

If the Shoe Fits

by GinnyW

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Chapter 1: I Still Believe

Chapter 1 of 8

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A/N: This story was written for Keladry_Lupin for the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange. It is completely written and I will post it over the next couple of weeks. :)

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Chapter 1: I Still Believe

Hermione fought the urge to look at her watch for what had to be the hundredth time this evening. Not that the time mattered at this point; it was now a matter of completing her task. There was no way she'd be allowed to leave before she was finished, regardless of the plan.

She grabbed the next pan from the slowly dwindling stack. Casting a quick charm on the brush, she put her wand back in her pocket and grabbed the brush as fresh soap bubbles began to form.

And she scrubbed.

She'd been at this now for at least four hours and she was quite certain her mentor had assigned it with the sole intent of forcing Hermione to stay late, yet again. Hermione had the feeling that she should have the words "house-elf" tattooed across her forehead. It made her want nothing more than to renew her campaign for S.P.E.W.

Ron would never forgive her if she did such a thing, however.

Hermione rinsed the pan and set it with the ever growing stack of clean ones before grabbing the next. This time, however, she couldn't resist the urge to check her watch: 8.15. Officially, she'd been off-duty at seven, and judging by the stack of soiled bedpans she had left to scour, she had another forty-five minutes to go.

If this had been one of her twelve-hour shifts, she wouldn't be nearly as cranky or exhausted as she was now. No, her mentor had seen fit to assign such a tedious and menial task at the end of a thirty-six hour shift.

This was one of the things that wasn't mentioned in the pamphlet she'd read about becoming a Healer. She hadn't expected the training to be easy. No, Hermione Granger had been through a war, after all. Not only had she been through a war, but she'd been on the front lines. It was in preparation for that war that she had learned basic First Aid and Healing charms and discovered her love for the art of Healing. She had also seen many things in the war that had given her experience to put her heads above her

present classmates in the Healer Training Program.

She felt she had come into this career choice with her eyes wide open. That hadn't made the decision any easier for her to make. Following the war, she, Ron and Harry had all been promised positions in the Auror Training Program. After several weeks of agonising over the choice, Hermione had ultimately decided not to accept the position with her two friends.

Several things had factored into her refusal, but at the time, she had decided that she'd spent more time than she had ever wanted chasing down Dark wizards. She certainly had no desire to make a career out of it. Not to mention that she thought it would be a bad idea to go through the same three-year training course and then work in the same profession as her boyfriend.

The three friends had agreed to take a year off before making any formal decisions about their careers, however. During that year, Hermione had convinced them to sit their N.E.W.T.s so they would have other options available to them. The Aurors had extended the invitation based on their performance and past marks in school and had been willing to accept them without their N.E.W.T.s. Both Harry and Ron had whinged incessantly when she'd told them her plan and given them schedules for self-study and revision.

In the end, they had all sat their N.E.W.T.s, and only Ron had joined the Aurors. Harry had gone to work for the Ministry in their Magical Games and Sports Division, while Hermione had signed on to become a Healer.

Now, six years later, Harry and Ginny were married. They spent most of their time travelling abroad in his job for the Ministry, and Hermione usually only saw them on holidays.

She and Ron had dissolved their relationship after two years of trying to make it work. Although she partly blamed their hectic schedules, it had ultimately been their different interests and their personalities that had caused them to grow apart. Ron was now working as an Auror as he'd always dreamed, and ironically, was presently dating the Muggle receptionist from Hermione's parents' surgery. The couple had met at the Grangers' Christmas party the year before and had been seeing each other ever since.

And Hermione... well, Hermione was just starting her seventh year of the eight-year training program to become a Healer. The program at St. Mungo's was intense, more so than she'd even anticipated. The first five years were nothing but classroom instruction, followed by the three-year apprenticeship. The first year of apprenticeship had been a general overview of the entire hospital, covering everything from basic Spell Damage to midwifery.

Tonight, looking at the remaining soiled bedpans, she groaned. What was she doing here, cleaning bedpans by hand? This year she was supposed to deal with the more complicated aspects of the job. Dealing with the harder to treat cases, the brewing and experimentation of medicinal potions and Dark curses. It was still an overview of the varying fields, but she was to delve into each aspect deeper so that she could decide which field she wished to specialise in for her final year of training.

So far this year, Hermione had learned very little about which field she'd like to specialise in. All she knew for certain was that she hated cleaning bedpans, and if possible, she would like to avoid any long-term care wards.

Like Hogwarts, the new year for St. Mungo's trainees began on the 1st of September. Today it was only the 10th of October barely six weeks from the start of her new apprenticeship and she was already looking forward to the end of the program year. For her, that time would come at the end of July.

When the group of Healers-in-Training had gathered in the fifth floor tea room on the 1st of September, they had each been assigned one Healer to shadow for the duration of the program year. Each participating Healer was respected and skilled as a general practitioner, and would take the time to teach the more intense aspects of Healing beyond the basics which the group of apprentices currently possessed. Hermione had been assigned Healer Sedgwick.

Three days after starting work with Healer Sedgwick, Hermione had found herself flipping through the obituaries in the *Daily Prophet* to see if Professor Snape had suddenly died. He hadn't, of course, but that didn't stop her from wondering what evil soul was presently possessing the Healer that, before this year, she had heard only good things about. It was only because Hermione was certain that things would soon improve that Hermione had yet to lodge a complaint; surely, Healer Sedgwick's past positive history with apprentices meant something.

Surely, there was a logical reason that Hermione was still cleaning bedpans while her fellow trainees had gone home over an hour ago...

A door slammed behind her, causing Hermione to jump and drop the bedpan she had just finished rinsing.

"Miss Granger," Healer Sedgwick looked down her stubby nose and said in an admonishing tone, "aren't you finished yet? Unlike you, I do not wish to spend all night here. And, as I'm sure you are aware, I cannot leave until you do. I am quite tired, and I would like very much if I could get some rest before I have to return."

Oh, yes, Hermione was positive that the Healer was tired. They were on hour thirty-eight of a thirty-six hour shift. Then again, Healer Sedgwick had been able to sleep while Hermione spent the night watching over an aged wizard who constantly tried to get out of bed and fiddled with everything within his grasp. The man hadn't tired and fallen asleep until five o'clock this morning, only an hour before Hermione had to be ready for morning rounds.

It was through gritted teeth that she finally answered, "I'm working as fast as I can, and since you insisted that the bedpans had to manually scrubbed, I've had to see to each one myself. Otherwise I would've cast a charm on the lot of them and been done hours ago."

Healer Sedgwick focussed her beady little eyes at the stacks of bedpans and inspected the one nearest to her. "That I did say. We had to cordon off an entire floor. There was an epidemic at Hogwarts this last week that infected the house-elves. I was previously informed of your sympathy towards their plight, so I didn't think that you would mind assisting. The virus doesn't pass on to witches, but wizards can also be infected. It is passed through the excrement. It's impervious to charms and must be scrubbed clean. Surely you didn't think that just because you were a witch that you would never have to do manual labour?"

"I know plenty about manual labour. Was anyone at Hogwarts affect by the disease?"

"One professor, but he only suffered minimally. No long-term effects. The matron there did a fair enough job of containing the virus to the house-elves, but the infected elves needed to be quarantined so they were moved here. They were lucky."

Hermione nodded as she grabbed the second-to-the-last dirty pan, curious about who'd been infected, but choosing to keep her questions to herself; when dealing with this woman had proven to be a safer strategy. She knew that Healer Sedgwick was talking about the House-Elf Flu. (Leave it to wizards to constantly name viruses after those whom they blamed for it.) It was a terrible virus for house-elves and wizards, but affected them very differently. For house-elves, it affected their intestinal tract, wrecking havoc. For wizards, it caused headaches, breathing difficulties and memory loss. It made Hermione thankful she was a woman, although there were equally dangerous illnesses out there that only affected witches.

In a frustrated huff, Healer Sedgwick Conjured a second brush, grabbed the last pan and began scrubbing. "I wish to leave. Unlike you, I would prefer to get home and get some sleep. I have to be back to work on Sunday."

Hermione fought the urge snap back at the woman. She wanted nothing more than to get home and get to sleep. Hermione only had to work the occasional Sunday and thankfully it was not the one this weekend. However, she did have other work at nine o'clock tomorrow morning.

It was by sheer force of will that Hermione was able to drag herself out of bed before nine the following morning. Just as she always did, she'd showered when she stumbled into the flat the night before. So, all she had to do this morning was drag on a clean set of robes, run the brush through her hair (for all the good it did) and try to wake up her brain with a quick infusion of caffeine.

"Good morning," greeted the all too perky voice of her roommate, Heidi Davies.

Hermione mumbled back a half-hearted greeting as she prepared a second cup of tea and with a wave of her wand shielded the cup to prevent spillage. Her roommate truly was much too perky and alert in the mornings, especially the mornings on which Hermione felt as if she were hung-over. Heidi, too, was currently going through the apprenticeship program at St. Mungo's, and they'd been in the program together since the beginning. Heidi had been two years behind Hermione at Hogwarts and was the younger sister to Roger Davies.

"I'm running late," Hermione said as she grabbed her cloak and put it on.

"Oh, you have some post here," Heidi said, running over with a small handful of envelopes.

"I'll read them when I get home."

"You haven't been home since Thursday morning, Hermione. One is from your mum ... I can't miss the smell of her perfume for anything ... and another had a return address from Norway, I believe."

"All right, I'll take them." She could read them during lunch if the shop wasn't too busy. Although it was Saturday, and Saturdays were notoriously busy. The enticement of a letter from Harry and Ginny was too much to pass up, however. It had been several weeks since she'd last heard from either of them. Hermione took the stack of post from the blonde woman, shoved them into the pocket of her cloak, muttered a hasty goodbye and darted out the door.

At precisely 9.03, she arrived at number 93, Diagon Alley: Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes.

She was three minutes late! Knowing that she was more disappointed in herself than her employers would be, she heaved a heavy sigh before she opened the door and made her way inside. The redhead standing behind the cash register grinned at her as she weaved her way to the backroom to hang up her things. When she returned to the front, she carried her teacup with her and set it under the counter.

"Good morning, George," she said.

"You look like you've had a rough night."

"Try a rough couple of rough nights."

He smiled warmly at her and Hermione went to work. She began her shift the same way she usually did, by going through the aisles and restocking all of the items in the store. She helped children find the Pygmy Puffs, and she sold Skiving Snackboxes.

This obviously wasn't her dream job, by any stretch of the imagination, but it did pay the bills. She had been grateful last year when her apprenticeship at St. Mungo's had begun paying a minimal salary. It hadn't been much, but it had been enough that, added to her wages from the Weasley twins, she'd been able to finally move out of her parents' house. Of course, she'd also had to take Heidi as a roommate.

Living in London wasn't cheap.

Her hospital salary was enough to pay her half of the monthly rent and utilities. The monies she received from working for the Weasleys covered food and miscellaneous expenses. There wasn't much left over for extras.

The benefit was that Fred and George were easy to work for. For one thing, they'd matured... well, they'd matured~~some~~*some*. Her schedule was flexible, and the pay was good. When the store was slow, she helped them in the backroom on the development of new products.

The greatest advantage, however, was the fact that unless she was helping Fred or George in the backroom with a new product, she didn't have to think. She had to be there, help keep the store clean, keep the shelves stocked, point to where items were located and occasionally be called upon to count out change. And counting out change she could do in her sleep. This morning, after two days of not being able to sleep and still being forced to keep her mind sharp and her wits about her, Hermione Granger relished the mind-numbing work.

As was typical for a Saturday in Diagon Alley, the Weasley shop was a bustle of activity. It wasn't until about three o'clock when a lull hit the shop and Hermione could finally take a break and sit.

"How is Fred doing?" she asked George as he pulled up a stool to sit next to her in the backroom. They could see the front of the store from here if anyone came in, but they were blessedly screened from any patrons who came calling.

"Much better, thanks to you. We don't know how to thank you, Hermione."

"I was just doing my job." She took a bite of an apple and stared out at the empty shop while she chewed.

George began to fidget on his stool, although it took a few moments for Hermione to finally notice.

"What?"

"We just wanted to... uh... make sure that," he said as he looked behind him to ensure that no one had come in without him noticing, "that... you know... you hadn't..."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, giving him a look of disapproval. "That I haven't turned you in?"

And then she waited while her employer looked at her anxiously, a pleading look in his eyes.

"No, I haven't, George. Your secret is safe with me."

An exhaled sigh of relief met her ears.

Last Tuesday she'd been awakened by the sound of George yelling through her Floo to come quickly to the shop. She'd done so, only to find that while Fred and George had been working on a new product; they'd made a miscalculation and a cauldron had exploded. Fred was covered in what turned out to be a highly hazardous byproduct. Hermione had worked quickly in both containment and healing. As a result, both twins were now safe.

However, whenever such an accident occurred, and especially when an outside source is called in to help, the newly formed Department of Magical Experimentation and Dangerous Potions must be called in to assess the scene. All wizards and witches working on experiments are supposed to file papers with the Department to seek out permission and to have their work approved before proceeding. The intent of the law was to decrease the number of accidents.

Fred and George had already been fined three times for not filing for an Experimentation Permit. If they were caught again, their shops could be forcibly closed by the Ministry for up to thirty days, pending a hearing.

"But, you both owe me."

George emphatically nodded. "Actually, we were discussing that, and we'd like to repay you."

Hermione waited for the other shoe to drop. She could tell by the enthusiastic nod of George's head and the glint in his eyes that the twins had something up their sleeves.

"We think you need a good shag, Hermione."

Hermione choked on the pumpkin juice she had just taken a sip of and sprayed it all over the desk in front of her. "Excuse me?"

"You need a good shag," George said again. "Well, likely more than just one shag. But don't worry though; we weren't thinking one of us."

"Oh, well, that's good," Hermione muttered in disbelief as she cleaned up the mess on the desk.

"Didn't you used to date Krum? We thought he might be good for you."

"Viktor? Erm, yes, I did. I've not seen him in ages because he's still living in Bulgaria."

George got a big smile on his face. "He just signed a contract to play for the Wimbourne Wasps. He moved to England last month."

"Really? And what exactly do you propose I do, hmm? Walk up to him and say, 'Oh, Viktor, I've missed you terribly. Would you mind shagging me silly for a moment? Thanks.' For some reason I don't think that will go over all that well. We really were only just friends. Besides, I doubt there is ever any occasion where I would see him."

"Well, we'll think on it. If worst comes to worst, we'll just make certain that you're at the New Year's Eve Masquerade Ball."

"What ball?"

"The one that the Ministry is hosting New Year's Eve at the Great Ballroom. It will be the event of the century. They've not hosted anything like this in years."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Don't you read your mail? Of course they're inviting all of the heroes of the war."

"Oh!" Hermione jumped up and grabbed the stack of letters from the pocket of her cloak. Sure enough, one of them was addressed to Miss Hermione Granger, with the return address from the Ministry of Magic. She broke the wax seal and revealed an invitation to a masquerade ball, just as George had said. As she read the details, Hermione made some quick mental calculations and shook her head.

"There is no way I'll be able to go."

"Why not?"

"I can guarantee you that I will have to work New Year's Eve at St. Mungo's. It's one of those 'perks' that comes along with being an apprentice. We work our schedule regardless of the date on the calendar. It's a Friday night, and I'll be coming off of my long shift. You've seen me after one of those shifts at St. Mungo's. I'd never be able to manage a ball after work."

"Oh, sure you could. At least you won't have to worry about working here the next morning. The shop will be closed New Year's Day."

"We'll help you figure out something; you have over two months to work on it. Besides, it's the perfect opportunity to meet someone. You have no social life, Hermione."

Hermione snorted. "You're starting to sound like your sister."

George wrinkled his nose at the analogy. Hermione knew that it was always a sure way to silence one of the twins... that or compare them to Molly.

Just then there was a ringing of a bell from the front of the store, so Hermione stood up from her chair.

"No," George told her. "Finish your lunch and read your letters; I'll get it. But we're not finished here, yet."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his parting remark. Maybe George was right. She'd been thinking for quite some time that she was ready to try dating again. There had to be someone out there for her... she just didn't have the time right now to try to find someone. And some small part of her still believed in the overly-romanticized idea of destiny and love.

Shaking her head and squashing her insignificant beliefs, Hermione picked up the envelope from Norway and settled down to catch up on the latest news from Harry and Ginny.

Chapter 2: Are We Dancing?

Chapter 2 of 8

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

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Chapter 2: Are We Dancing?

Just the small comments made by George Weasley one Saturday afternoon had sparked the flame in Hermione's soul. A single candle waiting for a mate. It was an odd feeling for an independent woman who had been taught by her parents that she didn't need anyone to make her a complete person.

When she and Ron had ended things, she had convinced herself that she would be quite happy alone. Many women did it, and they were quite fine.

A woman did not need a man to be happy.

She kept telling herself that, but still Hermione yearned for someone with whom to share her life with. She'd been happy when she'd been with Ron. Okay, their

relationship hadn't been all peaches and cream. It had actually been more like oil and vinegar ... they never had been able to meld. But they had been able to communicate on some levels. He had been one of her closest friends when she'd been growing up and they shared so many experiences. It was just interesting that once they had fought their battles together that they found they no longer had much in common anymore.

One could only live in the past for so long, but she missed the companionship. She wanted to have someone she could talk with to share her day. Someone with whom she could discuss new ideas and theories or carry on a spirited debate. Or someone to just curl up with and enjoy a good book. She no longer even had Crookshanks' companionship.

Maybe she actually had been mourning the loss of her relationship with Ron when she'd thrown herself into her work. Hermione kept trying to convince herself that these weren't just some unrealistic romantic notions. But the more time passed, the more she realised that her actually finding these things with someone was about as likely to happen as one of those fairy tales her mum used to read to her each night before bed.

Prince Charming just didn't exist anymore.

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It was the weekend before Halloween, and Hermione was noting how much busier things had become at work both at St. Mungo's and Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes the closer that they came to the bewitching holiday. Hermione was working her long thirty-six hour shift through Friday night and only had to worry about a very hectic day at the Weasleys' shop... after that she'd be able to rest up for a day.

It was again Friday night, and again, Hermione was being kept a bit later than she should have been. At least tonight she wasn't knee-deep in bedpans. No, she was making her way through the incoming triage patients.

Almost as bad, really. Especially when Healer Sedgwick told Hermione that she needed to see every patient who had appeared before six o'clock.

Glancing up at the clock, she sighed; it was only half-past seven. Not terribly late then, and looking at her list, she only had one patient left to either send home with a simple fix or dispatch to another department.

Hermione could almost smell the lavender-scented bubbles and hear the sounds of the pulsating jets of her bathtub from her flat on the other end of the city. With a new degree of determination, she walked into the private exam room on the Spell Damage Ward.

"Good evening, Mrs. Graham. What seems to be the problem tonight?" she asked with a genuine smile.

Mrs Graham was an elderly, kind-hearted witch whom Hermione had seen several times in the last year. The last time, she'd been admitted with a simple case of Dragon Pox; unfortunately, as with all childhood illnesses, it became a much more exaggerated case for the elderly woman. She had spent nearly two months in hospital.

It was during that hospital stay that Hermione had learned that the old witch didn't have any surviving family, so Hermione had spent many evenings and nights keeping the old witch company. It was from those nights she'd learned that Mrs Graham's husband had been killed during the reign of Grindelwald. Their only son had been killed by Death Eaters before Harry had finally been able to kill Voldemort.

Mrs Graham had appreciated Hermione's company and had sung her praises for the wonderful service that Hermione and her friends had done for the wizarding world during the battle against Voldemort. She had taken it upon herself to treat Hermione as if she were a surrogate granddaughter.

Hermione did like the elderly woman and enjoyed her company. It just saddened her that the only time that she got to see her was when Mrs Graham was a patient at St. Mungo's.

Tonight, after fifteen minutes of talking and diagnostic spells, Mrs Graham finally admitted to having been involved in an accident with an experimental potion and an obscure charm.

Hermione put her hands to her head and began massaging her temples. There were loads of precautions that needed to be taken when someone was working on experimental magic. Not to mention the paperwork that this was going to mean. The Department of Magical Experimentation and Dangerous Potions had to approve *all* experiments by commercial interests such as the Weasley twins as well as by elderly widows living alone on their savings.

With a sigh, she left the exam room so that a specialised room could be set up for her patient. Noticing Hermione's distress, the oncoming Healer approached her.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get your patient taken care of." Healer Schmidt then plucked the woman's chart out of Hermione's hand and told her, "You've been here long enough, and you need to go make sure that you weren't contaminated."

Hermione sighed with gratitude. "Thank you so much."

"No problem, Hermione. Go home and have a good night."

Not having to be told twice, Hermione made her way to the staff room to find her mentor so that she could officially leave. It was as she walked that she finally gave attention to how badly her legs and feet were hurting... not to mention the stiffness in her back. She hastened her steps. The sooner she was out of here, the sooner she could give her own body the rest that it sorely needed.

"Are you finally finished? I've been waiting here for an hour so I could leave," Healer Sedgwick testily greeted her as Hermione entered the staff room.

"Yes, I just handed over the last patient to Healer Schmidt."

"Good. It's about time. You should've been done an hour ago. You need to learn to manage your time better."

Hermione opened her mouth to defend herself, but before she could, the door to the staff room had been slammed shut after the other woman stormed out. Hermione didn't know why Healer Sedgwick had been so haughty, after she'd had a full night's sleep in the lounge the night before.

Hermione sighed, grabbed her cloak and slowly made her way out of the back doors of the building so she could Apparate to her flat.

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Each step up the three flights of stairs to her home was almost worse than the last. She fumbled with her key in the lock and toyed with the idea of taking a quick shower before falling into bed, or running a hot bath where she could at least doze some before hauling herself off to bed.

Since it was a Friday night, Hermione knew that her roommate, Heidi, was out for the evening. Hermione tossed her keys on the small table next to the front door and hung her cloak on a hook by the door. She grumbled as she walked into the lounge and saw footprints in front of the fireplace.

It was the very reason she chose to Apparate when she went places. The soot from the hearth was a horrible mess to clean and a simple *Evanesco* didn't always do the trick, as was evident by the three smudges on her floor... but they were too large to belong to Heidi.

Hermione groaned and squeezed her eyes shut as she walked past the lounge. She wasn't going to deal with it tonight. She wasn't even going to think about it. If she closed her eyes and didn't think about it, that meant that it wasn't there, right?

She opened her eyes as she walked into the dining area so she wouldn't trip, and it took a moment for her to reacclimate herself as a wave of dizziness washed over her. It was just a clear sign of her exhaustion. Her eyes fell on the kitchen table and she stopped short at what she saw.

There, sitting on the table, was a sight which would have rendered her speechless had there been someone else in the room with whom to converse. Hermione walked over to the table and examined the items more closely. Sitting prominently in front of everything else was an invitation to a ball, which looked like the one she'd discarded weeks ago without another thought after being told she'd not have the time off to rest. She picked it up and shook her head with slight confusion. The ball wasn't until New Year's Eve, but this invitation clearly stated that there was a ball tonight ... the weekend before Halloween.

Not even having the energy to try to figure that one out, Hermione placed it back on the table. It didn't matter when the ball was, she was still so exhausted that she was struggling to keep her eyes open and her legs ached even when she was just standing there.

Despite her body's protests, she looked back at the table where the invitation had been and found a note.

Hermione,

Certainly, you're shaking your head and planning on dismissing this entire idea. However, you need to know that this parchment was infused with a charm that will help you feel alert and revitalised.

Beware; the effects will only last until midnight. Your body will require a full night's sleep after that to properly recuperate.

The dress robes and the mask are a gift. You should have no trouble Apparating to and from the ball. Just don't forget to keep track of the time. It's not as if the carriage will only turn into a pumpkin and you will be forced to run home... instead, you'll fall flat on your face and someone will have to peel you off of the pavement.

Enjoy your evening.

~FG

She didn't know whether to be pleasantly stunned or to laugh. "FG" indeed. Although, she did think it was an awfully sweet gesture for Fred and George, much nicer than them telling her to ask Viktor for a shag. Did she dare trust them, though? That was the question. True, the wizarding world had a Rejuvenation Draught, but it was very short-lived, only lasting up to thirty minutes at a time; and it left the drinker severely agitated and with a racing heart. It was worth the side effects once in awhile, but certainly not for something like going to a ball.

Hermione picked up the scrap of parchment again and rubbed her fingers along it; nothing felt different about it. Bringing it to her nose, she cautiously sniffed. Still nothing she had no new sense of being awake and revitalised. She was fairly certain that the twins had at least tested the spell on themselves. That was usually what they did with their newest creations. But why would it wear off at midnight? Was such a thing even marketable? What sort of legal ramifications were involved?

Just as it usually did, thinking about the legalities of anything that Fred and George Weasley did began to make her head hurt.

For a distraction, she turned her focus onto the dress robes they had sent. She wasn't quite sure why they hadn't been the first thing on which her mind had focussed when she'd approached the table. Perhaps it was her brain's attention to detail, or maybe it was simply because she was extremely tired. Either way, she was looking at them now and the only word that would come to mind to describe them was... Stunning.

The robes were a rich royal blue colour. The bodice, the short sleeves and the front panel of the skirt were made of velvet, while the side was a fine satin of the same shade. She brushed her hand over the soft, heavy material.

There was a small black velvet cloak to go over the top and also to cover up what appeared to be a rather low-lying neckline. The cloak had a small round silver clasp. Then to top everything off, there was a small locket hanging by a gold chain, which she realised had her initials engraved in it, "HJG". Although, oddly enough, the letters weren't in the proper order. Well, they *were*... but...

Traditionally, when something was monogrammed, the centre letter was larger than the two letters on the sides; that letter in the middle was supposed to be the initial for the person's surname. Fred or George, or both, obviously didn't know that. So, the "J" stood out prominently in the middle of the clasp, flanked with an "H" and a "G" on either side. She had to smile at it. It was still very thoughtful of them.

Turning her eyes back to the table, she saw a small black butterfly-shaped mask that would cover the area around her eyes and the tops of her cheekbones. And sitting next to that was a brand new bottle of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion.

Hermione sighed. When she'd first walked in the room, all that she'd wanted to do was to crawl into bed. Now she was beginning to feel more alert, and the achiness in her legs and feet was beginning to lessen... not to mention that she would feel incredibly guilty if she didn't *use* the gifts bestowed upon her.

There was no decision to be made. Determined, she grabbed the items on the table and went to ready herself for an evening of dancing. Who knew? Maybe she'd even meet someone new...

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Hermione had opted for a shower and then began her rush preparations for the ball. She'd be arriving late, obviously. There was no other option. If she was going to make an appearance at all, she had to be quick about it. She really didn't have that much time as she'd not returned home from work until after eight.

It was half-past nine when she Apparated into the reception area of the Grand Hall, where the ball was being held. Like many other wizarding places, it was hidden from Muggles. This one was below Wandsworth Park in London.

Hermione walked up to a side door, where she took off the small velvet cloak and checked it in the cloakroom. Then she went to the entrance to the ballroom, handing her invitation to the gentleman at the door. After a quick glance at the velum, he nodded his head, and opened the door for her.

The ballroom was swarming with people. This was the upper crust and elite of the wizarding world; the people with whom Hermione rarely socialised. Truthfully, she didn't have the time, nor did she even have the inclination. It was a duty that her status after the war had demanded of her war heroine role model to young witches everywhere, especially to Muggleborns. Smile, shake hands, sign autographs, answer the same questions again and again. She had always told her friends that it was one of the reasons she'd decided to become a Healer, as it kept her busy enough to keep her mostly out of the spotlight.

Like the Halloweens she remembered from Hogwarts, tonight there were jack-o'-lanterns and candelabras floating high above the room, providing the main source of light. It was dim, true, but not dangerously so.

There was a large orchestra at the upper left-hand corner of the room near the large dance floor. The dance floor itself was surrounded by numerous small round tables with linen tablecloths, each table holding a circle of several chairs. Hermione saw trays with drinks floating amongst the crowd, and she nearly screamed when she bumped into a body slightly in front of one of these floating trays, only to find that it was a house-elf.

"I'm sorry. Please excuse me."

"Izzy is sorry, ma'am," apologised the elf, who hurried past Hermione before she could say anything else.

Hermione could only shake her head and move on. She found a table off to the side of the room where she had a clear view of the rest of the ballroom and could look for

familiar faces. Not that she could tell who was who. The lighting was too low to see faces well, and most people were wearing at least some form of mask.

However, as she was looking out at the room, she was saved from wondering too much when someone with unmistakable red hair came over and sat down at her table.

"Hello" she said politely.

"Good evening." He paused for a moment and looked at her. "Can I offer you something to drink?"

Hermione smiled. "Please."

With a snap of his fingers, Fred Weasley had a glass of wine at the table before her.

"Thank you."

"Nah. I owe you," he said sincerely. Then his face cracked into a broad smile.

"You know that those experiments are going to get you one of these days," she said. But she stopped herself from saying anything more; she wasn't here tonight to talk about work, with an employer. "Anyhow, I'm glad it worked. Thank you."

"Well, I'm glad you came," he answered, before he rose from the table. "Can I get you anything else? No? Well then, I need to go find a lovely young witch who doesn't know yet that she's crazy for me."

"No love potions," she scolded.

He gave her a winning smile as he stood from her table. "Would I do something like that?" Then he winked at her before he walked away and was soon lost amongst the sea of people.

Hermione didn't lack for company, however, although most people didn't recognize her. She decided after a while that the only reason that Fred had guessed who she was, was because he'd given her the dress robes to begin with. After being there for over an hour, she found that she quite liked her anonymity. It made for a pleasant change from the other functions she'd attended. For the first time since Voldemort's death, she felt free enough to say what was on her mind, or to flirt because the man sitting across from her had no idea he was talking to a war hero and one of Harry Potter's closest friends.

Most men were too intimidated by both of those things. So, whenever anyone asked for her name tonight, she simply told them the truth *"It is a blessed change to be anonymous for once and I would quite like to keep it that way... for now."* If that didn't suffice, she gave them her middle name and left it at that. She'd then give them a flirtatious smile and gracefully change the topic to something else.

Through the evening she ran into a surprisingly large number of people that she knew, although by the time she'd finished a casual conversation with them and a dance or two, it was rare for them to have recognised her. Only Ron seemed to know who she was, and even then, he'd seemed slightly bewildered.

It was all rather odd when she thought about it.

~~~

Hermione was watched as she finished another dance. Her third, perhaps? She did seem to be enjoying herself, although there were unanswerable questions regarding her choice in dance partners. From the flaming red hair, it was obvious that her present partner could only be a Weasley.

At least Hermione was making some progress. There was some concern that the young trainee-Healer would simply sit at a table all evening ignoring everyone. Sending Fred Weasley over to speak with her and relax her a bit had been a good decision.

Healer Granger gracefully excused herself from her most recent partner and made her way towards the bar. There was no way that she'd approach one of the house-elves to ask to be served; her penchant for house-elves was a well-known fact. Once there was a drink in her hand, she went to sit down at one of the far tables, again, far away from the crowd.

Perhaps now was a good time to see if there was someone a bit more suitable for her. After a moment, the target was spotted. Then, with a snap of the fingers, one of the house-elves was summoned.

"Do you see that gentleman over there? The one with the long black hair and the... erm... prominent nose?" A crooked finger pointed to the famed Quidditch player across the room.

"Yes, Qwerty knows."

"I'd like you to take him a glass of champagne. Be certain to tell him that it's from the woman sitting over at that table. The one wearing the blue robes. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes," answered the eager elf with a nod of his head.

The little elf went on his way towards the star Quidditch player, as a set of determined eyes carefully followed Qwerty's every move.

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Qwerty made his way to the group of men that had been pointed out to him.

*Black hair, big nose*, he repeated to himself

He was pulled from his mission when a man gruffly called, "Elf!"

"Y-yes, sir," Qwerty asked, looking up at the wizard.

"I requested a glass of firewhisky from... someone... more than ten minutes ago."

It was then that the house-elf looked at the man. Black hair, large nose. Qwerty glanced over at the Quidditch player he'd been on his way to see. The two men were standing less than six feet away from one another. And this man's nose was much larger than the Quidditch player's.

Qwerty then looked over at the woman at the table who now seemed to be looking right at Qwerty and the sour-looking wizard.

Oh, Qwerty had been about to make a terrible mistake. He was very grateful that the sour man had stopped him.

"I'm waiting, elf."

"Oh, Qwerty is sorry. I have champagne for you from the woman sitting over at that table," Qwerty said, pointing at the woman sitting alone.

When Qwerty looked up at the sour-looking wizard and saw only a brief look of surprise, he handed the champagne flute to the man and ran back to the kitchens before he

could be summoned to do anything else.

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That was not what was supposed to happen. There was nothing to be done for it now. It was obviously Hermione's choice, whether conscious or not.

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Hermione sat at her table, sipping her wine and now nibbling on a canapé. Her present entertainment had been watching the interactions of those around her. The most amusing was the tall wizard with long black hair ... not uncommon for a wizard ... who seemed to be arguing with a house-elf. Well, at first she thought that they were arguing. It appeared that the little elf had said something to stop the wizard's brief tirade. She smiled when they both seemed to glance in her direction and then she turned her attention onto a couple who were now arguing off to her left.

It was merely a minute or so later when she felt the presence of someone standing before her. She looked up and found a wizard at her table ... the same wizard whom she had seen speaking with the house-elf just a moment before.

"Hello," she said politely.

"Good evening." The gentleman held out his free hand to her. "My name is Severus Snape. And you are?"

*Snape?* She hadn't recognised him, and the man wasn't even wearing a mask. Although, looking at him now, he naturally looked older than he had the last time she had seen him. Older and... more relaxed. The harsh lines on his face had softened, and the scowl that she was sure she'd seen when he'd been conversing with the house-elf seemed to have disappeared.

"Oh," she said, realizing that she was still sitting there gawking. "I'm..." What should she tell him? Quickly deciding it was prudent to maintain her anonymity, she answered with the only name that came to mind, "Jane."

"Thank you for the champagne."

"Erm, you're welcome," Hermione stammered a bit uncertainly as a few of the pieces to the puzzle began to slip into place. "Would you like to sit down?"

Snape gave a perfunctory nod of his head and sat at the table, careful to leave the chair immediately next to Hermione empty. He seemed to be sizing her up much as she was doing with him. The last time she'd seen him was before the battle, when Voldemort fell, and truly, she'd had little or nothing to do with Snape, since he was her professor at Hogwarts. Though she had, on some level, admired him, she had no idea what to make of him now.

"So, Severus, what do you do?"

He looked at her a bit oddly before answering. Hermione was certain that he was trying to decide if he knew her or not and how it could be that someone here didn't know what he did. Most everyone in Great Britain knew what Severus Snape was up to. His every move was well-documented in rags such as the *Daily Prophet*, *Witch Weekly* and the like.

"I am a part-time consultant for the Ministry of Magic and I am an adjunct professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Oh? What do you teach?"

"I teach N.E.W.T. level Potions." Snape narrowed his eyes. "Do I know you?"

Careful to school her features, Hermione shook her head. "No, I don't believe so." She convinced herself that this was the truth; after all, she never did know Snape as anything more than "Professor Snape". Even after the help he'd given the Order of the Phoenix during the war, she had never been involved with anything that had to do with Severus Snape. Her main role, concerning Snape, during the war had simply been lecturing Harry that Snape truly wasn't all evil.

They sat in silence for a moment, just enough to allow the quietness to seep in between them and cause Hermione to become uncomfortable. Later, she would blame the discomfort she was beginning to feel for her next words.

"Would you like to dance?"

Her heart caught in her throat when she heard the question leave her mouth. But the worst thing, or the best thing, rather, that could happen would be that he'd be so appalled by her request that he would leave.

Of course, that's not what happened. Instead, Snape stood from his chair and moved before her. Within moments, Hermione found herself being led out to the dance floor. The instant that their hands touched, she fought the small gasp which had tried to escape from her throat as a slight tingle ran up her arm and sparked in her chest.

Magic, indeed.

With one of his hands clasped around her own and the other on her waist, they began to move to the music of a classic waltz. Even without speaking through the first several bars of the music, the awkwardness that had settled over them before seemed to have evaporated.

"So, tell me, Jane, what is it that you do?"

"I am in medicine," she said, using the Muggle term.

"Which field?" he asked, his interest seemingly piqued.

"I'm actually in the middle of a training program. I haven't chosen a specialty yet." Her answers were still vague, and she questioned herself whether that was because she simply wanted to maintain her anonymity, or because she knew that once he figured out who she was, he would no longer have anything to do with her.

He moved his head back and gave her another appraising look. "Are you sure we haven't met before?"

"Why?"

"I have been a professor far longer than I have been working for the Ministry." Then, in a professorial tone that Hermione well remembered, he added, "And I make it a point not to associate with former students."

At his last statement Hermione smiled but chose remain silent on the subject. Instead, she took the opportunity to ask what it was he did at the Ministry.

"I work in the Department of Magical Experimentations and Dangerous Potions."

"Really? What do you do there?" Hermione fought to control her features. The lights may have been dim, but she had no doubt that Severus Snape would be able to spot any sign of embarrassment or guilt that crossed her face.

"I work in the potions division. It's mostly a lot of reading and paperwork to decide if the applicant's theory is sufficiently sound to be attempted safely. That's what I officially



do. In fact, it's nothing more than bureaucratic rubbish. I took the job at the Minister's behest with the impression that it would further my own research. Instead, I am responsible for giving people permits or declining them."

Hermione nodded. "That sounds about right, at least from my own dealings with the department." So, he was going to hedge the truth as well... interesting. She knew very well that Severus Snape was working for the Ministry as part of his probation, a secret known only within the Wizengamot and Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Of course, Ron learned it from Auror staff meetings and told Harry and Hermione. But she understood the man's need for subterfuge tonight, as she too wanted to be anonymous. For the moment, they were neither war heroine nor Death Eater spy; they were merely trainee-Healer and potions bureaucrat.

"Ah. Yes, it seems that we get a lot of papers filed by Healers and mediwizards when they've treated someone who has caused themselves harm through experimentation."

"Well, they are breaking the law," she pointed out mildly.

"Indeed. But the law is also hindering progress."

"But you work for the department."

"Just because I work for the bureaucrats on some level does not mean that I agree with what they are doing. My department has been open for two years. In that time the number of new spells and potions has decreased by eighty-five percent."

"How many lives have been saved?"

"And that, in and of itself, is the summation of the present argument going on in the Wizengamot."

Hermione found herself smiling in spite of herself.

Their conversation continued and easily took them through three more dances; with each one, they stood closer to each other. And, much to her surprise, Hermione found that speaking to Severus was actually comfortable. When she'd been a student, it was a well-known fact that Professor Snape longed for the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. Once he had the DADA position, he fell under the same curse as all of the previous professors and was driven out of the school before the end of the school year. But she hadn't realised how much the man truly enjoyed potions. It seemed that now, being able to dabble in another position that could satisfy that itch, he was content.

After their fourth dance, they went back to sit at a table and continued conversing.

"How long is your training program?" Severus asked.

"It's eight years. I'm currently in my seventh. This year has only just begun, but I'm counting the days until I finish next summer."

"That would make you... twenty-five?" His tone was a bit harsher as Hermione watched him make the mental calculations.

"No, I'm thirty-one, actually. I took some time off after school. Travelled a bit and then wound up in London seven years ago." All right, it was deceptive, she knew, but she wanted him to believe that she'd been to school elsewhere. And mentioning the war would completely give her away. This was no longer an issue of preferring to maintain her anonymity. In the time they'd spent dancing while he told her about his experiments, Hermione had begun to enjoy talking with him.

"I see." He relaxed momentarily, and then his eyes narrowed at her as if he were trying to put the rest of the pieces of the puzzle together. "And where did you go to school, Jane?"

"I..." she began, but stopped just as she started to hear the chimes coming from the clock in the front hall. "What time is it?"

"Midnight, I believe."

"Oh, I lost track of time. I need to leave," Hermione said as she scooted her chair back from the table and stood.

Severus' eyes narrowed further as his hand reached out and grabbed her wrist. He remained silent, as if waiting for her to explain, and did not relinquish his hold on her. Thus, Hermione struggled to pull away.

"I'm sorry, but I have to leave now, Severus." Her voice was now pleading.

Just as quickly as he had grabbed her, he released her from his grasp. Hermione recognised the scowl that was growing on his face as one that he only wore when he'd been about to do something vile to Harry.

And at that moment she knew exactly what he was going to think of her running out of the room. She silently cursed herself for not speaking to him about her time limit a bit sooner. Reluctantly, she took a step away from him. "I'm truly sorry. It's not you, but I have to leave right now."

"What? Or your carriage will turn back into a pumpkin?" he sneered.

Now *there* was the former professor that she remembered. Hermione heard another chime. Which one was that, ninth or tenth?

"I'm sorry," she called again as she ran towards the door, Summoning her cloak from the cloakroom and running out the door to the reception area so she was free of the Anti-Apparation wards.

It wasn't a moment too soon that she made it back to her flat, where she ran to her bedroom. She was just in time to hurriedly remove her dress robes and slip into the comfort of her bed. Almost instantly, she found that she could no longer keep her eyes open, and she was left with nothing more than her dreams.

## Chapter 3: Once Upon a Dream

*Chapter 3 of 8*

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

Thanks go out to my alpha and beta readers while I was working on this project. JuneW, DeeMichelle, Subversa, Cocomachristy, Minuet99 & Ferporcel. They are a wonderful group of friends and I appreciate the correcting, advice and hand-holding from each of them.

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### Chapter 3: Once Upon a Dream

Thin rays of sunshine filtered through the draperies in her bedroom. She was slowly coming to awareness as her brain gradually began the process of awakening before she forced her eyes open.

"Hermione! Wake up!" shouted Heidi as she walked into the room and tore open the draperies.

So much for a gradual wake-up.

"What?" she mumbled as she turned her face away from the window.

"It's just past nine. You're late for work."

"I don't start until late today. Fred and George are keeping the shop open until nine because Halloween is only a couple of days away. Besides, if you thought I was going to be late for work, why weren't you in here earlier?" Hermione replied, her mind quickly shaking off its grogginess.

"I was," Heidi said with her hands on her hips, reminding Hermione very much like her own mother. "You wouldn't budge."

Hermione snorted and sat up. Well, it seemed that sleeping hard was a side effect of the revitalising spell. Her mind automatically went to making a short list of signs, symptoms and effects, so she could tell Fred and George when she saw them.

"You must've been done in after your shift. You never have a lie-in," Heidi remarked, now sitting down on the end of Hermione's bed. This was not an uncommon occurrence. They often went into the other's room and talked, although it was usually when Heidi wanted something. Hermione wondered idly what it was this time.

"Well, I think it was a combination of the shift and then my going to the Ministry ball last night."

"There wasn't a ball last night."

And here Hermione smiled. "Yes, there was. It was hosted by the Ministry and it was very nice."

Heidi looked back at her, puzzled. "Hermione, there hasn't been a Ministry-hosted ball in nearly ten years, and that one was to celebrate the fall of You-Know-Who. Although I did hear a rumor about something for New Year's Eve, but...."

"No," Hermione insisted. "I know about the one for New Year's Eve, but this was last night. I went for just a few hours. I was back here a bit after midnight."

"No you weren't."

"No I wasn't...what?"

"You weren't out until midnight."

"Yes, I was. I came home, did a quick spell to change into my pyjamas, and I went to bed. It was just after midnight when my head hit the pillow."

"Hermione, I was home just barely after ten last night and you were here... asleep."

"What?"

"I came home a little after ten, and you were here, in this bed, asleep." Heidi chuckled and stood up from the bed. "I'll go fix some tea, while you wake up a bit more." And with that, she left the room.

*Heidi is wrong. She has to be. I hadn't even left for the ball until nearly nine* Hermione thought. Those chimes she had heard when she'd been talking with Severus couldn't have been for ten or eleven instead... *Could they?*

Determined, Hermione scampered out of bed and went to her wardrobe, where the new dress robes from last evening's ball were hanging. But when she opened the door, she couldn't find them. She had been so tired when she had come back. Was it possible that she had made a mistake with the spell to change her clothes, and she had sent the new robes someplace else?

Confused, she walked out of her bedroom, down the hall and into the kitchen. Hermione was very pleased to see that the tea that Heidi had promised was nearly ready, and she sat down at the kitchen table to wait.

"Did you happen to get the soot off of the carpet in the parlour?" Hermione asked Heidi when she entered the kitchen.

"What soot?"

"The soot on the carpet in front of the hearth. It looked like someone came in by Floo."

"I didn't see them," Heidi said, slightly alarmed as she put down the teapot and hurriedly walked into the other room. She was back a moment later, looking puzzled. "There's no soot, Hermione."

"What?" Now, Hermione had to go look. Sure enough, the floor in the parlour was as clean as it usually was... not a black mark in sight.

She went back to the kitchen table and rested her head in her hands while taking deep breaths and trying to relax. It did no good to get upset about such things. Could the entire evening have been a dream?

Very confused, she decided to drink her tea, and then she would try to get to the bottom of this.

Of course, none of that helped. After all, when a dream felt so real that you never even realised that you were dreaming, it could leave someone feeling a bit disconcerted afterwards.

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Saturday morning came for Severus, and it was time for his weekly meeting with the Headmistress. Severus opened the door to her office and greeted her before he sat down in the offered armchair.

Minerva sat behind her desk which was, as usual, piled with papers and scrolls amongst some of the various knickknacks that she'd saved from the office's former occupant.

"How was your week, Severus?" she asked.

"As dull and boring as it usually is," came his typical reply. "Hardin and Pucey were given detention for dueling in the corridors. Filch was none too pleased that I gave them to him."

"I'm sure." The Headmistress scratched notes on her parchment.

Tapping his fingers together, Severus glanced up at the portrait above the woman's desk to see Dumbledore wink at him. Severus rolled his eyes. He hated these weekly check-ins. Although if he were to mention it to her, they were as much for himself as they were for her. If it wasn't for Minerva's unwavering faith in him, he wouldn't be teaching any longer... even on a part-time basis. "And how was your week, Minerva? Did you and Filius enjoy your brief trip out of the castle yesterday?"

She smiled. "It was very nice, Severus. Thank you for asking."

He gave a non-committal hum.

"We had dinner at that new little restaurant down in Hogsmeade, and then he took me to the theater."

If he had wanted to know the details of their date, he would've asked her.

"Really, Severus, you should get out more," she said in that overly irritating, motherly tone.

"I am quite content spending the evening in my quarters here at the school. And if not there, then there is ample work for me to do with the Ministry."

Minerva took the hint from his nearly growled words and wisely changed the subject to the business at hand. "Well, then, let's get down to business and discuss what needs to be done this week."

And that they did.

As usual on Saturday mornings, Severus left Minerva's office with the beginnings of a headache.

How Severus ever went from being a Death Eater and a murderer (Albus Dumbledore's murderer, at that) back to being a professor at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House, was beyond him. But that, in fact, was the case. Oh, it hadn't happened all at once, of course. First he'd been outed as a spy for the Order and barely escaped with his life. Then he'd helped in the final destruction of the Dark Lord. After that, he'd been sent to Azkaban to await trial...a trial which he had been sure he would never get.

Severus had been resigned to his fate. In fact, he had welcomed it with open arms. He had been certain that the Minister of Magic was doing everything that he could to bring back the Dementor's Kiss or to reopen the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries for the worst of the Death Eaters... and Severus had known exactly how the wizarding community viewed him. How many people were classified as being worse than Dumbledore's murderer?

After twenty years as a hated teacher and spy, Severus welcomed death. It was his reward for services rendered.

It was during the time that he was awaiting trial that a barrister had come in to see him, carrying a small package. Apparently, Albus had left Severus something in his will.

The barrister had told Severus that he would return in two days time. Severus had tried to ignore the package and had succeeded in doing so for nearly forty hours, but with little to do in his cell, he eventually broke down and opened it.

It was simply a purple and orange sock with a note that read:

Severus,

Thank you for your years of dedication and service. The colours may not suit you, but I really don't expect you to ever wear anything other than those black socks that I've seen you wear every day since you came to be in my employ.

It is simply my promise to you that you will be free.

Albus

Severus didn't know whether to take those final words from his one-time friend as a final goodbye to reassure him that death would be welcome, or to give Severus a glimmer of hope.

Over his better judgment, Severus had decided that it was a thread of hope, and he found himself clinging to it with all of his might.

Exactly forty-eight hours after leaving the package, the barrister returned with news that Severus' trial date had been moved forward, as there was now a public outcry. Surprisingly, the public was demanding that Snape be set free.

Of course, the Wizengamot would not release Severus simply because it was what the people wanted. Apparently, Albus had sent out letters to other people, as well as to the *Daily Prophet*, the *Quibbler* and *Witch Weekly*, outlining all of the deeds that Severus had done as a spy for the Order; these letters included the names of each and every person whose life he had saved, either directly or indirectly.

On the day of his trial, there had been signs and banners held high and buttons worn by a large crowd of his supporters, all containing the simple words *I trust Severus Snape*.

Evidence supplied both by Dumbledore and by key witnesses who had been arranged to testify on Severus' behalf, long before Albus' death, had ultimately been what had saved Severus' life. Well, that and the fact that Harry Bloody Potter had come forth as the only eyewitness to Dumbledore's murder and announced that not only had he been paralysed by Dumbledore himself, but he was certain he had been Confused as well, thereby causing anything that he may have said immediately after Albus' death to be inadmissible.

Harry Potter's testimony had been the only evidence that they'd had to the murder. There was no way that Draco would have testified against him, as he owed Severus a life debt for killing Dumbledore for him.

And Severus Snape had been released. He'd been given community service as a special condition of his probation and supervised release; it was the only punishment for his time as a Death Eater. The barrister had told him that it was something that they could easily fight, but Severus had refused. That was how he began working for the Ministry of Magic on a part-time basis. He had unwittingly helped them to form the Department of Magical Experimentation and Dangerous Potions.

After he finished his probation, he stayed at the post even now because of the negative side effects of the laws, namely that the number of new and improved potions and charms had dropped by drastic numbers in the last few years.

Because it had been community service, at least to start, Severus had not been paid and had needed to look for another source of income. That was when Minerva had approached him with a proposition to come work at Hogwarts as an adjunct professor. The woman who was teaching potions had a husband and small child and had wished to spend a bit more time with her family.

Severus had accepted the position on the condition that he only teach N.E.W.T.-level Potions to deserving students who wished to pursue their studies. After some time,

Minerva, of course, had wormed more and more duties out of him, including reinstating him as the Head of Slytherin. That allowed him to live at the school full-time during the school year, but his reduced teaching schedule also allowed him to spend the time that he needed in his work for the Ministry.

His Saturday morning meetings were Minerva's way of appearing to the School Board as if she was keeping close tabs on the ex-Death Eater who was on her staff. Underneath the surface, it was Minerva's way of sticking her nose in his personal life.

Severus entered the study of his personal chambers down in the dungeons. He went over to his desk where he had the latest files from the Ministry and sat down. He rested his elbows on the desk and rubbed his eyes. He was tired this morning. Last night he hadn't slept well.

Well, that wasn't entirely true; he'd slept perfectly fine, he simply had experienced such a vivid and realistic dream that he woke up feeling as if it had all happened. He hated dreams like that. They always left him with an odd sense of not being able to tell exactly what was real and what wasn't.

Except, he knew that this dream hadn't really happened. In the dream, he'd attended the Ministry's Halloween Ball, when in reality there was no such event. The blasted dance had been complete with masks, music and glasses overflowing with pumpkin juice and champagne. Well, the champagne hadn't been so bad, but that didn't make it any more tolerable.

The only saving grace about the dream had been a woman who had genuinely appeared to be interested in him. He may have been popular enough to rescue from Azkaban, but that didn't mean that the women were presently pounding down his door. Severus had danced with this beautiful and intelligent woman several times, and he had been pleased with their discussions.

Severus never spoke like that to anyone. He never allowed himself to be so vulnerable. And *henever* danced.

All of these reasons made it even more odd that he would dream such a thing, for in the dream, a part of himself he had thought long buried had felt... content.

His head began to throb even more than before. Pulling out his wand from his sleeve, he Summoned a flask of headache relief potion and drained the contents. He then set to work on reading the latest batch of sixth-year essays and tried to put the odd dream behind him. Unfortunately, the dream kept niggling at his brain.

~~~

Hours later didn't find Hermione feeling much better. She'd eventually gone in to work and put in a full shift selling Wheezes. It had been so busy that Hermione had not been able to corner Fred until it was nearly closing time. He'd denied having anything to do with it, of course. Fred had even denied invading her dream to coax her to enjoy herself.

She went home from work just as annoyed with not having the answers as she'd been when she'd woken up that morning. Upon returning home, she had searched the flat thoroughly for any evidence that the events that she had remembered were, in fact, true.

She found nothing.

No dress robes. No cloak. No empty potion phial. No letter. No invitation. Not even a ruddy bottle of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion!

Hermione decided to speak with Ron to see if he remembered dancing with her (even though she knew that it would be futile, seeing as Fred knew nothing). She was on her way to the hearth to use the Floo when it flared to life.

"Healer Granger," said the head that was now floating in the flames.

"Yes."

"It's Healer Johnson. I am caring for a patient that you admitted to our ward last night, and I was wondering if you could come down here."

"Which patient? I admitted several yesterday."

"It's Mrs Graham."

"Is everything all right with her?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Well, we're trying to discern that very thing. Could you come down here, please?"

"Yes, I'm on my way."

Hermione walked to the cloak rack, grabbed her cloak and walked out the door.

~~~

When she returned home even later that evening, she didn't even bother with hanging up her cloak before she collapsed in her favourite chair in the parlour. Mrs Graham had fallen into a coma shortly after Hermione had left work the evening before. The Healers who had been taking care of her were trying to piece together exactly what had happened to the woman to put her in that situation, and since Hermione had turned over care to Healer Schmidt in order to get home, the Healers had very little information to go on.

Apparently, Hermione was the only staff member who'd had a chance to talk to the old woman before she fell into unconsciousness. When Hermione asked why they hadn't attempted to contact her sooner, she was told that they had been attempting to get in touch with her since the previous evening with no luck. Apparently, they'd left a message with Heidi, but Hermione wasn't surprised that she'd not received it. The girl was notoriously forgetful.

Seeing the old witch lying there in the bed had reminded Hermione of when Mrs Graham had been sick the year before with Dragon Pox. Just as Hermione had then, she felt horribly bad for the old woman with no family left.

After giving another report to the staff Healers who were caring for Mrs Graham, Hermione went to the hospital library to do some research of possible causes for the coma. She tried, desperately, to remember any particular smells or sensations that could give her some clue as to what Mrs Graham had been working on before she came in the night before, but nothing stood out.

When she cast *Priori Incantatem* on Mrs Graham's wand, the only silhouette Hermione could discern was that of stars. The only spell Hermione could think of that would do that was the Sparkler Charm she'd learned back as a first-year student ... not a practical spell by any means, and it certainly wouldn't explain the woman's present state.

So, Hermione had no choice but to file a form for possible unauthorised experimentation and send it off to the office at the Ministry. Hopefully, one of them could work on their investigation and give the hospital staff a little more information. Seeing as it was an emergency, they would put it at the top of their list and investigate Mrs Graham's home.

The first of November was two days later, and Hermione was back to work at the hospital. It was upon her return to work that she received a response from the Magical Experimentation Board.

Healer Granger,

After a thorough investigation of the dwelling belonging to Mrs Francine Graham, located at the cottage in the Enchanted Forest, we have found nothing to aid you in your care. There was nothing more hazardous than a simple sleeping draught in her cauldron; although it does appear that the cauldron had bubbled over, it is undetermined whether this happened before or after she left for St Mungo's. The spell books found in her home were nothing more than what one would give a first- or second-year student.

I suggest that you actually attempt to do your job rather than shirking off your own duties onto someone else. After six years in my classroom and defeating the Dark Lord, I had been under the impression that you had actually learned something. Perhaps being Mr Potter's friend and doing nothing more than ride on his coattails did you far more harm than I had originally thought. Or perhaps you don't have any where near the intelligence that I had thought you possessed.

Regardless, thank you for wasting my Sunday.

S. Snape

Department of Magical Experimentation and Dangerous Potions

Ministry of Magic

Hermione crumpled up the letter and threw it at the nearest rubbish bin, unworried about the documentation for her patient's chart. The hospital would've received its own copy, hopefully one that was less of a personal attack. This one had been addressed to her specifically, and now she wanted nothing more than to go down to Severus Snape's office and hex him in whichever spot she thought that it would hurt him the worst, for his attitude.

It was a far cry from the thoughts she'd been having about the man since she woke up from her dream Saturday morning. Some small part of her had actually started thinking that Severus Snape had the potential to be pleasant and almost charming. But if anything could have convinced her that her dream had been nothing more than a fantasy, it was that nasty missive from her old professor.

Odd, since prior to her dream, she'd not even thought of Snape since just after the war.

Chapter 4: Something There That Wasn't There Before

Chapter 4 of 8

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

A/N: This story was written for Keladry_Lupin for the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange. It is completely written and I will post it over the next couple of weeks. :)

Thanks go out to my alpha and beta readers while I was working on this project. JuneW, DeeMichelle, Subversa, Cocoachristy, Minuet99 & Ferporcel. They are a wonderful group of friends and I appreciate the correcting, advice and hand-holding from each of them.

Chapter 4: Something There That Wasn't There Before

November soon passed into December and Hermione found that she had even less free time than before. Her apprenticeship was passing by quickly, but Hermione reasoned that was only because she continued to work harder than a house-elf at the most tedious and menial tasks available. If there was cleaning to be done, she did it. If there was an irritable patient who needed one-on-one care, she watched them. If there was a Healer who was home ill, Hermione covered their ward while her mentor, Healer Whatever-Her-Name-Is, read books, ate and napped. And when basic potions needed to be brewed, naturally, the task fell to her.

She could brew Pepperup Potion in her sleep. And she was quite certain that she had.

Her life consisted of moving between St Mungo's and the Weasley's shop, working. And her free time, what there was of it, was usually spent at the library, doing research or sitting at Mrs Graham's bedside.

Hermione had found herself another cause. This, in all honesty, prevented her from worrying about her own maltreatment.

As had been the case last year, Hermione was the only visitor who came to sit with Mrs Graham, and Hermione wished that the old woman would wake up so that she could actually converse with her. She found herself missing the tales of the older woman's husband and son. It had been obvious to Hermione, before, how much they had meant to her, and Hermione could only imagine how lonely her life must be now without them.

The Healers were still no closer to discovering what had happened to the elderly witch to cause her to fall into the coma. The diagnostic spells revealed that she was simply in a deep sleep and could not be wakened. Initially, Hermione had thought that it had been due to the sleeping draught that had been found in her home, but analysis had determined that the potion had been complete before it had boiled over, and the counter-charms and potions for that concoction had not helped to revive the old woman.

In complete frustration, Hermione had even gone so far as to suggest that they find someone to kiss her to see if that worked. After all, it had worked for Sleeping Beauty.

The truth of the matter was that Hermione felt guilty. Perhaps, if she had done a more thorough intake, then she could've discovered what was wrong with Mrs Graham before she'd gone home that evening. Instead, she'd been exhausted and had not put her patient first. She'd trusted someone else and those few minutes had made all the difference.

Tonight was no different than every other Friday night. Hermione was coming off yet another thirty-six hour shift which had somehow become longer. A patient had vomited on the floor on the Potentially Perilous Potions Ward that Hermione was working on, and no matter how many times she tried to use her wand to clean up the mess, it hadn't worked. Of course, that meant that it needed to be cleaned up by hand. And, of course, Healer Sedgwick had insisted that Hermione be the one to do it.

After all, Hermione had been the one who had greeted the patient earlier that morning when she walked through the ward to gather some patient charts. In some bizarre way, that linked Hermione to the patient ... at least, in Healer Sedgwick's mind. Or it was highly possible that her mentor had just been looking for yet another way to torment her. Either way, it equalled another long night for Hermione.

It was a quarter after eight before Hermione was able to go up to the Spell Damage Ward to stop by and check on Mrs Graham before she left for the night. She looked at the old woman lying in the bed. For all appearances, she simply looked as if she were sleeping.

"Goodnight," Hermione said as she squeezed the woman's hand before she turned and left for the night.

Hermione went home and climbed the stairs to her flat. It was nearly nine, and she had to be at the Weasleys' shop at noon the following day. She unlocked the front door and went inside, tossing her keys on the small table by the door and hanging up her cloak. Then, walking through the flat towards her bedroom, she found the kitchen table again covered in things that weren't typically there.

"Heidi!" she called. Hermione knew that her roommate wouldn't answer. Heidi wouldn't be home... it was a Friday night.

She rubbed her eyes and opened them again to look at the table. With no small amount of trepidation, she walked over to inspect the items there.

Sitting prominently in front of everything was an invitation with her name on it in fine calligraphy. Picking it up, it was exactly as she had anticipated... an invitation to a ball tonight.

She glanced at the calendar on the wall: 17 December. There wasn't a ball tonight. She knew that there wasn't.

However, the invitation in her hand clearly stated otherwise.

She dropped the invitation back on the table and ran her hand over the dress robes and the small cloak. The robes were the same cut and style as before. This time, they were a deep royal blue, complete with a black cloak with a simple silver clasp.

And lying on the table next to a masquerade mask was the gold locket with her initials on the one side... again, engraved in the wrong order.

Finally, sitting in the centre of the table, was a note.

She didn't know how long she stared at the note without touching it. Since that night in October, she'd had more dreams about balls and dances than she ever had before. None of them had felt as real as the first... as real as this felt right now.

But if this felt real, and it wasn't, did she truly need to touch the note that no doubt held the charm to keep her awake until midnight, before she went? After all, it was all simply a dream. Then another small part of her argued that she was still exhausted, and if her subconscious mind had inserted a charm into her waking dream, then perhaps there was a reason for it... if nothing else, to reconcile the reason why she felt awake.

These were confusing thoughts.

In the end, she grabbed the scrap of parchment with a small grumble. Again, she began feeling the same tingling that started at the nerve endings in her fingers and toes. She closed her eyes for a moment as she felt the tiredness drain from her body and began to wake up and feel alive. When she opened her eyes, feeling refreshed, she looked at the words in the note:

You only have until midnight. Don't dawdle.

"Yes, Mum," Hermione muttered as she grabbed the new robes and went to get ready.

As she entered the ballroom underneath Wandsworth Park, the main thought running through Hermione's mind was that it looked the same as before.

Well, not *exactly* identical.

This time, instead of pumpkins floating along the ceiling, there were Christmas decorations. (The holiday was barely a week away.) Trees covered in ornaments, tinsel, fairies and snow lined the walls. There were candles floating above, giving off light for the room. It was, pleasantly, brighter than it had been before.

Hermione wondered if the dream was going to take the same course as the first time. In the dreams that she'd had since the first, if she dreamed of coming to the ball, the room appeared similar to how it had the first time. She would have odd conversations with people that she knew and her robes varied from those she'd worn the first time, to her old school robes, to wearing absolutely nothing at all.

In other words... they all *felt* like dreams.

This one didn't.

Her stomach was tied up in knots, and now that she was here, Hermione knew that it was in anticipation. She wanted to ~~see~~^{seem} again. Severus Snape had been the one constant and familiar thing about each dream that she'd had, although he was rarely there for very long. Each time, just before he'd vanished, Hermione had felt as if she were on the cusp of something truly marvellous.

With a glass of champagne in hand, Hermione began wandering through the crowd, looking for anyone who was familiar. Of course, being a single witch walking through a large group of people, she found herself declining several dance offers as she searched out a familiar face.

Giving up, Hermione decided that she might as well enjoy herself, and the next gentleman who asked her to dance, she accepted.

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*It worked! Finally!* This wasn't exactly how the spell was supposed to run its course, however. The Cinderella Charm was supposed to take place over three consecutive nights, and after the third night there would be such a large amount of sexual tension between the couple that they would know they were destined to be together.

That didn't appear to be something that would actually happen with this pair, although it was unknown whether that was due to the botched potion or if it was the people involved. Hermione, it seemed, didn't give much thought to romantic flights of fancy, and the wizard that Hermione had subconsciously chosen seemed as if he would be able to spot a forced attraction through a Dementor's breeding ground. Perhaps, in this case, there were advantages to the time in between. Hermione had obviously had time to think on what had happened. That logical mind of hers was trying to solve the problem, searching for any solution that she possibly could find.

The other one ... Snape ... he seemed to have a knack for ignoring problems that were staring him in the face. He'd been fighting the dreams... and it was only now that it seemed that he had allowed himself to fall under the spell enough to be able to pull him fully into another ball. Likely, the snarky wizard was ill and a resident of the school infirmary.

Perhaps if the attraction aspect of the spell were removed, then the couple wouldn't fight it so strongly. Although, there was no telling what sort of effect that would have on the spell. Would it even hold?

That didn't matter. Six weeks was far too long for the spell to last with any hope of it still being effective, anyway. Clearly, attempting to manipulate Healer Granger wasn't working, and the wizard she'd chosen was equally as stubborn. What had begun as a simple way of thanking the girl had quickly become too much to handle, and there was no telling what the long-term repercussions were going to be.

With a decision finally made, a portion of the original spell was lifted.

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Severus walked through the familiar ballroom. He didn't know what he was doing here, yet again. The first night he had dreamed of this place he had remembered falling asleep in his bed, and then suddenly found himself standing in a roomful of people while wearing his best set of dress robes. Quickly realising that he was only dreaming, Severus had begun to relax in a way that he rarely did when he was in a group of people. He'd soon found himself conversing with a young witch and had felt an odd compulsion to stay with her.

It was after waking the following morning, and then having a chance to think things through, that he had recognised the realistic dream and strong compulsion to see the woman again for what they were... a spell.

Since then, there had been several instances where he had fallen back into dreams with the same young woman, although none had felt as tangible as the first time, and as soon as he realised he was dreaming, he fought it, forcing himself to awaken. He began preparing himself for sleep with the help of various teas, whisky and sleeping draughts to also help prevent the dreams.

Naturally, Severus had also tried to find out who had placed him under a spell. After some researching, he had finally deduced that he was not outside Hogwarts often enough to be exposed to former students, so it must have been a prank played by a current student. There was always some young dunderhead each year who thought that they could truly bewitch Severus' mind and ensnare his senses. Although, until now, no one had ever succeeded. Severus decided that whoever it was that had finally done such a thing to him must have been a Slytherin, because Severus had yet to discover how the task had been accomplished.

Since he didn't know exactly which potion he had been slipped, he had been forced to brew one of the more generic remedies. The downside to this was that of all of the options, the generic 'cure-alls' took the longest to brew, and they usually had the worst flavour. After four weeks of brewing, he had imbibed the brew before retiring to bed for the evening.

And the ruddy potion hadn't worked.

He'd fallen into a peaceful sleep and now he was, again, dressed in his best set of black dress robes, and he was standing in the middle of a bloody ballroom. To make matters worse, he couldn't wake up. He'd tried.

Not only that, he wanted nothing more than to find the witch he had danced with before. What had been her name? For whatever reason, he found that he truly couldn't remember. Hell, he could barely even picture her. Severus just knew that he'd recognise her when he saw her.

After several minutes of surveying the crowd, Severus finally spotted her dancing with another wizard. Her dress robes were familiar, and he decided that they were very similar to the ones she had worn before, only the colour was boldly different. Her hair was smooth and had been pulled up on top of her head, although there were a few curly tresses that framed her face. The wizard she was dancing with pulled her a bit closer and moved his hand from her waist to the small of her back, causing a sudden surge of jealousy to swell up in Severus.

Forcing himself to clamp down on the feeling, Severus inwardly cursed the strong emotions he was feeling for someone he barely knew. And then, without warning, the feeling dissipated. He no longer felt the urge to walk over and cut in on the dance; he no longer felt as if he had to even stay in the ballroom. Obviously, the potion he had taken earlier was at last beginning to work.

He relaxed and began to turn around to leave the room, while waiting for his dream to take another course. Then the music ended, and the witch on the dance floor turned her head, and Severus found her staring directly at him. Feeling as if he'd been petrified, he held her gaze as she gave him a small smile. She said something to her dance partner before she turned away and began walking towards him.

The overwhelming compulsion to act the lovesick fool was gone, but that didn't mean that he wasn't completely captivated by this woman. When he had spoken to her before, she had carried on a pleasing conversation with him for over an hour. The way she debated and discussed things with him had truly intrigued him, and she had shown a level of intelligence that he had been hard pressed to find in most women with whom he associated.

Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than for the woman to be real, especially after the way she was looking at him as she made her way to him. This woman actually seemed pleased to see him. Being simply a war hero, he would have been popular and sought after... it was the other tag, of being an ex-Death Eater, that tended to only cause a particular type of woman to come on to him. Typically, they were either brainless attention-seeking bimbos or those with a penchant for certain kinks.

Unable to tear his eyes away from the enchantress who was approaching him, Severus found himself bereft of all urges to leave the room and try to fall into a different dream.

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Hermione made her way over to the man the moment she saw him. She could tell who he was by the very way that he stood. Even in her dreams, Severus Snape had a presence about him that was hard to miss. Although, as she was walking towards him, she suddenly began questioning exactly how much she was drawn to the man and why. Her thoughts over these last weeks had frequently been about him, but now she wasn't sure why that was.

But the fact of the matter was, even without that odd compulsion, she still was greatly intrigued by him. Much of what she did now was a direct result of the things that she had learned from his classes, both in Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts. He was an intelligent and intriguing man, and their conversation before had been enough to prove that.

If only it had been real.

She approached him and smiled. "Hello."

Severus nodded his head slightly in greeting and then asked her to dance.

Hermione had the distinct impression that he was feeling just as confused about this as she was.

He placed one hand on her waist and grasped her hand with his other, and began to lead her onto the floor.

It was the moment that his hand touched hers when she felt the same spark she had before, causing her heart to skip a beat as the sensation of warmth, familiarity and desire enveloped her. It all reminded her very much of the true love fables that she'd heard growing up.

*A spark when his hand brushed against hers.*

*Love's first kiss.*

*Not just any kiss... the kiss of True Love.*

When was it that level-headed Hermione Granger had become such a romantic?

Oh, she really needed to stop having such fanciful and childish thoughts. None of this was practical, but.... He felt so real, and Hermione found herself wanting nothing more than to have someone pinch her and prove she was awake so that she could believe the fantasy.

"Why am I not able to get you out of my dreams?"

Hermione looked up at him with a slight bit of surprise. "What?"

"I keep dreaming about you, but for some reason I can never remember who you are. Why is that?" he asked in a tone unlike anything she had ever heard her former professor use.

"I don't know," she answered carefully. "But when you find out, would you please let me know? My dreams are equally plagued."

*This is my mind's way of wishful thinking... of pulling me through the scenario and actually allowing me to fulfill the my dream of again dancing in his arms* she told herself.

He gave her a questioning look, as if he were trying to figure out a puzzle, and Hermione felt his once fluid movements begin to stiffen as the distance between them widened slightly. "What's wrong?" she couldn't help but ask.

He blinked, followed by a small shake of his head. "Nothing."

"You're lying," she said after studying him a moment. "I can tell. You get a small crease above your eyes when you lie."

He looked at her indignantly. "I do no such thing."

"Yes, you do. It's a calculated look, almost as if you're trying to decide if you can slither your way out of it with a version of the truth," she continued as she studied him.

"If I ever did such a thing I would never have survived as a spy for so many years."

Hermione smiled slightly. "Ah, but how often did you actually lie? Not often, I'd wager. I think that you probably bent the truth or withheld information. There is a bit of a difference, you know."

Her dance partner didn't respond, but Hermione's smile grew as the gap between them lessened.

They didn't speak much through their dances, but Hermione had the distinct impression that Severus did not want to let her go. She could understand this, of course; she hadn't wanted for him to release her either. There was an odd sense of foreboding, as if they both knew that the dream would soon end, and it would be hard to find their way back to one another again.

Fine, admittedly it was her own desire not to let him go, but she could easily imagine her fantasy-Snape feeling the same way.

He was holding her close, and they were moving along the floor together as if they inhabited a single body. With smooth, fluid motions they continued to move together for nearly an hour. Words were few, but she could tell by his firm grip that he did not want to release her. Most attempts at conversation had been short, and Hermione wondered why her mind refused to fill in any blanks or to romanticise the man whose arms were encompassing her.

He'd told her small bits about his work, but oddly enough, each time she pressed him for more information he refused to take the bait and enter into a livelier conversation. She'd even made mention of some of the forms she'd filled with the Magical Experimentation Board; although he stiffened at the mention, he didn't even rant about being sent on wild errands by former bossy students. *Perhaps I am romanticising him a bit*, she conceded. That was surely something that the real Severus Snape, Snark Master Extraordinaire, would instantly attack.

So, she tried another tactic and asked him if he'd take her out on the terrace. There truly was a terrace off of the ballroom. Of course, it was all enchanted. They were underground, after all, but the large balcony appeared to overlook a lake with a clear night sky full of glittering stars above them. The benefit of this one, though, was that since it was still part of the illusion, it felt pleasantly warm, instead of the biting December air that was really above them.

The terrace was empty, but the music could still be heard clearly through the doors. Severus put his arm over her shoulder, pulling her against him as they looked over the stone railing at the calm, glassy lake.

Hermione took advantage and rested her head against his shoulder. After several minutes of peaceful silence, she decided to take advantage of her fantasy and asked Severus to tell her about his childhood. If she was going to dream about this man, then she certainly wanted to get to know him better.

The other part of her mind argued that as long as she was only dreaming about the man, why didn't she just kiss him. She stopped by reminding herself that she was already enjoying this too much, and strangely enough, she envisioned that it would be easier to convince the real Severus Snape to snog her than it would be to get him to talk about his past. (Providing, of course, that he didn't know that it was Hermione Granger who was kissing him.)

Severus pulled her closer still, and in doing so, brought his hand down along her arm. The moment his fingers touched her flesh, she once again felt magical recognition of their souls merging, and she could have sworn that the magic itself gave the sound of a contented sigh. It was only because of this that Hermione wasn't surprised when Severus' began speaking in a soft, gentle voice.

"I was born in a small town in Lancashire," he began. It seemed that after he'd cautiously spoken the first few words that a dam had broken and this discussion now became a necessary way to cleanse his soul. Severus told her of his parents, how life had been at home before his acceptance letter to Hogwarts came, when his father had learned of his mother's lie that she was a witch which had led him to throw both mother and son out in the streets. It was then that he went to stay with his mother's family, who were pleased to have their only daughter home, but who were not as pleased with the son-of-a-Muggle she had in tow.

Hermione's heart ached for that eleven-year-old boy who, after being rejected by so many, then went on to Hogwarts, where he fit in even less. She only briefly wondered how it was that her mind was filling in so much detail for Severus' background as it was truly nothing to which she'd ever given much thought.

It was as he was telling her of his falling out with his closest friend in school that Hermione realised that she was feeling increasingly exhausted.

Panic gripped her as she tried to figure out how long she'd been talking with this man and what time it now was.

*It's not real, it's only a dream*, she reminded herself, but the panic turned to dread as she realised that it was, indeed, the alertness charm wearing off.

Severus was in the middle of telling her about what she knew as the "Shrieking Shack incident" when she began to hear the chimes of the clock off in the distance. Unsure what to say, but knowing that she had to leave, she pushed herself away from Severus, startling him.

"I'm sorry. I have to go."

If looks could kill, she surely would've died on the spot. The calm, almost caring gentleman whom she had just been with had morphed into the man that she had only seen once, on the battlefield, the day that Voldemort had been defeated.

"Did you get all of the information that you needed, then?" he sneered. "Was it worth it to invade my life, my dreams and my privacy for...what?...something like an article? Or are you planning on writing a novel on the life of the loathsome Death Eater who was Albus Dumbledore's murderer?" He began to circle her as if she were his prey. "Or is this just a way to gain blackmail material? Should I be expecting your owl first thing tomorrow morning? Perhaps you're with the Ministry and just looking for new evidence so you can bring me to trial. Let me assure you that it will never work." His last words were spoken so softly that Hermione never would have heard them if his face had not been mere inches away from her own.

"Is that what this is?" he asked as his hand reached for the chain around her neck. "One of those Charmed devices that records the words of everyone to whom you speak?"



"No," she insisted, brushing his hand away and stepping out of his reach. It was then that she swayed slightly, and she saw a brief flash of concern cross his face.

Sheer exhaustion was to blame for the tears she now felt forming in her eyes. She was not one prone to crying, but to see how much her inattention to the time and then her hurried words had hurt him...

Off in the distance, she heard the last of the chimes and the exhaustion took a firm hold. "I'm sorry," she said again, forcing herself to look at him. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I have to leave right now."

She took a step and barely felt herself fall as she slipped into unconsciousness.

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Art for this chapter, done by Cecelle, can be found here: <http://img.photobucket.com/albums/v326/GinnyWeasley31/shoefitsbycecelle.jpg>

## Chapter 5: A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes

*Chapter 5 of 8*

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

A/N: This story was written for Keladry\_Lupin for the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange. It is completely written and I will post it over the next couple of weeks. :)

Thanks go out to my alpha and beta readers while I was working on this project. JuneW, DeeMichelle, Subversa, Cocoachristy, Minuet99 & Ferporcel. They are a wonderful group of friends and I appreciate the correcting, advice and hand-holding from each of them.

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### Chapter 5: A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes

She slowly awoke. First, her brain began to process the roaring white noise that seemed to be surrounding her.

The noise soon became the murmur of soft voices, the clicking of shoes against the marble floors, the rustling of papers and the scratching of a quill.

It was next that she noticed the weight of the heavy blanket that covered her.

The foul aftertaste of a potion that she'd been undoubtedly forced to swallow via that horrible spell those Healers used plagued her mouth.

Finally, she opened her eyes, closing them almost immediately afterwards due to the brightness of the room. She tried to move, but the muscles in her arms and legs protested. Carefully, opening her eyes again, she allowed the light to filter in through tiny slits before opening them further, at last giving her the chance to adjust and take in her surroundings.

White walls, white linens and a small bedside table with a single vase of flowers on it; these were surroundings that she knew all too well. She was in St Mungo's, that much was obvious. Now if only she could remember why...

The sound of footfalls grew louder and she turned her gaze up to see the blurry image of someone at her bedside. The one thing that she could definitely discern was the lime green robes.

"You're awake," the voice of a woman said.

All she could handle was a meagre nod in reply, her throat too dry to properly work yet.

The Healer moved closer to the side of the bed and began waving her wand and uttering soft incantations over her body. After several minutes, the Healer finally stopped. "Well, Mrs Graham, other than being a bit dehydrated and some minor muscle atrophy, you appear to be in perfect health. I can't understand it." Another wave of the wand.

Fran felt her head being raised by the pillows behind her and then something cool and smooth at her mouth. Opening her mouth slightly, she welcomed the cool water as it wet her lips and tongue.

After a few sips of water, the Healer took the glass away from Fran. "Not too much, too fast. Although we've been giving you sustenance potions, we don't want to shock your system."

"How long?" she struggled to ask, grimacing at the sound of her own raspy voice.

"How long? How long have you been here, you mean?"

She forced another small nod.

"Just over six weeks."

"Six weeks," Fran all but whispered. She couldn't remember much of anything. Well, she remembered brewing the sleeping potion and causing a minor explosion in her lab when she tried to infuse the Cinderella Charm into the concoction. It hadn't worked quite as she had planned. Normally, it required that the potion be consumed and then the spell cast. She'd known that she wouldn't be able to do both of those things and had wanted another way to cast the magic.

And then what happened?

Vaguely, she remembered getting herself to St Mungo's because she was covered in the potion and she had been feeling rather dizzy. She had thought that she'd be fine; after all, it was a fairly innocuous potion which had exploded. Her main goal in coming to St Mungo's was to see Healer Granger before the potion dried, but had she seen her?

"You need to relax, Mrs Graham. Here, take this and get some sleep. You'll wake up in a few hours feeling much better," came the voice of the Healer who was still standing over her bed.

Yes, some relaxing sleep and a draught to help her mind and body heal was exactly what she needed. Perhaps when she woke the next time Healer Granger would be

around.

When the Healer brought a goblet to Fran's lips, she slowly drank and then allowed herself to collapse into the pillows behind her.

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"Calm down, Severus!" Minerva said with an air of distinct authority. "I'm sure that everything will be fine. I've cast several spells and I'm certain that you aren't bewitched."

The angry man stopped pacing in front of her. "How can you be certain?"

"Go see Poppy if you're concerned, but you said yourself that you took an antidote last night. It likely took effect partway through your dream, just as you had assumed. I doubt anyone out there is going to show up on our doorway trying to blackmail you."

"You can't know that!"

Minerva well knew what this was about. She'd known Severus for forty years, watched him grow up, watched him make mistakes and watched him redeem himself. The one thing that the man loathed more than anything was to appear vulnerable and weak. It was an emotional scar from his youth, one that no one had ever been able to heal.

"Fretting about it and carrying on won't help you, no matter what has happened."

The Potions master growled and threw himself down in the chair opposite of her desk, crossing his legs and resting one elbow on the chair's arm.

"Now, start from the beginning and tell me how all of this came about," Minerva said, in a tone that clearly told him that not answering was not an option.

Begrudgingly, Severus answered her and Minerva began to hear the entire tale. She listened as he told her everything, from dreaming of a ball back in October, to the woman collapsing at his feet last night. He even told her of the odd compulsions he had felt in the interim and the fragments of dreams that he'd been fighting with various herbs and potions.

When he was finished, Minerva gave him a questioning look. "And you don't know who it was you were dancing with?"

Severus shook his head.

"But it was the same woman both times?" Something was tickling Minerva's memory.

"Yes, Minerva, as I already told you."

"Relax, Severus. I don't think that a student poisoned or hexed you." Minerva rose from her desk. "But I need to look into a couple of things. I truly believe that you're in no danger of being exploited. Don't think on it."

Under his breath, Minerva heard him mumble, "Easy for you to say."

She bit back a smile. "Don't you have a Quidditch practice to oversee this morning?"

Severus stood and scowled at her before he turned and walked towards the door.

"It will be fine, Severus."

He nodded and left her office.

Minerva turned and looked at the portrait hanging behind her desk. "Well, Albus, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I believe that I am," said the white-haired old man as he tapped his chin with his finger. "But I'm curious who the charm could have been cast on. Frankie doesn't use it often, she always said it was incredibly draining and she's nearly as old as I was when I died. Her age could explain why the spell didn't work properly."

"Who could she have cast the spell on that would actually choose that grouchy old sod as her heart's desire?" Minerva asked with a disbelieving snort.

"I believe that I shall go look into it."

She watched as Dumbledore left his portrait. Minerva knew that he had several portraits that he could move in and out of, including one in his cousin's home.

She sat down to wait.

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Hermione had felt oddly disoriented when she had awakened earlier that day. She had heaved herself out of bed, almost as if she were in a daze.

She'd had another of those dreams... although the hold that it'd had on her before seemed to have dissipated as soon as she'd opened her eyes this morning. Parts of it had been very clear, while other bits were beginning to haze. The one thing that she remembered, quite clearly, was falling asleep at the ball before she'd had a chance to get home.

Strangely enough, when she'd got up that morning, she'd had a dull headache and a bruise on the side of her head.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't figure it out. Ultimately, she had come to the conclusion that she was suffering from severe exhaustion. That was, naturally, after she'd gone to work and again accused Fred and George of slipping her one of their new creations.

She went back to stocking the Patented Daydreams Charms, thankful that the shop was now closed. Hermione hated the late hours that the shop was open during the holidays. It had been an extremely busy day. It was now ten minutes after nine and the final customer had just left the store, leaving Hermione the task of now re-stocking the shelves before she left for the night.

"Imagine, Severus Snape actually revealing his motives for becoming a Death Eater," she muttered to herself as she waved her wand and with a flick began stocking the various charmed treats.

"What was that?"

Hermione turned her head. Lavender Brown had just walked in the door and was making her way towards Hermione. "Hi, Lavender. I was just talking to myself."

The other girl looked at her with an air of superiority that clearly showed that she wasn't surprised. No matter how much time had passed since school, they still didn't get on well. Lavender had at least matured since school, but that didn't mean that she wasn't still a vain and conceited little... well, vain and conceited.

"How are you tonight, Lavender?" Hermione asked politely.

"Fine. Is George still here?"

Hermione nodded her head towards the backroom. "He's in the back with Fred. They're just getting their latest explosion cleaned up."

Only here did Lavender share a small smile with Hermione before heading towards the back. Lavender also knew what sort of trouble the twins still managed to get into. She and George had been in an on-again off-again relationship for the last three years. Each time that George seemed settled enough to propose marriage, he and Fred would pull some childish prank that would send Lavender stomping off, swearing that she'd never speak to him again. Last time it had been a potion in her meal that had caused her to sprout whiskers on her face and meow like a cat for two hours... of course this was in the middle of *Vasumati's*, one of the nicest restaurants in wizarding London.

"Oh, by the way," Lavender said before she disappeared to the workroom. "Molly is having a family dinner at the Burrow tomorrow afternoon. Fred and George were supposed to invite you, but I imagine that they forgot."

"Yes, it seems that they did."

"Well, Harry and Ginny will be home. Dinner's at three."

"Thanks," Hermione called, although Lavender was already out of sight.

Well, maybe talking to Ginny would help Hermione clear her head.

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Hermione arrived home right at ten o'clock. She went into her flat and almost dreaded walking past the dining table. Sure enough, there was a note on the table. All but groaning, she walked over to read it.

Hermione,

St Mungo's Flooded. Your comatose patient...Graham, I think...woke up today and she's been asking for you.

Heidi

Dropping the note, she Summoned her cloak and ran back out the door.

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"I don't understand why you did this. You don't owe me anything," Hermione was saying not thirty minutes later to the elderly witch in the bed.

Mrs Graham, or Fran as she was insisting that Hermione call her, looked as if she had merely awakened from a restful nap. Her hair had that "I just woke up" appearance...white wispy strands sticking out in all directions from her loose bun; everything else about her seemed rejuvenated and refreshed. The old woman was wearing a pair of small wire-rimmed glasses that she wore perched on the tip of her nose, and she gave Hermione a warm, nurturing smile.

"Child," she said while grasping Hermione's hand. "It wasn't because I felt indebted to you for taking care of me when I've been here. If it was simply that, I would've given you a book. I may not know you well, but I know that you love the damn things. Much like I was at your age, you know. It wasn't until my aunt cast the same charm on me that I realised what I was missing, what it was that I truly wanted out of life. And you, Hermione Granger, deserve to have that same void filled."

"I don't need a man to be happy," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"No, you don't. We're all different, aren't we? But I know... it was something that *you* wanted." Fran squeezed Hermione's hand a bit tighter. "Did you know that aside from you, the only person who came to visit me last year was Minerva McGonagall? And she has a school to run. I think she was only here once or twice."

"But that's no reason..."

"Hush. Didn't anyone ever tell you that it was rude to speak out of turn?" Mrs Graham chided. "As I was saying, you kept an old woman company. But it was in my visit with Minerva that I realised who, exactly, you were. You were one of the children who stopped You-Know-Who. I've already told you that I lost my husband to that monster over thirty years ago, and I lost my son to him right before you and your friends finally brought him down. We all owe you a debt of gratitude."

The grip on her hands lessened and the older witch pulled one hand up and covered Hermione's hands, patting them softly. "And I saw so much of you when I was here last year; it led me to wonder how you had so much time to keep an old woman company. Minerva kindly filled in the blanks by telling me that you'd had a bad run of relationships and how you had chosen to throw yourself into your work."

Hermione started to protest, but the old woman's smile told her that it would be a futile effort. Instead she settled for saying, "So, you decided to meddle in my affairs?"

"Well... yes... I kept tabs on you. When you spent your month off this summer with your family or cooped up in a library, rather than out enjoying yourself, I thought that you might need a distraction."

Hermione rolled her eyes. This was as bad as George telling her a couple of months ago that all she needed was a good shag.

"There is more to life than books, child. You can't hide yourself away forever."

She wanted to argue, truly she did, but for some unknown reason, Hermione held her tongue.

"So, I thought that I'd try a charm to help find you someone."

"What on earth possessed you to try to match me with the likes of Severus Snape?" Hermione asked, indignantly.

Fran chuckled. "Last I was able to see, you two seemed to be getting on rather well. Besides, I was not the one who chose him. You did."

"Me? I never would've..." her voice trailed off.

"Ah, see? You can't deny it, can you?" Fran said knowingly.

Hermione sighed. "What was this spell, exactly?"

"It's a fairy tale charm. There are several of them, as I'm sure you well know."

Hermione shook her head.

"Ah, well, they aren't used much nowadays. The spells aren't found in books as they can only be passed down from the descendants of the fairy godmothers. Most fairy tales are based on true stories, you see." She smiled at Hermione's stunned look. "Of course, there was complicated magic involved in those tales, and many of those have been lost over time as the old family lines die out. My family tree stems from the fairy godmother who helped Cinderella."

"It was actually a series of dreams, not a series of dances. None of it really happened except inside of their minds, you see. By the third consecutive dream, Cinderella knew her intended well and wanted nothing more than to marry him, and he felt the same for her."

"Who cast the spell? How does it work? Wait, you said three *consecutive* dreams."

Fran gave her a motherly smile. "Usually you would drink a seemingly innocuous sleeping draught. Before you fell asleep, the charm would be cast and the spell would take hold. After watching you, I knew there was no way that I'd be able to get you to even drink the potion, much less cast a charm."

"So, I tried to infuse the charm into the potion."

"The cauldron explosion."

"Exactly."

"But, I didn't drink the potion."

"No, but the cauldron exploded over me and seeped into my skin. You touched it before it had been cleaned off."

"Then why didn't it work on you... or any of the other Healers who took care of you?"

"The spell had already been cast on me, and it only works once, but the potion wasn't without its negative effects. If you'll recall, I did fall into a coma."

"How could I forget?" Hermione said as she rolled her eyes. "And I warned the other Healers that you'd been in a potions accident so they were able to take precautions against coming in contact with the potion," she said as the thoughts worked themselves out in her head. She sighed. It was time to change topics before she got too lost in the details as she was wont to do. "So... three nights?"

"Yes, it's supposed to be three nights. But I believe that some of the changes that I made to the casting of the spell weakened it. And then you both seemed to be fighting it so fiercely. It took six weeks for me to pull Professor Snape back into a dream and he still fought that."

"So, he truly has no feelings for me," Hermione realised.

"Oh, child, the spell never would've worked if he didn't have at least a bit of respect for you. The magic just heightens everything for the singular intent of helping you find someone with whom you have the potential to be happy with. You chose him, but he had to be willing to ever appear in the initial dream."

"But the spell failed, so that's the end of it." Hermione wasn't sure if she was pleased by that realisation or not.

"Just because the spell failed doesn't mean that it's over. What I've been trying to tell you is that you both had a mutual regard for one another, even before the spell was cast. Because the spell has already pushed things along in getting to know one another, you would be foolish not to pursue anything with him."

"But you said yourself that it was a spell. He talked to me, he was telling me things last night that I don't think that he's ever told anyone, and honestly, I doubt he ever would if it wasn't forced from a spell."

"I lifted the spell when you two saw one another last night, Hermione."

Hermione raised her eyes to the old woman's face and met her eyes.

"The spell was lifted well before he ever did any of those things, dear."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means that he was telling you those things of his own free will. Whether he thought it was simply a dream or not, it doesn't matter."

Hermione sighed again. Honestly, it truly would be easier to just remain single the rest of her life.

Fran shot her a stern, disapproving gaze. "It is not a crime to be alone, Hermione. But you have such an amazing capacity for love. After the compassion that you've shown me, I just wanted to make sure that you had the opportunity to have everything your heart desires."

Hermione couldn't help but to smile, as it was a wistful fantasy to be a wife, mother and an extraordinary Healer. Impractical in the best of times, but she wanted it nonetheless. (Her mother had succeeded in being all of those things after.) The trouble was that with Hermione's busy schedule she didn't have time to try to find someone who would actually tolerate someone like her. Too many men were intimidated by strong women who could actually think for themselves.

"I understand why you did it," she conceded. "So, what do I do?"

"Whatever you wish. I won't meddle magically anymore; you have my word on that. But it would be a sad thing to leave things as they are between you. It's not as if you can wait for him to make the first move, as he doesn't know who you are."

"True, but the last real-life contact I had with him was a rather rude letter that he sent me shortly after you fell into your coma. I highly doubt that he would give me the time of day if I were to approach him."

"In my day the ministry held a New Year's Eve ball every year. Do they still do that?"

"Actually, for the first time in a decade, they are. Only it's on a Friday night and it would be a miracle if I could actually attend. I would need some very real magic and potions to make it work. And even if I could go, I seriously doubt that Severus would. He isn't a very social person."

"Just have faith. In my experience, I have often found that the Fairy Tale Dreams had a tendency to be somewhat prophetic. Now, whether that was due to the witches making them that way, or if it was a part of the spell, I do not know. But it does present you with some interesting opportunities."

"Miracles really do happen everyday, you know," Fran said with a vaguely familiar twinkle in her soft blue eyes. "Now, Healer Granger, I think that I need my rest."

"Oh, yes, of course. Thank you and goodnight," she said as she rose from her chair. After a brief moment of indecision, she gave Mrs Graham a quick hug, then she turned and left the ward.

Hermione certainly had some things to think on.

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Sunday afternoon, Hermione Apparated to the Burrow for dinner. She was excited to see Harry and Ginny. They had been out of the country since August and Hermione had missed them terribly. Even though her schedule was hectic and it was unlikely that she would've had much of a chance to see them in the last few months (she could count on one hand the number of times she'd seen Ron), there was always something reassuring about knowing that your friends are nearby.

Dinner at the Burrow was a noisy affair in the dining room of the remodelled and temporarily enlarged old house. (Magic truly was a Godsend at times.) Everyone and their families were present, excluding Charlie and his wife, who were not going to be there until Christmas Eve. Thankfully for Molly, not everyone was planning on staying at the

old house while visiting. Hermione couldn't even begin to imagine the amount of chaos that would cause. Children, spouses, grandchildren.... Hermione would actually feel like a bit of an outsider if it weren't for Remus and Tonks (as she was still called, even after marrying Remus years earlier), being there as well. That, and the fact that she'd been to most family dinners held by the Weasleys since she was in school.

She sat between Ron and Harry, and they tried to carry on a conversation about Harry's time in Norway. Of course, trying to carry on a serious discussion in a room that was full of so many people proved ultimately to be futile. Eventually the boys changed the conversation to Quidditch and everyone chimed in, leaving Hermione suddenly feeling alone and bored. Even Fleur was easily caught up in the discussion, especially as it slowly began to revolve around Wimbourne's newest Seeker, Viktor Krum.

It wasn't until dinner was over and the dishes were set to washing that Hermione was able to speak with her friends. Sitting up in Ron's old room, she found herself marvelling at how much it felt as if they were once again fifteen with only minor things such as Voldemort to worry about. Well, those were actually Harry's words, not hers, but she found herself agreeing that even though worrying about the rise of the former Dark wizard had been horrible, the struggles of adult life had their own problems.

Ron's girlfriend was downstairs cooing over Fleur's gravid belly, allowing the four of them to catch up. Hermione had to admit that the French woman was considerate of the friendship between the three of them... well, four, because despite being a year behind them in school, Ginny had always been part of their group in one way or another. Ron and Hermione listened as Harry and Ginny each talked about how they'd been spending their last few months in negotiations with a small herd of centaurs who, it was rumoured, were prophesying the rising of a new Dark Lord. Hermione laughed when Harry next said that he had found the centaurs and formed an alliance with them, but in speaking with them found that the rumours were just that... overblown rumours. Their prophecy merely stated that a dark-haired wizard would soon rise to power.

It was then that Harry told them that he was considering coming back to work in London so that he could have more of a hand at the Ministry. He surprised both Hermione and Ron when he said that he was considering running for Minister of Magic within the next ten years.

An ambitious goal for any wizard, but especially one under the age of sixty.

After twenty more minutes of hearing about Ron's latest work for the Aurors, the discussion turned to Hermione. She bored them with talk of her work at St Mungo's, and glossed over exactly how hard her work was under Healer Sedgwick. Hermione was ready for their conversation to take a new turn when Ron asked her if she'd been having any more dreams. Of course, this forced Hermione to tell Harry and Ginny what Ron was referring to, and because of her lack of skills at deception, Hermione began to tell them about the dream she'd had on Friday night followed by her discussion with Mrs Graham on Saturday.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Ginny, in a slightly excited tone.

Ron and Harry looked less pleased, and Hermione was hoping that they'd keep any negative comments, especially when it came to Snape, to themselves.

"There isn't anything to do. He doesn't even know who he was dreaming about. If I were to approach him, I'm sure that I'd receive a less than enthusiastic welcome."

"You can't just leave it like that! I mean, you said that the charm helped people to find the one who they desired. It sounds almost like finding your true love."

"Ginny, this isn't a romantic fairy tale," Harry interjected. "This is Snape. He's no Prince Charming."

"But he is a Prince," Ginny shot back with a small giggle.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the bad pun while Harry glowered at his wife.

The room again fell silent until Ron at last spoke, "Perhaps you should do something about it."

Hermione could only gape at him for a moment before she was at last able to make her mouth move to ask a simple question. "What?"

"Well, you said yourself that there was some chemistry between you two, and he didn't actually bite your head off in your dream. And you said that he seemed almost hurt that you were trying to leave him on Friday night. Perhaps he didn't want it to end either."

"Yes, exactly," Ginny chimed in to agree. "And it's really rare to have a spell cast by a descendant of the fairy godmothers. You're lucky, Hermione."

"You've all gone barmy!" Harry snapped.

Hermione nodded. "Harry's actually right. What would you have me do? Show up at Hogwarts on his doorstep? Or go to his office at the Ministry? If I did either one of those, he'd have me thrown out before I could say three words to him."

Her questions were met with silence, which in Hermione's mind meant that it was the end of that discussion.

After a few minutes, however, Ginny finally said, "Well, there is that ball that the Ministry is holding in two weeks. I bet that if he went there, you could see him. He might be more willing to see you during something like that."

"Yeah," said Ron. "You could go to that."

"I have to work, or have you forgotten about that small little detail." This really was not something she had wanted to talk about with these three people.

"Well, you aren't working that night, though, are you? I mean, you said yourself that your Friday nights were actually free."

"Oh, my Friday nights are free, but that's only because I am just getting off of a thirty-six hour shift... well, it's usually closer to thirty-seven or thirty-eight..."

"But you said that was what happened in your dream also and that you were affected by some sort of spell."

"Ron, as you just pointed out, that was a dream. There isn't a spell that works quite like that in real life. And the only potion is an Invigoration Draught, which doesn't last long enough and the side effects aren't worth it."

"What if I told you that there is a potion that does do something like that, though?" Ron asked cautiously.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, it doesn't last quite as long as the one in your dream lasted. And once it does wear off you are pretty much done in for several hours, but it is more effective than the Invigoration Draught."

"Ron, I really don't want to take a potion that Fred and George are in the process of inventing. I've dealt with enough of their inventions, thank you very much."

"This isn't Fred or George's. Actually, it's something that we're using in the Auror Department and it's been thoroughly tested. It's just not widely known because it does leave you pretty knackered afterwards." Ron looked at her. "Would you use it?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't know. It's... it's tempting," she had to admit. "I'd have to think about it."

Ginny gave her a bright smile while Ron nodded at her. The only one looking more pensive and concerned than Hermione was Harry... and she could almost read the worried thoughts as they crossed his face. Even if he no longer hated Snape like he did when he was in school, Hermione knew that the last thing that Harry wanted was for one of his best friends to be in a position where they could get hurt by the snarky git.

Hermione reached over and squeezed Harry's hand. "Don't worry, Harry."

*It's not as if Snape would actually show up to the blasted thing. He doesn't go to those events*she thought.

Harry relaxed and nodded as if he'd just read her thoughts.

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## Chapter 6: I'm Wishing

*Chapter 6 of 8*

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

A/N: This story was written for Keladry\_Lupin for the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange. It is completely written and I will post it over the next couple of weeks. :)

Thanks go out to my alpha and beta readers while I was working on this project. JuneW, DeeMichelle, Subversa, Cocoachristy, Minuet99 & Ferporcel. They are a wonderful group of friends and I appreciate the correcting, advice and hand-holding from each of them.

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### Chapter 6: I'm Wishing

Hermione knew that she should've been worried the moment that Ron and Ginny decided to team up together to take care of things for her. Truly, she wasn't sure who was the more worried about the two siblings' self-appointed cause, her or Harry. Harry still wasn't overly excited over the idea of Hermione having anything more than a professional relationship with Snape. Honestly, Hermione wasn't all that certain why Ron or Ginny had taken to the idea so quickly. When she'd asked them, Ginny had said that she had seen a sparkle in Hermione's eyes when she was talking about him that she instantly knew that it was the right thing to do. Ron, on the other hand, had mumbled something about owing her and that he just wanted her to be happy.

The only thing she could think of that Ron would be grateful about was that she'd introduced him to his girlfriend, Carol, who he never would've met otherwise. Hermione had to admit that they were rather good together. Ron had been much less controlling since they'd gone their separate ways, lending again to the theory that he always had been rather jealous. They were both happier now.

No amount of convincing would change either of the two Weasleys' minds. After several days, Hermione finally resigned herself to working herself to the point of exhaustion followed by going to the Ministry's ball.

As part of Ron and Ginny's efforts, Hermione received rather nicer gifts for Christmas than she had expected. Fred and George, who were still grateful to her for keeping the secrets that she held, had purchased her a new set of dress robes in a deep blue colour, very similar to the ones she'd worn in her dreams. Ginny and Harry had given her a black formal cloak to go with her dress robes with a small silver clasp.

Ron had given her a small gold locket. On one side was engraved a crossed wand and bone...the St Mungo's emblem; on the other were her initials. Ironically, the monogram had the same flaw as it had in her dream; the letters were out of order, although she didn't tell Ron that. What had been surprising about it was that the fact that she had dreamt about a monogrammed charm at all was a detail that Hermione had left out of the story that she'd told her friends. There was no way that anyone could've known about it... yet, here it was.

Ginny had then insisted on taking Hermione shopping to buy shoes and some new cosmetics to complete the ensemble.

Ron had spoken with Tonks and together they had procured Hermione a small bottle of the potion that he'd told her about. Ron had been correct, the Invigoration Draught's energising effects weren't as long as she'd been hoping for, but he insisted that two hours would be sufficient time to snag herself a Snape if she really tried. The term made her feel as if she were fishing. And who, in their right mind, would actually fish in hopes of catching that greasy grouchy git?

Obviously, Hermione wasn't in her right mind.

She spent the remaining fortnight until New Year's Eve trying to talk herself out of the insane idea. She was wholly unsuccessful. Just after Christmas, she had even received a note from Mrs Graham asking Hermione if she'd thought more on the discussion they'd had and what Hermione was planning on doing about it. The woman had gone so far as to strongly urge Hermione to attend the masquerade ball that was being held by the Ministry because it so perfectly mirrored Hermione's dreams that it almost seemed as if it were destined.

Yes, it was destined all right... destined to be a disaster, Hermione was certain.

Despite that, on the 30th of December, Hermione left for her shift at St Mungo's and began her thirty-six hour trek until Friday night.

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"Severus, there is no one else available to do this," Minerva insisted to a glowering Snape. "You saw Professor Durham just this afternoon. There is no way that he can take her; he'd infect half of the guests at the ball."

That stupid house-elf carried disease was back again. Severus still remembered the effects of the illness from when it had been at the school back in October. It was not something that he wished to repeat. It was for that reason that he'd not gone too close to Durham's quarantined room. Severus had simply stood at the threshold of the door just to see that the other wizard was indeed ill.

Unfortunately he was.

Thus the reason for Severus' current predicament: How to get out of escorting Minerva's niece to the Ministry's New Year's Eve ball which was set to begin in just over an hour?

"I have work to get done tonight and you know that there are some things that I can only accomplish when those dunderheaded students aren't here."

"It's a holiday, Severus. Not only is tomorrow a Saturday, but it is also New Year's Day. I'm positive that you don't have anything so pressing that can't wait until Monday."

"I am not going to the ball, Minerva. Why don't you escort your niece? I'm sure that she'll have a lovely time with you."

"I have to stay here tonight, and you know it. Poppy needs my help. I would send all of the male professors out of the school until we're certain we have this infection under control, but thankfully all of the rest of them are already home with their families. I'm just glad that there aren't any male students staying over the Christmas holidays."

Severus growled under his breath. Time for a new tactic.

"Minerva, your niece is a very lovely young woman. Don't you think that she will be horrified to hear she is going to attend with me? She would do much better for herself if she were to go alone. There is no shame in a woman attending such an event without an escort in this day and age."

"Don't you even start with me, Severus. You're a war hero. Most any woman would be thrilled to attend with you.... Well, at least until you spoke more than three words to them and they discovered what an arse you really are. And I know that you wouldn't dare speak to my niece in such a way. After all, you owe me for allowing you to skive off the staff Christmas party by feigning a migraine."

"There was no feigning involved. I assure you that it would have taken no more than ten minutes in a roomful of those idiots and I would have developed a migraine," Severus muttered.

Minerva choked back a small laugh which only caused Severus to grumble even louder.

"You're going to the ball tonight," she next said, firmly.

"I am going back to my quarters and packing a few things and then I'm going home until Durham is better, Minerva," he replied smoothly as he turned to sweep out of the room.

"Severus. Do not forget that it is because of me that you are not presently rotting away in Azkaban."

He turned and snarled at the portrait hanging behind Minerva's desk. "And do not forget that it is because of what you made me do that I ever wound up in there to begin with," he told portrait-Albus.

"Go, Severus. As a favour to me," Dumbledore said in a kinder tone.

Severus sighed and looked up at the portrait, defeated. Then, looking back to Minerva he said, "I will not court her, so get that thought out of your head right now."

"Of course not. Just make sure that she gets there safely and she has someone to escort her home. She is just out of a relationship and he turned out to be a very abusive man. I just want to make sure that she is safe."

Severus gave a quick nod. "I will come by your office at seven o'clock to pick her up. Make sure that she's not late."

Minerva watched as Snape then left her office. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing by forcing him to do this, Albus?"

"I am. After all, his dreams are about to become reality."

Minerva shook her head. Knowing Severus as she did, she wasn't quite sure how the man would take the upcoming events. Although, she had to admit that Severus actually enjoying himself and allowing himself the luxury of falling in love was a possibility. After all, stranger things could and, in fact, had happened.

Sighing, she left her office to go seek out her niece and help the young woman get ready for the ball. And even more importantly, she would tell her about her escort and how he was likely to treat her.

At least Maggie is a strong woman, Minerva thought as she entered her quarters.

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Hermione had been foolish to ever think that she would have been able to come home from work early or even on time the evening of 31 December. It's not as if she ever did at any other time. Tonight, it was almost as if Healer Sedgwick knew how badly Hermione wanted to leave, for each time Hermione finished her appointed tasks, yet another was awaiting her around the corner.

She was now caring for a patient who was suffering from Inordinatus Emein. Honestly, how much could one person vomit? She was beginning to wonder as she cast a quick Evanesco and Summoned a mop and bucket to spell them to clean the floor near where her patient currently sat.

Her replacement was late ... very late, actually. Although, Hermione had a sinking suspicion that the oncoming Healer was merely waiting for the forty-five minutes that it took for the anti-emetic potion to begin working on the patient.

The one consolation was that the tedious tasks had done a decent enough job of keeping Hermione's mind occupied with thoughts of anything other than what she was getting ready to do.

Over an hour and a half later, she stood before the mirror holding the phial of the sparkling blue Invigorating Draught firmly in her hand. Hermione checked her appearance in the mirror one last time. The robes that Fred and George had given her for Christmas were extremely flattering. She made a quick mental note to thank Ginny for picking them out. Not that Ginny had said that she had, but this certainly wasn't something that either of the twins would've chosen.

The small black velvet cloak was the perfect accent to wear over the royal blue robes. She ran her hand over the chain around her neck and couldn't hold back a small smile as she again thought about the strange coincidence of the monogram.

The soft chime of the clock in her living room, marking the half-hour, reminded her that she was quickly running out of time. This, after all, wasn't a dream and the potion in her hand would only last two hours. She had prepared for the ball without it, thinking that she'd hold on to it and wait until the last possible moment before drinking the phial's contents. However, she found that she was quickly tiring and she had little choice but to take it... well, the other choice was to go to bed, which was an incredibly inviting thought, but if she did that then Ginny Potter would be pounding down her door and dragging her to the ball. (Hell, she was surprised that Ginny wasn't here doing that already.)

Knowing that she had little choice, Hermione checked her appearance one final time, pulled the cork out of the phial and drank the contents.

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"Hermione. Oh, those robes look absolutely stunning on you," Ginny whispered in her ear as she tried to lead her into the ballroom. "You know that I was about ready to leave the party to come and see what was keeping you. I had thought that you had just gone home to bed."

Hermione snorted. "I considered it, trust me, but I knew that you would never let me live it down." Hermione was only slightly comforted when her friend squeezed her arm. She looked over Ginny, in her dark green robes, with her red hair tied back in a braided knot at the nape of her neck, and a small emerald green demi-mask covering the area around her eyes. "You look amazing, Ginny."

Ginny beamed. "Thank you."

"Oh, hold on," Hermione said as Ginny led her towards the doors. "Let me check my cloak. I'd hate to lose it."

"That reminds me. Did you fix the locket?"

"No, I..." Her voice trailed off. She had no answer to why she had decided that she wouldn't tell Ron of his error. For whatever reason, it all seemed rather fitting. "Where's Harry?" she said instead, intent on changing the subject.

The sly smile that the redhead gave her told her that Ginny wasn't the least bit fooled, but she would play along. "Harry and Ron were talking with Viktor Krum the last time I saw them."

"He just left you to fend for yourself at this thing?"

"I'm hardly alone. After all, I had to come look for you. I'm not like Ron. I hate the spotlight. You know that Harry doesn't like it much either, but he has little choice in the matter. Just because he's learned to accept and deal with it, doesn't mean that I have to... at least not all of the time."

Ginny walked with her as she checked her cloak and then they went into the ballroom. Hermione's stomach tightened in anticipation. Her hand went up to her mask subconsciously, to ensure that it was straight... not even considering that the mask was held on by a charm and wouldn't budge no matter what she did unless she reversed the spell.

"What time did you take the potion, Hermione?"

"Half-past nine."

Ginny nodded. "Ron said that it would last about two to two and a half hours. It varies in people. You should probably leave at the two hour mark. Otherwise we'll be scraping you off of the floor."

No, she didn't want that, not after... well, aside from feeling extremely foolish, she just didn't want to subject herself to something that could leave her so vulnerable.

"And how are you feeling? Is it working all right?"

"Yes, it's fine," Hermione assured her. "After being on my feet for so long, I'm feeling surprisingly clear-headed and alert."

"Good," her friend said and she pulled Hermione into the throng of people. "Let's go see if he's here."

"You can't still believe that Severus Snape would show up for a Ministry-sponsored event of any kind, Ginny." For Merlin's sake, Hermione had already been coerced to come to this thing. Ginny couldn't possibly be serious about forcing an encounter between Snape and her. "What on earth do you think would result from such a thing?" she asked.

Ginny looked at Hermione thoughtfully for a moment before saying, "I think that things will happen exactly as they are supposed to. It may not be destiny or true love, but there is definitely more at play than sexual attraction. I mean, you can't possibly tell me that you even gave Snape more than a passing thought before."

Hermione snorted. That comment didn't even deserve a response. Before all of this, *whowould* have given Snape anything more than a passing thought. "What makes you think that he'll even be here?"

"Oh, when I saw Professor McGonagall last week she assured me..."

"You told Professor McGonagall about this?" Hermione interrupted.

"I mentioned something in passing about how it would be nice if Snape actually showed up to something like this," Ginny said, waving her hand and glancing around the room. "Anyhow, she got a thoughtful look on her face and then went on to insist that she would get Snape here, no matter what. Don't worry, Hermione, she knows nothing of this or you."

"And speak of the devil."

"What?" Hermione asked as she turned her eyes to where Ginny was looking. Sure enough, there he was. Dressed from head to toe in black dress robes, Severus Snape stood stiffly as he scowled at the crowd of people. He had been easy to spot for the simple fact that he was one of the few people in the room who was not wearing a mask.

Unable to pull her eyes away, Hermione felt her stomach flip-flop. She cursed herself for being nervous... that would, of course, imply that she cared. Unfortunately, this led her to realise that on some level, she did care. That was when she noticed him turn his attention to someone who was standing next to him... a woman. Although the woman wore a small black demi-mask, Hermione was certain that she couldn't have been much older than her. And for a reason that she refused to acknowledge, Hermione was extremely bothered by the short, form-fitting dress that the woman was wearing instead of the more traditional robes.

"Well, are you going to go over there?" came a voice from Hermione's side.

"No," she replied, still watching the two who were obviously together, judging by the way that the woman's hand was now touching Snape's arm. "Didn't you say that Viktor was around here somewhere?"

Well, her dream may have been shattered, but that didn't mean that she was going to waste the brief amount of time that she did have.

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Severus forced himself to nearly smile at the young woman who was hanging on his arm. Okay, it wasn't really a smile so much as less of a scowl than he typically wore. And the woman may as well have been hanging on him. She was touching him and that was more than he usually tolerated from people who he hardly knew. But this was Minerva's niece and for whatever reason, Severus felt obligated to be polite.

"What is it, precisely, that you are requiring of me, Miss Hardin?" he asked in a bored voice. "You do not actually expect me to entertain you this evening, do you?" Oh, Merlin, please don't let it be that. Minerva had only said to ensure the girl's safety to and from the event. Surely this girl wasn't expecting him to dance with her.

"I will be fine. I highly doubt that my ex-boyfriend will make an appearance here tonight, but you know how Aunt Minerva frets."

Severus grumbled. Babysitting a thirty-three year old witch, what had he been reduced to?

As if reading his mind, the young woman smiled and brushed her hand along his arm again. "I will come and find you before I wish to leave so we can make Aunt Minerva happy by having you see me home. Let's say half-past twelve?"

Severus gave a short nod.

"I am sorry about this. But, who knows, maybe you'll actually enjoy yourself."

"Yes, and I just heard that there was a sighting of some pigs winging their way over Buckingham Palace earlier this evening," Severus muttered under his breath, but the small giggle that he heard from Maggie ... before she left him standing there in the middle of the room ... told him that she'd heard him.

He really hated silly, giggly women. The only thing he hated more was idiotic, brainless children who could not seem to comprehend about how dangerous magic could be.

Turning sharply on his heel, Severus went in search of a dark, quiet corner, and a stiff drink. *Too bad there wasn't a rose garden down here*, he thought.



Twenty minutes later found Severus exactly where he wanted to be. (Well, if one ignored the fact that being at any Ministry function was truly the very ~~last~~ place that he wanted to be.) He was standing up against the wall on the far left side of the room as close to the door as possible while not being in direct sight of those coming and going from the main ballroom.

Taking a sip of his firewhisky, Severus tried to calm his mind. Ever since he'd walked in here he'd felt oddly disconcerted. It had brought forth memories. Memories? No, they weren't real memories. It just all reminded him strongly of the dreams that he'd been plagued with since Halloween.

He didn't know if he should be grateful or wary that the dreams had ended after he'd told Minerva of the dream he'd had nearly a fortnight ago. After several discussions, Minerva had finally convinced him that it had likely been a remaining side-effect from the House-Elf Flu which he'd been lucky enough to contract back in early October. However, that didn't explain why the dreams had ended so suddenly. Nor did it explain how he had such an odd feeling of déjà vu now.

And though he hated admitting such a thing, even to himself, Severus found himself wondering about the mysterious woman who he had dreamed about so consistently for nearly two months.

It was as this final thought was passing through his head that he saw her. Every detail about the woman who he saw dancing with a man ... whom he easily recognised was the famous Quidditch Seeker, Viktor Krum ... was familiar. The dress robes, though the cut was slightly different than the one that the woman in his dreams had worn, were nearly identical in colour. Her brown hair was weaved in the same style and pinned on top of her head, leaving a few ringlets to frame her face.

The mask she wore to hide most of her face was of a black butterfly, always rather symbolic of new life and change. Severus had thought that he'd dreamed of it because he had felt ready for something new in his life. It had been the first time since Lily that he'd felt as if he'd truly wanted to be in a relationship with a woman.

It was then that the light caught something and Severus noticed that she wore a simple necklace with something that appeared to be a locket or charm on it. Nothing like the fancy diamond or pearl necklaces worn by most of the women who were presently in the room.

*Could this possibly be the same woman?*

With rapid care, he began to mentally run through the possible charms and potions that could be responsible for such a thing. And then, before he even finished cataloguing all of the possibilities, the realisation that the dream could have been real, in some small way, hit him and it felt as if a pile of lead had suddenly dropped into his gut.

If it was her, if it had happened....

He had to know before she told....

It had been two weeks; perhaps it was already too late.

Minerva had gone to great lengths to reassure him that he was safe from scandal the morning after his last dream when he'd realised that he'd dropped his guard and began revealing his secrets. Severus had no other choice; he had to approach her and find out what she knew.

Severus quickly knocked back the rest of drink and stood tall. He made certain that his features were in their forever masked state and walked quickly towards the dancing couple. Being none too patient, he tapped on the Quidditch player's shoulder.

"Yes," Krum asked, looking at him.

"May I cut in?" Severus asked formally.

The man looked at his dance partner for permission. "Her..."

Severus didn't miss the woman stepping on Krum's boot.

"It's fine, Viktor," she said to Krum. She then turned her eyes to Snape. "I'd be honoured to dance with such a famed war hero."

And there was that same voice. It was her. A combination of curiosity and anger was sparked within him.

Krum bowed slightly to the woman and left the dance floor, giving Snape a look which clearly spoke volumes of the mistrust that he felt for him.

Ignoring him, Severus took the young woman in his arms and they began to dance.

"What exactly did you do to me?" he hissed in her ear, ignoring the instant feeling of comfort and security which had washed over him the moment he touched her.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know exactly to what I'm referring. The dreams were real, weren't they?"

"I...um, yes," she stammered.

Severus was so disgusted and angered by her response that he stopped leading them around on the floor and simply scowled at her.

She took a breath and her face hardened. "I didn't cast the spell. I didn't even know about it until after it wore off." She looked around them. "Could we discuss this someplace else, please?"

Dropping his hands from her, Severus led the way to one of the many smaller parlours off of the main ballroom. It took several minutes to find one that wasn't full of couples in intimate conversation. Finding a room, he then led the woman to a secluded corner and gestured for her to sit in a stiff chair.

"Now. Speak," Severus said with no preamble while he hovered over the witch as if she were one of his errant students.

Hermione didn't know how to respond to Severus. She recognised his stance and demeanour immediately. She was worried of so many things happening at once. It took every ounce of control that she had to remember to do the simple things, like keep her mind clear of anything incriminating so that he didn't become even angrier than he already was and begin throwing out even more accusations.

Worse, she was very aware of the time and she knew that she didn't have much of it. It had been eleven o'clock when she'd begun dancing with Viktor and the time she'd spent dancing with him, followed by Snape, and then searching for a room.... Well, there wasn't much time left. Getting this over with and explaining as quickly as possible was likely a very good idea.

"There is this woman I know. She felt that she owed me ... thought that she was doing me a favour ... she cast a charm on me," she rushed to explain.

"What charm was it?" he said in a low, harsh whisper.

"The Cinderella Charm is what she called it. Although, it involved a potion as well. I've tried looking it up since she confessed and I can't find any information on it."

Snape growled and Hermione wondered if he knew of the spell. Finally, he shook his head slightly and turned his gaze back on her. "It can't have been. The charm doesn't work that way. If you ... I mean, we ... had been under that spell, then it would've concluded three days after the first dream. And the attraction, during the dreams, would

have been too intense to fight."

Well, that answered that question. He definitely knew of the spell.

"She said that she had altered the spell and even from that it took an unexpected course. Two weeks ago, she lifted the spell saying something to the effect that the two of us were too stubborn for it to work properly after she'd weakened it."

Hermione began wringing her hands in an old nervous gesture of hers. "I didn't ask her to do any of this. I was just as surprised as you are when I found out. Before that I just thought that the stress of work was finally getting to me."

"Yes, I can understand that," he admitted. "I was trying to figure out who had poisoned me. Now, I know it was you she was after. Though, I must say that catching me in the crossfire was likely not an unwelcome side-effect." Severus appeared to relax a little, and Hermione let out a small sigh. At least he'd lowered his wand.

"You know who did this?"

Severus nodded. "Albus Dumbledore's cousin."

Dumbledore's cousin? "How can you be so certain that it was her?"

"Only members from her immediate family can cast that particular charm. I heard that it upset Albus terribly when he learned that he would never be able to cast it." Then she heard him quietly mumble under his breath, "Praise Merlin that he never could."

"I was hoping that I'd see you tonight, although I thought that it would be rather unlikely," she said, changing the subject.

After appearing to debate with himself for a moment, Severus sat down in a chair next to her. "I wasn't going to be here. I don't attend these sorts of functions."

"No, you don't seem to be the type," Hermione said with a smile. "Granted, I don't enjoy them much either."

"Hmm." He then looked at her shrewdly. "How much of the dreams do you remember?"

Hermione knew exactly what he was after. Francine had explained that his memory would be slightly obscured, but after she had lifted the charm he would remember much more clearly what had happened from that moment on. "Everything."

"I see."

"I have no desire to expose you, Severus. Your secrets are safe with me."

"And what makes you think that I will believe you," he said, again pulling his wand from his sleeve.

Hermione eyed his wand warily. She couldn't let him Obliviate her. Besides, could someone Obliviate a dream? Especially one that was two weeks old.

*He's bluffing*, she decided. Although that didn't mean that he wasn't still staring at her with a calculated look. "If you know of the spell, Severus, then you must know that there has to be a mutual regard for it to have ever worked in the first place."

"Precisely. The spell didn't work. Obviously, the old woman bollocksed it up," he said as he stood.

Hermione shook her head determinately. "No, that's not what she said. It was just weaker... logically speaking, that would mean that our attraction is stronger."

"I don't even know who you are! How can I bloody well be attracted to you?"

Hermione stood as well. There was no way she was going to tolerate him talking down to her like he did when he towered over people. "Not a physical attraction, you ruddy git: a calling of the souls. Don't you feel it?" she asked, grabbing his hand. "I do. It's a spark of fire that just tells me that this is right. It gives me comfort, contentment and a burning desire all rolled into one."

He dropped her hand. "It's a remnant of the spell and will soon go away. But, obviously, that means that you can't believe any of this."

"Yes, I can. I may not know very much about you, Severus, but I know this has the potential to be right."

She watched him scowl and pace in front of her. At least she was no longer on the wrong end of his wand. Then, far off in the distance, Hermione heard the single chime denoting that it was half-past eleven. *What horrid timing!*

"Oh, I'm so sorry, but I have to leave. Right now."

He stopped his pacing and stared at her, almost disbelievingly. "What do you mean you have to leave? This isn't a dream, woman," he snarled, grabbing her shoulders.

Hermione struggled slightly to get out of his grasp. "I know it isn't, but I took a potion, and I have to leave right now," she rushed to explain.

"A potion? What kind of potion?" Snape demanded angrily.

"To keep me awake. I never would've been able to come if I hadn't taken it. I had just finished working over thirty-seven hours at St Mungo's. Please let me go."

Watching the frustration, anger and something she couldn't quite identify, flash across his face, Hermione increased her struggles and pulled back from him. "I do want to see you again. In a day or two... I'll send you an owl."

"Wait," he said, almost desperately and reached out towards her again. This time, his long fingers only caught onto the gold locket that she now wore around her neck all of the time.

Hermione began to feel slightly dizzy and she panicked, jerking away from him and running towards the door. "I'm sorry. I'll contact you. We'll talk," she called back.

"Damn it!" she heard him shout as he started to run after her. "I don't even know who you are!"

She weaved her way quickly through the ballroom, Summoned her cloak (just as she remembered doing in her dream before) and ran full-tilt to the entryway.

Severus had taken three steps to chase her, but had stopped himself when he remembered that there were other people present. It had also been the presence of those very people that had prevented him from pulling his wand and simply binding the woman. She was right; there was something about her that he was drawn to.

Biting back a growl he looked at the locket he held in his hand. A small smirk grew on his face as he shoved it in his pocket and went to go find Minerva's niece so that he could leave. He had things to do.

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# Chapter 7: I Won't Say (I'm In Love)

Chapter 7 of 8

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

A/N: This story was written for Keladry\_Lupin for the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange.

Thanks go out to my alpha and beta readers while I was working on this project. JuneW, DeeMichelle, Subversa, Cocoachristy, Minuet99 & Ferporcel. They are a wonderful group of friends and I appreciate the correcting, advice and hand-holding from each of them.

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## Chapter 7: I Won't Say (I'm In Love)

Slowly she opened her eyes. Dizziness mixed with nausea were the first sensations to register through to her fog-filled brain. Hermione hated hangovers; it was the main reason that she rarely drank. It seemed that if she had more than two glasses of wine then she was ill the next morning, and unfortunately, the Wizarding world had yet to create an adequate hangover relief potion. Wracking her brain, she tried to remember exactly how much she had drank, and she could only recall the one glass of wine. That was when she remembered the energising potion that Ron and Tonks had given her, and its aftereffect: exhaustion.

She tried to focus on her surroundings and realised that she was not in her warm, comfortable bed. Instead, she was sprawled on the sofa. Groaning, she sat herself up as the room continued to spin.

"It's about time you woke up," came a voice from behind her.

Turning her head slowly, Hermione tried to focus on her roommate, willing the woman to stop dancing around in front of her. "Good morning," she managed to mumble back.

Heidi snorted. "Try 'good afternoon'. If you'd been asleep much longer, 'good evening' would've been more appropriate. What the hell happened to you last night?"

"I went to the masquerade ball."

"That much is obvious."

Hermione looked down at herself and noticed that she was still wearing her dress robes from the night before; only they were wrinkled and... covered in soot. The mask which she'd worn the night before was broken and on the floor, next to the sooty footprints which she'd left.

"That's the last time I ever take a potion offered to me by Ron Weasley."

Heidi laughed. "Don't worry. I'll help you clean up the mess. Though why you'd trust his brewing, I'll never know."

"I didn't trust his brewing; it was something he got from work."

"Then you should know better. Those Aurors take some nasty potions for some extreme work. What did he give you anyway?"

"Something to wake me up so I could go to that bloody ball." Remembering how she'd fulfilled her prophetic dream and run out on Severus, she added, "It would've been better if I'd stayed home and found another way."

Heidi gave her a funny look, but chose to say nothing to Hermione's comment. Instead, she went over to the table and handed Hermione a scrap of parchment. "A house-elf came by and delivered that this morning from Healer Sedgwick."

Hermione read it over three times to understand the simple message. Healer Sedgwick wanted Hermione to work tomorrow instead of Monday. Crumpling the note, she threw it in the hearth and laid her head back against the sofa.

"Come on, Hermione," Heidi said. "Let's clean you up, put a bit of food and tea in you, and then tuck you into bed."

Lacking the energy or the will to argue, Hermione allowed herself to be led about and cared for by her roommate. She soon found herself in her comfortable bed and settled down for a peaceful night's sleep.

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Severus swept through the darkened halls of the school, grateful that most of the students were still on holiday. He mentally swore that he would take one hundred House points off of any student that he encountered this morning, and he was hoping that it wasn't going to be a member from his own House. But, of course, there were no Slytherins in the castle, so he knew he wouldn't have to do such a thing. After two nights of no sleep, he was in a foul mood, and the only infraction that a student would have to do to get on his bad side was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Almost absently, he made his way to the Headmistress' office. He needed to speak with her; he just had no desire to do so at this point. Yesterday, Severus had walled himself away in his quarters avoiding everyone and everything, including his post. Bloody owls didn't know the difference between a holiday, a weekday or a workday. Stupid birds. It almost... *almost* made Severus long to live in the Muggle world.

This morning when he'd opened the door to his quarters, not only had there been a barrage of owls attempting to enter and deliver the post that they'd not been able to deliver the day before, but there had also been a note from Minerva taped to his door requesting a meeting with him first thing this morning. He would've ignored the note. However, he'd had to touch it to open it, and less than thirty seconds after he'd opened it, the scrap of foolscap had burst into flames leaving nothing but ash. Severus knew that this meant that a small mark had burned next to his name on a list on Minerva's desk, and she now knew that he had read it.

Whoever it was that had created the Delivery Confirmation Charm should be strung up by their thumbs and hexed to the next plane of existence.

Grumbling, he made his way up the stairs and entered Minerva's office.

"Oh, good morning, Severus," she said as he walked in and sat down without invitation.

He merely glared at her in reply.

"I am sorry. I know how you want your privacy. But, you know, you were supposed to come and meet with me yesterday, or did you forget?"

"I didn't forget. Yesterday was a holiday, surely everyone is allowed a holiday now and then. I simply wanted to be alone. Has it been so long since you've had that luxury that you've forgotten what it's like?"

"No, no, Severus, of course not," she said, brushing his words away. "I just need to turn in my report to the Board of Governors and it wouldn't do for it to be late."

Severus snorted. "It's not due until Tuesday and you know it. You just want to see if there is some other way that you can meddle in my affairs."

"I've done no such thing!"

Cocking an eyebrow, he asked derisively, "Haven't you? I seem to recall you claiming that Professor Durham had contracted the House-Elf Flu a few days ago as the reason that he could not escort your niece to the Ministry ball. Funny, I saw him just this morning as I was walking up here and he appeared to be perfectly fine."

The Headmistress looked sheepish as she fiddled with the papers on her desk. "Well, yes." She sighed. "I am sorry about that, Severus."

"I have no doubt that you had some undue influence," he said glaring up at the portrait hanging over Minerva's desk. The figure in the portrait had the audacity to wink at him. "Though, I am not sure why you wanted me there."

There, let her explain the reasoning behind her actions.

"I recognised the way that you described your dreams to me, Severus. Although, I have to admit that when the charm was cast on me, it did play out its natural course. Of course, someone as headstrong as you would require alterations to it."

"It wasn't cast on me, Minerva. It was cast on the woman."

"Well, of course it was. The Cinderella Charm is always cast on the witch. But any woman who would choose you as their heart's desire would have to be just as stubborn as you."

He scoffed at the term 'heart's desire'. It was wholly unlikely that he would be anyone's heart's desire. The weakening and alterations to the charm had likely caused the woman to unconsciously choose him. However, that didn't stop him from wanting to find her. He'd spent Friday night and all of yesterday brewing a potion to try to locate her through the locket. The potion had failed. Apparently she'd not owned the locket very long to have created much of a signature on it.

All he had to go on was the engraved healing symbol on one side and the monogram on the other which indicated that her first name began with an 'H' and the last a 'J'. No names were coming forth as ones that were familiar. The woman had been too young and too thin to be Hestia Jones.

If he truly wanted to find her, he'd have to go to a general location and cast a tracing spell. But the most effective spell was Dark in nature and he would have to be careful where and how often he cast it. Certainly, doing so while in his office at the Ministry of Magic would not be a wise move. Perhaps if he went to St Mungo's....

"Severus?" Minerva asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"What?" he snapped.

"I was telling you how the charm affected me."

"What are you talking about?" Severus demanded.

"The woman is consuming your thoughts, though it's not spell-compelled in your case, it is part of the nature of the charm. From what I understand, you dreamt of her often. It's unsurprising that she would now consume your thoughts."

He sat silent, neither confirming nor denying her statement. It was true, though he would never admit that aloud to anyone.

"It's not a sign of weakness, Severus. Dreaming about someone for weeks will do that to you. You should've seen poor Albus when his cousin cast the same spell on me," she said as her features softened to a small smile. "You see, she was quite certain that he would be the object of my affections, even though he was denying any attraction to me quite fervently. He insisted that our age difference was much too great to overcome. But the spell showed him otherwise and after the dreams ended, he couldn't rest until he'd found me and returned my lost shoe."

"I heard that the spell ended before she could run away and lose her shoe. I was hoping that by going to the Ministry ball that you'd get the chance to actually find her." Minerva said the last words in a hopeful tone and Severus knew that she was expecting an answer to whether or not her play had worked.

When silence had well and truly settled heavily on the room and its occupants, Severus finally answered her. "She was there."

Minerva beamed. "That's wonderful. So, you saw her? Who is she?"

"I don't know," he bit out.

"What do you mean you don't know? You just said that she was there? Didn't you go speak with her?"

"Of course, I spoke with her! We danced, we talked... and just when I started to ask who she was she ran out on me. Again!"

She narrowed her eyes. "Were you being difficult?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, you do have a tendency to be that way. Then why, pray tell, would she leave?"

"I do not know. We were there. We were talking and then she uttered some nonsense about a potion and being out of time. Next thing I know, she's running out the door."

"Hmm," Minerva said thoughtfully, "I wonder if there was some aftereffect to the spell. Did she happen to leave her shoe?"

"No, she bloody well did not leave a shoe, Minerva! This is ridiculous!" He was on his feet and hovering over the Headmistress' desk. And then... he stopped.

"What?" she prodded.

"She left... I grabbed..." He pulled the locket out of his pocket and dangled it in front of Minerva.

Her fingers came up to take it and gently inspect the piece of jewellery. "Did you try an identity potion?"

"Of course I did. Either she never wears it or it's fairly new. It couldn't give me anything more than a bunch of wavy lines."

"Did she say anything about what she does? Does she work at the Ministry? Or..." She turned the locket over. "St Mungo's, perhaps?"

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, and sighed in exasperation. "She spoke of patients and she mentioned St Mungo's. I was considering

going there and casting the Vestigium Spell."

At Minerva's confused look, he explained, "It's a tracing spell. It's thought of as Dark because it invades privacy... but I am considering it. The only catch is that I have to be in the same general location as her."

"So, St Mungo's would be a good place to start."

"So it would seem."

His old friend looked him in the eye and asked, "Are you going to go try to find her?"

"The spell is Dark. If the Ministry found out I would be on my way back to Azkaban."

She placed the locket carefully back in his hand and held it there for a moment. "I have the utmost faith that no one will see you cast the spell."

Severus looked down at their hands and then back to her. Squeezing his hand around the trinket, he gave Minerva a sharp nod, then turned and swept out of her office.

~ ~ ~

His hands still gripped firmly around the locket, Severus spied the Welcome Witch at the reception area of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The witch sitting behind the small desk had short, curly blonde hair and wore too much makeup. She pushed up her glasses and chomped on her gum as Severus neared the desk.

Barely even glancing at him, the witch pointed her wand at the floor guide.

Severus glared at her, but deciding that it was best to state his intentions...whether true or not. "I am here to visit with Mr Ollivander," he said, grabbing the first name he could think of. Mr Ollivander had barely survived his incarceration with the Death Eaters during the Second War. The Dark Lord had wanted him for information on locating Rowena Ravenclaw's wand which had been carefully hidden in Ollivander's shop. ~

"First floor, Dai Llewellyn Ward, but he won't understand a bit of what you're saying. I don't know why you people bother."

Without saying anything, Severus brushed past the desk to the stairwell. He waited until the door shut behind him before he uttered the spell that would lead him to the witch... if she was there. The locket began to faintly glow warm, indicating that she was, indeed, somewhere nearby, and at that same moment he felt a jolt within his chest.

Severus followed the glow as it got warmer and brighter until he was soon up to the fifth floor tea room. Knowing that there would likely be others about, he placed his hand with the locket firmly in his grasp, in his robe. He would have only the warmth to guide him, although he hoped that he wouldn't need it once he saw her.

Concentrating on her initials, he set his mind on finding her. If nothing else, he would be able to put his mind at rest. Perhaps he'd be giving her completion as well... perhaps. He didn't have a shoe, but at least with the locket if he came across the wrong woman, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone else cutting off their heel or toes.

He quietly opened the door to the tea room and, stepping back into the shadows, surveyed the room. There were only half a dozen people in there. Four of them were women, two of which he could discard immediately because of their skin colouring and ample size, unless the woman he had danced with had used a disguise of some sort.

One of the other two women was sitting at a table with her back to him. Her hair was wound in a messy bun at the back of her head. Severus watched as she pulled a quill out of her bun and the hair suddenly hung loose, cascading down her back in a mass of curly, brown hair. For reasons unknown to him, Severus wanted to run his fingers through the fine tendrils, but quickly squashed down the very thought. It was unlikely that was the woman that he was looking for. Possible, but unlikely.

He'd only ever seen her with her hair neatly done up, but from what little he knew about hair care, even Severus knew that it would've taken hours of effort to contain that mass of hair into the neat hairstyle on the woman he'd been sharing dreams with.

There was another woman was sitting next to her. He also couldn't see her face, but her hair was neatly pulled back into a tight bun. That could possibly be her.

Both women wore the lime green robes that designated a Healer. (Really, who else would wear that colour?) He stepped a bit closer and cast a discreet spell to amplify the two women's conversation.

"I don't know why you let her do that to you. You're not a slave. Really, she treats you as if she has some sort of personal vendetta against you."

Severus shook his head slightly, almost disheartened. That wasn't her, the voice was wrong.

"It may feel like a vendetta, Heidi, but I don't believe that it truly is. Perhaps she just wants to ensure that my fame doesn't get me any free rides. I have a friend who was treated like that all through school."

Now, that was her. The witch's voice was almost like food to his starving soul. Perhaps he had been able to sense her and that was the reason for the urge to run his fingers through her hair.

"Scrubbing out cauldrons is the punishment for sticking your gum under your desk in Potions class when you're a first year at Hogwarts. It ~~is~~ot, however, a standard requirement for a Healer-in-Training who is in her seventh year of training."

"Professor Snape." Severus snapped his head to the short, stout woman who was standing before him. "Can I help you with something?" she asked next.

~ ~ ~

Evrna Sedgwick had seen him come into the tea room. Though he seemed to be an expert at slinking in the shadows, she'd happened to be looking up from her book when he'd walked in and her eyes discreetly followed him. He seemed to be rather interested in her apprentice and when he pulled a familiar looking necklace out of his pocket, she knew that he was watching her.

The entire thing made her rather ill. She'd been trying to get Miss Granger to quit the Healing Program since first taking over her apprenticeship at the beginning of September. Evrona made certain that she worked the woman to the bone, giving her tasks that she wouldn't give a house-elf. She hated her. With every ounce of emotion that she had, she hated her, and Evrona wanted nothing more than to be rid of the young woman.

Up to this point, nothing that Evrona had done had been enough to get her to quit the Healer Program. Perhaps if she attacked on a more personal point...

Without even thinking it all through, Evrona arose from her chair and walked over to the tall, thin man who was dressed all in black. She gave her best simpering smile when she greeted him and asked him if she could help him in anyway.

"No," he said simply. "I need to go speak with that woman over there."

Thinking quickly, Evrona asked, "Is that my locket you found?"

"Excuse me?" He looked her up and down. "No, I don't believe that this belongs to you."

"Oh, yes, I'm certain that it is mine. I lost it Friday evening," she said, remembering the story she'd overheard Granger tell one of the other apprentices.

Snape looked confused for a moment. "I think that I'll just go speak with her first."

She stepped in front of him again and narrowed her eyes. "Professor Snape, I believe that I will have to call a Security Wizard if you do not return my locket to me. And with your... history... I don't quite know how they will respond. I wonder how Azkaban is this time of year." The last words were spoken with an airy thoughtfulness about them. It was a well-known fact that the prison was freezing this time of year. All of the Warming Charms in the world couldn't stop the chilling air from seeping through to the cells and their occupants.

"I see. Is there some reason that you don't wish for me to speak with that young woman over there?"

Evrna lowered her voice and took a step closer to the wizard. "My husband died at the Death Eaters Last Stand, Professor. And that woman is of no use to people like you and me."

"Ah, one of those people then, is she?" he sneered and glared over in the direction of the young woman.

"Yes, Professor, I'm surprised that you don't recognise my apprentice. She's one of the Famous Four."

Snape snapped his head back to Evrna. "She is?" he asked, unable to cover the surprise in his voice. His voice smoothed as he continued, "I trust that you have been able to ensure that she gets the treatment that one such as her deserves. Nonetheless, I believe that I shall go pay her a visit."

Evrna had no choice but to move out of Professor Snape's way. However, she was now fairly certain that he would treat Granger exactly as she deserved, and with any luck he would slip her apprentice a deadly but untraceable poison.

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Hermione had spent her day doing exactly as she'd told Heidi, scrubbing out cauldrons. But not just cauldrons, she'd then gone to clean and organise the ingredients storeroom, followed by dating and cataloguing all of the brewed potions on the shelves. Perfectly dull and boring work suitable for a lab aide or a first-year intern.

Her break was almost up and it was time to head back towards the Potions Lab so she could finish her work and go home. Maybe, if she was lucky, she'd be able to do *something* more meaningful during her next shift. Thus far, this year, she'd done little more than clean and do things more suited to aides and helpers than Healers.

Heidi smiled and went to go finish her shift on the Dai Llewellyn Ward for Serious Bites while Hermione stood, picked up their paper cups and moved to toss them in the bin.

"Miss Granger. One would think that a witch would remember that wands can be used to do such things."

"It is just four steps..." she began to defend herself and then she met his dark eyes. "Severus," she all but whispered.

He flicked his wand and the rubbish in her hands flew to the bin. Snape glanced quickly behind his back and then back to Hermione. "Perhaps there is someplace more... private... where we can continue have this conversation."

"Oh, um... yes. Follow me."

Hermione's heart thudded in her chest and she was certain that he could hear it as he followed her down the stairs. Every few seconds she reminded herself to breathe, and her body was rather thankful for the reminder... and the oxygen which it supplied. Having led him to an office which she shared with three other apprentices, she opened the door and glanced inside, thankful that no one else was there.

Once she heard the door shut, Hermione took a deep breath and turned around to face the man of her dreams, so to speak.

Before she could say anything, he took three steps towards her and held out his hand to her. "I believe that this belongs to you, Miss Granger."

His voice sounded so cold.

She looked at the trinket which he dropped into her waiting hand. "I hadn't even realised that I'd lost this. Thank you. But how did you... I mean... how did you know it was me? I suppose that you could've figured it out. I just thought that if you did then you'd never want to see me because of.... Well, because of who I am," she rambled.

"I didn't know. If I had, you're right, I likely never would have come."

Hermione hadn't known how much this conversation would hurt. She'd anticipated him not being pleased when he'd learned who she was, but she'd never expected him to be so close-minded to not be willing to get to know her more. She could only simply nod in understanding to his words.

After several minutes of silence while they continued to stare and study one another, she wanted nothing more than to scream at him to just leave her alone since he obviously wanted nothing to do with her. She squeezed her hand in a fist around the necklace and felt the edges dig into her palm, jarring her enough to calm her down. This wasn't his fault, none of it was.

"I am sorry that you were dragged into any of this," she at last said.

"How much of it was real?"

"For me... all of it," Hermione answered truthfully.

He said nothing.

"And for you?"

Severus nodded his head and took another small step towards her. "All of it."

"What happens now?"

He brought his hand up and cupped her cheek. "We are no longer under a spell, but for a reason that I am not able to explain, I want to know how the fairy tale ends?"

"This is hardly a fairy tale. No evil stepmother, no tree dropping gifts, no shoe..."

"No Prince Charming," he finished for her.

She quirked her lips. "Well, you are a Prince, and I find you rather... enthralling."

Severus brushed his thumb along her cheek and down across her lips. "And you were quite wrong about the evil stepmother. I met your mentor briefly. I believe she qualifies."

Her lips opened softly at his touch, sending small shivers down her back. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"And I believe that this is a shoe," he said, pointing to the locket in her hand.

He pulled his thumb slowly down her lips, dragging her lower lip and opening her mouth a bit more. Hermione closed her eyes and gave a small sigh, enjoying the simple sensation. She felt him move closer as he moved his hand from her cheek to behind her head to weave within her hair. She could now feel his warm breath only inches away from her.

"And I strongly believe that if the shoe fits..." He never finished his sentence as his mouth covered hers. The feel of his lips on hers immediately set a fire in her belly to accompany the one flaring in her heart. Moments later, his tongue licked along her lips and then into her waiting mouth where she readily welcomed the intrusion.

Hermione had no idea how she came to be encircled within his arms, with her arms encompassing him, the locket long since forgotten and now somewhere on the floor at their feet.

It was some time later that a knock on the door caused them to pull apart, albeit reluctantly. Hermione was certain that once Severus came to his senses he would scream at her and wonder what the bloody hell he'd done.

Heidi opened the door and glanced between Hermione and Severus with a knowing smile. "Healer Sedgwick is looking for you," she told her.

"Oh, um, thanks."

Heidi gave her a small wink and shut the door.

Hermione turned to Severus. "I should get back." She was reluctant to leave him. Especially after how she'd left him Friday night. She wanted desperately to know what he was thinking. "I should be off in another hour. Would you stay? Perhaps we could go to dinner?" she asked.

He nodded. "I think that could be arranged. I have something to take care of right now anyway. Seven-fifteen at the ground floor stairwell?"

"Yes, I'll be there." Hermione left to go find Healer Sedgwick and finish her job in the Potions Lab.

Severus spied the locket on the floor. He picked it up and waved his wand over it as he muttered an incantation. He then grabbed the stapler from off of the desk and carefully transfigured it to match the necklace. Being certain to place the genuine locket in his pocket, he cast a final spell on the Transfigured jewellery and set off to find someone.

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A/N: There is only an epilogue left. Thanks for reading!

## Epilogue: So This is Love

*Chapter 8 of 8*

Sometimes life can be a fairy tale.

### Epilogue: So This is Love

Hermione smiled as she looked over at her fiancé of two days. He glared at her in return. Severus truly wasn't much of a morning person. She'd known that before she'd come over this morning, but that didn't make her any more pleased about dealing with it. She could only imagine what he'd be like to wake up to every morning... but that led to an entirely different line of thought.

She smiled.

"You are entirely too happy in the mornings," Severus grumbled.

"You haven't even asked me why I came by so early," she pointed out.

"I don't have to. You are absolutely bubbling with the desire to tell me, it is blatantly obvious what happened."

"They are sacking her."

Severus put down his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. "I told you that they would."

"Healer Sedgwick was suspended this morning for her actions. And then, when they went to lock her out of her office they found some interesting things. She is now under investigation by the Ministry for suspected Death Eater activity. Or, at the very least, for being a sympathiser. Either way, she should be on her way to Azkaban within the month."

Severus nodded. "Good. It took them long enough. Your complaint was filed over two months ago."

Well, that was true. It had taken a long time, and it had finally been statements from witnesses and an owl from Harry Potter that got the Chief of Staff at St Mungo's to pay any attention to her complaint.

When Hermione said nothing else, Severus picked up his newspaper again.

Hermione walked to the table and picked up a piece of toast, which she smeared with a thin layer of Marmite before eating. She knew quite well that the Dark Magic which they'd found in Healer Sedgwick's office had come from her stapler. (Severus had told Hermione that his Transfigurations never held for very long, but his Dark curses would hold for years.) The stapler had held an untraceable Dark spell on it. It was a highly illegal spell which was known only to Aurors and Death Eaters.

What had surprised Hermione, was that the Security Wizard at St Mungo's had also found three other items which held similar spells. She wasn't sure if those had truly belonged to her former mentor or if Severus had placed those in her office as well, and she could tell by his mood that now was not a good time to ask... if it ever was.

She sat in the chair at the table, grabbed another piece of toast, and started to stare at Severus as he continued to sip his coffee and read the newspaper. Their time together over the last three months had been surprisingly comfortable. It had been awkward at first, when they talked and realised that they'd already said the same things to each other before in their dreams. The 'getting to know you' phase was almost redundant to them and it took a few uncomfortable dates before they were able to move past that.

It had also taken time, for both of them to get over the misconceptions of what they thought that the other person was like. Severus, though snarky, was not the complete bastard that she'd always thought him to be. And she'd had to convince him that she really didn't think that she knew everything.

Severus had been right, that spark she could have sworn that she'd felt when they first touched had dissipated. It was a residual bit of the magic, and for a while she had worried at how a real relationship could be built under seemingly false pretences. She knew that her feelings were real, but she was uncertain about his. After all, Severus Snape was not a man who was prone to showing his emotions.

She would never forget the night that she confessed her concerns to him. It was Valentine's Day and Hermione had been in an irritatingly bad mood. She'd been feeling maudlin over the overly sappy and commercial holiday. When Severus had noticed her mood, he'd goaded her into an argument until she told him the true reason for her snit. Instead of defending himself, Severus had sat her on the sofa and kissed her softly. He then walked over to the bookshelf, pulled a tattered old tome off of the shelf and returned to join her.

And then he began to read to her the story of a scullery maid, her evil stepmother, and her going to a ball where she met her Prince Charming.

"Are you quite finished staring at me?"

"Perhaps. Are you finished being grumpy?"

"Perhaps." He put down his paper and stood from his chair. Severus moved and held out his hand to her. "Come," he said simply as he led her over to the sofa where he sat and pulled her down with him, placing his arm over her shoulder and drawing her close against his chest. "I am glad that things are finally resolved."

"Thanks to you."

"I never could understand how the woman who stood up for the rights of house-elves wouldn't stand up for herself in a situation of abuse of authority."

Hermione shrugged. "I wouldn't have allowed her to get away with something truly atrocious. I just figured that some mentors were like that and I only had to go through it for a year. I had no idea that she had a personal vendetta against me."

Then after a moment, she added, "But don't think that means I am going to be a submissive wife."

He snorted. "No, definitely not."

Severus held her close and slowly began to rub her arm. She may no longer feel a spark when he touched her, but the safe and secure feeling of being loved was much better. And he did love her. He may not say the words often, but it was there in the things that he did. It was the way that he touched her, the way he held her, kissed her, made love to her and... when he read to her.

As if reading her mind, Severus Summoned a book from a shelf, opened it and began to read.

Hermione relaxed as his deep, melodic voice washed over her and began to caress her very soul.

"Once upon a time..." he said as she closed her eyes and smiled.

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A/N: Thank you to everyone who read and reviewed. I am thrilled that so many people seemed to enjoy this story. It was a joy to write.

And more thanks to my beta-readers, alpha-readers (aka cheerleaders) and especially to Keladry\_Lupin who inspired the story. My singular goal was to write something that she would enjoy. :)

\*Hugs Keladry\_Lupin\*

As many people recognised, the chapter titles are all from Disney movies:

"I Still Believe"—song from *Cinderella III*

"Are We Dancing"—song from *The Happiest Millionaire*

"Once Upon a Dream"—song from *Sleeping Beauty*

"Something There"—song from *Beauty and the Beast*

"A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes"—song from *Cinderella*

"I'm Wishing"—song from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

"I Won't Say (I'm In Love)"—song from *Hercules*

"So This is Love"—song from *Cinderella*