

A Fresh Start

by richardgloucester

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 11

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Chapter 1

Neville Longbottom knew quite a lot about butterflies. Actually, he knew quite a lot about insects in general, having discovered early on that entomology was an important subsidiary for any serious herbologist. And Neville was a very serious herbologist, with a serious interest in one particular field of research: the influence of magical insects on the potency of medicinal herbs. He had devised one very specific research project, had written it up as a proposal for extra credit in his Herbology NEWT, owled the whole thing to Professor Sprout, and received enthusiastic dispensation from his teacher to come up to Hogwarts a week before the start of the new school year in order to get everything ready. Currently, Neville was digging over the school's extensive vegetable plots, which had been badly churned up during the final battle. He was doing it manually, not magically, as he found that monotonous labour helped him think. To the rhythm of his spade and his heavy breathing, he was methodically working out the final details of how to prepare his study of the influence of the Golden Ariadne butterfly as pollinator of common lungwort, a key ingredient of many potions used to treat respiratory complaints.

What Neville Longbottom did not know at least not yet was that he had quite a lot in common with butterflies. Just as a pudgy, unpromising grey caterpillar emerged from its chrysalis transformed into a glorious, jewelled creature, Neville had emerged from puberty and war as sex personified.

Professor Sprout tried to consider the transformation with professional detachment. Having observed Neville setting off with his spade, she decided to see to some urgent re-potting in greenhouse five, which just happened to overlook the vegetable plots. Strategically positioned at a bench half-concealed by vegetation from outside view, she

watched Neville plunge the spade in again, and again.... She fanned herself with a cabbage leaf, willing the hot sun of what promised to be an Indian summer to have an effect on the young man outside. A pot crashed to the floor, knocked over by her flapping sleeve as she punched the air. Yes! Neville had paused to take off his shirt. Pomona Sprout absently batted aside a few questing, green tentacles and settled in for a very pleasant afternoon, completely forgetting her pots.

As the staff drifted back from their summer break, mostly spent recuperating mentally, emotionally or physically from the events of the past year, notice was taken of the changes evident in young Mr Longbottom. The third evening, Rolanda Hooch marched into the Great Hall where a relatively small table had been laid for those already returned. She had a couple of racing-broom catalogues tucked under one arm, meaning to badger Minerva for funds to update the school's stock; in fact, to replace the stock after the battle, in which the broom sheds had taken a certain amount of collateral damage, there were only five brooms which could even get off the ground, and two of those were on their last gasp. She was gloomily pondering the likelihood of any money being forthcoming, given the vast sums required for general repairs to the castle, when her yellow eyes lit on Neville, who was talking quietly with Professor Sprout, and widened. She drew breath and pursed her lips to whistle appreciatively before remembering where she was.

"Startling, what a few months can do..." came a dry Scots voice at her ear.

"What the hell happened, Minerva?" she hissed back, still taking in the sights.

"The usual good genes and a little time. And of course he's developed all that quiet confidence through the war. He's a man, now not a boy. I think we'll be seeing a lot of this sort of thing when the students return."

"But hardly on this scale, surely?" Rolanda muttered.

"It's almost enough to make you believe in magic, isn't it?" replied the Headmistress drolly.

Neville stood up as he saw the two teachers approaching. Madam Hooch looked up, and up, and up at him. *I must have grown a bit*, he thought. She seemed to be having a little difficulty choosing which seat to take, eyeing both the one next to him and the one opposite, so he opted for a little quiet chivalry (his grandmother had drilled him thoroughly) and held out the one at his side. Later, he felt it might have been a mistake, as he found it a bit embarrassing that their thighs would keep brushing during the meal. Madam Hooch was also distinctly more attentive than he would ever have expected, given that he had always been a complete disaster on a broom. He put it down to the lack of company and gave his attention to his discussion with Professor Sprout about hybrids of comfrey. He missed the interplay of sour and triumphant looks between the women seated either side of him, but wondered briefly why Professor McGonagall looked so amused.

On subsequent evenings, he had to endure gentle arm-touching from Professor Vector, obscure conversational gambits from Professor Sinistra, and rather too much mothering from Madam Pomfrey; Professor Trelawney, surprisingly, was the most endurable she just gazed without blinking, her mouth hanging ever so slightly open. Neville began to suppose that relief at the end of the war was making everyone a bit touchy-feely; having been brought up under the strict aegis of Augusta Longbottom, he wasn't entirely comfortable with it, but was too polite to say anything. He took refuge in the greenhouses and vegetable gardens with only his butterfly eggs and a very cheerful Professor Sprout for company.

Professor Snape didn't return to Hogwarts until the last evening before term. Brought back from the brink of death by the timely actions of Poppy Pomfrey, cleared of criminal charges by the Wizengamot, exonerated by the testimonies of Dumbledore and Potter, but viewed still with suspicion by the wizarding community at large, he had left the country for a while to think things over. His options were limited: he didn't anticipate a queue of eager, prospective employers beating a path to his door; selling his memoirs seemed entirely too tawdry; setting up his own business was an attractive idea, but in truth he was simply too tired to find the energy or inspiration to do so. As a result, when Minerva's owl finally found him in mid-August, trudging gloomily through an Irish rainstorm, he had been only too glad to accept the offer of his old position as Potions master (Slughorn having gone back into retirement). He'd owed back promptly to query the wisdom of her choice, given his current popularity rating, but her assurances of amnesty were sufficient to overcome his reluctance.

He began to question the prudence of accepting the appointment when he noted the distinct chill in the atmosphere as the other staff members realised just who was approaching the dinner table. He nodded curtly and took the seat next to Minerva. Vector was the first to speak.

"Not too upset about your demotion, then?" she asked, archly.

"Not at all," he replied, gritting his teeth. "You know my reasons for accepting the Headship, and they no longer apply."

She coloured faintly, for she, like the rest of them, knew it was only through his efforts that the staff and students had been protected from the worst excesses of the Carrows' tenure. Not to be put down so easily, though, she tried again.

"So you don't think that the parents are going to be up in arms when they learn that You-Know-Who's lieutenant is back in the saddle?"

Snape drew breath, but Minerva, observing the deepening crease between his eyebrows, forestalled him.

"You know perfectly well, Septima, that the parents are most concerned about the quality of their children's education. Or at least, they *should* be and will if necessary be *made* to be," she added a trifle sourly. "And there are those here now who have good reason to know that Severus can be trusted." She fixed a glare on Professor Vector, who turned away, a little chagrined.

Yes, thought Snape, *you do have good reason*. He'd rescued her from some of Amycus' more pressing attentions and helped her ward her quarters more effectively afterwards. He hadn't known that Minerva was aware of it.

Seeing that Minerva had his defence well in hand, Snape tuned out of the rest of the conversation. He'd expected a measure of hostility, and while it depressed him coming from colleagues of several years' standing, it also bored him. He'd lived with hostility all his life; it was nothing new, and right now he was too tired and preoccupied to be bothered. There was something almost hallucinatory about returning to Hogwarts. In some ways, nothing had changed: there were lessons to prepare, duties to be performed, students to harass, his dungeon quarters his home for so long to put in order (he'd arrived so late there had only been sufficient time to dump his bags and go to dinner).... On the other hand, there was the tangible proof that the world had been turned upside down. Parts of Hogwarts were still in ruins; scaffolding was evident on the sections currently under repair; bright new stone could be seen where the work had been finished. On his way up to the Great Hall, he'd missed several familiar portraits and statues the castle seemed a palimpsest of itself. Most disorientating of all was the fact that *it was over*: no Voldemort, no war, no master, no double life. Severus was at a bit of a loose end.

Seeing a free seat between two male members of staff, Neville made a beeline for it when he arrived, late. He'd been finding the unremitting female company he'd been getting lately rather oppressive, and so as he sat down, he greeted Professor Flitwick with relief, then turned to the man on his left. He recoiled slightly when he saw who it was. The reaction was not lost on Snape, who merely raised an eyebrow and asked, "What are you doing here, Mr Longbottom? You finished your schooling last year."

"Yes, sir," Neville replied, "but last year was a dead loss academically, and most of us never even got to sit our NEWTs. I reckon there'll be a lot of us coming back tomorrow to repeat the year."

"That's right, Severus," put in McGonagall. "And you must remember that many students never had a chance to attend school at all last year. I forgot to tell you that your final year classes will be more populous than usual. You can split them up, if you like there's room in the timetable."

"You are too kind, Minerva. I can't tell you how overjoyed I am at the choice between having double the number of over-ambitious cretins poisoning themselves and each other in my class or of spending double the time with them," sighed Snape. "I think I'll go and review the class lists now and give you a decision in the morning." He got up abruptly, fed up with the whole pretence of a civilised meal with his colleagues, most of whom were reacting warily to his sudden movement.

"Oh, by the way, Severus," called Minerva to his departing back, "we were just speculating why you might have chosen Ireland of all places to hide in...."

"There are no snakes in Ireland," he cast back over his shoulder, glancing bitterly at the Slytherin banner on the wall above their heads.

Hermione Granger came back to school a day late. She, Harry and Ron had sought and received permission to do so in order to avoid being mobbed by the press, public, and their fellow students at King's Cross. It was felt, quite rightly, that their presence would cause the unthinkable and make the Hogwarts Express depart late. Instead, they spent a quiet day at Grimmauld Place, sorting out their belongings for the coming year and rather deliberately only talking about the future, and then Flooed to the Burrow for a fine, if melancholy, family meal with the Weasleys. Everyone was happy to have Percy back in the fold, but Fred was sorely missed, and it was unnerving to have a quiet George at the table. All three were relieved to leave after breakfast the next day, burdened down with good advice and messages for Professor McGonagall and others.

They Apparated to the area outside the school's gates and waited for whoever was appointed to meet them to arrive and lower the wards.

"Stable doors and horses come to mind," muttered Harry.

"Oh, Harry," sighed Hermione in her 'explaining' voice, "you know they've got to keep up appearances. Hogwarts is known as the strongest place of safety in the wizarding world."

"Yeah, and just look how well it kept the bad guys out last time," answered Ron impatiently.

"Yes, but...," she began as Harry cut in to head off what promised to be another argument.

"I just think they could make an exception for *us*, that's all," he said loudly.

"Still overwhelmed with the idea of your own importance, I see, Potter," sneered an all-too-familiar voice, but somewhat without its usual harsh edge.

"Oh, she persuaded you to come back, then?" Harry said, turning to face his former nemesis.

"As you see."

They eyed each other for a moment or two, then Harry gave a small shrug, and Snape nodded as if to acknowledge that most of the animosity was gone how could it remain? but there was a long way to go before respect became anything warmer.

"Hello, Professor," said Hermione as she stepped through the gates. Ron said nothing but joined Harry, walking up the long path to the main doors.

Hermione hung back, gazing up at the school, and Snape elected to stay with her, not wishing to participate in either awkward silences or stilted conversation with the other two. Her steps slowed until she finally came to a halt. Snape cocked an enquiring eyebrow.

"It's weird," she admitted, "coming back here after all that's happened. The prospect of a normal school year, when all I have to worry about is homework, exam results and prefect duties, is somehow really disquieting." She glanced apologetically at Snape. "I feel rather at sea life's been a little too focused the last couple of years, and now I have to work out how to enjoy it."

"I know exactly what you mean, Miss Granger," he responded drily.

"Yes, you would...." Hermione tried to imagine how bizarre an uncomplicated life would seem to the ex-spy who had lived in secrecy and danger for twenty years. "Perhaps we all need to learn how to make a fresh start."

They moved on a few paces in silence. Then it was Snape's turn to halt and turn to her. He hesitated before asking, "Am I right in thinking it was you who told Madam Pomfrey where to find me, and the nature of my injuries?"

She nodded mutely.

"Then I am obliged to thank you. The very fact that I have a fresh start to make is down to you. I owe you my life.

"Mind you," he added judiciously, "I'm not entirely sure that I am grateful for the gift."

"Thanks go both ways. I'm just glad you came through alive, sir."

She stuck out her hand; after a moment, he took it.

"A fresh start?"

"A fresh start."

A/N: "palimpsest": "a manuscript on which two or more successive texts have been written, each one being erased to make room for the next" (Collins English Dictionary).

Two

Chapter 2 of 11

The first days back at school.

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Chapter 2

The Gryffindor common room was crowded and noisy. Sunday breakfast was over, and many students had drifted back before deciding what to do with the day, and who with. Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole behind the two boys, and took note of who was there. Ginny had leapt up and thrown herself into Harry's arms as though she hadn't seen him only a couple of days previously; Ron had drifted over to Seamus and Dean. Everything seemed refreshingly normal, right down to the worn old carpets and squashy armchairs, except for the unusual concentration of girls of all ages over at one side, beyond the fireplace. They shifted a little as what seemed to be a minor deity rose from their midst and hurried towards Hermione; she blinked and experienced a paradigm shift the demigod was, of all people, Neville Longbottom. She gaped at him, then recovered when she saw that his expression, a little desperate and certainly desperately relieved to see her, revealed the same warm, shy Neville soul.

"Hermione!" he gasped, "it's *wonderful* to see you! How was your summer?" He dragged her over to a window seat a two-person window seat and sat down, placing her between the rest of the room and himself. She, being a normal girl in many ways, preened at the looks she was getting from various quarters. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Ron appeared to be bristling at Neville's move. Certainly he had gone red in the face and then very pale, seeing them together, but then it might buck up his ideas a bit if he saw her being propositioned by what was surely the most beautiful young man in creation.

She shrugged and turned her attention to Neville, who was asking her about her summer. She had been to see her parents in Australia, discovered they were happier than they had ever been in England, and had travelled around with them before returning to England with a clean conscience about uprooting their lives. She was just describing a boat trip to the Great Barrier Reef when Neville, who was clearly not listening, interrupted her.

"Hermione, you're a girl," (here we go again, she thought), "can you tell me why all the girls are acting so strangely towards me? They won't leave me alone, and most of them keep giggling." He sounded rather panicked. True, this would be a novel situation for a boy who had always been the dumpy tag-along, but she could see he was going to have to learn to deal with it, and fast.

"Well," she began carefully, "you seem to have changed a little bit lately, Neville."

"I know I'm taller," he butted in, "but..."

"It's not just that. You've become..." she wondered how to put it without embarrassing him: drop dead gorgeous? Utterly droolworthy? Sex on a stick? "Er rather attractive," she said, weakly.

Neville looked doubtful.

"Aren't I pretty much the same as always?"

"I'm sure you're just as nice as you ever were, Neville, but you have to remember that you've been through a war: you've been a hero, and it shows." She paused again. "You're going to have to learn to deal with a certain amount of fandom." Better he should think he was being pursued because of what he'd done rather than for his physique; he'd find out the truth eventually, but this way might be easier. Some of the girls were beginning to drift closer, and Neville started to fidget.

"I'm going to the greenhouses," he whispered to her, and bolted.

Parvati was just climbing in through the portrait hole with a note for Hermione from the Headmistress in her hand. She managed to brush against Neville as he left and looked extraordinarily smug about it as she handed over the letter. Patil: one; rest of the House: nil, thought Hermione, signalling to Ron when she read that McGonagall wanted them.

Professor McGonagall had clearly gone to some effort to make the Head's office her own, despite the twinkling presence of Albus Dumbledore in the large portrait behind the desk. The furnishings were austere but comfortable, the colours soft and warm. A fine china tea service took pride of place on a rosewood table near the large window overlooking the grounds. The Headmistress rose from behind her desk when they knocked and went in.

"Ah, there you are," she observed. "And how do you find the school on your first day back?" She seemed ill-at-ease as she led them towards the tea table and motioned them to sit. "Tea?"

They made small talk about the ongoing repairs and the opportunity they provided to improve some of the amenities, but soon enough McGonagall got down to business.

"I wanted to talk to you about your position as prefects," she began.

"Oh, we're quite prepared to resume our duties, Professor," said Hermione. "Aren't we, Ron?"

Ron looked non-committal.

"Yes, well," said the Headmistress, "that's just it, you see. I felt that, given your prolonged absence from the school, and your slightly special status as war heroes and not least as fully adult witch and wizard..." She seemed to lose courage but then continued, looking apologetically at Hermione, "I felt that it would be better to give the duties to other students, those who could do with a taste of responsibility now they are approaching the end of their schooling."

There was a short silence and then, unusually, Ron spoke for both of them.

"That's fine, Professor. We understand." He was evidently quite pleased.

Minerva turned concerned eyes on Hermione, who hadn't reacted at all.

"And I'm afraid we've offered Susan Bones the position of Head Girl. We thought that after all you have been through, you might appreciate a little more freedom to enjoy your final year."

"Hermione?" said Ron, when she still didn't show any response to the news.

She blinked.

"It's just not what I was expecting, that's all." A deep breath. "Susan will make an excellent Head Girl, I'm sure. And I think I think I may actually enjoy stepping off the path I had mapped out for myself. No really!" She suddenly smiled brightly. "It's like beginning all over again! It's okay, Professor, in fact it's *perfectly* okay. I'm going to *enjoy* this year!"

Professor McGonagall was filled with a sudden presentiment that she might not have done the right thing.

Hermione could have sworn that the portrait of Dumbledore winked at her as they left the office, but she was rather too preoccupied to care. Ron shot her a couple of concerned glances, troubled by her unusual silence, but waited until they had passed the gargoyle again before broaching the subject.

"Are you sure you're okay about all this? I know you were expecting to be Head Girl and all...." He tailed off. He didn't really know how to express sympathy for her disappointment since his mind was filled with relief that he was no longer expected to act the responsible adult all the time.

"It's fine, Ron, honestly." Hermione's mind was turning over the words she had exchanged with Professor Snape that very morning: a fresh start. Here was her perfect opportunity to change a lot of things that needed changing. She looked up at Ron and experienced a sort of epiphany. "Ron, why don't you just come out and admit that you're gay? No one's going to mind," she blurted.

Ron choked, turned red and stopped in his tracks.

"Gay...?" he gasped once he had partially recovered the power of speech. He dragged her into an alcove. "What do you mean?" He sounded panicked. Then, at the knowing look in her sympathetic brown eyes, he deflated. "How did you know?"

Hermione smiled reassuringly.

"It's obvious now I come to think about it. I should have realised ages ago. But this morning, when you looked at me and Neville like that, it wasn't me that made you go all red, was it? The way Neville looks now just kind of hit you smack in the face, didn't it? And it's not just that," she continued, silencing him, "it's all sorts of little things, really. You don't touch me very much never have, really and you've never been all that pushy about wanting to sleep with me. You don't really look at girls in general, now I think about it. Lavender was something of an experiment for you, and I'm just camouflage."

"When you put it like that, I feel ashamed," he admitted, not meeting her eyes. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be, Ron. We're too much friends for that kind of rubbish. And I know how hard it must be under the weight of your mother's expectations. But just think about it, Ron!" Her eyes sparkled. "Now really is the time to make a fresh start so much has changed; we've been through so much, it would be a shame to go on living with the same old issues and pretences. Go for it, I say."

"What will Harry think?" said Ron, miserably.

"Harry's a big boy he'll cope. After all, you've shared sleeping quarters for the past seven years and you haven't ripped his clothes off him yet, so why should you start now? Just because you're gay doesn't mean you fancy every man who crosses your path. I don't, so why should you? Cheer up, Ron. Go and find someone to play Quidditch with I've got some thinking to do."

"Find you in the library later, then?"

"No, I don't think so. I rather believe I'm going to find some time in my life for other things than just books."

Whereas the first week of term passed rather quickly for the Golden Trio, getting into the swing of a simple, protected and stress-free existence, time crawled by for Severus Snape. He functioned on autopilot, teaching the same lessons he'd taught for years, making the same cutting remarks, docking points unnecessarily but none of it had much savour. True, he was employed, housed, safe, but he was also bored, bored, bored. He had no one to talk to and couldn't conjure much enthusiasm for any new research projects that might distract him. When he looked around him in class or in the Great Hall at meal times, those eyes that met his were filled with anything ranging from fear through to distrust and dislike; only Minerva was friendly towards him, but she had little time available for him outside her duties. There was only one other face that seemed to hold any warmth that of Hermione Granger, but he had had no opportunity to speak to her outside classes, and she didn't seek him out. She wasn't in the places where he might have expected to find her (not that he was desperate enough to go looking, oh no), such as the library, and he didn't know where else she would be except in the Gryffindor tower. "A fresh start" was much easier said than done under these circumstances. In all, he reflected, he had felt less miserable, less alone, and considerably more entertained in the middle of an Irish bog.

However, as the second week of term wore on, Snape came out of his shell sufficiently to notice that something unusual was happening amongst the students. From time to time, he would come across young females rushing in herds down corridors, giggling, and evidently in pursuit of something, though as he himself was generally on the way to somewhere else when this happened, he didn't have the opportunity to investigate and wasn't sufficiently interested to do more than snarl a few choice comments about blocking the passageways. Then at mealtimes, he noticed a great deal of whispering and giggling, again among the female contingent, and seemingly directed towards the place at the Gryffindor table where most of the seventh-years sat. To his consternation, even some of his colleagues seemed to be mesmerised by the final year students. For the life of him, he couldn't see why, though the mildly speculative look directed at him by Miss Granger made him wonder whether there was some sort of plot hatching. By the look of it, it could be mischief on a Weasley scale. But then, towards the end of the week, when he was forced to break up a fist-fight between two second-year girls, he had his first precise indication of the root of the trouble. The source of the dispute was a photograph of Neville Longbottom, stripped to the waist, digging in the school vegetable garden.

Neville Longbottom?! Admittedly, the boy had improved in looks and address, but to set half Hogwarts by the ears? Snape confiscated the picture, docked twenty points each from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and went in search of Dennis Creevey, who had apparently stepped into his older brother's shoes and was making a fortune from paparazzi-style photos of the unfortunate Longbottom.

It was short work to extract Creevey from the Charms classroom and question him about the extent of the hormonal madness gripping the school. Apparently, original photos were going for as much as a Galleon each (for the half-naked, sweaty shots), and Dennis didn't know the re-sale value. He didn't much care, as he had already sold upwards of two hundred, and the market was still expanding. Snape made some rather pointed remarks on the subject of invasions of privacy, took some points, awarded a week's worth of detentions, and ordered Dennis to cease his activities, though he hadn't much hope of being obeyed, given that the boy had obviously discovered a vocation. *Longbottom*, thought Snape. *Why on earth had the world gone mad for Longbottom?!* It beggared belief.

The following day, Saturday, his question went some way towards finding an answer.

Three

Chapter 3 of 11

An interesting encounter, during which one or two things are explained.

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Chapter 3

After leaving Ron to think over her discovery of his preferences, Hermione had gone to mull over her own. She fetched a quill and parchment, found herself a quiet, sunny spot overlooking the lake, and being a methodical young woman started making lists. She wrote down four headings: "What I want (long term)"; "What I want (short term)"; "What I want to do (long term)"; "What I want to do (short term)". Then she set herself to the hard task of honest self-examination. Over the next few days, she took the parchment out of her bag at odd moments between classes, and even once during class when a particularly brilliant notion struck her, mostly to add something or occasionally to cross off an item that she felt, on further reflection, didn't really fulfil her requirements. At the end of the week, she reviewed her lists. Some of her resolutions, such as "Don't spend every waking moment studying", or "Don't turn in a three-foot essay when eighteen inches will do", were (relatively) easy to implement all they required was a little discipline, which she had in bucketloads. Others, like "Don't be so anal over-disciplined", were harder. Many of the rest, such as "Enjoy being a girl", seemed to point in one rather unexpected direction. *This could be fun*, she thought, *as well as worthwhile*, and started planning her campaign.

The Saturday in question, Hermione began. She borrowed the Marauders' Map from Harry and spent a large part of the morning studying it, following the meandering path of one particular dot, which seemed to be mainly intent on avoiding company rather than going anywhere specific. Eventually, it drifted towards the part of the castle Hermione had half-expected it to visit, a part that was not yet fully reconstructed and therefore largely deserted. She tucked the map into her trunk, exited her dorm and the common room, and then ran as fast as she could. At all costs, she had to be there first if this was to work.

Severus Snape could have kidded himself that he was patrolling, but as he was neither on duty nor aiming at any corridors where malefactors usually lurked, it didn't hold water. He was just wandering aimlessly, passing time until he could stop passing time and go to bed. He decided to go and have a look at some of the recent repairs. Surely there would be some entertainment value to goading Minerva about shoddy workmanship, or bad taste. Up three flights of stairs; along a short passage; down another staircase and round the corner into a long, bright corridor lined on one side with arched windows. The corridor was devoid of decoration apart from a pair of Muggle denim jeans encasing a very shapely female posterior, the rest of the female in question hanging out of the window presumably enjoying the sunshine. From his perspective, the view was more pleasing than most things he had seen since the start of term, so rather than obeying his first impulse to sneak away unobserved, he stayed to watch. The woman shifted her weight. Really, she had the best rear end he had ever seen: by no means large, but well-rounded and firm. Good grief! What was wrong with him? He must be going deranged with boredom if he could be so easily distracted. He turned to go, but the woman heard him and straightened.

It was Miss Granger of all people. She looked... different. The jeans sat snugly on her hips, but not as snugly as the small t-shirt encasing her torso and pert breasts *get a grip, man!* which were *Merlin!* heaving slightly with her breath. Her eyes were very bright, her cheeks becomingly flushed, her wild hair twisted on top of her head and held in place by her wand thrust through the knot, exposing a slender, elegant neck.... *Shit! Must get out of here.*

"Hello, Professor." She smiled.

Bugger, bugger, bugger. Now he'd be obliged to converse, if only a little, before escaping with his credibility hopefully intact. Deep breath, assume the mask, cold voice...

"Miss Granger, what are you doing in this part of the castle? Alone, too. Won't your little friends be missing you?"

"Not really. Ron's probably still asleep, and Harry may not be sleeping, but he's almost certainly in bed. I'd be a little *de trop* in either case, I feel. The common room is full of noisy children, so I came here for some peace and quiet." She hadn't missed the indrawn breath, and couldn't resist a saucy smirk, though she turned quickly to resume looking out of the window.

Snape raised his eyebrows and looked suspiciously down his long nose, knowing very well that there was no view worth the name from this side of the castle. The pause stretched a little too long. He gave in any conversation might be better than the terse one-liners he'd been getting (and giving) most of the time.

"What are you staring at?"

"I'm not staring I'm ogling," she corrected him. "Lustfully," she added demurely.

Hermione stepped aside a fraction, inviting him to look out of the window. She was too close, he thought, catching the floral fragrance of her hair, but hadn't taken the thought much further when he saw what she had been looking at.

"All I can see is Mr Longbottom, digging," he said coolly, masking his surprise.

"Exactly," she answered dreamily.

"How, *exactly*," he echoed sarcastically, "does Neville Longbottom qualify as worthy of ogling?"

"Haven't you noticed?" She paused. "You really haven't noticed, have you, sir? Neville's gorgeous!"

"Is he?" with another disdainful glance.

"Yes, sir, look more closely: the height, the lean face and body, the broad shoulders and narrow hips, the taut muscles under tanned skin, the tight arse, the kind eyes and shy smile... Oh, yes, he's right at the top of the scale," she sighed.

Snape was looking again, trying to see what she was describing, but at the last word, he turned his dark eyes back to her.

"Scale?"

"Oh lord, yes girls have been grading men on the scale for ever!"

"Enlighten me," he invited, curious in spite of himself.

"Well, on the lower end you might have the toads and flobberworms; it rises through the fairly normal blokes, and then we get to the hunks, film stars, gods and..." She looked back at Neville and spoke in reverent tones: "Knitting Pattern Man."

Snape choked on a laugh, but seeing she was apparently serious, he looked the question.

"Oh, yes," she continued. "The very apogee of male perfection as measured on the Scale: perfect physically, also kind, understanding, considerate, and willing to wear a badly-knitted jumper everything a girl could want. That's what Neville has become. He doesn't know it yet, either, and that's what makes him doubly irresistible. Poor thing, he thinks he's hiding out there in the vegetable gardens, but just look!"

She gestured out of the window. Snape leaned past her, scenting her fragrance again, and saw faces peering from numerous windows in the castle walls. Creevey's lens glinted in some bushes. Apparently Miss Granger was in the right of it; he was a little disappointed that she should share the same tastes as all the other girls at Hogwarts

he had thought her more discriminating but remembering her appearance when he had chanced upon her, he realised that she was just as mesmerised as the rest. He glanced once more at the unlikely object of all that passion, not really seeing it himself, but feeling a vague discontent, all the same. He was startled when she asked, a propos of nothing, "How's your fresh start coming, sir?"

"Just fine," he snapped.

Her face fell at the rebuff.

"I'll leave you to your... activities, Miss Granger," he said, making to leave. He stopped. "Out of interest, where would I fit on your famous Scale?" Even in his own ears, it was a pathetic attempt to sound nonchalant.

"You, sir?" She studied him. "You are completely off the Scale, Professor Snape," she said enigmatically. He left.

Hermione conjured a cushion and sank to the floor with her face buried in it, smothering the giggles which she finally allowed to overwhelm her.

A/N: Knitting Pattern Man borrowed with thanks from the scriptwriters of the TV comedy series "Coupling".

Four

Chapter 4 of 11

A little self-assessment.

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

This is post-DH and EWE. Hermione is of age but a student, so please if you can't take teacher/student relationships, don't read any further.

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A/N: Huge, enormous, massive thanks and homage to Subversa for her tireless encouragement and meticulous beta-reading.

Chapter 4

Snape returned to his quarters feeling oddly cheerful. He put it down to having had his first conversation with a personable woman since, oh, about 3000 B.C., even if it was Granger, and even if her attention had been focused elsewhere. Now, there was a puzzle: Longbottom was at the root of all the disruption he'd been noticing. He still couldn't see it himself, but decided that as his colleagues had seen fit not to burden him with any form of social activity, he might as well give some time to observing and analysing the phenomenon. It was strange enough to be mildly interesting, and he could put into use some of the skills he'd honed during his life as a spy.

There was a pile of post waiting for him on his desk. Minerva had been screening his letters for hate mail, Howlers, concealed curses, hexes, jinxes, and poisons as far as she was able. Clearly, she didn't want him to realise the full extent of his unpopularity with both sides, though she was mistaken if she thought he didn't know. Enough subtle Dark magic got through her net to make *that* quite clear. Severus checked the letters for anything bad, binned the two hexed ones Minerva had missed (he'd dispose of them properly later), kept the poisoned one for analysis as it looked like an interesting compound (hey, he really was feeling better), chucked the perverted fan mail on the fire, and sat down on his battered old sofa to read the rest. Somewhat to his surprise, there was a collection of articles submitted to various potions journals which had been forwarded to him for review. So although he was a murderer, Death-Eater, traitor, blah, blah, blah, he was apparently still one of the foremost experts in his field. Good. The second positive thing that had happened in his day. And with a little luck, there would be sufficient idiocy in these articles on which to vent his spleen. He made some tea and settled down to work with relish for the first time in a long time. Several hours later, papers scattered far and wide around him, he put down his quill, leaned back and closed his eyes. Where he hadn't been vicious in his commentary, he'd been harsh, and where that hadn't been possible, he had at least managed snide. He felt quite satisfied. Though there remained one or two papers to read, the clock showed that it was time for dinner. Time, therefore, to begin his new project.

So much more cheerful was he, in fact, that Professor Snape even felt up to making his patented Entrance, flinging the door of the Great Hall open and striding down past the house tables with his robes billowing dramatically round him. As he passed the seventh-year Gryffindors, he noticed that Longbottom had arranged protection for himself: Miss Granger and Miss Weasley (safe females, apparently) on either side of him, his dorm mates flanking them and opposite him. Snape wasn't sure about the wisdom of choosing Miss Granger as a shield, given her point-by-point analysis of Neville's attractions earlier, but as he passed, he noticed that she was in fact absorbed not in Mr Longbottom but in a book, and even raised her eyes to give him a smile as he walked by. Hmm. Neville looked stressed. Given that every girl over thirteen who had a chance of seeing him was craning her neck to do so, this was unsurprising. Up at the staff table, Hooch was watching him like a cat at a mousehole, Sprout was watching Hooch suspiciously, and most of the other women couldn't keep their eyes to themselves either. Snape's mouth quirked; this was really amusing.

"You look chirpy, Severus," said Professor McGonagall.

He didn't bother with a put-down for the epithet. Chirpy was very nearly how he felt.

During the meal he exercised his talent for watching without seeming to and examined Longbottom, attempting an aesthetic judgment not coloured by his experience of the boy's ineptitude at potions. To do him justice, Snape had appreciated and even invisibly facilitated Neville's rebellion against the Death Eater regime at the school during the last year, but he had had no idea that any significant physical transformation was taking place under his nose. But now, observing closely, he could see that Neville was just that little bit better-proportioned than the other young men; he moved with an understated strength, but was unfailingly courteous and gentle towards the girls at his side; when talking, his face yes, it did now seem to be a handsome face was mobile and expressive; even the hunted look he wore was somehow quite endearing. Turning his attention to the mass of female students (and some males, he noted wryly), Snape saw that nothing Neville said or did went unremarked. The girls in Neville's line of sight blushed and giggled when his eyes fell on them. Except for one.

Hermione had noticed what Snape was doing; Snape noticed her noticing; she noticed him right back. *This is ridiculous*, he thought. He lowered his eyebrows a fraction in reproof at her stare, but she just grinned impudently back at him before turning to answer something Weasley had said. So Granger wasn't under Longbottom's spell after all. Perhaps she really was 'the brightest witch of her age', gushy though Lupin's description had been.

He finished his meal and left the table without being acknowledged by the rest of the staff. It was galling, the contrast in treatment between that meted out to him and the adulation the Longbottom boy was getting. Severus had admirable qualities did it take only his readiness to put his life on the line day in, day out for anyone to recognise

them? His temper began to sour again. Back in his quarters, he paced moodily for a while, resentment getting the upper hand in his thinking. Indeed, he had been a fool to accept this job, offered to him out of pity in some vain attempt to protect him from pariah status. It was enough to make a man spit. Here, on the one hand, was Longbottom, a young hero, who through a few brave acts but mostly by having a pretty face had achieved the admiration of the world. On the other hand, Severus Snape, who for years had lived a life of danger and often of terror, had worked behind the scenes to save many lives and ultimately prevent the death of countless more by helping to bring down Voldemort, but was he admired and petted? No, he was reviled and ignored!

Snape pulled himself up short, recognising that he was working himself into a jealous rage over the opinion of people whose views he generally despised and about a boy who was in no sense responsible for the situation. There must be a better way of dealing with this: a way that would offer him some personal satisfaction and give him at least some of his own back.

He went into his bedroom, where there was a large, full-length mirror. Right, what did Longbottom have that he didn't? Twenty years less, most of them spent living hard, for a start. Snape noted the deep lines between his eyebrows and the creases either side of his mouth, etched in by his now habitual scowl. He took off his robe and chucked it on the bed. Now what? He stood in his black frock coat and trousers and attempted unsuccessfully to be objective. Item: one head of greasy black hair; item: two black eyes, with lids to them; item: one neck, one chin, and so forth. Nothing special there. Forget the nose for the moment. Better go the whole hog. He took his clothes off and studied himself again. He was, at least, tall. Lean, too (actually a bit too lean note: should eat more). Muscles not bad, for it had been necessary to stay in condition to combat the rigours of his life, and the last few weeks spent yomping round Ireland hadn't done him any harm. Shoulders? Broad enough to suffice. Arse? He turned round and peered back over his shoulder at the mirror. Now, in the arse department at least, he could compete. However, the whole package was wrapped in skin so pale that he looked like something found under a stone, and the scarring didn't help. Very well, the clothes would have to stay on. He got dressed again and thought back to his conversation with Miss Granger. What else had she specified?

"...the kind eyes and shy smile..." Ye gods, no! "...kind, understanding, considerate, and willing to wear a badly-knitted jumper..." Even less so.

So now the question that had to be asked was: what did he have that Longbottom didn't? He sat down to think for a while, then summoned an elf to carry a hurriedly-penned note.

A/N: "yomping" UK Marines slang, originally: marching, slogging, trudging.

Five

Chapter 5 of 11

A little light plotting; and Neville's popularity actually increases.

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

This is post-DH and EWE. Hermione is of age but a student, so please if you can't take teacher/student relationships, don't read any further.

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A/N: Huge, enormous, massive thanks and homage to Subversa for her tireless encouragement and meticulous beta-reading.

Chapter 5

Hermione went at once in response to the note she received. She didn't tell anyone where she was going. The Potions master's quarters were in a part of the dungeons she had never seen before, but he had described the route, how to find the hidden door, and given her the password, "Poteen". She felt it was a promising sign that he didn't also tell her how to pronounce it.

When she entered, she found Professor Snape looking grumpy no great surprise there but somehow energised. He launched in without preamble.

"Miss Granger, you're a woman," (*you have got to be joking*, thought Hermione *him too?*) "and yet you do not appear to have fallen under Mr. Longbottom's spell. Am I correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are telling me that in spite of the fact that you understand in great detail why every other female in the castle is out of her senses with lust for him, you remain immune?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why is that, precisely?"

"I suppose it's because I know him so well, sir. We've been friends since the first year, and so when I look at him, yes, I see his good looks and appreciate them, but he's still just Neville. None of the other girls have ever been friends with him they've mostly just dismissed him, so they don't know what he's like, and all they see is the surface."

"Are women really that superficial?" Snape sounded intrigued.

Hermione bristled a bit.

"No more so than men, sir," she responded tartly. "I don't seem to recall anyone much fancying *me* until I did my Cinderella act in the fourth year, and that soon petered out when I went back to normal."

She sounded surprisingly jaundiced about that, he thought.

"Touché, Miss Granger. But it is this superficiality among the women here that I wish to address."

"Sir?"

Snape took a deep breath. He was not entirely sure that Hermione would be willing to help him with his scheme. She seemed to him a typical Gryffindor (if rather more intelligent than the usual), straightforward, uncomplicated, distressingly honest in most situations, but he had known her to be unscrupulous on occasion when it suited her or could benefit her friends, and it was on this that he was counting, as her overtures lately had at least seemed sympathetic.

"I have been pondering the subject of popularity," he began. "The contrast between Mr Longbottom's and my own status amongst the school's population, is, to say the least, stark." She looked interested good. "In the light of the contributions which both of us made during the war, this state of affairs is... inequitable. I admit to being discontented with the situation, particularly as regards the women with whom I have worked and whom I have protected as far as I could."

"Go on, sir," she prompted when he paused.

"I wish to demonstrate to them the injustice and superficiality of their behaviour. In truth, Miss Granger, I am angry at the way I am being treated, and I want to strike back," he finished, deciding to be straight with her, as this was likely the best way to assure her cooperation.

"And you want my help with this?"

He nodded, not willing to unbend so far as to ask directly.

"I've been thinking, actually, that the way everyone is treating you is abominable," she continued. "We all know the facts now, about what you did and why, but you're still the scapegoat. Totally unfair. What do you want me to do?" she asked briskly.

"Firstly, I want your objective opinion about my appearance, and suggestions about how I might make myself appealing to women."

Hermione started to say something it sounded a lot like "Oh, but y..." but stopped herself. She closed her eyes briefly and began again. "Stand in the middle of the room and let me look at you."

Snape gritted his teeth as Hermione walked round him, her hands on her hips, her eyes critically surveying every inch of him while she unconsciously chewed on her lower lip in thought. He felt very exposed, particularly when she told him to take off his teaching robe and looked him over again.

"Well?" he felt obliged to ask.

"Would you mind taking your frock coat off, too, sir?" Her tone was all business, now she had a problem to consider. The long row of buttons was duly undone she watched his hands while he did this and the coat followed the robe onto the back of the sofa. Now he was dressed in just his boots, black trousers and white shirt and was more ill-at-ease than ever. He stuck his hands in his pockets. Hermione happened to be behind him at that moment, and murmured appreciatively as the fabric of his trousers was pulled tight across his buttocks, at which he smirked and relaxed a fraction. Perhaps this would work, he thought. His face was impassive by the time she came round to face him again.

"Well?" he said again.

She composed her thoughts and started speaking clinically:

"These are the good points: you are tall, your figure is good, your colouring is unusual but not unattractive, you are intelligent, I'm sure you have a sense of humour in there somewhere, your voice is remarkable and you move well. Sir? I'm not sure that this is really very appropriate..."

"Miss Granger, we stepped past the bounds of propriety when you entered my apartment. Continue."

"Right. The less good points: your hair, your teeth, the way you use your clothes as a disguise, your expression, your habit of saying the first cutting thing that occurs to you, your totally unrelaxed and intimidating demeanour, your persona..."

"I will not change who I am, Miss Granger. That would negate what I am trying to achieve."

"I'm not asking you to change your personality, sir. Just your persona, a very little you of all people should know how to adapt what you project for the company and circumstances in which you find yourself!"

"Very well," he subsided, "continue."

"I think that will be enough to start with, don't you? Do you have a quill and parchment handy? I need to make some notes."

"Of course you do," he said drily. "Come and sit down."

She was surprised to see that the entire floor area between the sofa and the fireplace, not to mention the coffee table and the sofa itself, was strewn with papers. She wondered where exactly she was supposed to sit and reached to move one of the piles aside.

"Not that one!" he barked. "The letter on top is poisoned." He carefully removed the papers to a bookshelf.

"Poisoned? After everything that's happened, they're actually still trying to *kill* you? That's so unfair! I had no idea!" Hermione was profoundly shocked on his behalf, and her indignation warmed him. He cleared her a space and she sat down. While he went to the small kitchen to prepare some tea, she picked up one of the articles he had been reading earlier. He came back with two mugs to find her laughing quietly.

"I'm glad you never wrote that on any of my essays," she said, accepting her cup with an open, friendly expression such as he had rarely had directed at him.

"Happily, Miss Granger, you have never written anything quite so asinine." He shifted some more rubble to make room for himself.

"You know, Professor, I always thought of you as far more orderly and methodical than this," she gestured to the mess surrounding them.

"This *is* methodical," he growled, hunting for a clean piece of parchment. "I know exactly where everything is. Aha! Now, where do we begin?"

"With a shopping list..."

Some time later, when Hermione had scribbled down a long list of purchases she considered necessary to what had somehow become *their* endeavour, she asked, "When would you be able to come to London with me to get all this?"

"You are free on Wednesday afternoons, are you not? Then perhaps this Wednesday," he suggested.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Ron is going to start teaching me to fly properly on Wednesday. How about next Saturday?"

Snape was diverted.

"You, Miss Granger? On a broomstick? Your dislike of flying is legendary!"

"Oh, but I can't leave Hogwarts and have it said that there was anything worthwhile the school had to teach that Hermione Granger couldn't master, can I? Fresh start

remember? And with Ron teaching me, I know I won't be laughed at. At least, not much. So what about Saturday, if your House duties will permit."

He looked away, pained.

"I have ceded the Headship of Slytherin to Professor Sinistra. I was... disappointed with the behaviour of my House during the battle last year; I had hoped they might have shown more character."

There was a short silence, which Hermione broke.

"Saturday, then. I'll get permission from Professor McGonagall. And in the meantime, you can get on with stage one."

"Which would be...?"

"We'll start slowly: leave off the robe from time to time. Your suits are well-tailored and show you off, particularly your shoulders. Let them see a little of that. But only a little, mind if you burst forth in all your glory one day, they'll think you've gone to some sort of effort for them, which is *not* the goal. We want them to end up thinking that they've been blind and foolish all along, and they'll play right into your hands."

"If only you had been in Slytherin, Miss Granger," he deadpanned. "It's after curfew: I'll walk you back to Gryffindor Tower."

"No thanks, Professor, I could use some practice sneaking around."

Before she Disillusioned herself and closed the door behind her, she grinned mischievously, leaving Severus Snape to stare at the two empty mugs perched on a pile of papers and ponder the nature of that "we" she had been throwing around so freely.

During the next week, Hermione learned two things which interested her greatly.

The first was related to her by a breathless Ron Weasley, when she emerged on Sunday evening from a long session in the library. He ambushed her before she got to the common room and pulled her into an empty classroom to tell her the "real story" before any of the rumours came to her ears. Apparently, Neville Longbottom was at that very moment in the Headmistress' office explaining why he had seen fit to curse two fifth-year girls and alter the fabric of the castle. It seemed that he had looked up from his digging that afternoon to find the girls sneaking up on him, trampling several rows of new seedlings in the process. He had seen red and caused them to put down roots and grow branches. He had then noticed that his sanctuary was far from inviolate; many windows overlooked the vegetable gardens, and most of them were occupied. Neville simply made the windows disappear blank walls now overlooked his domain. And he had been so angry that no-one (including himself) had yet been able to undo his spells. Ron had been extremely impressed. "And what were *you* doing in the vegetable gardens, Ron?" asked Hermione. He blushed.

The two girls Neville had cursed were dug up and replanted in large pots, which were transferred to the hospital wing. Professor Snape, whose expertise was called upon, was also reluctantly impressed. Neville refused point blank to assist the staff in trying to reverse the girls' condition, until it was made clear to him that he would be refused access to gardens and greenhouses until they were restored to normal.

In the morning, it was all over the castle that Neville Longbottom had a Dark Side. The hysteria of adulation actually got worse.

The second piece of news which interested Hermione concerned the Halloween party being planned by Professor McGonagall. She had gone to the Headmistress to ask for permission to visit London, which was granted without question.

"I appreciate you asking me, Miss Granger, but really, as you are of age and have returned voluntarily to complete your schooling beyond the time when ordinarily you would have graduated, I think I can grant you a little freedom in such matters," said Professor McGonagall. "But please be discreet about this. I don't really want half Hogwarts roaming about the country on a whim."

"Certainly, Professor," agreed Hermione. "Is there anything you need me to pick up for you while I am there?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. I have one or two new Transfiguration texts ordered from Flourish and Blotts would you see if they have arrived? And I would like you to pop in to Madam Malkin's with this order for masks."

"Masks?"

"Yes, dear. Halloween will be here in a mere few weeks, and I see it as our first opportunity to have a real celebration after the war, that has nothing to do with the war. A mark of a return to a normal life, if you like. So I am planning a party to outdo anything Albus ever conceived: games, rides and the like during the afternoon, then the feast, and later in the evening a masked ball for the older students and staff. What do you think?" she asked a little tentatively.

"I think it is a splendid idea, Professor," said Hermione.

Six

Chapter 6 of 11

A shopping trip.

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

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Chapter 6

Hermione met Professor Snape in the Leaky Cauldron at 7.30 a.m.

"Is there any particular reason for my being here at this ungodly hour?" he demanded, reaching for the coffee she held out to him as soon as he arrived.

"Lots to get through. You look nice, sir," she said, taking in his Transfigured charcoal grey Muggle suit, white shirt and green tie. She had never seen him in anything other than black, and the change made him seem much more approachable despite the formality of the clothes.

"Thank you. Your efforts have not been wasted, either." In fact, he found her rather pretty in the long, rose-coloured skirt and cream blouse she had chosen. Her hair was tied back neatly, showing off her large, brown eyes. Yes, remarkably pretty. The prospect of a full day being seen in the company of the Gryffindor know-it-all suddenly seemed less tedious than he had previously anticipated. She blushed a little, but got down to business straight away, consulting a list she had spread on the table in front of her. He leaned back, amused.

"Once we've finished coffee, sir, I'll be taking you to the dental practice my parents used to own. I know the hygienist pretty well, and I've twisted her arm to get an early appointment. I now owe her big time." She gave Snape an admonishing glance. "Then we will be going to a hairdresser..."

"What?" he interrupted, his amusement evaporating. "I am *not* going to have my hair cut!"

"You asked me to help you in this, sir, so let me do so. I drew up a list of what needs to be done initially..." (His heart sank initially? What had he let himself in for?) "...and I say something needs to be done about your hair. Don't interrupt! I don't know what you've been using on it. I don't *want* to know but clearly it doesn't work unless the effect you're aiming for is 'ick'. I don't intend you to undergo any radical change in style, but you *will* have it trimmed and taken care of. After that, we will be..."

Severus Snape began to have sympathy for Potter and Weasley, who had managed, somehow, to survive more than seven years of this. Granger had the bit between her teeth, and there was clearly going to be no negotiation, let alone stopping her.

"If you've finished your coffee, Professor, we should get going. We'll Apparate to the surgery. I'll take you Side-Along, as that'll be easier than explaining how to find it."

Both of them found the physical contact a little awkward, but neither said anything about it.

The torment of a thorough dental work-over was nothing compared with the stress of a visit to the hairdresser. Snape found himself helpless in the hands of a person whose very existence he despised, who spoke some kind of code (layers? hot oil treatment? conditioner?) and who expected him to provide answers to questions made meaningless by their incredible banality. Happily, Miss Granger seemed to speak the language and understand how to handle the natives. He shut his eyes, gritted his teeth and pretended he was elsewhere.

"You can open them now, sir."

Over the past couple of years, he had let his hair grow quite long so that even after a good trimming, it could be tied back neatly. He examined himself in the mirror. The face was the same, the nose just as prominent, but he had to admit that he did look somehow better.

Hermione had predicted that Professor Snape would be nearly beside himself by this stage and had deliberately sought out a salon located near a very good bookshop. The man was no saint, it had to be admitted, and as there was (possibly) worse to come, she had programmed some periods of cooling-off into the day. Even Muggle London had some oases in it, after all. An hour, several books bought and a cup of coffee later, she started dragging him into clothes shops.

The first port of call was a fairly up-market establishment where the Professor could be properly measured (one area to which Hermione's expertise did not stretch was men's tailoring). She found a chair on which to wait while he was escorted behind some curtains, and opened one of her new books. She didn't pay much attention to the conversation taking place out of sight, though her head came up when she heard her teacher's tone take on a snarl she knew only too well, but as there were no sounds of actual violence, she decided not to intervene. After a little time, a shop assistant sporting a tape measure around his neck came out to collect some shirts and other items from the shelves.

"You are a *very* lucky girl," he stage-whispered to Hermione on his way back.

She didn't know whether to blush or give him a frosty stare on her teacher's behalf, but he was gone before she could do either. When Professor Snape finally emerged, he looked ready to commit murder. They left the shop without purchases and in silence, which continued as they walked down the street.

"Lunch?" ventured Hermione eventually.

Snape glared at her, but relented at the tremulous sound to her voice.

"You had better know of somewhere very good, Miss Granger. I am currently in no mood for idiocy or mediocrity of any kind."

She took him to a small, out-of-the-way Italian restaurant. It was unpretentious, and the food was very good indeed. They started to relax over the meal, and the conversation was wide-ranging and interesting to them both. Snape was impressed by the breadth of her knowledge and the intelligence of the questions she asked, often provoking him to consider a subject in a new light; Hermione enjoyed the subtlety of thought and sly wit he displayed, his increasing lack of inhibition in talking with her showing him in a kinder light than she had ever anticipated. After their main course, he sat back to savour the last of the wine in his glass.

"How did you know of this place, Miss Granger?" he asked. "It's not the sort of restaurant many schoolgirls would come to."

"My parents used to eat here from time to time. They mentioned that it was..." She stopped with an unexpected hitch in her voice. "Sorry," she continued. "It's just that now they've left the country for good, I feel rather alone sometimes. Not really connected with anything any more." She looked at him. "Do you know what I mean?"

He noticed how a trace of sadness appeared in the soft brown eyes and realised that in fact it was always there to a greater or lesser extent. Even the resilience of youth and the protection of friendship had not prevented her from being marked by the war.

"I do, Miss Granger, I really do."

The afternoon passed rapidly. Hermione regained her good mood bullying Snape into buying a few items of clothing not designated solely for the use of funeral directors. They had a fairly major wrangle over a dark red shirt ("I will not wear red!" "It's not Gryffindor red!" "That's beside the point! I do not wear colours." "But you look good in it!" etc. etc.), but the biggest argument came when Hermione told Snape to purchase a pair of black denim jeans. At first she could not be induced to tell him exactly why she thought them necessary to his wardrobe, and as he had no idea when he would possibly ever wear them, he remained steadfast in his refusal. She was just as adamant in her insistence that jeans were necessary to their campaign. Finally, arguing in a hissing undertone outside the changing rooms in a large designer store, he forced her to give in.

"Just come out with it and stop being so damn coy!"

"Oh, you oh, all *right!* They make your hips and...and... and..."

"Arse?" He was enjoying her discomfort.

"Yes, all right! Arse look... sexy!"

She was blushing bright red by this time and turned her back on him. There was no further argument and no further mention of the subject. Snape paid for the jeans.

By half past four they were both exhausted, and Hermione felt they deserved a treat. She took them for tea at Harrod's. The Professor watched in great amusement as she practically inhaled scones, jam and cream and then ordered more. He reflected that although they had spent a large portion of the day arguing, and although he had allowed her to bully and hector him into things he would never normally have contemplated, he had seldom spent a day in company so congenial to him. He did not feel he had to watch his words with her, as she generally gave as good as she got, and while they maintained a certain distance between them (except perhaps during the jeans incident), they were at ease with one another. He didn't know if it was friendship, even if that was possible between two people whose relative ages and positions inevitably set them apart, but it would do for now.

As for Hermione, she was satisfied with her achievements and her time spent with Professor Snape. He was not nice exactly, but his company suited her down to the ground. Despite the arguments, she was content in his presence. They parted with some reluctance, she to complete the Headmistress' commissions, he to Apparate directly back to Hogwarts, as they could not be seen to return together. Each had much to think about, and the promise of a strategy session to look forward to.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 11

Severus and Hermione start to put their plans into action.

Summary: Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)

This is post-DH and EWE. Hermione is of age but a student, so please if you can't take teacher/student relationships, don't read any further.

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A/N: Huge, enormous, massive thanks and homage to Subversa for her tireless encouragement and meticulous beta-reading.

Chapter 7

The strategy over the next week was in fact very simple: do nothing. Professor Snape was to behave as usual, with the exception of 'forgetting' his teaching robes from time to time when not actually on duty. Hermione was to keep a sharp eye on any reactions to his improved appearance. They met to assess the situation the following Saturday evening.

"Sorry I'm late, sir," she said when he admitted her to his living room. "I had to mop up a couple of first years who'd had their pictures of Neville confiscated."

"First years?"

"Eleven can be a very hormonal age," she said, a little defensively.

"Apparently, so can fifty-six," he responded. She sniggered when he told her about the portfolio of photographs which was building up in the staff room.

Snape made tea while Hermione cleared a space for herself on the sofa and dropped her bag down next to it.

"So have I made any progress amongst Hogwarts' women-folk?" he inquired, sitting down with her.

"Well, I've definitely seen a few glances going your way puzzled expressions, as though there's something different, but no-one can work out what that sort of thing."

"Who?" he demanded.

"A few of the older girls, and probably Madam Hooch."

He shuddered.

"I suppose it is what I'm after. What's the next stage?"

"Well, I've been giving it a bit of thought, and it seems to me that what we really ought to be doing is emphasising the contrasts between you and Neville."

"That shouldn't be too hard," he interjected.

"Quite," she said, a little impatiently. "Look Neville's basically Mr Nice Guy, young, innocent-looking, fresh-faced..."

"Don't go out of your way to make me feel good about myself, Miss Granger."

"...whereas you do Tall, Dark and Dangerous without even trying."

His expression went cold at what he felt was too close a reference to why everyone hated him in the first place.

"No, sir, don't take offence it's really something that many women find devastatingly attractive. Think Heathcliff, Mr Rochester, James Bond and so on. You just have to convince them it's what they've been seeing all along."

"And how, exactly, am I to take the next step along what I have to say is a most unclear path?"

"Well, you know how everyone got even more hysterical about Neville after he cursed those stupid girls? Neville showed them that he had something more to him than just niceness, gave them a pleasant little frisson of fear. You've got to do the same thing in reverse!"

"What Severus Snape, teddy bear extraordinaire?"

He could add new savagery to sarcasm before waking up in the morning, thought Hermione before bravely suggesting the next step she had planned.

"I thought you might try a well-chosen smile on occasion..."

"I do *not* smile, Miss Granger."

"Precisely. Just think of the effect it would have."

"Heart-attacks all round and an immediate call to St Mungo's to have me carted off to the bed next to Lockhart's, probably. Do be realistic, girl."

She bristled.

"I'm not talking about a great big cheesy grin! And don't call me 'girl' or we can forget about this straight away. I will not be dismissed or treated with contempt!" Hermione was suddenly very, very angry. She stood up and turned to leave, but Snape's voice stopped her. He was surprised that his prickly attitude had got under her skin to such an extent as indeed was she.

"Miss Granger, excuse me. I am not accustomed to being treated with the kind of... informality... this situation has produced between us. Nor is it easy for me to accept your help graciously. Sit down," he added with asperity.

She sat, mollified by what amounted to a lavish apology.

"You must understand, though," he continued, "that a smile from me would stop the whole school in its tracks. As a next step in a subtle campaign, it leaves a lot to be desired you are too Gryffindor in your approach." He didn't add that he had probably forgotten how, in any case. "If you want us to continue keeping any costume changes in our hand for the moment, then I will concede a little softening of my manner very occasionally. Will that do?"

"Just don't make it so subtle that no-one can detect it," she grouched into her mug of tea.

They were quiet for a little while. Snape was unused to having company in his quarters. Dumbledore had been an occasional visitor, but there had always been an element of coercion in their relationship which had kept his visits to the business in hand; any socialising had been a veneer, unwanted on Snape's part at least. But here he was having tea with someone who had come not to use him but to help him and, moreover, whose presence was neither a burden to him nor a reminder of past mistakes. He felt the urge to reciprocate her interest.

"Why have you brought your book bag, Miss Granger? Something you wanted help with?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." She was glad he had broken the silence. "There's something in this book about the mechanisms involved in the maturation of Veritas serum which I couldn't quite get my head round."

"I'm not surprised this is a Master level text! Where did you get this?"

"Harry gave it to me for my birthday this week. He knew I was interested in having it." She sighed a little.

"Why so gloomy?"

"Oh, it's not gloom, really. It's just that it would be nice once in a while to get something other than books and such like as presents, something pretty. Even Ron sometimes forgets that I'm a girl as well as a brain. Never mind. Tell me what it is I'm not understanding here."

Snape filed away that interesting piece of information. Weasley, her *boyfriend*, forgot she was a girl? Well, then.

During the next few weeks, the Headmistress became aware that two of her charges, perhaps the two who concerned her most in all the school, were behaving atypically. It wasn't anything very serious, but it was sufficient to cause her some disquiet.

Firstly, there was Severus Snape. He had returned to the school at her behest, only to have to don a carapace as tough as the one he'd used to protect himself during the war. She had hoped that the revelation of the true story of his activities would soften people's attitude towards him, but in this she had been sorely mistaken. For the first part of the term, she found herself fearing that she would go down to breakfast one day to find the school without a Potions master. Lately, however, he had seemed more relaxed. He had not gone so far as to be friendly with anyone, exactly, but from time to time he was to be seen without the intimidating bat-wing robes, and in the staff room, at least, he had unbent enough to exchange a little civilised conversation with the other teachers. Accustomed to being treated with disdain at the very least, they were bowled over by such neutral pleasantries as "Good morning". At staff meetings he refrained from ridiculing every single proposition put forward, and McGonagall herself had been witness to one occasion when he had *not* taken house points from a group of silly girls giggling over one of Creevey's photographs. It was all very odd. She felt it would be nice to be able to take Severus' efforts at face value, but on the other hand she couldn't help feeling he was either ill or working to a hidden agenda. Why else would he wash his hair?

And secondly, there was Hermione Granger. Her behaviour was of less concern since she was young and finally taking the opportunity to behave according to her age. Nevertheless, it was out of character for Hermione to turn in essays not three times the required length, and not to spend every waking moment with her nose in a book. Her work was never to be faulted; indeed, her essays gained focus from restraint and her practical spell work was flawless, but still... Professor McGonagall knew she should be glad that Hermione could find it in herself to spend an hour just sitting by the lake, or playing cards with her friends, or even taking her courage in both hands and learning to fly (now that was a real eye-opener), but she wondered whether Hermione was not being too deliberate about enjoying freedom and her final year as a schoolgirl. This was a war veteran and a hero, a young woman, not a child, and there were things, the Headmistress sensed, that Hermione was refusing to face. She resolved to keep a sharp eye out for her favourite pupil.

She was unaware of what she might well have considered the unholy pact between the two objects of her concern.

Snape and Hermione began by meeting once a week to assess his progress in seducing the school away from Neville-worship. They soon progressed to twice-weekly meetings where the ostensible reason for their conversations was generally swiftly dealt with and then they passed on to other, more interesting topics. Hermione grew to think of Snape's living room as a haven of quiet and good company; he just looked forward to the time spent with her. Neither chose to analyse it any further. It was a gift they both simply accepted. When she returned white and shaky from a flying lesson, she knew she would find a cup of tea and a good discussion with her professor to bring her back down to earth; he enjoyed being the one she turned to for intellectual stimulation or even, sometimes, silent companionship over books in front of the fire. One end of the sofa rapidly became her own.

Of course, there were milestones in the fresh start each had undertaken. Such as the day that Professor Vector offered Snape a cup of coffee in the staff room (at Hermione's suggestion, he refused all initial approaches why seem eager?). Or the day that Hermione Granger made history.

Two weeks before Halloween, on the Wednesday morning, the seventh years had Potions. They were working on individual projects involving moonstone, all appropriately complex at their level of alleged (Snape would say) expertise. Just before the end of the lesson, the unthinkable happened. Hermione's potion, which should have been a clear green with silver tones, suddenly turned into an ugly, congealed grey mass. Several last bubbles forced their way grudgingly to the surface with a loud farting sound before, with a prolonged sigh, the entire cauldron collapsed. The mess was incredible. Hermione's face sank into her hands and her shoulders began to shake convulsively. Everybody went absolutely still and the room was silent but for the muffled choking noises coming from Hermione. Snape shook himself.

"So finally the Gryffindor know-it-all proves that she doesn't," he remembered to sneer. "Miss Granger! Control yourself and then clear up your mess. You will stay behind and account to me for this negligence. Everyone else stop gawking. Place your cauldrons under stasis and get out. Now!"

Hermione, her face still covered, used one hand to wave her wand feebly in the direction of her cauldron.

"Ev... evane... eva...", she gulped in a muffled voice, trying to Vanish her work. Harry and Ron were worried sick for her, she was so evidently beside herself, and they

lingered, unwilling to entrust her to Snape.

"OUT!" he bellowed again. He too was concerned. "Come, Miss Granger," he said impatiently, "one failure in all your career at Hogwarts cannot justify such a loss of control. For Merlin's sake, pull yourself together!"

This produced no reaction apart from another vague wave of the wand, which he ducked. He grabbed her wand arm and then took her other wrist, gently pulling her hand away from her face. There were tears streaming down her face tears of....

Hermione Granger was incoherent with laughter.

Snape was completely taken aback, which made Hermione laugh so hard she could barely stand. It took another ten minutes and a dose of Calming Draught before she could even begin to speak.

"I have always, always, *always* wanted to do that!" she gasped. "Oh, your *face*! Oh God, oh it's priceless! Oh, oh, and *all* of them...! It's too rich! Sorry! Sorry! Oh, God! I actually melted a cauldron!" And she was off again.

In fact, Hermione Granger made history twice that day. Those who lingered outside the heavy dungeon door, hoping to overhear what happened inside, could have sworn they heard Professor Snape, of all people, bellow with mirth.

The school gossiped, of course, but as Snape showed no further signs of behaving out of character and Hermione complained long and bitterly about having to serve a double detention with him in order to get her Potions project back on track, thus missing half a day of the next Hogsmeade visit, the talk died a natural death. Neville resumed centre stage, much against his will, and the school turned its attention to the upcoming Halloween festivities. The older girls were particularly anxious to secure fantastic gowns for the ball, all eager to persuade Neville into a dance. The Potions master and his accomplice kept a close eye on the situation. Both were a little surprised that Neville had so far resisted all attacks on his virtue, but they put it down to natural diffidence. Hermione insisted on pushing forward Snape's campaign a little faster, and was able to report with satisfaction that the sixth-year girls had been discussing his hands and arms very favourably after seeing him rolling his sleeves down when they entered the Potions classroom; one had gone as far as to wonder what it would be like to be touched by those dexterous fingers. Granted, the general reaction had been "Ew!" but, as Hermione hastened to reassure him, "It shows that people are starting to think of you in that way the next bit is simple: turn opinion around!"

"Very simple, Miss Granger," was the sardonic response.

But two days later, she spent a happy half hour in the dormitory with Lavender and Parvati speculating whether Professor Snape planned to dance at the Halloween ball half an hour during which Neville didn't get a mention.

"You do know how to dance, don't you sir?"

"Believe me, Miss Granger, one cannot spend years associating with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of the so-called elite without acquiring at least a few social graces."

Eight

Chapter 8 of 11

The Halloween Ball

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

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Chapter 8

The Halloween celebrations that year were generally considered to have outdone anything attempted for the festival ever before or for a long time afterwards. Normally, there was just the feast to look forward to, but Professor McGonagall declared the afternoon free for fun and games, to be followed by the traditional feast and then, after two hours for primping and preening (the boys considered this excessive, the girls, insufficient), the Ball would begin.

The day dawned propitiously, cold and fine, which was ideal as the Headmistress had decided to hire a collection of Muggle fairground rides to be set up in the grounds. Additionally, there were to be many simple, childish games and races. The students responded with all the joie de vivre at their command. For young people being brought up in Hogwarts castle, the ghost train proved surprisingly popular. Indeed, they found it hilarious, and the castle ghosts who could be persuaded to have a go found it tolerably amusing. Games such as apple-bobbing and the sack race drew students of all ages, and even some of the staff. Professor Snape contented himself with patrolling, his daunting presence guaranteeing that things never got completely out of hand. He caught sight of Hermione from time to time, acting like a loon on the bouncy castle, emerging with her hair sopping from the apple barrel, or being dragged breathlessly along by Weasley in the three-legged race. Called on by Potter and the Weasley girl to adjudicate, he disqualified the other pair, as Ron had finished by bodily picking up Hermione and running with her under his arm. When urged to hand out a punishment, he had them run it again blindfold. Consensus was that this demonstrated that Professor Snape actually had a sense of humour, especially as he encouraged the crowd to shout directions that put the pair of them in the lake.

Hermione made her entrance into the Great Hall that evening in the company of Lavender and Parvati. She and Lavender had long since resolved their differences concerning Ron (for Hermione's part, there was little point in jealousy, and Lavender had moved on to other prey), so the three girls had been able to spend a very pleasant two hours enjoying all the rituals involved in becoming beautiful. Checking in the mirror before going down, Hermione felt she had succeeded tolerably well. Indeed, when the three of them paused for effect in the doorway, many people turned to look at them, and there was even the odd wolf whistle to be heard as several of the young men began to gravitate towards them. Lavender smirked, Parvati contrived to look exotic and haughty though she was struggling with giggles, but Hermione was momentarily frozen in place by the abrupt and devastating realisation that there was only one head she wished to turn that evening only one person for whom she had taken such care in her preparations. And she couldn't see him anywhere.

He, however, could see her. When the three young women had paused, framed in the lavishly-decorated arch of the Great Hall, he had barely noticed the other two. She stood a little apart from her friends, apart as she had always been, outclassing them in every way he could think of. She wore a simple, elegant halter-neck dress of the deepest crimson; its soft, sheer fabric clung to her curves and swirled round her legs to the ankles. Her riotous curls had been tamed into an elegant chignon that showed off her slender neck, accented by the red crystal drops that swung from her ears. She smiled with lips that were lush and glossy, the same deep crimson as her dress, and her eyes sparkled behind the black silk mask she wore. In every respect, Hermione was exquisite, and it pained him to the core. This was *not* what they had agreed, *not* what he was aiming for, and would doubtless horrify her if she knew how, all of a sudden, the presence of every other woman in the room had become a complete irrelevance to him. With difficulty, he forced his thoughts back into character and away from the dangerous path into which they had strayed.

Professor McGonagall, indulging her Scottish origins, had organised a ceilidh for the evening. They had a good caller, so the students and staff quickly got the hang of each dance, enjoying the sometimes complex patterns and the liveliness of the event. The masks everyone wore hid no-one's identity but gave everyone an air of faux mystery that only added to the fun. For the first hour Hermione was never without a partner, and although she regretted that Professor Snape had so far apparently not appeared, she set herself to enjoying the evening and her unwonted popularity. Thus it was that she turned a bright and smiling face to him when he approached as the band began a lilting waltz.

"Miss Granger, would you do me the honour?" he asked.

As Professor Sprout was at that moment taking the floor with Neville, and Professor Flitwick was dancing with a fourth-year Ravenclaw who was talking animatedly to the top of his head, there was nothing too extraordinary about his request. This was, so far, just what they had planned. Severus Snape had to be showcased to the rest of the school. But he took her breath away. He was dressed in his usual unremitting black, but the cut of his frock coat showed him to perfection. For the first time since their trip to London, his hair was tied back, displaying his sharp jaw and high cheekbones. The fine, dark eyes were a glitter behind the mask. The only way she was capable of answering his invitation was to place her hand in his and allow him to lead her into the dance.

He did not hold her close, but for the first few measures Hermione closed her eyes and gave herself to the pleasure of being in his arms and guided by him. She knew it was a dangerous indulgence and yet it was with reluctance that she searched for something to say, to break the spell. She looked up, her lips parted to make some comment on the evening, she knew not what, but Severus met her gaze with a slight shake of the head and a quirk of the corner of his mouth. They danced on in perfect silence and perfect accord.

When the waltz came to an end, they walked hand in hand, as dictated by custom, off the dance floor. They parted with a few formal words of thanks, but an unmistakable squeeze of the fingers. Each, unbeknownst to the other, felt almost a revulsion for another dance, unwilling to displace the ghost of their last touch.

Hermione returned to her group to meet a barrage of questions. Yes, he was a good dancer; no, they hadn't talked at all; no, she wasn't in shock.... And so on. It was all quite tiresome. From the corner of her eye she could see her professor (*her* professor) escorting the Headmistress through one of the less riotous numbers. Every girl in the vicinity seemed to have tuned her radar to his presence, and the discussions about him were spreading like wildfire. Snape wouldn't have to sit out a single dance if he didn't want to. "Come on, Ron," she said suddenly, and dragged him off to where another set was forming. The best way to deal with this now was to put it off until later she would *not* make a spectacle of herself. The evening progressed, as evenings are wont to, and Hermione danced as if it was her last chance in the world to enjoy herself. To everyone else, it looked as though she was having the time of her life. She partnered Ron, Harry, Neville, Dean, anyone who asked her. At midnight, she cheered as hard as anyone at the ritual unmasking. But there was a little voice inside her which droned, "Later, later, later...." and she tried resolutely not to notice when Professor Snape danced with other people. People who were behaving with much less hostility than before. People like the attractive Professor Sinistra, who smiled up at him as they talked.

"I need some air," she said to Ron. "Come with me?" She didn't really want to be alone to face her feelings just yet.

They left for the rose gardens. Ron noticed her silence and reached for her hand.

"Something wrong, Hermione?"

"No. No. I'm just tired, that's all."

"You look nice this evening."

"Thanks, Ron. So do you."

They walked for a little.

"How are you getting on, Ron? You know, since..."

"Oh fine, I suppose. Actually, I know. You did me a favour, Hermione. I've been able to think about things a bit straighter, if you know what I mean."

Her sense of humour reasserted itself a little.

"*Straighter...*?" she laughed.

"You know what I mean," he grinned back at her. "I think I might even tell my parents soon." He paused. "Do you think you could be with me when I do?"

"Of course I can. You're my friend."

He wrapped her in a big hug, and she took comfort from his familiar, uncomplicated presence even though she couldn't voice her inner turmoil. After a moment, she shivered and they went back inside the castle, Ron's arm round her shoulders. They were unlucky enough to surprise Professor Snape being backed up against a wall by Madam Hooch. The look he gave them could have shrivelled granite.

Hermione knew enough about keeping up appearances to return for the final dances, though inside she was screaming to be anywhere else. Severus, too, managed to sidestep Hooch's advances (she had clearly gone one Firewhisky too far) and escape back to the Great Hall, where he was in time to watch Hermione, her hair now loose and whirling round her, flying down the set in "Strip the Willow", being swung around by every great oaf in the school, it seemed. He had seen red when he noticed Weasley embracing her, and now he had to endure *this*. Reaching the limits of his tolerance, he found Minerva to congratulate her on the arrangements and then beat a retreat to his rooms, where for the next several hours he berated himself for the imbecility of having feelings for a woman twenty years his junior, who was his student, who had a boyfriend, who had offered him friendship but clearly wasn't interested in anything else.... Above all, he did not want to put that in jeopardy; it was too precious to him. He resolved that, however difficult it might be, he would behave as if nothing had changed.

Hermione finally made it to her dormitory at around two o'clock, but not to sleep. She undressed, put on her favourite old cotton nightie, got into bed, drew the curtains round all four sides, warded them for silence and against intrusion, and then, finally, let herself cry. She wept until there were no more tears. Her face was sore, her eyes swollen, and her head ached viciously. She was thirsty. She slunk miserably out from behind her wards and curtains and went to get a drink of water, feeling too tired to conjure one. By the time she got back, she was ready to think. So she had been stupid enough to fall in love with Severus Snape. There didn't seem to be anything she could do to stop it, but the question was: what was she going to do *about* it. She considered his reaction were he to find out how she felt. He would be mortified, wholly embarrassed, that a silly little girl his student, for God's sake had developed a crush on him. He would ban her from his presence, quite rightly. Hermione couldn't bear the thought of that. They had, over the past couple of months, developed a genuine friendship, and on reflection she decided that if she was to be a real friend to Severus, she would not burden him with the knowledge of her other feelings. So she was in love with him? She would just have to deal with that on her own. She would have to try to be pleased with the apparent success of the scheme they had hatched, however much it hurt. She would not sacrifice proximity to a person who had become dear to her on many levels. She resolved that, however difficult it might be, she would behave as if nothing had changed.

A/N: A ceilidh (pronounced "kay-lee"), for those unfamiliar with the term, is an evening of Scottish dancing, with a live band playing traditional dance music, and a caller who teaches everyone the patterns of the dances, which are usually performed in sets of eight couples. Good fun. And yes, during most of the ceilidhs I've been to, they do play the odd couple dance, usually a waltz as most people can cope with that one!

nine

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione and Severus deal with the aftermath of the Ball.

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

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Chapter 9

If Hermione and Severus were both pale and silent at breakfast the next morning, it went unremarked. Most people were worn out after the celebrations, wishing only to dive into a vat of coffee and somehow weld their senses to the day before lessons began. If the second-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws emerged from their double Potions lesson at lunchtime thoroughly traumatised, their elders, wiser in the ways of the world, explained that the cause was undoubtedly a world-class hangover. If Professor Sinistra noticed a certain coolness in Hermione's demeanour towards her, she put it down to abstraction over the particularly knotty problem she had set the class.

On Friday, things were easier.

By Saturday, each of them believed they had achieved tolerable mastery over themselves. Which was as well, since they were due to meet that evening. Neither chose to consider how eagerly they were anticipating spending time together.

Severus welcomed Hermione with apparent calm. The tea was waiting. She took her place on the sofa and said, "Well?"

"Well, what, Miss Granger?"

She rolled her eyes. So it was going to be one of those conversations.

"Well, what fallout has there been from Halloween?"

Severus mentally scrolled through the many answers he would have liked to give to that question and dismissed them all.

"While I do not yet appear to be every thinking woman's ideal playmate, I can at least report that the atmosphere in the staff room is somewhat warmer than previously. I have been approached for actual conversation rather than just unavoidable small talk."

"Madam Hooch certainly seemed to have bypassed small talk on Wednesday night," teased Hermione, sticking her neck out and praying inwardly that it wasn't far enough for her head to be bitten off.

He snorted.

"I did say every *thinking* woman, Miss Granger. Your fortuitous arrival with Mr Weasley provided me with the opportunity to escape, for which you both have my heartfelt thanks." *Which got that neatly out of the way*, he thought. "Rolanda Hooch and Firewhisky should never be allowed in the same building as each other. Or the same country, for that matter."

Hermione laughed.

"So, what do you want the next step to be?" she asked.

"I think we are now in a position to push matters forward rather faster. The coloured shirts could be brought into play, together with some judiciously chosen moments of informality. It's time I started to encourage these women to start throwing themselves at me, so I can punish them at my leisure."

She was taken aback.

"P-punish?"

"Never make the mistake, Miss Granger, of supposing that I am a nice man. The men here have been mostly fair in their treatment of me - hostile when I was the enemy, neutral when proved otherwise - but the women have treated me acrimoniously. I told you when we started this that I wanted to pay them back, and so I do - in humiliation. I am civilised towards you because you have treated me with an unusual degree of openness and even friendship, but I am sick of rolling over and showing my belly to people who should be at the very least grateful to me for what I have done. You need not fear that I offer them any physical harm..."

He noted her shocked face and felt a pang. But if she wanted to be his friend, then she would have to take the rough with the smooth.

"You wish to withdraw? I will not hold it against you if you do. But I ask you - how would *you* feel about a *man* you had helped, who didn't hesitate to insult you, tried to prevent you from gaining employment, gossiped spitefully about you, and then for no better reason than, say, a new dress and a haircut, tried his very best to get into your knickers?" he finished coarsely. "Because that is exactly what I had to deal with from Hooch last night. And that is what, with varying levels of subtlety, I will have to endure from most of the others, if the ball is anything to go by. If they leave me be, they won't have to deal with the consequences, but if they choose the route of hypocrisy then they are fair game."

She considered all the slights he had endured, not just during the course of the recent war, but over the years before, and during his time as a student. This, after all, was why she had had the impulse to help him in the first place. Clearly, turning the other cheek was no longer an option for him.

"You promise no-one will be physically hurt?"

"I do."

"And no-one will lose their livelihood as a result?"

"Not through my actions though I will not be held accountable for theirs."

"Then I'll stick with it. I'm not entirely comfortable with this, but I will keep my eyes and ears open and let you know what's being said, as far as I am able."

He leaned forward to pick up his cup, letting his hair swing forward and hide the relief and pleasure he was sure he had not been able to keep from his face. He had resolved to lay this out before Hermione, to give her the chance to get out, and yet she remained by his side. A small voice suggested to him that this might not be the best way to gain her admiration, but he ignored it.

Hermione was dubious about her part she had not thought far enough ahead to what Severus actually meant to do; if anything, she had thought he would be content with turning the tide of opinion in his favour but she couldn't bear the thought of being excluded from his life, which was clearly the only other option at present. Perhaps she might be able to dissuade him, in time.

"You don't think that they were, perhaps, just mistaken, and were embarrassed to admit it?" she ventured as a last attempt to soften his attitude.

"Do me a favour, Miss Granger," he bit back. "You weren't; Minerva wasn't."

She gave up and, seeking a change of topic, rose to look at the crammed bookshelves that lined the room. He wouldn't let her near the shelves of Dark Arts texts behind the desk, but otherwise she was free to browse and had taken advantage of the privilege over the past few weeks. Bending to look at a low shelf, she said, "What's this? Poetry!"

"All work and no play makes Severus a dull villain," he quipped. "Of course I read stuff other than work-related books. There are other ways to 'bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses' than those brewed in a cauldron. Do you read poetry, Miss Granger?"

"Not much, no," she admitted.

"You should. The great poets have ways of saying so much more than is obvious. Here " he handed her a slim volume, "I've been re-reading this Irishman lately: some good visionary poems, some political pieces, some mythological or what he thought of as magical, some absolute tripe. But what I chiefly appreciate at the moment is his habit of using masks."

"What do you mean?"

"He adopted simplified personae to do his speaking for him, to express ideas more clearly than he could with his direct authorial voice. Of course, the trope is deceptive because it permits great subtlety."

"I see why it would fascinate you, sir. Read me something," she prompted.

Later, she would regret her impulsive request. Her dreams were haunted by his voice caressing the verse, caressing her.

The following day, Hermione held in her hands proof positive of Professor Snape's success. She was strangely reluctant to show him, but as she had promised to do so, she made her way back down to the dungeons. No butting in when she wasn't expected she Disillusioned the door, then knocked and waited.

"What do you mean by this?" he snarled, flinging the door open.

Hermione was upset by his aggressive tone.

"But I "

"You're not even supposed to know this door is here, let alone be visiting me. Merlin's beard I might have had company!"

As this hadn't even occurred to her, she was shaken. But of course, she shouldn't be surprised. 'Company' was the aim of the game after all.

"Sorry, sir," her voice came out very small. "I'll just... go. Sorry."

But as she moved away, he reached out for her arm and pulled her inside the room.

"You might as well tell me what's so important as to make you come barging down here uninvited." He sounded exasperated. She felt gauche just the sort of silly little girl he wouldn't want hanging round him.

"Here, look." She thrust an envelope at him.

He opened it and drew out a photo of Longbottom and himself. Neville had come to him on Friday to discuss testing the potency of his experimental herbs and had evidently been tailed by the enterprising Creevey. Neville was as beautiful as ever, but Severus was surprised to see that, in the objective eye of the camera, he himself came out looking, well, aristocratic as Hermione had once told him he did.

"The girl I borrowed this from thought I was confiscating it, at first. She offered to let me have the half with Neville on if she could keep the picture of you. I thought you'd like to know. I should take it back to her now." Hermione held out her hand, not looking him in the eye. She wasn't to know he was fighting the urge to soothe away her hurt expression.

"Miss Granger... Miss Granger. I am simply concerned for your reputation, as well as my own. Take the photograph back. Thank you for letting me know," he dismissed her.

"I shouldn't have come charging down here. Sorry," she said again. "See you on Wednesday evening." And she was gone.

Severus sat down at his desk and looked at the pile of essays waiting there for his attention. He'd been mean to her, and she had looked crushed. He felt like shit. All he wanted to do was find her and say something to bring back her smile, but he couldn't. She probably didn't even want him to. If he'd just been a little more temperate, not allowed himself to be surprised into being harsh, he could have had an unexpected hour of her company, but now all he was left with was a pile of inane scribbles to mark and the stupid bloody game he was engaged upon and which now held no interest for him whatsoever. She hadn't even noticed that he was wearing the red shirt she'd bullied him into buying.

Hermione had noticed. She noticed he was still wearing it when he came into the Great Hall with Professor Sinistra that evening, his robe flung casually over the top of shirt and trousers. She listened to the gossip this occasioned, but kept her eyes on her plate. She supposed she should be pleased for him, but it was hard. What she really felt was upset and angry. Upset that she'd been stupid and he had been unkind; angry with him for wanting to be with other women, and angry with herself for getting into this irrational state. So much for behaving just as usual. Oh, well, she could always revert to type and bury herself in her books.

But even in the library, gossip reached her ears. Rival fan clubs were forming amongst the students: those who remained loyal to Neville, and those who preferred the "Dark Hero". She snorted pumpkin juice the morning she heard that one, and had to admit (to herself at least) that she enjoyed his discomfort when she told him about it. Fortunately for all concerned, Professor Snape's manner remained sufficiently chilling to keep the girls from chasing him down corridors, but Hermione knew that there were now more than a few photos of him being kept under pillows. It was disgusting, really, and made her ashamed for her sex. On the one hand there was Neville, a nice boy, honest and straightforward as the day is long, being idolised as some kind of sex god; on the other, her grouchy, sarcastic, intelligent, splenetic professor, now the subject of untold hormone-injected fantasies. And it was her own fault. Gryffindor Brain indeed it was a bitter irony. Her mood soured by the day, particularly as she now regularly saw him walking and talking with the female teachers. She supposed she should be grateful that as yet there were no rumours of broken hearts in the staff room. By mutual unspoken agreement, Severus and Hermione stayed clear of the whole topic when they met as usual in his rooms. There were better, and safer, things to talk about, whole areas where they could both pretend that they were just good friends.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 11

A memorial service provokes a revelation of feelings; Hermione is forced to make plans again.

Summary: *Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)*

This is post-DH and EWE. Hermione is of age but a student, so please if you can't take teacher/student relationships, don't read any further.

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A/N: Huge, enormous, massive thanks and homage to Subversa for her tireless encouragement and meticulous beta-reading.

Chapter 10

Mid-November was miserable: chilly, wet and foggy. The weather was entirely appropriate to the next event hosted by the school, a ceremony to unveil the portraits of Hogwarts' own who had died in the final battle of the war. The school gathered silently in the Great Hall along with assorted dignitaries and family members of the people being commemorated. Professor McGonagall gave a moving speech about sacrifice and sketched the life of each of the dead heroes as their portraits were uncovered. Colin waved cheerfully from his picture at his brother, Fred leaned on the frame giving his trademark smirk, Remus and Tonks were painted together, looking regretfully but fondly down at their infant son nestled in his grandmother's arms. At Harry's insistence, there were even portraits of Moody and Dobby, and Dumbledore had been carted down from the Headmistress' office to participate. The mood was sombre.

Hermione and Harry stuck by Ron and Ginny. The pair of them were reliving their grief over their brother, Harry and Hermione hardly less miserable than they. Mr and Mrs Weasley were standing in front of Fred's portrait with a monosyllabic George, once more receiving condolences for the loss of their son. At last there came a lull in the traffic surrounding them. Ron had been in whispered consultation with Hermione and, seizing both the opportunity and her hand, finally approached his parents. Molly and Arthur greeted them both affectionately; Molly was pale and a little tearful, but she was glad to see them both and went so far as to call Hermione her 'almost' daughter, "But not an 'almost' for long, either, dear?" she prompted, looking from her to Ron hopefully.

"Actually, Mum," said Ron, clinging tightly to the lifeline of Hermione's hand, "we've decided not to get married. You see "

"Not?"

"No, Mum, you see, Hermione and me, we're just friends, and that's all we're ever going to be, because, well, you see, I'm..." He trailed off in the face of her obvious consternation. Hermione nudged him, but before he could draw breath, portrait-Fred guffawed.

"Here's a corker," he said conversationally to George. "Ickle Ronniekins is about to come out to Mum."

"Bout time too," replied George automatically.

"We both knew," said the twins, together, "Dad suspected," they continued, as though they had rehearsed it, "and it seems our Hermione's found out and told Ron what's what!"

"Hiya, live George," said Fred.

"Hiya, dead Fred," replied George with half a smile and his eyes moist.

Light was slowly beginning to dawn on Mrs Weasley's face. She didn't know whether to be disappointed and shocked with Ron, angry with Arthur, who had laid an encouraging hand on Ron's shoulder which sagged in relief, or overwhelmed with joy that George seemed at last to be coming out of the semi-catatonic state he'd been in for months. She looked around at them all, and at Harry and Ginny, who had joined them, and began to weep. Arthur gathered her in his arms.

"There, there, Mollywobbles," he murmured into her hair as their children gathered round.

Hermione couldn't take any more. Giving Ron's hand a brief squeeze he was over the most difficult bit now she slipped through the crowd and out of the Great Hall.

Her departure did not go unobserved. Professor McGonagall watched with concern as Hermione left, looking very pale, but she could not follow, trapped as she was in yet another pointless discussion with the Minister. Five minutes later, Severus exited unobtrusively.

She had not gone very far. He found her on a bench in the rose garden, surrounded by the nearly leafless bushes sporting a few last dull-looking rosehips. She was sitting with her knees drawn up to her chin, her arms wrapped around them. Her eyes, huge and shadowed, stared sightlessly over the lake as tears ran silently down her cheeks. She didn't acknowledge him as he sat beside her, and for some time they remained silent. Eventually, Severus proffered a handkerchief.

"Thank you."

They were silent again.

"You should go back inside, to your friends, Miss Granger," he said at last.

"Not all of my friends are inside," she replied, still not looking at him.

Such a simple statement to take his breath away so completely.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked her.

"I " She began again. "That's the thing about a fresh start: you get to leave things behind. The loss, the pain, the fear. You get to have some fun. But the world changes and some of the good things get left behind, too, like expectations, hopes, people..."

"I saw something going on with the Weasleys you've broken up with their boy?"

"Not really. We weren't really together. Ron needed me there when he told his parents he's gay..."

That surprised Severus and warmed him despite the frigid November weather.

"...but they're so disappointed, and they know I won't ever be a part of their family now, not really, not like Harry, not as everybody expected. And with my parents gone too, I'm..." She paused again. He waited. "...alone. And afraid." She sniffed. "I needed some time to come to terms with it. That's why I'm out here."

"Why are you taking flying lessons?" he demanded suddenly. "I know you can fly you did so in your first year, even though you hated it."

"The fear. I thought, maybe if I could face my fear of just one thing, I could break the habit." Hermione looked at him seriously. "Of all people, you know what it is to live in fear the whole time. I've covered it with bravado, but since the end of the fourth year, I've been terrified most of the time. Most of the things I was afraid of happened; some things happened that I hadn't even thought to be afraid of until afterwards; we defeated the worst. But I'm still afraid, and I want it to go away."

"In time, Miss Granger, it will. Have patience. You will find other things to take its place and make you happy." Though it was unlikely that he would figure very largely in her future, he reflected sadly. The dank, misty weather and the fading light were affecting them both, he realised. He stood and held out his hand. "You're freezing. Come with me."

Severus' living room was welcoming after the chill outside and the dark castle corridors. Hermione sat and watched as he bent over the fire, mulling some wine to warm them both. Her hand was already warm from being engulfed in his the entire way to his quarters; her heart, too, was warmed by the contact, by the care he had shown for her. He sat back and offered her a mug of the spiced wine.

"It'll make me sleepy," she warned.

"Doesn't matter. There are no lessons today you'll be able to sleep it off in your dorm behind closed curtains, and none the wiser."

They inhaled the sweet fragrance and sipped in silence, enjoying the companionship. Hermione felt herself getting heavier, settling back into the comfortable old sofa cushions.... Someone knocked at the door, startling them both.

Severus looked around, a little wildly. There was nowhere Hermione could be comfortably concealed except he pulled her to her feet and pushed her through the door into his bedroom. Promising to get rid of whoever it was quickly, he locked the room. She was left facing the door, her steaming mug still in her hand, feeling a little dazed. She looked around. Severus Snape's bedroom was as austere as his living room was comfortable and chaotic. The wide bed was covered with a simple green quilt, and a blanket was folded at the foot for extra warmth, if needed. There was a wardrobe, a mirror, a bedside table, and a small rug on the stone floor by the bed. That was all. Another door proved to lead to the bathroom. He even favoured black towels, she was amused to see. She wandered back and put her ear against the door to the living room, and as she listened to the hum of voices, her expression darkened. Aurora Sinistra had come calling and didn't sound as though she was going to be dislodged any time soon. Well, with Hermione trapped in the bedroom, at least they wouldn't be getting *that* far, she thought a little spitefully. But then, neither would she. Having nowhere else to sit, she perched on the edge of the bed and picked up the book lying on the little table. It was the volume of verse from which he'd read to her. It fell open at a poem of magical transformation and love lost and found:

"I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.
When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And some one called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.
Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon,

The golden apples of the sun."

Hermione read on.

It took a good hour to get rid of Professor Sinistra, at the end of which time Severus unlocked his bedroom and went in to find Hermione curled up fast asleep, his book held loosely in her hand. He looked down at her for a long moment and then, unable to help himself, took off his shoes and stretched out next to her, gathering her to him as if there were no more precious thing in the universe.

Hermione woke in dim candlelight to find herself nestled snugly against her professor's side, the blanket covering them both. When he felt her breathing change, his arm tightened around her. In response, she drew closer to him, flexing the arm she had stretched across his stomach. Eventually, she raised her head and met his eyes. They stayed like that for what seemed a very long time, lost in each other's gaze, breathing each other's breath.

"Go, Hermione," he said at last, softly, shattering her heart. "Go back to your dormitory and your friends. I'm not what you want."

Her eyes filled with tears as she clung to him, but he gently prised her hands away and sat her up.

"Just go, Hermione," he said again.

She paused at the door, looking back to where he sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands.

"I may come and see you as usual, mayn't I?" she asked forlornly, knowing what the answer would be.

"That would not be wise."

Turning to go, she missed the look of naked grief and longing on the face he lifted to watch her.

For a second time, Hermione warded herself behind the curtains of her bed. This time, however, she was beyond tears. Surely she could not have been mistaken in what she had seen when he had looked at her and held her? Surely not. Definitely not. So why had he sent her away? Hadn't they crossed any student/teacher line long ago? Wasn't she an adult, well over age? She was rocking, her arms tightly bound around her body to hold in the panic and pain that threatened to escape. She had to calm down, to *think*. She forced herself to take a deep, shuddering breath, then another, until her body lost some of its rigidity. Severus wanted her she had to anchor herself to that belief so why had he turned her away? What had he said? He wasn't what she wanted? If he believed that, then he was so very wrong. Why would he say that? Did he think himself too old? too corrupt? too bitter? His age was a ridiculous consideration, in her opinion. Twenty years was far from insurmountable. As for the second, he had the purest, bravest heart she had ever encountered, hidden beneath the crabby exterior. But life had used him badly, had forced him to be distrustful and suspicious; everyone he had known for a long time had either hated him or used him, sometimes both. She had to find a way to convince him that he, flawed as he was not some image they had played at creating was *exactly* what she wanted, for her entire happiness was at stake. More importantly, so was his. Stupid, arrogant man, to think he could tell her what she wanted....

Hermione's Gryffindor determination was beginning to reassert itself and bring a spark of hope. She scabbled for those lists she had written so long ago and re-read them by wand-light. Trivial stuff. She erased them all and began again, and on a single list under the heading, "What I want", she wrote two words. She had an idea, and she would gamble everything on a single throw.

During the weeks that led up to Christmas, Hermione's friends noted a change in her. It wasn't so much in what she was doing she kept to the patterns she had established during the first weeks of term, taking whatever life had to offer her, relishing the company of her friends, soaking up whatever knowledge came within her sphere. Yet there was a difference. She seemed almost to be waiting for something, though nobody knew what, and she wasn't telling. They knew she was working on something in secret, but she wouldn't breathe a word about it except to say that it was something deeply personal, so would they kindly mind their own business, and they would all know what it was if it worked. With that, they had to be satisfied. All Hermione's close friends knew what a tartar she could be once crossed over something she had set her sights on. So the time passed. She remained close to Ron, whose secret, thanks to the twins, was well and truly out. Some spiteful things were said about both of them, but she helped him to weather the storm. Apparently he was keeping his parents up to date with his life, for Molly resumed corresponding with Hermione, seeing in her a champion and protector for her youngest boy. The two of them would always be special friends, which made Hermione as much a part of the family as ever, Molly assured her. Hermione assumed that Arthur had managed to talk sense into Molly, as anyone with six sons couldn't really justify being surprised at having one who was gay. For herself, she missed Severus desperately, and watched the loving relationship between Harry and Ginny with jealous fondness, but with her goal in sight, she put off her grieving until such time as it might become necessary.

Severus was lonely again. He had not fully appreciated how the twice-weekly meetings with Hermione had enriched his life. Granted, people were speaking to him again now, but words couldn't begin to describe his indifference, though he forced himself to listen and respond. He castigated himself as an obsessive, perverted old lecher, and told himself he was glad Hermione had obeyed him and stepped back out of his life, yet at the same time the fact that she had done so left him gutted. He saw Hermione at a distance, interacted with her only as much as necessary during lessons, treasured every look and syllable she bestowed on him and every stroke of her pen on parchment, however dry the topic. Pathetic, lovesick mooncalf. There was little left to see out his time each day but to play the game they had started to its finish. There was at least some satisfaction in that. He set himself to charm the women around him, and frankly, in the closed environment of a boarding school, it wasn't difficult. Using the skills he'd perfected as a close companion of Lucius Malfoy, philanderer par excellence, he soon found the offers flooding in. And yet the endgame each time was of no interest. When he thought of how Hermione's small frame had felt in his arms, against his body, he had no desire to follow through with anyone else. He satisfied his need for revenge by letting each of his would-be lovers know exactly why he was not interested; he spared them the humiliation of taking them to his bed first.

Hermione observed. She couldn't know the details, but she did see that the dynamic at the staff table was changing. From fear, anger, distrust and contempt, through a stage of coquetry, on to an offended shoulder being turned, through to a grudging respect for him, she saw Severus change the attitude of his female colleagues and knew that the last stage would never have been reached if he had followed through on his avowed intention to wound. She would say that in general opinion about the dour Potions master was changing. But he seemed indifferent to it all. This worried her, but it also gave her hope.

A/N: The poem is "The Song of Wandering Aengus" by W.B. Yeats.

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 11

Christmas Day. The denouement.

Summary: Neville, Snape and Hermione return to Hogwarts after the summer. Some things have changed in the post-Voldemort world how do they cope? (Response to prompt 12 on the Potter Place Fall Challenge Prompt List.)

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Chapter 11

School broke up for Christmas. Hermione left for the Burrow with Ron, Harry and Ginny. Every single Weasley would be there, so the house was going to be stuffed to the rafters, heaving with activity, noise and all the emotions usually evoked by family gatherings. Arthur had even managed to persuade the Headmistress to let them borrow Fred's portrait on a long loan. Hermione's increasing nervousness as the holiday approached was put down to her anticipation of being teased about being responsible for Ron's newfound orientation. In the flurry of preparation and excitement about the big day, however, no-one paid her much mind. *One of the advantages of a large family*, she thought.

Severus woke fairly late on Christmas morning. He didn't see much point in leaping out of bed like a child, as the only presents waiting for him would be courtesy gifts from colleagues, and the only one of those that interested him was the single malt Minerva usually sent, which was in any case a little inappropriate for the morning. He lay in bed, contemplating the ceiling and sensing the silence of the huge castle, until the twin urges for a pee and some coffee drove him upright. Crossing his living room from the bedroom to the small kitchen, he registered something strange but wasn't sure what until he had his coffee ready in his hand and a plan for distracting himself with work ready in his head. He made for the sofa, where he had left the latest journals at some late hour the previous evening. His presents were on the low table, one large and unexpected parcel taking pride of place.

Who had sent it? Was it dangerous? There were still some fairly nasty pieces of mail getting through to him (*don't* think about Hermione's outrage...) from time to time. He approached it gingerly and, holding his breath, turned over the label with the end of a quill. Ten seconds later, holding the contents of the parcel in one hand, he chucked some Floo powder in the fire and stuck his head into the green flames.

"Minerva!" he roared.

Professor McGonagall, resplendent in a green tartan dressing gown, nearly fell out of her armchair with shock.

"Severus!" she shrieked, "What on earth is the matter? Is someone dead?"

"Where is Hermione Granger?" he demanded wildly.

"At the Burrow, I should think. But why...?"

He was gone.

The Weasley Christmas morning was utter chaos, and one of the best representations of what Christmas ought to be that could be imagined. Molly was in her element, marshalling troops in the kitchen and pretending exasperation at having too many people underfoot; Arthur was the calm eye of the storm. Everyone was bullied and babied impartially, and excitement levels were high as they all gathered by the tree to open their presents. With much exclaiming, kissing, thanks and hugs, the gifts were exchanged and the piles of discarded paper grew. Hermione professed herself most content with the usual thoughtful choices of books and nice stationery, and even with Fleur's parcel of hair care products, which she felt was more of a reproach than a gift, if truth be told. Amid all the activity, no-one really noticed that she was getting more and more agitated, her hands clenching on the knees of her trousers, her teeth worrying at her lower lip.

Everyone started at a great banging on the door. Wands were raised, people jumped out of their seats; Fleur grabbed her baby and ran for the stairs. In the sudden hush, Arthur went to answer.

"Severus! What an unexpected pleasure..." he exclaimed.

The Weasleys looked at each other in consternation as the Potions master slowly entered the room. He was dressed, most uncharacteristically, in black denim jeans, a red shirt and a large, black, badly-knitted jumper.

The silence was broken by a whimper from Hermione. Her eyes wide and shining with unshed tears, she charged forward, stumbling over feet and furniture on her way, until she was close enough to throw herself bodily at Severus. He staggered back under her onslaught, wrapping his arms round her automatically, and without further ado they disappeared outside. A hubbub ensued. What the hell was going on? Did Hermione just attack Snape? Shouldn't someone go and rescue him? Or her? Did anyone need rescuing? What was Snape doing here in the first place? Had they *seen* what he was wearing? The family crowded at the windows, trying to see what was going on in the garden. The uproar got worse as Arthur and, surprisingly, Molly placed themselves in the doorway to stop everyone from pouring outside.

Hermione and Severus sought some privacy among the bare fruit trees at the bottom of the garden. He practically had to carry her there, clinging to him like a limpet, apparently unable certainly unwilling to let go for a heartbeat, laughing and sobbing all at the same time as the stored-up emotions of the past weeks and months surged through her and found expression in the kisses and tears she rained on every part of him she could reach. Though far from averse to receiving such proofs of affection from her, Severus eventually managed to peel her away and look into her face.

"Stop, Hermione stop! Talk to me!" he said, breathless from her attentions and his own desperate need to respond in kind. She gulped and calmed herself a little.

"You're here! You're wearing it you understood me! You believe me, don't you?"

"I think you're probably insane, Hermione. But if you have spent as much time in reflection as in knitting this regrettable garment, then yes, I suppose I must believe you have some regard for me." His tone was dry. "Though I don't think you could possibly be sufficiently demented as to believe me to be what was it? 'the apogee of male perfection'."

Hermione was taken aback at his apparent coolness.

"Not objectively, perhaps..." He drew back a few paces from her. Had he misread her? Had this been just another friendly attempt to boost his ego? That far at least, he had understood her impulse to help him gain popularity at the school. She raised a hand towards him.

"But for me, you are," she continued. Wondering if she was going too far, she added, "There is no-one I would rather be with, nowhere I would rather be than by your side. I *miss* you every moment I'm not with you." He didn't reply. She drew a shaky breath. "Unless you don't want me there; unless you don't feel the same way..."

"What have I done to deserve you?" he asked.

"You let me get close enough to know you," she replied simply. "But I don't know yet what you want of *me*, if anything. Tell me, Severus. Tell me, please."

For a long moment, they were still. Then he drew his wand and conjured a paper dove. Into its claws he placed a small box and sent it fluttering to where she stood, where it flamed and disappeared, leaving the box in her hands.

"Open it."

Inside, nestled on a cushion of black velvet, was a delicate pair of earrings and a gold locket on a chain. The earrings were in the form of little apples, one of silver, one gold. The locket was finely engraved with a sun and a moon, the moon inlaid with silver. Hermione's eyes widened and her mouth fell open a little.

"That poem..." she breathed.

"Indeed. I had these made for you after Halloween, when I realised how I... Hermione, I never knew if I would ever be in a position to give them to you. Put them on. Please."

Her hands trembled as she put on the earrings, and as she fumbled with the clasp of the chain, he finally came to her and put his hands over hers, brushing his fingers against the smooth skin of her neck as she released the necklace to him and lifted her hair out of the way.

"Something pretty' for a beautiful woman," he said, cupping her face in his palms and lowering his head to kiss her gently, then more deeply, and at last with a passion that left them both shaking and clinging together. They found their way to a bench beneath a gnarled old apple tree, where they sat, Severus' arms wrapped tightly around Hermione, her head resting on his shoulder. It felt peaceful, and right.

"What's inside the locket?" whispered Hermione. "Can I look?"

"It will only open if the circumstances are right," he warned. "I charmed it so that..."

But it was already open between her fingers. There was more engraving inside: H and S, entwined.

"You're turning blue," he commented some time later.

"So are you let's get in out of the cold."

"Ah, there you are," said Arthur, a touch too casually, while the rest of the clan tried to look as if they had been doing what they were doing all along. "Dinner's nearly ready. I assume you're staying, Severus?"

"Am I welcome?" he replied, his expression closed, though Hermione had assured him he would be.

"Not everyone refused to accept Albus' and Harry's testimonies," Molly said. "Oh, you're freezing, the pair of you! Severus, go and get warm by the fire. Hermione, come and get some posset there's time before we eat." She detached Hermione and bustled her into the kitchen, where she took the younger woman by the shoulders and looked at her seriously. "Are you sure this is what you want? Absolutely sure?" But she couldn't deny the joy that suffused Hermione's features. "And does he love you?"

"Yes, Molly, he does. He may never say it directly I don't know but he really does love me."

"Then he is as welcome here as you always will be."

"Thank you, Molly," said Hermione, sniffing a little. "You don't know how much that means to me. I thought, after Ron and I..."

"Don't be silly, dear. Now, take these mugs and "

"Miss Granger!" called an imperious voice, "Stop gossiping and come here immediately."

She rolled her eyes, calling back, "You'll have to do better than *that* if you want to intimidate me, *sir*."

Over dinner, the family gradually came to terms with Severus' presence and the extraordinary state of affairs between him and their friend. As Molly's magnificent cooking and the abundance of wine worked their mundane magic, those who had been taught by Severus overcame their awe of him, and everyone started to appreciate his sarcastic wit and talent for vituperation. After the meal, the family broke up into groups variously chatting idly, playing board games, or, for the more energetic, a bout of Quidditch in the fading light and raw air of the winter day. As the lamps were being lit, Ron and the others came back in, this time with Neville Longbottom in tow.

"What are you doing here, Mr Longbottom?" queried Severus, before noticing that the young man had his fingers laced through Ronald Weasley's. After a moment, he started to laugh, bringing the whole room to a standstill. When he could be brought to explain that he wasn't laughing at the pair of them, they all wanted to be let in on the joke. Together, he and Hermione were pressured into revealing the irony of the whole 'Transformation of Severus Snape', which had been prompted by Neville's sudden popularity amongst the females of Hogwarts. "They are going to be *so* mortified," crowed the jubilant Potions master, laughing again out of pure *Schadenfreude*.

"Severus have you been at Arthur's homebrew?" enquired Molly sternly.

"I'll tell you what's even more ironic," said Hermione, over the top of her lover's guffaws. "I actually prefer all the buttons and layers of black wool." Severus mastered himself sufficiently to raise his eyebrows. "So much more scope for imagination," she explained, worming her way into his arms and setting them all off.

Severus and Hermione were taking their turn supervising the washing up when they broached the subject of what would happen for the rest of the school year.

"Must we wait? Or will we just continue to sneak around?" she asked him.

"Are you capable of such discretion? You shine like a beacon."

She smirked.

"I'm not sure I'm capable of waiting, that's for sure."

"Nor I, so perhaps we should consult the Headmistress "

"She *knows*?"

"She may not be as omniscient as Albus was, but she's far from stupid, Hermione. However, she may be able to find a way for us to marry and live together discreetly "

Hermione dropped a plate. With a quick *Reparo* the damage was put to rights, and he took her hands.

"*Will* you marry me? Hermione, I just assumed... You are *mine*, and I'm not about to let you go, but I shall not force you into anything you don't want..."

"Don't be an idiot, Severus," she said into the front of the awful sweater, "I'm *not* ever leaving your side. Never again." She pulled a piece of folded parchment from her

pocket and showed it to him. It was a list. A very short list. And it had obviously been living in one pocket or another for quite a long time. Under the heading "What I want" were the words: "Severus Snape".

Bill and Percy were quizzing their younger siblings and friends about their career choices after NEWTs.

"Auror," said Ron.

"More research, and my own business growing magical and other herbs," answered Neville.

"Professional Quidditch and then dunno what," Harry said lazily.

"Healing, probably," said Ginny, "but I haven't quite abandoned the idea of training as Hagrid's apprentice." She watched her mother choke.

"And you, Hermione?"

"I don't know. I haven't made any plans."

Everyone was astonished. Hermione Granger didn't have everything mapped out and organised, categorised to the nth degree on a colour-coded chart?

"No I really don't know," she said. "I want to take time to enjoy life," she glanced at Severus, "maybe travel, decide from one day to the next where I want to be, just as the mood takes me. Be young for a change." *And then, eventually, I'll take him to live in Ireland* she added privately to herself, *where there are no snakes, and where he can put off the mask he's worn for so long.*

Hermione's friends watched as she turned her face up to say something to Severus, who was leaning over the back of her chair, pointing out something in the book that was lying open on her knees. She looked happy. They couldn't really see why she felt as she did about their hook-nosed, sallow, viper-tongued professor, but maybe it would come to them in time. In the heat of the crowded house, Severus had discarded the sweater on the banisters and now Ginny picked it up.

"You know, it must have taken Hermione ages to make something this bad," she said contemplatively. "She's really quite good at knitting these days. She must really love him."

They looked over at the couple again, outlined in the warm firelight. They still didn't fully understand it, but as Neville, Ron and Ginny agreed together later, Hermione Granger was a lucky girl: in jeans, Severus Snape, contrary to all possible speculation, did prove to have a Very Nice Arse indeed.

THE END

A/N: "Schadenfreude" is pleasure at someone else's misfortune; we all do it, but the Germans, bless 'em, have a word for it!