

A Different Kind of Love Story

by fizzabella

Deathly Hallows Prompts 6 and 8.

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Time: After the Epilogue. Place: Hogwarts. Hermione is teaching at Hogwarts and is Deputy Headmistress to Minerva McGonagall. Her children, Rose and Hugo, live at Hogwarts with her; her husband Ron manages the All-England Quidditch League. When Minerva McGonagall dies, Hermione is appointed Headmistress and moves in to the Head's office.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 15

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Author's Note:

My thanks to my beta, WriterMerrin, for her patience, and her help in bringing this story to life; and to Southern_Witch_69, whose encouragement and patience with my attempts at html leave me in her debt for much kindness received.

Disclaimer The characters you recognize belong to the brilliant J. K. Rowling; I owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude for her creation, a new kind of Camelot.

Chapter One

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

"Minerva, it's time."

"I know, and I'm ready. But... part of me doesn't want to go."

"I understand, but be content to know that you have done your best, my dear, and truly made a difference all these years."

"Oh, Albus. I certainly hope so."

The elderly witch at the desk cast her glance around the room, a tired smile tilting up the corners of her mouth. Then she sighed and seemed to slump in her chair, her head coming to rest on her desk, and somehow the light seemed to go out of the room. The silence of the big office was broken by the sound of soft laughter that filled the office and then faded away.

~0~

The Daily Prophet-Special Memorial Issue

Minerva McGonagall, Order of Merlin, Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, passed away today at the age of 109. Headmistress McGonagall was found in her office at Hogwarts. She had suffered from poor health as a result of injuries sustained in the Second War against Tom Riddle.

Professor McGonagall was Deputy Headmistress to Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape and was appointed as Headmistress after the Final Battle. She was a member of the Order of the Phoenix and was honored with an Order of Merlin, First Class, after the Second War.

She held a Master's certificate in Transfiguration, authored several standard texts in transfiguration, and was a regular contributor to many professional publications.

She had no near relations, having been widowed before the First War against Tom Riddle. She survived her daughter and grandchild, killed at the same time as her husband.

This issue of the Prophet contains a special section devoted to Headmistress McGonagall, including tributes from the Ministry, a photo section, and a bibliography of her many published works.

In related news, The Board of Governors of Hogwarts announced they have requested Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley to serve as Interim Headmistress of Hogwarts. The Board of Governors will be meeting today at the school to discuss the appointment of a new Head of School.

The Daily Prophet will bring you the results of that meeting and complete coverage of Memorial Services for Headmistress McGonagall.

~0~

By Owl

Harry Potter,

Defense Against the Dark Arts Instructor,

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

Hogsmeade, Scotland

to:

Ron Weasley

General Manager

All England Quidditch League

Cairmorgan-On-Liffey

Ireland

Dear Ron,

I just got your owl and had a minute and so sat down to write. The school is a madhouse, but you would be proud of Hermione. She has the Board of Governors Meeting all set up and is going to London in a few minutes, to meet with the Minister, and get everything organized for the Memorial Service for Professor McGonagall. I don't think she's stopped to eat; she's just plunged in and gotten things done.

It's too bad you have to be out of the country right now, but I know she understands.

Hugo and Rose are coping. James, Albus and Lily have been with them all day. I saw them not too long ago, eating lunch in the great hall. Rose has been crying, but today, who hasn't?

I shall owl you again when I have more news, and hopefully you'll be back from Ireland in time for the services, which won't be for a few days, at least.

Hermione just popped into my classroom to tell me to tell you that she got your owl, and she thanks you but hasn't got a minute to write back just yet. She'll owl you tonight.

I'll make her eat if I have to tie her to a chair and feed her myself, and I might be able to persuade her to come home with me so Ginny can fuss over her. Your mum and dad will probably be coming to the house, too. They'll help us keep Hermione from overdoing it.

Take care of yourself, mate, and we'll see you soon,

Harry

By Owl

Ron Weasley

General Manager

All England Quidditch League

Cairmorgan-On-Liffey

Ireland

to:

Hermione Granger-Weasley

Deputy Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade

Scotland

Dear 'Mione,

I am so sorry it's taking me so long to leave here. I've cancelled practice, and arranged for Bellweather to take my meetings, but our Floo isn't working well and they are sending a bloke out to look at it, so I hope to get away soon.

I WILL be at Hogwarts tomorrow morning, I promise. In the meantime, I'm worried about how you are managing. You were always Minerva's favorite, and I know you have loved working with her these past years. Was it you who found her? Harry didn't say, and there's been nothing in the press about it yet. I hope it wasn't you, that would have been hard to bear, but I hope it wasn't a student, either, as that would have been worse.

I'm sorry for the rips and blotches in this letter, I've a rotten quill and half frozen ink, but I had to write and tell you I love you and send you what comfort I can.

Give Rose and Hugo hugs from Dad, and tell them I will be there as soon as I can.

Love,

Ron

By Owl

Hermione Granger-Weasley

Deputy Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade

Scotland

to:

Ron Weasley

General Manager

All England Quidditch League

Cairmorgan-On-Liffey

Ireland

Dear Ron,

I'm at my desk in my office, and every time the Floo crackles, I expect it to be Minerva. I can't tell you how many times I have wanted to call and tell her what's happened. Silly of me, but we chat back and forth, a dozen times a day. I can't bring myself to believe she's gone, I guess, and it all feels so unreal.

Rose and Hugo came to me after lunch and stayed for a cup of tea and a biscuit. They loved Granny Min, but they are taking her death very well, all things considered. Being here at Hogwarts with me, they could see, as I did, how frail she'd gotten these last few months, and how much pain she's been in, though she tried very hard to hide it. I really think a big part of Minerva died when Albus did, and she was just doing her duty till she could be with him. She looked up to him so much, as he was her mentor all her life, and I think he relied on her far more than we ever realized.

In the end, it was very peaceful, I believe. Kreacher took her tea in, as usual, and found her at her desk and couldn't waken, so he came right to my office to get help. He was quite distraught. He was wringing his hands, and he said Lady Professor Cat McGonagall would not wake up. Ron, the papers on her desk weren't the least bit disarranged, and she was smiling. It looked like she had just laid her head down on the desk and gone to sleep. I shall miss her so much, but I know she is with Albus now. Her portrait has already appeared, on the right hand wall of the alcove, so she can look over at Albus. I wish there was a portrait of her in my office, too, so I would be able to chat with her and know she was watching over me.

I must dash. I have an appointment with Minister Shackbolt at the Ministry of Magic to make arrangements for the funeral."

Love,

Hermione

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 15

The Board of Governors' meeting at Hogwarts.

Author's Note: Much thanks again to my beta-reader for her excellent suggestions and kind manner. I enjoy working with her very much.

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Chapter Two

Board of Governors Chambers, 6th floor, Lion Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Draco Malfoy, Chairman of the Board of Governors, tapped the gavel on the heavy oak table in the Board of Governor's chamber and requested, "Please come to order."

The whispers abated as people took their seats and looked expectantly towards the head of the big table.

"Thank you for coming. I'm grateful that everyone could be here today for this meeting. I wish to state for the record that the entire Board of Governors is present, and Madam Fleur Weasley, our Ministry Liaison Officer is also in attendance."

Draco glanced to the foot of the table, where a glamorous blonde witch was the focus of admiring glances from every wizard in the room.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman." Fleur Weasley stood up and bowed her elegant blonde head then sat back down.

"As I'm sure you are all aware, Headmistress McGonagall passed away around eleven o'clock. As authorized by your owls this morning, I have asked Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley to serve as Interim Headmistress. She has graciously accepted this duty and will serve as long as she is needed."

Draco looked over at Fleur Weasley again.

"Madam Weasley, I believe you told me before the meeting that you had a message from the Minister of Magic? "

"Yes. I bring you greetings from Minister Shacklebolt, who extends his sympathy to the staff and students at Hogwarts at this sad hour. He had the greatest respect and admiration for Minerva McGonagall, and he admired her courage. He asked me to say that he knew her to be a woman of the greatest integrity. She was a valued colleague and he will miss her very much."

"Thank you, Madam Weasley."

"Allow me to inform you of the events as they occurred and the arrangements that are pending, and then we will discuss the issue of a new Head of School for Hogwarts. Mr. Charlton, distribute the agenda for our meeting to everyone, please."

He nodded to the Recording Secretary of the Board of Governors, who immediately got to his feet and distributed a sheet of parchment to each person in the room.

"Madam Granger-Weasley was called into Headmistress McGonagall's office by a house-elf named Kreacher, who had taken in the Headmistress's morning tea. The house-elf was in much distress, as he could not awaken the Headmistress. Madam Granger-Weasley came to the office at once and called Madam Bones, the school's Mediwitch, when she herself could not awake the Headmistress. Madam Bones examined the Headmistress and determined that she had passed away. As per our established policy, Madam Granger-Weasley notified me, then she and Madam Bones sealed the office until the arrival of Ministry officials, who went to Hogwarts as soon as I notified them of the Headmistress' death. Headmistress McGonagall died of natural causes, and there was no evidence of foul play. It's distasteful to think of it, but the issue will come up, with Headmistress McGonagall being a War Hero. Madam Granger-Weasley had been given a copy of the Headmistress' will and letter of instructions, which are in good order, and will be executed in good time. Madam Granger-Weasley has made no formal announcement to the school as yet."

He turned cool grey eyes on each member of the Board of Governors in turn.

"You must expect to be approached by reporters, and I trust you will all deal with them honestly and discreetly."

He drew a piece of parchment out of his robes and once again looked around the room at each member of the board.

"Headmistress McGonagall left this last request about her interment."

He cleared his throat and began to read from the parchment in his hand.

To the Chairman and Board of Governors, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry:

I have been honored to serve as Headmistress of Hogwarts for many years, and Hogwarts is my home. It is here that I have been happiest, and here that I have been privileged to teach the brightest and best witches and wizards of our community.

At Hogwarts, I found my greatest friend, and life-long companion. I have loved Albus Dumbledore as a mentor, colleague and friend ever since he was my Head of House here at Hogwarts, and I request the privilege of remaining close to him, even in death. I desire my remains be cremated and my ashes scattered over the Black Lake, near the tomb of Albus Dumbledore.

Chairman Malfoy looked around the room once again.

"Those who wish to grant Professor McGonagall her last request signify by raising their hands."

The vote was unanimous, and he nodded as he saw the secretary record it in his notebook.

"Thank you. Headmistress McGonagall's request is granted, and we shall place a stone monument to her memory on the grounds near the tomb of Albus Dumbledore. The Board of Governors will send a suitable floral arrangement to whatever memorial service is planned. As Headmistress McGonagall was very close to Madam Granger-Weasley, I thought it appropriate for Madam Granger-Weasley to discuss the planned memorial services with Minister Shacklebolt. That meeting is taking place at the

Ministry even as we speak. I also think it would be appropriate for us to fund a Memorial Scholarship in Headmistress McGonagall's honor. We will add that item to the agenda for next month's regular board meeting."

He dropped his eyes to the ground for a few moments, and everyone could see that he was struggling for composure, but when he spoke again his voice was cool and perfectly controlled.

"I wish to pay my own tribute today to Headmistress McGonagall. In the years I have served with this board I have seen her devotion to her pupils and her concern for their magical education. Looking back to my own days here at Hogwarts, I remember that she was always concerned for the welfare of all the students under her care."

He paused for a moment, then continued, his voice a little shaky now.

"In addition to the care I received as her student, I owe a great personal debt to Headmistress McGonagall for her kindness to my mother. At the end of the last war, when Riddle had fallen, some of his followers attacked my father and burned our house. Headmistress McGonagall invited my mother to stay at the school for her safety, and I have always been grateful to her for her compassion."

There were murmurs of agreement with Chairman Malfoy's tribute, but the room grew silent as Draco motioned for attention and spoke briskly.

"Now let us proceed with the second order of business. I will entertain discussion of the appointment of a new Head of School for Hogwarts. Let me remind you of the qualifications we seek for this position, and then we will discuss it further.

The successful candidate will be a witch or wizard in good standing in the magical community, a British citizen, and preferably a graduate of Hogwarts. He or she may be a professional educator, a qualified Healer or nurse, or a professional administrator with a minimum of five years experience in an educational environment. He or she is expected to live on the premises, and to educate, or have educated his or her own children, if any, at Hogwarts. We have several recommendations already, and I will present those now, before we begin our discussion.

Those recommended for consideration are:

Madam Susan Bones, Mediwitch, Hogwarts.

Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley, Master of Arithmancy, Potions Master, Deputy Headmistress and Potions Instructor, Hogwarts.

Madam Rolanda Hooch, Flying Instructor and Quidditch coach, Hogwarts.

Mr. Harry Potter, Defense against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts.

Healer Theophilus Parkinson, Deputy Director of Medical Education, St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies.

The floor is now open for discussion, with the first question being whether we think it appropriate to choose a new Head at this time or appoint an Interim Head of School while we search for a suitable candidate."

Suddenly the room was filled with the babble of many voices, and it took a while for Draco to sort out the order of the speakers. Everyone in the room seemed to have an opinion, including the portraits that hung on the walls. The board quickly voted to appoint a new Head of School as soon as possible.

"And do we have a qualified candidate whom the board is confident of appointing?"

The big room was silent for a moment, and then the portrait of former Headmaster Severus Snape spoke in his familiar drawl.

"Draco, it would be obvious to a Flobberworm that the Board of Governors should offer the position to Hermione Granger-Weasley."

Draco nodded up at the portrait of his godfather, austere dressed in black and seated in a gothic chair of fabulous black oak. "Her qualifications and record of service to the school are impressive," he said quietly, watching as his godfather's mouth quirked up in what might have been a smile. "The board must consider all the candidates, though, before making a decision. It's procedure."

"Merlin's Fancy Beard, far be it from me to suggest the discussion is unnecessary, since it is procedure." Snape raised one eyebrow and cast a mocking glance around the boardroom, and Draco chuckled to see nearly everyone at the table wince and shrink back in their seats. Most of them had been taught by Severus Snape at Hogwarts. His godfather had long since consigned all administrators to the category of self-important dunderheads. He did understand educators very well, though, and his support of Hermione Granger-Weasley showed he still recognized an excellent teacher when he saw one.

Again, a babble of voices, but as Draco allowed each person to speak in turn, it became apparent that Madam Granger-Weasley was the unanimous choice of the entire board.

Draco actually smiled as the final vote was tallied. How well he remembered Hermione Granger, as she had been then, from their years together at Hogwarts. They had been enemies and rivals, at first, Hermione being sorted into Gryffindor and Draco into Slytherin. Over the years they had developed a grudging respect for one another. That respect had turned into an odd sort of friendship after the Second War.

"Madam Granger-Weasley, then, is this board's choice for Headmistress of Hogwarts."

The minutes of the Board of Governor's meeting contained an abbreviated version of Hermione Granger-Weasley's *Curriculum Vitae*.

b. Hermione Jane Granger, September 19, 1979.

Student Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, 1991 through 1998.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels 1996

Outstanding marks in Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, History of Magic, Potions, and Transfiguration; Exceeds Expectations in Defense against the Dark Arts

Founder of Dumbledore's Army.

Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests 1998

Outstanding Marks in Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, and Transfiguration.

Master of Arithmancy, Greater Wizarding University, Cambridge 2001

Master of Potions, Witches Institute, Salem 2004

Potions Instructor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, 2004 through 2014

Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, 2014 through the present.

Madam Granger-Weasley is married to Ronald B. Weasley, General Manager, All England Quidditch League, and is the mother of two children, Hogwarts students Rose Kathleen and Hugo Arthur Weasley.

Once again Malfoy smiled; this time it was a relieved smile that the issue of a new Head of School was successfully concluded.

"This meeting is adjourned, and we will meet again next month on the date and time already appointed. I will present our formal written offer to Madam Granger-Weasley at the earliest opportunity, which I anticipate will be tomorrow, and inform the board at once of her acceptance or rejection of that contract."

Draco watched as the members of the Board of Governors made their way out of the conference room and went their separate ways. Then he went to the office of the Deputy Headmistress, where he was ushered in and seated on the sofa in front of the fire and offered tea.

Prompt Information

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Chapter 3: A Meeting with the Minister

Chapter 3 of 15

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Chapter Three

Minister Shacklebolt's Office, Ministry of Magic, London

"Hermione, my dear, how are you holding up?"

Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt dismissed his secretary, and wrapped his arm around Hermione for a quick hug, then helped her off with her cloak, ushering her to a low sofa near the fireplace. "Sit down, Hermione, I've ordered tea; it should be here in a moment."

"Kingsley, it's so good to see you." Hermione stood on tiptoe to kiss Kingsley's cheek as befitted an old friend, then dropped onto the sofa, brushing away tears. "It has been dreadful, but I'm coping. Ron's in Ireland, but Harry and Ginny are close so I'm not alone. At least a thousand times today I've headed for Minerva's office or gone to Floo her and realized I can't. I don't think I've really realized yet that she's gone, actually."

"I don't think any of us have realized it yet, not completely."

A footman entered the office bearing a loaded tea tray, which was placed on the low table in front of the sofa. Kingsley leaned forward and poured tea for both of them, gesturing to the plates of sandwiches and sweets on the tray.

"I'm not going to listen to your arguments, Hermione; I know you won't have eaten for hours. Fill your plate with sandwiches and sweets and EAT. You can't manage the whole of a stressful day like today on nothing but tea."

He spoke as one who knew her well, but Hermione really needed little urging. She was so hungry she was getting a headache, and travel by Floo was always a little upsetting anyway. Hermione gratefully filled her plate, enjoying the little sandwiches and sweets.

They conversed sporadically as they consumed the light meal.

"That was perfect, Kingsley; thank you so much." Hermione sat back on the sofa with a fresh cup of tea, while Kingsley pointed his wand at his desk and commanded "Accio notebook." A thin leather-bound folio soared into his hand, and he sat back with his own fresh cup of tea.

"First, Hermione, in case you've not heard, there was no evidence whatsoever of foul play. Susan's initial assessment was spot on; Minerva's heart simply gave out, which surprises nobody. And you handled sealing her office and calling Susan just perfectly; it was exactly what needed to be done. Thank you for that, my dear. My job is so much easier when people follow procedures."

He looked up and smiled fondly at her.

She waved away the commendation, but pounced on the first part of his statement.

"I know she was growing steadily weaker; Madam Bones had mentioned that she was concerned about Minerva. I'm just grateful that Kreacher found her rather than one of the students."

"We must be thankful for that," Shacklebolt agreed. "I understand you and Draco opened the office when the team from the Ministry got there?"

"Yes. Once they'd taken away her body, Draco and I opened the secure drawer in her desk. She'd told me where her will was and had given me the password when I became her deputy, you see. She expected she would die at Hogwarts, and she wanted to be sure that her burial instructions and her will would be found in good order when she passed on. You know Minerva: always efficient, even about something like this. It was," Hermione began to cry. "It was her way of making sure that it would be easy for all of us afterward. I shall miss her so much."

Kingsley offered her a clean handkerchief and held her hand while she cried. He used a tissue from his desk to mop up his own tears.

When Hermione stopped crying, she asked to use the bathroom to wash her face and comb her hair. When she returned, she was composed enough to sit back down on the sofa and ask calmly,

"What is the Ministry planning to do about her funeral or memorial service?"

"She made it clear in her letter that she wanted to be cremated." He chuckled. "I remember hearing her say, many times, that she didn't ever want to be put on display like the stuffed House-elves on the walls at Grimmauld Place." Hermione nodded, remembering Minerva's acerbic humor and gruff Scottish burr.

"We will set up the meeting room on the first floor with a large photograph and a bier for her urn. We'll use a still photograph like the Muggles use. The public can come and pay their respects here in London. We will hold the visitation on Friday from noon till eight in the evening. I hope you can be here for that, and Harry, too."

"I'll come early to help get things organized, if you need me." Kingsley nodded and made a note, then continued, "Saturday, I will bring her urn to Hogwarts in time for the memorial service that afternoon. The Ministry would like to hold a reception in the Great Hall afterwards."

Hermione nodded her head. "I'll see Harry when I get back to the school, and I know he will be honored to participate. Please let me know how many to expect for the reception."

"Of course."

"Have you arranged for speakers at the Memorial Service on Saturday, though?"

"I will give the eulogy. And Arthur Weasley has already volunteered to pay tribute on behalf of the Order. I think it would be appropriate to have Harry speak, if he feels able to."

"What about the Gryffindor Prefects? Minerva's whole life was teaching; it would be suitable to hear from two of her current students."

"That's a good thought. Will you speak to the Prefects for me?" Hermione nodded.

They both glanced up as the clock on Kingsley's desk began striking the hour.

"My goodness, it's that late already." Hermione got to her feet, with Kingsley following suit immediately. "I thank you for the tea, Kingsley, but I really must be getting back to Hogwarts. I still need to talk to Draco, and I wanted to have a bit of time with Rose and Hugo before they go to bed. They're quite upset, as you can understand."

"Of course they are, and of course you must get back. Thank you for making the time to come all the way to London. I would ordinarily have come to Hogwarts myself, but I have been inundated with letters and Floo calls."

Kingsley helped Hermione on with her cloak. As his office was part of the Floo network, Hermione's return to Hogwarts was extremely easy. She tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fire, called out her destination and stepped out of the fireplace and into her office at Hogwarts a moment later to find Draco Malfoy dozing on the sofa.

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Chaper 4: Of Friendship and Ferrets

Chapter Summary: A quiet vote of confidence from the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and a chat between Hermione and Draco.

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Chapter Four: Of Friendship and Ferrets

Office of the Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Hermione Granger-Weasley stepped out of the fireplace into her own office at Hogwarts. There, head thrown back against the cushions and sound asleep, she saw Draco Malfoy. In sleep, fine blond hair disarranged he looked very young, and Hermione remembered a certain white ferret with a fond smile. She looked at him sleeping peacefully, and for just one moment she thought longingly of following his example. She was exhausted and wanted a private corner to crawl into; a place where she could mourn the loss of her friend and have a good cry. It would be so lovely to go to sleep right now and not wake up till the funeral was past, and her grief had lost its sharp edge.

Sighing, she took off her cloak and hung it up, then called for Kreacher, who appeared only a moment later.

"Mistress called for Kreacher, what does Mistress want?" he asked, with a funny bob that was all he could manage of a bow.

"Good evening, Kreacher. I would like a cup of hot cocoa, please? And can you bring up tea, sandwiches, and cakes for Mr. Malfoy?"

The little old house elf bowed again and vanished with a soft *POP*. Hermione went over to Draco.

In public Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley would be very formal when addressing Chairman Draco Malfoy, of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. In private Hermione Granger, who'd known Draco Malfoy since First Year at Hogwarts, could be a great deal more informal.

She flopped down on the couch next to Draco, nudged him in the shoulder with her hand and whispered, "Oi, Ferret, wake up."

Draco shuddered awake with a sneer that belied the suspicious twinkle in his eye and shot back, "What do know-it-alls want?"

"Only to speak to you, then I shall consider my life's purpose fulfilled." She watched for his reaction, then smiled as he rolled his eyes and made a horrible face at her.

"I sincerely hope you do not mean that, Granger. It will destroy the positive opinion of you that I have somehow managed to acquire."

She chuckled. "You've grown up nicely, Malfoy. I never thought I would see the day when you and I would have a civil conversation, much less be able to work together as well as we have."

"I can say the same, Granger. We do work well together. How did things go in London?" As he spoke, he was sitting up straight on the sofa and looking around, clearly surprised at the lateness of the hour.

Hermione told Draco about her meeting with Kingsley Shacklebolt and the arrangements for the memorial service. Draco nodded, listening while he helped himself to tea and food when Kreacher brought it in.

"So Friday we'll pay our respects at the Ministry, and Saturday is the service here. Right, Granger, that'll do. How was Kingsley?"

"Sad, as we all are. Not surprised, though. I don't think anybody was really surprised. Kingsley was very supportive, which is his specialty. He fed me High Tea and let me cry, then very efficiently organized the services just as Minerva would have approved. It's really quite nice to have a competent Minister of Magic."

Draco nodded his head, but then changed the subject, his fair brows drawing together in a frown.

"How's Weasel, and where are he and Potter? I would have expected them to be here with you every minute."

"Ron's in Ireland with the Team; he plans to be here tomorrow morning. Trouble with the Floo connection from Ireland to here. They are sending someone out to the training camp to fix it but not till tomorrow. Harry's been teaching all day, as we thought it best not to disrupt the pupil's routines any more than we had to. I shall have to make an announcement at dinner tonight though. Or you could do it. Are you staying for the evening meal?"

She looked hopefully at Draco, and he backed away.

"I plan to stay, but they'll take that sort of announcement MUCH better from you."

She gave him her patented Basilisk stare, but Draco was immune to anything short of a punch in the nose from Hermione. He had been on the receiving end of her glares, hexes, sarcasm, and the aforementioned punch in the nose when they had been schoolmates, and he could testify truthfully that the punch had been the worst.

Now he smiled at her and patted her hand.

"Bear up, sweetie pie. A woman does these little jobs ever so much better than a man can." Being Draco, he spoke as condescendingly as possible, if only to tease a reaction out of her. He had felt suspiciously near tears all day himself; he needed to make Hermione mad, or at least annoy her, so they didn't both break down and cry. When he saw the temper flare in her eyes he allowed himself a genuine smile and spoke encouragingly.

"There's a good girl. Potty and I will be at dinner to support you, and you've the rest of the staff as well. You'll do fine, Granger."

"Don't call him Potty." She spoke crossly. "You make him sound like a potty old geezer."

"Ah, but he already ACTS like a potty old geezer." Draco grinned unrepentantly at her. A visit with Hermione wasn't complete until he had teased her about Potter. Satisfied with his efforts, he picked up another cucumber sandwich and was about to bite into it when he saw her draw in a deep breath. Her anxious question came out in a rush of words.

"Has the Board reached a decision about a new Head of School?"

How fun it would be to torture her, but Draco had matured and knew that grown-ups did not do that sort of thing. He said casually, "Yes, they have, actually." He paused, but gave her a warm, genuine smile. "By unanimous vote, Hermione, they want you to be the new Headmistress. The contract will arrive tomorrow. I wasn't sure if you

wanted to talk about that tonight, though."

She sagged in the sofa, resting her head against the back and closing her eyes for a moment. When she sat up a moment later, she patted his hand and whispered, "Thank you for telling me, Draco. I'm very grateful."

"You're the obvious choice, Granger. You've done us all proud, though you won't catch me saying that often in public. It would never do for a Slytherin such as me to offer too much praise to a Gryffindor."

"No, that would never do," she agreed with a smile. "I'll read the contract before I sign it, but just between us, I am grateful to accept. Please convey to the Board that I am honored by their confidence in me."

A comfortable silence fell over the office as they ate sandwiches and drank their tea and cocoa. About midway through the impromptu meal, Hermione looked around at her small office and realized that she would have to move into Minerva's office at some point. She had a sinking feeling that all of her things plus all of Minerva's knick-knacks, plus all of Albus's fascinating gadgets would make for a very crowded, cluttered office. Where would she find the time to clean out two offices, on top of all her other duties?

"Will I need to get permission beforehand to make some changes in the Head's Office?"

Draco chuckled lazily and remarked, "Father always said it was easier to get forgiveness than permission, and I think he's right about that. What sort of changes? As a rule, the board doesn't interfere much with what the Head of House wants to do."

"It's just that Minerva kept all of Albus's gadgets, and I can't walk round that office without feeling like I'm going to break something."

"Oh, that sort of thing is always left to the Head of House. Don't hold a jumble sale or throw it away, of course. Don't chuck it in the Room of Hidden Things, no matter how great the temptation."

"I wouldn't dare throw out anything; I've no idea what most of those things are. To say nothing of what they might do in the hands of a curious first year. I just want to put them away someplace safe that's not underfoot."

She glanced appraisingly around the room again and Draco chuckled.

"Just can't wait to get into that bigger office, eh? I can see you're itching to get started. But do wait till Minerva's buried, there's a good girl."

"Draco!" She sounded so horrified that he had to laugh. "You horrible changeling!" Just then, the clock struck the half hour, and she hastily got to her feet.

"Come on, we need to get down to the Great Hall."

He took a last bite of sandwich and stood up beside her.

Much as she had done for Ron and Harry over the years, she adjusted his robes on his shoulders and straightened his tie, then reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out his comb. "Loo behind you to the right. You're sort of rumpled. I can't think why, you look as though you'd been sleeping."

"And they said you were no good at divination."

He ducked away from her swatting hand and made his way to the adjoining bath while Hermione crossed to her desk and pulled out a brush, mirror and pot of lip color. She took down her hair and brushed it briskly, then twisted it ruthlessly back into a knot at the nape of her neck. She examined her own face in the small mirror while applying the sheer, glossy color to her mouth. She did look rather red around the eyes, but she wouldn't frighten the children, she decided.

Draco re-joined her in the office. "Ready?"

She nodded, and they walked to the door together.

"Right then, we can do this."

"I'm here, Granger. But you go first."

Chuckling like the old friends they were, they left the office and made their way to the Great Hall.

Prompt Information

This story was written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge.

I used prompts 6 and 8 but modified them.

The original prompts:

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost.

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. Waiting until after the war is won, Hermione gets her Time Turner and goes back a year. She confronts Snape and tells him what will happen. They take the year to come up with a potion that will react once the Dark Lord and the gang leave the Shrieking Shack. Since Hermione cannot be seen by her other self, she must stay with Snape in the dungeons until the day of the battle. I think it would be kind of cool if she were to fight during the battle as herself and her time turner self.)

My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 15

Deathly Hallows Prompts 6 and 8.

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost. (I changed this to a portrait instead of a ghost.)

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. (The prompt calls for Hermione to use a Time-Turner to go back and rescue Severus, but I wanted to comply with the book and see if I could write a story where Hermione develops a strong, loving friendship with the Severus Snape she meets as a portrait many years later.)

Time: After the Epilogue. Place: Hogwarts. Hermione is teaching at Hogwarts and is Deputy Headmistress to Minerva McGonagall. Her children, Rose and Hugo, live at Hogwarts with her; her husband Ron manages the All-England Quidditch League. When Minerva McGonagall dies, Hermione is appointed Headmistress and moves in to the Head's office.

Chapter Five

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

In the empty Headmistress' office, the portraits on the walls woke up and began to speak quietly amongst themselves.

"No good can come of it! A Muggle-Born witch to be head of school! Mark my words, no good will come of it."

"Which is it that bothers you more, Salazar; the witch part or the Muggle-born part?" That was Dilys Derwent, former Headmistress and noted Healer.

"In my day, the only witches who taught outside their homes were witches who couldn't find themselves a decent wizard. And I certainly didn't have any Muggle-born in MY house!"

The crotchety co-Founder of Hogwarts, Salazar Slytherin, could discourse for hours on his favorite topic, pureblood superiority. He had, in fact, done so many times. The other portraits on the wall had heard it before, and it hadn't been interesting the first time. Most of them didn't bother to reply; instead they went back to sleep or began conversing quietly amongst themselves.

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore remained awake, however, as did the one of Severus Snape.

"Amazing, really, how grown up they are, isn't it, Severus?" The portrait of Dumbledore was remarkably realistic; his eyes seemed to twinkle as he spoke to Snape's portrait, across the office from his.

"To whom did you refer, specifically?" Snape looked up when Dumbledore spoke to him, an expression of long-suffering on his expressive features.

"Why, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy, of course. I saw them in here earlier, when they came to open Minerva's desk, find her will, that sort of thing."

"Governor Malfoy, Chairman of the Board of Governors, and Madam Granger-Weasley, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, have turned out tolerably well. They both have made good use of their talents and station in life."

The twinkling-eyed old wizard, in the huge portrait directly behind the desk, chuckled as he looked across the office at the black-haired, sardonic younger one whose portrait hung on the wall above the sitting area.

"Tolerably well, Severus? I have not heard such effusive praise from you in many years."

A snort was the only reply from the black-haired wizard, but as the big office once again grew silent, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore chuckled and repeated, "Tolerably well, indeed. Yes, I should say so..." before nodding off to sleep once again.

Chapter 6: A New Headmistress for Hogwarts

Chapter 6 of 15

Written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge Response, Prompts 6 and 8.

Full prompt details at the end of each chapter.

Author's Note Millions of thanks to my original beta reader, who helped me tremendously, and to my new beta reader, whose gentle criticism and enthusiasm inspire me to do better. I appreciate the comments and support of everyone who took the time to read and review my story. Your generosity and kindness are amazing!

Disclaimer: The characters you recognize belong to the brilliant J. K. Rowling; I owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude for her creation, a new kind of Camelot.

Chapter Six: A New Headmistress for Hogwarts

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

The evening meal was just ending in the Great Hall as Madam Granger-Weasley and Chairman Malfoy walked up the long aisle towards the teacher's table at the far end of the huge room. Malfoy detoured to speak to Harry Potter, the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, before taking his seat at the right of the place of honor, the throne-like chair reserved for the Headmistress. Hermione stood near her own place, at the left hand of the Headmistress's chair. She drew in a deep breath and then raised her wand to her throat, murmuring *Sonorous* under her breath. When she spoke, her voice, magically amplified by the wand and the spell, reached every corner of the Great Hall.

"Good evening. I would like your attention, please."

She looked around the room, waiting for silence, which the students and teachers respectfully accorded her. No official announcements had been made, but everyone was aware that something out of the ordinary had occurred at Hogwarts this day, and everyone wanted to know what it was.

She glanced to her right, to see Draco nodding at her to continue, and then nervously looked at Harry Potter, her brother-in-law and her best friend since her own first year at Hogwarts. She had already seen that neither her children nor Harry's were in the Great Hall, but when she glanced at Harry, eyebrow raised in inquiry, he mouthed "Tell you afterward, they're okay though." She nodded her head and turned her attention back to the Great Hall.

"It's my unhappy duty to inform you that our beloved Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall, passed away this morning in her office here at the school. Her loss is sincerely mourned at Hogwarts and throughout the British wizarding community, as well as the entire greater magical community. It is a very sad day for all of us. I need to inform you that all evening activities have been cancelled and your teachers have agreed to be available in their offices or classrooms until 9:30 this evening, if any of you feel the need to seek counsel. Madam Bones will also be on duty in the Infirmary, if needed. And now..." Hermione was finding it difficult to draw breath for a moment, and her wand amplified the quaver in her voice. "And now... if you would all stand and pay tribute to dear Professor McGonagall with a moment of silence... and then you may dismiss to your common rooms."

The huge room was filled with the rustling of robes and the shuffling of feet as the students and staff all got to their feet. Looking out across the Great Hall, Hermione caught her breath as she saw the number of tear-stained faces, heard the sniffles and the out-and-out weeping. She watched with her heart in her throat and tears streaming down her own face as students turned to comfort students, and teachers reached out to other teachers and staff. At the end of a minute, she said softly, "You are dismissed," and continued to stand, transfixed, as the students and staff filed out of the Great Hall. She lowered her wand and murmured *Finite Incantatem* to end the spell which amplified her voice, then she sank into her chair, tears continuing to fall.

A moment later, she felt herself enveloped in strong, warm arms as Harry knelt beside her and hugged her tight.

"Mione, oh, 'Mione, what will we do without her?"

Harry wept unashamed for his teacher, mentor, colleague and friend, and Hermione wept with him.

Through her tears, she murmured, "We'll be strong for the students and miss her fiercely when they're out of sight, Harry. You know we can't let her down. She'd hex us into next week."

Sniffing, laughing, wiping his eyes, Harry drew back, nodding his head. "You're right; it's what she'll expect of us."

He drew a clean handkerchief out of his pocket, and a second one for Hermione, and they both mopped up their faces and tidied their hair. Harry drew up a chair and took Hermione's hands in both of his.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, looking at her closely. "And I want the truth, not a lot of rubbish about how I'll-be-just-fine-so-don't-worry-Harry."

"But I will be just fine, and you don't need to worry, Harry. I had a good cry with Kingsley and another bit of weeping with Draco just now in my office. I'll have a good cry tonight and another with Ron tomorrow when he gets here. I should be all cried out and quite composed by Friday."

"Eh, what's Friday then?"

"Visitation...that's a horrid word, isn't it? ... at the Ministry, noon till eight in the evening. Memorial Services here on Saturday, out by the lake, if the weather permits it."

"And after that, life goes on, just like that?"

"Minerva'd never forgive us if we let this keep us from doing our duty, Harry."

"Eh, I know, I know. And in my head, I agree with her... but my other parts haven't figured it out yet, you know?"

Hermione sniffled and wiped her nose again. "Yes, I do know. I've been telling myself that all afternoon. It's really not quite real yet, actually. But Minerva expects us to cope, and I'll not let her down."

"Never." He smiled at Hermione, marveling that she had found the strength to hold everything together so far, giving comfort to everyone by her very presence.

"Where are the children?"

"James and Albus got permission from Neville to have Hugo bunk in their room tonight; Rose and Lily were both really upset earlier when classes ended and they realized they couldn't run up and kiss Granny Min goodnight. Ginny came up from Hogsmeade and took them both back to our place. She was expecting Arthur and Molly and some of the rest of the family there tonight."

Before she could ask, he added, "I checked on the boys before I came down for supper, and they were all three fine."

She nodded her head, grateful for the web of family love and support that enabled them all to take care of what needed to be done while still ensuring that their children also felt loved and cared for.

"'Mione, have you eaten?"

Harry's anxious voice drew her back from her musing, and she nodded her head, smiling a little bit. "Kingsley fed me a lovely tea at the Ministry, and just now when I was talking to Draco before we came down to the Hall, I had a cup of tea. I knew I would be missing dinner, not that I feel much like eating anyway. You?"

"I ate...can't say I remember what, or what anything tasted like. But I ate."

She nodded her head, and they both fell silent for a moment. Weariness washed over Hermione, but she could not stop thinking of the things she still planned to do, and it must have shown on her face because Harry rested his hand on her shoulder and waggled an admonitory finger in front of her nose.

"No, no, no. I hear the wheels turning in your head; stop that right now. If you look, you can see that Draco Malfoy is wearing his best 'Chairman-of-the-Board-of-Governors' hat and talking to all four Heads of House and Madam Bones. He's a decent sort these days; he'll come and tell you if there is anything that needs your attention tonight. You don't need to check on the boys, Neville checked them shortly after I did. He came to supper later than me. He said James is already sleeping, and Albus and Hugo were sort of playing chess and talking. The age they are, if their mum or auntie stops in to check on them now, they shall be embarrassed. I've been told off to escort you to our place; that's probably where Ron will go first. You can wait for him there, have a bit of tea and supper and check on the girls, all in one trip, which is efficient. And we have plenty of spare rooms, if you wind up too tired to come back to the school tonight."

He looked at her and smiled his crooked grin, and she chuckled at how neatly he had planned the rest of her evening for her. It was a tribute to their long years of friendship that what he planned for her was exactly what she needed.

"Alright, then, I'll get my cloak."

"Correction, I will get your cloak, you will stay here and rest."

"Alright, but I shall fall asleep right here in this chair if you take too long."

"You won't even realize I've been gone," he promised, and made his way purposefully out of the Hall. She saw him stop to speak to Draco on his way out, but the day was catching up to her; she laid her head back against the back of the chair and was almost instantly asleep.

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Chaper 7: An Unexpected Champion

Chapter 7 of 15

Deathly Hallows Prompts 6 and 8.

Summary: Written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge Response, Prompts 6 and 8. Full prompt details at the end of each chapter.

Disclaimer: The characters you recognize belong to the brilliant J. K. Rowling; I owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude for her creation, a new kind of Camelot.

Author's Note: My beta reader sent back the last chapters of this story this morning, and asked me if I am excited that it's finished. I am, I'm totally thrilled in fact, but one of the reasons for my elation is the chance to work with her, and the wonderful, talented admin on this archive who has been helping me with html and other stuff. These two ladies, and my totally wonderful original beta reader have given me encouragement, support, suggestions, and help beyond what I could imagine in my wildest dreams. I owe them a debt of gratitude that rivals what I owe J.K. Rowling. Thanks to all who are enjoying this story:) Your reviews brighten my day, and your pleasure makes me want to keep writing more:)

Chapter 7: An Unexpected Champion

Potter's Hollow, Hogsmeade, Scotland.

Ginny Potter sighed as she let the curtain fall back over the window, closing out the darkness and the mist that had risen in the night and now shrouded the ground. As she looked out, rain began to fall softly, and the idea popped into her mind that the weather was mirroring the tears of witches and wizards all over Wizarding Britain, weeping for the loss of Minerva McGonagall.

She wiped away the tears that threatened to blind her, and set about preparing breakfast, choosing things that could be made now and kept under stasis charms to hold their freshness and warmth. She knew she would have a houseful of guests for the next few days, and while Potter's Hollow had been designed with company in mind, a certain amount of attention had to be paid to the housekeeping.

No one would feel much like cooking, especially today. Ginny already had a list of things she knew would have to be accomplished over the next few days. Some of the items on it needed to be done as soon as possible, such as stocking the larder and pantry and having Harry check the bar supplies, as she had a feeling the Firewhiskey would be in demand.

She needed to make sure that she and Harry both had appropriate black funeral wear, too. Ginny had one indispensable black dress, but she was sure it had been bought when she was pregnant with Lily, and would need altering or replacing. Ginny wasn't a clothes person and didn't wear black unless she had to, no doubt a reaction to all those years of black robes and tights and skirts and shoes she'd worn at school.

Other items on her to-do list could be done later in the week. She could ask Mum or Fleur to order the flowers. Mum might be the best choice, since Fleur assumed that everyone had a bottomless purse, and spent accordingly. While the Potters were very comfortably fixed, Ginny's childhood of enforced frugality made it really distasteful for her to waste money, even 20 years later.

"Hey, babe, are you crying?" She turned blindly into Harry's arms, and snuggled close, taking comfort in his warmth, his nearness, and his love for her. Here was safety, and she let herself weep for the teacher they'd both loved and for her own profound sense of loss.

"Shhh, it'll be alright..." Harry held his wife tight, stroking her hair and murmuring words of comfort that he doubted she even heard. It was enough just to hold and be held on this weepy rainy morning.

After a time, Ginny stopped sniffing, and released herself from Harry's arms to grab a tissue, wipe her eyes and blow her nose. She gave her husband a gentle hug, then pushed him into his usual place at the table, setting a cup of steaming tea before him and filling a plate with ham and eggs and scones. Butter, clotted cream, and jam were already on the table.

"You are a wonder; this looks great, Gin. I really appreciate it." Harry looked up and let his appreciation show in his smile. Ginny took care of him the way they both had seen her mother take care of her father, and he counted himself the luckiest man in Britain to be one she'd chosen to marry, all those years ago.

"Tuck in and eat well. Today is going to be a madhouse."

Ginny brought her own plate and cup to the table, and took her own advice, addressing herself to her breakfast so she would be able to withstand the demands of the day ahead.

"Has Ron owled yet this morning?"

"No, the post hasn't come yet. Is he coming home?"

"Gin! It's Professor McGonagall. Of course he's coming home." Harry wasn't irritated with his wife, but he was surprised that she would think her brother would stay away at a time like this. "He owed Hermione last night and told her he'd be home this morning. He would have come last night, but there's something wrong with their Floo, way out there in the wilds."

Well, that made sense. All England stood a good chance of making it to the Quidditch World Cup Finals. Wanting his team to really focus, Ron had moved them from their sumptuous London training grounds to more primitive digs in Ireland so they could train undistracted. The training facility was way out in the middle of nowhere, and even the Department of Magical Games and Sports hadn't been able to guarantee the Floo worked all the time. Ginny hadn't seen Ron in three or four months. He had been too busy training with the Quidditch team to come to Potter's Hollow to visit, and she certainly hadn't had the time to go to Ireland to visit him.

Ginny had a niggling feeling that something was wrong, that Ron and Hermione were unhappy. She shook her head in frustration; maybe unhappy was too strong a word. But she couldn't think of a more accurate one. Something was different between Ron and Hermione; some change for the worse. It frightened her. She hadn't shared her fears with Harry, though she caught him sometimes looking at Ron or Hermione with a questioning expression on his face. Maybe he saw the uneasiness between them, too. She knew she could ask Harry what he thought, and it would be comforting to hear he'd seen the same things she did. She'd know she wasn't imagining things. On the other hand, it would also be worse, because if Harry saw it too, it would make it more real. There was definitely something to be said for being able to think one was imagining things. She sighed. It was too early in the morning for thoughts such as these.

She buttered a scone, and bit into it, resolutely focusing her mind on the day ahead and the things to be done. Harry must have been reading her mind, she decided, when he looked up a moment later and asked, "Do we know yet who will be arriving today?" He had finished his ham and eggs and was dawdling over a second cup of tea and another scone.

"Charlie and Bill and Fleur will be here this afternoon; Mum and Dad this evening. I expected them last night, but Dad got tangled up in things at the Ministry. Mum Flooed me last night when Dad got home, he was exhausted and still had a lot to do today. I think Percy and Penny will probably come with Mum and Dad. Percy worked late last night, too, to get as much done as he could so he can take the next couple of days off. "

"Kingsley should just close the ministry, and let everyone have the entire week off," Harry grumbled. "I bet Minerva taught ninety per-cent of Wizarding Britain; they should just make it a national day of mourning."

"She had an incredible life, Harry. She will be in the History books, and we were taught by her when we were children and you've worked with her as a colleague for years. What an amazing life she had."

The tears threatened again, and Ginny resolutely put her chin up and continued to name people from whom she'd gotten owls about coming to stay.

"George and Katie will be here tomorrow; they are closing the shops Thursday and not opening again till Monday. Kingsley called on the Floo. He will be staying at Hogwarts, but he's coming round to see us tonight when he gets in from London."

"Ok." Harry sipped his tea, trying to chase down the stray thought he'd wanted to share with Ginny. A soft chime from the fireplace behind them indicated someone was calling on the Floo network, and Harry got to his feet and went to kneel on the hearth.

"Hello, Harry speaking."

"Potty, glad I caught you."

Draco Malfoy's cultured tones floated out of the fireplace, and Harry and Ginny both smiled.

"What do ferrets want this early in the morning?"

A chuckle, and then, "Well, I can't speak for ferrets as a species, you understand, but I'd like to pop through the Floo and cadge breakfast off you if Ginny's cooking it. I've got something to tell you. Are you decent?"

Ginny called out, "No, but we're dressed, come on through." She and Harry broke into comfortable laughter. A moment later there was a flash and a whooshing sound, and Draco Malfoy stepped out of their built-extra-tall-on-purpose walk-in fireplace. While he and Harry were shaking hands, Ginny was wielding her wand to get the dust off Draco's impeccably tailored dark suit; she exchanged a hug from him for a cup of tea, and Draco sat down at the table on Harry's right.

"What brings you out so early, anyway? It's barely half six, you're never up this early. Oh, wait, I know...There must not have been any opening nights or charity galas to attend last night?"

"Old joke, Ginny, give it a rest, alright?"

Draco scowled at Ginny, and she playfully waved her wand at him, setting a filled plate in front of him a moment later.

"So, what's up?" Harry looked at Draco with curiosity in his eyes. In the years since he had started teaching, he had come to know Draco Malfoy well. He didn't just pop over to a friend's house for breakfast. Something was up.

"Well, Potter, I wanted you to know first thing that I honored your request not to be considered for Minerva's job. Your name did come up, and you had quite a lot of support, but I told the board that you didn't want the job. Anyway, after a lot of noisy discussion, the Board of Governors offered the Head of School position to Hermione, and she accepted our offer. It will be announced later today. "

"Excellent! Thanks, Ferret. I don't want the Head's job, because I'm no administrator, but there are still a few on the Board and at the Ministry who think that *Boy-Who-Lived* rubbish makes me eligible for any government job that comes up vacant. 'Mione is the best choice; I'm glad you all could see that."

He sipped his tea contentedly with a satisfied smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Draco chuckled, making Ginny and Harry look up at him suspiciously.

"What is the meaning of that evil sound, sir?" Ginny spoke for both of them.

"You weren't at the meeting yesterday, to hear what old Snape said to the board about her."

Ginny and Harry both widened their eyes in surprise, and Harry said, "Go on, then, what did he have to say? And if it was something rotten about her being Muggle-born or a Know-It-All, I will hex him into next week, even if he's only a painting."

"It's nothing bad, Potty, I wouldn't have allowed that. No, it was something else entirely, something I never expected to hear."

"What did he say, then? You can't torture us like this; tell us he said something amazing and then make us wait for it."

"I could, but it would be cruel." He paused, drawing out the moment, and found himself facing the business end of Ginny's wand from a distance of 3 inches. She had an evil glint in her eyes as she said, with a friendly smile, "I've been doing lots of reminiscing lately, thinking of everything I learned at Hogwarts. Did you know it was actually McGonagall who taught me that Bat-Bogey Hex?"

"Stop, I surrender, I'll tell." Draco was laughing as he pushed her wand away. "That was a horrible hex. The governors were all talking about who should be Head of School, and the portraits were all arguing, you should have heard old Salazar Slytherin bellowing that there was only one pure-blood candidate being considered. It was total chaos. And then Snape cut them all off with one sentence." Draco dropped his voice to its lowest register, and said, in a fair imitation of Snape's lazy drawl, "Draco, it would be obvious to a Flobberworm that the Board of Governors should offer the position to Hermione Granger-Weasley."

Harry had taken a sip of his tea, and now he nearly choked on it, coughing as Ginny pounded him on the back. Ginny was laughing uproariously.

"Give off, he never said that! Snape?"

"As I live and breathe."

Harry was still laughing. "Did you tell 'Mione?"

"No, I shall save it for the proper moment."

"Wish I could have seen that."

"I didn't think he would care about the appointment. I was surprised he took that much interest."

"Be sure to tell Ron what he said when you see him."

Harry got up to replenish Draco's cup of tea and Ginny's. While he was standing at the sink refilling the tea kettle, he noticed a whole flock of owls heading for Potter's Hollow, and opened the window to let the birds in.

"The day has definitely begun," he announced, and the three of them began untying the messages tied to each bird's leg.

~OoO~

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My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chaper 8:The Value of Family

Chapter 8 of 15

A little motherly council and a glimpse of the next generation.

Disclaimer: The characters you recognize belong to the brilliant J. K. Rowling; I owe her an immeasurable debt of gratitude for her creation, a new kind of Camelot.

Author's Note: My beta reader sent back the last chapters of this story this morning, and asked me if I am excited that it's finished. I am, I'm totally thrilled in fact, but one of the reasons for my elation is the chance to work with her, and the wonderful, talented admin on this archive who has been helping me with html and other stuff. These two ladies, and my totally wonderful original beta reader have given me encouragement, support, suggestions, and help beyond what I could imagine in my wildest dreams. I owe them a debt of gratitude that rivals what I owe J.K. Rowling. Thanks to all who are enjoying this story;) I am going to try posting a longer chapter next time, also, and thanks for the suggestion.

Chapter Eight: The Value of Family

Potter's Hollow, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Hermione looked around sleepily at the sound of the door opening. The guest room was dark, but the hallway was well lighted, and she blinked at the sudden change in light level. There were two childish figures silhouetted in the doorway; one was her daughter, Rose, the other her niece, Lily Potter.

"Mummy?" "Auntie 'Mione?" The two girls stepped into the doorway and drew closer to the bed, smiling a little uncertainly when they saw Hermione was awake, but not up yet.

"Girls, it's alright. Come in, I'm awake."

She sat up in bed and murmured 'Lumos' to turn on the lights, then patted the bedside. "Did you want to talk to me?"

They both nodded and came to sit down on either side of the bed, pulling their feet up under their voluminous flannel nightgowns to stay warm. Hermione looked at their bare feet, but didn't make the obvious comments about slippers. Instead, she scooted forward and hugged her two visitors. And that was all it took for Rose and Lily to begin to cry.

"Mummy, why did Granny Min have to die?" Rose asked when the storm of weeping had passed.

"Sweetheart, it's the natural order of things. We're born, we live our lives, and then we die. This phase of our existence ends, and we go on to the next one."

She swept Rose's curly red hair back from her face and pressed a tender kiss to her daughter's forehead. She wanted to weep, not for herself, now, but for the pain her little girl was feeling.

"We shall miss her so much." Lily got a hug and kiss on the forehead too.

"I know, dears. I And Granny Min will miss us, as well. But she gets to be with Professor Dumbledore now, and the other people she loved, who've already died. I absolutely believe that we shall see her again when we die. And I promise she will still love us, and will be glad to see us again."

"That's what mummy said yesterday; Daddy too," Lily agreed. "They talked to us last night when they tucked us in."

"Well, then. We do all feel sad, and this first bit of time will be hard because we aren't used to Granny Min being gone. But it will get better. We need to remember how much she loves us, and try always to make her proud of us, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, Mummy."

"Yes, Auntie 'Mione. You sound an awful lot like my dad."

"And Aunt Ginny, and Grandma Molly too."

"That's the good thing about families. We all mostly believe in the same things, and you always know what to expect from us."

The blessing of being friends with someone for a very long time, Hermione thought, was that you did have the same standards, and it made for a wonderful, comfortable feeling of security at times like this.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Shall we have to wear black for a whole year? You know, in mourning?"

Hermione chuckled at her daughter's question. They had never discussed mourning customs with the children; Rose had to have found that old rule in a book someplace.

"Where did you read that?"

"Oh, this old Muggle book on etiquette." Rose paused for a moment and Hermione knew she was dredging up the memory of the exact book. "It was by this very sneakily funny woman called Miss Manners. She wrote a whole chapter about funeral customs."

"I do remember those books. Grandma Granger has them."

"Yes, Mummy."

"Well, it's not the custom any longer. Your everyday dress and robes are already black, so you can say they're for mourning if that comforts you, dear heart."

"Well, no, I shan't do that. But look, Mummy. Show her, Lil."

Rose pulled back the sleeve of her nightgown to reveal a bracelet that looked like a thick black rubber band.

"I transfigured my old Muggle school bracelet, Mummy, and I did Lily's, too."

Lily pulled back her sleeve also, and looking closer, Hermione could see words embossed into the band. In bold block letters, the band said "Granny Min, In Memoriam."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears at the loving gesture.

"What we were wondering was whether this is alright for wearing at school."

"Yes, I think so."

"Cause we loved Granny Minerva and we shall miss her so much."

Hermione looked into their earnest tender faces and felt her own heart breaking for them.

"I know Granny Minerva would be honored that you would wear them as a remembrance of her."

Lily and Rose both nodded their heads. That, it seemed, was all they wanted to know, for they began to fidget. A moment later they excused themselves.

"We need to get dressed for school. Daddy told us last night that he would take us back to Hogwarts this morning, but we would need to get ready early, so we don't make him late."

"Of course. Off with you both, I need to get up and get ready, myself."

Both girls gave her another hug and left the guest room. Hermione got slowly out of bed and made her way to the bathroom, wanting a long hot bath, but deciding she needed to settle for a bracing shower, instead. She would save the bath for tonight when she needed to relax and sleep. It didn't take a talent for Divination to predict that it would be a difficult day.

~OoO~

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Chaper 9: Hermione's Next Great Adventure

Chapter 9 of 15

Wherein an official announcement is made, and Ron finally arrives at Hogwarts.

Author's Note: I am so excited to be working with my beta reader and XXX from staff of The Petulant Poetess. These two wonderful women have given me help and guidance, inspiration and support. My story has benefited immensely from their care and expertise. When I consider that this is nearly the end of the Challenge, and try to imagine the work load that XXX is facing, her patience and forbearance with me are even more appreciated. My original beta continues to encourage and inspire, and I am grateful for her support, also.

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To my readers, it's all for you. Your generosity and kindness recognize no bounds, and I thank you.

Chapter Nine: Hermione's Next Great Adventure

Potter's Hollow, Hogsmeade, Scotland

When Hermione came downstairs into the kitchen at Potter's Hollow after showering and dressing, Draco and Harry were still eating, but Ginny was talking with her mother on the Floo network.

"Good morning, everyone." Hermione waved at Ginny, not wanting to interrupt her conversation. Harry and Draco both stood and hugged her, but she pushed them back into their seats when Harry would have filled her plate. "No, sit down, I'll serve myself. Finish your breakfast," she insisted. When she was seated at the table with scones and a cup of tea she told Harry about her conversation with their daughters, touched to see that he was as proud of his daughter and niece as she was.

"They're good kids," Harry commented softly. "I'm proud of them. "

As Ginny joined them at the table he added, "Ginny and I are really proud of you, too, 'Mione. Or should I say *Headmistress*?"

"Oh, Harry. I hate it that Minerva died and left the position open. I'd much rather she... retired to a beach in the Caribbean... or... an island in Greece... or even a cottage on Loch Ness. I am so honored to be asked to serve as *Headmistress*, though."

Harry got up and wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders, leaning down to drop an affectionate kiss on the crown of her head.

"We know you'd have been happy to serve as Minerva's deputy for the next 100 years, if it had worked out that way. We're just happy for you, in the middle of all this sadness."

"He's quite right, Granger. "

Draco smiled at her and added, "I shall be coming to Hogwarts today to make the announcement to the staff and students." An impish grin lighted his cool eyes. "And I know something you don't know." He spoke in a sing-song voice, and Hermione narrowed her eyes at him.

"Oh?"

Draco looked up at Harry and laughed.

"You missed a very interesting meeting yesterday, Granger."

She raised her eyebrows inquiringly. "The Board of Governors' meeting?"

"Yep."

"Well? Are you going to tell me what happened, or sit there and smirk?"

"I thought I would sit here and smirk, actually."

Hermione narrowed her eyes again and joked, "I'd appeal to your better nature, but I'm not sure you have one."

Ginny choked back a giggle.

"If you keep insulting me, I won't tell you. You'll have to wait till you get back in my good graces, which will take a while with all the insults you're heaping on my innocent head. You'll be sorry you were so mean to me. And your curiosity will torture you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Draco Malfoy! Tell me what happened, this instant! "

"What do you think, Potty? Should I tell her?"

"Unless you WANT her to hex your bits off."

"Hem... Hem..." Draco coughed delicately. "Leave my bits out of it, please."

Harry chuckled.

"You might try talking TO me instead of ABOUT me," Hermione grumbled.

"Nah, this is more fun."

"Draco, please tell me whatever it is that has you smirking so smugly."

"Oh, nice alliteration, Granger, very nice, indeed."

Ginny got up and thwapped Draco on the back of the head as she walked by him on the way to the sink. "Ack, now the redhead is assaulting me, too!" He threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender, then looked up at Hermione, his lower lip drooping into a pout. His silver eyes were still gleaming with mischief.

"You have an unexpected champion, Granger."

"A what?" Her eyes widened in surprise. "I don't understand."

"An unexpected champion. Yesterday, when the board started discussing who should be the new Head of School, it was total chaos. I thought Salazar Slytherin was going to jump out of his picture and strangle somebody, the way he was going on and on about Pure-bloods. Dilys Derwent was really getting up his nose. Anyway... we were making no progress, and I was seriously wishing I could hex a couple of paintings, when my godfather speaks up."

"What did Professor Snape have to say? Do I really want to hear this?" Hermione frowned, remembering the tall, dark, but not conventionally handsome Professor of Potions, from whom she had learned so much. He was her inspiration for studying Potions, his introduction to the subject in their first year something she had never forgotten.

The words echoed in her mind even as she thought of that first day in Potions class... The hushed dungeon classroom, the unfamiliar odors, the sound of cauldrons bubbling, and Professor Snape's enthralling description of *the subtle art and exact science of potion making*. He had gone on to tell them of the things they could do with potions. *I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory... even stopper death.*"

His deep, quiet voice had lingered over the words, a verbal caress, as if he were loath to let them go. Those few solemn words had made a profound impression on her. *Not the only time he made a profound impression*, she thought ruefully. Not even Ginny knew of the tremendous crush she'd developed on Professor Snape at the end of her fifth year of school.

She forced her mind back to the present and asked, anxiously, "What did he say, Draco? Was it something horrible?"

"Weren't you listening? I said you have a champion. You know... Knight in shining armor?"

"I was lis-what? You can't mean he said something nice?"

Harry glanced over at Draco. "Come on, stop torturing her and tell her what he said."

"Very well. You're an impatient lot. Everyone was arguing about who should be the new Head of School, and Snape speaks up. And what he said was, "Draco, it would be obvious to a Flobberworm that the Board of Governors should offer the position to Hermione Granger-Weasley."

Hermione nearly dropped her teacup, she was so surprised.

"He really said that?" she asked after a moment.

Draco nodded. "Believe me, I was as surprised as you are now. The whole board just stopped talking. You could have heard a pin drop on the floor. Then everyone decided they agreed with him. Well, except for Salazar Slytherin, but he doesn't have a vote on the board, anyway."

"Professor Snape said that about me?"

"Yes."

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

The Wizarding clock chimed from the hall, and Hermione suddenly got to her feet.

She pushed back her chair and neatly placed her plate and cup in the sink.

"Harry and Ginny, thank you for everything. I really need to get to the school."

She murmured a charm to summon her cloak and bag, tossed a pinch of Floo powder into the fireplace, called out her destination, and was gone in a flash of green light.

Office of the Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland,

She emerged from the fireplace in her own (soon to be someone else's) small office, stowed away her bag in the desk drawer and hung her cloak on the coat rack. She had a number of things to do today, and it would be best to make a list of them now while she had the peace and quiet to do it.

Draco would be coming to Hogwarts this morning to make the announcement of her appointment as Headmistress. That would take a good part of the morning, she was sure. She would invite Draco and Ginny to stay for lunch, as well as Ron, from whom she had still heard nothing. *Ron probably left early and didn't bother to send a letter by post owl when he knew he would get here before the letter did*, she told herself.

She looked around the small Deputy's office. She would have to take the time, soon, to clean out the Headmistress's office and find places for everything Minerva had left behind. Some of the hundreds of items in Minerva's office would be distributed according to her will, but that would not come close to emptying the office. She had a sinking feeling that even an expansion charm wouldn't help enough, once she added her own files, books and teaching materials to the items already in the Headmistress's office. What could be done?

A snarky little voice in her mind offered several suggestions, from holding a Wizarding Jumble Sale, to casting a well placed *Incendio* and shoveling out the ashes after they'd cooled. But she couldn't do that. Some of the items now stored in the Headmistress's office should really be under lock, key, and security charm. Truthfully, some of the items in the Headmistress's office should be in a buried vault at Gringotts.

Burning the place down to bare stone, tempting as the idea was, simply would not do.

She smiled at her own whimsical ideas and steeled herself to the fact that both offices would have to be cleaned out bit by bit. Harry and Ginny would help and possibly Draco, if only out of curiosity. She made a mental note to swear everyone to silence, as well. Merlin help her if George Weasley discovered she was clearing things out. He couldn't be told till everything had been disposed of.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the soft *POP* of an apparating house-elf, and she looked up to find Winky curtsying before her.

"Winky is sorry to be disturbing Madam Headmistress, but Mr. Draco Malfoy is asking Winky to find Madam and tell her she is wanted in the Great Hall."

Hermione looked up with a friendly smile for the little elf, now dressed in an immaculate white ruffled apron and frilled maid's cap. Winky had gotten over her grief at being freed by her old master and took great pride in her quarter century and more of service at Hogwarts.

"Thank you very much, Winky. When Mr. Malfoy has finished his presentation in the Great Hall, will you bring us tea in the Headmistress's office?"

"Winky will watch, yes, and be ready when Madam and Mr. Malfoy is ready to be drinking tea."

Hermione nodded her thanks again and hurried out of the office. It would never do to keep Draco Malfoy waiting, after all. As she made her way down the corridors and through the echoing hallways, she felt a surge of excitement. A new position with new responsibilities surely qualified as her own Next Great Adventure.

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Draco Malfoy looked around the Great Hall as he approached the lectern in front of the High Table. Behind him he could hear the whispers of the staff, and before him he could see the four House tables filled with students. At the far end of the Hall near the double doors, he could see several reporters and one photographer. He had, as a matter of course, arranged for the press to be notified that an important announcement would be made this morning, so the presence of the reporters was no surprise. As he prepared to speak, he noticed the big doors swinging open again and two familiar redheads appeared in the doorway; Ginevra Weasley, whom he had seen that morning at breakfast, and behind her and towering over her, her brother Ron. Good. It was entirely appropriate that Madam Granger-Weasley's husband be here for this auspicious occasion.

"Attention, please." Draco forgot to amplify his voice and quickly murmured *Sonorus*, placing his wand up to the side of his neck where the wand would pick up the sound of his voice and broadcast it through the Great Hall.

"The Hogwarts Board of Governors met here last night to discuss the appointment of a new Headmaster or Headmistress for the school. I have the very great honor of announcing the Board's decision to appoint Hermione Granger-Weasley as the new Headmistress of Hogwarts." He started the applause for the new Headmistress, looking over at his former classmate with genuine affection and pride.

She approached the lectern now, and Draco met her halfway, conducting her to the front of the dais with a deferential hand under her elbow. Then he stepped back and watched her as she looked around at the cheering students and applauding staff. Which of them, he wondered, could have imagined this moment, all those years ago when they had been frightened first years themselves?

Hermione murmured her own *Sonorus* incantation and smiled warmly at Chairman Malfoy before stepping up to the lectern. Her hands gripped the sides of the lectern in an almost painfully tight grip, the only outward betrayal of her sudden nervousness.

"I thank Chairman Malfoy and the Hogwarts Board of Governors for their faith in me and am entirely sensible of the honor of being chosen to serve as Headmistress of Hogwarts. In my own student years here, "Hogwarts: A History" was my favorite book. Reading it, I soon discovered that I was learning so much more than the history of this school. I was learning the rich traditions of Witch and Wizard kind as well. I hope that together we can build upon another rich tradition—the tradition of excellence in Magical Education. This tradition began with the Four Founders and has continued through ten centuries to the present day. I am excited to serve you," her glance swept the students at their tables, "and to serve with you." She cast a glance back over her shoulder to smile at the ranks of teachers seated behind her at the High Table. "I thank you all for your support and pledge to serve you to the very best of my ability."

Heart overflowing with happiness, she whispered a mental "Thank you" to Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall, then stepped a pace back from the lectern and murmured, *Finite Incantatem*, grateful that her voice had not cracked while she spoke. Then Draco was standing at her elbow announcing a free period for the students, who got to their feet and shuffled out of the hall.

Draco motioned the reporters to come forward, but before they could get to the platform, Ron and Ginny hurried up the main aisle with Harry and Neville right behind them. For several moments Hermione was hugged and passed from person to person, all of them telling her how proud they were of her, how happy for her.

"Come on, admit it, this is what you've always wanted," Ginny giggled while Harry chimed in, "Well, this or to be the librarian." It took several minutes before Hermione realized that, beyond a brief hug when he first reached the platform, Ron had said very little. This wasn't the time or the place to ask him what was wrong, but something definitely was. When the reporters reached the platform and began clamoring for pictures, Ron moved to the back of the group, shaking his head when Dennis Creevey motioned him forward. "I'm too tall. Best if I'm in the back row," he said lightly, but Hermione wasn't the only one who noticed how distant he seemed.

~OoO~

Finally it was over. Finally the reporters had asked their questions and taken their pictures, and all of her colleagues had been given the chance to offer their congratulations. Hermione was getting a headache. She wanted nothing more than to transfigure her sensible leather pumps into fluffy slippers and go up to her own quiet little office to curl up on the sofa before her own fireplace, with only a cup of tea for company.

She smiled when Draco pulled her to one side and said he had to be going.

"Thank you for everything, Draco. I mean that sincerely. And I do look forward to working with you."

Malfoy's cool silver eyes lit with warmth as he smiled back at Hermione. "Hogwarts is in good hands and you have my support."

"I'd planned to invite you for tea when all this was done. Come one day next week?"

"I'll fit you into my calendar."

Draco patted her hand and then made his way out of the Great Hall while Hermione turned to her husband and family.

"Come up to my new office for tea?"

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and then back at Ron, their expressions unreadable, and Harry shook his head. "I have papers to mark, and Gin has to get back to the house to meet visitors from London. I'll see you at lunch time though."

"Right, sure." She could feel tension building up in the air, but turned to Ron. "Have you time to have tea with me? Come see my new office?"

He nodded but did not smile, and a cold tendril of fear twined around her heart. She didn't say anything, but led Ron out of the Great Hall and down the hallways and up the stairs to the Office of the Headmistress.

~OoO~

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Chaper 10: Adventure Upon Adventure

Chapter 10 of 15

In which we FINALLY see what Ron has been up to, and in which Madam Granger-Weasley has a surprising conversation with Professor Snape.

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Chapter Ten: Adventure upon Adventure

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

When they got to the office, Winky appeared with a laden tea tray, and Ron sat down on the couch before the fire, helping himself to some of the little cakes and sandwiches. He still had the same enormous appetite he'd had as a teenager, though Hermione reflected with fond amusement that his manners had improved.

"Shall I pour?"

Without waiting for an answer, she poured a cup tea for Ron, just as he liked it, her actions automatic after so many years. She handed it to him then poured a cup of tea and filled her own plate.

She tried to draw him into conversation as they ate, but stopped when she realized Ron wasn't responding to her comments.

"Ron, is something wrong?"

His face flushed till it nearly matched the color of his hair, and he abruptly set his cup and plate down on the tea table. In the sudden silence, the clink of china on wood seemed extremely loud. Neither Ron nor Hermione noticed the portraits around them opening their eyes and leaning ever so slightly towards them.

"Yeah, there is, actually. Bloody hell, this is hard to say, Hermione." His voice had grown hoarse, and he looked down at his hands, unable or unwilling to meet her gaze.

Hermione leaned forward and placed her own cup and plate on the table, fearing to drop them from suddenly nerveless fingers.

"What is it, Ron?"

"Hermione, I know that what I say is going to hurt like hell, and I hope you'll believe that I didn't do this on purpose. I've been... There's a girl. Bloody hell! I've been having an affair." Ron looked across the table at her, and she could see the pain and shame in his eyes. Suddenly her chest felt tight and she couldn't speak.

"I didn't set out to do this, and I know it's my own fault, 'Mione. It's not your fault at all." He dropped his eyes, not wanting to see the pain his words had caused.

She sat back on the sofa, pressing her hand over her mouth to hold back the ugly things she knew she should not say. When she was certain she had herself under control, she asked, "Who is it? Is she someone I know? Someone we know together?"

He drew in a deep breath and shook his head.

"No, not this one. Some of the others," he kept his eyes down. "Some of the others are people we both have known."

"Not this one? How many have there been, Ron?" There was no holding back that question; it burst from her lips as if the words had a life of their own.

"There've been three that were serious."

"Sweet Merlin! If there were three serious affairs, how many casual ones were there? Ron, when did this happen? How long have you been unfaithful?" She didn't want to hear the answer but she couldn't stop herself from asking.

"Since I got the General Manager's job and started traveling."

Ron had been General Manager of the All England Quidditch League for more than five years. All that time, Ron had been seeing other women, sleeping with other women, and she hadn't had any idea. Her thoughts whirled around in her head. Thankfully, she seemed to have gone numb, though. *It's like watching a train wreck, she thought. It's horrible but I can't look away.*

"Why now?"

"Why tell you now, you mean?"

She nodded.

"My... That is, Caroline is pregnant, and she plans to keep the baby. I can't bear to have her terminate the pregnancy, Hermione. I think it's wrong, and my mum would hex me into next year if she knew I let that happen. You know Mum."

"I understand. That's never the best option." Hermione had dealt with her share of sixth-and seventh-year students who'd forgotten to use contraception potions or charms. Most of the girls she'd known who'd terminated their pregnancies regretted it bitterly afterward. *Your mum will still hex you inside out when she finds out you've been cheating*, she thought, but didn't speak the words out loud.

"I've come to ask you for an uncontested divorce, Hermione. I don't want to hurt you or Rose or Hugo. But I... Well, I love Caroline, and I want to do right by her and the baby. As right as I can under the circumstances."

She bowed her head, thinking *He has always been this way for as long as I have known him. He knows the right thing to do and is basically decent, but sometimes he just doesn't think. And when he doesn't stop to think, he winds up making a mess of his personal life*. She knew he really had no malice in him, she admitted sadly. He just didn't stop to think. So horribly sad that this time, his life wasn't the only one being messed up.

"Does she work?"

So far, the numbness was holding her anger in check. She supposed she should be grateful for that.

She works for the Department of Magical Games and Sports. That's how we met, actually."

"She lives in Ireland, right?"

"Caroline has a cottage near the Quidditch grounds. We'll stay there till after the baby is born, and then buy a bigger place."

"What about Hugo and Rose?"

"Caroline loves kids. I think she'll get on with them very well. We're already planning to get a house big enough so Hugo and Rose can each have their own room. I figure they can be with me and Caroline on some of the school hols, or they can go visit your parents or stay at the Burrow, as we've always done. They'll be here with you during the school year. I'll visit them here when I have time. If you don't mind, that is. And if it isn't too disruptive for them."

A swirling vortex of anger, shame, and hurt was building up behind her eyes, but she forced herself to nod. His plans were really quite sensible. Turning into a shrieking banshee would only cause a commotion, and she fervently wanted to avoid that.

"What about the London flat?" Hermione and Ron had bought a flat in London when they married, and they still maintained it, though neither of them stayed there much any more. With Hermione and the children at Hogwarts and Ron in Ireland, the flat was usually empty except during the school holidays.

Ron had apparently thought of this already.

"That's really up to you. I don't use the flat much anymore. The team really likes the new training grounds, and I don't see us moving back to London. The flat is handy, but I can always stay at the Leaky Cauldron when I need to be in town."

Hermione still couldn't muster up any anger. *I'm sitting here discussing the end of my marriage as if I were talking about making holiday arrangements* she thought to herself. Even the incongruity of the situation couldn't break through the numbness she felt.

"I shall make arrangements to sell the flat in London then. We'll have to move everything into storage."

"I'll help with that as much as I can, Hermione. And I want you to keep the money we get for it. We've had it a long time, and selling it will bring in more than it cost, maybe many times more than it cost. Your book about the war paid for it in the first place, and I want you to have the money to do what you want."

"That's very generous of you." *Why can't I feel anything? I should be raging, I should be screaming, and sobbing and throwing things!*

"Giving you the flat doesn't begin to make up for what I've done to you, or for what I'm asking of you, 'Mione."

Decision time. With a sinking heart, Hermione knew she had already lost Ron and her marriage. Though part of her was furious, the part of Hermione that always carefully counted every cost had already decided to grant him the divorce. To contest it would be futile. To contest it would put Hugo and Rose right in the middle of an ugly situation and would cause Caroline's child to be born out of wedlock, which was still a serious thing in the wizarding world. She could not take out her anger and hurt on her own children or an innocent baby.

She drew in a deep breath, and felt a sense of calm flow over her.

"I won't contest the divorce, Ron. But I want you to put money aside every month in Gringotts for Hugo and Rose, for their education. Their Hogwarts tuition will be waived with me serving as Headmistress, but I won't be able to put aside much for their education after Hogwarts if I buy a new flat."

"Thank you, 'Mione. I'll set it up so Gringotts takes it right out of my pay packet."

"We'll need to have a lawyer go over all this, Ron. Neither of us has ever done this; we don't know how to make sure everything will be legal."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Ron smiled, but it was a rueful, self-deprecating smile.

"I'll probably regret telling you this, but... You should talk to Draco and get yourself a good, sharp attorney, 'Mione. I want to make sure our settlement is fair to you and our kids. You're being incredibly decent about this."

"Ron, we've already done the 'freeze-each-other-out-and-not-speak-for-months' bit to each other. I think we can be more mature than that, don't you?"

A tiny smile was playing at the corners of her mouth. For a moment Ron just looked at her and then he chuckled softly.

"You know everyone is going to be furious at me."

"I'm very hurt and angry, myself, Ron. But I hope they won't show it in front of the children. This is the time when we most need to be decent to each other. If we turn this into a bloody battle, everyone we love will be hurt."

"I know. I'll do my best to keep everything civilized. I can't really tell you how much I appreciate the way you're handling this."

"There is one thing you must help me with, and one thing you must do yourself, though." Hermione spoke firmly.

"Eh? What's that, then?"

"You must help me tell the children, and it's up to you to tell your mum and dad, along with the rest of your family. I'll take responsibility for telling my parents."

Hermione was very close to her husband's family but she was not going to be the one to break this news to them.

"I'm not looking forward to that." For a moment Ron looked perfectly miserable. "I'll tell them as soon as I see them, though, so Mum doesn't have to send a Howler. I'll let her yell at me in person."

"Thank you."

Silence fell between them, a silence that held both relief and dread. Ron broke the growing tension by reaching for his abandoned plate and cup.

"Er... Do you mind if I finish this? I left the stadium before they served breakfast this morning."

That brought a burst of laughter from Hermione.

"Be my guest."

She looked at her own plate and cup and decided that she was still hungry, as well.

Ron was looking around curiously while he ate.

"I don't think I've ever seen so much stuff in all my life. What do all these little machines and gadgets do?"

Hermione looked around at the overstuffed office with a sinking heart.

"I have no idea," she confessed.

"Really?"

"I've not had a chance to study any of them, Ron, and some of them are a bit frightening. They make strange noises for no good reason I can see, or puffs of steam shoot out them. Some of them tick, and that's going to drive me mad."

"George would..."

"Be thrown in Azkaban for using ANY of this stuff. If you even HINT that I am going to be moving it or getting rid of it, I shall hex you into the middle of the next century, Ronald Bilius Weasley. George MUST NOT find out about this stuff." She glared at him so fiercely that he scooted away from her on the sofa. He knew that glare from first year and had learned very quickly to respect it.

"I won't say a word, promise."

"See that you don't."

Ron had finished his tea and placed his cup and plate back on the tray.

"I shall have to go soon. I have an appointment at the Magical Games office in London."

"I'll be going back to Potter's Hollow for a bit this evening. We'll have to tell Rose and Hugo before you go back to Ireland, Ron. I don't want them to find out from anybody else."

"No, I don't either. I'll come back to Harry and Ginny's tonight. And I mean it; you should talk to Malfoy. Ask if he knows a really good attorney."

Ron got to his feet and Hermione rose also, walking with him to the door of the office.

Both of them recognized that this was an ending, that nothing would ever be the same from this point on.

"I really am sorry, Hermione. I still love you very much, but... I think I see, now, that we are better as friends than lovers. I wish I had seen that sooner and spared all of us this situation. No regrets, though." Ron drew her into his arms and bent his head to place a very tender kiss at the corner of her mouth. "I shall miss you."

Now the tears she couldn't cry earlier welled up in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall as she hugged him close. For so many years, her tears had been cried into the crisp cotton shirts he favored, but now those tears would have to fall somewhere else.

"I shall miss you too, Ron. Probably more than I can even imagine right now."

He nodded miserably, and she could see tears in his eyes, too.

"Goodbye, Ron." She stepped out of his arms, and he squared his shoulders and opened the door, looking back only once before he went out and closed the door softly behind him. She heard the click of his boot heels as he walked away down the long stone hallway.

~OoO~

Hermione dropped onto the sofa in front of the fireplace and cried silently into her hands, completely unaware of the interested glances from the portraits on the wall.

Unsurprisingly, Albus Dumbledore's portrait spoke first.

"Madam Granger-Weasley." He cleared his throat and called her name again, and she looked up in surprise.

"Oh, Headmaster Dumbledore. Er... Hello."

"My dear, can we do anything to help alleviate your distress? Perhaps one of us could summon Mr. Potter?"

My husband has just asked me for an uncontested divorce so he can marry his pregnant mistress, and now I am talking to a portrait of a man who has been dead for more than twenty years. I feel as though I have fallen through the looking glass. Despite the surreal quality her life had taken on, she lifted her chin and wiped her eyes, smiling politely at the portrait of the ancient former Headmaster.

"Thank you so much, but I don't need to disturb Harry. I'll be fine."

"You've had a shock, my dear. Please remember we are all pledged to help the current Head of Hogwarts in any way possible."

"Thank you, Headmaster. I shan't forget."

"I must say you have comported yourself with admirable restraint, Miss Granger..."

The low, velvety voice of Headmaster Severus Snape startled her and she spun around to look at his portrait over the fireplace. "Thank you, Professor. I wish I felt worthy of your compliment. I really was too shocked to know what to say."

"Had it been you confessing infidelity to your husband, I daresay all of these magical devices would be in shards on the floor, and we portraits would be ducking and dodging in our frames. Mr. Ronald Weasley had a bit of temper. Whatever your motivation, Madam, your behavior does you credit."

She smiled at the austere man in the portrait and then dropped her eyes, unused to praise from Severus Snape.

"Well said, Severus. Hermione, my dear, you have comported yourself with great dignity."

Hermione got to her feet and started to pace. She could not allow herself to dwell on what Ron had just asked of her. If she let down her guard she would wind up in tears again, and that was not how she intended to spend the remainder of her first day as Headmistress of Hogwarts. She paused and looked around the big circular office, truly seeing it for the first time. Headmasters Dumbledore and Snape watched from their frames as she went to the windows, drawing open the drapes to let in the morning sunlight. The drapes opened with a flurry of dust motes, and Hermione sneezed explosively several times, causing Headmaster Snape to chuckle.

"I always kept the drapes drawn. I sneezed for an entire day the first time I opened them and decided after that to leave them alone."

"They are getting rather dusty, I must admit. I never did find the time to put away all the instruments so the house-elves could take the drapes down for cleaning." Headmaster Dumbledore looked mildly vexed at his failure to accomplish the needed task, but Hermione forgave him. She had been a student at Hogwarts during the war. She knew how little cleaning the drapes had mattered at that point in time. "Minerva did have them cleaned when she moved in to this office, but they seem to attract the dust." Dumbledore peered doubtfully at the drapes.

Hermione looked around again once she had drawn all the drapes open. The office occupied the highest floor of a circular tower and had a charmed ceiling like the one in the Great Hall. Today it was a hazy grey blue, drifted with thin streaks of dark clouds. She watched the ceiling for a moment, then looked around the rest of the office in wonder.

All of the furniture was old and beautifully polished, and there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere on any cleared surface. But her heart sank as she realized how few cleared surfaces the room held. The huge desk in the center of the room did have a cleared space the size of a tea tray, and the table by the fire held only a low, colorful arrangement of flowers, now that Winky or one of the other house-elves had retrieved the tea tray. Most of the chairs were empty. Every other horizontal surface in the room was covered with JUNK. Amusing, fascinating, arcane, undoubtedly valuable, and possibly dangerous JUNK.

A soft chime sounded, followed by a whistle like a tea kettle. Various bowls and vases bubbled and steamed and underneath all the other sounds she was aware of the tick of a clock. Several clocks, actually; all of them ticking away at different intervals. She turned her eyes to the windows again and winced. Aside from being dusty, the drapes were a violent red and gold Tartan. How had she failed to notice that until just now? Especially the lions rampant embroidered in black on the red velvet tie-backs.

Severus Snape had been watching her as she walked around looking at everything, and his lips were twitching in amusement at her changing expressions. Wonder, bewilderment, appreciation and now dismay flitted across her features as she looked at the loud Tartan drapes.

"Interesting décor, wouldn't you say, Miss Granger? That is... Madam Granger-Weasley..."

"Please, I am quite accustomed to hearing you call me Miss Granger." She looked around the office once more, then back at him.

"I don't even know what most of these things are."

"Surely you recognize the tea services and biscuit barrels?" He raised one thick black eyebrow, a mocking half smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

"Er, yes. Those I did recognize."

Snape remembered many of the instruments from when this had been Albus Dumbledore's office. If he was honest, he didn't know what most of them were, either. He could not resist the temptation to provoke Granger just a little bit though. He was stuck to the wall of her office, after all. She would have to get used to him. He could see that she was as curious now as she had been as a first year. He knew it would not be long before she had found out what each instrument was and what it did.

"I believe many of them are used in the science," his voice took on a heavy note of sarcasm now, "of Divination." He almost laughed as she rolled her eyes. She had failed divination rather spectacularly in her third year. He recalled Sybill Trelawney's indignation that Miss Granger had told her off and stalked out of the Divination classroom, but his sympathy had really been with Miss Granger. Divination depended heavily on the innate talent of the witch or wizard, rather than spells or equations. Miss Granger's mind was a very logical one; her magical talents leaned heavily towards the practical. She had been dreadful at Divination and had hated every second of it.

"I never was very good at that."

"No, you were not. It was one of the few classes in which you did not excel." Flying had been the other.

"A compliment from you, Professor Snape?" She laughed, but there was a tinge of sadness in her laughter.

"Your academic record speaks for itself, Miss Granger. Your marks were always exceptional, and you took more NEWTs than anyone in your year."

"I wish your praise had come 25 years ago when I wanted it so desperately."

Professor Snape's dark eyes reflected something that looked very like regret, and his voice dropped lower. "I wish I had been in a position to offer it 25 years ago."

"I do understand." And she did. Severus Snape had been a spy for the Order of the Phoenix when Hermione had had been a student at Hogwarts. His cover story depended upon Voldemort believing he favored Slytherin house and pure-blood wizards in all things, which meant he'd been unable to praise good students from the other three houses at Hogwarts. Withholding criticism had been as close as he could come to praise during those years. Once Hermione had seen Snape's memories, given to Harry Potter on the day that Voldemort fell, she'd repented of all the resentment she'd felt towards him. If only she had known.

"Your success at brewing Polyjuice Potion in your second year is a feat that remains unmatched. I never quite understood what you three intended to accomplish by using it, nor where you got the fur that turned you into a cat."

"We thought Draco Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin, and hoped to catch him incriminating himself among his housemates in the Slytherin common room."

"Ah. I had never heard the full story. Presumably, then, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley impersonated two of his companions?"

"Crabbe and Goyle, actually."

"And who did you plan to transform into?"

"Millicent Bulstrode. I thought I had a strand of her hair to use for the transformation. I didn't know she had a cat, and I got one of the cat's hairs, rather than one of Millicent's." Miss Granger's cheeks were flushed with embarrassment and she couldn't look at him. With great difficulty, Snape resisted the temptation to tease her and turned his chuckle into a cough.

"I must admit I have been much more careful about what goes into my potions ever since that incident."

"Then it is a lesson well learned."

Hermione came back to the sofa near the fireplace and sank down onto the cushions, glancing up at her two Headmasters again.

"I'm very sorry you were forced to witness the scene with Ron."

"Rest assured, child, there are no surprises to those of us who occupy this office." Headmaster Dumbledore's voice was soothing.

"Mr. Weasley did give you one very good piece of advice, Miss Granger."

"He did?"

"Mr. Malfoy could refer you to a very good attorney, and you should retain one as soon as you can. Your interests should be protected, and those of your children."

Hermione frowned.

"I really hate to do that. I hate to think I can't trust Ron to keep his word."

"Miss Granger. Please do not allow your pain at his transgression to blind you to the fact that he has, in fact, already broken his word. If Mr. Ronald Weasley had proven trustworthy, you would not now need legal representation." *Despite all that has occurred, she remains the quintessential Gryffindor*, he thought, *... always wanting to believe the best about everyone, even when there is evidence to the contrary.*

"That's what I am doing, isn't it? Thank you for pointing that out to me."

"Severus." Albus Dumbledore could still rebuke him just by invoking his first name. "Madam Granger-Weasley can use all our tact," there was definitely an emphasis on the word *tact*, "and support at this difficult time."

"I spoke rather hastily, Miss Granger. It is not my intention to chide you for a situation that is not of your making."

Hermione recognized that this was a fulsome apology, coming from Severus Snape.

"I'm not offended, Professor Snape. I appreciate your advice, and yours, Headmaster Dumbledore."

She got to her feet and began pacing around the office again. Ron's confession meant she had even more to do now.

~OoO~

Hermione had only been alone for twenty minutes when the gargoyle statue that guarded the stairs to her office announced, "Mister and Madam Harry Potter seek an audience with the Headmistress."

Glancing to the portraits on the walls, she asked, "Does it do that all the time?"

"Yes, indeed. The gargoyle is very helpful, Madam Granger-Weasley. It allows entrance to anyone who has the password, and announces all other visitors."

"How do I tell it to let Harry and Ginny in?"

"Merely instruct the gargoyle to permit them to enter the office, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Professor Snape."

Raising her voice slightly, she said, "Gargoyle, please allow the Potters to enter the office."

"Yes, Headmistress."

A moment later the doors swung open and the Potters surged into the office. Both of them engulfed Hermione in hugs, followed by a flood of tender words, mingled with indignation at Ron's behavior. Dumbledore watched the proceedings quite openly, looking for a chance to put in a helpful word. Snape wasn't as obvious about it, but he, too, closely observed the conversation.

"Are you sure you want to just LET Ron have the divorce uncontested, Hermione?"

"There's really not much point in fighting it, is there? It's clear that he wants to be with her. If I drag this out for months, everyone will be hurt, and his child-THEIR child-will be born illegitimate. I don't want to be the cause of that."

Harry and Ginny protested that Ron's first obligation was to Hermione, until she reminded them that Ron had already chosen to put Caroline first.

"Ron's a prat; Mum and Dad are going to be so disappointed in him."

"It will all work out, Ginny. I don't want a huge fight to tear the family apart. The more bitterness there is, the more it will hurt Hugo and Rose. This is better."

Snape and Dumbledore watched as she spoke soothingly to her best friends. Snape felt a stirring of compassion for Miss Granger. Even in this situation it was she who maintained her composure, and she, the injured party, who lavished comfort on her friends, rather than seeking comfort from them.

Snape could not have explained why this bothered him so much. He sat back in his chair, just watching quietly and wishing there was something he could do for her. Perhaps there was. He nodded his head. Yes, perhaps there was.

~OoO~

By Owl

Draco Malfoy

Malfoy Manor

Nottinghamshire, England

To:

Madam Hermione Granger-Weasley,

Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade, Scotland

Dear Hermione,

I just heard of the situation with Ron and am writing to offer you my solicitor's name and address. Dominus Attenbury is the head of a very old wizarding law firm, and will take good care of you. Attenbury and Associates have an excellent reputation. Actually, if I am very frank, they're sharks. But a shark with big, sharp teeth is just what you need right now.

I've written to Dom already and informed him that you are the new Headmistress of Hogwarts, so you will need him to come to you, rather than you trying to scramble to get to London to see him. He actually went to school with Minerva McGonagall; that will give you an idea of his age. He is honorable and competent, though, and he'll do what's best for you, rather than what's most expedient. I trust him implicitly, and you can, too.

And in case you are wondering if you and Ron were overheard and now the news is all over the school... Rest easy, it's not. My godfather brought the news this afternoon. Mother had a portrait of him commissioned after the war and he visits us often. He's entirely on your side in this whole mess and quite indignant over Weasley's behavior. I shall be very disappointed in you if I need give you any assurances as to Uncle Sev's discretion.

I'm very disappointed in Weasley myself, just so you know where I stand. I know feelings are next-to-impossible to control, but one can always regulate one's own behavior. And now that I sound exactly like my sainted mother, I shall end this missive by expressing my concern for you, especially, and Hugo and Rose. You know how to reach me if I can be of any help to you.

Owl my solicitor, Granger.

Give my regards to your children, and know, Madam Granger-Weasley, that I remain,

Your obedient servant,

Draco Malfoy

P.S. Daphne sends her good wishes, as well, and thinks you should hex Ron where it will do the most good.

Hermione collapsed into giggles at Draco's formal letter and the odd, mis-matched post script, but then looked up at the portrait over the fireplace. Professor Snape had not returned, and she felt oddly disappointed that she could not thank him.

~OoO~

The Library, First Floor, Malfoy Manor, Nottinghamshire, England.

Severus Snape watched from his portrait as Draco Malfoy sent off the owl bearing his letter to Hermione Granger-Weasley and left the room. Then he glanced up at the portrait of Lucius Malfoy, which hung on the opposite wall. The elder Malfoy lounged in a fabulous chair, silver-headed cane in hand, impeccably tailored, as always. Tonight, his eyes glittered with amused malice as he greeted Snape.

"Well, well, even bloodlines don't guarantee good breeding, do they?"

Snape shook his head. "If you're saying that Weasley is a short-sighted, inconsiderate lout, I'll not disagree with you."

"What I cannot understand, Severus, is how he allowed himself to get caught. A gentlewizard's first duty is NOT to remember whom it was he took to his bed the night before, my old friend. A gentlewizard's FIRST duty is to ensure that there won't be inconvenient reminders of his pleasure coming along nine months later. After all, there are both potions and charms to prevent this sort of thing." Malfoy's eyes narrowed in malicious appreciation of his own wit, and Snape had to laugh. Trust Lucius Malfoy to get to the heart of the matter at once.

"If Mr. Weasley is as thoughtless now as he always was while a student at Hogwarts, this outcome could easily have been predicted, Lucius."

"Yes, I remember your comments about him when he was your student. Still, it's a pity for Madam Granger-Weasley. I have been watching her, not that I would ever admit that outside this room. She's done well for herself over the years. Quite an intelligent witch."

"I think we can expect great things from her. I predict she will rise above this unfortunate turn of events... in time."

"Draco and Daphne think well of her."

"As do I, Lucius."

"It will be interesting to see how it all turns out."

When Draco returned to the library a few moments later, he saw that his mother had joined the conversation, slipping into her husband's portrait frame, and the topic of Hermione Granger-Weasley was forgotten.

~OoO~

Prompt Information

This story was written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge.

I used prompts 6 and 8 but modified them.

The original prompts:

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost.

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. Waiting until after the war is won, Hermione gets her Time Turner and goes back a year. She confronts Snape and tells him what will happen. They take the year to come up with a potion that will react once the Dark Lord and the gang leave the Shrieking Shack. Since Hermione cannot be seen by her other self, she must stay with Snape in the dungeons until the day of the battle. I think it would be kind of cool if she were to fight during the battle as herself and her time turner self.)

My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chapter Eleven: Comfort from the Most Unlikely of Sources

Chapter 11 of 15

In which we learn that even long-cherished perceptions can be inaccurate, and friendship can bloom in the unlikeliest of circumstances.

Author's Note: I am so excited to be working with my beta reader and XXX from the staff of *The Petulant Poetess*. These two wonderful women have given me help and guidance, inspiration and support. My story has benefited immensely from their care and expertise. I also tip my hat to my first beta reader, XXX. I feel as though she is cheering me on, and I am so grateful for her support and encouragement.

As always, my debt to J.K. Rowling cannot be measured. I make no profit from my variations on her theme and claim no ownership of anything that belongs to her. I am profoundly grateful to be able to borrow her wonderful universe and characters.

To my readers, it's all for you. Your generosity and kindness recognize no bounds, and I thank you.

Chapter Eleven: Comfort from the Most Unlikely of Sources

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

The next few days passed in a blur for Hermione. She conferred with Winky about suitable accommodations for all the guests who were coming to Hogwarts. When she ran out of guest rooms to assign and menus to plan, she buried herself in reading lesson plans from each of the teachers, even though this was mid-year and no changes would be made to the curriculum. She desperately needed to stay busy.

She met with Mr. Attenbury, the solicitor whom Draco had recommended, and retained him to represent her in the matter of her divorce from Ron. She spent a nightmare evening at Potter's Hollow trying to explain to Rose and Hugo that she and Ron were not going to be married much longer. Her heart broke when Rose and Hugo turned to her for an explanation, and all she could say was, "Daddy has Caroline in his life now and will be much happier living with her." That nightmare evening was followed by a long, lonely night in the guest room, where she lay awake wondering if her choice had been the right one.

What if she refused to grant the divorce? What if Caroline mis-carried and it brought Ron to his senses, made him realize all that he was throwing away? Then again, what if she and Ron stayed married but argued all the time? What if they stayed married but he paraded a succession of lovers through their home? She thought of taking a lover herself, and that thought made her ill. No matter how far-fetched her fantasies, she continued to believe that granting him the divorce was the best decision out of a lot of really bad choices.

She got up the next morning feeling exhausted and went downstairs to face Rose and Hugo, who looked at her as sadly as though Ron had died. Harry and Ginny hovered over her until she wanted to scream. When she did snap at them, she suffered the tortures of the damned for being so shrewish. *Be fair, Hermione, they mean well.* Later, she rudely interrupted Molly Weasley's lament that Ron would miss Hugo and Rose very much by pointing out that it was entirely his own choice. She'd added, spitefully, that his mistress had already started working on replacements, so Ron wouldn't feel childless and lonely for long. She'd felt ashamed of what she'd said and had apologized sincerely, even though it was Molly's thoughtless remark which had sparked her anger. To avoid hurting any more people who were dear to her, she took to locking herself in her offices...old and new... to pack, arranging for the house-elves to move the boxes to her new office as she filled them.

Her greatest comfort came from the least likely source.

Towards the end of the week, she'd stormed into the Headmistress's office feeling as if the all the Furies in Hades were at her heels, to find the office quiet and the portraits asleep. Needing to keep busy, she started packing some of the thousands of knick knacks that Minerva had collected. She filled one box and carried it to the sitting area by the fireplace, then glanced up to find Professor Snape wide awake and gazing down at her.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Good evening, Professor Snape."

That was all he said for several minutes. He did not ask her about Ron or the children. He didn't insist on commenting about the upcoming services for Minerva McGonagall. Instead, he waved his hand in a sweeping circle, his gesture calling attention to the boxes stacked around the room.

"I commend your industry, Miss Granger. I always found it soothing to bury myself in work when I was distressed or angry."

"Thank you, Professor."

"My godson tells me you retained Mr. Attenbury as your solicitor."

"Yes, I did. He seems very competent."

"The firm of Attenbury and Associates has served the Malfoy family for generations. They are intelligent, shrewd, hard-working, and utterly ruthless when protecting the interests of their clients. I commend you again for having the sense to retain them."

"Draco said they are sharks."

"My godson has a fondness for colorful metaphors."

Professor Snape's drawling voice and understated comments were so familiar, so safe. Hermione relaxed and drew in a deep breath for what seemed like the first time in days. Before she could decide what to say, Professor Snape had drawn her attention to the latest edition of *Potion Masters Monthly*, which had been delivered to her office with the morning post. He'd found a very informative article on brewing Wolfsbane. Had she found the time to read it yet? No? He was sure she would enjoy it when she did find the time. The author had written about the very exacting potion and the proper steps to prepare it. The beauty of the article had been the detailed information about each ingredient in the potion and the precision of the author's description of the process. He, Snape, had always enjoyed reading about a familiar process because it helped fix the details in his mind. Perhaps she felt the same way?

Hermione looked up at Headmaster Snape and was amazed at what she saw. Those black eyes, usually cold with disdain, were filled with something that looked quite a lot like compassion. His expression suggested they were discussing something as innocuous as the weather. He wasn't conspicuously mournful or sweetly solicitous and didn't set her teeth on edge by asking impertinent questions.

"As a matter of fact, Professor, I do learn a lot from reading a well written description of a familiar process. I shall be sure to read the article." She conjured several boxes and some packing material and went back to wrapping the china figurines that filled entire shelves.

The corners of his mouth lifted briefly in what might have been a smile, but he continued to listen quietly and kept their low-key conversation going. After some time, Hermione looked up in satisfaction from the box she had just finished sealing with Spellotape.

"There. That's the end of the knick-knacks. Thank you for your company, Professor Snape. I have enjoyed our conversation very much."

He lowered his head so his hair swung over his face, concealing his expression, but Hermione could hear the smile in his voice.

"I also have enjoyed our conversation, Miss Granger." He hesitated then cleared his throat and added, "I had not anticipated finding our association so agreeable."

She looked up at him, a brilliant smile lighting her eyes. "I believe I shall enjoy our association very much."

Neither of them said any more than that, but nothing more needed to be said.

Hero's Memorial, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

To Hermione, it seemed that half of Wizarding Britain arrived at Hogwarts on Saturday for Minerva McGonagall's memorial service. The castle was crowded, with a constant stream of carriages clogging the road between Hogwarts and the train station at Hogsmeade. The Great Hall was filled with adult witches and wizards, and the High Table had been expanded to more than double its normal capacity to accommodate all the visitors. The house-elves were in their element with all the guests to care for, but Hermione just wanted the whole ordeal to be over. The visitation at the Ministry the night before had been a nightmare, too. Crowds of people had thronged the largest meeting room, creating a nightmare of jostling and noise overlaid with the cloying perfume of too many flowers in too small a space.

The guards had closed the doors and blocked the Floo network at eight, but it had been ten-thirty before all the people had gone. Hermione had been at the Ministry the entire day, shaking hands with people as they came through the receiving line, trying to find something kind to say to each one, inwardly wincing as her hand grew sore and her feet began to ache.

By the time she was free to apparate back to Hogwarts, she was trembling with exhaustion and had a blinding headache from all the noise. She was hungry, but was sure she would be sick if she tried to eat the kind of meal that Molly and Ginny had most likely prepared at Potter's Hollow after the service. She knew Harry and Ginny expected her to stay at Potter's Hollow that night, but once she got to her own cozy suite of rooms and took off her shoes, she had no intention of leaving the castle again. The weather had been cold and damp all day and now rain was pouring from every corner of the sky.

Her children were all at Potter's Hollow with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. She would see them at breakfast before the memorial service. Deciding that it was too late for a visit to the Potters tonight, Hermione sat down at her desk and wrote a note to Ginny.

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

~OoO~

Hermione Granger-Weasley

Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade

Scotland

By Owl

To

Ginny Potter

Potter's Hollow

Hogsmeade

Scotland

Friday Night, 11:00 p.m.

Dear Ginny,

I hope you'll forgive me, but I simply cannot come to the Hollow tonight. The services at the Ministry have utterly worn me out, and I plan to eat a bowl of soup, then drink a whole pot of hot chocolate, THEN go to bed. My hand is cramping, writing this, and I haven't two rational thoughts in my head. I'm sure that my face will crack and fall OFF if I try to talk, with all the smiling I had to do today.

Tell Rose and Hugo that I love them extravagantly and will see them for breakfast tomorrow before the services, but I am just exhausted tonight. They will understand.

Don't be mad? Right now I need about 36 hours of absolute quiet. Do you think Minerva has a Time Turner stashed somewhere in that office? Everything else is there.

All my love,

Hermione

She sent the owl on its way and received an answer within a few minutes.

Ginny Potter

Potter's Hollow

Hogsmeade

Scotland

By Owl

Headmistress Granger-Weasley

Headmistress's Quarters

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hogsmeade

Scotland

11:15 p.m.

Dear Hermione,

We're all just sitting here in the kitchen remembering all the people from Minerva's generation. It's rather pleasant, in a horribly maudlin sort of way. Harry's definitely overindulged a bit and is getting sentimental. Half the people here are already wiping their eyes.

It's a good thing we built the fireplace so big. Hagrid had quite a bit of Firewhiskey before the reception at the Ministry, and he must have had more when he got there. When he Flooed back, he got stuck and it took a bit of effort to get him out. The children were so busy trying to help and laughing so hard at every idea we had that didn't work that I don't think they missed you.

Stay at Hogwarts. You're not missing anything, nor are you needed here. The kiddies are tucked up in bed, and if they know what's good for them, they're sleeping. You had the rottenest duty today, and tomorrow will be no better. Sleep, or at least rest; no one expects you to troop out at this hour.

We'll be up to the school in the morning to have breakfast with you.

Love,

Ginny

~OoO~

Hermione gave the Potter's owl a treat and called for Winky, requesting a pot of cocoa and a bowl of soup. Within minutes Winky was back with both, as well as a plate of dainty sandwiches and a slice of cake.

"Mistress must eat. Winky is not liking to see Mistress looking so peaky." Hermione felt silly being scolded by a being who reached only as high as her knees, but Winky was right. She needed to eat. She dimly recalled a tea break at the Ministry, but that had been hours ago. The simple meal Winky brought was exactly what she wanted. When she had finished eating, she was still too restless to sleep and decided to go over the lesson plans for the seventh-year Defense classes. Where were they? Hadn't she brought them to her quarters the night before? With a sigh she realized she'd left them in her office.

She shrugged on her teaching robes over her comfortable flannel pyjamas and slipped her feet into fleece-lined slippers, tucked her wand into its pocket and marched bravely down the dimly lit corridors to her office.

"Hermione Jane Granger, what are you thinking?" she scolded herself as she walked. She couldn't possibly be hoping Professor Snape would be awake? Of course not, but she did enjoy his company. She slipped into her office as quietly as she could but automatically glanced to the left when she saw a soft glow emanating from the portrait over the fireplace. Professor Snape was awake, and her heart gave a funny little bump when she saw him look up at the sound of the office door closing. He slid a bookmark in place and closed his book, then greeted her quietly.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

"Good evening, Professor Snape."

He studied her for a moment, taking in the red puffy eyes with shadows under them, the pallor of her complexion, the tired slump of her shoulders. She looked exhausted. She also looked just a little silly with her flannel pyjamas peeping out from under the hem of her robe. And what were those things on her feet? Whatever they were, they were violently pink on the outside, appeared to be lined with fur, and covered her ankles.

"Given the lateness of the hour and your attire...especially your er... slippers?...I hope you are not planning to leave the castle again tonight, Miss Granger."

"Pardon me?"

"I daresay your feet will remain warm tonight. The only thing I can say for the rest of your costume is that it appears to be comfortable." One thick black eyebrow arched in surprise and amusement at the sight of the pink bears and elephants, yellow stars, and dancing green frogs printed on her pale blue pyjamas. "Is this the latest fashion trend?"

She looked down at herself and mentally compared her attire to the professional suits, formal robes, and high heeled shoes she usually wore, then began to laugh at herself.

"Did I say something amusing, Miss Granger?"

Between giggles, she replied, "Since I began teaching, I have always tried to show respect for my students and my work by dressing appropriately. And look at me now."

"You look rather like you have come from a... What do the Muggles call it? ... A slumber party."

"I'm surprised you have even heard the term."

He rolled his eyes and retorted, "Miss Granger, I was a teacher for a number of years. I am familiar with even the oddest practices among adolescents."

"Of course." She couldn't stop the giggles, but after a moment, and to her utter horror, the laughter turned to tears, and the tears poured out in a virtual flood. The tears were for Minerva, for the end of her marriage, for her children, for her anxiety over her new job. Hermione thought she had cried all the tears she could cry, but clearly, that wasn't the case. Professor Snape said nothing, just patiently waited for her to stop crying. When she had cried herself out, she fumbled in the pocket of her robe for a handkerchief and used it to wipe away her tears. Then she looked up at him and smiled weakly.

"I didn't mean to go to pieces like that. I'm sorry."

"It's not unexpected. You have had a great many unpleasant things to deal with recently."

"You really have changed." Her voice was filled with quiet wonder.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I dreaded moving into this office because I expected you would question every action I took, criticize every decision I made. I didn't expect you to be so nice."

His eyes lit with malicious glee, and his mouth twisted into its familiar sneer.

"Merciful Merlin, I'm not nice, Miss Granger. I spent more than twenty years as a spy. I have never been able to afford the luxury of nice. "

Her eyes opened wide in surprise as he continued, "You are confusing niceness, which is insipid and mediocre, with approval, Miss Granger."

"Approval? You approve of me? I'm the *Insufferable Know-It-All*, remember?"

"Some things will never change." His lips quirked up in amusement. "Nevertheless, I do approve of you. You were always an intelligent child and, later, a sensible young woman. I admit my good opinion of you suffered when I heard you had married Mr. Ronald Weasley. But you have accomplished a great deal in spite of that."

She looked up at the portrait, shaking her head in amazement. Was he teasing her? He seemed to be completely serious.

"How did you even know what I was doing?"

He snorted.

"Surely you don't think Minerva could resist bragging about you at every opportunity. She regaled Albus with your accomplishments every time she received a letter from you, and you were often the topic of conversation in the staff room. I wondered how you accomplished so much, when you obviously spent so much of your time writing letters to her."

She snickered at that. She had written to Minerva every chance she got.

He was looking down at her, sardonic amusement in his eyes.

"You have improved immensely since you were my student. You have learned to think rather than rushing off impulsively to do the first thing that comes to mind. You possess the ability to make a plan and carry it out, and you no longer insist on filling every available moment with chatter. You do those things that need to be done without demanding constant approval for each achievement. In short, Miss Granger, you are an intelligent, accomplished witch, and I approve of you."

If Professor Snape had stepped out of his frame and hit her over the head with a Beater's bat, Hermione could not have been more surprised. She felt herself melting in pleasure at these long-desired words of approval from this, the toughest teacher she had ever had, and the one from whom she had learned the most.

"I truly do not know what to say."

"Then say nothing, or say 'Thank you, Professor Snape,' and tell me how Mr. Zabini is managing Slytherin House, Miss Granger."

Was that a smile she saw lurking at the corners of his mouth? She smiled in return and said demurely, "Thank you, Professor Snape. Blaise is an excellent Head of House. He is strict with the students, but very just and fair..."

Albus Dumbledore had only been pretending to be asleep. As Miss Granger and Professor Snape continued to discuss Slytherin House until Miss Granger leaned her head back against the cushions and fell asleep mid-sentence, he simply watched the two of them, wishing, somewhat wistfully, that they could have had this conversation twenty-five years before. Ah, well, it didn't matter. They were having it now.

~OoO~

Prompt Information

This story was written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge.

I used prompts 6 and 8 but modified them.

The original prompts:

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost.

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. Waiting until after the war is won, Hermione gets her Time Turner and goes back a year. She confronts Snape and tells him what will happen. They take the year to come up with a potion that will react once the Dark Lord and the gang leave the Shrieking Shack. Since Hermione cannot be seen by her other self, she must stay with Snape in the dungeons until the day of the battle. I think it would be kind of cool if she were to fight during the battle as herself and her time turner self.)

My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chapter Twelve: Friendship Cherished

Chapter 12 of 15

Hogwarts Museum

Author's Note: I am so excited to be working with my beta reader and XXX from the staff of The Petulant Poetess. These two wonderful women have given me help and guidance, inspiration and support. My story has benefited immensely from their care and expertise. I also tip my hat to my first beta reader, XXX. I feel as though she is cheering me on, and I am so grateful for her support and encouragement.

As always, my debt to J.K. Rowling cannot be measured. I make no profit from my variations on her theme and claim no ownership of anything that belongs to her. I am profoundly grateful to be able to borrow her wonderful universe and characters.

To my readers, it's all for you. Your generosity and kindness recognize no bounds, and I thank you.

Chapter Twelve: Friendship Cherished

Hogwarts Museum, Entrance Hall, Ground Floor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Draco Malfoy, Chairman of the Board of Governors, rapped on the huge double doors of Hogwarts main entrance, and was let in by a bowing house-elf.

"Mr. Chairman Malfoy is most welcome. May Kreacher take Mr. Malfoy's cloak?"

"No, Kreacher, I am here to see the Headmistress. Is she in her office?"

"Madam Headmistress is with her advisory students. Shall Kreacher go and tell her Mr. Chairman is here?"

"Yes, please. I'd heard she's made some wonderful changes, and I came to see what all the fuss is about."

"Kreacher can show Mr. Chairman around the Museum, if Mr. Chairman wishes."

Kreacher led the way through double inner doors to the old Entrance Hall, and as they entered the formerly empty, echoing space, Draco looked around, his eyes widening with delight.

The center floor space held several clear glass display cases, with other wood-and-glass curio cabinets ranged around the walls. All the cabinets and cases held magical machines, devices, and gadgets, and each device had a neatly lettered card propped next to it or in front of it. The cards held information on each piece in the collection. In addition to the display cases, there were two padded benches and a study table in the center of the room. Sunlight flooded the room through clerestory windows high up in the north and south walls.

Kreacher led Draco around to each display case, proudly pointing out the various devices and explaining how they were used, and Draco simply had to smile at the sight of the miniature Curator. Instead of the traditional white Hogwarts tea towel with the embroidered school crest, Kreacher wore a black toga embroidered with his name and the words "Hogwarts Museum of Witchcraft and Wizardry" in elegant green script.

"This is excellent, Kreacher. You must be very proud of the Museum."

"Kreacher is very proud to be showing the Museum to Mr. Chairman Malfoy."

Draco looked around once again and then moved confidently through the Museum to the doors leading into the castle.

"I'll find my own way up to the Headmistress's office, Kreacher. Please pop in on her and let her know I am here, though."

"As Mr. Chairman Malfoy wishes." Kreacher gave a low bow and disappeared from the room.

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

"Merlin's curly beard, what have you done to the office?" Chairman Malfoy came into Madam Granger-Weasley's office at Hogwarts and looked around, his jaw dropping in surprise. "I saw the display cases in the entrance hall, but I never realized you'd taken them all out of this office, Hermione."

Hermione smiled at Draco and waved her hand around her spacious uncluttered office. "Draco, you saw the office when I first moved into it. I couldn't walk or breathe for all the STUFF in here. Professor Snape had the idea to use the old Entrance Hall as a museum, and he also thought of the idea of having students research all the gadgets as a special project for extra credit. We have a pupil who is a very talented artist, and she lettered all the cards."

"It's perfect. The glass cases protect the instruments so nothing will get broken or lost. You did ward the cases though, didn't you?"

"Professor Snape devised the wards for the display cases and taught me how to cast them."

Draco beamed. "It's marvelous. The Museum is a popular topic of conversation at the Ministry these days."

Now he looked around the office, clearly trying to assimilate all the changes. Rich Persian carpets still covered the stone floors. The sofa, chairs, and tea table still graced the area to the left of the door in front of the fireplace. The sofa and chairs had been re-covered in something sturdy and crisp...denim or twill of some kind. The sofa was covered in a fabric printed in narrow stripes of periwinkle and white. One flanking chair was periwinkle blue, the other a delicate floral print. Thin periwinkle curtains fluttered at the windows, and he could see heavy velvet drapes in the same blue, drawn back in each corner. Because the weather was warm, the drapes weren't needed to keep out the drafts. Draco didn't recognize anything else in the huge office.

To the far left of the door, beyond the sitting area, was the intimate dining area where Madam Granger-Weasley gave small suppers for the school's patrons and guest lecturers. The table would seat ten, and the chairs were comfortably cushioned. The Headmistress's china and crystal graced a heavy sideboard, but the entire area was remarkably free of clutter.

Albus Dumbledore's heavy Gothic oak desk had been replaced by a smaller, more delicate design in warm cherry. The surface of the desk hosted a quill and ink bottle, trays for incoming and outgoing letters, and a few framed photos. Two chairs faced the desk; low comfortable chairs cushioned in the same striped fabric as the sofa. A plush throw was draped over the back of one chair and another was thrown over the Headmistress's chair behind the desk. A tall cabinet to the right of the desk, with fabulous doors of Tiffany glass, concealed file drawers and the few magical devices Madam Granger-Weasley used on a regular basis.

"We have a rich heritage here at Hogwarts. It seemed fitting to put it on display downstairs, where it could be properly appreciated." Hermione smiled and took Draco's arm and ushered him to the sofa before the fireplace. "Do sit down, Draco. Winky is bringing tea."

Draco sank into the cushions of the sofa with an audible sigh of comfort. "This is extremely nice."

"I'm glad you approve. The upholstery is treated to be waterproof and easy to clean so it's pupil friendly."

And THAT was vintage Hermione Granger, always thinking of the welfare of house-elves. Draco rolled his eyes at the memory of *o&P.E.W.*, her passion in fourth-year.

Hermione seated herself next to her guest and poured tea for him when it arrived. She had been Headmistress of Hogwarts for two years, and the students had never gotten a better education. She was introducing new subjects to the curriculum and new methods of teaching, but in such a thoughtful, well planned manner that the Board of Governors readily supported each change.

Draco had even heard one member of the board remark to another that Madam Granger-Weasley was "a sensible little woman with a lot of good ideas." Draco wasn't sure how he could pass the compliment along to Hermione without getting punched for the 'little woman' part, but perhaps she would forgive it if he explained that the wizard who'd said it had just celebrated his hundred-and-forty-fifth birthday.

They chatted over their tea, and then Draco looked up at Hermione and put down his tea cup. It was time to discuss the real reason he'd come. "I saw a birth announcement in the Daily Prophet this morning. Weasel and his wife have another new baby?"

Hermione smiled gently. "Yes, their second child. Seems Caroline is willing to give him that Quidditch team he always wanted."

"I don't like to pry, and you seem to be doing fine. But when I saw the announcement, I wanted to be sure."

"I'm very happy, Draco. Mr. Attenbury took care of everything for me, and Ron is honoring the conditions of our settlement. He visits them all the time, and puts money in their Gringotts accounts every month. When they leave Hogwarts, each of them will have enough gold to pay for college. I sold our flat in London, as well, but the galleons are just gathering dust in my vault at Gringotts right now. I haven't decided what I want to buy. Actually I haven't decided IF I want to buy anything right now. There's no

real hurry, after all."

"I could recommend a broker for you if you're interested in investing. Daphne mentioned the notice in the paper, and we were both concerned that you might be feeling sad."

Hermione smiled. "I'm genuinely touched by your concern and Daphne's, but I am happier than I have been in a long time, actually. I really love my work here at the school, Draco. It's so exciting. Don't get me wrong, I love Molly and Arthur and all my brothers-in-law and Ginny. I even grew rather fond of Fleur. But I never quite fit in, you know. In the summer at the Burrow, everyone would be outside watching the grandkids play Quidditch, and I would be in the house trying to avoid the noise and find something to read." She wrinkled her nose and shook her head and Draco laughed. "Believe me, I'm quite happy."

"You're held in very high regard by the Board of Governors and the Ministry."

"That pleases me very much." Her eyes were sparkling with happiness, and suddenly she laughed.

"What's funny?"

"I was just remembering what Mr. Collins told me after he toured the school three months ago."

William Collins was the old wizard who'd called Hermione a sensible little woman, so Draco waited impatiently to hear what the outspoken old wizard had said to her. "What did he say? Come on, Granger, I can't wait to hear this."

"He said...and this is a direct quote, mind you... 'Very sensible changes, Madam Granger-Weasley, very sensible. I'm quite surprised; I had expected much worse from a modern young woman who can't be satisfied with one name and has to clutter up the parchment with all these dashes and dots'...end quote. Then he asked me if I was the one Professor Snape always called the *Insufferable Know-It-All*."

Draco chuckled. "In case you hadn't guessed, William Collins was in Slytherin."

"No, really? I never would have guessed."

"Five points from Gryffindor for impertinence, Miss Granger," Draco teased.

There was a pause in the conversation, and then Hermione asked, "Am I really doing well, Draco? Or are they just saying what they think I want to hear?"

"You're ABSOLUTELY doing well. You've made ME a hero to the board, you know. I have been one of your most vocal advocates since Minerva recommended you as Deputy Headmistress, recommended you over the heads of more experienced teachers who'd been at the school much longer. The Governors see you doing so well with the school and they remember that." He pointedly blew on his fingernails and buffed them on his robe. "Thank you for making me look so good."

She dissolved in giggles and Draco laughed along with her. "Seriously, Granger, you're doing fine."

He looked around the office again, finally noticing that most of the portraits were gone.

"I just noticed. What did you do with all the portraits?"

She chuckled again.

"The short answer is we moved them downstairs when the castle grew space for a gallery. The former Headmasters and Headmistresses got very lonely here with only each other to talk to. I'm not in the office much during the day, as I am still advising in Arithmancy and Potions, even though I'm not actually teaching the classes any more. With all the portraits downstairs in their own gallery, the pupils can go there at any time and ask for advice, and the portraits are anxious to help. I think they enjoy all the attention."

"And the long story?"

"Great merciful Merlin, it was a nightmare. Salazar Slytherin was the WORST, but the other Headmasters and Headmistresses were nearly as bad. Not one of them was appointed Headmaster or Headmistress before age seventy-five, so I heard comments all the time about my youth and my lack of maturity. Of course they didn't like the fact that I am Muggle-born, either. They questioned my magical talent till they saw me demonstrating some hexes in a Defense class one day when Harry became ill during class. Then they decided that I MUST be the illegitimate child of some Pure-blood house, because 'everyone knows Muggle-borns just aren't as magically talented as those of purer blood.'" Hermione snorted her disgust. "Then they didn't like my being divorced. Apparently, I should have closed my eyes to Ron's having a 'fancy piece on the side.' I could go on, but surely you get the general idea?"

Draco shuddered. "I do, indeed."

"So I had to figure out some way to get them out of this office without hurting their feelings, and the next morning when I came downstairs, the castle had moved the walls and bumped out a large alcove on the north side of the Museum and a smaller one on the south side. The smaller one is for Albus and Minerva. They have their own special gallery."

Draco glanced up at the portrait of his godfather which still hung above the fireplace and raised his eyebrows in question.

"Hullo, Uncle Severus. It's good to see you without my having to go down to the Gallery."

Hermione smiled, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Professor Snape preferred to remain sequestered here in my office."

"He preferred... That's... extraordinary." Draco could not fathom that. Something was going on here. His godfather and the Headmistress traded conspiratorial glances; clearly they shared some private amusement.

"Miss Granger indulged my request to remain here, knowing how tempted I would be to take house points from misbehaving students. They tend to be more careless, or perhaps more daring, when there are no teachers present."

The comment was vintage Severus Snape, perfectly enunciated and edged in acid, but Hermione was smiling and Snape's eyes were filled with humour. Draco suddenly felt as though the ground he was standing on had tilted just a little, leaving him on an uncertain footing. He didn't say anything about it, but grew rather quiet as he finished his tea and made his farewells.

When Draco had gone, Hermione looked up at Professor Snape and spoke severely, belying the sparkle in her eyes.

"It was really unkind of you to let Draco think you can still take points away."

"All I said, Miss Granger, was that you knew how tempted I would be to take points. Neither of us actually said I could do so."

He smirked and continued, "You were entirely truthful and so was I. The students are more daring, or more careless, when unsupervised, and I would find it extremely tempting to take points away. The only thing we neglected to tell my godson is that I cannot actually do so."

"Why lie, when misdirection will do?" She nodded her head in sympathy.

"Exactly! Misdirection is so much more subtle."

Laughing, Hermione went back to the pupil lists she was checking, and Snape picked up the book that rested on the table beside his chair, but did not open it and start reading. In the comfortable silence, he thought back to the portrait fiasco and Miss Granger's surprising solution.

She had nearly gone mad with all the portraits of the former Heads of School in her office. Whether they wanted to advise her or patronize her, the former Headmasters and Headmistresses all enjoyed her attention, and spent a great deal of time trying to talk to her. Unfortunately, it was time that she simply didn't have. Always respectful, hesitant to hurt feelings, Miss Granger was in a dreadful position. The wizarding world had changed a lot since the subjects of the portraits had lived and worked at Hogwarts, but they didn't realize it and insisted on giving her out-dated advice.

The breaking point had been reached when Salazar Slytherin had protested that Ron's support payments for Hugo and Rose should be managed by Harry Potter, since Hermione could not be trusted to handle money, and her father was unsuitable by virtue of being a Muggle. As her brother-in-law and a teacher at Hogwarts, Harry Potter was her nearest male relative.

Snape had braced himself for the fireworks he was sure would follow, but with admirable restraint Hermione had made some polite reply, and then, when the old wizard was asleep, had covered his painting with a thick black tablecloth. Salazar had sputtered and raged behind his curtain when he had awakened, but Hermione had ignored him and eventually he had fallen silent.

Later that evening, when most of the portraits were sleeping, she looked up with a sigh to the portrait of the one former Headmaster whose company she truly enjoyed.

"Yes, Miss Granger? Out with it, I can see you are thinking of something."

"This is a lovely office."

"Now that you have put away all the targs and daggers, stuffed Highland Cows, and ersatz bagpipes, the office is becoming pleasant. What has that to do with anything?"

"I was just thinking that I would almost rather be back in my old office. I know all these people mean well, and I'm sure they are charming if you speak to them individually." The pencil she was holding snapped in her hand, as she finished, mutinously, "But trying to make even the tiniest decision causes so much debate and enmity that I feel I'm watching a session of Muggle Parliament. There's got to be a better solution than this."

"I am sure you will find it, Miss Granger." And she had.

The display cases of instruments had already been moved to the Entrance Hall. Two seventh-year Ravenclaws had begged the privilege of researching them, and their findings were written up and displayed along with the devices. The two seventh years had done the research as a special project and earned extra credit for their time and trouble, which pleased them and their Head of House. The solution pleased Hermione because it uncluttered her office.

The morning after her conversation with Shape, Hermione had gone down to the entrance hall to find that the castle walls had moved. Deep alcoves now protruded onto the lawn on the north and south sides of the Museum. In that moment, Hermione had a flash of inspiration, and set the house-elves to laying down some fine rugs and bringing in backless cushioned benches, such as one would find in an art gallery. Then she had gone back to her office and asked for the attention of all the portraits on the walls.

"I have asked for your attention today because Hogwarts has a great need, which I believe only you can fulfill," she began and watched as the portraits woke up and nudged their neighbors.

"I know that you are all pledged, on your oath as witches or wizards, to help the current Head of School." A murmur of agreement rippled around the office. "I find I can best use your help by giving you a lovely new gallery on the ground floor, where the pupils can come and meet you, talk to you, ask your advice. You know far more about Hogwarts than I ever will, and our pupils need your guidance, badly. The Wizarding world is changing very fast these days, and many of them come from untraditional families. Many of them are children of orphans, who have no extended family to help bring them up properly. Would you be willing to make yourselves available to our young people? This is service you alone can give, and it will benefit everyone at Hogwarts."

That was all it took to secure the agreement of the portraits. They found Hermione's office very quiet and quite boring, because she was almost never in it until late at night. Many of them missed teaching and wanted to interact with the students again. In very short order, the house-elves were unsticking the portraits from the walls and carting them down to the new gallery.

When all the relocation was done, Hermione had come back to her now quiet and uncluttered office, flung herself onto the sofa by the fireplace and smiled up at the portrait of Severus Snape.

"And has all been arranged to your satisfaction, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, thank you, it has. Are you quite sure you don't wish to have another portrait of yourself down in the entrance hall? Won't you be lonely up here all by yourself?"

"I thank you, Miss Granger, but that is entirely unnecessary. I prefer the solitude. Your company suits me because you are not offended if I have little to say. If you have some pressing need for me to have a place down in the hall, I will support your decision, but I would prefer to remain here."

Hermione looked up at him for a moment, the previous two years flashing through her mind. She really did enjoy the company of this reserved, thoughtful wizard.

"Professor, though it is incredibly selfish of me to admit this, I enjoy your company so much, I would prefer to have your portrait remain here."

He inclined his head an inch or so and murmured, "As you wish, Madam Headmistress." His words were formal, but this time he made no attempt to hide the smile that curved up the corners of his mouth.

~OoO~

"I never hated Harry Potter, Miss Granger. I felt a great deal of frustration that he could not see how dangerous his behavior was. He did remind me a great deal of his father. Both of them so quick to act, so slow to think until after the deed was done. I must admit that Mr. Harry Potter does not seem to have the meanness that James possessed then."

Hermione had dozens of questions she longed to ask Professor Snape. She wanted desperately to know about his dealings with Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, and especially about Lily Potter. She couldn't admit it, even to herself, but his devotion to Lily both made her sad and gave her shivers. What must it be like to be loved as Snape had loved Lily Potter?

It was late on a summer night, and the castle was extremely quiet, since school was not in session. Hermione had opened the office windows, and the cool night air flowed in, bringing with it the scents of lake and forest.

"I wish Harry had known more about his parents."

"May I ask why, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape was looking at her intently; she could feel the force of his gaze, even if he was sitting with his head tilted down slightly so his hair obscured his eyes.

Hermione blushed, but answered honestly.

"Harry showed me the memories you gave him in the Shrieking Shack, the day you... the day of... the day of the last battle."

"The day I died, Miss Granger?"

She sighed. "I hate to say that. I can't forgive myself, you know, that we didn't do anything to help you."

He sighed and rubbed his fingers over the bridge of his nose.

"I wish you would not be troubled, Miss Granger. I hope I can reassure you that there is nothing you could have done."

"We should have tried."

"No, it's better that you did not attempt it. You would have failed and possibly paid for your failure with your lives."

"But you did so much for all of us. Harry says you did more in the fight against Voldemort than he did; maybe even more than Headmaster Dumbledore, if the truth be told. We should have tried to help you."

"Miss Granger, had you three interfered with the Dark Lord's plans, you and Mr. Weasley would have been killed, and the Dark Lord would have confronted Mr. Potter before he learned about the final Horcrux. The result would have been the doom of the Wizarding world. I beg you not to trouble yourself over this. I have found peace, Miss Granger, and an unexpected joy in the existence I have now."

Hermione was glad that he had found peace, but an impossible frustration filled her heart. In the time since she had been appointed Headmistress and moved into this office, she had grown to care deeply for the man in the portrait.

She had wished for a Time Turner so she could go back and fix the past, but what could she have done? Hex the Dark Lord? Behead Nagini as soon as they had seen the snake? What might her life have been like if Professor Snape had survived? Would they have become friends, somehow? She almost snarled in frustration. It was so unfair that this man, who had sacrificed so much, should have been killed in such a horrible way. And it was miserably unfair that Ron should be happy with his new wife, while the man Hermione had grown to love was nothing more than paint on a canvas.

"Miss Granger?"

She jerked her thoughts back to the present at the sound of his voice.

"I'm sorry, I was remembering that day. And wishing it could have been different. Somehow."

He spoke very gently now.

"Miss Granger... Hermione, if I may be so bold. Had I not died, that day, I still do not know if we would be here now, enjoying one another's company as we have these past months."

"Things would have been different. You would at least be alive, to enjoy the rest of your life without the shadow of Voldemort hanging over you."

"It's possible, of course, that had I survived, my life would have been the utopia you seem to be imagining. It's also quite possible that, had I been saved, Mr. Potter might not have killed the Dark Lord. The Light might have been overthrown. I prefer not to agonize over either outcome. Instead, I try to enjoy today, and what I have now."

She looked directly at him and asked, "And that is?"

He paused for a moment, and she could see that he was carefully considering what he intended to say.

"I have the knowledge that I kept my promises, Miss Granger, and prevented Draco Malfoy from making a ghastly mistake. I protected Mr. Potter to the best of my ability, which honors the love I had for his mother, Lily. I know she has forgiven me for betraying her friendship. I kept my promise to Headmaster Dumbledore and made atonement for the evil deeds I did during my lifetime. And now I delight in your company, you, intelligent, kind, and lovely as you are. I feel very privileged to enjoy such a close association with you, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears.

"I feel the same way, Professor Snape. I am honored to know you."

For a moment the office was very quiet, and then Professor Snape spoke almost hesitantly.

"Perhaps, as you have made no objection to my addressing you as Hermione, you would accord me the honor of calling me Severus?"

"I would like that very much."

~OoO~

Prompt Information

This story was written for the Potter Place Deathly Hallows Challenge.

I used prompts 6 and 8 but modified them.

The original prompts:

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost.

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. Waiting until after the war is won, Hermione gets her Time Turner and goes back a year. She confronts Snape and tells him what will happen. They take the year to come up with a potion that will react once the Dark Lord and the gang leave the Shrieking Shack. Since Hermione cannot be seen by her other self, she must stay with Snape in the dungeons until the day of the battle. I think it would be kind of cool if she were to fight during the battle as herself and her time turner self.)

My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chaper 13: Tragedy and Hope

Chapter 13 of 15

A tragedy, an offer refused, and hope.

Author's Note: I am so excited to be working with my beta reader and XXX from the staff of The Petulant Poetess. These two wonderful women have given me help and guidance, inspiration and support. My story has benefited immensely from their care and expertise. I also tip my hat to my first beta reader, XXX. I feel as though she is cheering me on, and I am so grateful for her support and encouragement.

As always, my debt to J.K. Rowling cannot be measured. I make no profit from my variations on her theme and claim no ownership of anything that belongs to her. I am profoundly grateful to be able to borrow her wonderful universe and characters.

To my readers, it's all for you. Your generosity and kindness recognize no bounds, and I thank you.

Chapter Thirteen: Tragedy and Hope

Three Years Later

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

"Hermione."

Hermione looked up from a Ministry form when Severus called her name. She was instantly concerned when she saw the drawn look to his sharp features.

"What's wrong, Severus? You look quite upset."

"I have just been at Malfoy Manor, Hermione. There's been a dreadful accident."

"Oh, no, what's happened?"

"Daphne Malfoy was thrown when her horse refused a jump. Draco fears she has broken her neck."

"Oh, no!"

Hermione dropped the form on her desk and jumped to her feet.

"My godson charged me with telling Scorpius about his mother. I would feel most comfortable if you summoned him here. Perhaps you could ask Professor Zabini to come with him?"

"I agree. Please excuse me. I'll get Blaise myself; this is not an errand for house-elves."

"Of course."

Hermione hurried out of the office in a flurry of swirling robes and tapping heels and returned within a very short time. It had been a passing period between classes, and she had found the Head of Slytherin House just outside the Great Hall.

"Blaise has gone to find Scorpius. They will be here shortly, Severus." She paced around in the clear space between the sofa and her desk, her lips trembling and chocolate brown eyes liquid with unshed tears. She had not been close friends with Daphne Greengrass in her student years at Hogwarts, but they had become friends through Draco. She stopped pacing to ask, "What were they doing for her? Surely they weren't going to try to get her to St. Mungo's?"

"No, Draco Floored St. Mungo's for a Healer to come to Malfoy Manor. Daphne could not be moved."

The gargoyle announced, "Professor Zabini and Mr. Malfoy have entered the staircase, Madam Headmistress."

"Thank you."

A tense silence filled the spacious office as Hermione waited to usher in Professor Zabini and Scorpius Malfoy. She seated them on the sofa in front of the fireplace, anxiously studying the tall, thin, Malfoy heir. He looked so much like her memories of Draco at the same age. She didn't embarrass the boy by speaking of it, merely made sure her two guests were comfortable, and told the gargoyle to prevent anyone from entering her office till she told it otherwise.

"Madam Granger-Weasley, you said it was urgent?"

"Thank you for bringing Mr. Malfoy, Professor Zabini. Will you stay, please? Mr. Malfoy, Professor Snape needs to speak to you."

Scorpius looked up and broke into a smile. "Great-Uncle Severus." Clearly the boy was delighted to see Professor Snape.

"Scorpius, I have just come from your home." His voice faltered for a moment, then softened. "I have some very distressing news."

"What's happened?" The boy turned pale, and Hermione and Blaise Zabini each put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"Your mother was out riding this morning and was thrown from her horse. She has been very badly injured, Scorpius. They may not be able to help her. I am so sorry, son."

Hermione felt Scorpius begin to tremble under her hand, and she squeezed his shoulder, wishing she could comfort him. After a moment, he swallowed hard and asked,

"Do I need to go home? What's being done for Mother?"

"Your father has summoned the best Healers, Scorpius. He wants you to stay here at the school unless he comes to get you. I fear there is nothing you can do for your mother till the Healers have her condition stabilized."

Scorpius grew even paler and his lips quivered just a little. He drew in a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. When he spoke, the only outward evidence of his fear could be heard in the husky rasp of his voice.

"Great-Uncle Severus, will you go to your other portrait and check on her?"

"Yes, Scorpius, from time to time I will."

He turned to Hermione and Blaise. "What shall I do, Professor Zabini? Headmistress?"

"You'll stay here in my office, Mr. Malfoy. Your Great-Uncle won't want to chase through all the portraits in Hogwarts looking for you when he gets word of your mother's condition, and you might be needed on a moment's notice. Professor Zabini can excuse your absence to your teachers and get your assignments from them for you."

"I'll take care of notifying his teachers now, Headmistress." With a friendly hand on Scorpius's shoulder for a moment, Blaise Zabini left the room, and Hermione got Draco's son settled on the sofa by the fireplace in short order. She arranged for tea and took Winky aside to charge her with young Mr. Malfoy's comfort while he waited for news of his mother's condition.

She was happy to see that he seemed to have his own resources to rely on. He pulled a book out of his pack and began to study, looking up every few minutes to see whether his Great-Uncle had any news for him.

Hermione noticed that Severus watched over the boy, giving him a quiet word of reassurance each time he came back to his portrait from Malfoy Manor. Severus was pleased to see that Hermione didn't fuss over Scorpius. Her compassion for the boy was evident in her eyes, in her thoughtful comments and honest answers to his questions. Scorpius Malfoy was probably better off at school, Severus decided. Draco would be attending the Healers, and Scorpius would have been left to the company of already busy house-elves.

Hermione ordered dinner to be served in her dining room and, after a brief conference with Blaise Zabini, invited two of Scorpius's closest friends to join them, but it was a very quiet meal. Scorpius's two housemates returned to their normal activities again after dinner, and Scorpius went back to his books.

Severus had gone to Malfoy Manor right after dinner, and Hermione wondered what was happening, and whether the Healers had been able to do anything for Daphne.

The hour grew late and Scorpius fell asleep over his books. Hermione covered him with a soft blanket and dimmed the candles by the sofa, but did not leave her office. She was waiting when Severus returned silently to his portrait. She hurried over to the portrait as soon as he arrived and reached up to touch his painted hand on the canvas. His eyes were dark with pain and he shook his head.

"The Healers were not able to save her," he whispered. "Draco will be coming to Hogwarts tonight, as soon as the necessary arrangements have been made."

Hermione nodded. She would wait up for him. No, that was not entirely correct. She and Severus would wait for Draco. And they would stand by Scorpius together.

~0o0~

The months passed. Hermione gave Scorpius Malfoy the password to her office so he could come in and speak to his Great-Uncle's portrait when he had free time, and as she grew to know the young man, he became special to her. Her own two children, Rose and Hugo, had befriended him, and through them, he became friends with James, Albus and Lily Potter. Scorpius was awestruck that Harry Potter had given Albus the middle name of Severus, and that increased his respect for Professor Potter. Harry and Draco had long since become good friends, and now the friendship between their children was easing the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

Draco was lonely. He began spending quite a lot of free time at the school, at first visiting his son and chaperoning Hogsmeade weekends. Soon, he was spending as much time with the Headmistress as he spent with his son. Hermione enjoyed his company, and she grew accustomed to his dropping in after dinner for tea and conversation. For her that's all Draco's visits meant, and she completely unaware that Draco was interested in something more, until one night when he lingered after a dinner party.

They were sitting on the sofa in front of the fireplace in her office, and for once Severus was not taking part in the conversation. He had moved his chair to the back of his picture and was sitting in the shadows. To any casual on-looker, he was asleep. Actually, he was watching through the curtain of his hair and straining to hear what was being said in the office.

"Draco, would you like more wine?"

Hermione held up the elegant decanter, but Draco shook his head. He leaned towards her and brushed his lips across her cheek, then took the decanter away from her and set it on the table. He caught hold of her shoulders and drew her into his arms, kissing her tenderly, but then with growing passion. For an instant, Hermione remained quiet in his arms. When he continued to kiss her, she drew away with a confused murmur of his name.

"Draco? What..." Her voice trailed off as she scooted back slightly from the handsome man sitting beside her on the couch.

"I wanted to kiss you. I have for a long time, Hermione."

She didn't say anything, but Draco continued, "You know how much I appreciate all you've done for my son... Somehow, I have been thinking about you more and more. You're really an extraordinary woman. I think I could be falling in love with you, Madam Headmistress."

His voice was soft and gentle as he spoke, and he looked at her steadily, trying to read her feelings from the expression on her face.

She drew in her breath and let it out in a shaky sigh. "Draco. Oh, Draco. You're very dear to me, and I have grown to love Scorpius as much as my own kids or my nephews and nieces. You're a wonderful father; Scorpius is growing into a fine young man. You should be very proud of him."

"But...?" His eyes were kind, his mouth curved in a rueful smile.

"Please don't be hurt, or angry? I love you the way I love Harry, Draco. You're one of my best friends, but you deserve so much more."

Draco smiled tenderly and kissed her again, this time on her forehead.

"I'm not angry, dear. I'm very fond of you, and if there were any sparks between us, I was going to steal you off to Malfoy Manor and ravish you. Since you're not so inclined, though, I will just look around and find another lady to shower with attention." His eyes lit with mischief, and an impish smile quirked up the corners of his mouth. "I'll have to think of some other way to make Father spin in his grave."

"What an incentive." She smiled back at him, relieved that he wasn't angry. This was just Draco, her dear friend, and they were talking and joking as they did after every dinner party at Hogwarts.

"Hermione, my dear... May I be honest?"

She nodded her head.

"Maybe it's the Slytherin coming out in me, but I wanted to find out if you were interested before I allowed myself to fall in love with you and make a fool of myself chasing you. It's been so long since I had to worry about dating and all the usual mating rituals." His grin was unrepentantly cheeky. "I suppose it's my ego that has to ask if there is someone else in your life."

Hermione glanced up at the portrait of Severus Snape and her cheeks flushed a soft rose, but she shook her head.

"I'm not dating anyone, Draco. You're very, very dear to me, but I don't think I shall ever marry again."

He nodded his head. He'd seen her fleeting glance up at the portrait of his godfather, and he understood what the look meant, even if she didn't.

"You're very dear to me, too, Granger." He got to his feet and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry you and I are a story destined to go unwritten."

She looked up at her friend and then wrapped her arm around his waist. "You really do understand, though."

"I think I do, yes."

"And you're not angry with me?"

"As rejections go, yours was the very nicest I have ever gotten." He pouted and dropped his eyes, trying to look heartbroken.

"Brat! Draco, I do love you very much, but not that way. I know I'm not saying this right..."

He turned her to face him and placed a finger over her lips.

"I do understand. Honest."

She hugged him tight and dropped her head onto his shoulder for a moment before releasing him.

"A part of me knows I am an idiot, to turn down the most eligible bachelor in Wizarding Britain, Draco."

"If you cared for that sort of thing, you would have seduced me long ago, Granger." He gave her a cheeky smile, and she laughed.

"Still as horrible as ever you were. Why do I put up with you?"

"Because I'm rich and good looking."

"Damn! Forgot about that. You are some woman's dream walking round on two legs."

"Just not your dream, eh? I guess that means there is still hope for me, though. If you happen to run across that particular woman, steer her in my direction, alright?"

She chuckled. "You bet."

With a jaunty salute he left the office, whistling as he walked down the hall. Hermione sat back down on the sofa, her eyes soft, and an amused smile on her face.

A cough drew her attention to the portrait over the fireplace.

"Severus, good evening." Her smile was warm and filled with genuine delight.

"Hermione." He smiled at her, but seemed uncomfortable. "I was trying not to eavesdrop, but I have always had exceptional hearing. Please forgive me, I couldn't help but hear your conversation with my godson."

"Severus, I have no secrets from you." *Except that I love you with all my heart, but other than that...* she thought with a mental shrug of her shoulders.

"How very Gryffindor of you."

"I trust you."

"I am honored." He sketched a bow and she shivered, imagining him kissing her hand.

She didn't think he had any idea how she felt about him, and it seemed so pointless to tell him, but part of her wanted to share her feelings with him and to learn how he felt about her.

"You shivered."

"Yes, I felt a draft."

"Hermione, honor demands that I tell you I believe you and Draco would be well matched. He is a very charming man and he would treat you well; he has the example of his father to follow. Whatever else he was and did, Lucius loved Narcissa very much and treated her like a queen."

Severus spoke in favor of Draco because he wanted, more than anything, for Hermione Granger to find happiness. His regard for her had grown past the point of friendship; he knew that he loved her very much. Honor kept him silent. He had nothing to offer her. He could not climb down out of his portrait to kiss her, to hold her when she cried, to stroke her hair and cuddle with her on the sofa and watch her eyes close in drowsy contentment. Harry Potter had thrown away the Resurrection Stone after the fall of Voldemort, but if it had been available Severus would have begged it from Potter on bended knee, if it meant he could be with Hermione. And that was not possible.

He was drawn out of his thoughts by her soft voice.

"Severus, Draco is all that is handsome and wealthy and charming, but he's not the right man for me. I'm not the right woman for him."

"I'm sure he cares deeply for you. He is proud of all you have accomplished."

"I love Draco very much, but only as a friend. And I will never feel more than friendship for him." She shook her curly head and smiled up at Severus. "It would have been wrong of me to let him think I care more than I do. I won't play those kinds of games with his heart. He needs to be free to find someone who will love him as he deserves to be loved."

Severus gave her a longing look from behind the curtain of his hair and thought to himself, *What of you, Hermione? Do you not deserve to find someone who can love you as you deserve to be loved?* But he didn't dare speak the words out loud.

"As it happens, I know Luna Lovegood adores Draco. I think I will give a little dinner party in the next few weeks and invite them both. See what happens."

And with that, she changed the subject.

The Library, First Floor, Malfoy Manor, Nottinghamshire, England

"So tell me what's going on at Hogwarts these days, Severus." Lucius Malfoy lounged elegantly in his portrait in the library of Malfoy Manor. The library was empty save for the two men in their portraits, but a bright fire burned on the hearth and a half glass of wine waited on the desk, along with a number of unanswered letters of Draco's.

"Surely you've heard about Hogwarts from Draco?"

"I've heard all the news from Draco. He rattles on and on about Quidditch and that museum of Dumbledore's, as if it were Dumbledore's idea, and not yours or Hermione Granger's. I want all the gossip, Severus. And I want to know why Draco isn't seeing nearly as much as Madam Granger-Weasley as he was this time last month."

Severus had spent the evening with Lucius and his godson and had been dreading this topic the entire time. Of all the ill luck, Draco had been called away by an unexpected visitor before Severus could make his farewells and get back to his portrait at Hogwarts, and Lucius had pounced as soon as the door closed behind Draco.

"I believe my son was going to propose to our dear Headmistress, Severus, and I should like to know why he suddenly stopped seeing her."

Severus was spared the agony of answering by Draco's return to the library. He entered in time to hear Lucius's last question and smiled as he sat down at his desk.

"Father, I would have answered that had I known you were so curious."

"I would very much like to know what you were thinking and planning."

"Father, I thought I was falling in love with Hermione Granger-Weasley. I had dinner with her several weeks ago and told her how I felt, and she very gently and nicely rejected me and told me I needed to look elsewhere to find the love of my life."

Severus had never seen Lucius put so neatly in his place. Malfoy senior sat back in his chair, started to say something, then decided against it and shook his head.

"She rejected you?" Severus almost laughed; from the stunned look on Lucius's face, one might have supposed the moon had moved backwards in its orbit.

"Yes, Father, she did. And I'm glad, too. There are a lot of women who would have lied, tried to convince me or themselves that they loved me, and it would have been a huge mess later on. Granger never pulls her punches, Merlin bless her."

"But you're a Malfoy."

"I don't think blood-lines mean a lot to Granger."

"Well, they damn well ought to."

Draco was leaning back in his chair, laughing heartily at his father's indignation.

"She doesn't love me, Father. That's hardly a crime."

"Were you in love with her?"

"I thought I might have been falling in love with her. But her honesty made me think about it more carefully, and I realized that I was really feeling a tremendous amount of gratitude to her for all she's done for Scorpius. Along with a healthy dose of attraction. She does clean up nicely. That dress she wore to the Memorial gala last winter was very nice, indeed."

"I saw her picture in the newspaper. I'll grant you, she did look quite lovely. But I am glad you're not marrying her."

Severus remembered how Hermione had looked the night of the gala, as well. He would never forget how beautiful she had looked that night, actually. She'd worn a gown of deep red velvet, cut on slender lines. The gown had a wide, low, sweetheart neckline that almost bared her shoulders, and the velvet clung faithfully to her slender form till it flared into a bell skirt that brushed the floor. The warm color was very flattering to her russet hair and fair complexion, and Severus had thought, looking at her, that Draco was incredibly lucky to be escorting her to the gala.

"She said there was no one else, but I have come to believe she wasn't entirely truthful about that."

"Oh?" It was Lucius who spoke, but both he and Severus leaned forward in their chairs and gave Draco their full attention.

"I think she cherishes tender feelings for someone other than me."

"Who, then?"

"Uncle Severus, actually."

Lucius chuckled, but Severus went pale.

"I sincerely hope you're wrong, Draco. It would be entirely inappropriate for her to waste her life on fantasies."

"First, Uncle Severus, I doubt she sees caring for you as wasting her life. She's choosy and wouldn't be happy with most wizards. I'm surprised she and Weasley stayed married to each other as long as they did."

"Ronald Weasley was an ignorant, inconsiderate dunderhead." Severus's criticism of Weasley brought chuckles from his companions.

"That's very true, Severus."

"He didn't know how to make her happy, Uncle, I'll grant you that. But there aren't many wizards who would. She intimidates most of them."

"That doesn't mean she... er... cares for me, particularly."

"No. I can't really explain why I believe she cares for you a great deal, Uncle Severus. But I think she does."

I would be the happiest and the most miserable wizard in Britain if she does care as much as Draco thinks she does. But of course, she can't possibly... Severus felt decidedly out of sorts as he made his farewells and traveled back to his portrait in Hermione's office at Hogwarts.

"Mark my words, Father, Hermione Granger does love him. He will never believe it, but it's true all the same."

And Lucius nodded his head. He, too, had seen the look in Snape's eyes when Hermione's name was mentioned.

The Albus Dumbledore Museum of Magical Devices, Ground Floor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

With time, the exhibits in the Magical Devices Museum grew more elaborate, and now a portrait of Albus Dumbledore hung in the exhibit room. The venerable Headmaster spent many hours in his frame there, explaining to students and visitors what the devices were and how they worked.

Severus had a new portrait in the museum now, at Albus Dumbledore's request. Several of the gadgets in the Museum were used in making potions or preparing ingredients, and Albus occasionally requested his presence to explain the finer points of brewing potions to eager advanced students who understood how talented Snape had been.

One Saturday afternoon, at the end of a discussion on brewing Wolfsbane, Albus implored Severus to stay for a few moments so they could catch up. Severus realized it had been weeks since he had seen Dumbledore.

"Minnie is sleeping, and planned to visit with Dilys Derwent when she woke up, so I welcome the chance to speak with you, Severus. How are you getting on these days?"

"I am well, Headmaster. You're looking hale and hearty yourself."

"I thoroughly enjoy being down here where I can mingle with the students and visitors. It keeps my mind active. Don't know if you've noticed, but Salazar Slytherin's picture is in a very dim corner of the Founder's Gallery, and he doesn't bother to stay awake most days."

"In these days of new-found tolerance, perhaps he doesn't get many visitors." Snape lifted one eyebrow in silent eloquent question, and Dumbledore laughed.

"He didn't get many visitors when being a Pure-blood was fashionable, Severus. But perhaps it's for the best. We don't need anyone encouraging the students to regress in their attitudes."

Severus nodded his assent, and Albus shot his younger colleague a sharp look. "How is Madam Granger-Weasley these days? I do hear her voice out in the corridor nearly every day, and she pops in here about once a week to say hello and ask if I am comfortable, but she doesn't have much time to chat."

"Miss Granger is well. She is very pleased with the students and teachers here and very happy with the support received from the Ministry."

I'm glad." Dumbledore's bright blue eyes began to twinkle now. "When shall I have the chance to wish her happy? I'd heard that young Draco Malfoy offered for her?"

"Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger are not courting, Headmaster." Snape hoped his explanation would cause Dumbledore to drop the subject, but Dumbledore had a specific end in mind and wouldn't be distracted.

"A pity, in some ways. They would look handsome together on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*."

"Merlin's worm-riddled broom, what does that have to do with whether they would be happy?"

Snape's sharp rejoinder caused Dumbledore to chuckle. He'd guessed it would take more than a few comments to get Snape to speak of Hermione Granger.

"Why should they not be happy? She is a lovely, accomplished witch, he a handsome, wealthy wizard. They have similar values and work well together."

"Miss Granger rejected the relationship when it was offered to her. She does not feel they should suit as er... lovers or marriage partners."

A hint of red crept into Snape's cheeks as he spoke; a flush that Dumbledore was watching for and spotted even through the curtain of Snape's hair.

"How interesting. I know that Mr. Ronald Weasley is not around much... "

"Miss Granger's former husband and his second wife live in Ireland, and have several children now. I believe that keeps him rather busy."

"I hear they're very happy together, which is lovely. Don't you agree?"

Severus rolled his eyes.

"I'm ecstatically happy for them both, you may be sure."

"Hermione and Harry were always more like brother and sister; I never saw the two of them as a romantic pair." Dumbledore was musing now. "Does she not have a teacher with whom she socializes? Someone who makes her heart beat a little faster?"

"Headmaster, I am hardly privy to such information as that."

"But you're in the perfect position to observe her, my boy. Isn't there someone who is a regular visitor to her office out of hours, so to speak?"

Irritated by the questions, Severus snapped, "I am generally the only company Miss Granger has in her office of an evening, Headmaster."

"Does she have a tendresse for you? Is that why she refused Draco?"

"Good Merlin, I hope not. And it would hardly be appropriate for me to gossip about it, regardless."

"Well, of course that's true. One doesn't inquire too closely into a lady's feelings. What about you, Severus?"

"Me?"

"Have you developed a secret passion for Miss Granger?"

"Surely you jest, Headmaster. What have I to offer Miss Granger?" The flush in his cheeks deepened and Albus began to smile. "I hardly think it would be appropriate for me to cherish tender feelings towards her, nor to discuss it if I did, Headmaster."

"Now, now, don't get defensive. I didn't ask if it would be appropriate, Severus, I asked if you love her. She's a charming woman, and I have wondered from time to time whether the two of you might have been a good pair, had things gone differently."

"I agree that Miss Granger is very charming. Any reasonable man would be honored to have her care for him."

"As you have often described yourself as unreasonable, I gain no information regarding your feelings for Hermione Granger, Severus."

It's was like being on the rack Severus thought desperately. *I feel all the muscles stretch beyond endurance and the inquisitor loosens the wheel, only to tighten it once again. Even Cruciatius would be better than this* Snape was sure that Dumbledore would continue to pick at him until he revealed how he truly felt. And really... was it such an evil thing to admit his deep regard for Hermione Granger? Deep regard wasn't an accurate description. He loved her with his entire heart. His feelings for Hermione were so much stronger than anything he'd ever felt for Lily Potter that it seemed ridiculous to call both of them love.

"Severus? Have I pushed you too hard?"

"No." He shook his head and spoke very softly. "I... I love her. But I don't have anything to offer her."

"You can give her love and companionship and understanding, Severus. Those things are important."

He looked up at the aged Headmaster, his eyes widening in shock. "I... No, Headmaster, I can't ever allow her to know how I feel."

"You should more than allow her to know; you should tell her how you feel, Severus."

He shook his head.

"No. I can't interfere in her life. She's a very young woman, she's talented and beautiful and charming. I want her to find someone who makes her happy."

He hesitated. "Perhaps I should ask to have my portrait moved to the dungeons. The Potions classroom, perhaps."

"She is not likely to permit that, if she cares for you." That blasted twinkle was back in Dumbledore's eyes, and for a moment Severus wondered if he could hex the other portrait, given that he had been painted with his wand on the table beside him. Then his face softened. He knew he could not raise his wand against Albus Dumbledore. It had nearly killed him to do it once. Even in jest, he could not do it again.

"Albus, I can't ruin her life as I did Lily's. She won't have time to come to the dungeons every day to speak to me. In time, she would forget how she feels. Loneliness would

drive her to associate with others, and she would find someone to care for, someone who would care for her in return."

"Severus, tell me one instant where Hermione Granger has ever forgotten anything important to her? This is nothing like the situation with Lily Evans. " The kindly Headmaster paused, then continued in a gentle voice, "Severus, you cared for Lily Evans more than you ever cared for anyone in your young life. Lily was a charming girl, and she was your first love. But, Severus had you won her from James Potter, had you never turned away from the Light... I do not believe you would have been happy with Lily. She had flaws that you were too entranced to see."

"Even if that were true, Headmaster, I should not allow Miss Granger to continue to care for me, not if that costs her a chance to form a relationship with someone more deserving of her."

"Severus, love isn't about deserving. I have worried for all of your adult life that you would feel as you do: unforgiven and unworthy. Let me tell you now, Severus, that the only forgiveness issue between us is the need for me to ask your forgiveness for all I asked of you. I put a burden on you that ten wizards should not be asked to carry, and you never once let me down. But my demands cost you your happiness. Will you forgive me?"

"Albus, you helped me right the wrongs I had done. You trusted me. If you need my forgiveness you have it, but I would say you have done nothing that requires my pardon."

The old wizard smiled a gentle smile that glowed softly in his eyes. "I thank you, Severus. But my counsel to you is this; you owe Hermione Granger the privilege of choosing for herself. You can't go running away."

"Dumbledore... I can't... What would I even say?"

"Well, you could compose a song in her honor, or write your feelings in verse, but probably *love you, Hermione* would do." Severus felt cornered with nowhere to hide. Dumbledore almost made it sound sensible to tell Miss Granger how he felt about her. It was insanity, plain and simple; what would Miss Granger say? What COULD she say? He could imagine it now... He would tell her that he loved her, she would give him a pitying smile, and then there would be a thick black curtain thrown over his picture. When the curtain was opened again, he would find himself turned backwards and stuffed behind a wardrobe in the room of hidden things.

Severus shook his hair back over his face and bowed to Dumbledore.

"I beg you will excuse me. Perhaps I should go and... compose a sonnet in her honor." This conversation had left him completely off balance and horribly confused.

"A sonnet would melt a heart of ice, Severus. I applaud you, dear boy, and shall await the results with interest."

Severus made haste to return to his frame in Hermione's office. Compose a sonnet, indeed. The way he was feeling now, he would be lucky to come up with a limerick, but sarcasm was lost on Albus Dumbledore.

He seated himself at his table and picked up his quill to sketch a frame of nine squares on a sheet of parchment. Tic-Tac-Toe required very little in the way of creativity or even intelligence. It would be a safe enough pastime.

~OoO~

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My modifications: The story is written about a portrait and not a ghost. I only borrowed Hermione being in love with Severus from prompt 8.

Chaper 14: Revelations

Chapter 14 of 15

In which honesty prevails and long-silenced feelings are expressed.

Author's Note:

First, the debt I owe to J.K.Rowling cannot be measured. I respect her as a person for her generous support of her fans and love the marvelous universe she has created. My variations on her theme earn me nothing except personal satisfaction and, I hope, the pleasure and enjoyment of those who choose to read my work.

The moderators of this forum are incredibly kind, generous with their time, talents, and knowledge, and tremendously supportive of a newbie author with a galloping comma anxiety. I tip my hat to them and would send them Alan Rickman himself, if I could. (It would be up to them to decide how to share him.)

My beta-reader, XXX, is a sweetheart who encouraged me with great suggestions and the patience and good humor of a first-class coach. It does my heart good to know she is cheering me on.

To those of you who have read the story and enjoyed it--it's all for you:)

Chapter Fourteen: Revelations

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Evening. Soft breezes filled the room with the cool green scent of the Forbidden Forest. Hermione Granger-Weasley was curled up on the sofa in her office, shoes off, hair twisted into a casual knot at the back of her neck. She was reading the latest edition of an Arithmancy journal to which she subscribed. Severus was seated at his desk, and the only sound in the office was the soft scratch of his quill on the parchment before him. Occasionally, one or the other would look up with a comment, but neither felt the need to chatter to fill the silence. They were comfortable together. For Hermione contentment was a quiet evening just like this, with only Severus for company.

Tonight, Severus was suffering the tortures of the damned, however. His recent conversation with Albus Dumbledore kept echoing in his mind. He loved Hermione Granger. He was beginning to believe she cared for him in the same way, but what was he to do about that? He wanted to run and hide. He felt keenly the failure of his relationship with Lily, all those years ago, and didn't want to go through anything like that ever again. Mostly, though, he wanted to protect Hermione from any sort of hurt. And that was proof of his love for her.

His instincts told him that as long as he said nothing to her about his feelings, he could not hurt her, but since his conversation with Albus, he was beginning to doubt that. Wasn't it natural to want to share feelings such as these? Looking back, he could vividly remember how much he had wanted to know that Lily cared for him, how much it had mattered to him to know she cared. Would Hermione want to know that he loved her? He turned the question around. Did he want to know her feelings for him? The answer to that was, "Yes," without doubt or qualification.

He sat at his table, lost in thought, until he heard a soft exclamation of pleasure from the sofa, and looked up to see Hermione holding a piece of silvery grey parchment in her hand.

"What is that, Miss Granger? It seems to give you a great deal of pleasure."

She smiled up at him. "It's a wedding invitation."

"Oh? Who is getting married?"

"Draco Malfoy and Luna Lovegood. Did you know they were dating?"

"I was aware that my godson had escorted Miss Lovegood to several functions recently, but I did not know he intended to propose."

Hermione's laughter bubbled out like champagne. "I don't think he did propose, actually. Luna put a little note in with the invitation. She has been in love with him for years, and she says in her note, *'He said YES!!!!'* I think she may be the one who actually proposed."

"What an extraordinary idea."

"Why?"

Severus smiled. He had known his comment would arouse a question from Hermione Granger, who still wanted to know and understand everything.

"It's the man's duty to propose." He firmly suppressed a smile, trying to maintain an illusion of mild distaste at the concept of forward women.

She got to her feet and stood before his painting with her hands on her hips and a challenging glint in her eyes.

"And if a woman loves a man, she can't declare her feelings for him and ask him to share her life?"

"I suppose there is nothing against it." A disapproving snort. "But it isn't normal or customary in Wizarding society."

"You could hardly describe Luna as normal or customary, Severus." He inclined his head in acknowledgment of her point. "I am very happy for them. Luna understands Draco very well, and they will be good for each other."

She saw him sigh heavily and wondered what he was thinking. Watching her, Severus realized that the time had come to reveal how he felt about her. He reasoned, *will never get a better opening. I might as well get this over with fast. That way, if she does not care for me as I do her, the pain will be swiftly administered, and I can have my portrait moved to the dungeons, where I can lick my wounds in peace.*

"Miss Granger, indulge my curiosity?"

She nodded her head.

"You have not re-married, and you refused a romantic relationship with Draco Malfoy not very long ago. May I ask why?"

She blushed, but maintained eye contact with him. Severus found himself holding his proverbial breath.

"Draco is a wonderful friend." She drew in a deep breath. "But he deserves better than an unfaithful wife."

He felt as if he had just taken a Bludger to the stomach.

"I don't understand."

"Draco is very dear to me. But he would have known that he did not have my heart, Severus. That belongs to someone else."

His heart sank. Surely she wasn't carrying a torch for Weasley after all these years?

"Weasley, I suppose." The faintest edge of disdain crept into his voice.

"Ron? Great Merciful Merlin!" Her soft chuckle surprised him. "No, Severus, I haven't had those kinds of feelings for Ron for a long time. Years. Don't you understand what I am trying to tell you?"

"No, Hermione. I have never been good at this."

Now he dropped his eyes, as if he could not bear to hear what she would say next.

"Severus, I can't give my heart to Draco because it belongs to you. I love you very much, Severus Snape. Can't you see that?"

Her voice was very soft and tender, and when he risked a glance in her direction, he saw that her eyes were filled with love. Happiness and duty warred in his mind, and being Severus, duty won out.

"Hermione, if I were a better man, I would compel you to take it back and give it to Draco. He is the better choice for you, by far." To him, the choice was painfully clear. "You're the same age. He is very personable and charming; a handsome, wealthy wizard. He could give you more children if you desire them. Even if you don't desire more children, Draco could give you so much that I cannot."

"Severus, he isn't you. And Draco's very perceptive. He would see that I am always thinking of you, Severus. What would that be like for him? To know that no matter what

he did or how he tried, I would be thinking, always, of another man?"

"That would be intolerable." Hadn't he lived through that when Lily had begun dating James Potter?

"I love Draco, Severus, but as a best friend, a brother. I love Draco the same way I love Harry. I'm thrilled, actually, that he and Luna are getting married. They suit each other so well. "

"Hermione, I have nothing to offer you." He dropped his head so that his hair fell in curtains over his face to hide his shame.

"Severus, I have your companionship. I hope and believe that I have your affection. Is it as much of you as I want? No, because I wish you could climb down out of that picture and hold me or that I could climb up there to kiss you. But the image of you means more to me than the reality of Draco or any other man I have ever met."

"Hermione, you humble me. My dear, I love you so very much. But this is not right. I do not deserve your feelings for me. I do not deserve to be loved like that."

"Severus Snape! Listen to me. Love isn't about deserving, love is about acceptance. It's about faith in the people you love, that they will love you always, come what may. I know you accept who I am, bossiness, temper, bushy hair and all. Just as I accept you as you are, sharp tongue, brilliance, snarkiness and all. And I know that with you I am happier than I have ever been. Don't tell me I should have chosen Draco over you. If I had, it would have condemned both of us to a lifetime of *what might have been's*."

Tears were streaming from her eyes now. "Severus... your image lives in that painting. But you... you live in my heart." She came to the fireplace and climbed onto the tea table to reach up and tenderly stroke her fingers over his mouth. "I love you."

He reached up in the picture and brushed his fingers across his lips where her fingers had touched an instant before.

"My dear one. You know what my life has been like, and I do not have the fortitude to try to talk you out of loving me. You have chosen me, Merlin alone knows why, and I want you to love me the way I hope for my first glimpse of heaven. It's a wonder to me that you can love me as I am." He still couldn't quite believe this conversation was real, as it so closely resembled some of the pleasant daydreams that he had lately fallen prey to.

"I wouldn't be happy with Draco, Severus. And surely you can see how unfair it would have been for me to marry him?"

"Yes, I understand now." And he did. Gryffindor honesty demanded that she be truthful even to herself, and Gryffindor courage would carry her through, even if being honest meant she lived the rest of her life without a mate.

"Draco IS my friend. I couldn't be so uncaring of his happiness."

Joy and guilt warred for supremacy on his face. Finally he smiled, but immediately grew solemn again.

"You make me very happy, Hermione. But if ever you do find someone that you love... you must let me go. Will you promise me that?"

She chuckled, a watery chuckle that still held traces of tears.

"I promise, though it will never happen. I require a promise from you in return, though."

"What can I promise you, my dear?"

"Let me share something with you, please? You may not have heard this." Severus nodded and watched her intently, his eyes never leaving her face. "When we left the Shrieking Shack, Voldemort had given us an hour to give Harry up. Harry went to Dumbledore's office and looked at the memories you gave him. He found out what Dumbledore had known all along." Her voice grew raspy again, and her eyes filled with tears. "That Harry was the last Horcrux, and he would have to die to get rid of that piece of Voldemort's soul. He knew he had to let Voldemort kill him."

Severus nodded. He knew this part of the story. When he had awakened in his picture frame in Minerva McGonagall's office, she had told him Harry's story, and Severus had been stunned by Harry's courage.

"Severus, when he walked from the school to the forest where Voldemort was waiting for him, his mother and father and Remus and Sirius met him. They were allowed to be with him when he... died. To escort him to... whatever comes after this life. I know Harry talked to you after the war was over. Did he ever talk to you about this? "

"Mr. Potter came to speak to my portrait a few times, right after the war... when I first awakened as a picture. He did mention that experience."

She smiled in relief.

"Severus, when I die... Promise that you will come for me. I won't be afraid if I know you are waiting for me."

He drew in his breath and a single tear sparkled like a diamond in his dark eyes.

"My dear, I will be waiting for you. I promise."

She wiped her tears away and looked up at him with a shaky laugh.

"There's an old Muggle song... that says... *If we both were born in another place and time, this moment might be ending in a kiss*... You have no idea how much I wish I could kiss you. Can I owe you one? To be paid at the first available opportunity?"

A rare smile lit his eyes.

"I shall hold you in debt to me for a lifetime of kisses. I'll add them to your tab, shall I? Along with the Boomslang Skin and Bicorn Horn you stole from my stores in your second year. You may be sure I shall collect on the debt."

"And I will gladly pay it. With interest." She drew in a deep breath and tenderly touched his portrait again. Then, she wiped her tears away and climbed down from the tea table, curling up again on her sofa. When she looked up at him, the tenderness was still there in her gaze, even though her words were brisk and business-like. "Now, did you read this article in the *Potions Master's Digest*, about using a cheese grater to shred crystallized ginger when you need to work with it? Have you ever heard of anything so silly in your entire life?"

"I did read the article. Crystallized ginger needs to be cut into uniform size pieces, and you simply don't have that precision if you use a grater. The idea is not new, but it's as ludicrous now as it ever was..."

As the night drew on, the castle itself seemed to heave a huge sigh of relief and hope.

~OoO~

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Chaper 15: Epilogue

Chapter 15 of 15

Deathly Hallows Prompts 6 and 8.

6. The kids leave after Snape dies. He sits up and realizes he is a ghost. (I changed this to a portrait instead of a ghost.)

8. As Hermione, Ron, and Harry watch Snape die, Hermione is devastated because she has been secretly in love with him. (The prompt calls for Hermione to use a Time-Turner to go back and rescue Severus, but I wanted to comply with the book and see if I could write a story where Hermione develops a strong, loving friendship with the Severus Snape she meets as a portrait many years later.)

Time: After the Epilogue. Place: Hogwarts. Hermione is teaching at Hogwarts and is Deputy Headmistress to Minerva McGonagall. Her children, Rose and Hugo, live at Hogwarts with her; her husband Ron manages the All-England Quidditch League. When Minerva McGonagall dies, Hermione is appointed Headmistress and moves in to the Head's office.

Chapter Fifteen: Epilogue

95 years later

Office of the Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Hogsmeade, Scotland

Sunlight streamed in through leaded glass windows, warming the hands and face of the very old witch who sat behind the beautiful cherry desk. Her face was lined and wrinkled, but her eyes were bright, her hair a long tangle of riotous snow-white ringlets. She had papers spread before her on her desk, but she was not reading any of them. Instead she was looking up at the picture over the mantel.

"Did you say something, Severus?"

"Hermione, my dear, it is time."

"Finally! I have waited so long. I'm definitely ready." Hermione Granger-Weasley gave the austere wizard in the portrait a brilliant smile as he stepped as close as he could to the front of his portrait and reached out his hand to her. His face wore a tender smile, and his eyes were glowing with love for the woman who sat at the desk.

"Then come with me, dearest one."

At his softly murmured invitation, she got slowly to her feet and made her way to the fireplace. Gone were the frivolous high-heeled shoes and tailored suits—they had been replaced with gracefully cut robes and ballet flats. For a very old woman, she moved with grace and purpose. A subtle bit of wand work transfigured the low tea table into a short bank of stairs, and she climbed up them easily, her gaze locked with his. She reached out to him. When her hand touched his on the canvas, it was suddenly a young hand again, unlined and unlined. There was a gentle glow around her form as her worn out physical body slumped down to sit on the stairs.

Then her image was there in the portrait beside his. Her hair was a honeyed tangle of curls, her skin smooth and glowing with health, her mouth curved up in a smile of pure joy.

"I can't believe you are finally here." Gently, almost reverently, he wrapped his arms around her, his hands cradling her head, long fingers tunneling through the tangles of curls. He had waited 95 years to do that, and the reality was worth every second of the wait. "Welcome to my world, my very dear Miss Granger."

She laughed and snuggled into the arms of Severus Snape, then twined her hands around the back of his neck to pull his head down. Standing on tiptoe, she raised her lips to meet his.

"Here's the first one I owe you."

~0o0~ Finite ~0o0~