyone else. Is that clear?"

"But Hermione, just listen a second ..."

"No! *You* listen to *me*. I am finished discussing this with you. I am telling you right now, if there is anyone in this world who is my soul mate, it is Severus Snape," she declared, grabbing his hand and pulling him to her side. "And do you know why? Because I love him. I *love* him. Do you understand what I am saying? I love him. I'm *in* love with him. This man ... right here. I love *him*. I love his intelligence, his sarcastic wit, his wicked sense of humour. I love his greasy hair, and his black eyes, and his crooked, yellow teeth. I love how he accepts me as I am, that he doesn't care that I'm a bookworm, or that I'm bossy, or that I have wild, crazy hair. I love that he doesn't want to change me, and I love that *I* don't want to change *him*! He speaks to me do you hear me? He speaks to my heart, to my mind, to my very soul, and if that isn't good enough for you, then *sod* you! I don't care what you think! He's the one for me, damn it prophecy or no prophecy, he's the one I want!"

Tears were coursing down her cheeks as she reached the end of her rant, and she angrily wiped them away, struggling to regain her composure.

"You love me?"

Hermione jumped, startled to hear Severus' voice. Caught up in the moment, she had completely forgotten he was standing right next to her. She turned to face him, daring to look no higher than his chest, a little afraid of what she might see in his dark eyes. Gentle fingers raised her chin until her gaze met his, and she gasped at what she saw. Severus' own eyes glistened with emotion, and before she could utter a word, he swept her up in a bruising kiss. Raising his head, he stared deeply into her eyes before crushing her to him in a tight embrace.

"Take me home, Severus," she whispered.

He leant back to see her face. "Home?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, to your flat, to my room, to the cottage in Dorset .... It doesn't matter; wherever you are is home to me."

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Severus swept her into his arms, more than willing to carry her all the way to the Apparition point, through Diagon Alley, and up the stairs into his flat. He wanted to take her to his home, to love her in his bed now.

"Wait!" Minerva called to them. "What about the prophecy?"

He sighed. They wouldn't be able to let it go unless he told them everything. Looking down into Hermione's loving eyes, he knew what he had to do.

Slowly, he lowered Hermione's feet to the floor, but held her tightly to his side. "What *about* the prophecy, Minerva?" he asked, pretending he did not see Hermione's curious look.

"We still don't know to whom it is referring, Severus. Surely you understand we only want what is best for both of you! I don't want to see either of you hurt should some other man come into the picture at a later date. Please can't you see? We need to resolve this somehow," she pleaded.

Glancing briefly at Hermione, Severus sat down at the head of the kitchen table. "Fetch me a quill, Minerva. Mrs Potter, please pass the copy of the prophecy. Thank you."

With a deep breath, he took the quill and wrote a few words, and then left the table, leaving the parchment behind. Instantly the rest of the group crowded in, and there was a short scuffle over who would get to read it first. Potter apparently won, snatching the parchment off the table. The others gathered around him, reading over his shoulder.

"Well, bugger me," Potter said, absentmindedly passing the parchment to those behind him.

Weasley cleared his throat. "That's surprising, eh? Who knew prophecies could be so vague." He ignored Hermione's glare. He scratched the back of his neck. "I mean, when you look at it like that, it's obviously talking about Snape, but when you look at it the other way .... Merlin, Hermione no wonder you hate Divination so much!"

Hermione, however, wasn't listening as the others began discussing the ambiguity of the wording she had been handed the copy of the prophecy. Severus watched as she stared at the piece of parchment, her eyes scanning the words repeatedly until she lowered her arm, the paper falling from her loosened fingers to the floor. In a daze, she sat down in the nearest chair, staring at the top of the table as she mulled over the words she had just read.

Concerned, Severus crouched beside her, "Hermione?"

Her gaze remained fixed on the table as she quietly asked, "How long have you known?"

"Since the moment the words were spoken," Severus replied.

She nodded woodenly. "Explain."

"Albus was more of a father to me than Tobias Snape ever was." Severus cringed at the slightly pleading tone in his voice.

"S-o-n. 'Son of the phoenix.' The headmaster cared for you as if you were his son," she said dispassionately.

Severus blinked at her tone, but responded, "Yes. So much so that he named me his heir in his will."

Hermione's eyes closed. "And the other?"

Picking up the parchment from the floor, he glanced at what he had written. He had crossed out the words "dragon saviour," replacing them with "Dragon's saviour." Tossing the parchment onto the table, he shrugged. "Potter was partially correct. 'Draco' does in fact mean 'dragon.' I believe it is referring to the events of five years ago when I saved Draco's life."

Again, Hermione nodded, but did not look at him. Finally, she raised her eyes to his eyes so full of pain he felt his heart clench.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

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Hermione couldn't believe it. All this time, he had known. He had known the prophecy was talking about him from the very beginning, and yet he had said nothing to her. Why? Why would he do that? Even as she asked him that very question, she feared the answer. Looking back, she realised that Severus hadn't shown any romantic interest in her until well *after* the prophecy was made. Dear gods what if she had unknowingly walked into the very situation she had been trying to avoid? What if he was only with her because he believed it to be inevitable? What if he truly did not want her at all? Too horrified to look at him any longer, Hermione jumped out of the chair, knocking it over in her haste, and ran from the room.

She heard Severus calling her name as she raced up the stairs, his heavy footfalls echoing as he chased after her, but she paid him no heed. Her eyes stung with the effort to hold back her tears as she ducked into the library, slamming the door behind her and waving her wand to ward it against intrusion.

Collapsing onto the sofa, she heaved a sob and then began to weep in earnest. Suddenly, she felt a tingle of magic as Severus took down her wards. Waving her wand, she put them back up, only for them to be instantly removed again. Scowling through her tears, Hermione waved her wand again, placing the strongest wards she knew upon the door. Now certain that she would not be disturbed, she wept until there were no more tears to shed.

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Severus kicked at the library door. His *darling* little witch had placed powerful wards to keep him out but had obviously forgotten to cast a Silencing Charm he could hear every heart-wrenching sob.

Running his hands through his hair, and kicking the door again for good measure, he leant his forehead against the wood. He had already considered Apparating into the room but then remembered that during the war Potter had warded the entire house against Apparition in case headquarters was ever infiltrated. Damn it! She had to let him in; she had to listen to him. He knew what she was thinking that he was only with her because of the prophecy but nothing could be further from the truth. He needed to tell her, to explain ....

"Trouble in paradise?"

Potter. *Just my luck.* "Come to mock me, Potter? How juvenile," he said, flatly, his head still resting against the door. Hell and damnation he couldn't even manage a sneer.

Potter did not respond, but did not leave. Curious, Severus turned to face the-man-who-had-once-been-the-bane-of-his-existence. "Just what is it you want?" he asked wearily.

Hands raised in a conciliatory gesture, Potter said, "I've come to help that's all."

Severus eyed the other man suspiciously. "You've come to *help* me?"

"Yeah. She has some pretty strong wards up, doesn't she?" Potter asked conversationally, as if he didn't hear the sobbing witch on the other side of the door.

Thinking that perhaps the younger wizard might be of some use after all, Severus nodded. "She does." He paused for a moment before adding, "I am unable to break them."

Apparently not surprised by this revelation, Potter simply shrugged, "Yeah. Those would be Hermione's 'special wards.' She developed them herself when we were out hunting for Horcruxes. They came in handy a time or two."

Severus was surprised at Potter's candour; the saviour of the wizarding world rarely spoke of the war, even to his closest friends. Not knowing how to reply, Severus simply nodded.

"I can take down the wards for you if you'd like," Potter offered.

Surprised by the unexpected offer, Severus blurted out his question, completely unchecked. "Why would you do that?"

Emerald-green eyes stared at him seriously. "I heard what she said down there. She loves you a great deal. I won't pretend to understand it, but I can see that it's true. And, if you don't mind my saying, I saw your reaction to what she had to say, and I think you love her, too." Potter shuffled his feet uneasily. "She's my best friend I just want to see her happy."

Severus shifted his gaze to the closed door once more before he nodded at the younger wizard. "Your help would be greatly appreciated, Mr Potter."

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Hermione sat on the sofa with her legs tucked to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. She had cried until she felt she couldn't possibly have any tears left to cry. Sniffing, she rested her forehead on her knees, allowing herself to wallow in self-pity for a while.

Suddenly, the library door flung open with such force it slammed against the wall with a heavy thud. Hermione's head whipped around toward the sound, only to see Severus skidding into the room, his hair sticking out all angles, and his eyes wild.

Seeing him standing there filled her heart with such painful longing that her eyes welled with tears once more, blurring her vision until she could no longer see him.

In an instant, Severus was pulling her into his arms and soothing her with gentle words as she cried. Eventually the tears ceased, and with her breath hitching, Hermione asked, "H-how did you g-get past the wards?"

A hand stroked her hair as he answered, "A certain friend of yours removed them for me."

Surprised, Hermione lifted her head to look at him; there was only one person who could have taken down those wards. "Harry?"

Severus nodded, his hand urging her head to rest upon his chest.

Hermione allowed him to comfort her for a moment before she came to her senses, disentangling herself from his embrace and standing to her feet before walking a short distance away. She wrapped her arms around herself, seeking some measure of self-preservation. "W-why? Why didn't you tell me?"

He did not answer immediately but instead pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and stepped forward to dry her tear-stained cheeks. Hermione felt her breath catch at the intimate gesture. "Refresh my memory. Why was it you chose to ignore the prophecy?"

Hermione was bewildered by the question. She hiccupped, then asked, "What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"Humour me, sweet."

With a shrug, she looked away from him. "I didn't want to be with someone who came to me solely out of obligation." She raised her gaze to meet his eyes. "Why would I want someone who was only with me because they felt they had no other choice? I want to be loved for *me*, not because of some prophecy," she said disdainfully, her tone ripe with accusation.

Completely unfazed, Severus smiled softly one corner of his mouth lifting ever so slightly and quietly asked, "And why would you think that I would feel any differently?"

Hermione froze, his words echoing in her head. *And why would you think that I would feel any differently?* What was he saying? That he had wanted her to come to love him of her own volition? Was he saying that he loved her?

Worrying her lower lip, she plucked at a nonexistent string on her robes before tentatively asking, "*How* do you feel, then?"

Tenderly, he cupped her face in his hand and whispered, "I love you, Hermione." He placed soft kisses on her cheeks "I love you" her forehead "I love you" her nose "I love you."

Severus lowered his head, and her lips parted to accept his kiss, when suddenly a collective, "Aww!" came from the doorway.

Startled by the sudden intrusion, they broke apart, turning their heads as one to face the open doorway. Crowded there stood the entire assemblage from the kitchen.

Hermione choked back her laughter as Severus glowered at the group as the phrases, "How sweet!" and, "It's so romantic!" drifted into the room. Her eyes widened as he reached for his wand.

"Severus," she said, placing her hand on his arm. Looking up at him with all the love in her heart shining clearly in her eyes, she felt his body relax, and then he turned his head to face her. He smiled at her, one hand rising to caress her cheek. Blindly, he waved his wand in the direction of the library door, slamming it shut as he smugly called out

"Sod off!"

## Epilogue

### Chapter 10 of 10

Having just announced her engagement to Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger is shocked when her friend, Luna Lovegood, gives a prophecy foretelling that she will fall madly in love with her soul mate - and it isn't Ron! One man knows for certain of whom the prophecy speaks, but he isn't telling. Who could it be, and will Hermione choose the right man? Winner for Best Fluff in Round Two of the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

*Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun*

Epilogue

*Twelve months later ...*

Luna stood in a corner of the ballroom, the silk skirt of her bridesmaid's gown swishing about her legs as she swayed to the music. Humming along with the melody – although slightly off-key – she watched the bride and groom as they danced. Sighing at the romance of it all, she smiled dreamily as Mr Snape – no, *Severus* to her now – led Hermione gracefully around the floor. They were so happy together, so absolutely perfect for each other, that it made Luna want to spin around crazily with glee.

And it was all due to her – Loony Luna Lovegood.

An uncharacteristic smirk graced Luna's lips. Oh, yes. She took full credit for this happy occasion. Perhaps she shouldn't – she supposed Sybill Trelawney, Merlin bless her, did have *something* to do with it – but really, if it hadn't been for Luna, this wedding might not have ever happened. She frowned for a second. Maybe that wasn't true, either. Perhaps someone or something else would have intervened had she not chosen to do so. But then again, maybe not. Luna suddenly remembered why she had hated Divination class at Hogwarts – it had made her head hurt.

Eventually, her mind returned to its original train of thought – how this wedding would not be taking place if not for her intercession. Of course, she could never tell Hermione, and this did bother her a bit because, after all, Hermione was her dearest friend. There was no way around it, though. Hermione could never know the truth.

The truth was that Hermione had been right all along – Luna was *not* a Seer.

No, Luna was definitely not gifted in the art of Divination, but she *did* possess an excellent sense of hearing and a rather nice Pensieve. Both had come in quite handy.

Feeling somewhat nostalgic, Luna thought back to the night her journey into covert activities had begun. It had been the night of the battle in the Department of Mysteries near the end of her fourth year at Hogwarts. There they had been, a bunch of teenagers, engaged in battle with a roomful of Death Eaters in the Hall of Prophecy, small glass orbs shattering all around them – prophecy after prophecy being revealed with the breaking of each crystal sphere.

Luna admitted that she wasn't always the most logical thinker; however, she was not stupid, either – she *was* a Ravenclaw. The summer after the battle, she had realised that there may have been invaluable information in the prophecies they had destroyed, and so she had hauled out her Pensieve – the one that had belonged to her mother – and placed her memories of that night inside. Over and over again she had entered the Pensieve, carefully listening to every prophecy she could in the vain hope that something she heard would be helpful in their fight against Voldemort. She had been unable to distinguish them all – there had been so many orbs destroyed, and it had been rather noisy as it was a battle – but she had done her best. Unfortunately, she had not discovered anything particularly useful as far as the war was concerned, but she had heard one prophecy that had intrigued her.

From the moment Luna had heard the prophecy, she had known it was speaking of Hermione Granger. She had been curious as to who the other person was and so had explored her memory of when they had first entered the Hall of Prophecy, walking amongst the shelves, looking for Hermione's name. She had been afraid she might not be able to locate it, since she had to stay within sight of her memory-self. After hours of searching, she had finally found it. Surprisingly, it had been extremely near to where Luna had been standing just before the Death Eaters had arrived.

Luna vividly recalled her shock at reading the label. The writing had indicated that the prophecy had been given the summer before her third year by S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D. Under the initials was Hermione's name followed by a name Luna would have never expected to see – Severus Snape.

Of course, she had been fifteen years old at the time, and the thought of Hermione Granger being soul mates with their sardonic Potions master had been rather disturbing. So, Luna had kept the information to herself, never really thinking on it until Hermione had begun to go out with Ron Weasley after the war had ended.

Luckily, Luna was a firm believer in contingency plans. When Hermione had told her that she and Ron were becoming serious as a couple, Luna had gone home, opened her storage trunk, and pulled out the piece of parchment containing her documentation of what she thought of as "Hermione's prophecy." Whilst she had believed that Hermione would at some point come to her senses and realise that her feelings toward Ron were those of friendship only, Luna had decided that if circumstances ever warranted it, she had best be prepared to take action. She had memorised every last word, practising it over and over until she had it perfectly.

And so it was that Luna had been more than prepared the evening that Ron and Hermione had announced their engagement. She had certainly been surprised by the announcement – she hadn't really expected she would ever have to carry through with her plan. However, knowing Hermione Granger, Luna had realised that all it would take was a nudge in the right direction to start Hermione questioning her relationship with Ron, and then fate would handle the rest.

It had been a risky plan, pretending to be a Seer. Hermione was a stubborn witch and might have decided to marry Ron just to spite the prophecy. Luna had been horrified when Ginny had written the words incorrectly, shifting the focus to Charlie Weasley. She had been flooded with relief when Hermione had begun seeing Mr Sn ... Severus, insisting that she would not allow talk of soul mates and redheaded dragon-handlers to deter her from seeking a relationship with the dour man. Things may have been a bit bumpy at times, but in the end, everything had all worked out for the best.

Luna was certain no one would ever suspect her of orchestrating such a scheme. Of course, everyone had pegged her as "that crazy Ravenclaw." Luna grinned. They didn't know that her mum had been a Slytherin.

Smiling, Luna waved to the happy couple as she continued to stand in her little corner of the ballroom, gently swaying to the music.

"Excuse me, Luna," she heard a familiar drawl say. She turned and looked up into the aristocratic face of Draco Malfoy. "Would you care to dance?"

Luna blushed prettily and dreamily accepted, allowing Draco to guide her onto the dance floor. It might have seemed an odd pairing to some – the loon of Ravenclaw dancing with the prince of Slytherin – but not to Luna.

After all, Hermione's prophecy wasn't the *only* one she had discovered in the Pensieve.

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*A/N: A huge thanks to the world's best beta team: Subversa, DeeMichelle, and Elfarren. My undying gratitude to LettyBird for Brit-picking and to ubiquirk, for giving the entire thing a final pass. You are all wonderful!*

*I hope you enjoyed the conclusion. I'm working on Draco and Luna's story right now, so if you're interested in what happens to them, look for Heart and Soul, also archived at TPP.*