

The Lost Corridor

by Snarky SandWitches

Hermione and Snape are locked in an unknown corridor at Hogwarts. Each door they open leads them to a different place where they must complete a task in hopes of finding a way out of the corridor. Their journey brings hidden feelings to the surface along the way. Round Robin by some of the Poetess admins.

Chapter One by Southern Witch 69

Chapter 1 of 10

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Disclaimer: We're playing with JKR's characters and will have them home by teatime. No Galleons are being made...sadly enough.

Thanks go to RobisonRocket for the beta! We appreciate it, mate!

This story is the start of a round robin, which is being brought to you by some of the Admins here at the Petulant Poetess (amsev, CocoaChristy, LadyintheCloak, Soul Bound, and Southern_Witch_69). I have more details listed in the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter One By Southern Witch

Hogwarts was bustling with activity this evening, being the first night back for the students after the break for Christmas. Hermione smiled as they milled about, chatted excitedly with their neighbors at their tables in hopes of catching up, or simply relaxed as they enjoyed the castle food once again. She looked down the table to where Neville was sitting with Professor Sprout and waved at him.

He'd changed so much over the past few years, starting back when he'd stood up to the Carrows during his seventh year at Hogwarts and continuing up until now, apprenticing under Professor Sprout. She was quite proud of him and rather fond of the person he'd become.

Two years before, Professor McGonagall had taken Hermione on as her Transfiguration apprentice since her duties as Headmistress of Hogwarts kept her busy. McGonagall was even working closely with the Ministry to help them draw up a revised set of rules and a new governing process. Things were definitely changing.

Well, almost everything was anyway.

Covertly eyeing the dour man sitting directly to her right, she wondered if he'd ever be happy with himself. He'd survived the war...even after they'd all thought him dead...and he still didn't seem able to enjoy life. She wished that he would. He'd done so much for everyone. Sadly, she wished he'd find someone to love again...to love the way he'd cared for Lily Evans.

"What is it you want?" he asked bluntly, catching her watching him.

Thinking fast, she said, "Oh, er, I was wondering, Severus, would you like to take a walk with me after you're finished eating?"

"For?"

"There's something that I want to show you," she said quickly, grasping for any excuse to cover being caught spying.

"And what's that?" He seemed moderately interested, which was interesting.

"Well, I'll just have to show you," she said with a smile. "Let me know when you're done."

"Actually, I was about to leave now. I suppose I can spare a few minutes for you."

"Er... all right." *Damn it. What can I possibly show him that he'd be interested in or wouldn't already know about?*

She noticed that one eyebrow was arched and his lips were curved up in amusement. "Of course if you'd prefer to do this another time..."

"No, now is fine...really, it is!" She stood. "It's in the third floor corridor."

"What have you been doing there? Sneaking out of bounds, are you?" he asked conversationally after they'd entered the staff passageway.

"Oh, well, sometimes I like to take walks, and the staircase moved suddenly, giving me no other option." She grinned impishly. "Besides, no place is out of bounds for the staff... is it?"

He smirked and gazed at her knowingly. "I think you might have been reliving old memories from your first year, mm?"

She grinned, glad that he seemed to be in a good mood after all. "That seems so long ago."

"Twelve years?"

"About that, yes," she said, thinking back to the first adventure that she'd shared with Harry and Ron there. "So much has changed since then, hasn't it?"

"Some things," he said.

Gone was his sociable demeanor, and back was the dispassionate expression she'd grown used to for so many years. "What things are still the same for you, Severus?" she asked suddenly, not certain where she mustered the courage to ask such a personal question.

"I don't think that's any of your concern."

"You misunderstand me..."

"No, I'm not," he said sharply. "How would you like it if I endeavored to pry in your private life? Shall I ask what you've been doing late nights with Longbottom? He does spend a great amount of time in your company and in your *chambers*."

Hermione's mouth gaped open in shock. He'd been spying on her? How in the world would he know that Neville had been coming to her rooms most evenings? "I don't appreciate what you're insinuating at all, sir, and I believe that our questions are totally different. I wasn't prying into..."

"Yes, you were," he interrupted. "I suppose Potter told you about my... past."

She held her chin up high, gazing at him directly. "And what if he did? What's that to do with anything?"

"It has *everything* to do with my life, and I'll not have some... some..."

"Some what?" she asked crossly, one hand making its way to her hip.

"*You nosing about where you shouldn't.*"

Hermione stepped away from him and shook her head angrily. "I think this was a bad idea. Good evening." Spinning away, she quickly began ascending the nearest stairway, not caring where it would take her.

She should have never been concerned about him in the first place. So what if Harry had told her about Snape's feelings for Lily? "How can someone ~~be~~ that private? I was just being... friendly!" she huffed to herself.

That wasn't entirely true, and she knew deep down that he'd called her on her actions spot on. She'd wanted to know why he couldn't just go with the flow, learn to live again, find someone else? And how dare he blatantly accuse her of shagging Neville Longbottom like that! Her cheeks reddened as she pictured a naked Neville hovering over her, lust in his eyes.

"Good grief," she mumbled, stepping off the stairs and onto the dark stones of a strange corridor. She looked left and right, pulling her wand from its holder. *Lumos!*

It had the stale odor of an unused building...old wood, mildew, something earthy. She could only venture to her right, as there was nothing but a wall to her left. After she took ten steps, the bright, orange-tinted light of a sconce lit her pathway. As far as she could tell, there was nothing special about the corridor, save for what looked like numerous wooden doors lining either side. Where did they go?

"Hermione?"

Her scream rent the air. "Damn you, Severus Snape! You scared the shite out of me!" she yelled loudly, one hand over her heart, the other shakily holding her wand.

"What is this place?" he asked, ignoring her glare and lifting his own lit wand for further inspection.

Panting slightly, heart still beating frantically, she said, "It looks to be an unused wing. Probably old classrooms or chambers. Shall we have a look?"

He nodded and walked with her towards the nearest set of doors. "You look there. I'll look here."

"Well, wait a second," she said nervously. "I don't know what's in there, and in moments like these, two wands are better than one. I'll go where you go."

"Very well." Just as he lifted his hand to turn the oddly shaped, glass doorknob, they heard a loud scraping noise behind them.

Spinning around, Hermione called out, "Look! The stairway! It's moving away!"

"No, that's not it. That section of the wall... just there, it's closing off our way out."

They both ran forward, but it seemed that no matter how quickly they moved, the closing wall got farther away until finally the last of the light from the main stairwell was gone, shut out by the solid wall.

"Oh, God... what is this place?"

"You shouldn't have come here!" he bit out angrily, pressing against the wall, not budging it. "We wouldn't be stuck here if you hadn't stomped off like that!"

"Well, nobody told you to follow me!"

"I wasn't following you. I simply noticed that the stairway had brought you to a floor that I've never seen before. It's my duty to examine these things as Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked around in exasperation.

"You've honestly never seen this place before?" she asked seriously, all accusation leaving her voice. He truly seemed as perplexed as she...and just as bloody frustrated.

"Never."

Hermione bit her lip and furrowed her brow as she thought of all that had taken place. "Something strange is going on. Did you notice how we almost seemed to be running in place just then?"

"I did." He nodded towards the length of the corridor. "We'll see where it ends up. When one path closes, another usually opens."

"Good idea."

Deep down, she was actually quite glad that he had followed her. As brave a person as she was, she wouldn't care to be locked in the corridor alone. It seemed a bit ominous...too unfamiliar and dark, lit only with the magical sconces that began to shine when nearby. Even so, she was eager to explore and learn more about it. *Look how much help the Room of Requirement was to us? This place might have some similar power!* she thought excitedly.

Together they began to walk hurriedly, wanting to escape the strange corridor. However, it took only a few moments for them to realize that it was much like walking on a Muggle treadmill.

"The two doors on either side of us aren't moving, and we're walking in place," she pointed out.

"You don't say," he replied dryly before he stopped and pointed his wand towards the floor, trying to detect any change, but there was nothing. To the naked eye, there was no logical reason that they should be detained. He frowned as his gaze met hers again. "We'll have to try the rooms. We've no choice."

"Together then."

"I thought we agreed on that already, Miss Granger."

"Oh, don't start calling me that again. I believe I've been Hermione to you for the past couple of years."

Not answering, she strode past him pushed the door open forcefully. A blinding bright light rushed out to meet them, followed by a warm breeze and fresh air. After her eyes adjusted to the sudden shock of illumination...and after she'd jumped back behind Severus...Hermione gasped in delight. "Look at it, Severus. It's beautiful."

Moving to pass him and enter, she felt his hand on her shoulder, pulling her back against his chest. "No, we have to be certain that it's safe."

"But how can we possibly know? We haven't any other options, do we?"

He let go of her and crossed the corridor to try the other door. It, however, wouldn't budge. "We've no choice it seems. You are right," he admitted in defeat. When she moved, he quickly added, "I'll go first. Get behind me, Hermione."

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Neville knocked on Hermione's door once again, wondering why she hadn't already answered the door. He always met her on Sundays at nine. "Hermione? Are you there?" He waited a few more minutes before turning to leave.

The last he'd seen of her, she and Professor Snape were exiting the Great Hall and in the midst of a conversation, but he was uncertain where they'd gone. That had been hours earlier, though, and she should have returned to her chambers. She wouldn't have forgotten about meeting him...surely not.

Frowning, he made his way back down to the Entrance Hall, preparing to go out and check on the greenhouses, when he suddenly had the urge to descend the stairs leading down to Snape's dungeons. He had to know if she was there or not.

Since it was past curfew, he met no students in the corridors, and only a few ghosts glided through a wall to his left just as he stopped in front of Snape's office door.

"I must be mad for doing this," he muttered to himself as he raised his hand and knocked. What excuse could he possibly have for going down to the dungeons? For going to Snape's office? He flitted through several ideas, but the true reason, checking on Hermione, kept surfacing. It wasn't that he didn't trust Snape... Well, it wasn't something as simple as that. He simply didn't like that Hermione wasn't in her rooms and that Snape had been the last person he'd seen her with.

Five minutes passed before he realized that the man wasn't in his office...either that or he was ignoring him. Neville shrugged and decided to go out onto the grounds and check things over before going back up to see if Hermione had returned.

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The pecking of an owl on his window woke Harry just as the sun's first light made its way upward into the horizon. "It's too early," he grumbled, stumbling as he left his bed and made his way towards the impatient animal.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Go back to sleep. 'S just an owl," he said through a yawn. Opening the window, he gestured for it to enter, which it did and quickly took a spin around the room before returning to land on the windowsill in front of Harry and sticking its leg out.

The parchment was crumpled and seemed to have something sticky spilt on part of it. The handwriting was quite messy, and Harry had to squint to make out the words in some parts.

Harry,

I don't know whom else to talk to about this, but I'm worried about Hermione. I know you're going to say that I should talk to McGonagall or someone here, but I want your opinion first, as this deals with Professor Snape. I don't want to make any waves here if you know what I mean.

We had plans to meet last night, and she wasn't in her rooms. I last saw her with Professor Snape just after eating in the Great Hall. She's still not there. It's been all night. Snape's not answering his office door either. I tried to get the Bloody Baron to show me where his chambers are, but the git won't say anything.

If she doesn't show up for her first class this morning, should I go to McGonagall? What if Snape doesn't show up either? Could something have happened? Since you are

supposed to come later this morning to speak to the Defense students, I thought maybe you might come earlier to help me look for her. Could you bring your map? It can at least show us if she's on Hogwarts grounds.

Sorry to bother you. I know you've a lot on your plate, what with taking over in the Aurory, but I thought it better to ask you than Ron, seeing as he's still unhappy about how things turned out.

Neville

Harry groaned. He was certain that Neville had to be mistaken, as Hermione was much more vigilant than to let something happen to her at Hogwarts, and unfortunately, Harry had hoped to get a little more sleep this morning. Glancing towards the bed with a smirk, he thought, *I wanted to do a little bit more of something else, too.* Arching an eyebrow, he decided that dallying just a few extra minutes wouldn't hurt.

Southern's Notes: Exactly what has Severus and Hermione stumbled upon? Will someone find them? How will they get out, and just what is Neville doing meeting up with Hermione? Is there some truth in what Snape asked her? And who the hell is that in Harry's bed? Teehee!

It will be Soul Bound's job to carry on with it next.

We can promise that this fiction will be updated quickly, as per our own rules upon getting together. The fun thing is that we aren't making outlines with each other, and whatever one of us writes is a surprise for the rest of us as well! This should be fun for everyone involved! Please let us know what you think! Thanks!

Chapter Two – By Soul Bound

Chapter 2 of 10

The plot thickens as Severus and Hermione enter a strange, new room in the castle. Neville is desperate and plotting, and Harry is enjoying being alive!

Disclaimer: We've borrowed these characters from JKR, but we will return them in the condition in which we found them . . . and we won't get a dime for babysitting either...****!

Thanks go to RobisonRocket for the beta! We appreciate it, mate!

This is the second chapter of a round robin, which is being brought to you by some of the Admins here at the Petulant Poetess (amsev, CocoaChristy, LadyintheCloak, Soul Bound, and Southern_Witch_69). I have more details listed in the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter Two By Soul Bound

"I'll go first. Get behind me, Hermione."

Hermione obeyed Severus's instruction and stood behind him for a moment until her curiosity and the fact that she couldn't see got the better of her. As the man in front of her took a step into the room, she ducked under his raised wand-arm and stood beside him. In her peripheral vision, she saw him turn a glare to her, and she resisted rolling her eyes.

"I told you to stay behind me; it could be dangerous," he said.

Hermione heard him, but was now too entranced with the scene in front of her to think of a retort. She'd caught a glimpse of it before, but was now presented with an unobstructed view of the land before her.

It really was beautiful. She found herself unable to look away from the rolling, green hills and the sparkling lake, the high cliffs and the stone pillars and walkways. It was then that she realized that this couldn't be the grounds of Hogwarts. It didn't even look like Scotland. She took in the fresh scent as her eyes wandered, and she realized that while she could hear the sound of birds chirping, she couldn't see any wildlife...let alone any other humans.

"How is this possible?" she asked to the air. "This isn't Hogwarts."

"Obviously," the man next to her said with a snort. "Think, Miss Granger..."

"Hermione."

"...we've just been trapped in an obviously magical corridor in an ancient, magical castle. Is this really such a stretch?"

Well, no, it wasn't; it was just a surprise...to walk through a door in Scotland and find herself in what appeared to be the Mediterranean. Hermione hadn't been anywhere in the area save for the South of France when she was a young teenager. This looked similar to that, but she couldn't remember any stone archways where she'd been. This place looked almost like a fantasy. It had to be, considering the bright sunlight; it was evening in reality.

She took a step forward, wanting to do a bit of exploring. At the back of her mind was the knowledge that she'd just stepped through some sort of enchanted door into a world that couldn't be real, but the researcher in her was far more interested in the stone carvings of strange runes that she could see a ways down the path.

She didn't get far. An arm caught her around the waist and held her in place. "What do you think you're doing?" asked Snape, his voice sounding as if he was barely holding back his irritation.

"Having a look around," Hermione answered.

"Don't."

"What, why n..."

"This is a strange place, and we don't know what could be here waiting for us. Have you forgotten already...in the last thirty seconds...where we've come from?"

He had a point. Hermione wasn't usually the type to rush headlong into the unknown without a thought to danger, but there was something about this place...a sense of peace. She hadn't even realized it until now, but that was what it was. But she couldn't tell that to Snape; she knew he would think it silly. Instead, she pursed her lips and said, "Fine, then what do you propose we do? We can't go back," she gestured to the still-open door, through which she could still see the darkened corridor of Hogwarts, "so we of course must go forward."

She watched as Snape mirrored her stubborn expression, and she had an urge to smile.

"Indeed, we must," he said, his lips still tight, "but we can at the very least inspect the area for anything out of the ordinary."

Hermione gave him a pointed look and gestured around them.

"Anything *more* out of the ordinary . . . for this place, which is . . . out of the...you know what I meant!"

Hermione gave into her urge to smile and tossed her hands into the air. "Be my guest, Severus."

"That's Snape to you."

Hermione couldn't help the roll of her eyes. "No, it's Severus. We've known each other too long and been through too much to keep up the formality, as I've said before. I will continue to call you by your given name and will continue to insist that you do the same."

She didn't receive a response, but coming from this man, that could almost be considered making progress. She watched as he silently cast scanning spells around the area, smiling at how graceful he was with a wand. If only he could turn that magical grace into some social grace . . . She snorted. In all honesty, she wouldn't know what to make of a suave, pleasant Severus Snape. The man was prickly by nature, and she actually liked that about him. It made for good conversations...most of the time.

After several minutes, he lowered his wand and pronounced that the area was secure. She noticed he still kept his wand in his hand, though.

"Great, let's have a look around then, shall we?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he gestured toward the path, telling her without words to lead the way. She set off at a leisurely pace with Severus a few steps behind her. She took in everything she could, from the smells to the lovely landscape, and when she stopped in under a stone archway to examine the carvings there, Snape caught up to her.

She traced her finger long the first set of runes, a perplexed frown on her face. "That's strange," she murmured.

"What is it?" she heard Snape ask from behind her, his voice quiet.

"I took several years of Ancient Runes, but I don't recognize these. Well, no, I recognize a few of them. This one means . . . 'dream', and this one means . . . Actually, there isn't really an English word for it, but it sort of means 'location' or 'place'. And this one here," she said, moving aside so that he could clearly see where she was pointing, "means 'desire'."

"May I?" he asked, putting light pressure on her shoulder to move her aside.

She met his eyes as he brushed past, and the skin under her robe tingled inexplicably. She quickly gazed at the ground, and the moment was gone. When she looked at him again, he was focused entirely on the carvings, his eyes narrowed slightly. She moved next to him and said, "I didn't know you could read runes."

"I can't."

Hermione frowned, not understanding.

"Then why are you . . .?"

"These aren't runes...most of them. Look." He pointed at the first set of symbols and cocked his head toward her. "Notice anything interesting?"

She moved in closer to get a better look and gasped, then laughed. Sure enough, they weren't ancient runes at all...except for the three she recognized; they were letters . . . upside-down. "Hogwarts has a strange sense of humor," she said, still smiling.

Severus quirked his lips and said, "I believe it's actually you who has the strange sense of humor."

"What?" she asked, wondering if she should be offended.

"Take a closer look at what this spells out."

Hermione was hooked now. She loved this type of thing...solving puzzles, using her intellect. She peered down at the symbols that she now realized were upside-down words, and it didn't take her long to figure out what they, combined with the three runes, spelled out.

THIS MAY LOOK LIKE YOUR DREAMS

BUT IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS

THIS PLACE GIVES NOT WHAT YOU REQUIRE

BUT WHAT YOU DESIRE

Hermione chuckled. "Simple, but to the point. So this 'room' is like the Room of Requirement, but it gives one a place they dream of, puts things in it he or she enjoys and desires."

"Yes, it seems that way," Severus said with the same almost smile he'd worn a minute earlier.

Hermione was growing excited. A new magical room in Hogwarts, how wonderful!

"And it knew that this is my favorite place, or something like it, and that I enjoy solving puzzles! Severus, this is fantastic!" And she was off . . . "I wonder how it knows. I always wondered that about the Room of Requirement, but this seems to be similar yet different because . . . But why did it mix letters with runes?" she mused. "That seems strange."

"That was what I meant about your sense of humor. I believe this room came from you, from inside you. It read that you favor this type of landscape. It gave itself the scents you enjoy. It used the runes you knew and combined the letters to make a simple puzzle for you."

"Oh . . ." She laughed again, seeing what he meant. She looked at his expression and was warmed to know that instead of being irritated and mocking, he seemed to be amused. She wanted nothing more at that moment than to launch into a discussion on magical theory with him, but another thought struck her. "Severus, we both found the room at the same time. Why didn't it read you?"

"It did."

"What?" she asked, looking around for something that seemed to come from him, but everything she saw reminded her of something *she* found beautiful. She looked back at Severus and found him staring at her with a strange expression in his eyes.

She wondered what it was about, but her thoughts were drawn again to the magic of the room and what else it held in store. She smiled brightly and took his hand in hers, not noticing the way his body froze minutely for a moment. "Come on," she said, pulling him gently to walk with her. "We have a room to explore."

* * *

It was 8:30 in the morning, there was still no sign of Hermione or Snape, and Neville was getting frantic. When she hadn't shown up for their . . . meeting the night before, he'd been worried, had searched the castle, and had finally given up and sent an owl to Harry in the early hours of the morning before going to bed. He hadn't received a reply yet, but that was the least of his worries.

Aside from his fears about what could have happened to Hermione, what Snape could have *done* to Hermione, there was a bigger problem. Three days . . . he had *three days* until the big night. If Hermione was missing . . . if something serious had happened to her, Neville would be stuck in the middle of Loch Shite with no oar and no wand to conjure one.

He'd been planning to come tonight for months . . . He looked around the Great Hall in desperation, his gaze resting briefly on each of the other staff members. The time was ticking away, and if Hermione didn't show up at all for breakfast, he didn't know what he'd do. If she didn't show up to teach her class . . . But unfortunately, he knew he had his own class to teach; he was pointedly reminded of this fact as a group of his NEWT students walked by and waved to him. He couldn't exactly wait by her classroom door.

Several minutes later, the bell rang, and he jumped out of his chair and left the Hall quickly, deciding that he would run by her classroom on the way out to the greenhouses.

He arrived there shortly and found that she was indeed not there. He held onto the hope that she was just running late after being out until the early morning, and he ran the rest of the way to his greenhouse. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't wait for her; it wouldn't go ever well with Headmistress McGonagall to miss his first class of the year.

But as soon as he was free, he would check again, he told himself.

The next hour and a half passed too slowly, and his mind wasn't entirely on what it should have been. When the bell rang to move to the next class, he dismissed his students without even giving them homework and took off for the castle. He had ten minutes to be there and back to his own classroom in time for the next class. If she still wasn't there, he knew he would have to go to McGonagall.

When he arrived at Hermione's door, he was surprised to find the aging Headmistress already there. "Headmistress, thank Merlin. I can't find Hermione anywhere," he began.

"Yes, I know," McGonagall said briskly. "She didn't show up to teach her class, nor did Professor Snape. I've been asking around, and no one seems to know where they are. I was headed to find you next, Professor Longbottom. Have you seen either of them since last night?"

"Yes," Neville said, still out of breath. "I saw Hermione leave the Hall last night with Snape, and I haven't seen either of them since. She was supposed to meet me last night . . . I mean, we've been meeting . . . because I, well, anyway . . ." He blushed but went on. "I looked everywhere for her last night, and I sent an owl to Harry . . ." Neville realized he was rambling and closed his mouth.

"You sent an owl to Potter?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, yes, I was worried, you know. Maybe Snape . . ."

"Professor Longbottom, this is a troubling situation, two of our professors going missing, but I sincerely doubt that Severus had anything to do with whatever has happened to them."

Neville had his own doubts about that, but it was clear they would be unwelcome with the Headmistress. He sighed as she went on.

"Now, you said you owed Harry."

"Yes, I told him that I couldn't find either of them, that I last saw them leaving dinner together, and I asked him to come to Hogwarts and bring his map." His eyes widened, and his mouth snapped shut as he realized what he'd almost said. The map was Harry's secret, and he knew he shouldn't have even mentioned it. But Hermione . . .

He looked at McGonagall and realized he wasn't getting out of it now. She had that look in her eyes, the sharp one he knew all-too-well, the one that said he was cornered.

"Bring his *what*, Professor?"

Neville swallowed. He hoped Harry would forgive him, that this would help find Hermione.

"Harry has a map of Hogwarts that shows where every person inside it is located. I asked him to bring it here so that if they are in the castle, we can find them."

McGonagall's expression didn't change in the slightest. "I see," she said and, after a long moment during which he could almost see the cogs in her brain moving, added, "Yes, that is an excellent idea. Has he responded?"

"No," Neville said. "I was going to owl him again and tell him we still haven't found Hermione."

"You have a class to teach. I'll fire-call him from my office; that will be the fastest way."

Neville breathed a sigh of relief. "Right then. I'll be going. Please let me know as soon as Harry's here. I want to help..."

"Of course," she said. "Have a productive class, Professor."

Neville took off at a slower pace back down to the greenhouses with his worry lessened slightly. She was bound to show up on the map.

She just had to . . .

* * *

"Oh, God, that was good . . ." Harry moaned as he lowered the legs belonging to the body beneath him from his arms and flopped down on the bed. He breathed heavily for several moments, finding his bearings, then turned to the magnificent creature beside him and grinned. He pulled his lover close and began to nibble on those swollen lips, run his fingers over that still-overheated skin.

What a way to start a morning, he thought.

"I like your hair like this," his lover said between kisses. "It suits you."

"What, the just-shagged look?"

A smirk. "Mhmm."

"It suits you, too."

A grimace.

They went on kissing and fondling unhurriedly until Harry heard the whoosh of his fireplace coming from the living room. He had a Floo visitor.

"Oh, bloody hell, not again! What is it this time?"

He untangled himself from his partner and stood, stretching as he donned a robe and tied it loosely. He glanced at the bed and saw eyes following his movements as he went to the door. He couldn't help but grin again. "Be right back," he said and closed the door behind him as he left.

Several minutes later, when he returned to his bedroom, he was decidedly less cheerful.

He dropped his robe and began dressing himself not hastily, but certainly more quickly than he would have if he were going to spend the day the way he'd been hoping for...more snogging, a nice, shared shower, going to lunch together, and then heading to Auror Headquarters for the afternoon. What good was his morning off if he wasn't around to enjoy it?

Still, he had to admit that he was beginning to worry about Hermione. The Headmistress had said she and Snape were still missing, and while he didn't think Snape would bring her into harm, he didn't like that she had just disappeared.

"What is it?" his still husky-voiced lover asked as Harry pulled his robe on over his head.

"Hermione's gone missing. Snape too. I'm going to take my map to Hogwarts and see if I can find them on it."

His lover sighed. "Do you want me to come . . . again?"

"Ha ha. No, I'm sure they just had too much to drink or something. They're probably still out cold somewhere."

"Damn, was looking forward to more time with you."

"Sorry, love," Harry said. "You know what I had planned for today." Scenes from his imagination brought a wistful smile to his lips.

"Yes," a wicked smirk, "I certainly do. It's fine, though. Just come home as soon as you can tonight, and we can make it up to each other."

That sounded lovely to Harry. He crossed to room and planted a final kiss on those lips he was so fond of. "Sleep in," he whispered.

"Love you."

"You too," he said, and he headed for the living room, casting a glance over his shoulder at the tufts of messy, blond hair that were now burrowing under the bed covers.

I can't wait for tonight, he thought as he threw a pinch of powder into his fireplace and stepped in.

* * *

Severus glanced down at the hand clasped in his and knew he was in over his head. He was glad Hermione hadn't pursued to issue of why the room hadn't stocked itself with things he desired. He certainly had no intention of explaining that he had taken what he desired into the room *with* him He cringed at that thought.

Only the first day of the school year, and he was already having this battle with himself. It had only been in the latter half of the last year that he'd even had this problem, and after a summer that had been too short by his standards, he had promised himself that he would keep his distance from her.

That resolution had lasted all of ten minutes. At dinner, he'd noticed her staring at him and hadn't been able to help himself. He'd wished immediately thereafter that he'd stuck to his promise...because in practically the next breath, he'd agreed to go waltzing about the castle with her . . . alone.

At least he'd managed to have a decent conversation with her...until the conversation had taken a turn for the worse. On the bright side, he was sure that she still had no idea that his feelings toward her were anything other than that of a completely professional nature.

He glanced at their joined hands again, wondering how long she'd remain preoccupied with their surroundings before she realized what she'd done and dropped his hand like a hot coal. Surely she would...because surely she didn't mean it like *that*. It was just her natural Gryffindor instinct to be friendly. He was certain that that instinct would be overridden once she realized she was holding hands with Severus Snape.

He thought back to the conversation in the corridor. He'd been doing fine until she'd stuck her nose where it didn't belong. Why had she gone and brought up his personal life? It was none of her business! Why would she even want to know? Severus knew that no good could come from examining his life too closely. That was a door best kept closed.

When she'd gone running off, he hadn't meant to follow her. He had found himself with his feet moving, wondering why they were doing so when he'd specifically ordered them to stay put. But he'd followed...to his great chagrin...and now he found himself trapped in a magical room, alone with Hermione Granger, with no apparent way out. He cursed silently. If only she hadn't asked him personal questions, and if only the subject of Lily had stayed completely buried!

Lily, Lily . . .

He loved Lily. He would always love Lily. But after the Battle of Hogwarts, after he'd almost died, after the war . . . It was different now. He'd spent so many years loving her in his heart, being faithful to her memory, protecting her son and keeping his promise to Dumbledore. Now that Potter was safe, free to live his life, now that Dumbledore was gone and Severus' promise was fulfilled, he felt he didn't have to cling to her memory any longer. He'd lived his first life for her. Now he had a new life, one that he could live for himself. He would always love her, but it no longer choked him, consumed him.

He didn't know if he could ever truly love someone else, but . . . He looked at the woman walking beside him and swallowed hard.

He really was in over his head.

* * *

It seemed to Hermione that they'd been walking for hours through this magical countryside. She wasn't sure exactly how long it had been, but her feet were getting tired. It was beautiful, and she had enjoyed for quite a while...the quiet company with the occasional conversation, the sounds of nature, all the green, the intermittent odd statue or archway...but now she was thirsty, and she was getting the feeling that she had seen all there was to see in the room. She stopped where she stood and ran her fingers through her hair, letting go of Snape's hand in the process. Again, she didn't notice the slight stiffening of his body.

"How long do you think we've been walking?" she asked.

Snape pulled out his wand and muttered, "*Tempus*," then frowned when nothing happened. He tried it once more and again produced no results. "It would seem that the room's magic is interfering with the spell."

"Well, that's fantastic," Hermione said dryly, "but my feet are starting to ache, and I'm more than ready for this adventure to be over with Actually, this room is amazing, and I'd love to explore what it can create further, but it's got to be getting late, and I...oh shite! I've missed my meeting with Neville!"

Severus' eyes darkened, and Hermione frowned back at him, remembering his earlier accusation. "Oh, please. It's nothing like that. He just . . ." Well, it really wasn't any of Severus' business; she wasn't going to give Neville's secret away, and Snape could think what he wanted. "Look, we need to find a way out of here, maybe another door or someth..."

She abruptly stopped talking when she noticed a glimmer over Snape's shoulder. A door! "Oh, thank Merlin!"

"What?" Snape asked, clearly irritated by her failure to stay on topic.

She pointed at the door, and he whirled around. "Thank Merlin indeed," he muttered, practically rushing out the door. Hermione followed and found herself back in the same corridor. Her heart fell as she realized that their way was still blocked. The door closed itself behind her before she could think about it, and she turned in time to see it seal itself, becoming part of the plain corridor wall again.

Great, she thought, throwing her hands into the air. Now they were stuck in a sealed corridor with only one door, which wouldn't open! Well, maybe . . . It hadn't opened before, but as Severus had pointed out earlier, this was a magical castle. Anything was possible.

She brushed past Snape and reached for the new door, hoping it would open so she could find a way out. She needed to find Neville and apologize for standing him up.

"Miss Granger, wait a moment. We need to be cer..."

He was cut off by Hermione's scream.

"Hermione!"

SB's Notes: Pretty strange room, eh? Is Hermione on her way to figuring out why Severus makes her skin tingle? Is Severus going to get it together? Was their stroll through the Mediterranean a colossal waste of time, or was it just what was needed to get things going? Just what is Neville planning, and who is Harry's blond bombshell?

LadyintheCloak is up next!

We can promise that this fiction will be updated quickly, as per our own rules upon getting together. The fun thing is that we aren't making outlines with each other, and whatever one of us writes is a surprise for the rest of us as well! This should be fun for everyone involved! Please let us know what you think! Thanks!

Chapter Three - by ladyinthecloak

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione and Severus end up in another room while Harry is with the headmistress, trying to resolve the mystery of Hermione and Severus' disappearance

Disclaimer: I am JKR in disguise. Just kidding.

The wondrous Robisonrocket has volunteered to beta this story. She probably had no idea what she was letting herself into. Thanks, dahling, we all appreciate it!

This story is the start of a round robin, which is being brought to you by some of the Admins here at the Petulant Poetess (amsev, CocoaChristy, ladyinthecloak, Soul Bound, and Southern_Witch_69). I have more details listed in the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter Three By ladyinthecloak

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Harry stepped through the fireplace into the headmistress' office, brushing off some soot.

"Oh, thank goodness, Mr Potter, you're here!" exclaimed McGonagall. "Mr Longbottom is very worried about Miss Granger, and, to tell the truth, I'm getting rather worried as well. It's been more than a whole day now since they disappeared."

"Yeah, I'm not sure what I can do here, but I've brought my map with me, just in case they show up on it," Harry replied, still rather grumpy about the loss of his morning in bed with his lover and not caring if the secret of the Marauders' map was finally going to be revealed. He pulled the map out of his cloak and opened it, silently casting the words that would show the map's purpose.

The headmistress stepped towards him, looking over his shoulder just as the writing appeared on the map. Her frown deepened as she studied the map.

"I can't see them anywhere," Harry finally admitted. "It looks like they're not inside the castle." He looked at her. "I don't know... Maybe Professor Dumbledore would be able to help."

If McGonagall was surprised, she did not show it. "Go ahead, Mr Potter."

Harry approached the portrait of a smiling Dumbledore. "Harry! How wonderful to see you!"

Harry greeted the former headmaster and came immediately to the point. "Unfortunately, this isn't a social call, sir, as much as I'd like it to be. Professor Snape and Hermione have been missing since Sunday night. Their names are not showing up on the Marauders' map either."

"Are you generally worried or do you still not trust Severus, Harry?" He gazed at Harry, his face one of polite interest.

"I trust him. But it's worrying that nobody seems to know their whereabouts, and from what I understand, both missed their classes, which is very uncharacteristic," Harry responded. He truly had no trust issues with Snape; those were buried the moment he entered the Pensieve just before Voldemort's downfall. He could not see himself being on friendly terms with the Potions professor, but he respected him.

"Yes... You have a point. I don't recall Severus missing a class, ever. I wonder... Excuse me for a few minutes, Harry, I must find out something." With that, Dumbledore stood and left his portrait.

Minerva cast a questioning glance at Harry, who shrugged. "He said he has to find something out and will be back shortly."

"Well, we might as well have some tea then." Minerva summoned a house-elf and motioned for Harry to sit down.

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"Hermione!"

Severus followed her eyes as she stood there, in utter horror, and watched with morbid fascination the scene unfolding in front of them.

A burly, bald man in a police uniform was putting handcuffs on a middle-aged man and woman and said, "Under the new Bill of Paranormal Suppression, you are herewith arrested. You have the right to remain silent, as everything you say now can be used as evidence against you."

The couple looked at each other, speechless. "And what is the crime we've allegedly committed, sir?" asked the man calmly. Severus assumed it was Hermione's father, considering the physical resemblance between them.

"You are guilty of having produced offspring engaging in... paranormal activities. The government does not approve of such." The policeman gave him a stern look. "Weirdos, the lot of you," he mumbled as he dragged them towards his car, lights flashing. A crowd had formed around them, gaping and staring.

An elderly lady came rushing out of the house next door. Breathlessly, but standing tall, she uttered, "How dare you arrest such respected people! They've been running this dental practice for as long as I've lived here, and there's never been any trouble!"

"Madam, that is none of your concern. We have evidence of their crime, and that's what I'm arresting them for." Rather unceremoniously, he pushed Mr Granger's head down and shoved him onto the back-seat. Dragging the woman, who was obviously Mrs Granger, considering her hair color and bushy hair, to the other side, he deposited her inside the car in the same manner. "Now, make way if you don't want to get run over!" he shouted at the crowd as he lowered himself behind the steering wheel, started the engine and took off with lights flashing and the noise of the sirens polluting the air.

Hermione stood rooted to the spot as the scene faded in front of her, tears running down her cheeks.

"Mum, Dad... It's all my fault. What can I do?" she sobbed.

"Hermione... it's not real." Severus tried to reassure her, but sounded hollow even to himself. Everything had looked *real*. But it couldn't be... He shook his head. She didn't seem to have heard him.

Before the lights had completely disappeared, a house in a typical middle-class Muggle neighborhood came into view. Hermione ran towards the door, still sobbing, and rang the bell frantically. "Oh, please, be home. Let this just be a bad dream. Please...." she muttered, still ignoring Severus, who had followed her, not knowing what else to do.

Foot steps rang through the momentary silence, and the door opened. A teenage girl opened the door. She looked at Hermione, then at Severus. "You," she sneered. "I was hoping you'd turn up so I can tell you that she doesn't love that freak. But you know what? She hates you enough to be with him because she knows how *you* feel about that!"

"You... you don't know what you're saying, Tuney," Severus stuttered.

Hermione had never seen him so completely white. His complexion was pale at the best of times, but now he looked as if the last drop of blood had seeped out of him. *Tuney? Oh Merlin, that must be Mrs Dursley! But how can that be? She's a great deal older than this girl!* she thought. *And... "What on earth are you doing in my home? This is my parents' house!"* Hermione shouted.

"This is *my* parents' house! And besides, who are *you*? You're one of them freaks, aren't you, being with *him*?" Petunia shot her a distasteful look and turned to Severus. "Surprised now, Sev, are you? Well, good. I've never liked you, anyway. I don't know what Lily saw in you. And I'm glad she's rid of you!"

Hermione shuddered as Petunia's spiteful words hit her. She wished they could return to the other room for a moment, and suddenly she remembered that the previous room reflected their desires. *If the other room held our deepest desires, this room is probably confronting us with our deepest fears... So... A kind of boggart room* She looked at Severus, who was still rooted to the same spot in complete shock.

"Severus, we need to cast *Riddikulus!* This room is about our worst fears, it must be! Remember how the other room was about our desires? I'm pretty sure this one is about our fears!" The urgency of her voice finally made him react.

Severus gave her a blank look, but then took a deep breath and said, "Right. Of course. On the count of three."

They cast the spell together, and the room changed instantly. Gone was the house with Petunia. In its place was a large, dark, wooden dining table and several non-matching chairs, giving it a homey and inhabited feel. The table was set with two plates and cutlery and glasses. Hermione looked in wonder as food dishes appeared between the plates.

"Good," Severus said blandly. "I'm starving." He sat down without further ado and raised his eyebrow at her.

"Oh. Right." Hermione sat down opposite him and inspected the culinary choices. "Mmmm, this looks and smells like *Coquilles St. Jacques!* I love those!" At Severus' questioning look, she added, "We used to go to France during the summer holidays, and I really came to appreciate the food."

"Really? You don't find a lot of English people who like the food. I'm rather fond of French cuisine myself," Severus replied, lifting the lid of another dish. *Coq au Vin*, he said appreciatively.

A tall, slim bottle appeared in front of him. He grabbed it and scrutinized the label. "Riesling d'Alsace. That'll do nicely, I suppose." He opened the bottle with a corkscrew that had appeared on the table now and poured a couple of sips into his own glass. He tasted it. "Hm, yes." Then he proceeded to fill Hermione's glass.

The first few minutes were spent in silence, with each concentrating on the food. "Oh, this is so good! I didn't realize how hungry I was," Hermione said.

Severus nodded. "It must have been a while since we have eaten. Mind you, if this is the kind of food served here all the time, I'd be tempted to stay."

"Erm, I do appreciate the food, but you know, I'd really like to get back to Hogwarts proper. Like somewhere that doesn't frighten the living daylights out of me by confronting me with my worst fears!"

"I agree. That was an experience I could have done without. I.... thank you, Hermione, for regaining your wits and figuring out how to change the room." He was by no means comfortable saying it, but as far as he was concerned, it was necessary. At least to retain his clear conscience. *Conscience? Since when do you consider yourself the owner of a conscience?* a small voice whispered to him viciously. He was side-tracked by the blush that suddenly graced Hermione's cheeks.

"I... I appreciate you being here. Sometimes, I wish I was still as ignorant as in my school days. But with all the new Muggle regulations going on these days, it reminds me of Voldemort's reign, and I can only hope that my parents will never be made to pay for what I am." Her eyes filled with tears, and she avoided meeting his.

He was at her side instantly. "Hermione! No Muggle will ever know you're a witch. I'm sure your parents have enough sense to keep it quiet." He looked at her intently.

"Yes. I mean, they've never told anyone, not even close relatives. But I can't help being afraid for them..." She took a deep breath. "Thank you, Severus. I can't tell you how much it means that you're not making fun of my fears."

"Fun?" he asked incredulously. A bitter laugh escaped him. "Do you know how many fears I've had in this life? No, of course not, how could you. Let me just say fear is no stranger."

"I guess not," Hermione whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." His voice was rough. "It's not as if it's your fault."

Hermione looked at him. He'd never returned to his seat opposite, but instead seated himself on the chair next to her. "No. But that doesn't mean... whatever."

"Indeed," he sneered.

At that moment, true to the French tradition, a board with cheese arrived, together with a bottle of red wine. Severus opened the bottle and again poured some in his glass, tasted it and filled her glass. Then he scrutinized the cheeses on the board. "St. Albray, yes, I like that one. Not too sure about the French Emmenthal. Personally, I prefer the Swiss variety. But, oh, yes, Munster! As smelly as it's tasty."

Hermione laughed at that, and he thought he'd just entered heaven. He looked at her in wonder, and, forgetting all self-imposed inhibition of the past forty or so years, he said, "Do that again."

Hermione looked confused. "Do what again?"

"Laugh, silly!"

To his delight, she blushed again. "It... it was funny how you described the Munster." Her smile was bashful, and he was certain about having arrived in heaven. His idea of heaven.

"Well, isn't it the truth?" He smiled down at her, and she looked at him with wide eyes. "It is very smelly. And I could quite happily eat it every day because it is rather tasty."

He cut off a small piece and handed it to her on a small fork.

Hermione tasted it and gasped. "Oh! I'd never thought it can be this tasty, considering the smell. You were absolutely right!" She took a knife herself and cut off another piece.

Severus pointed at her glass. "Have some wine with it. It brings out the taste even more."

Finally, Hermione said, "If I have one more bite or sip of anything, I'll burst! I don't remember having eaten this much in a long, long time."

Both scanned the wood-panelled walls, and indeed, where there had been mere wooden panels on the long side of the wall, a door had now materialized.

"Well, let's see if it takes us back to the corridor," Severus drawled. Both exited through the door and found themselves back in the corridor, which hadn't changed at all since they'd last been there.

"Oh, for crying out loud. This seems to be some silly joke the castle is playing on us," Hermione complained.

"You know," Severus said thoughtfully, "you sound lovely when you laugh. I can't say the same about when you sound *petulant*." He ignored her glare and pointed at a new door. "Oh, what a surprise. Another door for us to try."

"And this time, I'll let *you* go in first." She still glared at him.

He nodded curtly and proceeded to the door. Suddenly, the air was filled with deep laughter. *Is this Severus laughing? I've never heard him laugh a happy laugh like that!*

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Harry and Minerva were silently sipping their tea, occasionally glancing at the map spread out on the desk between them.

"So, Mr Potter, how did you come to be the owner of such a useful map?" Minerva enquired, curiosity finally getting the better of her.

Harry replied hesitantly, "Erm, Fred and George gave it to me in third year. Later, I found out that Remus, my dad, Sirius and Pettigrew had made it. When Remus learned that I had it in my possession, he first took it away, but then returned it to me when he left Hogwarts." He took a deep breath. "Not that it's helpful this time..."

Someone knocked at the door. Upon Minerva's call, it opened and revealed Neville. "Harry! I'm so glad you're here!" His face fell when he saw Harry's expression. "They're not showing on the map?"

Harry shook his head. "No, their names aren't there. But Professor Dumbledore..."

"Harry, Minerva...oh, hello, Mr Longbottom...I can assure you, there is no need to worry." Dumbledore had returned to his portrait and looked positively smug. Upon blank looks from the headmistress and the two young wizards, he added evasively, "You see, Hogwarts Castle has always harbored its own magic, occasionally in a way we do not comprehend. But rest assured, Severus and Miss Granger are perfectly safe where they are and will soon enough reappear."

"Although, judging how stubborn either of them can be, my estimate would be days rather than hours." He turned to Minerva. "It might be an idea to cover both their classes for the next few days."

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Litc's Notes: Hermione and Severus both have fears, and both like French Food. Severus likes her laugh. And Hermione likes his. Oh, and obviously, Dumbledore knows *something* about their disappearance it seems.

Amsev will carry on next.

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whatever one of us writes is a surprise for the rest of us as well! This should be fun for everyone involved! Please let us know what you think! Thanks!

Chapter Five by amsev

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione and Snape are locked in an unknown corridor at Hogwarts. Each door they open leads them to a different place where they must complete a task in hopes of finding a way out of the corridor. Their journey brings hidden feelings to the surface along the way. Round Robin by some of the Poetess admins.

Disclaimer: I am JKR in disguise. Just kidding. (Neither am I ladyinthecloak, but I borrowed her disclaimer as well as her nifty section dividers!)

Chapter Four By amsev

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Surprised by Severus' laughter, Hermione hurried over to his side. He was standing square in the doorway so she had to stand on tiptoe to peer over his shoulder.

Her jaw dropped in amazement. She wasn't sure just what in the scene before her had made Severus laugh; however, before them was the Great Hall, decorated for a ball with everyone in what appeared to be period costumes.

"Severus?" she asked him in a whisper.

"This ruddy corridor is playing mind-games with us. When I opened the door, I thought that we had found our way out into the Great Hall. I laughed because I realised that it *is* the Great Hall about 175 years ago." Severus also kept his voice low.

"And this is funny because..." She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"It seems we are walking into a Yule Ball. A Yule Ball circa 1820-1825 from the looks of the fashions. I merely found it humorous because with what I am wearing," he gestured at his frockcoat, "I will fit right in."

"Well, perhaps a trifle severe-looking."

It was Severus' turn to look at her in inquiry.

"You have no lace. Nor a fancy, starched cravat."

"Easily remedied." He waved his wand, and delicate lace appeared at his wrists. Another wave added a simply tied cravat around his neck. Yet another tied his long hair back into a queue at his nape. "Now, what shall we do with you? Obviously trousers aren't quite *de rigueur* for the ladies in this time period.

Hermione stared at the female students dancing in the set dances and withdrew her wand from her sleeve. With a gesture sweeping her body, her anachronistic clothes changed into an empire-waisted gown of delicate green. With another gesture, her hair rearranged itself into a chignon with ringlets draped around her face. Looking at Severus, she raised her eyebrows with a smile and a challenge.

"Ah, milady is ready for the ball," Severus murmured and offered her his arm to lead her into the Great Hall.

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Harry and Neville stared at Dumbledore's portrait in shock.

"Days?" blurted Harry. "They could be missing for days? Why?"

Dumbledore smiled gently at the young men. "Do not worry on their account. They are perfectly safe where they are. Or mostly safe," he added enigmatically under his breath.

Minerva glared at the portrait. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Only that there is nothing in the corridor that would actually kill them."

"But...?"

"Let's just say that the corridor is a bit like a genie in the bottle. Except that rather than getting three wishes when the bottle is uncorked, the corridor slowly, gradually reveals the innermost wishes of those who tread down its rooms and paths. Sometimes that journey can be a bit hair-raising for the participants. However, the corridor will provide whatever they need should something dreadful be thrown at them."

Neville looked puzzled. "How can they not know their innermost wishes?"

Dumbledore grinned and spoke "For example, Miss Granger did not know she was a witch until she received her Hogwarts letter. When she received it, she realised that this was something she had desired all along, just didn't know it up until then."

"Why Snape and Hermione?" asked Harry, a note of suspicion creeping into his voice.

"Why not?" asked Dumbledore. "Who knows why the corridor saw fit to have them both traverse it."

Harry looked unconvinced.

"Don't worry about your friends, Harry," Dumbledore counseled with an emphasis on the word 'friends.'

Harry's brows rose up towards his hairline.

"Surely you consider Severus a friend of sorts after what he has shared with you."

"Well, he didn't exactly do it voluntarily," countered Neville. Harry snorted, trying to hold in a dismayed laugh.

"Gentlemen, let's just assume that what happens is meant to happen, hmmm?" Dumbledore's eyes were drawn to the quaint clock Minerva kept on her desk. "Why, look at the time! Dillys, Everard and Mordicus are expecting me to make a fourth at bridge. I shall see you later. Minerva. Harry. Neville," he said as he nodded to each in their turn. "You know, Minerva, I am simply amazed at how much the other Headmasters and Headmistresses enjoy that game now that I've taught them how to play. However, that is a story for another time. Farewell." With that, he left his portrait, leaving Minerva and the young men glaring at the empty setting.

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Hermione looked at Severus, a small smile quirking her lips at his courtly manners. "If milord pleases," she murmured in return.

They had entered a few feet into the room when a voice shouted, "Prince! I say, Prince!"

"Oh, dear Lord, don't tell me Prinny is here." Severus quirked an eyebrow at Hermione.

Hermione, swiftly recalling the time period and the Regency romances she had read for a short time when she was younger, looked at him, dismayed. "The Prince Regent was a wizard?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"How else do you think they erected the Royal Pavilion at Brighton so quickly? John Nash was also a wizarding architect."

"Oh, my."

The person who had been shouting tapped Severus on his shoulder. "Flavius Prince, as I live and breathe! I swore just last week at the club that you would never set foot outside of your summer estate after that debacle of a duel, yet here you are!"

Severus glowered at the impertinent man. "I don't believe I have the pleasure..." he trailed off with a hint of menace in his voice.

"Oh, dash it all. You must have taken a stronger crack to that hard noggin of yours than we all thought." The man, who was obviously a dandy of the more extreme sort with a delicate pink vest under his deep mauve frockcoat, swept into a deep bow with his leg extended towards Severus. "Arsinius, Viscount Malfoy, at your command." Noticing Hermione, his eyes opened wider, and he smiled delicately at her with just a hint of a leer in his expression. "Flavius?" he asked, gazing at Hermione. "Not your usual sort, is she?"

Hermione found that she did not care for the tone of his voice and began to draw herself up. Severus covered her hand with his own and gently squeezed it. "A distant cousin of mine, here to get a touch of bronze to her manners. Miss Granger of Grange Hall, this gentleman, and I am using that term loosely," he said with a glare at the Malfoy ancestor, "is Arsinius Malfoy of Malfoy Manor. The currently reigning lord there."

Hermione dipped a shallow curtsy at the introduction and immediately snuck her hand back into the crook of Severus' elbow.

"Flavius, my dear. You wound me. First you pretend not to know me, and now you speak so coldly to me. Whatever have I done to offend you?"

Severus moderated his tone. "Nothing, nothing at all, old friend."

"Perhaps I might persuade you to loose your grip on the charming Miss Granger so that I may lead her into the next dance?"

Hermione faked a sneeze and ducked behind Severus. Whipping out her wand, she conjured a dance card with a ribbon tied around her wrist.

"Shy little thing, isn't she?" Arsinius observed blandly.

Severus, not entirely sure what was happening behind his back, murmured, "Quite."

Hermione stepped back out from behind him and pretended to consult her dance card. "My apologies, Lord Malfoy, but my next dance is promised to my Cousin Sev... er, Flavius."

The opening strains of a waltz wafted towards them across the dance floor. Severus moved to stand facing Hermione. He swept her an elegant bow murmuring, "Cousin. Shall we?"

Hermione looked panicked for a moment, but then realised that it was indeed a waltz playing rather than a set dance such as the fashionable quadrille, which she didn't know. Severus took her by the elbow and led her to the dance floor where he bowed again and she curtsied in response. She gave her right hand to him, and he gently slid his right arm around her waist to end in her mid-back. They paused until an opening appeared in the crowded dance floor, and Severus swept her into the dance.

About halfway around the circumference of the ballroom floor, Hermione relaxed enough to realize that Severus was a superb dancer. He sensed her relaxing and guided her through a series of twirls, then back to him. Hermione smiled at him in delight.

Circling back to where they started, Severus came to a stop because Lord Malfoy had decided to attempt to cut in.

"Dear Flavius, she is such a charming dancer that you simply must permit me to dance a part of this waltz with her." Malfoy smiled, a hint of shark to his grin.

Hermione shuddered. It appeared that this Malfoy ancestor was pursuing her. Severus' eyes smoldered briefly with anger, but acquiesced to Arsinius' demands rather than cause a scene, which Malfoy would undoubtedly try to cause if he didn't allow him to cut in. He bowed to Hermione and released her, catching her eyes with a warning glance. Hermione acknowledged his warning with a brief nod and curtsy, stepping over to join Malfoy to allow him to lead her into the dance.

A blessed few minutes were spent in silence, with Arsinius merely guiding Hermione around the dance floor. It was too good to last, however. Malfoy slowly tightened his grip, pulling Hermione closer than was seemly.

He leaned in toward her, whispering insinuatingly in her ear. "It seems my dear Flavius has been slain by your charms, Miss Granger. Perhaps I can convince him to share."

Hermione met his eyes, startled. He was openly leering at her and eyeing the low decotellage of the dress that revealed the roundness of the tops of her breasts and cleavage. "I-I don't know what you mean..." she stuttered.

"Of course you do. A pretty young woman pretending to the manor born is up on all marks. Surely you didn't expect me to believe this 'Miss Granger of the Grange' nonsense. Who are you really, my sweet adventuress?"

He smiled coldly at her and led her dancing in a new direction, right out to the balcony just outside the ballroom. The balcony had been created for the ball and spelled to keep the winter cold out, but Hermione didn't notice that as she tried to catch a glimpse of Severus before they were completely out of the ballroom.

"Now let's play friends, just like you and your kissing cousin Flavius are doing." Malfoy grabbed her wrists in one large hand and wove the other into the chignon at the base of her neck, pulling her face closer to his.

Hermione tried to push out to get away from him, but he was holding her wrists too firmly for her to fight loose and pull her wand out of the pocket hidden in the side of the skirt. She tried kneeling him in the groin next, but was dismayed to find that the skirt of the dress was too narrow to allow her knee to get anywhere near its intended target.

"Ah, ah, ah!" cautioned Malfoy. "I do enjoy a spirited young woman, but only if she plays the game my way." He pulled her in tightly and forced a kiss on her resisting mouth. His hot breath on her face filled her with repugnance, and she fought all the harder to get loose from his cruel grip.

Suddenly, a loud voice cut through her fog of revulsion.

"Malfoy, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Snape angrily.

Malfoy, startled, relaxed his grip on Hermione's wrists, and she broke free and ran to Severus' side.

"Flavius, Flavius, Flavius. You certainly do have a wicked sense of humor attempting to foist this innocent-looking demimondaine upon our little dance. She's clearly a Muggle-born adventuress intent on obtaining an entree into pureblood society." Malfoy's expression darkened. "Your little *slut* certainly won't make it far now.

A gasp had risen out of several throats at the word 'slut,' and Hermione realised that they were surrounded by small crowd intent on observing the little drama play out.

Severus stood straight and drew his wand out of his sleeve. This elicited another growing murmur and caught breaths from the crowd. "Clearly, Malfoy, you are going beyond what is seemly, insulting my cousin and her heritage. Perhaps it is *you* who wishes to disgrace an innocent young lady."

Malfoy himself gasped at this insult to his sense of honor. He swept a glove out of a pocket and swiftly strode over to Severus, striking him in the face with it. "Well, Prince, what shall it be?" he sneered. "Where do you want to meet?"

Severus glared at the young lordling and said, "Why not here and now, if you are man enough to follow through."

At this, the current Headmaster attempted to intercede to convince the men not to duel. He failed and, with great resignation, began clearing a space out in the Great Hall for the duel.

Short minutes later found Severus facing Arsinius across fifty feet of stone floor that had been cleared of the wood spell cast down to provide a surface smooth enough for dancing.

"Gentlemen, on the count of three," the Headmaster intoned, his voice laced with disapproval. "One. Two. Thr..."

Malfoy chose to cast early. Fortunately, Severus had anticipated this and cast a quick shield to block the curse flying at him. It bounced off his shield and ricocheted into the floor, digging a shallow rut into the stone before it dissipated. Severus looked up in alarm. It seemed that this Malfoy was playing for keeps. He gritted his teeth and started sending curses and hexes at his opponent.

Both men were evenly matched, so the spectators were treated to a frightening exhibition of magical strength and stealth. The battle went on, and both men began to tire. Malfoy saw a break in Severus' defense and didn't hesitate to send a vicious cutting hex through that opening. The hex caught Severus on his Dark Mark, slicing it open, causing him to gasp in pain and drop his wand. Malfoy cast another hex, and Severus ducked down and rolled in an attempt to evade it and to regain his wand without stepping outside of the boundaries of the duel.

Grabbing his wand from the floor, Severus moved swiftly to send hexes flying back at Malfoy, who had grown a bit careless with the fight having apparently gone his way. He roared, "*Expelliarmus!*" causing Malfoy to fly backwards and land hard on his back, apparently stunned. Blood dripping down his arm, Severus walked over to Malfoy to call quits and was joined by the Headmaster, when Malfoy whipped another wand out of his frock coat, sneered, and barked out a Diffindo. The force of the cutting hex carved a deep gash across Severus' chest and knocked him off his feet. He landed hard and struck his head on the stone floor.

"*Stupefy!*" shouted Hermione, aiming her wand at Malfoy, causing him to lose consciousness. She ran over to Severus, who was trying to sit up and shaking his head, trying to clear it. She used her wand to slice the narrow skirt of her dress and sat down behind him, catching his head and shoulders as he fell back in a faint.

"Severus," she gasped. "Lie still. I'll do what I can to stop the blee..."

A shimmer of fabric and stones flew past her bewildered eyes, a door slammed, and she found herself back in the corridor, cradling an unconscious Severus in her arms. As she looked down in amazement, the gash across his chest and the cut on his Dark Mark healed up, disappearing as if they had never happened.

"Severus?" she murmured. No response. She looked up at the ceiling, trying to hold back the sudden tears that sprang up in her eyes.

~±~±~±~±~±~±~±~±~

A blond head rested on the pillow at the end of Harry Potter's living room sofa. Having tidied up the place, it was time for a short kip.

The doorbell rang. The blond reluctantly went to answer it. The door almost flew open by itself, and there stood another blond, wand drawn.

"We need to talk," stated the intruder.

~±~±~±~±~±~±~±~±~

amsev's Notes: I just adore Regency Romance and had to indulge myself, particularly after reading all the wonderful responses to the Regency challenge over at grangersnape100 community on Live Journal.

Southern_Witch_69 is up to bat next!

We can promise that this fiction will be updated quickly, as per our own rules upon getting together. The fun thing is that we aren't making outlines with each other, and whatever one of us writes is a surprise for the rest of us as well! This should be fun for everyone involved! Please let us know what you think! Thanks!

Chapter Five by Southern Witch 69

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione and Snape are locked in an unknown corridor at Hogwarts. Each door they open leads them to a different place where they must complete a task in hopes of finding a way out of the corridor. Their journey brings hidden feelings to the surface along the way. Round Robin by some of the Poetess admins.

Disclaimer: We're playing with JKR's characters and will have them home by teatime. No Galleons are being made...sadly enough.

Thanks go to RobisonRocket for the beta! We appreciate it, mate!

This story is the start of a round robin, which is being brought to you by some of the Admins here at the Petulant Poetess (amsev, LadyintheCloak, Soul Bound, and Southern_Witch_69). I have more details listed in the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter Five By Southern Witch 69

Hermione wiped at her eyes, unable to stem the slow flow of tears. "I'm so sorry I got you into this mess, and now, we're stuck here, and I can't get you to Madam Pomfrey!" She sniffed and shifted so that his head rested partially in her lap and partially on the crook of her arm. With her free hand, she lifted her wand and chanted a few incantations to check his vitals. All seemed to be in order.

"Severus?"

There was still no response. What could be wrong? Shock? Had someone Stupefied him without her realizing it? It was possible.

"*Finite Incantatem*," she said softly, flicking her wand at him. Still nothing happened.

"Damn it." Frustration chased away any remaining tears as she gazed down into his peaceful face. Gone was the dispassionate expression or scowl he normally wore. She'd never seen him look so relaxed and liked the way his lips seemed to almost smile. "You're quite attractive, you know," she said softly, bringing her free hand up to caress his cheek and move back a lock of hair from his face.

"Why, thank you, Hermione," he said, eyes still closed, but his lips were curved up in a smug smile.

"You scamp!" she said, pushing him off of her. "There was nothing wrong with you at all!"

"Not in the least. However," he sat up and smoothed his robes, "your concern was quite touching." His tone was mocking.

Growling slightly, she stood and moved towards the next doorway. "Come on. Let's get this over with." When he didn't reply, she turned around and shouted in surprise. He'd quickly moved directly behind her and was now inches away from her. "W-what is it?"

"Did you mean that?"

"Mean what?" she asked innocently, knowing full well what he was referring to. Unfortunately, she felt her cheeks heat and blush, giving her away. "Oh, all right. I did."

His brow furrowed in thought, eyes not leaving hers. "You didn't really have anything to show me, did you?"

"I...yes."

"Forgive me, my dear, but I don't think I believe you." He smirked. "I can tell by the expression on your face, you see. Now, what was it you really wanted?"

When he stepped even closer, she backed into the door and brought one hand behind her to fumble with the latch. "I just wanted to talk to you," she blurted with a nod. "That's right. A chat."

"Mmm. A likely story." He closed the small distance between them and placed one hand on the door above her head, bracing himself, and leaned closer. "And what, Hermione, did you want," he paused for a moment and arched an eyebrow, "to talk about?"

Her lips parted in anticipation of his kiss...stomach clenching excitedly. She was going to allow him to kiss her. She wanted him to kiss her. Then... "I thought you deserved to be happy."

The lips that were just grazing hers abruptly pulled back and formed the word, "WHAT?"

Startled, her hand behind her flexed, and the door sprang open, causing them to stumble through and land in a heap, him on top of her.

"Oh, shite!"

"Damn!"

Severus began to scramble off of her, but he stopped when her hands clutched his robes and held him in place. "I said that wrong," she began. "And it doesn't mean that I don't want to kiss you."

"Who said anything about kissing you?" he said with a hateful sneer. "If you would kindly release me..."

"Right." She let go of him and sat up to look around. "What the bloody hell are we doing here?"

~~~~~  
"What do you theenk you're doing, Fleur?" Gabrielle asked indignantly, swatting at the wand pointed at her.

"Where ees, 'Arry?"

"At 'Ogwarts. Why?"

"I will speak to 'im about zis!"

"No. Zis ees my choice. I'm old enough, no?"

"But you are still my little sister! I will not let 'im use you zis way!"

"E's not using me! I love 'im and 'ave agreed to marry 'im!"

Fleur lowered her wand in shock, mouth gaping open. "Marriage? *Mon Dieu!* But when?"

"E 'az asked me more zan once. I finally said yes to 'im last night."

"Ow could I not know about zis?"

"I never told Mama or anybody else."

"But you should 'ave told me. When zey said 'Arry 'ad anuzzer lover, I waz worried eet was you. You theenk I did not see ze way you looked at 'im? Ron said 'e found blond 'air, but 'e thought eet might belong to Luna Lovegood."

"But no. Eet ees me!"

"Ermione said eet may be Draco Malfoy. Somezing about a camping trip."

"Arry is not gay! 'E ees my lover."

"Only I knew ze truth." She frowned and closed the door finally. "I just do not want my little sister to be 'urt, and 'Arry hurt Ginny, no?"

"Ginny 'urt 'Arry if you will remember."

"Maybe so, but zat..."

"Eet ees 'ow 'Arry remembers eet, and even Ronald 'az said 'is sister 'urt 'Arry." Gabrielle shrugged. "'Er loss, eet ees my gain."

Fleur then smiled. "You and I, we 'ave a way with ze men, ah? I married ze best, most brave Weasley, and you will marry ze Chosen One." She hugged her sister. "When 'e saved you in ze lake years ago, I thought to myself zat one day, 'e might make a good man for my sister."

"You did not!"

"Maybe not, but I should 'ave thought of eet then."

Both women laughed, and then Gabrielle pulled her sister into the living room so that she could finally, and happily, tell her everything she'd been keeping to herself.

~~~~~

Harry stopped and looked at Neville oddly once they reached the gates of Hogwarts. "Neville, what exactly have you been doing with Hermione... in her chambers... at night? Why was she expecting you?"

"Oh, er... that's, uh, personal, Harry. Sorry."

"You fancy her!" Harry accused.

Looking around wildly before bringing a finger to his own lips, Neville hissed, "Sshhh!"

"Admit it," Harry said, voice lowered.

"Don't get me wrong... I... No, Harry, I'm not going to tell you. It's private."

"Yes, but this is..."

"You should talk!" Neville blurted.

"Eh?"

"Shagging Draco Malfoy!"

Harry's eyes widened, and it was his turn to look about wildly. "I am not! Who said that? Is this about that trip down to the Continent? I'll have you know..."

"Hermione says Ron saw a bit of blond hair on your pillow last week. She figures it's Malfoy!"

Shaking his head and laughing, Harry said, "No, it's not Draco."

"So, Ron's right then?"

Harry's smile faded. "What did Ron say?"

"He said you might be seeing Luna."

"Luna?" he replied incredulously. "No, mate, she and I are only friends."

The look of relief on Neville's face was immediate. "Well, if not them, who?"

"I wasn't going to say anything until this Sunday," Harry began, "but I guess there's no harm in letting you know." His grin widened. "Gabrielle Delacour. She and I have decided to be married."

"Co-congratulations, Harry!" Neville said earnestly. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks."

"How did you ask?" Neville swallowed thickly, eyes wide in awe. "Weren't you afraid she'd turn you down?"

"She did."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I've asked a few times though. Finally said yes."

"And you weren't deterred at all?"

"No, I knew it would be a matter of time." Harry frowned at the thoughtful expression on Neville's face. "Is there something you want to tell me now? Like when you're going to ask Hermione to marry you?"

Neville smiled. "Let's go down to the Three Broomsticks. I'll tell you everything over a pint or two."

"Right then. Come on."

~~~~~

"This is your fault!" Severus accused, rising and dusting pink and white confetti from his robes.

"Oh, no, it's not! I've always detested this place," she said heatedly, looking around at the frilly decorations and cozy couples.

"What? Haven't been coming here with Longbottom then?"

Hermione crossed her arms and tapped her foot, thinking of something snappy to say. How dare he keep throwing Neville in her face! Deciding on a better punishment, she reached out and grabbed his wrist, pulling him behind her to a private table in the corner. "I think since we're here, we might as well enjoy Madam Puddifoot's famous tea."

"I will not take part in this," he said curtly, refusing to sit down.

She simply pointed back to the door they'd come through, which was fading from sight. "It appears you have no choice. There must be a reason for us to be here."

He sat down with a thump. "Yes, and I know exactly what it is!"

"Oh?" she asked, eyebrows arching in question. "Please share."

"You..."

"Hello, you two. What would you like?"

"A pot of your finest tea please," Hermione said sweetly. "And some sugar biscuits."

"Anything else?" the young girl directed this to Severus, though she didn't dare meet his eyes.

"Nothing else," he snapped.

When she walked away, he turned on Hermione and said, "You know very well why this room came into being! You're wishing to... kiss me; therefore, it sent us ~~this~~ wretched place!"

"I was not! I..." Her words were cut off as a teapot, cups, and a tin of biscuits appeared on their table.

"You just said minutes ago that you thought I..."

"But you were! If I hadn't opened the latch accidentally, we would have!"

"I believe it was your mouth you opened accidentally," he said while sweetening his tea with sugar.

"You seemed intent on mouth all right," she retorted, blushing at the remembrance of his lips grazing hers.

"Very well. It was an error on my part," he admitted, not meeting her eyes. "One that I shall not make again."

"Why not?" she asked suddenly, disappointed, placing her teacup on its dainty saucer.

Incredulously, he asked, "And make a fool of myself? I think not!"

"How is a small snog making a fool of yourself? I would... I wouldn't mind, so there's nothing to feel foolish about."

"I've known you for many years, and you've always had the notion that you could fix things...house-elves, classmates' homework, friends' relationships, Muggle-born rights... and many other projects." Here his eyes met hers firmly. "I will not be added to that list."

"It's not like that."

He smirked and changed the tone of his voice to mimic her nastily. "I just wish you'd be happy, Severus. Let me help you, Severus. Let me give myself to you if it will ease your suffering, Severus."

It was Hermione's turn to sneer. "How dare you say such a thing? I would never donate my body to some cause!"

"Wouldn't you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Isn't it interesting that Weasley, not Potter, got the girl? Easing the blow that his best talent to always come in last after everyone around him...brothers, Potter, you?" He chuckled hatefully. "And now you've tossed Longbottom into the mix."

"What a nasty thing to say! Ronald is not always last in line or lacking anything. And to think I thought you..."

"That's just it. You know nothing! You've no right to assume anything, Granger!" His knuckles whitened as his grip tightened on his cup. "I am content with my life as it is."

"I don't believe you," she whispered sadly.

"Pity has no place in this conversation. See to it that you lose it."

"I just want to be your friend! What's wrong with that?"



"Nothing, but that's not all you want. You want to meddle. You want to fix things as you see fit." He sighed. "Do you think so little of me that you believe I can't go and find a woman if that is what I felt I lacked?"

"No, of course not. I'm certain you could choose from among many women."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, do you think I was lying when I said I found you attractive or when I foolishly admitted that I wanted you to kiss me and would have allowed it?"

"Why?"

"Are you looking for compliments?" She'd intended for this to be a joke, hoping to lighten their conversation, but it had the opposite effect.

"Go to hell, you pesky wench," he said darkly, grip tightening too much and causing the cup's handle to break away, resulting in shards of China and drops of tea on the table.

The serving girl popped over and quickly cleaned the mess, replacing and filling Severus' cup. "Not a problem at all," she muttered before leaving.

"I'm sorry," Hermione offered. "I'm saying everything wrong." When he didn't reply, she added, "And I hope you don't mean the things you're saying either."

Surprisingly, he changed the subject. "Have you never been here?"

"Not on a date," she said softly, glad to return to safer conversation. "You?"

He nodded tersely.

"On a date?"

His eyes narrowed, but he answered her. "Once."

"Did you shatter your teacup then, too?" she asked with a smile, receiving a small one in return.

"Not because of her," he said, eyes lowering to look into his tea. "All was well... until others arrived, and then things turned out quite unexpectedly."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes, well, it's in the past." He frowned. "All four of them are dead now."

Hermione bit her lip for a moment, and then she asked, "Harry's father and his friends?"

"Feeling sorry for them, are you?"

She frowned. "I feel sorry for anyone whose life is cut short, but if you think that I condone anything they put you through, the answer is no."

"What do you know about it?" he asked suspiciously. "Potter's been talking?"

"What do you mean?" she asked honestly.

"Did he never tell you what he saw in my Pensieve during his Occlumency lessons?"

"No, he didn't. What did he see?"

"I... He simply saw that his father wasn't the man he thought him to be."

"I know he approached Lupin and Sirius about things they'd done in the past, but he never gave us any details." She shrugged. "I do know about the memories you gave him though. And about his mother."

"Yes, then you must know it was her who came here with me."

"Maybe you could have brought her again after that and had a better time."

He shook his head. "No, things were different then, and I'd already done something to make her want to spend less time with me. She rarely did anymore, and I almost had to trick her to get her here."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!"

Feeling bold, Hermione extended her hand and placed it on his arm. "I am glad to be here with you," she said with a small smile, hoping to put him at ease and maybe give him a fonder memory of the place.

His eyes closed for a moment, and when he opened them to gaze at her, she could tell that he wanted to say something. However, his eyes darted to the left, drawing her attention away from him.

The door had reappeared.

"It seems we're deemed ready to leave now," he said, a small hint of disappointment in his voice.

"Why don't we finish our tea and biscuits, Severus? Who knows when we'll be able to have anything else?" She grinned. "Using the loo wouldn't be amiss either...even though there are those fairies in there who fly about and try to assist you!"

They both smiled and reached for the tin at the same time, his hand lingering over hers for a moment.

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**Southern's Notes:** And here is the next installment. I do hope you've enjoyed it and the little surprise with the "blonds" I put in. The girls were warring over it being Draco or Luna, so I pulled a fast one. Hahahahaha.

And just what is up with Neville?

Next up is Soul Bound, who will have the next update ready to go soon enough. Thanks for reading this round robin. It's great fun. I'm sorry to say that CocoaChristy still has computer problems and won't be able to join us in this one, but I'm certain she'll be around for the next one.

# Chapter Six by Soul Bound

Chapter 6 of 10

How does Harry take the news of Neville's plans? Hermione and Snape have a bridge to cross. Can it be done?

**Disclaimer:** Wouldn't it be nice if we could legally profit fiscally from playing with J.K. Rowling's toys? I think so too . . . . But as that isn't likely to happen any time in the foreseeable future, on with the show (free of charge)!

*Thanks go to RobisonRocket for the beta! We appreciate it, mate!*

This is the sixth chapter of a round robin, which is being brought to you by some of the Admins here at the Petulant Poetess (amsev, LadyintheCloak, Soul Bound, and Southern\_Witch\_69). I have more details listed in the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter Six by Soul Bound

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Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom sat across from one another at a table in a corner of the Three Broomsticks. They'd ordered their drinks several minutes before, and Harry was listening patiently as Neville stuttered through several attempts to continue the explanation he had promised. He'd first told Harry that he did indeed plan to ask the woman he loved to marry him. Harry had been rather surprised at first, but he'd quickly realized that he probably should have expected it. It wasn't that strange, after all, that Neville would feel that way about her. The two of them had been through a lot together.

"So you can see, you know . . . well, why I didn't want to tell you...well, anyone really. It's just that . . . Oh, thank you, love..." Neville halted his rambling as Madam Rosmerta placed a full pint of Firewhisky in front of him. "Listen, mate. This is hard to explain. You just can't help who you love, you know."

Harry nodded, wanting to appear encouraging. He really wanted the full story from Neville, and the already nervous man might be frightened off if Harry pushed too hard. "Go on," he said.

"I don't want to lose your friendship . . . or Ron's, and I know how he feels about the men she dates . . . . And you...I knew that you might not . . . approve," Neville said, looking away.

"Of course not! I mean, of course I would approve, Nev. I meant that of course I wouldn't object to you," he clarified at Neville's briefly hurt expression. "You're my friend, and you've always been a good friend to her, too. If anyone could be there for her the way she needs, it would be you."

"Thanks, Harry. That means a lot," Neville said with a smile.

And Harry found that he truly meant it. It was true that Neville could be clumsy and a bit awkward at times, but he was a great man where it counted. True, this was a surprise, but the more he thought about it, the less it surprised him and the more it made sense. He found himself truly hoping Neville's proposal went well. He thought of his own lovely fiancée, and a rush of happiness filled him. *'Everyone should have the chance to be as happy as I am'* he thought. "So, how are you going to ask her?" he said aloud with a grin, and he watched Neville's face light up as he smiled in return.

"You really don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind. You didn't really need it, but you have my blessing. Now, let's hear it!"

All nervousness finally disappeared from Neville as he visibly relaxed and took a swig of his whisky. "Well," he said quietly, leaning forward with a conspiratorial smirk, "I've been planning for this Friday, but I still need to hammer out the finishing touches, and until Hermione and Snape come back . . ."

\* \* \*

After Severus had finally relaxed, Hermione had found it much easier to have a nice discussion with him. Even though they had both long since had their fill of biscuits and tea...as well as a much needed trip to the loo...Hermione was hesitant to do anything that might put a stop to their truce. She didn't know when, if ever, Severus would be so pleasant again. Seeing him smile like this, being with him . . . it brought to the forefront the feelings for him that she had long been unwilling to examine too closely.

Severus kept everyone at arm's length and had for a very long time. She knew her attraction and admiration for him were real, but for as long as she'd had these feelings, she'd known that allowing them to take root in her would only end up hurting her.

He was prickly, unpredictable, easily offended, and generally unpleasant . . . and yet there were times like these...and several instances since they'd been lost together...when he smiled, when his sense of humor shone through, and when it was easy for her to know why she felt the way she did about him. It was true that as quickly and unexpectedly he would smile, his mood would quickly turn in the opposite direction, but that was just the way he was. It didn't bother her too much. What bothered her about it wasn't his sharpness...by now she was rather used to it...it was that she wasn't ever sure what would offend him until she had already said it. But . . . she could learn, and maybe if they were . . . together . . . he would learn not to take everything she said in the worst way possible.

The thought gave her a shiver and made her smile. She didn't know if it was possible, given who he was, who she was, and what they had both been through without each other, but if they *could* be together . . . It had to be possible. It wasn't really so unlikely, was it? People fell in love every day, found someone to share their life with every day . . . . Why was it so impossible that *they* could?

She really did want him to be happy, but just as much, she wanted to be the one to make him happy, and she wanted to be happy herself...with him. The only thing was . . . she wasn't sure how *he* felt.

"Severus, can I ask you something?"

A doubtful look settled on his features, but he nodded his head once in assent.

"It's just . . . earlier, when we almost kissed...no, wait! Please just listen. When we almost kissed, I wasn't thinking that I wanted to kiss you because it would make you happy. I was thinking that I wanted to kiss you because . . . because it would make *me* happy." She risked a glance at him to gauge his reaction and found him staring intently at her. He hadn't stopped her, so she continued. "I don't feel pity for you. Not at all. I feel . . . admiration for you, attraction . . . desire. What I want to ask you is . . . could you ever feel those things for me?"

Her heart was thumping madly in her chest, and she took a deep breath to calm herself a bit and waited.

He was silent for a long time, and after a while, every second began to take its toll. What was he thinking? She couldn't imagine his continued silence was anything good . . . She was considering making a break for the still-open door, but then he spoke.

"I could. I . . . do," he said softly.

She was sure her smile could be seen from cities away, but it didn't last long; his next words weren't so wonderful.

"But I shouldn't, and I . . . It's not a good idea for me...or you...to indulge in them. I have been alone for a long time. There are things about me that you could never understand, and trying to change now, this late in my life . . . It's not feasible. Even if we do . . . feel a certain way about each other, I don't think it is wise to pursue it. It would only end up hurting both of us."

Hermione took in his words, and they left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, and her hands clenched as she replied. "So what you're saying . . . is that my feelings, your own feelings, are worthless...that any happiness we could find with each other isn't worth the risk of getting hurt." It wasn't a question. "I see."

In her frustration, the cheery feeling of the teashop suddenly didn't feel welcoming. She found she'd had quite enough of this room, this entire *adventure*. She got to her feet quickly and made for the door.

"Hermione, try to understand. It's not..."

"Not what?" she demanded, whirling around to glare at him. "Is it really so impossible to think we could have a relationship? I *know* what kind of man you are. I *know* the kind of life you've lived. No, I don't know everything about you, but I know enough to know that I respect you and want to be with you. How can you say that I could never understand you? In all the time we've been friends, when have I ever judged you? I don't care that you have ghosts that haunt you and skeletons in your closet, Snape. We all do. Why do you insist on believing that no one could ever accept you?"

He was silent again for several moments as she stared at him. "There are some bridges that can't be crossed," he finally said, his face an emotionless mask. "I'm sorry."

"You have never been more wrong," she replied, then turned and left the room without a backward glance.

Once back in the corridor, she found that once again, there was only one other door. Hoping that the game was finally over and that the door was the way back to reality, she pulled it open and stepped through...and let out a frustrated sigh. The main corridors of Hogwarts didn't contain any lakes or hills. Something moved in the periphery to her right, and she saw what appeared to be a *Marmot*. No, she certainly couldn't recall ever have seen one of those in the school.

Well, best to get it over with...whatever it was she was supposed to find. As she walked forward, she heard Severus enter the room behind her, but she didn't look back. Thinking about his stubbornness was the last thing she wanted to do right now.

She followed the trail and soon found herself standing in the middle of a camp. Her eyes widened as she recognized the people sitting around the campfire. She was quite surprised they hadn't said anything to her, considering she was standing almost exactly in front of both Harry and Ron, who were seated across from Dean, Seamus, Blaise Zabini, and Draco Malfoy, all bundled in blankets and gathered around the fire for its warmth. Strange, she didn't feel cold at all.

"Oh!" she said as she realized what she was seeing, and the fact that nobody seemed to hear her voice confirmed her suspicion. This was a scene from the past. Just like a memory in a Pensieve, these people couldn't see or hear her.

"What is this?" came Snape's voice from behind her. She briefly considered ignoring him, but decided it would accomplish nothing.

"I believe this is the famous camping trip the boys always go on about."

"Of course," Severus said with a snort, moving to stand beside her. "Only a Potter would be stupid enough to organize a camping trip in the Alps during winter."

Hermione barely contained her retort to that.

"I remember hearing about this," Snape went on. "Years ago. What could we possibly have to gain from watching this?"

"How should I know?" she said, then moved closer to better hear what was being said. She'd always been curious about what had happened on this trip. For all that Harry and Ron reminisced about it, she'd never been able to get any details about what had actually gone on . . .

"Where'd you stash the whisky, Seamus?" Ron was asking.

"It's in my bag," Seamus replied.

"Well, go get it!" Blaise ordered. "I didn't come all this way to stay sober!"

"Hear, hear!"

"All right, all right . . ." Seamus muttered as he stood. "Bunch of luses you lot are."

Hermione took a seat next to Dean and looked at the faces of her old schoolmates. It didn't take long watching them to notice a distinct pattern between two of them. As the liquor was passed around and the night rolled on, it became increasingly obvious that both Harry and Malfoy were focused on something other than the Firewhisky.

Harry would glance at Malfoy, then look away quickly when Malfoy looked back. His face would flush as he stared at the fire, and then several minutes later, he would look back at Malfoy, who would quickly look away from Harry himself, and the cycle would repeat. Hermione was more than intrigued. She'd known that the two of them had buried the hatchet years ago, but she didn't know there'd ever been anything . . . *else*.

The conversation became more entertaining as the boys all became more intoxicated, and still Harry and Malfoy took turns staring at each other. A rather revealing drinking game was played, in which Hermione learned more than she had ever wanted to know about Ron's masturbatory habits, and after a while, Seamus said he'd had enough and was ready to call it a night. He was soon followed by Dean, Zabini, and Ron, all retreating to their respective tents.

Harry and Malfoy sat across the fire from each other...now alone together. Both were just drunk enough to stare at the other openly, and Hermione could almost feel the heat of the fire through their eyes.

"'Spouse we should head off, too," Harry finally said.

"Harry," Draco said softly, and Hermione didn't know what to make of his tone, "let's play one more round."

Harry flushed again, then nodded shyly, his head tilted down as he met Draco's eyes. "You go first."

"I've never wanted to kiss my enemy." It was apparently a lie because Draco took a sip of his whisky.

Harry did, too, and it seemed to give him courage. "I've never wanted find out what your skin tastes like." He brought the bottle to his mouth, never taking his eyes off of the blond as he moved towards him.

"I've never wanted to feel what's under those baggy clothes you wear."

"I've never wanted to run my fingers through your hair."

Harry sat down and straddled the log Draco was sitting on, and Draco did the same. He shifted toward Harry until their legs were pressed together. "I've done anything as crazy as what I'm about to do."

Hermione felt her mouth drop open as Draco brought Harry's mouth to his and claimed it. She'd been expecting it, but still . . . Actually seeing it was something she could never have prepared for. The incredulous sound from next to her told her that Snape felt the same way.

Harry groaned as Draco slid his hands under his shirt, and as Harry threaded his fingers through Draco's silvery hair, Hermione found she didn't care how surprising it was. It was something she wanted to see, something she wanted Snape to see. It represented something very important, and this room would not have brought them here for no reason.

"I've never wanted to fuck you," Draco whispered against Harry's mouth as his hands worked to unzip Harry's jeans.

"I've never wanted to fuck you either," Harry whispered back as he worked on Draco's zipper as well.

"Now you're a liar."

"So are you."

Draco's reply was a moan as Harry took hold of him, and Harry hissed back as Draco did the same.

"Are we really going to do this?" Harry asked.

"If you stop now, I'll hurt you."

"Fair enough," Harry said with a chuckle, then kissed Draco again.

The rest was a blur of skin and sounds. Hermione could have walked away at any time, but she didn't. In the end it was Draco who took Harry, and Hermione was amazed at how gentle he was...amazed at how these two men with so much between them and behind them, who had despised one another for so long, had found a way around it. They had let it go, put it aside in order to truly *see* each other and share this together.

She felt a sort of reverence for what she was witnessing, and she hoped that Snape did too.

When it was over, Draco and Harry stayed fastened together for a while, just breathing and smiling. When they finally put their clothes back on and went to bed, Hermione sat in the silence as the fire died down. After a while, a door appeared in the air, and she stood. She turned to her companion as he got to his feet.

"You see, Severus? There aren't any bridges that can't be crossed...only people unwilling to cross them."

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**SB's Notes:** Well, there you have it! I know some of you were a bit disappointed that Harry's lover wasn't Draco, but this way we all still win. I hope you enjoyed it! Ladyinthecloak is up next. Let's see where she goes from here!

## Chapter Seven - by ladyinthecloak

*Chapter 7 of 10*

Harry tries to comfort Neville, Minerva is one angry witch, and Hermione and Severus find yet another strange room.

Disclaimer: I am not JKR. Srsly.

This is a continuation of the mischief some of the admins of the Poetess get up to when the queue isn't overwhelming. A round robin, brought to you by Southern\_Witch\_69, Soul Bound, amsev, and me. I think I can speak for everyone when I say I hope you enjoy reading this as much as we've enjoyed writing it.

Grateful thanks go to Robisonrocket for beta'ing. Thanks, love, we truly appreciate it! \*hands over stack of chocolates\*

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*Chapter 7 - ladyinthecloak*

"But, Neville, what do you need Hermione or Snape for to hammer out the finishes?" Harry asked incredulously. Who on earth would need Snape of all people to prepare asking a girl to marry him?

Neville grinned sheepishly. "Well... Obviously, I don't need Snape for that. But without Hermione, I'm kind of lost, really."

"Come on, Neville! Surely it's not that bad," Harry said, trying to comfort his friend. "She'll be back in no time, I'm sure of it. Professor Dumbledore saw no reason to worry, so I'm sure all is well."

are highly poisonous, and it wouldn't do to lose your voice. I'd imagine you'd go mad if you couldn't speak," he added wryly.

"Well, in that case, I'll harvest some daisy roots instead," Hermione muttered, pointing at an abundance of daisies in full bloom nearby. "Oh, and look! Fluxweed! I've never seen it grown in Britain!"

"Hm... who says we're in Britain..." Severus mumbled, watching her furtively as she carefully yet deftly extracted daisy roots from the ground and then tended to the fluxweed.

A butterfly in the colors of the rainbow landed on Hermione's arm. "Oh, aren't you beautiful?" she whispered, admiring the vibrant shades it displayed.

"Why, thank you, kind lady," the butterfly...no, the fairy...replied, and Hermione gasped.

Severus hurried to her side and chuckled when he saw the fairy sitting on her arm. "A colorful beauty indeed!"

The fairy slowly turned around to let its beauty be admired by the humans and said, "Take the left fork, and you'll find a spring to wash the poison off your hands and to refresh yourselves." Then it flew off again.

Severus followed the fairy's path of flight until it disappeared out of sight. "Let's go then. I surely could do with a drink of water," he said.

Hermione slowly followed his lead. "I've never seen a fairy before..."

"I have been lucky a few times; but only because I gather many potions ingredients myself." Severus put his arm around her shoulder. "The Forbidden Forest has its fair share of fairies as you can imagine. If you like, I'll take you along on one of my next forays."

"I'd like that! Do they all look the same?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Not at all, no. They're all rather small, but thereabouts ends the similarity. Most are quite colorful, although some look more drab. You can find them pretty much in any forest, or near water, but they're usually very shy."

They had reached the spring now and, after thoroughly washing their hands, took turns drinking the fresh water.

this extent," she muttered and approached the frame.

"No, no, Minerva, you can't do that!" The head of the painting's inhabitant appeared on the side. "You'd hurt yourself if you tried to lift it! Please, Minerva, be reasonable."

"Reasonable? Look who's talking, Albus Dumbledore! Before you ask *me* to be reasonable, kindly acquire some reason yourself! Why, pray tell, did you arrange for Hermione and Severus to be lost in that blasted corridor together? And don't even try to get out of this! I want an answer, and I want it now!"

Albus sat down on his chair in the portrait, searched his robes and took out what looked suspiciously like a Muggle sweet. He unwrapped it carefully before facing the angry witch. "I did not arrange anything, Minerva. Now, please excuse me. I'm in the middle of a Bridge game, and I would hate for my partner to lose out because I'm suddenly otherwise engaged." That said, he disappeared again, leaving behind an irate headmistress.

room would provide besides the obvious aphrodisiacs nature provided so abundantly.

Hermione stopped abruptly. "Did you hear that? It sounds like someone laughing." They were silent for a moment until both heard it. Indeed, someone seemed to enjoy him or herself tremendously, judging by the delighted laughter waving across to them.

The couple followed the sound and soon reached a clearing, half of which was surrounded by water features in the shape of a horseshoe. In the midst of the clearing on the ground was a couple, both naked, their bodies intertwined.

Severus watched mesmerized until Hermione gasped. "She looks like me. And, Merlin! He looks like you!"

All he was able to utter was a non-committing, "Hm..." staring at the couple in front of him, coupling with much obvious joy and no shame, oblivious they suddenly had an audience.

Hermione had gone silent, watching with equal amounts of fascination as the Severus on the ground touched her own form on the ground in various places, making her moan, sigh, and writhe beneath him. His one hand was squeezing one breast lightly, then he flicked his tongue across it while emitting a sound of deep appreciation. "So beautiful..."

Her sigh turned his attention to her face, and his mouth moved quickly to capture her lips in a searing kiss before covering her breast again. She moaned as his tongue circled her nipple. "More... Severus, more!"

He obliged her demands and slowly pulled away from her body. Severus, the observer, looked in wonder at Hermione's unfocused, full-of-lust eyes. Eyes that seemed to be filled with something else he could not make out. Too soon, Severus on the ground obscured his view, his body moving agonizingly slow, taking in the sight of her from various angles, his hands softly stroking her thighs as her hips flexed. "Please..."

"Please, what, love?" he asked. "Please, as in so..." His mouth came down on her curls, and she writhed underneath him. Lifting his head slightly, he asked, "Or maybe like so?" His fingers moved to her core and his tongue back to her clit, eliciting moans and gasps from her.

Minutes...or maybe hours later...he positioned himself at the entrance to her core. With each thrust, with each gasp, with each moan, the couple on the ground faded slightly until, with a final cry of each other's name, the clearing was left empty of writhing bodies, with only Hermione and Severus standing at its edge.

For long minutes, the couple stood there in silence, staring at the clearing where they had watched themselves making passionate love.

Eventually, Severus took a deep breath. He chanced a glance at her and, mollified how flushed she looked, said, "That was *quite* a scene to be witnessing..."

She was sounding more smug than should be legal upon his words. "I believe this showed us *what could* be. If you ever manage to get that stubborn head of yours out of your arse, dear."

## Chapter Eight by amsev

*Chapter 8 of 10*

Hermione and Severus have a bumpy exit from the garden. Albus worries and Minerva plots.

Disclaimer: I \*AM\* JKR. ~snort!~ Not!

This is a continuation of the mischief some of the admins of the Poetess get up to when the queue isn't overwhelming. A round robin, brought to you by Southern\_Witch\_69, Soul Bound, amsev, and ladyinthecloak. I think I can speak for everyone when I say I hope you enjoy reading this as much as we've enjoyed writing it.

Grateful thanks go to Robisonrocket for beta'ing. Thank you so much for your gracious help! Thank you to Southern\_Witch\_69, as well, for holding my hand on this one!

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## Chapter Eight by amsev

Stepping back into the corridor as the door to the garden closed silently behind them, Severus felt dazed at what he had seen. He shook his head, trying to clear the sights from his mind, the smells from his nostrils. He took a deep breath, and as his head cleared, he began to feel mortified. Struck by the irony of stepping out of the garden, he felt the warmth of embarrassment rising in his face. He glanced at Hermione, who still appeared to be dazed, and looked quickly away, suddenly finding the damp on his boots from the grass fascinating.

Hermione drew in deep breaths of the fresh, cool air of the corridor, missing the scents of the garden, and wondering what had just happened. 'Oh, Goddess,' she thought and glanced over at Severus to find him studying his boots, quite red in the face.

Feeling her eyes upon him, he glanced up. "Not one word, Miss Granger," he muttered. "Not one word." He held her eyes for a moment and looked away.

Bridges be damned. This wasn't some Garden of Eden to lose themselves in; this was real. He was a soul-blackened scoundrel and so curmudgeonly and ugly as to repulse the most stouthearted female. He thought of the last woman he had been with, many months ago, a prostitute. She could barely hide her disgust at servicing this most loathsome of Death Eaters, the murderer of Albus Dumbledore.

The women had been purchased by Lucius Malfoy for the enjoyment of the Death Eaters, particularly one Severus Snape, who had been forced to hide out in Voldemort's lair, having become too notorious to show his face freely in the world. Snape had chosen a comely wench with lovely, though obviously artificial, auburn hair. He had seen her eyes widen a bit with fear as he approached her before her professional sang-froid had taken over her face.

He had tried to pleasure her, drawing pleasure both from the sensations of his body and watching those of the woman. But she would not be pleased. She had been acting to the utmost of her abilities. He had murmured Legilimens under his breath and entered her mind to back out almost immediately as her loathing of him had been so extreme. Albus Dumbledore had been a near-saint in her eyes, and now she was forced to copulate with his killer, an ugly, loathsome git of a man. He had felt her incipient nausea, his own stomach had lurched, and he had finished quickly with her after that, leaving her presence to go brood.

So that was what the world thought of him. There was no sugarcoating it. All he had done for the side of the Light during the war simply wasn't enough. Nothing could clean his soul of the stain of having killed his friend and mentor. 'But he was dying anyway,' a quiet voice in his mind counseled. 'If I had time, and I would have had time, were it not for Voldemort's plotting, I would have been able to save him.' he answered back in his mind. And he grieved once again for the loss of the man who had somehow been able to see some good in him, had somehow forgiven him for what he had done when he joined the Death Eaters. 'Even though Dumbledore desired his death, that will not wash this sin from my necrosed soul.'

A small hand touched his forearm, drawing him out of his dark thoughts.

"Severus," Hermione whispered.

He drew back from her touch abruptly, a sneer forming on his face. "What do you want, Miss Granger, that you cannot leave me alone to think for a moment?" His voice was icy and contemptuous.

Hermione looked at him, alarmed at this change and sighed. It appeared the Greasy Git, in all his glory, was back.

-----  
On his way back to his Bridge game, Albus peered into the corridor and sighed. He could venture an accurate guess as to what was going through Severus' mind as he jerked back from Hermione. He sighed again. One step forward, then two steps back in this dance apparently. He returned to his card game with a somber expression on his face.

-----  
Minerva exhaled angrily at the sight of the empty picture frame. Damn the man. Even in death he had a way with infuriating and exasperating her. She sat down in the high-backed chair behind her desk and pondered the frame. Her mouth tightened in to a firm line. Two could play at the infuriation and exasperation game, and while she wasn't entirely sure that portraits really felt the full gamut of emotion the living do, she would find a way to make Albus Dumbledore just as frustrated as she was at the moment.

Transforming into her tabby Animagus form, she left the office to see what she could sniff out with her cat senses. She had been all over the castle in the last day in her human form, but perhaps she had missed some vital clue.

-----  
Hermione was mildly alarmed at the professor's reaction to her touch. And now he was glaring at her as if she were a piece of ancient chewing gum that had been stuck to the sole of his boot. She frowned at him, and his sneer and glare reached new heights of animosity.

"Severus, what on earth...?" she began.

"I'll thank you not to begin with your usual copious interrogation, Miss Granger," he barked back.

She made a frustrated noise and gave him glare for glare. Finally, in the face of his mounting anger, she was forced to look away. Tapping her foot, feeling her anger rising to meet his, she turned back.

"So what on earth is the matter with you? You haven't called me Miss Granger in that tone for quite some time now."

"There's nothing the matter with me, Miss Granger." His clipped response sent a shiver of apprehension down her spine.

"Then why are you acting like you just smelled dog shite and the odor is apparently coming off me?"

He sneered and turned away and began to walk to the next door.

Incensed, Hermione darted after him. She grabbed his arm and forced him to turn around and face her.

He showed his teeth as he yanked his arm out of her grasp. "Do not touch me."

"You were such a nice companion on this little adventure up until now. What the hell is wrong with you?" she demanded.

-----  
Minerva padded softly down the staff corridor, attempting to separate out all the confusing scents. She hadn't the nose of a bloodhound in her cat form, but her sense of smell was strong. She could tell the difference between the smells of those who had passed recently through the corridor and the lingering smells of older footsteps. She focussed herself on the recent smells. Her whiskers twitched, and she sneezed as her nose found a hint of Potions herbs.

There. That had to be Severus' track. She sniffed again, idly wondering which child he had frightened into dropping feverfew and lemon grass on the floor of the classroom. She hoped none of the other teachers had happened upon that particular mess and trod through it as Severus obviously had.

Moving slowly and cautiously so as not to lose the trail, she dropped her mouth open a bit to more deeply take in the smell of the herbs. She hoped that none of the teachers would happen across her and wonder at the odd behavior of a cat that wasn't Mrs. Norris.

Not looking ahead, keeping her nose to the stones, presently she bumped it against the first tread of a staircase. She looked up and sniffed the tread. The scent continued. She jumped up on the tread and sniffed the next tread. Proceeding up the stairs in this manner, she reached the top, which was swung to... Damn. The staircase was swung out over nothing, not attached anywhere. Changing back into her human form, she sat on the top stair and peered at the unreachable walls and floors.

Suddenly, the stairs moved and swung again. She gripped the top tread as she and they moved out over... Nothing. She was looking at a blank wall.

It shimmered. Rubbing her eyes, she focussed more intently on the wall. It shimmered again, this time revealing a corridor. To her delight, she could see Severus and Hermione a ways down the corridor.

"Severus," she shouted. "Hermione!"

They appeared to be arguing or at least glaring at each other and did not respond to her summons.

"*Sonorus*," Minerva murmured pointing the wand at her throat. "Hermione! Severus!" she called out again, her amplified voice echoing around the deserted stairways. No response. She saw Severus turn and walk away from Hermione, and Hermione catch up with him. She saw him shake off her hand on his arm and glare at her. Minerva started. She hadn't seen that much malevolence in his face since Voldemort. What on earth was going on in that corridor? "*Quietus*," she muttered to cancel the spell.

They couldn't hear her. She could see them, but apparently couldn't hear them either. She stood up and waved her arms frantically to try to catch one or the other's eye. She grasped her wand and shot red sparks in the direction of the corridor. To her surprise, the sparks bounced off an invisible barrier where the wall had been just moments before.

She swayed and almost fell as the staircase moved again. This time it aligned with the spot where the wall had disappeared. Minerva cautiously reached out towards the corridor and encountered... the rough, cold surface of stone beneath her fingers. She couldn't see it at the moment, but apparently, the wall was still there.

Stymied, she sat down on the top tread. They couldn't see her, even though she could see them clearly. What on earth had Albus and/or the castle gotten her two friends into this time?

She gasped as Hermione slapped Severus hard enough to make him stumble. She then stormed off, throwing open a door and walking through, shutting the door behind her. Severus stood there for a moment glaring after her and rubbing his reddening cheek. He grasped the handle of the door and strode through it. Now both of them were out of sight, the corridor empty.

Minerva stood and cast her Patronus to summon Harry and Neville, as well as Filius Flitwick. Surely he would know what obscure charm this illusory corridor was based on. And if he knew, he could crack it.

-----  
"I am no one's 'nice companion,'" Severus ground out between gritted teeth.

"You mean to tell me that you..." Hermione stopped her rising tirade to study the pale man in front of her. "Wait a second. You are embarrassed. You are embarrassed by what you saw in the garden. Well, I'll have you know that it was surprising and a bit embarrassing for me as well."

"Embarrassed to be seen so intimately with me?" he sneered.

"Of of course not, Severus, I was just surprised. In fact, I thought it was rather... sexy."

"Rather sexy to see yourself as the Snape whore?"

She gaped at him, her face previously a bit rosy from the delicacy of the topic now paled to the color of parchment in anger. She took one step closer to him and slapped him as hard as she could, forcing him to stagger back a step or two to remain upright. She turned and found that a new door had materialized, grabbed the door handle, swung open the door and stepped through, slamming it behind her.

And found herself in the midst of what looked like the Gobi Desert. She turned around and found the door had vanished. "Shit," she swore under her breath. "Shit, shit, shit." Now what?

-----  
Severus touched his burning cheek and stared at the closed door with a mixture of emotions battling for supremacy within him. After journeying through astonished anger, disgust at both of them and some serious bewilderment, he found he had settled on dismay. Dismay and... fear. She had entered and gone to who knew where without him.

In one long stride, he was close enough to the door to wrench it open and walk into the next room. He stepped through and was confronted by what was obviously a desert. A steady wind blew grit through the air and caused the surfaces of the dunes to slowly, hypnotically shift.

Suddenly, he felt the door handle jerk out of his hand. He whirled around as the door slammed shut again and faded from sight. And found himself confronted by yet more desert. Sand everywhere, for miles. And no sign of Hermione.

He thought for a moment. Which way would she have gone, and was the wind blowing hard enough to have already covered her tracks? He turned back to face the direction he had been initially facing when he had come through the door. Not so far from him was a dune that was rather taller than the others.

What appeared to be the late afternoon sun blazed down on him as he slowly climbed up the side of the taller dune. It was hard going with the sand constantly shifting beneath his feet.

He looked over his shoulder. His footprints at the base of the dune were already being obscured by sand-carrying wind. Surely Hermione's footprints would still at least be slightly visible. He tried walking faster up the slope, lost his footing and fell forward onto the sand, winning a mouthful of it for his troubles. Severus sputtered and spat the sand out of his mouth and was mildly alarmed at how quickly his mouth was drying out in the heat. Brushing sand off the front of his robes and frock coat, he slowly continued his ascent, finally reaching the top of the dune.

At the crest, he looked around. In the distance, he wasn't sure how far, he could see a fluttering of what looked like robes. It had to be her. "Hermione!" he bellowed. The unforgiving wind whipped his voice away so thoroughly that he might as well have not even tried shouting her name. He focussed on where he could see the fluttering and attempted to Apparate there. Nothing happened. Damn it, he would just have to try and follow her, counting on his longer stride to eventually overtake her. Striding down the other side of the dune, he went in pursuit of her.

After climbing over what seemed like countless dunes, he finally caught up to her as she steadily plodded forward. Grabbing her arm to stop her, he wasn't surprised when she shook him off abruptly and whirled, her wand out.

"Hermione."

"What, Snape? Not afraid to be seen with your whore?" she snapped.

He flinched and looked down at the sand. Finding his tongue quickly as she appeared to be turning away to continue walking, he blurted out, "I'm sorry!"

She paused, her back still to him.

He thought he heard a small snort over the rush of the wind. "Miss Granger, it is very unbecoming for a young lady to snort."

Hermione whirled back, her wand still at ready in her hand. "Well, Professor, in your worldview the fact that I'm a lady apparently isn't true, so what do you care if I snort or not?" she said icily.

He drew a breath and tried again, meeting her eyes. "I'm sorry. What I said was completely out of line. I was angry. I didn't mean to hurt you with my words." He held out his hand coaxingly towards her.

"But you did, Snape, you did."

His hand fell back to his side and he gazed at the ground. "You see now why this would never work? Some days, most days, all I would have to do is open my mouth to hurt you. I know that I would eventually drive you away just as surely as I did this afternoon." His voice was as bleak as their surroundings. "And every time you would go, you might come back, but every time when you go, our hearts would..." His words faltered and he stopped speaking.

Gentle fingers brought his chin up from his chest, and he found Hermione looking deeply into his eyes.

"Severus. At least we could try? Don't you think? Our future may not be as sad as you paint it." She took her hand away, and his head dropped as he gazed at the sand again.

Hermione mentally shook herself. This clearly was going nowhere. Attempting a brisk tone, she said, "In any case, the night seems to be approaching, and if what I remember about deserts is true, we should find some shelter and try to conjure some heat. It's going to get pretty cold over night."

He looked up at her. "I'm not sure that that will work. I attempted Apparating to catch up with you, and nothing happened. Our magic may not work in this other realm."

"Hmmm." She muttered a spell to conjure a glass. She looked up at him and grinned when one appeared in her hand. "*Aguamenti*. You look like you could use a drink." She smiled ruefully at him, taking in his dusty appearance. "Looks like you got up close and personal with one of these dunes."

He didn't say anything, just attempted a smile in return. And taking the glass of cool water from her hand, he drank.

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Harry had returned to his apartment. Sitting on the sofa, he pondered Neville's dilemma for a long while. Somewhere in that pondering, a warm body had insinuated itself next to him, drawing his arm around her shoulders. "What ees eet, 'arry?" Gabrielle asked.

He was just starting to tell the story, or stories as Fate would have it, of Neville's dilemma and the missing Hermione and Snape, when Minerva's Patronus came through the wall.

## Chapter Nine by Southern Witch 69

*Chapter 9 of 10*

Hermione and Snape are locked in an unknown corridor at Hogwarts. Each door they open leads them to a different place where they must complete a task in hopes of finding a way out of the corridor. Their journey brings hidden feelings to the surface along the way. Round Robin by some of the Poetess admins.

**Disclaimer:** Not my characters, but they're so fun to play with, right? And oi, JKR, don't sue me, too. I'm not trying to profit. Honest.

*Thanks go to the lovely RobisonRocket for the beta read...and also to my dear Soul Bound. Cheers, mates.*

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"Shite!" Harry said in annoyance.

"You 'ave to go again?" Gabrielle asked, mirroring his irritation. "I want to talk to you."

"McGonagall needs me at the castle." He smiled with a shrug. "You just heard. She's found them and needs my help to get them out."

Unable to help herself, she blurted, "My sister knows about us."

"How?"

"She suspected us and found me here today." She smiled brightly. "Eet ees all right. She ees 'appy for us."

"I'm glad," he said honestly. "I told Neville about us, too."

Gabrielle reached out and touched his cheek. "Your friends, zey felt eet was uzzer people zat you 'ave in your life...either Luna or Draco Malfoy."

Harry nearly choked and paled. "Draco? Who said that?"

"Zere ees no past, eh, with Draco?"

"Look," he stood, "how about we finish this conversation later? The sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back, and then we can have a nice long talk. All right?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and pouted a little, winking as she did so to let him know she was only playing. "I suppose I will 'ave to call my uzzer lover over."

Laughing, Harry kissed her. "He'd better be gone by the time I get here."



Once he left, Gabrielle walked over to the grate and tossed in some Floo powder. A second later, she kneeled down and stuck her head in. "Draco, are you zere?"

~~~~~

"I wonder what the purpose of this blasted place is?" Severus grumbled once again. "I'm tired of all this sand... and heat... and sun."

Ignoring his complaining, she pointed straight ahead. "Look! An oasis! Come on."

"It's likely a mirage."

"Only one way to find out." She quickly passed him and began a trek towards the small splotch of green amidst the desert horizon.

"Hang on," Severus said suddenly, clearly frustrated. "Why don't *you* Apparate us there since you seem to be able to do magic here while I cannot."

"I tried Apparition already," she admitted. "It won't work."

"Conjure a broomstick then, woman, like you conjured that glass!"

"Oh," she said, stopping, smile faltering. "I hadn't thought of that." Concentrating, she closed her eyes, imagined the broomstick, and flicked her wand. When she opened her eyes, there was an old Clean Sweep lying on the ground.

"Up," Severus commanded, and the broom jumped up into his hand. Mounting it, he slid forward and indicated for her to get on behind him.

She did so and wrapped her arms around him tightly. *So, this is what it feels like to hold him.* Hermione pressed her cheek against his back and sighed contentedly. *I could get used to this indeed. It's been so long for me.*

It dawned on her that she'd been thinking he was lonely and needed something in his life, but she needed that as well. There was something missing in her life, and if she could find something special with Severus, it was worth the risk of being hurt in the process. They'd never know unless they tried. Now, she simply had to convince him.

"I can barely breathe, you know," he said sourly.

"Sorry." When she attempted to loosen her hold, one of his hands moved to firmly hold hers in place.

"Leave it."

The oasis was obviously farther away than it had first seemed. Try as they might, the faster they flew, the more it seemed to move away from them. Hermione began to suspect that Severus had been right when he'd claimed it to be a mirage only. However, just as she was about to voice this, the distance quickly began to lessen.

"Finally," Severus said as he landed the broom with a small thud of his feet hitting the ground.

"It's beautiful."

"And small."

There wasn't much to it, but there were a few trees, a makeshift hut, and even a small stream that seemed to come from inside a nearby cave, which was nestled amongst some sandy boulders that made a small hill.

"I won't question it though." She kicked off her shoes, allowing her feet to press against the cool, thick grass as she walked over to the stream. "The water's so clear," she touched it, "and cool, too." Cheeks reddening, she asked, "Would you like to get in?"

"No," he said brusquely. "It will be night soon, remember? I recall something about cool desert nights."

She smirked. "Yes, Severus."

"Shall we inspect this shelter?" He extended his hand to her and pulled her up. However, he didn't release her hand as he led her in the other direction.

~~~~~

Flitwick squeaked in pleasure. "I've heard of this from the Grey Lady, but I never really came across it before. How exciting!"

"Well, do you think you can figure it out?" Minerva asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. I think I'll have a word with my house's ghost. Oh, Potter, hello."

Harry nodded to them both in greeting. "Any luck?"

"Not yet," she said. "The corridor sometimes let's peer inside, but other times, it's nothing but a solid wall." She frowned. "Hermione and Severus went through a door and didn't return yet."

"Oh, don't worry," Flitwick said. "They'll be fine."

"Hi." Neville had joined them. "What's going on?"

While the headmistress brought Neville up to speed, Harry pulled the tiny man aside. "Professor, do you mind if I come with you to talk to the Grey Lady?"

"Not at all." He turned to the headmistress. "We'll meet you in your office then?"

"All right," she agreed. "Come along, Neville."

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"One miserable cot...and not even big enough for the two of us," she said. When he arched his eyebrow, she grinned and went to work with her wand. When she was done, the cot was much larger, more comfortable, and would easily fit the both of them.

"I find it interesting that you choose to share a bed with me," he said quietly.

"Oh, I just thought that if it got cold... we might need to share warmth."

"What of Warming Charms?"

"Right. I can fix that then."

"Wait." He lifted a hand to stop her. "Leave it... if you want to share it with me...even after the way I treated you."

"I do."

She thought that he would kiss her, but he tore his gaze away from her lips and, instead, looked towards the doorway. "It's nearly dark now already," he commented awkwardly.

"Let's see if we can find something to eat, and then, I'd like to..."

"To what?" His stare had made its way back to her, intense and penetrating.

"To get to know you better, Severus."

Silkily, he asked, "And just how would we go about this?"

"Talking," she said sweetly, offering her hand.

He took it and pressed a kiss on her wrist. "There is something that I would like to tell you. Even after the way I've acted, I still think it needs to be said."

"All right." She could tell that it was something important by the tone of his voice and the expression on his face. Was it about his past love with Lily? Something else?

"I have been thinking of you lately, and to be honest, I've not really wanted to." He looked away then. "It sometimes feels as though I'm betraying~~ing~~er." He smiled ruefully. "Ridiculous, isn't it? Especially when she died to protect the child she bore for another man... the man she married."

Her free hand made its way up to cup his cheek. "The mind and heart have ways of manipulating us. I'm here to listen to whatever you have to say. If you're willing, as I said before, I am as well. We can maybe work through this together." When he started to speak, she pressed a finger to his lips. "I'll not intrude where you don't want me to. Trust me."

Severus nodded. "I do. Come. Perhaps there is some fruit here."

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Later, Severus watched Hermione as she ran her fingers through her hair and began braiding it. If he admitted the truth to himself, he would say that the evening they'd been sharing was quite pleasant. She made good company, and interestingly enough, she didn't badger him with unwanted questions. Nor did she try to pry too deeply. And that made him want to tell her even more things.

The growing feelings for her he'd been trying to suppress were surfacing again. The best part about being locked away in the strange corridor and its mysterious rooms was that he'd found out that she'd like to reciprocate his sentiments...maybe have a true relationship with him. He was tired of being lonely. Why not? Lily had chosen her fate, and nothing he did had helped her or saved her. Wasn't it time to accept that? Couldn't his heart make room for someone else...someone whom he hoped would never try to change him or leave him when something went wrong?

"Hermione?"

She paused and looked over at him. "Yes?"

"I want to try. Us, I mean."

Hermione grinned. "All right."

"That's all? No questions?"

"I'm sure there will be some along the way. Won't you have any for me?"

He nodded. "Fair enough. For now..." He stood slowly and walked towards her, gauging her reaction as he did so. When she licked her lips expectantly and leaned forward, arms open and inviting, he did the same, pressing his lips against hers.

The kiss was languid and soft and warm and everything he had expected it to be. Both were putting their feelings into it, probing, exploring, questioning. Her soft moan of approval echoed in his own. And that's when he knew. He could love her, would love her if she allowed it, and by all that was good in the world, he wanted her to love him, too.

Before he could say anything, they heard the loud creak of a door and broke apart. "The corridor is calling to us," she said breathlessly.

"I guess," he said with a small smile, "that this place was designed for us to come to terms with things."

"That doesn't explain why you couldn't do magic here while I could," she said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps I had to be at your mercy and learn to accept it."

"Did you really mind much?"

"I don't like feeling impotent if that is what you mean, but it's not been so bad, has it?"

She grinned mischievously. "Well, according to the last place we went to, you are anything but impotent, Severus."

His rich chuckle filled the small hut as he pulled away from her and helped her to stand. "Perhaps after we get to know one another better and decide where we want things to go, we'll see for ourselves."

"Before we go, I want to say something."

"All right."

"I've realized that I've been very lonely. I thought that my life was complete, but I've learned that I need something more...something that's been missing." She pulled one of his hands up to her lips and kissed the back of it.

"Me," he stated.

"Yes, you."

As if he'd been doing it for years, he embraced her tightly, lips nuzzling her earlobe gently before he whispered, "Thank you, Hermione." In response, she squeezed him tightly. No words were said as they moved towards the doorway and entered the corridor once again.

"Do you want to wait a while before going to the next room?" she asked.

"One moment." Severus pulled his wand, saying, "Nox." The nearby sconce went off. "Lumos. There. My ability to wield my wand is back." He smirked. "I didn't say I wanted to continue being unable to use magic while we're stuck here."

They both laughed, and hand in hand, they ventured into the next doorway.

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Draco Malfoy stepped through the grate and looked around. His eyes settled on the lovely woman before him. "Gabrielle, what are you doing at Harry's?"

She crossed her arms. "We need to discuss 'Arry."

"Why?"

"Come. Sit."

"Where is he?"

"E ees at 'Ogwarts." She sat down and patted the other end of the couch.

He sat down as if expecting Harry to jump out at any moment, and then his steely gaze met hers. "You're the one he's been seeing, aren't you? Is that why you've brought me here?"

"I am." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I will be 'Arry's wife soon."

Draco's face fell for a moment. "So?" he said snidely when he'd recovered.

"So, I thought you should know." She leaned closer. "What ees between you two?"

"Nothing."

"Ever?"

"Why?"

"I want to know. Ze way 'e acted was strange...when I mentioned you."

"You told him about *us*?" Draco said incredulously, rising and pacing. "Why would you tell him that? It was only those couple of months in France."

"No, I did not."

"Then what were you talking about me for?" It was his turn for his eyes to narrow. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to 'ave zis over our 'eads. I want to live 'appily." She sneered, her face transforming slightly in her anger the way that a Veela's might. "My 'usband should love only me. Eet seems 'Ermione thought 'Arry was with you. You should 'ave seen his face today. I want to know why."

"Ask him why," Draco said evasively. "And if you're quite finished, I'm leaving. I don't care what Granger says! She's as thick as it gets when it comes to relationships. There's someone who cares for her right next to her everyday, and she can't even see it!"

"Do you love my 'Arry?"

"Do you?" he countered.

"Yes. Wh-what kind of question is that?"

"You always did seem talk about him." He shook his head. "No, I don't love him. What would be the point?" Moving towards the grate, he stopped when he heard her next words.

"What if 'e loves you?"

"Does he?" he asked without turning around.

"I will find out when 'e returns."

He faced her again. "It doesn't matter, Gabrielle. Just leave it alone. Live your lives together and be happy."

And then he was gone, leaving her wondering if she'd done the right thing by telling him what she feared to be true. But Harry loved *her*. She knew it. However, she had to be sure that she could make him completely happy before they were bound together in marriage. At least if she and Harry brought everything out in the open, they'd be able to move on without any doubts. She would have to tell Harry about the time she'd spent with Draco when he'd visited France with his mother. At that moment, her gaze caught her reflection in the mirror. She and Draco were so much alike...neither had large frames, both had the same pale hair, nearly the same eyes, and even their skin was the same.

"Does 'e see me when we kiss... or ees eet Draco?"

Southern's Notes: Well, that's my installment. Soul_Bound is up next. Hope you continue to enjoy the story. She'll have more up very soon (within two weeks as promised). Ah, what fun this is. I can't wait to see what she does next. Bwahahaha!

Chapter Ten by Soul Bound

Chapter 10 of 10

Harry has something to discuss with the Grey Lady, and then he has a few more things to discuss with Gabrielle... How

will it go? And of course, we check in with Neville and our favorite snarky couple.

Disclaimer: Please don't sue me. I swear I'm not interested in selling this story.

Okay, thanks go to RobisonRocket as always for the awesome beta job, and an apology goes to all of you from me for making you wait more than the promised two weeks for this chapter. Sorry! I hope it's worth the wait. :-)

"Just through here, then," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "She's usually . . . oh, yes! Hello, my Lady!"

"Professor," came the Grey Lady's voice as she acknowledged Flitwick with a nod. "And . . . Harry Potter. It has been some time since last we met."

Harry smiled. "Yeah, it has."

"My Lady," said Flitwick, "we seem to have misplaced two of our Professors. I thought perhaps you could help us."

"Perhaps I can. Do you know where they've gone?"

"You once mentioned a corridor in the castle that exists to find those who need understanding and help them to it. It seems that this place has found Professors Granger and Snape."

Harry watched as the Lady's features lit up with an enigmatic smile. "Ah, yes . . . The Lost Corridor. It's been many years since it has made an appearance. This is rather exciting, I must say."

"Indeed," said Flitwick, his own excitement apparent. "Can you tell us how long they will be gone and if they are safe?"

"The corridor will keep them until they have come to the understanding they have lacked, and they are quite safe. This castle will not harm them. They will find their way back to us when the time is right...you needn't worry. I must tell my mother's portrait of this. She created the corridor herself, you see . . ."

"Er," said Harry, "speaking of your mother, I actually wanted to ask you something about . . . um, her . . ." Harry felt a bit uncomfortable voicing his thoughts, but a glance at the Grey Lady's open expression gave him a bit more confidence. "Well, it's just . . . I'm getting married, and..."

"Oh!" Flitwick interrupted. "Wonderful! May I ask who the lucky woman is, Mr Potter?"

"Oh, erm, I don't think you know her. It's Gabrielle Delacour . . . She's Fleur sister, and she's . . ." Harry smiled and flushed a bit. "Well, anyway. Miss Lady, uh, Miss Grey..."

"You may call me Helena."

"Right. Well, I was thinking . . . A few years ago, when I was doing researching on your mother while I was looking for her diadem, I remember coming across a picture of her where she was wearing a small necklace. It was gold...in the shape of some sort of knot, and it was inlaid with..."

"Blue sapphires. Yes, I know the one you mean. I keep it in a safe place...it was her favorite. The knot is the symbol of promises kept, and the sapphires represent peace and calm. The diamond they surround represents the steadfastness of true friendship. The necklace was a gift to her from a man she was very fond of."

Harry couldn't help grinning. "Yes, that's the one. I know this is extremely presumptuous, but I was wondering if you might consider letting me . . ." At this point, Harry lost his courage. Asking out loud for something he had absolutely no right to was a lot harder than he'd anticipated. He suddenly felt very foolish and was glad for the distraction that staring at his shoes afforded him. "I . . ." He searched for something to say that could save him and came up with nothing, and finally he looked up helplessly. He found the Grey Lady smiling gently at him.

"Young man," she said, "do not be embarrassed. If you are asking me if I'd be willing to part with the necklace so that you might give it to the woman you have chosen, I would gladly do so."

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. If he was honest with himself, he hadn't really thought this through, but if he had, he certainly wouldn't have expected her to be so accommodating. "But, you can't...I mean, you . . . It's thousands of years old, and it belonged to your moth..."

Helena Ravenclaw chuckled, and Harry felt completely lost. "You have done much for our world. If anyone has the right to ask for my mother's necklace, I believe that person is you. You see, I have no use for it now...a ghost can hardly wear jewellery. I have been keeping it safe, but I think that I've now found a better place for it...with you and your future wife. I have no doubt that its meaning will not be lost between two who are devoted to one another, and I can't think of a person I would trust with something so special more than you, Harry Potter, whose love saved a world."

Harry felt himself blush furiously. That was perhaps going a bit far, he thought. "I . . . thanks," he muttered, inspecting his shoes again. When he finally looked up again, he found her smiling at him, and he couldn't help returning the expression.

"Come," she said. "I'll show you to its hiding place."

Harry glanced at Professor Flitwick, who hadn't said a word during their exchange, and said, "Professor . . .? Maybe you should head..."

"Oh! Right! Of course, I'll meet you in the Headmistress' office. I should let her know . . ." His voice trailed off as he hurried away, and Harry turned to follow the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw.

When Harry reached the office of the Headmistress, he was unsurprised to find Professor Flitwick, as well as both Neville and McGonagall, convened in an odd assortment of conjured chairs. He slipped in and conjured himself a seat, completely unnoticed by the arguing persons around him, until he bumped his knee into Minerva's large, oak desk and swore a little more loudly than was probably necessary.

"Oh! Mr Potter, good. Now that you're here, I'm sure you can make Filius see sense."

Harry grit his teeth and rubbed his knee, trying to soothe the stabbing pain. A single grunt was his only reply to McGonagall, but it was apparently all she needed, for she charged ahead at full speed.

"I saw them, I tell you. After I spoke with Albus, I transformed and found the corridor. I saw them though the wall, although they couldn't see or hear me, and I tell you they were at each other's throats. Honestly, I have *no* idea what the castle hopes to accomplish trapping those two together . . ."

"They always argue, Minerva," said Flitwick.

"Yes, but she struck him, Filius."

"Probably deserved it..." muttered Harry, still smarting from his knee and feeling irritable.

"What was that?" McGonagall said sharply.

"Nothing."

"Headmistress, I must insist that we let this run its course. I suspected, and the Grey Lady confirmed my suspicions, that the corridor is there for a reason and that our professors are in no danger there. If you saw them arguing, I'm sure it was something that needed to be argued about. Let them alone."

McGonagall pursed her lips and crossed her arms. "I still think that we should do whatever we can to get them out of there. Who knows how long the corridor might keep them if we do nothing? Aside from my worries about their well-being, I simply cannot afford to have two of my teachers absent indefinitely. I have young Percy Weasley teaching Hermione's classes, and...well, the lad is a bit over-eager Seems to take the position a bit too. . . . But that is neither here nor there."

"Professor," said Neville, finally chiming in, "perhaps we *should* just let them be I mean, I want her back as much as you do," his cheeks flushed pink, "but I don't know If the castle thinks they need to be there, then maybe we should just trust it. I think they'll probably be back with us soon anyway, right?"

McGonagall sighed. "Potter? Any thoughts?"

"Er . . ." The truth was that Harry didn't really have an opinion. He was sure that his friend was fine, and frankly, his mind was elsewhere...on more important matters, like the conversation he would need to have with his fiancée when he returned home. "What he said," he finally pronounced.

"What who said?" asked the woman, narrowing her eyes.

"Er, Prof...Nev...Flitwick. Professor Flitwick."

"Mr Potter, you weren't even listening, were you?"

"I..."

"Oh, never mind. It appears I'm going to be overruled...but in the meanwhile, if Percy Weasley assigns one more detention for not using 'standard black ink,' the two of you are taking the detentions. I wash my hands of it."

Neville rolled his eyes, and Harry got to his feet. He wasn't sure if the meeting was over, but he figured it was better to leave now before the Headmistress started in on something else.

"Right, then," he said quickly. "Let me know when they're back, and...yes." With that, he hurried out of the office before another word could be said. As he walked out to the front gates, he pondered what he was going to say to Gabrielle, what she was going to say to him. He wasn't sure what would come of the impending conversation, but he hoped everything would turn out all right. All he could do was be honest, and he planned to do just that. As he closed the gates behind him, he took a deep breath, then Apparated home.

* * *

Gabrielle sat in Harry's favorite overstuffed armchair, facing the front door and waiting for her fiancé. Any minute now, he would come through the door, and her questions would be answered once and for all.

* * *

Back at Hogwarts, Neville left the Headmistress's office and headed for his own quarters. Over the past few hours, he'd come to a decision. Talking to Harry at the pub had really helped to give him the confidence he'd been lacking. He was no longer afraid that she would say no to him. After all, if Harry thought so much of him, and of them together, that had to mean something good. Neville had lived his whole life by what other people had told him to do...even in his early childhood, he'd relied on those around him to make his decisions and help him along. He'd been convinced he wasn't strong enough or smart enough or brave enough to figure things out on his own. In school, he had often relied on Hermione to help him through his classes and on his other Gryffindor friends to lead before him.

Well, over the last little while, he'd realized that when it came down to it...and now it had...he needed to take control. *A real man makes his own way*, he thought. *I am a real man, and if I want her love me and respect me, she needs to know that I did this on my own. Help from my friends can only get me so far, and now, the rest is up to me.*

Still, it would be nice if Hermione came back soon

* * *

Harry closed the front door behind him and hung his cloak on the hook before stepping slowly into his living room. "Hi, Gab," he said softly, crossing the room slowly and taking a seat in the chair facing hers. "So, let's talk."

"Yes, let's."

Harry couldn't tell from her tone what she was thinking, so he remained silent, watching her until she finally spoke.

"Arry, I 'ave talked wiz Draco."

He felt his eyes widen, and his heart sped up. "Oh," he said. "I . . . when?"

"Just a leetle while ago. 'E was 'ere. 'Arry, I asked 'im if 'e loves you."

Harry's heart stopped beating in his chest for just a moment. "What . . . what did he say?" he managed to whisper hoarsely.

She didn't answer, but said, "'Arry, do you love me?"

An easy question. "Yes, I do love you...very much. You know I do."

Gabrielle nodded, and the knot in Harry's stomach untied itself ever so slightly. Still, she hadn't answered him

"But you also love Draco." It was a statement, not a question, and Harry didn't know how to respond. "I am right, yes?"

Now was the time for that honestly. Harry took a deep breath and nodded. "I think I do, Gab I have for a long time. But I do love you as well."

"When you look at me, do you see 'im? Draco and I look very much alike"

Another easy question. Harry smiled. "No. I look at you and see you. You're beautiful, you're strong, and . . . you're you. You're special. I've never met anyone else like you. You're all I've ever wanted in a woman. I could never look at you and see someone else."

Gabrielle smiled. "I'm glad to 'ear zat, 'Arry. What do you see when you look at Draco?"

At this, Harry hesitated. It wasn't that he was afraid to be honest, and he wasn't ashamed of the answer, but he didn't want to hurt her

"Eet's okay. You can tell me. I want to know, or I wouldn't 'ave asked."

Harry nodded, collecting his thoughts before speaking. He pictured Draco Malfoy in his mind as he answered. "When I look at him, I see his eyes. They were the first things I ever noticed, really noticed, about him. And then I see him smile, and I think of the first time he ever smiled at me, truly smiled at me instead of sneering. And then . . . I hear him laugh, and I remember when we first became friends and he had the decency to laugh at my ridiculous jokes, like you do And I look at him and feel him holding me when I finally visited Remus' grave again. I see all those things, but the thing is . . . I see special things in you the same way, memories and things about you that will only ever be between the two of us. I do love him, but I love you, too. I know I do. I don't feel like loving him takes away from what I feel for you. Does that make sense?"

Gabby smiled softly at him and said, "I 'ave something to tell you as well. When I told you earlier zat I would 'ave to call my uzzer lover, I was only 'alf-kidding. You see, Draco spent several months in France wiz me before I came 'ere."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "You mean..."

She nodded and smiled slyly. "We were togegger. And . . . we still care very much for each uzzer. Eet really only ended because 'e 'ad to leave France. We . . . 'aven't been togegger since, but I often miss 'im, and I believe 'e misses me, too. When I spoke wiz 'im earlier, I could tell zat zere is still much between us zat was left unfinished. And . . . 'Arry, 'e does love you."

Harry found it hard to swallow.

"Eet was very obvious. I was afraid at first because I thought zat eef you loved 'im, you could not love me. I thought you should only love me. But zen, after 'e left, I sat here, and I thought even more about eet, and now zat I've listened to you, I 'ave realized something. Eet ees okay zat you love us both. I know zat I am all ze woman you will ever need, and eef you love another man, eet does not make what we 'ave mean any less. Especially eef zat man ees Draco. 'E ees very special, and eet does not surprise me zat you love him."

"Are . . . are you sure?" Harry asked hesitantly. He wasn't certain he could believe what she was telling him. "That's . . . a lot to ask of you...to be okay with your husband being in love with two people. I would understand if you hated me for it. But, I've chosen you. Even if I do love him, I've chosen you."

"I could never 'ate you, 'Arry. Not for zis or for anything else. I was jealous at first, but zen I realized that we 'ave a part of each uzzer zat can't be replaced."

Harry's entire mind and body lightened. For not knowing how she would take his honesty, this had gone better than he had ever thought possible. And it made him love her that much more to know that she accepted this about him without judging him or being angry. "This is exactly why I'm marrying you, Gab. There's nobody else like you. Thank you for being willing to understand. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't."

"I do understand. I know what eet ees to have more love zan you know what to do wiz. I can love you, and I can love Draco, and I know zat you are ze same way. Eet's one of ze things zat I admire most about you...your ability to love."

"'Arry..." she said, this time frowning slightly, "when I told Draco zat we were to be married, I 'ave never seen 'im look so sad. Eet was only for a moment...you know 'ow 'e 'ides himself...but eet was zere. I...I don't want 'im to be sad. I don't want 'im to lose us both."

"I don't, either," Harry whispered, his voice catching as he thought of how he would feel if Gabby and Draco married each other and left him on his own. He felt completely torn. He loved Gabby and Draco, and he wanted them both, but . . . "I wouldn't ever let anything come between us. I asked you to marry me, and I meant it."

"I know," she said simply. "'Arry, eef eets okay wiz both of us, I think zat we should . . . I don't think zat Draco should lose us. I don't want to lose 'im, and you don't want to lose 'im"

Harry felt a warmth start to grow in his chest. "You think . . . we should be together, the . . . the three of us?"

She nodded. "And you?"

"I think so, too," he said.

"Well, zen eet seems we need to speak wiz Draco. I will call 'im now, I think."

Harry almost couldn't believe what was happening. This was more than he could ever have hoped for. He didn't think there was a more fortunate man in the world. His fiancée really was very special. He wanted more than anything for her to be happy, and he felt very lucky indeed that having Draco would make her happy, too. And yet, he wanted her to know . . . "Gab, wait," he said as she reached for the Floo powder. "If you didn't want this...if you told me that this wasn't okay, if you ever tell me it's not okay...we wouldn't do it."

She smiled back at him and said, "And zat ees why eet's okay."

* * *

Draco Malfoy sat in his study, just opening a bottle of his strongest whiskey. He was going to get good and drunk, and nobody was going to stop him. A little over an hour ago, Gabrielle had informed him she was marrying Harry...that they were marrying each other. Harry was marrying Gabrielle, and Gabrielle was marrying Harry, and neither of them was marrying Draco. He took his first swig and closed his eyes. He imagined he could already feel the alcohol doing its job. Soon, if all went according to plan, he wouldn't be able to think anymore, and that would be beautiful He took another swallow.

He wouldn't let the memories of his body surrounding Harry's into his mind. He wouldn't. He hadn't let himself dwell on them before, and he wouldn't now. And he wouldn't think of the tears on Gabrielle's face when he had left her that day in France...or the way she smelled. He certainly wouldn't think of the way his heart had broken an hour before at Gabrielle's words. *"I will be 'Arry's wife soon."*

Another swallow it was

Damn it! Why wouldn't the buzz he needed just come already?!

Whoosh!

"Draco?"

Oh, God, no

He looked frantically around the room for a quick escape route, but before he could even get out of his chair, Gabrielle's head was sitting in his fire. He felt another stabbing pain in his chest as he met her eyes.

Why the fuck didn't I ward the Floo?

"Draco, 'Arry and I need to speak wiz you."

Draco snorted. "I think I'll pass. Why don't the two of the plan your honeymoon...or whatever it is you do when you're not . . ." He took another swallow of whiskey and almost choked.

"Draco, we really do need to see you. Come, please . . ."

Draco shook his head. "No, the last thing I need is..."

"Draco?" came Harry's familiar voice, and Draco froze. "Come through. We want to talk to you."

"I . . ." He swallowed hard and stared at the floor, wishing they would just go away and leave him to his whiskey. But when he heard Harry say, "Please?" he couldn't help himself. He took a deep breath and nodded, then got to his feet and set his still almost-full bottle down. She disappeared, and he followed, soon finding himself standing in Harry's living room. It looked the same as it had a year ago, an hour ago, but now, everything was different. He stared at the floor, clenching his jaw.

"Draco . . ." Harry said softly, and he knew, just *knew*, that Harry was about to say something that Draco could never forgive him for. He was going to give Draco his *pity*. With his eyes fixed steadfastly on the carpet, he didn't see Harry and Gabby look at each other. He didn't see them smile and nod, and when he heard Harry moving towards him, he just knew that Harry was going to give him a friendly hug and ask for his blessing, and wasn't going to be able to bear it.

When Harry stopped in front of him and lifted Draco's chin with his fingers, Draco shut his eyes as tightly as he could and so was rather surprised when he felt Harry's lips crush his own. His eyes flew open as he gasped, and Harry's tongue took that opportunity to dart into his mouth. Harry's hands didn't hesitate for a moment as they clutched Draco to him, and Draco found himself helpless to do anything but surrender. How long they kissed, Draco couldn't be sure. All he knew was Harry, and it didn't occur to him at all that there was another person in the room or that that person happened to be Harry's fiancée until he felt a second set of arms find their way around him from behind.

Suddenly, he froze. Harry was kissing him, and Harry was *engaged*. . . and his fiancée wasn't shouting at the top of her lungs. . . . "Wha...?"

"Shhh," Gabrielle whispered in his ear, and then she was kissing him, and that was perfect, too. Her kiss was completely different from Harry's, but he lost himself in this one as well. Where Harry's had been passionate, demanding, hers was sweet and almost gentle. And when she pulled away from his mouth and found Harry's, Draco felt he couldn't breathe, watching them. Each of them took one of his hands, and when they broke apart and smiled at each other, Draco was at a loss.

"You...what are...what are you *doing*?"

"I 'ad a talk wiz 'Arry, Draco. Zere ees much to say. Come."

* * *

Hermione released Severus' hand for just a moment as she pushed the new door open. She reached for it again as soon as they'd stepped through, and . . . "This is lovely," she said, smiling up at Severus. They stood in the midst of a clearing...a forest clearing. It was twilight, and the evening mist was just beginning to settle. "So, where from here?" she asked.

"Actually," he said, a perplexed look on his face, "for once, I think I know exactly where to go."

SB's Notes: Well, there you have it. Thanks for sticking with us this far, and I hope you've all had as much fun as we have. The story is winding down, and there should only be one or two more chapters left and possibly an epilogue. LadyintheCloak is up next, and it's going to be fun to see what she comes up with!