

Becoming Whole

by Southern_Witch_69

Hermione requests to sponsor Snape after the war when the Ministry feels most Death Eaters should be given the chance to integrate into society again, depending on their crimes. He moves in with Hermione, and life as they know it forever changes. DH not recognized.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 11

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Disclaimer: I'm just having a bit of fun here and not making any money either. Bummer!

Thanks go to my beta CocoaChristy for beta reading this for me a long time ago. I decided to wait until Deathly Hallows came out to post it. Thanks also go to Amsev; she did another read through for me. Cheers, girls!

This is a response to the Potter Place Summer Prompt Challenges. Details at the end of chapter.

Hermione listened to Arthur as he relayed what the Wizengamot had voted on earlier that morning. It seemed that most of them agreed that there had been enough bloodshed during the wars with Voldemort to last a lifetime, and any remaining Death Eaters should be given a chance to integrate back into society...depending on the extent and amount of their crimes of course. Some, like Blaise Zabini, had only joined and had never taken part in any atrocities, not even fighting against anyone, simply fearing for his life if he refused to be marked. His rejoining the Wizarding world as a free man wouldn't take very long at all. However, some horrid Death Eaters, such as Rabastan Lestrage, who'd done many notably terrible things, would have to go through years of rehabilitation and classes while being closely monitored by the Ministry.

"But how can they even think about trusting any of those wankers?" Ron blurted, interrupting his father mid sentence.

"Ronald Weasley!" Molly admonished, forgetting that her son was a man of twenty years. "Watch your language."

"Yes, Mum," he said, ears turning red.

Realizing that Harry was being too quiet, Hermione looked over to find him gazing out the window, face contorted with emotions.

"All right, Harry?" she asked softly.

"After all that, they're just going to let them all walk!" he said quietly with a shake of his head. "I can't believe it!"

"I know," she agreed. "I'm not quite certain I agree with them either."

Arthur cleared his throat. "There is a request from the... er... Minister."

"Yeah? What's that?" Harry asked, obviously incensed that the man was still trying to badger him. "Wants me to take pictures with him for the *Prophet* I expect."

"Ah, well, something of the sort... yes, but hear me out," Arthur said quickly. "He wants you to come in and speak with the committee in charge of determining which Death Eaters have committed what crimes and the acceptable debts they must pay to society, duties needed, and... you get the picture."

"Tell him Harry's got better things to do than to sit around with that lot...the same lot that was too scared to lift a finger to help until the last minute or after the fact!" Ron said heatedly. "They can toss the lot in the North Sea for all I care and let them try to swim their way from Azkaban."

"It doesn't make sense. Why not just jail them for the times that correlate with their crimes?" Hermione asked logically. "Honestly! I wouldn't want someone like Antonin Dolohov living next to my flat!"

"There's so much more going on than that," Arthur said. "It's not like we'll send them off and wish them well. The more... volatile blokes won't just be allowed to walk about." He looked back at Harry. "That's where you come in. The Minister feels..." Seeing Harry's narrowed eyes, he paused and changed tactics. "We *all* feel that the public would be more accepting of this decision if you back it, Harry. That's ultimately what it boils down to."

"Fat chance on that then," he replied firmly, gazing back out the window.

"It will happen whether you want it to or not," came the soft reply. "Son, if you did this, you would have a say in what happened to whom. You know more about them than anyone: what they're capable of, if they're even possible to rehabilitate, and what their futures should hold."

Hermione watched Harry as he thought it over, and she knew that he was being swayed. In fact, it sounded like a good idea to her as well, and she wouldn't mind being part of the procedures either. "Ron and I will go with you if you'd like, Harry."

When Mr. Weasley gave her an odd look and shook his head, she was shocked. He could only mean that neither she nor Ron were welcome...only Harry. When his face reddened as he searched for the right words, she knew her instinct was correct.

"Sorry, really. It's only for Harry. Nobody else has been asked...not even me," he said sheepishly, obviously waiting for an angry reply.

"I understand," she said disappointedly.

"Bollocks!" Ron said loudly. "You and I deserve to be there with Harry if anyone else has the right to. We've more right than them, you know!"

"That's right," Harry piped up. "They come or I won't."

Suddenly, Mr. Weasley was all smiles. "That's settled then. I'll Apparate on over and explain things. If it's agreeable, shall I tell them to expect you three in the morning? Say eight o'clock?"

Harry nodded and gazed out the window again. Once Mr. and Mrs. Weasley left them alone, Hermione went to him and put a hand on his shoulder. To her surprise, Ron did the same.

"She'll be all right, mate," Ron said quietly.

"We'll find the cure, Harry. I swear I'll never stop trying," Hermione vowed.

"I never told her that I love her," Harry said bitterly. "Oh, I'm sure she knew... deep down, but it's not the same as hearing it, is it?"

"I'll go check on her now," Ron said, widening his eyes at Hermione and minutely nodding at Harry.

She simply nodded in response and waited for him to leave before she spoke again. "Look at me." When her gaze held his, she smiled and said, "Ginny told me that she'd never stopped loving you, and that when things got back to normal, she was certain you and she would work things out, as she knew you still loved her...felt it when your gaze met hers, she said."

His vibrant green eyes watered slightly. "She might die, Hermione. What then?"

Firmly shaking her head, she said, "She won't. There is a cure for this waiting to be found, and I promise that we'll find it." She lowered her voice. "If Snape hadn't thought so quickly, then we might have lost her, but thankfully..."

"He only did it so that it would look like he's been on our side all this while!" Harry interrupted heatedly. "I wish the Dementors were still at Azkaban so they could suck his soul out, the bastard."

Hermione remained quiet, not wanting to voice her true opinion about Snape just yet. She wasn't the only one who shared it either, but everyone tiptoed around Harry when talking about it, not wanting to work him up into one of his rants. He was still very bitter about what had happened even though things had been explained. She could agree with Harry on some level, but what the Ministry was trying to do could very well be the answer to what their society needed to move on.

"Sorry," Harry said suddenly. "I didn't mean to yell at you." When her eyebrow arched, he added, "I'm just not ready to talk about *him* just now." He sneered slightly. "But I will try to see that my influence gets the bastard a rough time of it."

Changing the subject, she asked, "Want we should go up to see Ginny?"

"All right."

They made their way up to her room and found Mrs. Weasley plumping Ginny's pillow while Ron and his father were off to the side whispering.

"No change?" asked Harry.

"No," Mrs. Weasley said, "but don't be shy. Come and talk to her. She might be able to hear you."

Hermione began to cry silently as she looked over at her friend's blank stare at the ceiling. Her mouth was slack, and her many freckles seemed to stand out starkly against her pale skin. She only hoped that she'd be able to keep her promise to Harry. There had to be something that could cure her, be it a charm or a potion.

An idea took root in Hermione's mind. *That's it! A potion!* She would need help to research all the possibilities, and she knew exactly who would be perfect in assisting her. Arthur Weasley didn't know it yet, but he possibly could have informed them of a way to fight the horrid hex's hold on his daughter. She simply had to think of a way to convince Harry. If he asked for Snape to be released into her custody, the Minister would do it.

Frowning, she knew that it would take a lot to convince him. Conspiratorially, she motioned for Ron to join her in the hallway. If anyone could help her convince Harry, it would be Ron.

"Harry's all broken up," he said once they'd gone up several stairs towards his room. "Blames himself." He shook his head sadly.

"I think we've all been feeling guilty, but there's something that I want to talk to you about," she said, mentally preparing herself for an outburst. "Tomorrow, I'd like to have a Death Eater put into my custody."

Ron opened his mouth and closed it again, brow furrowing as he gazed at her. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," she said, taking his hand and pulling him into his room.

"I can tell you have one in mind!" he said sharply. "Who? A bloke?"

With a small nod, she said, "Yes, but it's nothing like what you're thinking." She swatted his arm playfully. "There is one who can help me find a cure for Ginny...be it doing something a bit dark: creating a charm or making a potion."

Face paling, he said, "Something dark? Potion? You mean you want Snape?"

"That's right. Think of it. He knew how to stop it from harming her any further. If he hadn't been there, she'd have died." She lowered her voice even though they were alone. "And we both know what Dumbledore told us about him. I don't think it'd be as bad as all that."

"It makes sense," he agreed, "but I don't like the idea of him staying at your flat with you...alone. What if he tries something?"

"Think of it, Ron. There will be stipulations for this lot to stay with sponsors! You don't think their wands will be allowed to cast anything harmful? And I'm certain sponsors will have final say in what goes on."

"And if the sod wants a chance at living free again after what he's done, he won't want to mess things up, will he?" After sitting on his bed and patting the spot beside him in invitation to her, he said, "How about I ask to be his sponsor?"

"Can you see him staying with you and Harry at Grimmauld Place?" she asked incredulously. "I didn't think so. Besides, I'll need access to be working with him at all hours. I can't do that unless he's at my place."

"How about I move back here then? You can come, too," he offered.

"That wouldn't work either. Your mum's got enough to be getting on with as it is, and Harry's here often."

"Yeah, and I'm sure my parents might sponsor someone, too. Don't need Snape collaborating with anyone, I suppose."

"What about Snape?" Harry asked from the doorway.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione said, squeaking with surprise. "Er..."

"We've been talking, and Mione's got a brilliant idea. You know how clever she is, and she thinks that... and I agree, mind, that she should ask to sponsor Snape. See, the thing is..."

"Are you mad?" Harry asked incredulously, entering and closing the door behind him.

"Hear me out please," she said, rising and walking towards him.

"It's mental! And you agree with her?" he retorted, looking towards Ron.

"Shut it, you!" Hermione said forcefully. Harry clamped his mouth shut and glared at her silently, so she continued. "Snape can help me research and find a cure for Ginny, Harry. Think of it. Who knows potions like him? Who knows Dark Arts like him?" She bit her lip as he seemed to think this over. "I need his help."

"Ron and I can help you," he said, though he sounded unconvinced.

"It's not the same, and you know it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked heatedly.

"It means we used to copy her homework, mate, and we haven't always put our studying first," Ron supplied for her, standing and moving behind her in support. "And I'm just going to come out and say this Snape saved Ginny's life! Even you should appreciate that and see it for what it is." When Harry tried to speak, he raised his hand and loudly said, "The evidence is there, and you heard what Dumbledore said, so, yeah, I think he has been on our side and helped us to come out on top!"

Hermione was shocked that Ron had actually voiced what she and the others had been thinking to Harry. What surprised her even more, though, was that Harry hadn't exploded. Timidly, she added, "I think so, too, Harry, so maybe his coming to stay with me and helping Ginny is something he deserves... more than Azkaban or anything worse."

"I'm going back to Grimmauld Place," he said as he turned back towards the doorway. "If I'm not up when you get home, Ron, I'll see you in the morning. Night, Hermione."

"But, Harry..." Her words were unnecessary, as he left without a glance or another word.

"Well, didn't take it too bad, that," Ron said with a shrug.

"Do you think he'll speak up for Snape?" she asked hopefully.

"Don't know."

"It's Ginny's only hope," she said softly, looking down in defeat.

"No, I don't think that *he's* her last hope, love. I think *you* are. He'll just be there to add in some missing blanks."

Beaming brightly, Hermione said, "Want to come over to my flat and watch the telly for a bit before you go home? Doesn't look like Harry's going to be much company anyway."

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "Say, you haven't any of those Pop Tarts?"

"I do."

"Right then. Let's go."

Hermione led the way down the stairs, not stopping in to look at Ginny again, but for the first time in a few days, she had some hope that things would be better soon. She did feel some trepidation as to what would happen the next morning, but surely Harry would see the need to go along with her plan. It was for Ginny after all. And not only that, after all Snape had done, murdering Dumbledore aside, he did deserve a second chance, for the war wouldn't have been won without it...not after what he'd done for them in the end.

Southern's Notes: I really think this is a great prompt, and I can only hope that I'll do it justice! :)

Potter Place's Summer Prompt Challenges

12.Prompt - The Ministry decides there has been enough bloodshed and wants to give any repentant Death Eaters a chance to re-enter society, but first, they have to live with sponsors who keep tabs on them, making certain they keep a job, do their share for the community (kind of like a probation officer). Who gets to sponsor Snape or any other Death Eaters? What happens? Would prefer Hermione to take Snape in and have romance occur, but it can be any other pairing you'd like.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 11

The fates of Severus and others are decided. What is his reaction to the proposal that he be put in Hermione's custody?

Disclaimer: The characters in the story aren't mine. I'm borrowing them from JKR, as you all know already, and I am not making any money with them...just having a bit of fun.

Thanks go to amsev for beta reading this. Cheers. And thanks also to Felicius21 for helping out.

The man looked up anxiously, his pockmarked face contorted into a hopeful expression. "Please, I hope you consider releasing me to my family. You know me...all of you! I worked with you for years at the Ministry."

"Indeed we do know you, Rookwood, and that is why we're deciding what is to be done with you," said a blond wizard from the middle of the room.

"I didn't murder anyone! Ever!" he said heatedly, suddenly looking frightened.

Kingsley Shacklebolt cleared his throat before speaking. "Augustus, you worked with us and passed information to You-Know-Who, and those actions alone led to the demise and injury of many people."

"Aye," said a large witch with orange hair. "Me sister and her family for starters. Ye can rot in hell for all I care."

"I...Elladora, you know I would never..." He clamped his mouth shut quickly.

"Wha's this? Kneazle got your tongue, does it?"

"Likely remembered he took Veritaserum and prefers not to answer," taunted an older man from the back row.

"That will do," Kingsley said, voice deep and authoritative. "Rookwood? Do you deny any of the accusations brought up today?"

"N-no," came the soft reply, the man's head again bowed in defeat.

"Minister?" Kingsley asked, looking to Scrimgeour.

"I've nothing more to add." He quickly marked something on a parchment. "We will take all that you've said into consideration...your testimony and that of your witnesses."

"And also the testimony of those against ye" said the orange-haired witch again.

"You will refrain from interrupting me," Scrimgeour admonished before continuing. "Guards, ready him to be returned to Azkaban."

"Minister, please," Rookwood begged.

"You will be brought back once we've reached a decision."

Hermione gave Harry a sideways glance and saw that he watched Rookwood until he left the room. Before she could ask what was on his mind, Scrimgeour addressed him.

"Potter, comments on Augustus Rookwood?"

Harry stood and made his way to the chair that Rookwood had just exited so he could address them. "He says he never murdered anyone, but it wasn't for lack of trying. My friends and I fought against him here... in the Department of Mysteries, and he was throwing all sorts of hexes our way." He looked around to make sure everyone was listening. "When he finally did get caught, he tried to finger an honest man...anything so as to not go down alone." He grinned. "You all remember Ludo Bagman?"

There was a mass nodding of heads and some murmurs of assent. Hermione's heart swelled with pride as she listened to her friend speak, and she knew that he'd one day be the person that everyone would turn to when they wanted something answered. It occurred to her suddenly that it was already happening. That was exactly why he'd been called in to these special meetings.

Giving Ron a sideways glance, she saw that he, too, was impressed with the way Harry was handling himself and the new confidence he exuded. Nobody had asked Ron or Hermione much, but when Harry had asked for their statements to confirm something, both quickly added their say and returned to their seats to watch their friend in action. So far, all of Harry's suggestions had been met with agreement...as far as Hermione could tell anyway. But she worried about what would happen next.

Severus Snape was next in line to be called. Harry hadn't mentioned to either of them if he'd considered her request from the day before. Part of her was sure that he would vouch for Snape because he was the only man who might know how to help Ginny, but another part of her was afraid that Harry's mind was so twisted with revenge that he'd try to do everything possible to see Snape rot in Azkaban for the rest of his days.

As if reading her thoughts, Ron reached over and squeezed her hand. "All right?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Just a bit nervous."

With a nod, Ron released her hand and sat back, watching as Harry made his way back to them. "All right, Harry?"

Harry either didn't hear or chose not to reply. He sat down and eagerly watched the door that Snape would be entering. If worse came to worse, she would stand up and speak for Snape herself, and she knew without a doubt that Ron would back her...it was his sister's life at stake after all.

"Who's next?" Scrimgeour asked, shaking his thick mane back from his face while lifting a parchment. "Ah, yes, Severus Snape." His expression became a sneer, and many people began whispering excitedly to each other. "Bring out the traitor."

Kingsley motioned for the guards to open the door and bring their prisoner in. He stood and said, "Severus Snape claims no wrongdoing...other than working for the organization known as the Order of the Phoenix, which was organized by Albus Dumbledore to fight against the late Lord Voldemort."

"Aye, working under Dumbledore's orders to kill him as well, I suppose," said Scrimgeour with a sneer.

"That is his claim," said Kingsley with a nod.

This statement was met with snickers from most in the room. Hermione was certain that things didn't bode well for Snape. Her gaze lingered on him for a long moment, and she noted that even in such a state of dishevelment, he was able to keep his indifferent demeanor and didn't respond to the unkind words of the guards or the comments from those present in the room. Instead, he sat down, turned his head, and looked straight at Harry until Scrimgeour spoke again.

"Very well, Snape. We're here today to hear testimony for and against you and to ultimately decide how severe your punishment will be and how to integrate you back into society."

"I've said all that I am going to say on the matter when we last spoke," he said, voice rough. "I believe you can easily pull up your records if you've the need to refresh your memory."

"This attitude, Mister Snape," said an older woman, who sat at Scrimgeour's right, "is not helping you. Speak while you've the chance."

"My testimony has already been given. I have requested to have my charges dismissed already." His eyes narrowed. "I will not stoop to begging, which I know is what you're looking for."

With a snort, Scrimgeour said, "If that's how you want it. You've not listed any witnesses that I see here."

Both Hermione and Ron turned to look at Harry, who was watching Snape intently. She wondered if he'd even been paying attention to the exchange, or if he had heard and simply refused to speak for Snape...even knowing what Dumbledore's portrait confided and even after what he'd done to help them!

"So you'll be sent back to Azkaban while we..."

"Hold," said a deep, smooth voice.

"Yes, Kingsley?"

"I will speak for him."

"You?" the Minister asked incredulously.

"Yes, I," came the smooth reply. He stood and went to the center of the room, all eyes wide and following his confident movement.

"What have you to say on this?"

"I've worked with Severus for many years in the fight against Voldemort. Dumbledore vouched for him all the years of his life, and even now, his portrait still vouches for him."

"Yes, but he was getting on in age...." someone pointed out.

"And a bit dotty."

"I don't believe Albus Dumbledore's mental state is being questioned here," Kingsley said, adding, "and we all know that he was right about many things, especially this."

"How can you say that?" Scrimgeour asked in confusion. "Snape killed Dumbledore and now has the gall the claim it was asked of him."

"It was," said Harry, finally rising to have his say.

"Potter?"

All eyes were on Harry now, and Hermione smiled encouragingly when he looked at her and Ron. She nodded minutely once the room quieted.

"It's true," he said, making his way to where Kingsley stood at Snape's side, gazing down into Snape's eyes, loathing evident between them. "Professor Dumbledore was dying and would have died a year before if Professor Snape hadn't *stoppered* death for a while."

"What's this you say?"

"Remember his withered hand?" When there was a murmur of assent, he continued, saying, "Well, that poison would have quickly spread throughout his body if Snape hadn't stopped it."

"That's all well and good, but..."

"It gave the headmaster time to put his affairs in order. When he found out there was a plot afoot to take his life, he requested that Professor Snape do it, which happened just as I reported it earlier. This enabled us to keep our spy, though we didn't know it right away." He frowned. "I don't like the man, that's no secret, but there is a way he can pay for the things that he's done, of which the good outweigh the bad...surprisingly."

Kingsley nodded. "It's true. All of it."

"What do you suggest, Mr. Potter?" an old wizard asked.

"Professor Snape has extensive knowledge of Potions and Dark Arts. Some people, such as Ginny Weasley, have been affected by curses and potions that even St. Mungo's can't cure. I think that's where Snape's penance should be paid."

"You think he should work at St. Mungo's?"

He shook his head. "No, I think he should be released into the custody of Hermione Granger, where he will work under her to find a cure that may save some or all of these people." Gazing back down at Snape, whose lip was curled in distaste, Harry added, "It's the least you can do."

"We shall take this into consideration and read through his previous testimony again before making a decision," said the Minister.

Harry started to walk away but stopped. "I'd just like it noted that this is my request, and it's what I would like to see done...if nothing else. It's very important to me."

"Noted. Thank you."

Hermione wiped her wet eyes and smiled at Harry again, feeling her chest swell with pride. He'd done the right thing after all...hadn't truly wanted to, but had seen the sense in it.

"Good job, mate," Ron said quietly.

At that moment, Hermione looked over to where Snape was sitting and saw that he was gazing at her almost angrily. *You'd think the git would be happy that someone stood up for him...Harry even!* Was being put into her custody truly such a bad thing? One would think that he thought Azkaban was the better option.

Narrowing her eyes and lifting her chin, she glared right back...better to show him now that if the Wizengamot did decide to honor Harry's wishes, he'd not be intimidating her. She could deal with him fairly and firmly if she had to. There was just too much at stake. Only when the guards moved in front of him to guide him to the exit did their eye contact break. She shivered slightly, suddenly wondering if she'd been mad to suggest such a thing.

"All right?" Ron asked, looking at her worriedly. "Have you changed your mind? Not too late to ask for him to be put with me."

"No, it's fine."

"Well, I hope it is," Harry interrupted, "because everything depends on it."

The Minister spoke again. "Next... Travers, is it?"

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Hermione watched Ron pace the floor a few times before finally asking what he was so obviously bursting to say. "Something wrong?"

He stopped to face her, eyes alight with anger. "For a minute there, I thought Harry wasn't going to say anything for Snape."

"Same," she said softly. She'd truly doubted Harry for a moment. She wondered if Kingsley hadn't bravely stood up for Snape if Harry would have said anything at all. "I mean, I'm sure he would have," she added quickly.

"You'd think he'd want to do anything possible to help Ginny."

"I'm sure he does, Ron," she said, rising and moving to him. "You know the history he has with Snape."

"Yeah, and I know the history he has with Ginny, too."

"The last thing we need right now is you two getting in a row about this. There's a time and a place for it, and..."

"Oh, there will be. I'll see to it, and I'm also going to let my sister know how *important* she was to him."

"That's not fair, Ronald!" She crossed her arms in front of her. "We don't know what's going through his mind, and we can't be sure that he wasn't just making Snape wait it out. Maybe he wanted to talk to the Wizengamot after Snape was taken from the room to make him think nobody would stand up for him."

"Maybe," Ron said with a nod. "I hope because if he's... Ah, forget it for now."

Beaming brightly, Hermione hugged him. "Thank you, Ron. I understand what you're feeling, but I am so proud of you for being so... mature about things."

"Surprising, that, isn't it?"

"Ar-are you doing this for me?" she asked suddenly, thinking back to the last conversation they'd had about possibly resuming a relationship together. The way he flew off the handle at things was one of the main reasons she and he had decided to take things much slower.

"I'll admit that you set me to rights when you ended things that night," he began with a wry smile, "but the more I thought about it, the more I knew you were right. So, you could say this is because of you, but it's mostly for me. I need to learn to be more responsible now that I'm a man." His chest puffed out slightly. "No matter what happens with us down the line, I'll be a better person because of you."

"Oh, Ronald," she whispered softly, moving closer and intending to kiss him, but the opening of a door drew them apart.

"It's done," Harry said with a small smile. "Snape's all yours, Hermione."

"Well, that's good then! Although, I don't know how happy he's going to be about it."

"Doesn't matter. It's going to keep him out of Azkaban," Harry replied with a shrug. "And if he truly is who he says he is..."

"You mean on our side," Ron interrupted.

"Yeah. If he's truly been on our side all along, then he'll do what he can to help Ginny and the others."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand affectionately. "I'm so proud of you for making certain to add those other people into the deal." She bit her lip and looked at Ron. "I'll admit that I'd only been thinking of Ginny when I suggested it, but that was a brilliant idea, Harry."

"Right. Good call, mate," Ron agreed.

"Well, I'd talked to Kingsley about..."

"Hang on. You knew that Kingsley would stand up for Snape?"

"Yes," Harry said, adding, "he and I decided we'd speak for Snape if it seemed we had to. I talked to him this morning when you and Hermione had gone to get our coffee. Sorry I didn't mention it, but when you came back, we had to hurry in."

Ron's face reddened, but Hermione could see the tension leave his body and the relief light his eyes. "'S all right. Never had a doubt," he said quietly.

"Well, of course not. After I thought about what Hermione said, I knew she was right." He looked to Hermione. "Thanks. Don't know what I'd do without you two sometimes."

"Not a problem," she said warmly, happy that an argument wouldn't be developing and feeling slightly guilty about doubting her friend. "So, what are the particulars?"

"Oh, well, Snape gets released to your custody. They're putting a charm on his wand now so that it can't be used to do certain things. It's for your safety...as well as anyone else. Just in case."

"I can understand that. I just hope he will."

"Especially if the bloke's innocent," Ron piped up.

"He can't leave the house without Hermione unless it's during the day, and even then, he won't be allowed to Portkey or Apparate anyplace farther than a certain distance without her." He smirked. "That's so he doesn't slip off."

"And how long is he to stay with me?"

"Until we deem him able to leave."

"We?"

"The three of us," Harry said firmly. "I know how soft you are, and I don't want you saying he's all right on his own until he's done what we want him to do...or has at least tried."

"You don't trust me, you mean!"

"She wouldn't do that, Harry," Ron said, trying to defend her.

"This is the girl who tries to free house-elves, Ron. We can't be sure, and besides," Harry said, gazing at them both unabashedly, "the Wizengamot feels this is a good idea. They want me to be involved in the progress of most of them. They think it'll sit better with the public that way."

Hermione frowned, still displeased with what he'd said. She wouldn't have done that! Would she? Remembering Snape's glare earlier, she decided that she would keep her thoughts to herself for now, though she didn't appreciate the lack of faith he had in her.

"Well, lucky for them you're so eager to help now," Ron said, sounding a bit bitter.

"Don't you see? *We*, us three, get to have a say in things. We know these sods better than they do."

"We? You said they wanted 'you.'"

Harry softly said, "I thought you knew that I don't work without you and Hermione. It's what I told them." He looked between the two of them. "Seems like you lot have something you want to say to me."

"No, really..."

"It's not like that."

"What's it like then? I can tell by the way you're looking at me and the things you're saying. I'm not out to... take all the credit or leave you behind. We're a team. Thought you'd know that by now after all we've been through."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said honestly, feeling slightly guilty. "It's just that so much has been happening, and if misunderstanding your intentions is the worst of it, I'd appreciate it if you'd cut us a little slack. It's not like you've not done the same with us."

"Fair enough. Ron?"

"Same. I'll talk to you before jumping to conclusions, but you might want to explain yourself better." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Earlier today, I didn't think you'd speak for Snape. I did believe you were letting your past get in the way of things that might help Ginny." At Harry's expression, he quickly said, "It didn't seem like you were going to say anything until Kingsley got up. You said yourself you'd meant to tell us. What were we to think?"

"All right. Good point." He held out his hands, one to Ron and one to Hermione. "We need to try to communicate better because no matter what happens, you're my family and the ones I'm closest to. I don't want to ruin that with misunderstandings."

"Agreed," Hermione and Ron said in unison, taking his hands.

After a moment passed, Hermione asked, "So... when does Snape come home with me?"

"Today. After his wand is processed. I told them we'd need to go to your flat first and get it ready. That all right?"

"Yes, definitely. I hadn't thought of that."

"Say, who are you taking in, Harry? Where are the others going?"

"I've got Pansy Parkinson," Harry said in annoyance, face turning red.

"Why'd they give you that slug-faced cow?" Ron asked, indignant for his friend.

"Because they thought it would do her good to be in a new environment, and since you and I live together, they thought it would be best if ~~we~~ both sponsored two who aren't likely to make any plans to escape or overpower us." His eyes narrowed. "You've got Daphne Greengrass!"

"What?" Hermione and Ron both said.

"Yeah, we've landed with those two, and they weren't even full Death Eaters, mind." Voice rising, he added, "After all we've done, it's like they still think we can't handle anyone more dangerous."

"That's not it," said the deep voice of Kingsley from behind them.

"What is it then?" Harry asked irately, spinning around.

"Harry, after all you've done, you deserve to be able to relax a little. The both of you." He pointed between Ron and Harry. "And you two will have your hands full with watching out for Snape and Hermione here."

"Not that I need help," Hermione put in.

"If the two of you are going to do this, finding these cures, you'll need some help, Hermione. It's no slight on what you can or can't do. Harry and Ron...and their wards...can all help with things. If you think of it, wouldn't you trust one of those girls before you would someone else who's actually been a Death Eater and taken part in atrocities?"

What he was saying made sense. She looked over at her two friends and saw that they understood as well. "Fair enough, but if they help, it's how I say. I like things done a certain way, and they aren't all that known for being neat or following proper procedure."

"That's between the three of you," Kingsley said with a smile. "However, I am sure that Severus does things his own way. You might want to speak with him about how he wants to work. He *is* the expert in this."

"Of course," she replied, feeling a bit silly for not thinking of that herself. How would she and Snape agree to work? Could Harry and Ron even help out without rows breaking out every other minute? That was something she'd have to take up with her charge, but like it or not, he would have to accept that she was the one who had the final say in things. "I'll have a discussion with him about this as soon as he gets settled in."

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**Southern's Notes:** And here is the second installment! More up soon. Teehee. We'll see how Snape and the others are taking things.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 11*

Hermione and the boys try to deal with their new guests.

**Disclaimer:** I'm borrowing some of JKR's characters for a bit of fun again...no money being made and all that.

*Thanks go to my friend, amsev, who always has time to beta for me when I ask. What a gem! And thanks also to Felicius21 for helping out.*

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Hermione nervously gazed at her new houseguest and waited for him to say something. She'd just welcomed him to her home after Kingsley had left, but he was simply staring at his surroundings in obvious distaste. She was suddenly glad that she'd insisted on being alone when he was to be delivered, though Harry and Ron had requested they be there. Things would have been much worse had she relented.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, she said, "It's not very large, but I think we'll get on comfortably."

Still, he said nothing, though his gaze had made its way back to her and lingered there...lips still slightly curled.

"Why don't you say anything?" she finally asked in exasperation.

"What will you have me say?"

"Well, something... anything."

"Shall I tell you how positively pleased I am that you and Boy Wonder brewed up this little scheme to keep me from my well-deserved freedom?" His voice was cold and seeped with sarcasm. "Everyone in that room had already heard my testimony and had already seen the evidence, yet here I am...in the custody of one Hermione Granger." His scowl deepened as he waved his hands around, indicating the room they were standing in. "Instead of peace and freedom, I have yet another master, more tasks set before me. Only this time, it's much worse."

"You *are* free. You can't tell me..."

"Free? I cannot leave without you as my chaperone! My wand has restrictions that will keep me from fully utilizing my magic!" His voice was rising now, and his eyes had taken on a glassy glaze. "I am now nothing more than a servant to a little know-it-all who thinks she is saving me from a terrible fate!"

"Don't speak to me that way in my own home. I certainly don't want you here for your pleasant company," she returned evenly, even though her stomach was clenching nervously.

"I would have preferred Azkaban than this fate!"

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it quickly, unable to think of a clever come back. What was so bad about being in her home? Deep down, she did feel that he should be a little grateful, and she didn't appreciate the insult.

"Your room," she began calmly, "is through that door on the far right next to the sliding glass doors, which overlook the street below." When he said nothing, she went on. "I'm sorry, but you will have to share the loo with me. It's the door over here...just there near the one you entered." That," she pointed to the door to the left of his, "is my room."

"I will be turning in," he said brusquely.

"All right. There is a nice-sized closet and a chest of drawers. Make yourself at home," she finished lamely.

"Indeed," he said bitterly. "I've no choice, do I?"

"Please don't be that way."

Instead of replying, he stooped down to pick up the small sack that held his personal items and left her standing in the room alone in frustration. She hadn't even showed him the kitchen or the attic, which she'd renovated and expanded for their workspace.

"That went well," she said aloud and made her way to the kitchen to put on some water for tea. As the minutes passed, she replayed their conversation in her mind and found herself indignant over his attitude and harsh words. Sure, she'd thought he'd prefer some sort of freedom instead of Azkaban or worse, but what was worse was that he was likening her to some sort of... Voldemort!

His duties, as he put it, were for a good cause. They could save lives. If that hadn't been important to him, he wouldn't have kept Ginny from dying when he had. Nor would he have tried to save the others. She'd seen him and his frantic wandwork as he'd tried. It was a bruised ego plain and simple, and she couldn't really expect much more, could she? This was Snape she was talking about. Never mind that he was getting a new chance on life. If things weren't happening his way, he wouldn't be satisfied, would he?

In a way, she supposed she could understand his bitterness. He had been spending most of his life helping Dumbledore and looking over Harry. If he didn't deserve peace, then who...aside from Harry of course...did?



"Miss Granger?"

She startled and spun around to find him standing just in the doorway of her kitchen. "Yes?"

"I'll have a cup of tea."

"Oh...er...all right then." She quickly reached up to get a second cup before pouring the steaming liquid into them. "It's just finished steeping."

He brought the cup to his mouth and tasted. "Acceptable."

She said nothing, choosing to sit down and glance at her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, curious to see which families had sponsored people and which Death Eaters had been deemed too dangerous to integrate back into society.

"I would like you to answer some questions."

Glancing up, she nodded and waited for him to speak, not wanting to appear to eager to converse with him. Hermione was quite happy that he hadn't stayed pouting in his room for very long.

"Whose idea was it for me to stay here?"

"Mine."

"Why?" he asked incredulously.

She set down her cup and said, "Because Ginny and people like her could use the help. I couldn't think of anyone more talented in Potions and Dark Arts combined who could help me."

Snape seemed somewhat mollified. "So, this was not Potter's idea?"

"No, of course not! Harry doesn't want you here!"

At this, he seemed to sit up straighter. "Indeed?"

"I'm being honest. We need your help, Professor. It's not some conspiracy to detain you, and I have no choice but to agree with the stipulations set forth by the Wizengamot if I'm going to have you."

"Why here? Alone? Not afraid of rooming with a murderer then, Miss Granger?"

"I...no. I know that you only had to do what was..."

"You don't know anything!" he bit out suddenly, pounding his fist on the table and causing their cups to rattle slightly.

Was he looking for a way to talk to her? To someone? "Well, if you'd like to talk, I'm a good listener."

"I think not," he said quickly, rising from the chair. "I shall retire for the evening. I trust you can show me where we'll be working tomorrow."

She smiled brightly. "Yes, I can."

He glared at her. "Don't smile as if you've won something here. I only want to start as quickly as possible so that I might be able to leave and get on with my existence away from the lot of you."

Stung, Hermione looked away as he disappeared from the room. If that was the way he wanted it, then that would be the way he'd have it. She didn't need him for company...only for his cunning and intelligence. The quicker they could find cures, the better.

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"And then what happened?" Ron asked thickly, careful to not spill any of the potatoes he'd just shoveled into his mouth.

"Well, after we finished the breakfast, which he deemed passable, I showed him the attic."

"Which you've made loads of renovations to."

"Exactly!" She sat back and crossed her arms in annoyance, hair flipping from her shoulders as she did so. "He looked around with that damn lip of his curled up and started pointing out all that would need to be fixed and added and taken out!"

"Right picky git, eh?"

"Probably a mistake having him there," Harry said sourly as he joined them at the table.

"What's got your wand in a knot?" she asked. "Still on about Snape?"

"No," he said, obviously irritated. "We're landed with these two lazy lumps!"

Hermione straightened up with interest. "Oh?"

Swallowing before he answered, Ron said, "Right moody, them and been in bed since they got here last night."

"Have you checked? They might have given you the slip!"

Harry snorted. "We wouldn't be so lucky." Running his fingers through his hair, he sighed loudly. "I just wish I'd been assigned someone... more... you know."

"Dangerous?" Hermione prompted.

"No," said Harry, eyes shifting away guiltily.

"What he means to say is that we'd rather be looking after blokes."

Crossing her arms once again and arching both eyebrows, Hermione asked, "And just what is wrong with looking after women?"

Leaning forward conspiratorially, Ron quietly said, "Well, look how awkward it is with Snape for you. Imagine me walking into the loo this morning and seeing girly things...push 'em ups or whatever you call them...in there! That'd be like you seeing Snape's box of condoms!"

"Oh..."

Harry snickered at this. "What's he going to be doing with those? Who'd have him?"

"Harry!" Hermione chided and added, "Ron!" when he joined in loudly.

"You'll just have to set them straight on the rules, that's all," she said confidently.

"Sure," said Ron sarcastically. "Just the way you set Snape right, eh?"

"Well, not yet I haven't, but I thought he should settle in first."

"Uh-huh."

"It's true," she said crossly.

"Yeah, that'll go over well," Ron said with a snort. Changing the pitch of his voice, he mimicked Hermione, saying, "Now, Professor, remember to put the lid down after you use the toilet, or I'll put you to bed with no dinner!" He quickly ducked the cup Hermione tossed at him. "Watch it!"

"I suppose I should leave." Rising, she nodded towards the ceiling. "You two had better sort them out. I expect I'll be needing some help with things soon enough, but if I don't trust you lot to do things right, then I won't allow it."

In a serious voice, Harry said, "We will make sure to do all we can. Anything to help Ginny...even putting up with Snape."

"Harry, when are you going to accept that he's done all of this for us?"

His eyes fell away from hers as he sat back in his chair. "I don't know."

That was better than an outright proclamation of eternal loathing. "Well, that's a start then."

Before she got to the door, she heard a scraping of a chair on the wooden floor and turned to see Ron approaching her.

"Er... I'll walk you out."

"All right."

Once they were out of the room and near the doorway, he said, "Are you sure you're all right? Want I should come over later?"

"You've your hands full here it seems. Maybe in a few days?"

"Fair enough." He leaned towards her as if to kiss her and then quickly moved back. "Sorry. Habit."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "'S all right, Ronald."

"Floo me if you need us. I'll come right over."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

Hermione felt quite warm and light when she left Grimmauld Place. It seemed that Ron was truly trying to approach things differently with her, and she appreciated it greatly. Perhaps things might turn out all right for them at some point in the future after all. First, however, they would see to their duties and then whatever happened after would be considered fate.

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"And what, may I ask, is this supposed to be?" Snape asked, looking down at the dish in front of him.

"Shepherd's Pie. Why?" Hermione asked worriedly, looking over her own plate to see if it had changed into something else. "What do you mean?" she asked, seeing nothing amiss.

"This meat smells rank! Trying to poison me?"

"It does not. I just bought it today."

"It's certainly not minced meat. What did you substitute for it?"

"Nothing! I seasoned it well. Perhaps you don't like some that I've used?"

"Hmph."

"Oh, you know, I used two different cheeses. I'll bet you..."

"Silence is grand."

"Fair enough then," she said through gritted teeth. He was truly getting on her nerves and seemed to be taking pleasure in pointing out all the things he disliked about her, her home, and even her cooking.

He used his fork to lift a bite to his mouth, holding it as if it were dirty. Parting his lips, his tongue met the food as he pushed it into his mouth and then chewed multiple times. When his nostrils flared, Hermione braced herself for something rude.

"I don't know why I thought you might be able to cook a meal. You never were top rate in Potions."

"That's it!" she said angrily, jumping up from her chair. She reached over, snatched his plate from the table, and then tossed it into the dustbin. "If it's such rubbish, don't eat it!" Losing her appetite, she did the same to her plate of food as well. "That's the last time I try to do anything nice for you. I don't know why you have to be so hateful. I cooked, I cleaned, I fixed your food and drink, and I've... I've really tried to make you feel welcome."

"Spare me your dramatics, my dear."

"Oh, piss off! And I won't be keeping Crookshanks locked up in my room anymore either. It's his house more than it's ever going to be yours! At least he doesn't treat me like shite! You can just stay locked in your own room if you don't like it." With that, she stormed from the room to go to hers, slamming the door loudly before throwing herself onto her bed in exasperation. Ron and Harry had been right. He was a bit too much to handle, wasn't he? How would she ever deal with this?

**Southern's Notes:** Some houseguests, eh? Yikes. At least she's not going to put up with his shite anymore. Perhaps he'll keep his mouth shut now, eh? LOL

**amsev's Notes:** Whoa, quite the not-so-charming arse! Go, Hermione!

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 11*

Hermione realizes that she's made a terrible error and hopes to change things.

**Disclaimer:** I'm using some of JKR's characters for a spot of fun. I'll send them back later.

*Thanks go to amsev for beta reading this for me.*

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Hermione woke early the next morning, intent on going about her business and ignoring Snape for as long as she could. She wasn't going to lose any more sleep over him or his childish antics! Crookshanks mewed lightly and rubbed against her legs when she placed them over the side of her bed.

"Hungry, boy?" He mewed again and looked towards her door. "Come on then."

Tail up, he followed her out into the next room where she stopped suddenly. Snape was already up and in her kitchen...if the clanking of dishes was anything to go by. When Crooks meowed, she shook away her surprise, steeled herself, and moved forward. Trying not to think of her disheveled hair or her rumpled nightshirt, she grabbed the box of cat food and shook out a portion into his bowl.

"Eat up."

When she turned around, Snape handed her a steaming cup of coffee.

"What's this?" she asked in surprise.

"A peace offering."

She gazed at him steadily, expecting a catch, but when he said nothing further, she took the cup and sat down at the table. "I should toss this back at you." After taking a sip, she added, "Or tell you how absolutely vile it tastes."

"You could indeed," he said smoothly with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders.

"Are you sorry?"

"For?"

"For being a complete git last night," she retorted, putting her cup down. "We won't get on if that keeps up. I'm just trying to coexist and am not asking for much."

Snape took another drink from his cup and then set it aside. "Tell me about Ginevra Weasley. What are her symptoms?"

"Oh... er... she's not regained consciousness at all. In fact, she just lies there...sometimes gazing at the ceiling, sometimes with her eyes closed."

"So, she's not responding to anything at all then?"

"No."

"How's her skin?"

"It's very pale."

"No, that's not what I mean. Is it dry?"

"Actually, it's not. She still feels normal." She frowned. "But, you know, Mrs. Weasley is always in there with her...likely freshening her up or hydrating her."

"And the coloration where she was hit with the hex? Did it spread much longer as it was doing before I put a stopper on the spell?"

"About an inch more, but it's no wider. Same reddish color." She leaned forward. "Is that a good thing?"

"It's better than what it could be." He stood and went to the cabinet, which she noticed had been rearranged and wiped down, and picked up a stack of parchments. "Here," he said, shoving them to her. "Read over these and meet me upstairs." His lip curled slightly. "And do make yourself presentable."

Hermione watched him depart through narrowed eyes while reaching for her cup again. If she felt like lowering herself to his level, she might just stay in her nightshirt and not bother to tame her hair. However, once she noticed that the dishes she'd used to cook with the night before had been washed and neatly stacked, she couldn't help feeling hopeful that he felt guilty for his actions the night before.

After finishing her coffee, she began perusing the parchments he'd left with her. "Oh... bloody hell," she muttered after she saw the date penned on the first page. A flip through the remaining stack showed that he'd been jotting down information and theories for a couple of weeks. Feeling completely guilty, she hurried to dress so that she could confront him.

Minutes later, she entered their workroom, parchments in hand. She checked the impulse to run a hand through her now tidy and pulled back hair. "Professor?"

Snape turned around, holding a phial containing a blue liquid in one hand. "Have you read them?"

"You started doing this right after they took you into custody," she said boldly, not wanting to put off the conversation.

"And?"

"You'd intended to help Ginny all along."

He turned away from her. "If you have indeed read through them, then you know it will only take a week for our brew to cure enough. After that, we can administer this to her." As she approached his side, his gaze again fell on her. "Lucky for her I was familiar with what happened to her...mostly."

"I know why you're so angry," Hermione said softly, resisting the urge to place a hand on his arm.

"You know *nothing*," he said brusquely.

"This whole time you'd planned on helping her, and here we are making it seem as if you are forced into it."

"There are some ingredients we'll need to procure. I've some of these in my stores at my home, but you will, of course, have to accompany me there, as I'm restricted from moving about freely." The bitterness in his voice couldn't be missed.

"We should have asked for you to be free," she said sadly, ignoring what he said. "It never really crossed my mind. I just thought that this would be best, that..."

"That you were saving me?" The glint in his eye wasn't friendly. "I've done everything I was supposed to do, and it still wasn't enough!" His voice lowered to a deadly whisper. "It appears that I have once again been put on the mercy of others. A Potter no less!" At these words, he lost his cool composure and kicked the table, knocking a few things to the floor in the process and causing Hermione to move back, startled.

"I'm sorry. Really. I feel horrible about this."

"Forgive me if I tell you that I don't give a damn how you feel right now." He nodded towards the parchments. "Let's get to work. I want to get this over with as soon as I can so that I might be deemed 'reformed' and be able to move on with my life in peace."

She'd find a way to make this up to him. Somehow. "Wh-when would you like to go to your home?"

"We'll need to go today. Now."

"That's not a problem. I don't have any plans."

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"Oh, this isn't what I expected," Hermione said softly, gazing around the nearly deserted neighborhood of dilapidated homes.

"Disappointed, are you? Thought you'd see a nice manor?"

"That's not what I meant!" she said heatedly.

"I'm certain it was."

She hurried to follow him down the cobbled street, nearly running into him as he stopped suddenly. "What's wrong?"

"I... nothing."

Hermione looked to where his gaze had drifted and saw a weedy park with a rusted swing set beyond a sparse copse of trees. Instinctively, she knew it was more than 'nothing.' Why would he have looked there? Did he have unsettling memories from his childhood there? She frowned. *What a sad place to play for a child.* She supposed, though, that back when Snape had been growing up, it was better cared for. There didn't seem to be any children running about, and it was likely rarely used...if ever.

Without a word, they then continued down the street to the very last house. He made quick work of unwarding his home and ushered her inside quickly, as if he feared someone might see them about. Once they entered and had the door locked behind them, however, his demeanor changed. For an instant, she thought he seemed a little embarrassed as she took in the drab room and furnishings, but that quickly passed, as his more acidic side came out.

"Do not touch my things. Stay in the sitting room." One eyebrow arched. "I mean it."

"I could help you if you'd like."

"I don't need your help."

"Really. It's no problem at all." She truly wanted to assist him in hopes she could prove to him that she wanted to try to be friendly.

"Let me rephrase that for you then. I don't *want* your help." His glare cut into her momentarily before he turned on his heel and flicked his wand at a bookshelf. It moved aside to reveal a rickety stairwell, which he quickly ascended.

"There goes that idea," she muttered darkly. How could she ever make things up to him if he fought her every step of the way? The state of the room looked worse than she'd first thought after she'd truly had a good look at it. Even though he obviously hadn't been about lately, it seemed like the house had been abandoned for many years. The furniture was very old and in a terrible state of disrepair. Dust lined the floors and the shelves. Peeling paint spotted the sections of the walls not covered by bookshelves. Even the curtains were tatty.

It was quite possible that he had been a little embarrassed by her seeing his home. She'd never been unfortunate enough to live in such a place, her parents always having money, but she did have a friend who never allowed her to enter her house because she claimed it was too ragged. She'd tried to explain that she didn't care about what her house looked like...only caring for her friendship. Unfortunately, once Hermione had started going to Hogwarts, they began drifting apart.

Unable to help herself, she strode over to the still-exposed doorway and gazed up in the direction Snape taken. Would he truly be angry if she followed him? To the left was a small hallway that led to what looked like a kitchen. As she took a timid step in that direction, a loud crash from above startled her. Pulling her wand, she quickly made her way up the stairs without a second thought.

"Professor? Are you all right?" she called as she entered the first opened doorway. What she saw made her lower her wand.

He was standing with his hands against the walls and his head bowed in defeat. At his feet, there lay many shards of glass from a broken picture frame. The picture was of a lovely young woman with long, red hair: Harry's mum.

"Oh..."

"Get. Out."

"I heard something and thought..." When he looked at her, she took a step back, shocked at the animosity in his eyes. "I really didn't mean to intrude."

"Will you not give me a moment's peace?" he hissed.

Without saying another word, she hurried down to the sitting room and sat on the threadbare sofa, thinking over what she'd just witnessed. She'd never seen Snape in that condition before. She'd seen him at his worse: livid and dangerously angry. But this was something completely different. Her stomach clenched, and she felt even guiltier than she had before.

He did deserve peace, didn't he? There was someone who could give it to him, and she would go see him as soon as she and Snape returned to her flat.

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Harry frowned as he took in everything his tearful friend had said. He wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't do that and still wrap his mind around all that she'd told him. Thankfully, Ron was there as well and able to pat her awkwardly on the back.

His thoughts jumbled: Ginny could be well in just over a week. Snape had already been working on something for her and hadn't needed to be forced into doing it. Dumbledore had requested that Snape be the one to kill him, knowing he was already dying. His friends trusted him. Kingsley and the others believed Snape's story and the one told by Dumbledore's portrait. Snape had loved Lily.

"M-maybe I've been wrong about some of this," he said finally, feeling a little guilty about some of the things he'd said and done and knowing he'd simply reinforced Snape's belief that he was just like his father, James. However, Snape hadn't been exactly kind to him either, never giving him a chance to prove that he was his own person...not a clone of his father.

Hermione smiled. "I feel so guilty. I mean, no wonder he's being an arse about this. I think that I would, too. All he's done, and here we are still not appreciating it."

"Just kind of hard when he killed the only man who..." Harry sighed, stood, and went to sit at Hermione's free side, putting a hand on her back. "I think I know how I can fix this."

"How?" Ron asked when Hermione busied herself with blowing her nose.

"Give him what he wants."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said gratefully, absently handing Ron her soiled handkerchief. "I just felt so horrible for him. I think this is for the best."

"Er, thanks," Ron said, making a face and tossing the linen to the floor.

It was then that Harry realized they weren't alone.

"Oh... hello," Hermione said softly.

"Granger," Parkinson said, eyeing the three uneasily. "I was just coming to say that Daphne doesn't want to cook." She crossed her arms. "And I'm not either! I did my turn yesterday."

"I, uh, think I'll just be going," Hermione said, rising. She quickly gave both Ron and Harry a hug before hurrying out.

"What's she doing here?" Pansy asked suspiciously, gazing at Ron.

"That's none of your business, Parkinson."

"Where's Daphne?" Harry asked, wanting to get away from the pair, who seemed to get nothing done but arguing.

"She's up in the bath!"

"Oh." His face flushed. "Could you tell her to come down then?" He certainly didn't want to deal with a female in a bath.

"She won't come."

"Er... I'll do that for you, Harry. Don't mind at all." Ron made to move forward only to be stopped by her words.

"Fine!" Pansy shouted suddenly. "I'll tell her!" As she got to the doorjamb, she added, "But one of you'd better start luncheon. I don't think it'll get done otherwise."

"What did we do to deserve that harpy?" Ron asked, rolling his eyes.

"Don't know, but I'm tired of this. I'm going to have a talk with Kingsley again. They might as well be on their own for all they did in the war."

"Aiding Death Eaters is pretty serious."

"Yeah, well, there are none to aid now, is there? Might as well get them out of here and out of our hair." He stooped down to pick up Hermione's handkerchief and called out, "Kreacher!"

Crack! "Master calls for Kreacher?"

"Er, do you think you could fix us something to eat."

"Something edible," Ron piped up.

"Yes, of course Kreacher can." The elf popped away quickly.

"Don't know if I like the sound of that," Ron said. "Was a bit too nice about it."

Harry agreed with a nod. "Took off before I could tell him to wash this."

Ron pulled out his wand. "No problem. *Scourgify*."

"Thanks."

There was a loud shriek from above and the slamming of a door.

"Bloody hell! That's it! I've had it with those two!" Ron yelled and thundered past Harry and up the stairwell.

He shoved the handkerchief in his pocket and sighed. He didn't care if they burned the place down. Ginny would be well soon, and that was all that mattered. First, he supposed he should take care of the Snape business.

# Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 11

Severus and Hermione share a moment, but things are different after a visit from Harry.

**Disclaimer:** See previous chapters for clever response! :)

*Thanks go to amsev for reading over this for me. What a gem! And thanks also to Felicius21 for helping out.*

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"Would you mind checking this over for me?" Hermione asked as she straightened and stretched, yawning heavily.

"If you're tired, you should just let me take over."

"Well, we've been at this for nearly two days. Don't you ever sleep?"

He smirked. "I don't think it wise for you to try to keep up with me, my dear."

Hermione smiled, arching her back slightly as she tried to soothe the ache on its lower section. "Standing and stirring all this while... ouch."

"It's not the right color."

Instantly, her fatigue slid away, and she gazed down into the cauldron. "It's orange."

"More of a yellow." He moved by her and opened the tome once again, flipping a few pages from the center. "Look at this." His index finger tapped a picture of what their finished potion should look like.

"You're right of course," she said with a frown. "Maybe if it sits a while?"

"Possibly. We shall see. Let it simmer."

"All right." She leaned down and adjusted the flame to where it was barely visible beneath the dark cauldron. "I hope this works." Again, she placed a hand on her lower back and rubbed.

"Come." He gestured for her to precede him out their lab.

Not needing to be told twice, she quickly led him down into the living room, sitting on the couch immediately and letting out a long sigh. "This feels great."

"I'll be right back," he said and went to his bedroom.

She closed her eyes and thought about how great it felt to let her lids rest. Why had she not listened to him and slept a little more? How come she, almost half his age, couldn't keep up with him?

"Hermione?"

She startled, having not heard him return.

"You were sleeping," he accused.

"No, just resting my eyes," she said with a small smile.

"And snoring, which indicates to me you were sleeping."

"I don't snore!"

"Yes, you do," he said with a smirk.

She looked over at Crookshanks in that instant and regretted it. His gaze seemed to be saying that she did indeed snore. "Clearly, I need my sleep," she grumbled. "I don't want to stop this though. I want to see if it will come out right."

"I've this," Snape said, shoving a tube of something into her hand.

"What is it?"

"If you rub it into your skin, it will soothe your aches," he said, moving to sit in the chair across from her."

"I... Would you?"

He paused before his bum hit the cushion and shot up awkwardly. "You want me to apply this?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind," she began crossly, "I haven't anything you can catch from touching me, you know!"

With his eyes narrowed dangerously, he snatched the tube from her and made a circle in the air with his finger. "Turn over then."

She did so, sprawling herself along the length of the couch, hiding her face within the cushions so that he couldn't see the redness in her cheeks as he lifted the back of her blouse up...all the way up past her pink bra strap. Inwardly, she cursed herself for wearing pink that day. Why had she chosen something so... girly? If she'd known that he would have seen her bra, she'd have picked something more professional... something he'd approve of and relate to maturity. She held in a snicker as a satiny, black bra with heavy straps, stiff cups and pesky underwires flashed through her mind. Luckily, she always dressed for comfort and not style.

However, all amusement left her mind when his hands began rubbing in the salve. It was quite warm, and the more firmly he pressed against her, the more she felt little

jolts filter through her aching muscles beneath his kneading fingers. The effect was simultaneous. "Ahh... yesss, God, that feels so good," she said, not caring that she sounded as if she were having sex.

"If I..." His voice cracked slightly, and his fingers faltered. "If the wind of a fan would blow on this, it would heat up more... quickly easing your pain further."

Unable to resist and not sure why, she said, "Blow on it." His fingers stopped their firm circular motion. "Oh, please, don't stop." And then she sucked in a sharp, raspy breath as she felt him shift and lightly blow on her skin. She could feel the flesh of her back heat further, yet there were chills forming on her arms and a tingling in her stomach. It was probably the most intimate position she'd been in... in a very long time.

And then his fingers and palms began working her flesh again, coupling with the gentle breaths he blew. She'd never felt so at ease, so relaxed... so drowsy. "Don't stop," she whispered before drifting off into a much-needed rest.

Later, she awoke just as the first light of dawn was making its way across the sky. He'd placed a pillow beneath her head and had covered her with the duvet from the bed in her room. She wiped her eyes to grind the sleep away and sat up, body feeling refreshed, no pain remaining. The tube was on the table next to her couch, its top screwed on tightly. How much longer had he rubbed her aches away? Was he still awake? What had happened with the potion?

Picking up her pillow and the duvet, she made her way towards her door, noticing that there was a large opening in his door. Peering into the dark room, she was able to discern his form on his bed, thanks to the minute light filtering in from the side of his drawn curtain. Before she turned to continue to her room, she realized that he was still dressed in the trousers and shirt he'd been wearing. Wanting to return the favor, she quietly entered his room. Since he was sleeping on his duvet, she dared not wake him by trying to get it out from under him. Instead, she placed her own over him, knowing she could always grab a spare blanket from her closet.

She gazed down at him for a moment and smiled softly. A lock of hair had fallen over one of his eyes. She reached down to gently push it away from his face, letting her fingers linger for a moment on his cheekbone. They'd been getting on well enough since she'd returned from Grimmauld place a few days before. He chose not to speak of what she'd seen at his home, and she chose to not ask any questions. They'd been working together companionably, and he'd been keeping his bitter comments to himself. She'd not been able to visit with Harry or Ron, as she and he had been working on the potion for Ginny, so she couldn't help but to wonder if Harry had gone to the Ministry yet to get Severus his freedom. She hoped so, feeling as though he'd be pleased.

With a small sigh, she fixed his curtain so that the intruding light was snuffed out and made her way back to the doorway, her own pillow still under her arm.

As she closed the door, Severus opened his eyes and gazed up at the ceiling. He shouldn't have allowed her to cover him... or to touch him. Why hadn't he let it be known that he wasn't sleeping? That he'd only just come to bed moments before?

"Because you wanted to see what she'd do," he said to himself quietly, bitterness tainting his words. How ridiculous! He hadn't expected her to touch his face, and he hadn't expected to relish the feel of being touched... by a woman's delicate fingers... *her* fingers. Flashes of the way her soft skin moved beneath his fingers came to mind. And that voice! How long had it been since he'd heard a woman speak to him that way? Too long, which explained how it had made him feel.

With a nod, he closed his eyes. That was it. That was the answer. It had been a while since he'd had the company of a woman... things had been too hectic for the last couple of years. He'd need to find a way to visit one of his old partners and soon. Otherwise, he might do something stupid and... kiss the girl.

*No. I will not. Not even I will be that desperate... or that lonely.* This was a girl who thought that the best way to help him was to imprison him in her home and attempt to force him to work on potions for people he didn't particularly care for. Of course, he would have helped anyway, but they'd never given him the chance, had they? No, they'd simply assumed he'd let innocent people die and be unwilling to help.

It was then he thought of the long dead woman that had haunted his dreams and had invaded his mind for most of his life. What would she think about this? He turned over and tried to push those thoughts from his mind. However, it was hard not to think of Hermione Granger... as the duvet he was buried beneath held her scent so perfectly. He inhaled deeply and finally allowed sleep to come.

~~~~~  
Hermione woke again near noon and noticed immediately that Snape's door was still closed. As quietly as possible, she bathed, dressed, and went to the kitchen to prepare lunch. While she was turning the oven on to preheat, there was a knock at her door.

"Harry!" she said happily as she opened it and eyed her friend. "I've been hoping to come by, but I never had the chance." His visit could only mean one thing. He'd done it! He'd talked to the Ministry and had Severus' freedom granted.

He pulled a rolled up parchment from his robes. "Where's Snape?" he asked, looking behind her.

"Come in," she said before lowering her voice and adding, "the kitchen." She nodded towards Snape's door. "He's still asleep."

"At this time?"

"Yes, we had a late night... Busy few days actually."

"Doing what?" Harry asked, following her to her table.

"Working on the potion for Ginny of course. What did you think?" She grinned. "Things are working out all right. Better than I'd thought."

"Well, that's good," he said glumly.

"Yes, it is. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing about that. It's just... Pansy and Daphne are driving me mad. And the worst of it is Pansy and Ron. All they do is argue and goad each other. I almost want to tell him to...er..."

"To what?" she asked encouragingly.

"Ah, nothing."

"Tell me."

He looked extremely uncomfortable for a moment, but then he said, "It seems like maybe they should have a shag already and get it out of their system."

Hermione's face paled. "Is he interested in her?"

"No, no," Harry said quickly. "It just seems that... you know... the tension." He waved his hand. "I shouldn't have said that, Hermione. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's all right, Harry. He's not *my* boyfriend any longer." She frowned. "It does seem odd, though, the thought of him and someone else."

"He loves you still," Harry blurted. "It was you who..."

She held up her hand. "I know, I know. It's all right." To prove to him that she was serious, she smiled. "If something should come out of this, then I guess it was meant to

be, right?"

"Here," he said, pushing the parchment over to her in an obvious attempt to change the subject. "Thought you'd like to see this and brought it over myself."

"Are these his papers?"

"Papers?"

"You said you'd give him what he wanted."

"And I have." He nodded to the parchment.

When she unrolled it, her smile faded. "The *Daily Prophet*?"

He beamed brightly. "Read it. First page, just there."

The Chosen One Speaks Out!

An Exclusive Interview with Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter contacted me, hoping that I had time to grant him an interview. Well, who wouldn't make time for the Chosen One, especially when he has something delicious to divulge? Of course, as he and I go back a long way, it is I he decided to contact, what with all of my connections and excellent writing ability. But enough about me.

He thought it was time to bring some information to light...something many of us have been wondering about. Who does this information concern? Severus Snape, the man who ended Albus Dumbledore's life! What you are about to read comes straight from Harry Potter himself.

"Severus Snape should be looked upon without scorn. There is more to the story about Headmaster Dumbledore's death, and I should have come forward before, but I had to be certain. After talking to Professor Dumbledore's portrait, viewing documented items, and speaking to others, I can only conclude that what Snape did... he was acting on Dumbledore's orders.

"Professor Dumbledore was already dying. He and I went on a mission that night...one I will not disclose here. Needless to say, he ingested a poison created by Voldemort himself, and it weakened him immediately. Add that to the effects of something that had happened the previous summer...you all remember what his hand looked like...well, it seems that both things were working against him, and he wouldn't have lasted the night."

I asked our hero to go into more details about this proof and if he planned to make this known to the Wizengamot, and here is what he had to say:

"Most of it is rather personal, but I would think that Professor Snape's testimony at his trial should be sufficient enough. I, and a few others, will guarantee that he is telling the truth. That should be the end of it. Dumbledore planned his own death...knew it was coming and decided to go out in a way he deemed fit. That's all there is to it."

At this point, Harry stood to leave, but I, of course, coaxed him into sitting down and sharing another cup of tea with me. I asked him about his future plans and his love life.

"I've just accepted a position to head the Aurory. It's something I agreed to as part of the reformation process. I suppose I might as well disclose that now, as it's going to be posted in the issue anyway. There are other things, but people can read that for themselves in the proper article."

And I had to point out that he was quite young, but he soothed my worries, dear readers, by saying, "I've done a lot more in time than many of the Aurors have done in their long careers. I should be the one to head this. I wouldn't work under anyone else. Hey! I didn't say that! What I said was: I feel that my experience should speak for itself and that I've done things comparable to most who've been working there already. Everyone agrees that it's a good idea."

Something had gone wrong with my quill. I'm not certain why it was trying to insert its own words. Luckily, that was quickly sorted out. And here is his comment on his young girlfriend, whoever she might be!

"As far as my love life, that's rather private, isn't it? I don't think she'd like me going on about it here for the whole of the Wizarding UK to be reading, eh?"

When I commented that he's always seen alone, he simply said that she had 'other things going on at the moment,' but things would be back to normal soon.

Now, the rumor we heard last was that he was seeing Ginevra Weasley, youngest child of Arthur and Molly Weasley. However, the poor dear is in a hopeless condition, and it's clear that the Chosen One has moved on. Who is his newest conquest? Look no further, readers, than the two women placed in his home under the care of himself and his friend, Ronald Weasley. And who can blame Harry Potter?

Time is short, isn't it? And it makes sense that either Miss Daphne Greengrass or Miss Pansy Parkinson would make a suitable partner for him! What a way to prove to the world that the time of discriminating against people for old deeds is a thing of the past! Good luck to you, Harry Potter! And thanks for the exclusive interview!

Hermione set the paper down and met Harry's gaze squarely. "What the hell is this, Harry?"

He sat back, shocked. "What do you mean? He wanted recognition, and I gave it to him!"

"No, he doesn't want that, Harry! He just wants his respect and to be free. Now you've taken what he's done and made it into some..."

A cough alerted them to someone else's presence. "I could hear the two of you from across the room." He nodded at Harry, eyes narrowed. *Potter.*"

"Snape," Harry greeted in return before facing Hermione again. "Well, I'm sorry if that's how you see it. I thought it to be the best way to get the truth out there."

She tried to cover the *Prophet*, but Severus must have spotted something on it referring to him, and he snatched it away from her. He held the paper in front of his face, and she couldn't see his expression, but she saw the knuckles of his fingers whitening as his grip tightened.

"Severus, he didn't mean to..."

"It appears," he began, "that I should give you thanks, Potter."

Harry nodded. "Think nothing of it."

"Thanks for once again seeing to it that any good someone has done, no matter how grand, comes off as insignificant next to your life and problems. Thanks for discussing a most private matter with Skeeter and the world. Thanks for living up to my expectations and more, Potter."

Without another word, Severus turned on his heel and went to the attic doorway and disappeared. Harry turned to her, incredulous expression on his face, "Well, what the hell was that all about? I didn't want Skeeter to ask about Ginny! And she put a different spin on what I said anyway. He should know that!"

"That's not the point, Harry." Hermione sighed and put her head in her hands. All the progress she and Severus had made would be tossed out the window. She doubted he'd believe she had nothing to do with it. Well, she did have something to do with it, didn't she? If she hadn't gone to Harry, he'd still have his dignity in tact. "He just wants to be free. I thought you'd go to the Wizengamot and explain that he shouldn't be forced to do anything... that he wants to do it of his own accord... that he deserves to be treated with respect."

Harry stood and pushed his chair under the table. "You know how that lot is! I just thought everyone should know. Do you think they'll keep him this way now that it's public? I wouldn't be surprised if they aren't getting Howlers asking for Snape's release."

"But it's *your* word that matters to them, Harry."

"This *is* my bloody word, Hermione! Now they'll have no choice but to do what's right. Do you think I gave that cow an interview for my own gain?" He turned and stormed out, leaving Hermione alone and upset.

Sadly, she rose and turned off her oven, deciding sandwiches would be best. As she did so, she heard Crookshanks' loud screech and his little paws pounding down the stairs as he fled the attic. She ran out to see what had happened, but he'd already ran to cower under the couch.

Angrily, she made her way upstairs. "What the hell did you do to my cat?" she asked.

Severus, who was flicking his wand to clean up the mess of a spilled potion, paused and glared at her. "That beast is NOT to come up here! Look what he's done! He knocked over the cauldron, and nearly all of the potion is gone. We won't be able to test this on Miss Weasley with only half a phial's dosage!"

"He didn't do it on purpose," she retorted hotly. "And I believe you were the last one up, which means YOU didn't close the door to keep him out."

"We'll need a test subject, one whose body size can take such a small dose, and I know just which pesky cat I'm going to use." He made towards the doorway.

"You will not touch my cat!" she said, wand drawn. "I don't care how lousy of a day you're having, but what Harry did is not Crooks' fault! Nor is it mine! I just thought he'd do the right thing, and he only thought that what he did was..."

"You asked Potter to do this?"

"No! I told him how I felt and explained that you didn't deserve to be forced to live here, that you should be granted your freedom. I didn't think he'd do this. I thought..."

"I should have known! I told you already that I do not want to be any of your projects, Granger!" He put his wand away and pointed to the overturned cauldron. "This sets us back another few days. That's another few days I'll have to stay in this miserable flat you call home! Another few days I'll have to put up with your bloody annoying questions, and..."

"Piss off, you arse! This isn't my fault!" Hermione yelled, quickly turning and making her way to the couch to fetch Crookshanks. Once she had him, she went to her room, all thoughts of making lunch and working with Snape forgotten. How could she have been fooled into thinking he was anything more than the arsehole she'd just left upstairs. Sure, what Harry did wasn't the right thing, but he hadn't done it purposely.

Now they were both angry with her. "Fine," she muttered, cuddling her cat closer. "We'll get this potion done, and hopefully, he'll get out of our lives for good, Crooks. We don't need him."

Southern's Notes: Well, damn. That went south. More up soon. Thanks for all the feedback. I appreciate it. If you're bored, I have another WIP going at the moment ("Flight of the Prince"). There are more chapters in that one.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione and Snape have a row that causes her to do something bold. Later, she finds out the truth behind Harry's actions, and she also realizes that she will never have a future with Ron.

Disclaimer: Still not my characters, but yes, I'm having fun with them. Pity there's no money involved!

Thanks go to amsev for reading this over for me. And thanks also to Felicius21 for helping out.

The day had begun much like the previous ones, only Snape had decided to give Hermione the cold shoulder. He didn't take any of the coffee she'd made, settling on making himself tea, and he bypassed the extra slices of toast she'd left on a saucer. She was content to leave things that way as well. Mostly. It didn't pay to converse with someone who seemed bent on making things worse. He only spoke when he wanted her to do something or to answer a question she had about the potion they were making. Having been through the process once already, they were able to work together easily, the repeated steps going smoothly.

However, it did annoy her a little, as she did enjoy talking by nature. Most of her time was now taken up by covertly looking at him...all in the name of learning of course. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She found herself looking at the oddest things...his fingers as he worked, the triumphant smile he flashed to himself when the potion turned out right, the way his hair fell over his cheeks, or even the way he cocked his head to the side and brought an index finger up to circle his lips while lost in thought. None of this had anything to do with potion making, and yet, she couldn't help herself. There was something intriguing about him, even with his sour disposition.

Crookshanks seemed to know that Severus was still angry with him and avoided him completely. Then again, he always had been smart, being part kneazle and all. Snape spoke, pulling her from her thoughts.

"It can simmer for the next nine hours." He bent down to check the flame. "You needn't worry about waking to come stir it at that point and add the next set of ingredients. I shall handle it."

"Well, I'd like to be a part of everything if you don't mind. I may need to do this again when alone, and the extra practice doesn't hurt."

"And miss out on your *beauty* sleep? I wouldn't hear of it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Was he taking a poke at her looks?

He sneered and brushed a piece of nonexistent lint from his robes. "Well, some people seem to need more sleep than others...for whatever reason." His smile widened nastily. "Why, did you take it to mean that I thought you truly needed beauty sleep? That I find you to be lacking?"

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm sure of it. I think I liked it better when you were ignoring me."

"I shall wake you then, but if you simply mumble and turn over as you did last time..."

"I did no such thing! You didn't even try to wake me."

"I did."

"My door was closed and my bag was still in front of it. How do you explain that?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "You didn't bother to wake me! You didn't want me to be a part of it."

"Not that I need to explain myself to you, but I did indeed go to your room. You were lying on your left side facing away from me, bare legs twisted in your sheet." He smirked slightly and gazed at her intently, lowering his voice. "Your already too short nightgown had slid up to your waist, revealing light purple knickers to my wandlight."

"How dare you sneak into my room and... and look at my knickers!" she said indignantly.

"Trust me, you silly little girl, you have nothing that I want to see." He brushed by her, glaring all the while. "I'd rather visit an old friend in Knockturn Alley than be reduced to sneaking glances at someone I am certainly *not* attracted to."

"I... You're so rude!" She frowned, trying to think of something to say. Why did he insist on insulting her? "I don't appreciate the way you treat me. I know you're unhappy, but can you honestly tell me that offending me makes you happier?"

He ignored her words, moving to the door, saying, "Lock this when you leave. I don't want that infernal beast coming here to ruin anything."

"I think he's learnt his lesson."

"That remains to be seen." He turned to face her. "And I will require you to Apparate with me in about an hour. Be ready."

"Wait, what? Where to?" She should tell him that she wouldn't after the way he'd acted.

"I have things that I need to purchase. Diagon Alley if you don't mind."

Feeling devious, she said, "All right. I have a quick stop to make, too...if you don't mind." She'd fix his arse. Little girl, eh? Unattractive, was she? She'd force him to visit the lingerie shop with her so that she could get his opinion on a suitable nightgown. That would serve him right.

"Very well."

And then he was gone, leaving her to frown in his wake. Why did he have to be so sour? She could sympathize with him for his situation and even felt guilty for her part in it, but he could at least try to be amiable so that the days weren't so long and awkward. Harry had only been trying to tell his side of the story. It seemed the only true way to get his word out was to have it plastered in a paper. She wished, though, that he'd gone to the Minister, as she'd thought he would do.

And why had there been a gleam in his eye when he'd recalled what she'd been wearing? If he truly wasn't attracted to her or found her lacking, why had he spoken that way, as if reciting a fond memory? It seemed as though he'd thought of her undressed state more than once. Was her nightgown too short? He *had* taken some interest in her. Maybe. That or she definitely needed to get out more. "Wonder what Ron's up to? Maybe I should have let him stay the night last time he asked."

Sighing, she decided to push those thoughts away and get cleaned up. Making certain to close the door behind her, she went down to her room to gather a fresh set of clothes for their evening excursion. Without thinking, she opened the bathroom door...only to drop the items to the floor and to gape in shock.

Shirtless and with his trousers partially unzipped, Snape stood in front of the mirror, toothbrush in hand. Hermione couldn't help but to admire what she saw. While he was on the thin side, he seemed to be muscled and held an aura of strength about him. His chest had a light smattering of hair that thickened slightly the lower it trailed, meeting with a thatch of dark hair peeking out his opened trousers.

Forcing her eyes away, she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were in here." And now the shoe was on the other foot. He'd seen her nearly undressed, so it seemed she'd returned the favor. However, it was affecting her much more than he'd claimed to have been affected. Her heart was beating quickly, and she could feel her face heating.

"I do, upon occasion, groom myself," he retorted sourly. When she didn't move, he added, "I'll be done in a moment. Don't let me stop you. It's not anything I haven't seen before...or care to see on you."

She looked up and met his challenging gaze. He was testing her. Chin up, she picked up her things and brushed past him to turn on the faucets, touching the spray to make certain it was warm enough. Once done, she placed her clothes on the counter next to the sink and pulled her hair up in a ponytail.

A look at him showed him leaning down and brushing his teeth, not even paying attention to her *Maybe he was being honest when he said I didn't merit a second glance*. Part of her didn't believe it though. In a shaky voice, she said, "It won't take long. I don't have to wash my hair." He carried on and ignored her.

He probably thinks I won't do it. And I shouldn't. But I can't let him think he intimidates me. I'll just act as though he doesn't bother me at all His nasty words came back to her, and she decided to show him that she was no little girl who'd go rushing from the room...from his silent challenge. With that, she turned her back to him and quickly undressed and ducked behind the shower curtain, uncertain if he'd seen her naked backside or not, but inwardly hoping he hadn't. What the bloody hell had possessed her to do that? Feeling foolish, she quickly went about washing her body, wishing she could rub the redness out of her flushed skin.

And what if he was still there when she finished? She hadn't even got a towel down to dry herself with *Damn it!* She could hear nothing beyond the forceful shower spray, and the shower curtain was so thick, she couldn't see if he was still there. That was a good thing, she supposed, as it meant he couldn't see her either. And why hadn't she ever noticed before the past couple of days, and especially now, that beneath his uninviting appearance there was a very attractive man...one whose hands could work magic if his massage had been any indication.

Good grief, am I so lonely that even Severus Snape is tempting? Maybe I really should take Ron up on his offer. It's nothing we haven't done before.

When she finished rinsing her body, she turned the water off and cautiously peeked around the shower curtain. Snape was gone, and the door was closed, leaving her in privacy. Breathing a sigh of relief, she opened the curtain and smiled in surprise as she saw that he'd placed a fresh towel on the hamper for her.

Even though she'd just done something that was utterly foolish and something she'd likely regret, for the moment she felt triumphant. She'd beaten him at his game. Maybe. Perhaps he truly wasn't affected by what she'd done, but at least she'd proven to him that she was no little girl. "Though I might be silly," she admitted to herself with a wry grin, drying herself with the towel he'd left for her.

The towel. She'd take that as a sign of his defeat. He wouldn't have left it otherwise. Dressing as quickly as she could, she walked over to the closed door, took a deep

breath, closed her eyes to summon the courage to face him, exhaled, and twisted the doorknob. He was nowhere to be seen.

In relief, she walked over to the couch to put on her trainers. It was then that he exited his room, his eyes meeting hers. "Ready, I see?"

"Yes." She cursed herself inwardly for sounding breathless, but she couldn't help feeling embarrassed by what she'd done...and hated that she found his black trousers and crisp grey shirt a complement to his dark hair and eyes.

"Come here," he said, extending his hand to her.

Was this another peace offering? She rose and walked over to him much like an Inferius might approach its victim, allowing him to slowly take her in his arms, even stepping as closely as possible to him. Was he going to kiss her? She looked up and tilted her head just the right way, licking her lips as she did so.

"Well?" he said, his voice deliciously silky.

Did he expect her to make the first move?

"Aren't you going to Disapparate us?" He smirked, eyes gleaming. "I'm restricted here."

Hermione quickly looked down in embarrassment and tried to ease back, but he held her close. "Of course. I...I was just making sure you were ready."

"I am."

She could hear the amusement in his voice. He knew that she'd misunderstood his intentions, and he knew that she'd have allowed him to kiss her if that had been what he'd wanted. But why? They didn't even like each other. What was he doing to her? Where was her head? Was all this time away from her job getting to her? She'd heard of something called cabin fever. People who only stayed indoors for an extended period of time sometimes went crazy. Yes, that was it. She was suffering from some mental issue.

With a crack, she Disapparated them to Diagon Alley, just missing another man who'd Apparated in. "Sorry, sir," she said politely while still being held tightly by Snape.

"S all right." The man's eyes moved from hers to Snape's. They widened momentarily before he nodded and moved on.

She stepped away from Snape quickly. "Where did you need to go?"

"The apothecary first and then to Flourish and Blotts."

"All right."

"You needn't accompany me to the apothecary. I'll meet you at the bookstore."

"Now, hang on."

"Oh? Feel the need to watch over me, do you?" He sneered. "Yes, that's right. My warden. Come along then."

Feeling foolish once again, she said, "I only meant that I need to get something else first, so if I'm not in the bookstore when you get there, I'll be around shortly." She saw his cold glare soften slightly as he nodded and moved on. She praised herself for the quick lie. She truly had been about to insist on accompanying him. However, it wasn't because she was trying to keep tabs on him. While she wasn't certain why, she did honestly know that that wasn't the reason. Frowning, she turned and went the other way.

Deciding she no longer wanted to force him into accompanying her to find a new nightgown, she opted to get one herself while he purchased his things at the apothecary. Nancy's Nightwear was the first place she saw, and she ventured in. It was rather pricey, so she'd never bought anything there before. The strong scent of cinnamon assailed her immediately, and she thought of backing out, but a display to her left got her attention. There was a lovely nightgown made of a light blue velour fabric that clung to the mannequin's frame attractively, yet covered most of her legs and showed no cleavage.

Unable to help herself, she reached out and ran her fingers over a sleeve. She loved the soft feel of it and knew that it would be comfortable against her body. *There's no way he'd call me a girl if he saw me in this*, she thought smugly. However, the smile on her lips faded. What did she care anyway? She wanted to buy something that he wouldn't consider too short or, what he was likely thinking, immodest. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea at any rate...no matter what her hormones had been trying to whisper all day.

"May I help you?" a saleswitch asked.

"How much is this? I don't see a price."

"Ah, that's on sale. We happen to be overstocked at the moment."

"Oh, that's good. Er... what price?"

"Only 70 Galleons."

"70 Galleons!" Hermione exclaimed. That was definitely too much...especially if it were on sale. What was the normal price?

"I know! Such a lovely nightgown for more than half the price," the saleswitch said, obviously misunderstanding Hermione's gasp. "They last for a lifetime...guaranteed, are flame resistant, and they come equipped with two spells: one to make the sleeves and length shorter for our warmer months and the other to change colors."

No wonder it was so expensive. One would never have to buy another gown in her lifetime if she bought this one. "How... What's recommended to keep it clean?"

"Cleaning Spells are fine. Otherwise, you can follow the directions on the tag." She grinned proudly. "I have one of these myself. It's come in handy indeed."

Looking at the gown again, Hermione tried to mentally tally what she had in her account and anything outstanding that needed paying. With the Ministry giving sponsors funds to keep their "guests," she had extra money, but she hated to spend it, uncertain as to when she'd be able to return to work. It had been a while since she'd bought herself anything luxurious though, and this could be considered something needed, as it was obvious Snape didn't appreciate her normal attire.

"I'll take it then," she said, following the smiling woman to check out.

"Hermione, what are you doing here?"

She spun around in surprise and grinned. "Ron! I could ask you the same thing."

"What's that?" he asked, nodding towards her gown. She could see the question in his eyes.

"Oh, well, I wanted something that I could feel comfortable in with Snape there. In case he happened to see me in it."

Ron smiled and nodded. "Yeah, wouldn't want him to see you in that little black..."

"Shhh!"

"What? I'm sure she's heard more than that before," he said, ears reddening slightly. "Where is he?"

"The apothecary. Figured I could do this discreetly," she said and promptly bit her lip. She hated lying to Ron, but she very well couldn't tell him the story behind her reasoning. In fact, she wanted to push those thoughts away. "Where's Harry?" she asked, looking behind him.

"Ah, he's with Kingsley. Looks like they're going to work together to get that all sorted out. Scrimgeour, that arsehole. Knew he'd go back on his word."

"His word? What do you mean?"

"Well, Harry went to see him about getting Snape's freedom. Bloke wouldn't hear it. Made a deal with Harry if he accepted that job with them, he'd talk to the Wizengamot."

"When?"

"Right after you left that day," he said. Lowering his voice, he added, "Scrimgeour came over with Kingsley not long after and said the Wizengamot felt Snape hadn't stayed with you long enough to make a fair decision, considering nobody else would be getting their lives back anytime soon."

"Harry didn't tell me this!" Hermione said angrily. Why hadn't he explained this to her? Then she could have told Snape and smoothed things over! "I thought he went straight to Rita Skeeter!"

"No, that was my idea," Ron said proudly, hooking a thumb towards his chest. "That's right. Told him it's what you would do. Remember back when we got her to tell his story in fifth year, the truth about You-Know-Who coming back? And boy is it working. You should see all the owls of support we're getting." He snickered. "Making Greengrass and Pan...Parkinson organize and reply to them. Bout all they're good for. Besides complaining, that is."

Still shocked, Hermione signed the slip that would allow the store to draft the Galleons for her purchase out of her account at Gringotts and blindly took the bag with her nightgown in it, following Ron towards the back of the store. "I wish Harry would have said something." She frowned. "I said some awful things to him."

"Yeah," Ron said with a nod. "But he knows it's his fault. He just felt bad... you know, letting you down like that."

"Please tell him that I'm really sorry ab..."

"Ronald," said a feminine voice from behind Hermione. "How does this look? Daphne says it makes me look fat."

Hermione whirled around and faced Pansy, who wore a sleek, satiny night slip that showed her lengthy legs and much cleavage. It was definitely not for someone wanting to be modest. Narrowing her eyes, she gazed between Ron and Pansy.

"Er, looks all right," he snapped. Then his eyes met Hermione's. He shrugged. "Not like it matters to me anyway. Get whatever you'd like, but hurry it up."

"What's going on?" Hermione asked quietly, thinking back to what Harry had said. Was it true? It did bother her a little, especially now with Pansy flashing a smug grin. She felt oddly jealous of the girl, and she'd never before wanted anything to do with her.

"Oh, they said they needed some supplies. Harry says it's my turn, so here I am." He nodded to the doors behind Pansy. "Been in there an hour, both of 'em."

Pansy moved closer and peered at Hermione's shopping bag, trying to make out what was inside. "Buying something to impress Snape?" she asked in amusement.

"She is not!" Ron answered before Hermione could reply.

"Uh-huh. If you say so. Why, I'll bet..." Her words stopped abruptly as she realized what Hermione had. "You know, I do believe you're right. No one in her right mind would try to seduce anyone wearing *that* thing."

"You ridiculous cow! How dare you insinuate anything! Look who's the one buying something to impress someone!" Hermione retorted.

"Yeah, Pansy, don't go talking to Hermione like that," Ron said, looking flustered.

"Is he off limits, Granger?" Pansy asked bluntly.

"Who?" Ron asked dumbly.

"Sorry?"

Pansy simply grinned at him and then glared at Hermione. "I thought you weren't interested in Ron any longer. Maybe I am." With that said, she turned and walked back into the dressing room.

Ron's mouth gaped open slightly, and he seemed to be struggling with himself over what to say. Hermione decided to talk to him and get things in the open. "Ron, is something going on with you two?"

"No, no. I don't know why she's even said that! All we do is argue." He couldn't meet Hermione's eyes though when he said the next part. "I don't find her pretty at all."

"She's right. You're not taken."

"But I still wouldn't do that to you. Remember? We're just testing the waters and trying to live alone for a while to see..."

"If you can find happiness with someone...even her...I wouldn't stand in your way," Hermione said firmly, the memory of Snape, half dressed and in her loo, flashed through her mind. "Maybe this has all happened for a reason."

"Well... I care about you so much," he said softly, lifting a hand to caress her chin. "Really, I do."

"Me too," she said sadly. "But we've not been right for a long time. Why should I interfere if you could find someone who can give you what I can't?"

"But you could."

"We don't know that. What if later on I..."

"Hermione, are you saying... Do you mean that you want me to pursue something with her?"

"Not if that's not what you want."

"It's not! I don't even like her!"

"You protest a bit much," she said with a small laugh. "Don't rush into anything. I'm not saying that." She smiled but was unable to keep the sadness from her voice. "Even Harry can see the attraction between you two. I love you enough to want you to be happy, even if it's not with me."

He leaned closer and kissed her lips softly at first and then passionately, his arms moving around her waist. When he pulled away, he shook his head. "I love you, you know that."

"Yeah." And she truly did feel sad. Why was there no spark in his kiss any longer? Where was the desire she'd once felt for him?

"I guess I should tell you the same."

She laughed. "Don't worry. I doubt Snape will be falling at my feet!"

He snorted. "Right. I meant... with anyone else that might catch your fancy. I want you to be happy, too."

"Thank you, Ron." She gathered him close and hugged him tightly.

"We're done, Weasley," Daphne said, interrupting them. "Granger, hello."

"Hi."

"Where's, uh, Parkinson?" Ron asked, looking around.

Daphne smirked. "Oh, she came out a minute ago. Ran off for some reason. I expect she's waiting outside. Couldn't find anything to fit her big arse."

"Now, see here," Ron began, "it's not that big."

"Noticed, have you?" Daphne asked coyly.

Sputtering, Ron said, "I didn't mean it like that." His eyes widened and found Hermione's.

She laughed and said, "Better go find her before she harms herself trying to Disapparate without you."

"Right then. See you later!"

"Bye."

Daphne didn't follow him. Instead, she looked at Hermione for a moment. "Are you all right, Granger? Living with Snape I mean."

She shook her head. "I'm all right, but he's no ray of sunshine."

"Uh-huh. He was the same as our Head of House." She looked away for a moment, but then she said, "I think it's good what you two are doing. A lot of people, my brother included, will benefit from a cure. Thank you."

"Your brother?"

She nodded. "Yes, he went to Durmstang and is a few years older than me. He was a Death Eater for a while, but I helped him hide when he wanted to defect. It never set well with him the things they did. It's why I'm considered a commiserating party and on forced probation. They won't hear that he was hiding and had changed his mind or that he'd never hurt anyone. They just chucked me in gaol and him in St. Mungo's. See, one of his old mates found him and hexed him just as the Aurors arrived where we were. I was going to be next...after a round of games, he'd said. Dolohov, I believe."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "That's unfair! Why didn't they give you Veritaserum to verify it?"

"Oh, they did, but then they asked if I knew Occlumency, and I was trained in it. They figure I was able to stage my answers anyway."

"I'm sorry."

Daphne nodded. "I will go purchase this and find the others. Good day."

With much on her mind, Hermione made her way over to Flourish and Blotts and found Snape waiting just inside the door.

"Bout time," he said, looking at his pocket watch. "Nancy's Nightwear?" he asked, nodding at her bag.

"I...yes." She blushed. "I thought I should get a new nightgown, one that wouldn't offend you so."

"Miss Granger, Hermione," he said softly, "what I said earlier. I had no right to say such things. That was uncalled for and inappropriate of me."

She looked away and said, "No more inappropriate than my shower."

He chuckled slightly. "I agree."

"Is that an apology?"

"We can call it that, yes."

"Accepted. I found something out just now that I think you should know."

"Indeed?"

"Would you want to have dinner out tonight instead of at home? We could talk then."

He stood still for a moment. "Very well. Where would you like to go?"

"Muggle London. I know a lovely café, and we won't have any of this lot hovering around." She indicated several people who were staring at them.

"Lead the way."

Southern's Notes: And here's my next installment. Some progress has been made finally, and geez, silly Hermione! What was she thinking? Snork.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione and Severus share a lovely evening together, each pondering on what the future could possibly hold.

Disclaimer: I've snatched some characters for a bit of fun.

Thanks go to beawesley2 for the beta read.

"What would you like to eat?" Hermione asked, gazing at the menu.

"I'll just have fish and chips, I think," Severus replied, placing his menu back in the napkin holder at the far side of the table.

"Good idea." She turned and waved to the waitress. "We're ready."

"Lovely. What'll ye have then?" the portly woman asked.

"Two orders of fish and chips please."

"And two Cokes," Severus added.

"Oh, right! Sorry."

"Be out shortly."

"So, Hermione, what did you want to tell me?" he asked, not beating around the bush any longer, eyes firmly holding hers.

"I think we were both mistaken where Harry is concerned."

He snorted. "I highly doubt that."

"When I was shopping for my nightgown, I bumped into Ron."

"Weasley was buying himself a new nightgown?" he asked jokingly, arching his eyebrows. "I always thought him to be a Nancy boy."

Hermione laughed loudly at his joke and quickly covered her mouth, looking around to see if anyone had noticed. "No," she said through stifled giggles. "He was there with Pansy and Daphne. They were the ones shopping."

"Ah, I see. And?"

"Harry didn't go to Rita Skeeter right away. He went to Scrimgeour to talk to him about releasing you."

"And Scrimgeour declined," he surmised.

"Yes, but not before he'd hoodwinked Harry into agreeing to work for him. Let me tell you the whole story." Here she explained all that Ron had told her, adding in her opinions. "So you see," she said as she finished, "it wasn't even his idea to go to her. Ron thought it's what I would have suggested since I've done so before, and he's probably right."

"Done so before?"

"When we were in our fifth year at Hogwarts, Fudge, Umbridge, much of the school, and most of the Wizarding world believed Harry and Dumbledore to be liars. And that was all because of the bloody *Prophet* and their biased articles and jokes." She shrugged. "I'd blackmailed Rita Skeeter into interviewing Harry and publishing the truth in Luna's Dad's *Quibbler*."

"Blackmailed?"

"Well, I'd caught her in her Animagus form, and since she wasn't registered, we made a deal... so maybe blackmail is a strong word."

He roared with laughter, his deep and rich chuckle filling the café. Unlike Hermione when she'd had her outburst, he didn't try to stifle his amusement or look around to see who might be looking their way.

"It did work, though, because after that, Harry started getting more support. Ron said it's happening again this time. People are rallying to support you, sending in owls and messages...Howlers to the Ministry."

"To support Potter you mean."

"Who happens to be supporting you."

Severus was quiet for a moment, reflecting on what she said. When he finally spoke, she was shocked. "Perhaps I may have been a little rough with him, but how could I not expect the worst when that's what usually happens when Potter is involved in something? He's always seemed to be an attention seeker, just like his father was, and I don't know that it's changed any since he left Hogwarts."

"Now that's a little unfair, don't you think? He's not his father, completely opposite in fact."

"Ah, here's our order," he said, ignoring her last comment.

"Here you go, love," the woman said as she set his plate in front of him. "And yours, honey," she said to Hermione. "Blast. Your Cokes. I'll be right back."

"Smells good."

"It does."

"Sorry about that," the kind lady said, placing their drinks before them. "Enjoy."

"Thank you," Hermione said with a smile.

"Not bad at all," Severus commented as he sampled a piece of fish.

"Mmm, very good," she agreed.

"So, what are you not telling me?" he asked casually.

"About?"

"When you were talking about Weasley, it seemed you were omitting something."

Damn Legilimens! she thought bitterly. "It's nothing that would interest you, I'm sure. Just personal things."

"I see."

"I didn't mean that as an insult," she said quickly, as he seemed offended.

He held up a hand. "I understand completely. As you know, I am also one who appreciates privacy without others prying about."

Hermione was certain this was a hint to her, but she decided to not say anything more on the subject. "We've been getting along terribly, haven't we? I hope you can believe me when I say that I am very sorry about everything so far."

"We'll just take more care to be amicable in the future." His eyebrow arched. "However, I will still not tolerate that beast of yours in the lab."

She grinned. "Nor I."

"That's settled then."

A peaceful silence set in while they both finished their meals. Hermione covertly watched as he chewed his food, lips moving slowly as he savored each bite. Every now and then, she'd see him eyeing her as well, which quickly caused her to smile and look away, finding something on the wall suddenly interesting. When she'd eaten her fill, she pushed her plate away and took another drink from her glass.

"Are you finished?" he asked, eyeing her plate.

"Yes." She patted her stomach. "I'm full."

Without asking, he reached over and swiped the pieces of fish left in her plate. She grinned and blurted, "What do you think of Pansy Parkinson?"

"Sorry?"

"Is she nice? I mean, if you are someone whom she likes, would she be a good friend?"

"Thinking of making nice with Parkinson, are you?"

Hermione snorted. "Heavens, no! But she says she's interested in Ron. I just wondered..."

His brow furrowed for a moment. "I thought that Weasley was your beau?"

"Not any longer. We've decided to part ways."

"That's what was bothering you then."

"A little," she said honestly. "Would she be good to him you think?"

"Miss Parkinson has always been a spoiled girl, coming from older, wealthy parents, and I know she can be spiteful at times, as you know, but I've found that she's fiercely loyal to those she cares for, such as Draco for instance, which is what landed her in this position in the first place." He looked away. "If she is sincere in her interest about Weasley, then I think you can say he is safe from her less desirable attributes."

With a nod, Hermione said, "That's good then."

"Indeed." His eyes bored into hers. "Sometimes knowing someone you care for is happy has to be enough. If it takes someone else to give the person what you can't, no matter how much you'd like to, then don't stand in the way...even if it's with someone you don't particularly care for."

And Hermione knew he was speaking through past experience. Was that how he'd looked at Lily's relationship with James Potter? She didn't dare ask him and simply smiled. "Thank you. You're right of course."

"Would you like anything else? Something for afters?" the waitress asked.

"Not me," Hermione said, looking over to Severus who shook his head.

"Just come pay when you're ready then."

"Daphne told me about her brother. I think it's unfair what's happened to her," Hermione said after a moment. "What we're doing," she placed a hand over his in her enthusiasm, "will help so many people. Thank you so much for this." When his eyes travelled down to her hand, she removed it quickly but without apology.

"I, too, want to help as many people as I can. It's the least I can do," he said quietly, eyes still drawn to the spot her hand had been.

"Let's go home and see how the potion is going. I have some ice cream we can splurge on if you're interested."

"Certainly." He stood and extended his hand for the bill, which Hermione had taken from the waitress. "I'll take care of this if you don't mind."

"Oh... thank you."

He said nothing, leaving Hermione alone at the table. She quickly pulled out some money to leave for a tip and waited for him at the doorway. When they left, she asked, "Where did you get Muggle money?"

"They returned my effects when they brought me to your flat," he said with a shrug. "I live in a Muggle neighborhood and use pounds often enough."

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?" When he didn't reply, she added, "Did you get what you need in Diagon Alley?"

"I did." He pulled her into a darkened alcove. "You may Disapparate us from here. No Muggles should notice."

Getting much closer than she should have, she placed her hands on his waist and brought them back to her flat. Once there, they lingered for a moment before she stepped away reluctantly, as the scent of his aftershave or cologne was simply heaven. "I'll get the ice cream?"

"And I'll check on the potion."

"Meet you back here."

"All right."

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Severus couldn't believe how easily she'd forgiven him when he'd apologized to her for the hurtful things he'd said to her...completely and sincerely. It simply showed him that not everyone tried to hold things over his head. The evening had been a good one, both talking like friends instead of captor and captive. And of course that wasn't how she looked at it, and truthfully, he didn't see it that way any longer. He would, however, enjoy being able to Disapparate at will.

If what she'd said about Potter were true, then he could expect his release sooner than he'd thought. That made him feel much better about the situation. Freedom to do what he wanted, when he wanted... for so long it had been an unfathomable dream. No masters. No more simply surviving to help Lily's son.

That time had past. As he thought this, his eyes were drawn to the bathroom door, which was partially open. He could see Hermione brushing her teeth through the crack. While he wished she'd put on her new nightgown, he was quite glad that she hadn't. It would have been too tempting. Being so close to her lately was wearing on him more than he wanted to admit.

It had been too long since he'd had sex, and he needed it. Earlier when he'd silently dared her to shower while he was getting ready, he'd been surprised that she'd not fled the room. Instead, she proudly, albeit quickly, shed her clothes and stepped in under the spray. She didn't know it, but the angle of the mirror had given him a clear, full view of her perfect body, making him harden in lust for what he couldn't have. She was definitely a girl no more. All woman indeed. And how had Weasley let her slip away? It was obvious she cared for the brat, and yet, she'd bowed out gracefully when Pansy had made her feelings for him known.

The sly part of him knew that she was quite vulnerable and that he could profit from that, likely by plying her with drinks and talking her into bed, but the logical part of him knew that nothing could ever work out for them. Once he helped the hexed people, he would begin his life anew, possibly not even in the UK. He couldn't ask that of her...nor did he really want to.

His body was simply craving the touch of a woman. Badly. His eyes drifted shut, and he relaxed back into the couch, listening to the weather report on the telly. The next day would be quite rainy according to the bloke, and it was that one word, rainy, which gave Severus an idea.

*I'll go to see Rainie tomorrow. It's been a long time, but she'd been plain when she'd said that I'd always be welcome...no matter what happened (Potter winning or the Dark Lord winning). His eyes opened, and his gaze was again drawn to Hermione, who'd now tied up her hair and had commenced washing her face. That's what I'll do. I'll go to Rainie, compensate her quite well for thirty minutes of her time, and then I'll be able to remain here without thinking like some randy seventh year at Hogwarts. The plan would work well...unless the woman happened to be unavailable or elsewhere. If she can't do it, then I will quickly find someone who will. That's all there is to it.*

He'd only have to figure out what to do with Hermione, as he couldn't be very far from her and needed her to Apparate him. It wasn't as though he could come out and tell her that he wanted to see an old friend of his, one he paid for intercourse.

At that moment, Hermione came out of the bathroom. "It's all yours," she said, smiling at him beatifically.

If only she knew where his thoughts had been, she'd not have reserved such an angelic expression for him. He cleared his throat. "Would you mind terribly escorting me to Knockturn Alley?"

"What time?"

"Early morning would be fine, I'm certain. Seven? There's an old friend whom I sometimes do business with."

"I don't mind at all. Just let me know when, and we can go see him."

"Ah, well, *she* doesn't take kindly to strangers. I wonder if you'd allow me some privacy while we discuss my proposition." He tried to word things so that they were as true as possible without outright lying to her, and he felt a slight pang of regret when the curious light dimmed in her eyes.

"I understand."

"There's a shop just across from there...books and whatnot, though used...that you might browse through." He added slyly, "I don't think I'll take very long at all."

"That sounds like fun. As you know, I don't make a habit of going to Knockturn Alley, so looking around would be okay... especially with you there with me."

"Indeed."

"Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Hermione."

His eyes never left her form as she retreated into her room. What would it be like to have a woman such as she in his life? For his own. It had been many years since any woman had treated him in such a way. Not since Lily. He smiled sadly as he thought of his fiery Lily, who'd never failed to speak her mind, who'd blown up spectacularly when angry, who'd given as good as she'd received, who'd been kind to everyone, who had given him a chance when nobody else would. If Hermione were older and perhaps not such a close friend of another Potter...he'd never put himself in that position again...then he might try to woo her, for they were certainly compatible.

But she was young indeed and likely fickle. Yesterday she'd loved Weasley while today left her uncertain, so what would tomorrow bring and all the tomorrows after that? He frowned then and looked towards his crotch.

"It appears that I'm thinking with the wrong head."

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Hermione entered her room and resisted the urge to look back at him while she closed her door. He'd seemed so relaxed, more than she'd ever seen him, and she would have loved to join him again on the couch for another chat. However, she didn't want to intrude on his personal space. They'd come so far in just one day, and nothing would make her risk that.

After changing, she slipped into bed and helped Crookshanks under the cover where he liked to sleep. Her mind was too filled with thoughts to be able to drift off. What had he been thinking about? Did he feel the connection between them as she had? Was this what had been missing with Ron?

But how could this man, her old Potions professor, stir such feelings so quickly? She knew that it was not love, that was for certain, but there was definitely a kinship between them. Add that to the sudden longing to ease his pain...the one he'd been carrying around for all those years of his life. When he'd given her that advice about Ron, it had truly touched her and added another layer to the man she thought she knew.

Ron. How would she feel if he popped over to say that he and Pansy had become an item? Would she truly be happy for him? The memory of a smiling Severus wiping ice cream from her mouth came to mind. His touch, his dark and penetrating eyes, his voice... Yes, she would be happy for Ron. Why? Because she had someone else filling the empty spot in her life.

Nothing would ever come of it, of that she was certain, but she vowed to make the most of the rest of the time they had together. There was so much she could learn from

him and so much she could teach him about friendship and mutual respect. They'd stayed up together quite late to tend to the potion's next step, instead of him having to wake her...which hadn't worked out the previous time, him claiming she wouldn't get up. It was possible. Sometimes she did sleep quite soundly. The best thing was the company they'd shared. The entire time they'd been working together, it had never gone so smoothly.

What if something were to develop? Was it too soon? Was it really what she wanted? She shrugged and pushed those thoughts away. She and he would simply deal with this spark one day at a time. "I'll not pressure you into anything," she whispered to the darkness, finally able to drift off into a slumber.

Crooks woke her up quite early the next morning, obviously wanting to be let out of her room. "I'll have to magically fix you a little door on there, won't I? Sorry, Crooks." She'd been sleeping with her door closed lately, forgetting to leave it partially open for her familiar's access.

She padded over to the kitchen to feed him and noticed that Severus had already been up to make coffee. "Does he never sleep?" she grumbled jealously. Her cat looked up at her, his squashed face tilted as if to say he couldn't care less about Snape. "Here. Eat up."

After she fixed herself a mug of coffee, she went to his bedroom door and knocked. She heard a little rustling within and waited for nearly a minute until he opened the door. "What time do you want to leave?" she asked, hoping he didn't mind the interruption. Her eyes roamed over his body briefly, taking in the fitted trousers and comfortable white linen shirt. He looked quite dashing, especially since his hair was freshly washed and dried.

"It's still a little early yet, but," he gazed at his timepiece, "she always did wake before the sun, so I'm certain she's awake. I can only hope she's available."

"You smell nice," she blurted. Before he could answer, she asked, "What time does the bookstore open?"

"It already is," he said. "I don't know if they ever close. The nutter who runs it claims to never sleep." His lips changed to a smirk. "And by the way he looks, I quite believe it."

"Good grief. Do I even want to go to this place?"

"You'll like it. Trust me."

Hermione flashed him a smile and said, "Just give me a few minutes."

"Oh, there was an owl...from Potter, I assume. I placed the letter under your door. Did you get it?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't see it. I think I was still half asleep." Moving a little, she craned her head and nodded. "There it is. Thanks."

Once in the privacy of her room, she opened Harry's note.

Hermione,

Ron's told me that he talked to you. I'm sorry I've not had time to go back over, but Kingsley and I have been busy. I think you will appreciate what we have in the works. I've taken a page out of your book on this one.

Always,

Harry

With a broad grin, she placed the letter on her dresser. All would be well. Perhaps after Severus concluded his business appointment...whatever that was about...he and she might pop over to Grimmauld Place to see what was going on or maybe to the Burrow to check on Ginny. Anything to get out of the house again...together.

Southern's Notes: I'm sorry for taking longer to update. I've been so busy with the exchange that I've been lacking in other departments. Apologies.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 11

Hermione and Severus share a heated exchange after she finds out about his plans.

Disclaimer: I'm still having fun with JKR's characters, but no money is being made.

Thanks go to Beawesley2 for the beta read.

"Is that cologne you're wearing?" Hermione asked after she'd Apparated them to Diagon Alley.

"It is."

"What brand?"

"Something I made myself."

"It suits you," she said softly, looking around. "Where to now?"

"Follow me." He paused. "And thank you."

She said nothing and followed behind him, enjoying his confident gait and straight back. There seemed to be a swing to his step this morning, and she couldn't help but to hope that it had something to do with her and the great evening they'd shared. She wanted to know even more about him. When he wasn't being an arse or using his sarcasm as a blade to slice her to the core, he was quite amiable, and it fascinated her to know that there was so much more to learn.

The whole thing with Ron and Pansy had to be a sign of some kind. How much could be actual coincidence? Hermione smiled to herself as Severus stopped to look both

ways before entering a busy intersection. His face was so serious, so determined. Perhaps later, she'd see him smile again...or laugh.

"It's down this way," he said, pointing to the left and walking in that direction. "I'm sure you will find something to your liking. There are books there that I doubt you've ever even heard about."

"That's the exciting part! I can't wait." She tugged on his arm to make him stop. "Will I be safe without you? I mean, this is Knockturn Alley after all."

"From my experience, it's quite safe at this time of day. Most cretins are abed now that night's over." His lips quirked up slightly. "Besides, this is the good part of Knockturn Alley, and I don't doubt that you can handle anyone who might dare accost you."

The compliment made her shine. "And where's the business place you're going to?"

"It's right near there. Here we are," he said, nodding towards a large doorway. "There's coffee or tea as well. Rather a nice place actually. However, if the owner comes your way, don't engage in conversation with him, else you'll have no peace with all his chattering."

"All right. I'll see you shortly then?"

"I'm certain."

She hurried inside while he stood watching. Upon entering, the aroma of coffee wafted over, mingled with the scent of old books. It was quite appealing, and she felt immediately at home.

"Need some help?" an older lady asked, green highlights in her gray hair.

"Just looking," Hermione replied with a smile, continuing on her way. She made her way towards the first set of shelves, which happened to be near some tables where a couple of elderly men were sitting.

"I knew something like this would happen," proclaimed one.

"Ye didn' know nothin' o' the sort," said the other.

"I sure did. Knew something weren't right with Scrimgeour!"

Hermione looked more closely and saw that they were both holding the morning editions of the *Daily Prophet*. It could only mean that whatever Harry and Kingsley had been up to was working!

"Can I see that?" she asked, approaching their table.

"Sure thing, lady," the taller one said, handing the paper to her.

Minister Under Fire: Boy Who Defeated the Dark Lord Demands Answers

By Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter has been in the news a great deal lately, and it's not only for his Dark Wizard catching anymore. He's heading off corruption in the Ministry and is starting at the top with our Minister Rufus Scrimgeour. New evidence has been uncovered that most prisoners of Azkaban are being neglected. What's more, Potter claims that some people have been unrightfully sentenced...the Minister and many of the Wizengamot being well aware of this.

Potter issued these statements. "Hello, Rita. Nice to see you again."

"Harry," I asked, "can you tell me a little of what's going on?"

"Since accepting the job offered to me by the Minister yesterday, I've decided to do a little researching, and what I have found is just inconceivable. I am calling for everyone to join me at the Ministry tomorrow at noon to make certain they will have to listen to us an answer some questions that I have...which have been ignored so far."

"Bet he regrets signing Potter on now," said a source who doesn't want to be named. "Didn't think he'd be the next one to get taken down, eh?"

Can you see the relationship dear Harry and I have developed over the years? It's no wonder he confides in me above all my other colleagues. Back to the story... I've tried to contact the Minister for comments, but he is unavailable. A spokesperson for him has stated that there should be no one going to the Ministry tomorrow without an appointment, as there isn't enough room.

It seems that if they choose to honor Potter's request for an inquiry, it will be closed to the public. I shall update you with more information as soon as I get it.

"Brilliant!" Hermione said excitedly. "It's about time someone does this! I've been saying this for a long time now that people just aren't getting a fair shake, and it..." Her voice trailed away as she realized the men weren't looking at her any longer. They were glued to the window and gazing across the street.

She saw that their eyes were riveted on a woman who'd opened her door for a tall man with dark hair. Hermione quickly realized that it was Severus whom the lady was speaking with. *Must be the one he was meeting* she thought, curiously watching.

Oddly enough, the woman was dressed in only a fuchsia dressing gown, and her hair seemed to be up in Muggle rollers. Severus had said that the woman was an early riser, but it seemed as though he'd surprised her.

"Looks like Rain got company," a man said.

Hermione looked up towards the small sliver of the sky that she could see from where she was standing and noticed that it looked cloudy indeed. What was the man talking about though? He didn't even seem to be looking up into the sky, only at Severus and his friend.

"Rainie's always go' company," the other man snickered. "If ye'd pay 'er, ye could be 'er company, too, eh?"

"Naw, she told me I'm an old git last I tried. Said I didn't have enough money to change her mind either." He nodded towards Severus. "He used to visit her often...every month or so, bright an' early on a Saturday morning. Odd to see him back after all this time, eh?"

The paper dropped from Hermione's fingers and landed with a small thump on the table below. "You mean to say that she... is a prostitute?"

Both men snickered. "Right' in one," said the second one. "Ye shouldna worry about' it, less it's ye'r bloke o'er there paying for it."

Hermione felt the air thicken around her and press against her chest heavily. "That bastard!" she ground out between clenched teeth. He'd lied to her, had asked her to Apparate him so that he could visit a whore! He'd told her that he needed to meet someone for a business proposition.

"Good Lord, girl, ye'r not sayin' tha's ye'r man, eh?"

She stormed away from the nosy blighters and quickly exited the shop, going towards the corner she'd seen Severus talking to the woman on. They'd already gone inside,

and with this knowledge, Hermione felt her heartbeat quicken, and as she pulled her wand and strode purposefully over to the raggedy building, her hands shook with flowing adrenaline. From the corner of her eye, she could see the two old men watching from the window in the shop.

Of all the idiotic things for Severus to do! How could he?

Hurt and rage warred within her mind, and it caused her to lose all sense as she blasted the door from its hinges and sent it falling back inside the room. She didn't stop moving as she barged in, splinters of wood and shards of glass crunching under her feet. It didn't take long for her to find them, as they were both staring at her with wide eyes from the other side of the room.

"Who the hell are you?" the woman asked, scrambling for her wand on the small table near her couch.

"Don't you dare," Hermione whispered.

The woman froze and gazed at Snape in horror. "Severus, who's she?"

"How could you!" Hermione yelled, not letting him answer. "You asked me to bring you here for this! Why? Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie," he said smoothly, re-buttoning the buttons he'd obviously just begun to unfasten. "I told you I had a meeting with a woman."

"Yes, a business proposition," Hermione said coldly. Without thinking, she went to him, grabbed him roughly, and disappeared with him to her flat. Once there, she released him as if he were on fire. "How could you do this to me?" she asked, disappointment tingeing her voice.

"To you? I've done nothing to you."

"You lied to me!"

"I didn't bluntly state my intentions, but my words to you were honest."

She crossed her arms over her chest and gazed at him incredulously. "You should have told me what you needed instead of doing it like this!"

"What was I to say? 'Pardon me, Hermione, but I am only a man and being this close to you is driving me mad with the need to seek sexual pleasure with a woman.'" He gave her a nasty smile. "Why, I had no idea that part of your job was to make me *that* comfortable while I'm here."

She slapped him soundly on the face and was grabbed roughly by the elbows instantly.

"Don't you dare raise a hand to me, girl. I'm not some boy who will put up with that." He pushed her away. "What was I to do?" His voice lost its edge, but his eyes were still dangerously narrowed. "You've embarrassed me today, and I was just..."

Hermione reached up and placed a hand behind his neck, pulling his head down to meet hers. "I'm right *there*, and you're going to go to *her*?"

His eyes widened as her lips crashed into his, nearly making her laugh. However, once she opened her mouth to deepen their kiss, she was lost in his intensity. She'd never felt such passion in a kiss, and it felt that all of her anger and jealousy only helped to fuel the fire. She wanted to feel him against her, wanted to be the one to unfasten his buttons... everything.

Her hands raked down the front of his shirt and pulled at the crisp fabric, sending buttons flying all over the floor. His chest was smooth and had a light smattering of dark hair, which she immediately smoothed her hands over. This earned her a grunt and had him shifting to pull her blouse away from her.

Breaking their kiss as he pulled it over her head did nothing to deter the passion she felt. She wanted more, and as soon as she was able, her mouth latched onto his throat as if she were a vampire seeking blood, wanting to leave her mark on him. With a small sting, she felt the strap of her bra slap the skin of her back, and in the next moment, he'd whisked it away someplace, leaving her bare-skinned from the waist up.

And then he spun her around so that her back was against the wall, tearing her mouth away from him as his head lowered, his own mouth feasting on her breasts, his hands roaming lower and fumbling with the clasp on her jeans. Intrigued with his freshly washed hair, she grabbed handfuls of it and inhaled the scent of her shampoo on his locks. It had never smelled so good on her.

Hermione arched her back slightly, hoping to press more of her breast against his tongue. "Ah... yes, Severus." Her jeans slid down under the practiced motion of his hands. Not wanting to be outdone, she awkwardly bent so that she could reach the zip of his trousers, pulling it down and tugging the button through its hole. With the help of her feet, she pushed them down, not once dislodging his mouth from her breast.

Wanting to feel all of him, her hands roamed his back, his chest. The contact was too minimum, and as much as she enjoyed the feel of him teasing her nipples with his tongue, she wanted more...all of him.

She cupped his face and pulled his mouth back up to hers, giving him the hint that she'd had enough foreplay. Truth be known, she was hot and ready and wanting him. Never before had she felt so needy. "Now," she murmured between kisses.

There was a rustling of fabric, and then she felt his hands on her waist, pushing her knickers down. She moved her hips to help them along and actually kicked one leg free of her jeans and knickers, but before she could kick away the other side, her free leg was lifted and placed around his waist.

His kisses stopped suddenly, and he asked, "Do you want this?"

"Yes, don't stop," she managed to say.

And his lips were back again, tasting hers, tongue exploring. His body ground against hers a little, and she felt one of his fingers slide into her waiting heat as if readying the passage. She lifted up on her toes and tightened her grip around his waist, urging him on, and in the next moment, she felt him pushing into her.

"Anh..." she moaned against his lips, receiving a guttural noise that sounded like approval. Though a little awkward at first, they found a rhythm, bodies meeting, grinding, slapping. The friction was delicious, and at the angle he slammed into her, she could feel the tension mounting with each push.

She'd never experienced sex against a wall. Nor did Ron ever react to her in such a way or evoke such passion in her. All she knew was that she needed him...needed more. When her leg began to tremble, he scooped her up, bracing most of her weight against the wall. She shook away the jeans and knickers still caught on her other foot, and then wrapped both legs around him, arching against his body, grabbing onto the nearby doorjamb with one hand for leverage and clutching onto his shoulder with the other.

"You feel so good," he murmured at some point.

Hermione wanted to tell him to not stop because she was nearly there, but the words wouldn't come. His hands were kneading her arse and steadying her as he pounded into her, adding to the pleasure she felt. She shifted and pumped against him, adding the rub of his pelvic bone against her clit to the inner stimulation that she was already feeling.

"OH GOD!" she shouted suddenly as an orgasm came from nowhere, sending tingles and heat and pleasure sweeping through her body.

Severus quickened his pace with long, deep strokes, faster and faster, and then she felt it. His entire body was trembling, and he arched back slightly, eyes closed, murmuring, "Yes, yes..." as he came.

His forehead came to rest against hers, and the first thing she could think of was how sweaty both of them were. He didn't pull away from her, but instead, he tried to move them over to the couch, only to trip slightly on the trousers and underpants that were still wrapped around his ankles. They toppled onto the couch, both panting, and she grinned, certain they made a sight. She was completely naked, and he was nearly there as well, though his shirt and trousers were still on his person. She'd never took the time to do more than rip open his shirt to get her hands on his flesh.

There was so much that needed to be said, and when she finally slowed her breathing enough to ask, Crookshanks jumped up on the small table next to the couch and meowed at them in annoyance.

"Crooks! Go away," she said, feeling a little embarrassed. It wasn't everyday that her familiar spied her in such a manner.

When the cat just sat there, she turned to look at Severus. His expression was inscrutable for a moment, and his eyes lowered, taking in her undressed state. Feeling self-conscious, she started to rise to gather her clothing, only to have him rise as well. But instead of moving away from her, he kicked away his trousers and underpants, neatly scooped her up, and brought her to his room where he kicked the door closed behind him and then dumped her onto his bed.

She watched with wide eyes as he unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt and tossed it to the floor. Her anger had long since dwindled and had been replaced by need for him, but now that that had waned, she was uncertain what to do next. It was obvious that he wasn't done with her. Nor did she want him to be. However, she didn't know what to expect now.

He graced her with a small smile that melted her insides, pushed out all other thoughts, and gave her courage to scoot back against his pillows, part her legs, and crook her finger at him. Severus quickly crawled over to her, nestling himself between her thighs, propping up on his hands as he gazed down at her, slowly lowering his head, dark eyes not leaving hers as his lips met hers in what was a surprisingly soft kiss.

It was the softest kiss she'd ever experienced. His mouth was so gentle against hers that she had to open her eyes to make certain he was still there. His tongue moved around hers, tasting her, almost lovingly. She felt so cherished, so needed. He slid down her body slightly and began to worship her breasts anew, sending shivers of delight through her. It occurred to her that he was not only a Potions master, but a master of so much more. Never had she felt as though she could succumb to orgasmic bliss from only the stimulation of her breasts.

"What are you doing to me?" she asked, voice strained with delight.

He said nothing, but his head moved lower, his tongue laving the softness of her stomach, teeth nicking her flesh every now and then. When he tried to go even lower, she stopped him by placing her hands on his face and making him look up at her. She shook her head, not exactly feeling comfortable with what he was about to do, and guided him back up to kiss her again, her hands sliding down his back and grabbing his smooth arse.

And then he was pushing into her again. This time it was a slow rhythm, him learning her body and her learning his. Gone was the fevered rush and need. Something else had replaced that. His eyes seemed to beg for acceptance and sought encouragement, so she gave it to him by whispering sweet nothings to him, telling him how good he felt to her, and how much she wanted him.

Though she didn't have an orgasm this time around, she was not disappointed. Just feeling him shudder and pump into her at his steady pace was enough. She relished in the fact that he fell asleep after placing light kisses on her throat and face, still on top of her. She doubted he ever let his guard down with many people...if anyone...and yet he trusted her enough to have experienced this side of him. She was certain that not many people saw that. And she wanted more.

Her jealousy, which was quite surprising, had caused her to act like a wild woman, but she was quite pleased with how things had turned out. How would he feel about it once he woke and thought things through? Would he want something more with her? Were they moving too fast? She'd only earlier vowed to take things one day at a time, and yet, she and he had already crossed many boundaries. She closed her eyes and tried to find the sleep that had taken him over.

Southern's Notes: Well, oops, eh? LOL Sometimes you mean to do one thing and something else happens. Ah, how will they deal with this? ~snerk~

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 11

The potion Hermione and Severus have been working on is finally complete. And just how do they spend the day after the morning they shared?

Disclaimer: I'm snagging a few of JKR's characters for a bit of fun.

Thanks go to ladyinthecloak for the beta read and for being such a good friend.

Hermione opened her eyes and stretched out slowly before suddenly remembering where she was and what had happened. She turned over to find the bed empty and his spot cold. How long had she been sleeping? Where had he gone?

"Severus?" He wasn't in the room, and through the small crack in the door, she noticed that he wasn't on the couch either. Being unable to Disapparate without her, she knew he was there somewhere. *Shite!* she thought.

She sat up and realized she was still naked, but as far as she could tell, her body had been magically cleaned and tucked under the cool sheet. Her clothes were nowhere to be seen. "Great. Now... how do I get out of here without him seeing me naked?" she muttered, sliding her legs down to the floor. "Oh." He'd laid out her new nightgown for her on the chair next to the bed.

How thoughtful. She quickly slid the gown on for the first time, enjoying the feel against her bare flesh. "Definitely worth the money." Taking a deep breath, she decided to try not to make things awkward for them. What she'd done was nearly inexcusable. What had she been thinking to barge in like that...crashing down that woman's door...and the way she'd just taken him home? She didn't even want to think about the slap to his face! She'd had no right. God, what he must have thought!

A sly smile graced her lips as she thought of where all that had led. It had all happened so quickly, but she didn't regret any of it. It had been the most intense and best sex

she'd ever had. When he'd brought her to his bed and showed her his vulnerable side, she felt the stirring of other emotions. She could love this man...this sour grouch...if he would let her, and that thought made her insides tingle.

"I must be mad," she said, peeking out of the opened doorway. She could tell that he was in the kitchen, so she made her way towards him, ready to face up to what she'd done. *I hope he's not too weird about things.*

"Hey," she said softly, gazing at the clock and seeing it was already past noon.

He turned to face her, and there was nothing about his expression that made her feel uncomfortable. He seemed to be looking at her no differently than he had that morning before they'd left to go out. After a moment, he said, "I thought you'd sleep all day."

"I did think about staying in bed," she said, feeling her cheeks blush, "but I supposed, though, that I needed to be up."

"You've had a few owls this morning. I've put the mail on the counter, just there."

"And just what are you up to?" she asked with a big grin, noticing the nearly prepared meal spread out on the counter.

"I was bored since the potion is only simmering. I... couldn't sleep for too long, so I thought maybe I could make lunch for a change."

She stretched. "I *am* hungry." There was a small silence. "I'll go get a shower and join you after?"

"All right," he said quietly with a nod, turning back to the stove.

On the way out of the room, she saw that he'd fed Crooks, and this more than anything warmed her. Things would be all right, and it seemed that they could both approach this new phase of their 'relationship' as mature adults.

"Hermione?" he called after her.

"Yes?" She turned and found him clutching the doorway, an uncertain expression on his face.

"It's nearly done. If you want to wait on your shower..."

"Are you sure?" she asked. When he said nothing, she pointed to her nightgown. "I don't want you to feel... uncomfortable." As she said the words, her cheeks flushed anew. *And now I sound liked a damn berk!*

At this he flashed her a small, unsteady smile. "I think we're a little past that now, aren't we?"

"I'd say so." She followed him back into the kitchen. "Anything I can do?"

"You could set the table while I finish this."

"Done." After she set out their plates, she asked, "What do you want to drink?"

"Whatever you'd like."

"I made some lemonade last night...the kind with real lemons like my Aunt Helga from Ramstein taught me to make. It's... really quite good. Would you like to try some?"

"Certainly." He busied himself with the food and placed the pots on the table while she poured their drinks.

After he seated himself, she reached over and began to fix his plate for him, handing it to him and then starting on hers. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about." She heard a small sigh and looked up, but she didn't notice a change in his expression. Was he dreading that she might bring up their sex? "When I was in that store this morning, there were two old blokes reading the *Prophet*. Do you know what Harry's done?"

Severus smirked, seemingly relieved, and nodded towards the counter with the mail. "I took the liberty of reading the morning's edition. I'm surprised Potter has it in him to take on the Minister like this...so openly. Only someone... someone like Dumbledore would have the gall to do so."

"I think, Severus, that you just gave Harry a compliment."

"Hmph," he said noncommittally. "Dumbledore was quite dotty at times, wasn't he? Look where all that courage got him."

"Yes," she said softly, "he helped to save the world."

Severus didn't reply, suddenly becoming infatuated with the new potatoes on his plate.

"I'm sorry. I know that subject is probably hard for you."

"There are many things that aren't easy for me," he said quietly, still looking down.

Knowing she should change the subject, she asked, "So, what do you think of this potion? All okay?"

"We'll find out this evening, won't we?"

"So soon? I thought it had another day."

"I've gone over the calculations again, and it seems that I was wrong in the length of time required for it to cure. Do you think the Weasleys would welcome us to try tonight?"

"Yes, I know they would," she said happily. "Oh, this is such good news! We'll never be able to repay you, will we?"

"Your beast was harassing me for breakfast earlier, so I obliged him."

"I noticed. Thank you." After tasting the roasted chicken, she exclaimed, "This is really good."

"And did you really expect anything less?" he asked dryly.

"I suppose not. You are good at *everything* you do, aren't you? I... oh!" She realized what she'd just insinuated and hated the heat she felt rising from her throat to her face.

"Ah, a compliment indeed," he said before sipping on his lemonade, eyes not leaving hers. "It's good," he lifted his glass, "so I suppose you're good *at* you do as well."

Hermione grinned and sheepishly said, "Thank you."

Lunch was filled with pleasant small talk, mostly about potions he'd created, and once they were done eating, they cleaned the table together and placed the leftovers in

containers to be refrigerated. Things were much more pleasant than Hermione could have imagined. There was none of the strain or animosity she'd first feared upon waking.

"I've updated my notes on the potion. Would you like to go up and see?"

"Sure. Oh, let me see what this is. Looks like it's from the Ministry." There was a crisp, ivory envelope with the Ministry's official seal on the back. "Blighters better not be trying to force me back before..." she muttered, trailing off as she read the letter.

Dear Miss Hermione J. Granger,

It has been decided that your testimony will be needed in a hearing tomorrow that has been called by the Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour to answer to allegations against our administration brought forth by Auror Harry Potter.

Proceedings are set to begin at 9 A.M. sharp at the Ministry of Magic in Courtroom Eight. As listed under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, this is mandatory, and you must be present. It has been noted that you are currently sponsoring Severus Snape, as per arrangement with the Ministry, and he will be allowed to accompany you to the proceeding. You must bring this parchment in able to get in.

Hoping you are well,

Yours Sincerely,

Lanithica Lathicani

Summons Department

Ministry of Magic

"It's like they want me to testify against whatever Harry says." She passed the letter to him. "What do you think?"

"I think that I hate having to go back there. I've had enough of the blasted Ministry and their fake trials."

"This is a chance to right those wrongs," she said, placing a hand on his arm.

"Possibly."

"I wish I knew what was expected of me. I think I should owl Harry and let him know. He's got a lot to fill me in on anyway."

"Very well. I can show you my notes later," he said crisply and walked towards the door that led to the attic.

"No, it's all right. I expect he's eating lunch now anyway with the Weasleys. I'd like to read over what you've got if you don't mind. That way when I owl him, I can include something from you and our possible visit to the Burrow this evening."

He nodded and beckoned for her to precede him up the stairway.

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Molly Weasley opened the door excitedly. "Hermione! Severus! Come in, come in." She grabbed them both and hugged them like a woman who hadn't seen her children in months. "So good of you to be here. Arthur, Harry! There're here!"

"Hello," Arthur said from behind his plump wife. He held out a hand to Severus, who was trying to smooth down his disheveled hair after Molly's embraces.

"Arthur," he said with a nod, shaking his hand. He then turned to face the other person in the room. "Potter."

"Snape," Harry greeted.

Hermione smiled and closed the door behind them. "Hope you don't mind us coming before dinner like this, but we didn't want to do this too late."

"Nonsense! We've plenty and would love for you to share our meal," Mrs. Weasley offered.

"Meatballs," Arthur said with grin. "Best round these parts, I'm sure of it."

"Maybe," Hermione said, looking up to Severus, whose gaze was still locked with Harry's.

"You can decide," he said coolly, finally turning to face her.

"Uh, let's go up first. That's more important, I think."

"Indeed." He pulled a large phial from his pocket. "I would like to administer this to Ginevra."

"I'll go with you," Harry said immediately.

"Harry dear, I think I'll be the one to go in with Severus. She'll likely need some privacy," Molly said kindly, inching closer to Severus as if ready to grab him and pull him forward.

Harry nodded and watched as Severus and Molly left the room, Arthur trailing behind, obviously bent on not being left out. Hermione touched Harry's arm. "All right?"

"Nervous."

"Me too." She hugged him tightly and placed her head on his shoulder. "It's got to work. You've no idea how brilliant Severus is. I think he could figure out anything given the time and resources." She pulled back and smiled up at him. "She'll be fine."

His eyes had narrowed slightly, but then, he breathed out a sigh. "I think so, too. About her being fine, that is." He flashed a small smile. "And I guess I'll have to admit Snape's brilliant if this works."

"How are things at Grimmauld Place?" She couldn't bring herself to ask directly about Ron and Pansy, but the lack of their presence seemed to indicate that something wasn't right at their house. "Are you and Ron having a row? Why is he not here?"

"No, nothing like that. I just didn't want *them* here, ya know? We fought over who should be here. I won." He shrugged. "I think I should be. In fact," he stepped away from her and continued in a suddenly angry voice, "I shouldn't be bloody stuck down here. I should be up there, too."

"I can only imagine what you're feeling." She pulled his hand into hers and guided him towards the table. "Let's sneak some of this food while they're up there. We don't

know how long they'll be."

"What's he going to do?"

"Actually, she's got to drink some of it, and then some of it needs to be rubbed into her skin."

"Where?" he snapped.

"Does it matter? I'm sure that's why Molly wanted privacy!"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Sit. I'll fix a bowl."

"I don't think I could eat just now, Hermione."

She sat down with a thump. "To be honest, I can't either. My stomach's in knots!"

"Speaking of knots, what did you do to your hair?" he asked, arching an eyebrow. "New style?"

"Harry Potter! Are you taking the Mickey? I'll have you know that your hair isn't exactly tidy either."

He snorted. "But yours looks like you've been rolling round on the floor or something."

She blushed profusely. *Rolled against the wall early this morning if you must know.* "I had a nap this morning and spent the afternoon in the attic with Severus, reading over his journals of notes and discussing what could be tweaked if something didn't work this round, thank you very much. When we realized the time, we rushed over."

"Oi, so defensive! It's not like I thought you were really rolling around on the floor with..." His mouth gaped open, and he sat back so hard, his chair scooted backwards a little. "Hermione, no!"

"Sorry?" she asked uncertainly. What was he on about?

His mouth shut tightly, and his head turned to gaze at the quiet stairway as if debating on running for them.

"Harry? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Look at me." His green glare took her by surprise. "I... Are you angry with me?"

"No."

"Then why do you look like you want to hex me?"

"Not you."

"Then who?"

"Myself," he said, bringing his hands up to cover his face.

Hermione stood, a little confused, and moved to his side of the table, putting her arms around him. "Harry, I love you, and while I might be a bit bossy or irate at times, I hope you know that I appreciate all you've done for this world. If anyone deserves some peace, it's you. Please stop blaming yourself for all that's gone on. It's not your fault."

He turned and gave her an incredulous look before snorting and standing up. "There's so many things I could say right now, but you're right. Ginny comes first."

"I'm nervous about tomorrow. What could they want with me? What do they think I could tell them that would possibly help their case?" she asked.

"I don't know, but no matter what happens, just be honest. I've nothing to hide."

"Neither do I," she said firmly. "Is Ron going to be there?"

"Yes, he was also sent a summons, as were Pansy and Daphne."

Her brow furrowed. "Odd. Wonder what that's all about then."

"I'd planned on asking you all to come anyway." He grinned. "We'll beat them at their own game. I know we will."

Footsteps alerted them to someone's presence. They turned to see Severus descending the stairs. "Potter, Molly would like you to go up."

"Any change?" Hermione asked, bolting up.

"Nothing major. Her eyes blinked a few times and then closed. It may be a while. I've given them instructions."

Harry nodded. "I'm going up. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Everything all right here?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, he's a bit stressed and tensed up."

"I see."

"Would you like me to fix you something to eat now?"

He smirked. "I remember Molly's meatballs. The one time I was coaxed into staying at headquarters for a meal, I regretted it later."

"They are spicy, aren't they?" Hermione said with a laugh. She lowered her voice and asked, "Severus, what do you think about Ginny?"

"I feel positive about it." He gave her a small smile. "As it seeps into her pores and is passed through her body, she should start healing from the inside out. The time it takes will be up to her, I suppose."

"Should we stay here to monitor? Perhaps to take notes? We'd know what to expect when we treated the others that way."

"That won't be necessary. Molly has volunteered to mark down changes and the times for us, which will be a big help."

"Oh, here's someone now," she said, moving towards the stairway. "All right?" she asked when she saw Harry.

"Yeah." His smile was broad. "She clenched one of her hands just now. We're going to be up here a while, so... want to come up?"

"We'll just be going," Hermione said. "It's been an, uh, eventful day. Should I meet with you in the morning before going to the Ministry, Harry?"

"Maybe come round to Grimmauld Place at seven? I can show you what I'll be discussing, and we can see if I've missed any angles."

"Sounds good." She smiled and held up a hand in farewell. "We'll leave you to it then."

"Er... thank you, Snape," Harry said.

"It's nothing," was the reply.

Once they were outside at the Apparition point, Hermione pulled Snape into an embrace and squeezed tightly, unable to stop a few tears from spilling. "Thank you so much."

His arms surrounded her, and he squeezed her back in return. "Regardless of what people may think, I find it pleasing to conquer problems and to have my work help others."

She laid her head on his shoulder and Disapparated them to her flat. Once there, she reluctantly let go of him. "I don't know if you're keen on leftovers, but I quite liked what you made for lunch, so would you mind terribly if I heated that up for us?"

"Not at all. Do you need me to do something?"

Grinning, Hermione said, "You can set the table and pour something for us to drink."

"Wine tonight?"

"All right," she agreed, leading the way to the kitchen.

Dinner passed pleasantly, both talking excitedly of the possibilities of the potion and other types of potions that could be made from it. After the kitchen was cleaned and the dishes put away, Hermione stretched slightly.

"I'm going to go have that shower finally," she said. "... I had a lovely day today."

"Considering its start?" he asked bluntly.

"About that... I had no right to just barge in there and..."

"I shouldn't have done that...misleading you about what I'd intended. I think your anger was justified."

She smiled. "I appreciate that." There was so much more she wanted to discuss and to ask, but she felt that the time wasn't exactly right. When he made no move to say anything else, she quickly went to her room to get her nightclothes so that she could take a shower.

When she got out, he was waiting at the door, mostly blocking her exit. "I'll take one now as well," he said.

"I think I've left some warm water for you," she replied, waiting for him to move. When he didn't, she asked, "Did you need something?"

"Are you going to bed, or will you still be up for a while?"

Hermione's heart started beating more quickly. "I thought I might read for a little while."

"All right. I won't be long," he said, stepping aside to let her pass.

After she heard him turn on the water, she sat on the couch and held her book in front of her. She couldn't do anything to focus on the words, as her mind reeled with the implication of what he'd said. He wanted to spend more time with her. Did he expect more sex? Did she? Perhaps he'd decided to talk more about what had happened between them.

*What do I want?* she asked herself honestly. If she told herself the truth, she'd have to admit that having a relationship with him would be her choice. She wanted to know all of him...past included. She wanted him to know her completely. They were quite alike and had proven that, although they could be hotheads, things could be pleasant between them...conversation-wise, work-wise, and sexually.

*What does he want?* she wondered. It was obvious that his past was still very much part of his life and heart. Could she breach that? Would he let her in and give her a place of her own? Did he only want sex, or had he also enjoyed the time they'd shared? Fear gripped her suddenly; what if he intended to tell her that a repeat of what they'd done could never happen?

She frowned, uncertain how she felt about that. And then it hit her. *What the bloody hell am I doing? He's so much older than I am, and there's just so much I don't know about him. He's nothing like Ron.* Ron. What if she'd tossed aside the one chance for someone to really love her when she'd let Ron go? What if this was all a mistake?

"Is your book uninteresting?" asked Severus.

Hermione looked up to find him leaning against the doorjamb, shirtless, head tilted sideways with his hair still wet from its washing. "I can't concentrate," she admitted, tossing it aside. "Maybe something good is on the telly."

"Or maybe," he said, stepping away from the bathroom door and backing towards his, "there is something better in here." He extended his hand in invitation.

Without thinking of the consequences or listening to any of the thoughts in her mind, Hermione stood and went to him, placing her hand in his and allowing him to pull her into his darkened room. Crookshanks meowed and tried to follow them, only to have Severus close the door.

"Not this time, cat," he said, amusement lacing his voice.

Hermione felt herself trembling slightly, but the moment he drew her to him for a kiss, all nervousness fled. Nothing that felt so right could be wrong.

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**Southern's Notes:** I'd hoped to get this out to you before Christmas. Season's Greetings to everyone. When I wrote this chapter, I'd decided long ago that I wanted a different "morning after." None of the awkwardness or long discussions. Just something... I dunno, normal. Hope you liked it.



# Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 11

Scrimgeour has a few tricks up his sleeves.

**Disclaimer:** I'm not JKR, though I do wish I had her money. Snerk.

*Thanks go to amsev for the beta read!*

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Hermione Disappeared from her flat with Severus very early the next morning. Nervously, she knocked on the door of Grimmauld Place. It opened moments later.

"Good morning, Professor, Granger," Daphne said. "Everyone's in the kitchen already."

Both Severus and Hermione greeted the girl and followed her inside. Once in the kitchen, she asked, "How's Ginny?" The beaming smiles from both of her friends told her all she needed to know. "Oh, thank God!"

"Can't wait to get this over with so we can all go to the Burrow. Bloody Ministry," Ron grumbled before stuffing a piece of toast into his mouth.

"What has she said? How does she feel?" Hermione asked quickly, hugging Harry, who was closest, and then Ron. She noticed Pansy crossing her arms and looking away. "Oh, stuff it!" she blurted. "He'll always be my friend."

Severus broke the silence. "Well? How is she, Potter? Taking well to the potion?"

"Yeah, she's responding really well. Even trying to talk."

"Nothing coherent?"

"She's trying, but no, she can't say much."

"Miss Weasley will grow stronger with each hour that passes. I expect she'll make a full recovery." He sat in an empty seat and helped himself to a slice of toast.

Hermione smiled and had to stop herself from going to him to brush back the lock of hair that had fallen over his face. "We've got you to thank for this. So many people will be helped." She nodded to Daphne. "Your brother, he should be next. Do you agree?"

"Yes, please," the other girl nodded vigorously. "That would be wonderful."

Harry sat down next to Snape and gestured for Hermione to join them. "Let's go over things before we have to get to the Ministry. I want to be ready for whatever this lot throws at us."

"I've got all the notes that Severus and I have worked on. That will show that we've been doing work, and we'll get Ron's father to testify about Ginny's results. That should be enough for them."

"And I," Daphne added, "will tell them what I think of the way they treated my brother and me."

Harry smirked. "Kingsley, Mr. Weasley, and I have taken statements from over a hundred people, and we're positive that..."

"Yeah," Ron interrupted, "even Percy sees the sense in backing Harry this time."

"The git," Harry added with a smile, causing Hermione to snicker while their three Slytherin companions looked at them in confusion.

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "Long story."

"Right. On with this then," Harry said, his laughter fading.

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A stunned Hermione made her way into her flat alone and didn't bother turning on any lights. The dark and cold that met her were the only company she needed. How could such a beautiful day have turned so sour? Things weren't supposed to be this way. Her gaze moved towards Severus' door, and she wished fervently that he'd be inside, sleeping peacefully.

"But he'll never sleep there again, will he?" she voiced to the empty room before numbly making her way to the shower, stripping away her clothing as she did so. Once she was under the hot spray and lathering her hair, she began to think over the events of the day. Harry had briefed them on the information he'd gathered and what he planned to question the Minister about. Although the hearing was closed to the public, it hadn't stopped wizards and witches from gathering inside and outside the Ministry. Many officials were disappointed that so many oddly clothed wizarding folk were out in Muggle London, causing a stir with passersby.

Hermione had immediately known that something was off when she and Severus entered the courtroom. Many of the Wizengamot turned to look at her appraisingly, some shaking their heads in disapproval. She then noticed a few familiar faces in the crowd...Severus' prostitute friend, the two old blokes from the shop across from the woman's home, and even the saleswitch who'd sold her the expensive nightgown. Her own boss, who'd been kind enough to give her time off to work with Snape on finding a cure, barely gave her a second glance.

Feeling uneasy, she'd looked at Severus to see if he'd noticed anything. However, his expression had been blank, and he'd simply stared straight ahead and at no one in particular. Not that she'd blamed him. After the way they'd treated him, they didn't deserve any recognition from him. However, she'd wanted him to at least spare her a glance.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, if you will be honest, you are mainly concerned for your friend's welfare, are you not?" Scrimgeour asked, leveling him with a hard stare momentarily before looking over to smirk at Hermione.

"Severus Snape and I are not what I would call friends, sir, so no, I don't know what you're getting at. I simply think that based on..."

"Oh, you do misunderstand me. I am referring to your friend, Miss Hermione Granger."

"Hermione? This has nothing to do with her and everything to do with you treating people unfairly and not thoroughly examining all evidence brought forth." He directed an equally cold gaze at the Minister and then at other members of the Wizengamot. "And for basically offering favors to get what you need done."

"Ah, favors, is it? I asked you to take a job, and you took it," Scrimgeour roared suddenly. "If you want to talk about favors, let's discuss what favors your friend is receiving from..."

"How dare you!" Minerva McGonagall said from across the room. "Don't you go trying to sully that young lady's reputation to save your own skin!"

"One more outburst, and I'll have you escorted out of here," he replied gruffly.

"She's a witness," Harry retorted hotly. "And I think you should explain yourself."

"In due time, Potter. In due time."

Tears mingled with the water running down her cheeks. She'd been ruined. The Minister had planned to use her the entire time to make himself look better and to try to discredit Harry. He'd even attempted to drag Ron's name through the mud. She sighed and began rinsing away the soapy lather from her body, thinking of Ron's angry expression as the saleswoman from Nancy's Nightwear took a seat in the chair and claimed she'd overheard the two of them discussing sexual relationships with Pansy Parkinson and Severus Snape, who were supposed to be their protected charges and not exploited in any manner.

"I'd just sold her a nightgown minutes before when I heard the Parkinson lady telling her that she wouldn't be able to seduce Snape with something such as that, so I'm certain that was her intention," the smug woman had stated, causing everyone in the room to gaze at Hermione. "And right when she bought it, she told the red-haired man, Harry Potter's friend, that she wanted something comfortable for Snape."

Hermione had been outraged, of course, and had even made a couple of outbursts, but Harry had wisely urged her to wait until she'd be able to give her side of the story. Severus' expression had been indifferent nearly the entire time, aside from a couple of scowls.

"Hermione never said that!" Ron said angrily. "This dirty rotten snitch hasn't even got her story right! Pansy was just having a go at Hermione!"

"Whatever for?" the Minister asked snidely.

"Because she thought Hermione and I were still together."

"What would that matter?"

"Well... because she..." Ron's face turned a shade redder as he realized the trap he'd made for himself. "Pansy fancies me."

"Ah, yes, our friend at the store said something to that effect in her statement, but I felt it unnecessary to bring up. However, now that you've brought it up, let's discuss this a bit further. Have you been trying to entice the young lady who's supposed to be under your care? Maybe you've given her the impression that a few sexual encounters would see her free quickly?"

"What are you on about? I've not touched her!" Ron retorted hotly.

Harry stood up. "And I'm witness to that. Both Pansy and Daphne have not been harmed or coerced in any way while living with us at Grimmauld Place." He nodded towards Hermione. "Neither has Snape!"

"Indeed?" a witch to Scrimgeour's left spoke up. "Shall we hear from the next witness then? I found her statement rather enlightening."

"Yes," Scrimgeour agreed. "Step down, Mister Weasley. We'll be calling someone else now."

"I've not asked him any questions yet," Harry said, glaring at the Minister and those around him.

"Go on then," the man said irritably.

Even though Ron had explained the entire situation, Hermione had seen that some people still looked upon her with disapproval. She smiled slightly as she recalled his flustered face when he'd tried to explain that the gown was long and nothing that looked seductive to him. Of course, the Minister then mentioned that it could be altered into something more provocative at the wearer's whim.

The next witness had been Rainie, the woman whose home she'd stormed into and snatched Severus from. That had painted her as a jealous lover and had landed her with a fine. Harry had done his best to discredit her, but when the two nosy blokes from the bookstore gave their statements, they'd claimed that Hermione had said Snape was her man before going blow the woman's door off its hinges.

Both Pansy and Daphne had given testimony about what had happened at Nancy's Nightwear and about the arrangements at Grimmauld Place. Hermione had been relieved that Pansy hadn't tried to sabotage her and had admitted she'd only been trying to rile up Hermione. The more people Harry had called for statements, the clearer it became that people were seeing Scrimgeour and his underhanded dealings in a new light...even after Hermione's disaster on the stand. By the end of the long day, many people held under suspicion had been released from custody as per the Wizengamot...Severus, Daphne, and Pansy among them. There would be another meeting scheduled, closed to the public, about Scrimgeour's future in the Ministry.

Severus had stood and nodded at Harry, stating that he would hold true to his word and help all the others that he could. He gave Hermione one glance and left without a word. Her heart had dropped.

It was painfully obvious that he'd been humiliated and held her responsible. She didn't have to look in his room to know that he'd returned to take his things and had gone home to Spinner's End. The dark and cold flat had made that apparent upon entering. Why couldn't he have waited and escorted her home so that they could talk? Hadn't he felt the strong connection that she had? How could he just walk away without a word?

Turning the water off, she decided to simply go to bed. There would be time to think about everything in the morning. She'd just have to take one day at a time and slowly rebuild her reputation. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that she hadn't enjoyed her job at the Ministry very much anyway. "This might be time for me to take a long holiday and think of a new career," she said, glancing at the foggy mirror.

Instead of going to her own bed, she slipped into the room Severus had been staying in and slid beneath his sheets, hugging his pillow to her tightly and inhaling his scent as she did so. Feeling more at ease, she slipped into a fitful sleep where dreams replayed the events of the day, taunting her over and over.

Hermione looked at the Minister incredulously. "You can't seriously wish for me to talk about my private life. It's not your business!"

"While you are sponsoring a war criminal for the Ministry, the goings on of your home are indeed our business."

She crossed her arms and sat back against the hard chair, refusing to look at the section her friends and Severus were seated in. "I do have feelings for Severus, yes,"

there was a gasp from some in the crowd, "but that has no bearing on the work we've done together. I've showed you pages of notes and results, documenting nearly the whole time he's been in my home and working with me. The changes in Ginny Weasley should be proof of that!"

"Yes, but it's interesting that Potter never came forward sooner to seek Snape's release. I believe he's only doing so as a..."

"He's asking for it because Severus is an honorable man who deserves more than to be chained to yet another warden! He's one of the reasons Harry and we were able to defeat the Dark Lord and his followers." She glared at him. "You should give him your thanks, not scorn! How dare you sit your arse there and..."

Scrimgeour stood angrily. "That'll do. We see how passionately you feel about this."

Hermione whimpered and vaguely realized she was having a horrid dream before drifting back off again. Her next dream was much more pleasant. In it, Severus had returned home and slid in next to her, holding her close and whispering that things would be fine, regardless of the horrid day she'd had.

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Minerva McGonagall woke early and made her way to her office to have a cup of tea to start off her day. As she seated herself, an owl flew in with an early edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Multiple headlines on the front page caught her attention immediately.

Rufus Scrimgeour steps down as Minister of Magic!

Only hours after yesterday's proceedings, which were initiated by Harry Potter the Boy Who Lived, Scrimgeour felt it was in the best interest of the Wizarding world if he stepped down, though he still denies doing anything that he felt 'would harm anyone' he'd sworn to protect when taking over after Minister Fudge. Kingsley Shacklebolt, Head of the Aurory, will be stepping in until further notice...

"Good riddance," Minerva said, wishing she'd been able to give the sod a better tongue-lashing. "Poor Hermione," she murmured as she scanned the page a little lower.

Hermione Granger has romantic liaison with Severus Snape

Severus Snape, Death Eater spy for Albus Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix, has been living in Hermione Granger's flat as ordered by the Wizengamot so that she could oversee and help him create antidotes for some hexed patients. It appears she's been overseeing more than his potion-making abilities. Testimony given at the Ministry yesterday...

"Have they nothing better to write about? Is the release of so many innocent people not better news than Hermione's personal life?" She looked out the window and watched the sky as it brightened with many colors of a dawning day. "Maybe there is something I can do for Hermione."

She gazed back at the article once more and read aloud: "When pressured to answer if she'd had sex with her charge, Severus Snape, Granger nodded her head and admitted that she had before claiming that she'd not forced him to do that in return for his work or that she'd not offered herself to him as a bribe. Severus Snape refused to comment on anything and left before Granger could follow him out. It is doubtful that charges will be brought against her, but the question should be visited: How far are sponsors allowed to go without being reprimanded? Should there be more investigations into the criminals' treatment?" Minerva shook her head in annoyance as she remembered the hush that had passed through the room at her admittance. Harry had narrowed his eyes in Snape's direction, but he'd not seemed surprised. Ronald hadn't known anything, though shock evident in his expression as he gazed at Hermione incredulously. She hoped the friends would talk and work things out.

Hermione was more than capable of making her own decisions, though she might not have thought this through clearly. Tossing the paper to the side, Minerva brought her teacup to her lips once more, quickly draining its contents. She wanted to send an owl to Hermione before she read the morning edition... or at least right after. There were options that she could consider.

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Stretching and yawning, Hermione awoke to feel a warm body pressed against her back and an arm resting on her waist. Surprised, she turned over to face a sleeping Severus. *It hadn't been a dream after all. He came back to me.*

She snuggled closer, and suddenly, everything seemed all right. He would help her, and together, they would get through the mess they'd landed in. Feeling him shift, she gratefully said, "I didn't think you'd come back."

"I went to check on Miss Weasley and then made rounds at St. Mungo's to see exactly who needed what. There are some with symptoms that do not match this cure. We may need to alter it a little."

Hermione lifted up on her elbow to gaze into his eyes. "About yesterday, I'm sorry. I had no idea they would drag us into this."

"Scrimgeour and those of his ilk always try to bring others down with them when they know they're cornered." He shrugged. "I am not pleased, of course, but there is nothing we can do to change what's happened."

Relief swept through her. He didn't hate her. "Thank you."

"Whatever for?"

"For being here with me. I..." Her voice cracked. "I was afraid of facing this alone...the world, Harry, my friends."

"I've faced more formidable foes in my past and have landed on my feet. It would take more than this to change my mind."

"Change your mind?"

"You and I, there's something between us. I didn't want to admit it, but when I realized you'd felt it as well, I thought that maybe this might be a chance for a new beginning."

She laid her head on his chest once more and held him tightly. "I feel the same."

"Then you won't mind if I remain here during the rest of our brewing?" he asked quietly a few minutes later.

"Of course not. I really like you here. I hated coming home last night and thinking you wouldn't be here. I thought you were so humiliated about everything that you'd left for good."

"I don't always think of myself," he snapped slightly. "Must everyone...even you...think the worst of me?"

"You left without saying a word to me."

He turned slightly and looked at her for a moment. "I thought it would make things worse for you in their eyes, and I assumed you'd need to have a discussion with Potter and Weasley about what was revealed. I didn't want to be in the way."

"Still..."

"Not one of my better choices then," he said softly.

"I should have been prepared for something like this. After all, I did cause a scene in Knockturn Alley."

"Indeed you did, but perhaps if you hadn't acted the jealous witch, we might not have had the pleasure of exploring our newfound feelings."

Hermione snickered. "The look on your face and hers was worth it."

Severus chuckled slightly. "I wasn't amused... at first." He was silent, as if gauging his next words. "Hermione, I never should have used you that way."

"It's done now. All's well."

"Do you..." His voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes.

"Do I what?"

The hand he'd placed on her back slid down towards her arse and pressed her against his body more fully. "I would like to make love to you this morning."

Not wanting to ruin the moment with words, Hermione squeezed him tightly and began placing kisses along his bare chest, working her way up towards his mouth. Things had definitely turned out to be more than she'd ever hoped for.

SW69's Notes: I wanted to try a different way of relating a story (reflection / flashbacks), so I did it in this chapter. Thanks for bearing with me. It was an interesting and frustrating experience.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione requests to sponsor Snape after the war when the Ministry feels most Death Eaters should be given the chance to integrate into society again, depending on their crimes. He moves in with Hermione, and life as they know it forever changes. DH not recognized.

Disclaimer: The characters and all that good stuff belong to JKR. I'm just having a bit of fun! Whoot!

Thanks go to my sweet CocoaChristy for the beta read!

Hermione took in the lovely decorations in the Burrow's gardens. Molly had truly outdone herself. All the guests were well on their way to having too much elf-made champagne and wine. Her smile deepened as she watched Ron and Pansy sway slowly to yet another song, kissing each other softly every few moments.

"Weasley should take her out of here, else they might end up celebrating their nuptials right here in front of us all," Severus commented dryly.

"They look so happy," she pointed out without need. She brought a hand up and waved to Ginny, who had her head on Harry's shoulder.

"Are your feet still hurting?"

"Not much, bloody high heels. Won't wear these blighters again."

Severus stood and extended a hand to her. "May I have this dance?"

"Of course." Placing her hand in his, she rose and allowed him to lead her to the far corner of the dance floor. "I can't believe it's been nearly three years since we created that cure."

"Three years for us."

She smiled warmly. "I'm glad you never left my flat once you came to stay with me."

"As am I."

Hermione placed her head on his shoulder and held him tightly, not caring if they were drawing knowing smiles or not. She loved him and wanted to be as close to him as possible.

"It's like becoming whole."

Pulling back to look into his eyes, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"Being with you, starting anew." He looked away as he said his next words. "Before you, there was Lily in my heart, but I was never whole—always lacking something, always feeling as if something were missing in my life." Shrugging, he brought his eyes back to hers. "You're what was missing. You filled the rest of my heart. Made it whole. Made me whole. Now, there is so much more to live for, so many ways to enjoy life. Giving and receiving. I just... What I mean to say..."

When he didn't go on, she said, "I love you so very much. Thank you for giving me a chance." She placed a light kiss on his lips. "You've made me whole as well."

"I wonder if you would like to be married." He stilled as he gazed at her hopefully. "To me," he added unnecessarily.

Grinning broadly, she nodded. "I would indeed."

"Excellent. We'll have to plan for it then," he said nonchalantly, almost as if discussing a casual agreement, his sweaty palms belying his calm demeanor.

Looking around and nodding towards the Weasleys, she said, "It needn't be anything like this. Just the two of us if you'd like. So long as I'm Mrs. Snape at the end of it."

Suddenly, he frowned. "And the school?"

"I thank Minerva every time I see her for donating her family manor so that we could help teach young Muggle-borns and their parents about our world—while still conducting our own research. They deserve to be prepared for Hogwarts and the—"

"That's not what I mean. The name."

"Oh..." She hadn't thought of that. Since Minerva had talked her into opening the school, she'd been working with many Muggle parents and their magical children—inviting them to stay during certain holidays, the summer, or whenever they could get away to learn more about the Wizarding world and what would be expected of the children at Hogwarts and beyond. Her parents would have appreciated such an institution and would have felt more included. It was quite successful, but it had come to be widely known as Granger's Preparatory School of Wizardry.

"If you'd rather not take my name—"

"I would be honored to. There's a ring to Granger-Snape's Preparatory School of Wizardry, isn't there?" She smiled. "Would you mind terribly?"

"I rather like it."

"Done then."

"What are you two smiling about?" Ginny asked cheekily as she danced nearby.

Hermione grinned, not wanting to share her secret just yet. "Only about how radiant you look. Pregnancy suits you."

"Thank you," Ginny replied. "May I cut in?" she asked.

Severus looked to Hermione, and she quickly nodded and backed away.

Once Ginny swept Severus away, Harry said, "May I?"

"I think you two planned that."

"We did." As he placed his hand on her back and guided her in circles, he added, "We'd like you to be godmother to the baby."

"Oh, Harry, yes!"

He beamed brightly. "Right then. Thanks."

"Severus asked me to marry him," she whispered conspiratorially. "Keep it quiet for now."

"What did you say?" he asked. "When?"

"Just now. And I said no," she said sarcastically. "Of course I said yes, you berk."

"Congratulations then."

"Thank you." She followed his gaze to where their lovers danced. "We ended up finding the right ones, didn't we?"

"Yeah, was just thinking that myself."

Finis

SW69's Notes: And that's all, folks. Thanks for following my little story. I appreciate it deeply. ~goes off to finish up the current "Flight of the Prince" chapter~