

Magical Betrothal

by cocoachristy

Luna convinces Hermione to perform a specific charm, and the results change the lives of four unsuspecting wizards.

Chapter 1: Lunacy

Chapter 1 of 17

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All thanks go to my awesome beta, Southen_Witch_69!



Hermione, Ginny, and Luna sat in the basement at Grimmauld Place, enjoying their last night together before Ron and Harry came back from their vacation. Harry had told Hermione and Ginny they were welcome to stay there as long as they liked, and the girls decided to take advantage of his generosity.

In an enlightened spur of the moment decision, Ginny asked Luna over for a girls "slumber party," and they had finished off the bottle of elf wine Hermione had discovered while rummaging through the kitchen cabinets.

Sighing dreamily, Luna told her mates, "You two sure are lucky! Just think, in only one more month, you'll be marrying the wizards of your dreams! I so long to be happily married."

Ginny smiled. "Yes. I've always loved Harry... before I even knew him, which is strange now that I think on it." She shook her slightly inebriated head. "How do you reckon

that could be, Hermione?"

Hermione snorted. "It couldn't, not really." Hermione rose and zigzagged her way to the wireless. Turning back to her friend, she eyed her intently. "Ginny, are you sure you want to get married? I mean, do you ever have doubts?"

"No!" Ginny protested a little too quickly. "Never about Harry." She paused for a few moments and then asked in a voice barely above a whisper, "Why? Do you have them about my idiot brother?"

"All the time! I am forever questioning Ron, his feelings, and our relationship!"

Luna laughed, shaking her head. "You two! It's just before wedding jitters, I say! How about the sex, Hermione? I'd say Ron would be an absolute animal in bed, eh?" Luna sighed dreamily and then turned to Ginny and continued. "And Harry? All that passion?" Luna began to fan her face with her hand for emphasis.

"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed, mortified. "You don't just... just... ask a person something as personal as that!" Turning redder by the moment, the girl portion of the trio decided to admit, "Besides, I wouldn't know. We're waiting for our wedding night."

"Ron?" Luna asked disbelievably. "Clever of you there. Just hard to believe he agreed to wait after hearing Lavender..." Luna scowled into her wine glass. "Sorry, 'Mione. It's this wine talking!"

"S all right, Luna. I know what went on between Ron and Lavender. It's in the past where I want it to stay."

"Exactly right," Hermione's future sister-in-law agreed. "Besides, Harry and I are waiting, too. There are other things you can do, you know... Damn! This wine ~~does~~ make you talk too much!"

At that moment the three ladies burst into a fit of giggles. Sobering, Luna reassured her friends, "You've nothing to fear, you two. You're marrying your *soul mates*!"

"I just wish I knew for sure," Hermione admitted, gnawing her bottom lip. "Too bad crystal balls don't work for me!"

"There are never any guarantees, you know," Luna said knowingly, "but there *is* a charm that you could perform."

Ginny thought a moment, slapping her hand on her mouth when it came to her. "Right! I'd forgotten that charm!"

"What charm are the two of you speaking of?" Hermione demanded, hating the fact that there was a charm that these two knew about that she didn't.

"Damn! I can't remember the name. It's something about Pairing..." Ginny said as she tried to recall.

"Why, the Pairing-Plight Troth Charm, silly!" Luna said, as if this charm was common knowledge.

"What charm is that? I've never heard of it." Hermione turned to Ginny, who was, in her opinion, the more levelheaded of the two. "Is this something that's commonly used?"

"No, not anymore. You see, once you use it, it's magically binding. Whoever the spell claims is your mate is the person you have to marry."

Hermione laughed, not believing that performing a charm such as that could be magically binding. "Even if the person who the charm claims is your 'mate' had no idea you'd even performed the charm?"

"Even so," Luna told her. "But really, if they're to be your soul mate, then I hardly think they would mind!"

"Of course they would, Luna!" Ginny yelled a bit louder than she'd intended. "How would you like to be sitting around, minding your own business, when suddenly you get a Ministry letter claming you *have* to marry some bloke because he performed some charm?"

"Oh, I think that would be *soromantic*! Couldn't you just imagine?" Luna looked off with an unfocused gaze while Hermione and Ginny rolled their eyes at each other.

"I could imagine some irate wizard using the Killing Curse! I know I would!" Hermione said. "But still, it would be reassuring to know if I am marrying the person I am supposed to... Say, what if the charm picks someone that's already married?"

"No, it wouldn't because one magical binding cannot be overruled by another. That's one thing you wouldn't have to worry about," Ginny explained. "I do agree it with you, though, that it would be wonderful to know if we're actually marrying the person we are supposed to be with!"

"Ginny?" Hermione questioned, troubled that her friend did seem to have some minor doubts.

"I know! Let's all do the charm!" Luna jumped up and danced around the room. "I could just see my red-haired... er... soul mate coming here to claim me after receiving a Ministry letter saying I am his betrothed!"

"Why should I do the charm?" Ginny demanded. "I know I'm marrying my soul mate! Harry *is the one* for me...no doubts!"

"But, Ginny, you just said that it would be wonder..."

"Then you shouldn't mind doing it with us!" Luna interrupted Hermione as she danced her way to Ginny and dragged her into the dance. "Come on, Gin! Wouldn't this be the perfect confirmation?"

"Hold on," Hermione told them before they could get too carried away. "I never agreed to this! Besides, this is not something I would just do. I have to go upstairs to the library and see if they have books on this charm. I wouldn't want to perform it incorrectly, you know!"

"Let's go search then!" Luna said as she bounded up the stairs with Hermione and Ginny reluctantly following her.

As Hermione and Ginny walked into the library, Luna rushed to the kitchen, saying she'd be right back. Shrugging her shoulders, Hermione walked straight to the bookshelves. "Ah, I found a book on charms!"

Just as Hermione was sitting on the couch with her nose in the book, Luna walked in carrying another bottle of elf-made wine and glasses. "More wine, ladies!"

"Oh, I don't know, Luna," Ginny groaned. "I think we've had enough for tonight."

"Nonsense! This is our slumber party!" Luna had no intentions of letting Hermione sober up. She really wanted to perform the charm, tired of being alone all the time. She had an inkling as to exactly what might happen.

"Fine! Hand me a glass, but for God's sake, hush so that I can read this!"

Smiling smugly, Luna handed the answer to her prayers a glass of wine.

"Oh! I've found it!" Hermione exclaimed thirty minutes later interrupting Luna and Ginny's conversation. "It's really rather simple. The hardest thing would be finding a flower

that best suits us personally."

"I have a book on flowers; let me go get it," Luna told them.

"You do?" Ginny asked. "Why?"

Luna stopped walking and turned to look at her friend. She told Ginny seriously, "Well, being a naturalist, having a book on flora does come in handy at times."

"Of course," Ginny agreed, blushing furiously. She sometimes forgot Luna even had a job.

After Luna returned and each girl had studied the book, finding the flower they felt best described them and what they would want, Ginny said, "Well, now how do we go about getting our flower?"

Luna rolled her eyes skyward as if her two mates were helpless. "Why, we owl Neville, don't we? He'll send us each our flower!"

"Too right," Hermione agreed as she took another drink of her wine. "Now, for the rest of the ingredients... Let's see. Kreacher!"

Despite having yelled for him, Hermione jumped when he appeared.

"You called Kreacher, Miss Mudblood?"

"Kreacher!" Ginny admonished. "You know what Harry told you about calling her that!"

"Ginny," Hermione said softly, "it's all right. Um, yes, Kreacher. I was wondering if there are any potions ingredients kept here."

"Yes, of course the noble house of Black has potions ingredients!"

"Would you mind terribly showing me where?" Hermione asked sweetly.

The ancient elf eyed her shrewdly. "You tells Kreacher what you needs, and I will fetch it."

"Well," Hermione began as she eyed the instructions in the book, "I need three snails and three puppy dog tails. Oh, and three cauldrons. The rest I can get from the kitchen myself." Hermione had learned in her first year not to be sickened by any ingredients that went into potions making.

Kreacher popped away and back so fast that in her alcoholic haze, Hermione felt dizzy. "Thank you, Kreacher," she told the house-elf when he handed her what she'd asked for. Without a word of acknowledgement, he popped away.

When Hermione looked over at her friends, Luna was proudly showing her the three flowers they'd asked for. "While you were talking to Kreacher, I Flooed Neville!"

Ginny sighed and looked at her two mates. "Are we really doing this?"

Hermione looked doubtful. "I don't know..."

"Yes, we are!" Luna demanded.

"Why don't you just do it, Luna?" Ginny asked. "Hermione and I are already getting married."

"No, we all do it or none of us do," Luna said. "True, you are getting married, but is it to the right man? Don't you want to be sure? However, if you're scared..." Luna trailed off, knowing what words to use to get to the two Gryffindors beside her.

"Let's just get this over with," Hermione irritably said, wanting to be done with it. "Why don't we take a few moments to write our poem and then get on with it?"

"Fine," Ginny and Luna said in unison, the first with apprehension, the second with glee.

After Hermione had prepared each cauldron, adding the sugar and spice, they each stepped forward with their flower to add and say the required rhyme. Hermione chose an iris for faith, hope and, most of all, wisdom. As she added her flower, she said: "I want a man who's witty and clever with a burning desire to learn. Who won't ridicule, who's never the fool, and will give me all that I yearn."

Luna eagerly stepped forward and added a tulip for perfect love and said: "I want a man who will love me despite my unusual ways. Daring, brave, handsome, and bold! Who will love me all of my days!"

Last, Ginny reluctantly stepped forward, adding a stargazer lily because the name and the meaning of honor and aspiration, reminded her of Harry. She thought, "Let it be Harry," before she whispered, "I want a man with integrity and honor, honest through and through. Who would defend the world, yet not forget me, while doing what he needs to do."

Hermione gasped and screamed, "NO!" as a name appeared in her cauldron.

Luna looked into her cauldron and smiled smugly.

Ginny grabbed her face with both hands and uttered, "What have I done?" before she promptly fainted.

~*~

Ron and Harry sat in a bar knocking back a few before they retired for the night. "This vacation has been great, mate. Thanks for coming with me," Harry told Ron. Since he'd defeated the Dark Lord, Harry had been taking two or three vacations a year...each more daring than the next. This time, he and Ron had gone mountain climbing.

"Yeah, it was a blast! Quite exhilarating, mountain climbing is. Though, now that I think on it, I don't believe it's something I would want to do all the time. It did have its scary moments, eh?"

"But that's the beauty of it, Ron! The scary moments are why I enjoy it so much!"

"Right. Well, I'm glad you're getting it out of your system now because after you're married, Ginny won't want you risking life and limb on a regular basis," Ron joked.

"I suppose," Harry agreed as he ran his finger under his collar as if he were suddenly too hot. "You looking forward to it? Marriage, I mean."

"Sure. It's just another adventure, after all." Suddenly, Ron looked worried. "Why? Something bothering you, Harry? Do you... What I mean to say is, you don't think we're... you know, rushing things with the girls do you?"

"Nah, not really. I mean, I do love Ginny and all, don't ever doubt that. And finally having a family will be wonderful! It's just, I don't know, we're so young!"

"Harry, you know you're family to us regardless of whether or not you're married to Ginny. You have been for quite some time. Never forget that, okay?"

"Sure, I know that. It will just be official once we've married. Besides, I do want to get married, I think. It's the word 'settled' that bugs me sometimes."

"Yeah, that and being with just one woman for the rest of your life," Ron agreed.

"Hold on! What do you mean, Ron? You don't think you would only want to be with Hermione? It seems like if you truly love her, then you wouldn't really want to be with anyone else."

"You mean to tell me you never think of being with anyone except Ginny...ever?"

"Well," Harry admitted, "I suppose a time or two, but I wouldn't ever act on it!"

"Well, neither would I! I never said I would..."

Ron suddenly stopped talking because an official Ministry letter appeared on the bar in front of him. "I wonder what this could be."

"I dunno." Harry shrugged. "Open it and see."

Ron tore open the seal and opened the letter, face paling as he read the contents. "BLOODY HELL!" Ron exclaimed.

~*~

Severus Snape sat at the dinner table with the Malfoys, enjoying the food and conversation. It had been a long time since he'd been able to just... be.

Once the dust had cleared in the aftermath of the final battle between the Dark Lord and Potter, and Severus had been cleared of all charges, Minerva had asked him back to his old position of Potions professor. He'd readily accepted the headmistress's offer, being a creature of habit and enjoying the familiarity of his dungeons and teaching.

It was rare that he enjoyed an evening out with friends, so he always tried to make the best of it when he did. Tonight they were celebrating the engagement of Draco to Pansy Parkinson.

"Narcissa, would you kindly stop throwing available witches my way? I can find a woman on my own, thanks," Severus told her after her latest attempt to pair him with a woman who would be attending the ceremony, but with little anger.

"Oh? Then why haven't you done so before now?" she admonished.

"Perhaps I don't want one! Your nagging is quite enough, I assure you! I don't think I could stand another."

"Why, Severus Snape! I never nag you! I just simply want to see you happy! With the right woman to hold you every night, maybe that scowl that seems to be a permanent fixture on your face would begin to fade."

"Now, Pet," Lucius scolded as he patted her hand, "we discussed this."

"Oh, all right!" Narcissa pouted prettily and gazed at her two gentlemen companions. "What do you think, Draco? Is your former professor a hopeless case then?"

Draco, not wanting to get in the middle of this ongoing battle, simply said, "It looks to be that way. Not every man can be as lucky as father and me." Draco leaned over and lightly kissed Pansy.

"Mayhap Lucius would be willing to share you?" Severus teased. "He could have one week and I the next."

Narcissa blushed and gently slapped Severus' arm. "Oh, go on with you!"

Just then, a Ministry letter appeared before Severus. "Now what? I swear, those Ministry arses look for reasons to harass me!"

"Well, don't keep us in suspense, man!" Lucius told him. "Open it!"

Once Severus opened the letter and realized what he was actually reading, he simply said, *FUCK!* I will fucking murder that blasted fucking bane of the wizarding world's existence once and for all!"

~*~

Oliver Wood was in the bed of his current lover, enjoying the spoils of his latest victory. He had his dream job of playing Keeper for the Harpies, and they had just won their fifth game in a row.

To show her team spirit, Wood's girl was pleasuring him just the way he liked, wearing only his team jersey. As his completion neared, he grabbed her head and called out, "Phoebe!"

After, Phoebe crawled her way up his body and kissed him tenderly. "I'm always so proud of you, Ollie! I swear my heart just goes pitter-pat whenever you block that ball!"

Oliver chuckled. "I do love the way you show your pride in me, doll."

Rubbing her finger across his chest, Phoebe asked, "Where are you off to next?"

"France. We've a big game there, so we will be practicing every night next week."

She pouted. "But, Ollie! I thought you were going to come to dinner with me and my parents next week?"

"No. I told you *I might*. After thinking on it, I decided that things are moving too fast. I told you when we started this relationship that I didn't want anything permanent right now, Phoebe."

"I know that you did. I just thought..."

Narrowing his eyes, Oliver asked, "Thought *what*?"

"That you'd changed your mind?"

"No, I haven't. I'm at the top of my career, and marriage is the very last thing on my mind. If this is not something you can live with, maybe we need to end things. I don't want to hurt you or for you to believe something will happen between us that's not going to."

"How noble of you! Right honorable, you are!" Phoebe spat. "You knew I was falling in love with you!"

"No, I didn't," Oliver said softly. "I'm sorry I didn't see the signs sooner."

Before Phoebe could comment, a Ministry letter landed on Oliver's chest. "What in the world could this be?" After he opened it, his mouth gaped open. Running his hands through his hair, he looked heavenward and said, "Please tell me this is a joke!"

AN: The prompt I chose to respond to is:

7. Hermione, Ginny and Luna sharing a girl moment decide to cast a Pairing-Plight Troth Charm on themselves.

Each places in a bowl/cauldron they have to add, one flower with sugar and spice and everything nice, and a snail and puppy-dog tail, and they each have to say the rhyme. (Make it up - be silly and original or fit the girl that says it.) Only the results didn't come out as any/two of the girls expected. Who is now Betrothed-magically to whom? How does the guy/man/wizard react and since it's a MAGICAL BINDING? And why is the Ministry so pleased?

Chapter 2: Truth and Consequences

Chapter 2 of 17

All involved parties meet at the Ministry and the explosions begin!

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Thanks go to my wonderful beta, Southern_Witch_69!



The next morning, Luna awoke on the floor of the library, head pounding. "Ouch!" she cried as she grabbed her head. "What was in that wine?"

She quickly closed her eyes again to try and alleviate some of the pain. "What a strange dream I had..." Sitting up slowly, she looked about the room. Hermione was asleep on the couch with a book splayed across her chest, and Ginny lay in the chair with a book on the floor beside her.

She rose slowly and tried to quietly make her way to the loo. In her hung over state, however, Luna stumped her toe on the couch and let out an involuntary cry.

Hermione jumped up like a shot. "Ugh!"

"Sorry, Hermione!" Luna apologized. "I was trying to be quiet."

Hermione glared at the girl standing in front of her as if she didn't have a care in the world. "I searched and searched, Luna! So far, I cannot seem to find a way out of this mess!"

"Whatever do you mean, Hermione? What mess? Could I help you?"

"Help? HELP? Don't you think you've done quite enough? Your scheming ways got us into this mess in the first place!"

Shocked at Hermione's outburst, Luna took a step back. Holding up her hands, she said, *My* scheming ways? I'm sure I don't know what you..."

When it started coming back to her, Luna's knees gave out on her, and she plopped down on the floor where she stood. "No! Oh, no! Hermione, I am so very sorry!"

Luna glared at the empty elf-made wine bottle. "What's in that stuff anyway?"

"That's neither here nor there, is it? I cannot believe I let you coerce me into doing that blasted charm! My God, Luna, do you know what you've done?"

"Ruined our lives is bloody what!" Ginny spat from her chair. "Why, Luna? Why would you do this?"

Silent tears fell down the face of the berated woman. Luna whispered, "I don't know. I have no idea what came over me! I swear it!" she shouted as she looked into her friends' disbelieving eyes. She stared into the fireplace, gaze unfocused. Almost trancelike, she murmured, "It was like the more wine I drank, the more... I don't know... uninhibited I became. It made me feel as if I wanted it, as if it was okay to do whatever I pleased." She shook her head. "I dunno. That's the best way I can think of to explain it."

Hermione just sat there, eyeing Luna intently. Before she could ask the question that had been burning in her mind since they'd performed the charm, Ginny jumped up and said, "Oh, that's right then. Blame the wine!"

Hermione held up a hand for peace. "Hold on, Ginny. Stop a second and think. I have never...not once...heard you doubt your feelings for Harry until last night. After we'd been a few cups into the wine, mind you." Then she turned her gaze back to Luna. "I'm not saying this in anyway excuses what you've done! Luna, my God! Just how long have you been in love with Ron?"

Luna blushed from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. "Oh, Merlin, Hermione, I never ever would have hurt you in any way! I've never told a soul!"

"How long?" Hermione insisted.

"Since my fifth year," the defeated girl admitted. "But I swear on my life, I never would have done anything to cause you a moment's pain....never on purpose!" She turned to Ginny. "Either of you!"

Hermione turned to Ginny. "Gin? How long have you doubted your feelings for Harry?"

Ginny sighed deeply and confessed, "It's not my feelings I've doubted actually. It's Harry's."

"Why would you doubt Harry?" Hermione demanded angrily. "He loves you! Don't put your doubts off on him, Ginny."

Ginny folded her arms defensively and glared at Hermione and then at Luna for good measure. "See, this is why I don't confide these things to you, Hermione. You've automatically taken Harry's side, and you don't even know the basis of my doubts!"

"You're right," Hermione said, chastised. "I'm sorry. Please, talk to me."

"When Harry and I got back together after he defeated Tom Riddle, things were wonderful, amazing. Then, little by little, his passion eased off, and truthfully, for the past two or three months, we've been more like brother and sister than an engaged couple! He barely kisses me, and when he does? It's mostly a peck on the cheek or forehead."

Hermione nodded and looked off into space. "Ronald and I are continually fighting...more so than we usually do. If I say black, he's going to say white no matter what. Then after we have a major blowup, all he wants to do is try to talk me into makeup sex." Hermione sighed and turned to speak to Luna, but the girl was no longer in the room.

~*~

Severus Snape slammed into Minerva's office without even knocking and threw the Ministry Parchment onto her desk.

"Severus? What is the meaning of this?" the headmistress demanded.

"See for yourself," Severus told her as he leaned forward and placed both hands on her desk. "Read it and weep."

Minerva stared at him a long moment over the top of her glasses and picked the parchment up. "What? I don't understand! What on earth..."

"You can read, can you not? That blasted fucking know-it-all cast the Pairing-Plight Troth Charm, and for some unholy reason, the charm chose *me*!"

"But... But..."

"And why she was even casting that blasted charm while she was all ready engaged to Weasley is beyond me." Severus ran his fingers through his long, lanky hair as he interrupted the headmistress. "I will not abide by this! I will not marry that twit!"

"But..."

"Stop that stammering this instant! We've got to *think*, Minerva! How can I get out of this?"

"You can't," said Albus' portrait. "It's either marriage to...to whom exactly, Minerva?"

"Miss Granger," Minerva said in a strangled voice.

"Ah ha! Very good! Miss Granger, Severus, or jail, I'm afraid."

"Right," Severus said, making the word long and drawn out. "Azkaban it is then."

"Stop speaking that nonsense right now!" the headmistress scolded after finally pulling herself together. "There has to be a solution."

"Minerva," Albus said, "you are aware of the magical binding of this charm." Turning to the Potions professor, he continued, saying, "What's wrong with Hermione, Severus? She's a delightful girl."

"You marry her then!" Severus shouted. "I am just going to have to go discuss this with Kingsley. He is a man of good sense. Surely I can get him to see reason."

"I don't know, Severus. The more I think on the idea, the better I like it. I've always wanted Hermione to come here and teach, you know. And I do think it's time you've found a spot of happiness in your life." Gently, she told him, "Lily is gone. It's time for another love in your life...the life you've got left."

"Humph! Do you think she is going to retire her Ministry job to teach a bunch of dunderheads? Not likely. And never...never...compare that twit with Lily Evans."

Barely able to control his anger, Severus left the room with a loud banging of the door as he slammed it. How dare they make light of his situation? How dare Minerva even think to put Hermione Granger in the same league with Lily?

Couldn't everyone just leave him be? He was content, damn it! Why did they all seem to think he needed a woman in his life to be happy? Hell, the last time he had a woman he loved... No! He would not go back to that dark, horrid place.

Shaking with rage, he walked to the outside of the gates of Hogwarts so that he could Apparate to the Ministry.

~*~

Hermione and Ginny started to go into the Ministry when they came face to face with Severus Snape.

"You!" he spat and pointed a long finger at Hermione. "I need to speak with you, Miss Granger! *Now*!"

Hermione shrank back as Ginny murmured, "I'll just wait for you inside."

"It was a mistake!" Hermione told Severus, ignoring Ginny.

"Oh, it was a mistake all right. What were you thinking?"

"Well, see, what happened... Um... Harry and Ron are off on holiday, see, and Ginny, Luna, and I are staying at Grimmauld Place..."

"Spare me your life story, Granger! Get on with it!"

"Okay! We found some elf-made wine in the cabinets, and after finishing off a bottle, Luna got the bright idea that we should cast that dreaded charm to make sure we were marrying the person we were supposed to be with. After I found a book..."

"Stop! Do not say another word. I want to clarify something. You mean to tell me that you and your nitwit friends drank an entire bottle of elf-made wine from the Black

kitchen?"

Hermione, frightened by his tone, simply nodded, and then remembered, "Well, two. Luna found another as I was reading the instructions on how to cast the charm."

Severus pinched his nose and tightly closed his eyes. "Do you have any idea what that wine consists of? And you say that Miss Lovegood thought of the charm?"

"Yes," Hermione acknowledged. "And as a matter of fact, she was quite insistent on all three of us doing the charm. She was very pushy, which is very unlike her actually."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. Pushy, you say? Quite devious in her methods? Why? What was in it for her specifically, besides forcing some poor man to wed her?"

"Well..." Suddenly, Hermione didn't want to betray her friend to Snape. "It doesn't matter why, does it? What matters is that it's done, and we have to fix it."

"Because, Miss Granger, that wine you drank is not ordinary wine. The Blacks had that wine made for one purpose and one purpose alone. It brings out your... darker side, shall we say? It makes you do and say things you normally wouldn't and enhances the darker side of your personality."

"Why on earth would anyone have a wine made such as that?" Hermione wondered.

"Think! Use that brain everybody seems to think so much of! They wanted Sirius Black to join the Dark Lord and become a Death Eater! It worked on his brother very well."

"Oh, my God. So that's why Luna acted in such a way! Well, why didn't Ginny or I start having dark thoughts then?"

"You must have cast the charm for a reason. What thoughts were you having when you did something that you knew could take you away from Weasley forever? Surely you didn't believe that he would be the perfect mate for you?"

"Not dark ones!" Hermione insisted. "And I said yes to his proposal, didn't I? So, of course, I thought he was the mate for me. I just had some doubts about our feelings for each other and had been wondering if he truly is the man I am supposed to marry."

"I can assure you, your exfiancé would find those thoughts dark indeed. I, however, couldn't care less about your thoughts or you for that matter. We have to fix this mess you've created."

Getting tired of his attitude, Hermione put her hands on her hips. "What do you think I am doing here? I want to get this straightened out as much as you do...more even! Do you think I actually want to marry *you*?"

Severus looked her up and down in a suggestive manner, then scowled. "There's no doubt that you're getting the better end of the bargain. But, alas, you will have to make do with Weasley, or whomever else you choose, as long as it's not me."

"I second that," said a male voice from behind Severus.

"Ron!" Hermione said. "You're back early, aren't you?" She began wringing her hands in a nervous gesture.

"Yeah, a little, but there is a reason. Look at this shite!" He handed Hermione his Ministry letter. "That Looney has cast that marriage charm or whatever it's called, and it's claimed me as her partner!"

"She did?" Hermione asked, stalling for time.

Grinning evilly, Severus chimed in, "Oh, Weasley, Miss Lovegood didn't cast that charm. Your wife-to-be did."

"What? You cast a charm for Luna? How? I thought for this type you had to cast it for yourself."

"Ten points to Gryffindor. That's quite right. Now, come on... Put the rest of it together," Severus urged.

Ron stood there, looking back and forth between his ex-professor and Hermione. After a long moment, he yelled, "You cast it for yourself, too! Hermione, why? Why would you do something like that when you belong to me?" Hurt radiated off him in waves.

"It's not what you think, Ron! Honestly! See, we were drinking when..."

"Merlin spare me from this explanation again! Suffice it to say, Weasley, that Hermione will be getting married, but it won't be to you." Regardless of the situation he found his own self in, Severus enjoyed the little drama playing out in front of him.

"Who?" Ron asked stiffly.

Severus opened his mouth, and Hermione said, "Don't! Please!"

Wanting to pay her back for causing all these problems and enjoying egging Weasley on, Severus said, "But I don't get to experience this type of enjoyment everyday *my dear*!" Turning to Ron, he asked, "Figured it out yet, Weasley? No? Why, it's none other than me!" His words were filled with false glee.

Ignoring Severus, Ron told Hermione, "You could've come to me and told me you didn't want to get married. You didn't have to go to this extreme to be rid of me, ruining my life in the process!"

"No, Ron! It's not like that! I didn't intend for this to happen!"

"Well, what exactly did you intend to happen? Did you do the charm thinking, 'I just know Ron will be the one!' or did you do it thinking, 'There has to be someone better for me than Ron!' Well," he demanded when she stayed silent, "which was it?"

"I'd say the latter," Severus spoke up when Hermione remained silent. "And just look how right she was! Clever little know-it-all, eh, Weasley?"

"Shut up!" Hermione yelled at Severus. "Just *shut up*, you git!"

"Temper, temper! Tsk! You'll have to watch that once we're married, you know. I won't put up with that after we've wed. However, I wouldn't mind some of that passion in the bedroom," Severus said, and Hermione could tell he was relishing the fact that he was taunting Ron.

Ron didn't even think. He simply balled up his fist and popped Severus right in the eye, causing his head to snap back. "Don't talk to her like that! Ever!"

Severus burst out laughing and righted himself, surprising the two Gryffindors standing beside him. "Ever the knight, aren't you? How... brave. Loyal. Miss Lovegood is certainly getting what she deserves." Having said that, Severus turned and made his way inside the Ministry, leaving them staring after him.

Hermione turned to Ron, putting her hand on his arm. "Listen to me, Ron. I never meant to hurt you. If I'd thought for one moment that you would have been involved this way..."

"That's just it, isn't it, Hermione? You didn't think I would be involved. I think you knew deep down that I wouldn't be the one the charm picked out for you, and that's why

you did it. So, by not being picked, I was *involved*." He glared at her.

"Don't, Ron."

"Don't what? Be angry? Upset? I have to marry fucking LOONEY LOVEGOOD, Hermione! I have to marry her! I have no choice!"

"Well, if I can't figure a way out of this, I'll have to marry Snape!"

"But you had a choice! Damn you, you cast that bloody charm! It's me, and hell, even Snape, that doesn't have a choice! Take your hand off my arm, Hermione. I don't want you touching me."

"Ron!"

"I mean it. Let me go, and stay the hell away from me. I don't know if I can ever forgive you for this."

Ron turned and made his way into the Ministry while Hermione stood frozen on the spot, tears running down her face.

~*~

Ginny was sitting on a bench inside, waiting for Hermione when she saw Ron walking towards her. "Ron! What's the matter?"

"Do you have any idea what Hermione and Luna Lovegood have done, Ginny? They cast that marriage charm, and now this Ministry parchment claims that I am betrothed to Luna."

Feeling guilty, Ginny averted her eyes. "Well... you see, we'd been drinking all that wine, and..."

"We? What do you mean *we*? You too? No, not you. Harry didn't get a Ministry letter, only me." Ron's eyes widened. "No, Ginny. Tell me you didn't do it, too, and it chose someone else for you!"

"I was so sure! I honestly believed that it would pick Harry! I did everything in my power to push it along! I chose a flower and poem that would best suit Harry, or the way I see Harry. Ron, what am I going to do?"

"Who did the charm pick for you, Gin?"

"Oliver Wood."

Ron whistled. "Well, we are going to have to go to Kingsley and try to get out of this is all I know."

They went to the lift together and started for the Minister's office. They heard Snape yelling before they even got to the door. Giving each other apprehensive looks, they walked to his secretary and asked to see the Minister.

Before she could answer, the door swung open, and Severus stormed out. Ginny cringed when he looked in their direction.

"Don't waste your time. That man is unreasonable!"

"Severus," Kingsley said from his doorway, "I am not being unreasonable. There is just nothing I can do for you. Besides, this situation makes me happy. I think a wife would do you some good."

"Yeah, but not *my* wife," Ron said angrily, causing the Minister to be at a loss for words.

Severus spun around to face Kingsley. "I. Don't. Want. A. Wife!"

"You're not my choice either, you git!" Hermione said as she walked up to Ron and Ginny.

"You sounded happy enough about it outside, Snape!" Ron spat.

Severus rolled his eyes and looked at Hermione. "You actually thought he could be your mate? Really, Granger? I say he's a little too... dimwitted for you."

"Oh, why won't you be quiet, Snape? You know nothing about him!" Hermione defended.

"Kingsley," Ron started, "there really has to be a way out of this. There is no way I'll marry Luna Lovegood."

"Sorry, Ronald. There really is nothing I can do. It's old magic. Unless you want to go to Azkaban."

"Couldn't we just get married for one day and be divorced the next?" Hermione offered.

Severus turned to her and sneered. "Funny. I thought research and too much information were your forte. Looks like I was mistaken, or either you've lost your touch. According to the Magical Contract, the couple has three days to wed. After doing so, the marriage has to be consummated within twelve hours, and the couple has to reside in the same residence for one year."

Hermione threw her hands up. "This is ridiculous! How long is the stay in Azkaban, Kingsley?"

Kingsley frowned. "Until you decide to honor the contract. I'm sorry."

"This is hopeless!" Ginny cried.

Just then, Oliver Wood came barreling up the stairs, waving his parchment in the air. He stopped short, looking Ginny Weasley right in the eyes. "Oi! Would you like to explain this?"

"I wouldn't mind hearing that explanation myself," said Harry as he came off the lift.

A/N: What a terrible mess everyone is in now!

Chapter 3: Reaping What You Sow

Chapter 3 of 17

Harry learns he is no longer engaged, Luna shows up at the Ministry, and decisions about the marriages are made.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Thanks to my awesome beta, SW69!



Harry stood in the employee lift watching the scene play out before him. Everyone was so engrossed in trying to figure out how to get out of marrying one another they'd not noticed him standing there.

It took only moments for him to realize that Hermione and Luna had cast some sort of magical binding charm, and now apparently Hermione had to marry Snape and Ron had to marry Luna. What he couldn't figure out was why Ginny was there.

Must be for moral support, he thought, but then Oliver Wood burst through the visitor's entrance, waving a piece of parchment and demanding an explanation from Ginny.

Once that happened, Harry couldn't remain silent. "I wouldn't mind hearing that explanation myself," he said, coming off the lift to join in on the conversation.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed. "Um... What are you doing here so soon after your holiday? And on a Sunday?"

Harry looked at Ginny long and hard before explaining. "When I got to Grimmauld Place and you weren't there, I went to check the Burrow. When your mum told me she hadn't seen you today, I decided to come in and catch up on some paperwork before coming in tomorrow morning. I found out that the Minister was working today and sent Kingsley word that I was in the office, and he requested a meeting with me. Now, would you mind telling me what in the hell is going on here?"

Everyone began talking at once.

"I wish I knew," Oliver spat.

"I can explain, Harry," Hermione said.

"It's not what you think!" Ginny blurted.

"Looney started this whole mess!" Ron told him.

"Your know-it-all friend created this entire situation," Snape informed him.

"QUIET!" Harry shouted. He could barely hear himself think with everyone speaking at the same time. Turning to Ginny, he said, "Explain what's going on, Gin."

Sighing, Ginny asked, "Could we go somewhere more private, do you think?"

"No you cannot!" Oliver said before Harry had the chance to answer. "Not until you tell me how I can get out of marrying you."

Harry glared at Oliver. "That'll do." Turning to Ginny, he said, "Gin?"

"All right. Hermione, Luna and I were staying at your place last night. We'd drunk a bottle of wine and began talking about the four of us," she gestured to herself and Harry and then towards Ron and Hermione, "getting married."

When she paused, Harry nodded his head and encouraged, "Go on." So far, things didn't sound too bad.

"Well, that's when Luna started going on about soul mates and such. I don't remember everything very clearly. That wine was... strong. Anyway, she'd brought the charm up, and after we'd explained what it was to Hermione, Luna had somehow talked us all into doing it."

"What does the charm do exactly? Tell you who your soul mate is?"

"Oh," Snape said, "if only that were all this blasted charm did. Not only does it *tell* you who your soul mate is, Potter, it *magically binds* you to them, creating a contract of marriage."

"I see," Harry said. "I guess the charm claimed that your soul mate is Oliver Wood?" Ginny nodded and tears flowed down her cheeks.

The-boy-who'd-defeated-the-Dark-Lord turned to Kingsley. "Couldn't you fix this? The charm is obviously bogus!"

"I'm sorry, Harry, but no," Kingsley apologized and then explained the situation to him and Oliver.

Oliver turned and was looking Ginny up and down, as if, Harry thought, she was some prized hippogriff and Oliver found her lacking. "No, this can't be happening to me. I'm not ready for this."

"You think she is?" Harry spat. "Why would she want you? Some pansy arse that has to play on an all-girls Quidditch team because he couldn't make it on ~~man's~~?"

Ginny gasped. "That's right! I'd forgotten!" She turned to Oliver. "You play for the Harpies, don't you?"

Ignoring Ginny, Oliver told Harry, "Oh, I can play for a man's team, Potter. I'm better than you ever were."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, I remember. Got knocked off your broom the very first game I ever played in, however, caught the Snitch."

"Oh, for the love of God, would you two shut it!" Hermione told them as she threw her hands up in the air.

"Quite right," Snape agreed. "You can compare cock sizes later."

"If he even has one," Harry said.

"I'll have you know I only play for the Harpies because me dad lost a bet to the owner of the team!" Oliver decided to explain. "She was upset because I was the last bloke her daughter dated before she revealed she played for the other team, as it were, literally. Her mum blamed me."

"Could be some truth in that, eh?" Harry taunted.

"How did you get out of your contract with Puddlemere United?" Ginny wanted to know.

"Harpies' owner bought out the contract." Turning to Harry, he said, "What about Cho? I think she dated you before she ended up with Padma Patil!"

"That was school shite, Wood. Things never went that for with Cho and me. Now you and the girl you dated on the other hand..."

Oliver held his hands up in a sign of peace. "Look, Potter, I know that you're upset. You've a right to be. But I didn't choose this, and I don't want your girl!" He stabbed a finger towards Ginny. "She is the one who took it upon herself to cast that bloody charm!"

Harry harshly rubbed both hands over his face and sighed. He looked around the room and jumped slightly when he saw Luna standing off to the side alone, crying. "Luna! When did you get here?"

Everyone in the room turned to look at the unusual girl, but she locked her gaze on Professor Snape and headed right for him. "Hullo, Professor. I must say, I am very happy that you're alive after that terrible incident with that horrid snake."

"Indeed?" Snape inquired. "Too bad I can't return your sentiments, considering the predicament you've landed me in."

Taking a deep breath, Luna turned to the room at large. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to ruin the lives of you all! I just wanted..." She looked briefly at Ron and then to the floor. "I swear that was not normal elf-made wine!"

"Elf wine?" Harry asked. "Where did you get this elf wine?"

Hermione sighed, looking at Snape rather than Harry. "From your kitchen cabinets, Harry."

"Damn it! Please tell me you didn't actually drink that wine!"

"Both bottles," Luna informed him. "Why? Was there something the matter with it?"

"Yes, actually, there was." He turned to the Minister. "It's the same wine I told you of, Kingsley."

"Ah, the Black's special elf-made wine that brings out your dark side?"

"The very one," Harry agreed. "I had planned on bringing it in tomorrow to have it analyzed and finding out what exactly is in it."

"I have a question," Hermione said, interrupting the conversation. "Luna, it's obvious who you wanted your soul mate to be. I'm just wondering why you were so confident that it would be Ronald."

Luna turned her wide, silver eyes to her betrothed. "Why, our auras, of course. They're the same, and like calls to like, my mum always said. Obviously, it's true because here we are."

"Yeah," Ron agreed angrily, "here we are!"

"This is all very fascinating," Snape drawled, "but there is the matter of the ones of us who have to wed only having three days to do so before being sent to Azkaban."

Kingsley looked around the room. "I can do it today."

"Today?" Oliver paled. "Well, I don't know. That seems too sudden I think. Don't you?" he asked around the room to no one in particular.

"Not really..." When everyone turned their gaze to Hermione, she explained, "Well, as Snape said, we've only three days! I don't know about the rest of you, but I have to be at work tomorrow morning, and I know how difficult it is for Professor Snape to leave the castle during the week."

"Did you forget what comes after the marriage, Hermione?" Ron asked, obviously hurt and angry. "Then comes the consummation. You'll have to have sex with that..."

"Careful, Weasley," Severus said in a low voice that made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck rise.

Harry fixed his gaze on Ginny and Oliver. Neither seemed to be looking at the other. He balled his fists so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Trying to calm down, he took a deep breath in through his mouth and exhaled it through his nose, giving the image of an enraged bull about to charge.

"How could you do this to us, Gin? *Why* would you? We were going to be married! I was going to finally have a family! I loved you," he whispered, running out of steam.

"Harry," Ginny started, but her voice broke, and she couldn't continue.

Severus yawned, patting his mouth. "Touching." Looking towards his betrothed, he told her, "I don't care what the rest of these imbeciles do, but I will not go to Azkaban because you and your idiotic friends once again meddled in something you didn't take the time to research properly. We will marry now, and then in one year end it."

Face reddening, Hermione told him, "That's just fine with me!" Looking at the Minister, she said, "Let's just get this over with."

"I don't know where you reside, but I'm sure Kreacher would be honored to help Harry Potter's friend move her belongings to my dungeons."

"What?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked. "Why do I have to move to Hogwarts?"

"You certainly don't think I'll be moving from Hogwarts? Remember? According to the binding, we have to live together during that year. Since you and your friends caused this mess, it should be you three who make the sacrifices."

Hermione and Ginny both gasped, and Luna just stood there, continually staring at the floor. Harry thought she looked ashamed and happy at the same time.

"Oh, bloody, bugging son of a dark wizard!" Oliver yelled. "I travel! I stay in hotel rooms!"

Ginny quietly informed her husband-to-be, "I don't know if you're aware, but starting next season, I will be playing for the Harpies. I signed up just last month. I'll be traveling with the team anyway."

"Oh," Harry said angrily, "isn't that quite cozy? The happy newlyweds take the Quidditch world by storm! Perhaps Rita Skeeter would write it up for you for old time's sake."

"Harry, mate, stop it!" Ron said.

Turning his furious green eyes to his best friend, Harry said, "No! I won't stop it!"

"Harry," Hermione pleaded, "calm down."

"Don't speak to me, Hermione. You find Luna a convenient scapegoat, but *you're* the one who looked up the charm! *You're* the one who figured out how to cast it, and it was *you* who told the other two! Little miss-know-it-all! If there is something you don't know, you just won't stop until you find it out!"

Silence filled the room. Hermione let out one broken sob, but then turned her face away from the hate directed at her in Harry's beautiful green eyes.

Suddenly, Snape said, "If everyone is quite done with their pathetic display of theatrics, I would like to get this over with."

"It's going to have to be today for me as well," Oliver said, sighing. Looking towards Kingsley, he asked, "You're sure there is nothing to be done?"

Kingsley shook his head. "No, nothing. And if you want me to perform the ceremony, it has to be today because I have to leave tomorrow for Italy to attend an International Ministry of Magic meeting."

"Well, I can't wait. I've got a game in France at the end of this week, and I will have to practice every night," Oliver said. Turning to Ginny, he told her, "We have to do this now."

Ginny simply nodded and turned her gaze to Harry. "Please, don't hate me. My feelings haven't changed."

"I'm not staying for this," Harry told them as he stormed out of the room.

Ron glared at Luna. "If they're doing it now, I suppose we should, too."

"We don't have rings," Luna said.

"Rings? What the bloody hell would we have rings for, Loo... er... Luna? I didn't plan to marry you!"

"Right," Luna agreed calmly. "We can get those later."

Kingsley cleared his throat before Ron could further lose his temper. "If you three will stand before me, face your intended and take hands?"

Kingsley turned to Severus and Hermione, deciding to begin with them. After they'd repeated their vows, a satin yellow cord wove around both of their wrists and then disappeared.

"Ah," Kingsley said. "The yellow binding cord. This signifies attraction, charm, confidence, balance, harmony, knowledge, learning, concentration, persuasion, jealousy, joy, and comfort."

Next, the Minister faced Oliver and Ginny. After they'd completed their vows, a blue satin cord wove around both their wrists and then disappeared.

"Yes, yes, the blue binding cord. This represents tranquility, understanding, patience, health, truth, devotion, sincerity, honor, loyalty, peace, wisdom, protection during sleep, and astral projection."

Last, he faced Ronald and Luna. Once they finished their vows, Luna gasped when a black satin cord wove around their wrists before disappearing.

"Don't worry, dear," Kingsley assured. "The black cord has great significance. It stands for strength, empowerment, wisdom, vision, success, pure love, negation without reflecting, unlocking when stuck, and banishing evil or negativity. Very well done."

"Kingsley, once our year is up, how do we dissolve our unions?" Snape inquired.

"Good God, man! Your cord has barely binded you and you're already asking about dissolution?"

"Oh, indeed. Indeed I am, Kingsley."

Shaking his head, the Minister informed the three couples standing before him, "Once the year is complete, if you do not wish to remain married, you simply have to come back here and cut your cords. After doing so, the legal arrangements to end the union can begin."

"Fine," Oliver said. "Ginny, we have to go and get your things. We need to get to the hotel room. I have an early start in the morning."

Ginny simply nodded. She glanced at Ron, who was looking at Hermione. "Ron... I don't know what to say really. Except that *am* sorry."

Ron turned his gaze from Hermione to Ginny. "Sorry is such an insignificant little word for the ruination of one's life...don't you think? Keep in mind, you've ruined your own as well."

"Hey!" Oliver said indignantly. "What's wrong with me?"

"You're not Harry," Ron simply said. Looking at his wife, who still refused to look him in the eyes, he said, "I have to go to the shop for a bit today. You can go get your things and move them to my flat. Put them in the spare bedroom, mind," Ron specified.

Luna nodded. "Okay, except I don't really know where your flat is. I've never been there."

"Oh, right. Fine. I'll show you on my way to the shop, and then you can go and get your things." Ron turned and walked towards the lift with Luna following in his wake.

"Don't forget," Kingsley warned, "this has to be consummated within twelve hours or it's null and void."

"All right," Ron said as he and Luna waited to enter the lift.

"I'm going back to Hogwarts now, Granger. You can get your things and come whenever you'd like. It makes no difference to me as long as it's within the twelve hours." He leered at her, mocking Ron in the process. "I don't have a spare room."

He turned and walked out with Hermione glaring at his back. "Git." Turning to Ginny, she said, "I want to say don't worry, that Harry will come around, but I've never seen him so angry."

Ginny nodded. "You know what's odd, Hermione? He was right furious, but he didn't seem like he was hurt by this at all. More mad than anything. Not that I'm saying he didn't have a right to be, mind, but you'd think if he was truly in love with me, his heart would've ached at least a little."

"True," Hermione agreed, considering. "He was livid. But, Ginny, you know how Harry keeps his emotions all bottled up."

Ginny nodded and started to comment when Oliver gently said, "Ginny, we've really got to go now. I don't know how long it will take you to get your things."

"Right, my things. We have to go to the Burrow." Realization hit Ginny like a rogue Bludger. "Oh, no! Mum!"

~*~

Severus once again made his way to Minerva's office.

"Oh, Severus, do come in," Minerva said, irritated that he'd entered her office for the second time in one day without knocking.

"Don't be sarcastic, Minerva. You can't quite pull it off. I'll only be here a moment at any rate."

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense! What did Kingsley say?"

"He married us. Come to find out, there were two other couples there affected by the charm as well as Hermione and myself."

Minerva waited a couple moments, and when Severus remained silent, she growled loudly. "Severus!"

He chuckled. "Ginny Weasley to Oliver Wood, and Luna Lovegood to Ronald Weasley."

"Oh poor Harry! He must be devastated! And Hermione! Ron, married to Luna?" The headmistress shook her head. "The poor dears."

"I'll remind you that one of the poor dears is my wife! Trust me, she traded up, Minerva."

"Why, Severus, if I didn't know better, I'd say you sound jealous!"

"Please!" he spat. "As if I'd be jealous over any of those imbeciles!"

"What color were the binding cords?" Albus spoke for the first time since Severus had entered the room.

"Yellow," Severus said with a sigh.

"Yellow, eh? Minerva, what does yellow signify?"

"I'm not sure off the top of my head, Albus! What? Do you think, I'm just a fountain of information?" she asked.

Albus nodded towards the bookshelf in the room. "There is a book there on hand fasting rituals. See if there's anything on binding cord colors."

"Really you two, that is hardly necessary. It doesn't matter. It's done," Severus said.

Minerva started to the bookshelf as if he'd not spoken. After reading a bit, she said, "Ah, yes! I see that jealousys one thing! As well as attraction and charm. Oh, and knowledge and learning, plus..."

"Yes," Severus interrupted, not allowing her to go on. "Kingsley explained the meaning after the cord disappeared. I think that the knowledge and learning signifies more than anything else."

"So you say," Minerva argued. "A few moments ago, I'd say jealously signified quite a lot."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I am not jealous over that girl. I can't wait to be rid of her already! I need to go. I simply wanted to come up here and update you on the status of things, considering she will be moving into the castle today."

"All right, Severus. Would you send her to have a cuppa with me once she settles in?"

"Yes, Minerva, I will relay the invitation. After all, I live to be messenger boy!"

Severus could still hear his headmistress chuckling after he'd shut the door on his way out.

Chapter 4: Reactions

Chapter 4 of 17

News spreads about the weddings!

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, SW69!



After Apparating to the Burrow, Ginny stood immobilized at the door, trembling. She couldn't force herself to actually enter the house.

"Go on then," Oliver encouraged, nudging her at the small of her back. "We've got to get on with things."

"Would you please be quiet? I know all of this is my fault, so please *do not* repeat that, but for heaven's sake, stop talking!" She wrapped her arms around herself and hugged for comfort.

"You're scared, aren't you?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"Of course! Have you met my mum?" When Oliver shook his head that he hadn't, Ginny explained, "Let's just say she won't be at all happy about this. She loves Harry, you see. She won't understand. Hell, I don't understand! It won't be... pleasant."

Resigning himself to the fact that it would be some time before he actually got back to the hotel, Oliver said, "Let's get this over with then."

"Maybe she won't be home," Ginny mumbled hopefully, half to herself. "If we're very lucky..."

Ginny opened the door and all but tiptoed into the house. Hearing the snicker behind her, the new bride turned to glare at her amused husband. "Sure, laugh it up. We'll see how long your amusement of *our* predicament lasts."

"Really, Ginny. She can't be as bad as all that."

Ginny sucked in a sharp breath and suddenly stopped, causing Oliver to ram into her back.

"Oi! What is it now?"

"Harry! You don't think... You don't think he would've come here, do you? When he left the Ministry?"

"How the devil should I know?" Oliver ground out. Running his hands through his hair, he said, "This is becoming troublesome. We don't have the time you seem to want to waste, Ginny. We've got to get your things and be off."

Ginny opened her mouth to speak and then visibly paled when she heard, "Ginny, dear, is that you? Harry came by looking for you earlier..."

"Mum, this is Oliver Wood," Ginny quickly introduced her husband, cutting her mother off mid-sentence and feeling utterly ridiculous.

"Oh, hello." Molly turned her full attention to Oliver. "You're a friend of Harry's then?"

"I used to be," Oliver said under his breath.

"What's that, dear? I didn't quite catch that," Molly asked as she wiped her hands off on her apron.

"Mum," Ginny began and then stopped, unable to form the words.

"What is it?" Molly asked as she tilted her head to the side. "Ginny, you're scaring me now. Is it Harry? Ron? What? Who?"

"Mum, stop!" Ginny said, rubbing her mother's arms for comfort. "It's nothing like that. I've some news for you, and I just don't want to upset you with it. That's all."

Sighing, the new Mrs. Wood told her mother, "Perhaps we should go into the kitchen and sit down. Um, is Dad here?"

"Now you're really frightening me, Ginevra!" Molly grabbed Ginny by the arm and forcibly led her to the kitchen with Oliver following in their wake.

Pointing to a chair, Molly snapped, "Sit! The both of you and out with it. NOW!"

Ginny jumped, and Oliver looked at his new mother-in-law with his mouth gaped open. Taking a deep breath, Ginny began her tale.

"Last night at Harry's, Hermione, Luna, and I got quite drunk on some elf-made wine that Harry had, and it turns out that that wine was actually dark wine that the Blacks had special made, hoping that Sirius would..."

"Hold it right there, Ginevra Weasley! You mean to tell me that the three of you purposely drank dark wine? What were you thinking, young lady?"

"Well," Ginny said defensively, "we didn't know that it was dark at the time, did we? What? Do you think we would've drunk it if we had known? Jeez, Mum! Give me a little credit, would you?"

"I'm trying, but so far you're making it hard." Gesturing with her hand, Molly said, "Please, go on."

Ginny told her mother the rest of the story, battling interruptions, finishing it with, "Then we cast the Pairing-Plight Troth Charm."

Molly shook her head as if to clear it. "Come again? I don't think I heard you quite right. It sounded as if you said you girls cast the Pairing-Plight Troth Charm."

When the silence became so thick it could be cut with a knife, Oliver turned to Mrs. Weasley. Holding out his hand, he told her, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Weasley. I'm the mate the charm chose for your daughter."

Ginny closed her eyes, mortified. He was brave; she had to give him that. *Oliver!*

"I see," Molly said, resigned. "I don't suppose your brother turned out to be Hermione's soul mate?" she asked a little too calmly, sounding to Ginny as if she already knew the answer.

"No, not Hermione's. It was... er... Professor Snape."

"What? I don't believe that! Not for a second!" She began laughing hysterically. "Oh, good one, Ginny! The things your brother comes up with! All right, George, show yourself." She started to rise. "You really had me going."

"Mum." Ginny laid her hand on top of her mother's. "This is not a joke. I've just come from the Ministry where Oliver and I just wed, as well as Hermione and Snape, and..."

Still laughing, Molly encouraged, "Oh, do go on. Don't stop now. Who did Luna enter the state of matrimony with?"

"Ron."

"Ron?" Molly started beating the table as she laughed. "Really, now. This is enough." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "As if two of my children...my youngest at that...would dare to get married without even telling me."

"We only had three days, Mrs. Weasley, and I have a game in France at the end of the week," Oliver explained. "There really was no other time to do this because the Minister said he had to leave for Italy sometime tomorrow."

Molly's eyes widened. "Yes, Arthur mentioned it." She turned to look at her daughter. "Ginny?"

"I'm so sorry."

"Oh, no, you don't! Have you... Harry! Does he... Does Harry know?"

Ginny nodded, feeling ashamed as only her mother could make her feel. "Yes. He happened upon us as we were trying to sort it out. He's very angry."

"Well, of course he is! What do you expect him to be? Good God, girl, do you understand what the three of you have done? If you were doing something that only affected you that would be different. But what you did has affected so many. Ginny, how could you?"

"I thought it would pick Harry!" Ginny yelled. "I did everything I could to ensure that!" She waved her hands frantically in the air. "Now, it's done, and I can't change it."

"What I don't understand is why you performed this charm in the first place," Molly scolded. "Were you that unhappy with Harry?"

"Well," Ginny said as she stood, wiping the tears from her eyes that she'd just realized were falling, "that makes two of us, Mum, who don't understand. It was that wine, I'm sure of it. As for Harry, well, let's just say I've had a few doubts as to his feelings. We have to go. I'm going to my room to get my things."

"Ginny..."

"Don't. I just can't take any more today. Really. I can't." With that, Ginny and Oliver walked from the room, leaving Molly staring after them.

~*~

After going to her flat and getting what she thought she'd need for the week, Hermione stopped by Grimmauld Place to pick up a file from work that she'd left there. She decided she could go back to her flat the next weekend and finish packing her things. *Damn man!* she thought of her husband. *I don't know what he thinks, but he won't be bossing me around all the time as he did today!*

She'd speak to the owner of her flat about subletting it for a year. Married or not, Mrs. Snape wanted to make sure she still had her flat once her year was up.

Hermione felt horrid about the scene at the Ministry with Harry, but she hoped that he wouldn't be home. She wasn't sure if she could stand to face him again today.

Quickly and quietly walking into the library where she'd left the file, Hermione jumped when she heard, "Do come in. Make yourself at home~~friend~~."

His tone made her shudder, which angered her so much that she walked very deliberately to where Harry was sitting, watching the fire, and drinking what looked to be firewhisky. "Harry, I think we should talk."

Harry snorted. "Too bad you didn't want to talk before you decided to mess up my life!"

"Okay, Harry. That's enough. I didn't do this all by myself, you know!"

"I know you, Hermione. I heard the things you all were saying at the Ministry. It was you who looked it all up and figured out how the charm works." Harry slightly slurred his words as he took another drink.

"Yes, I did. I won't try to deny it. But I didn't twist Ginny's arm...or Luna's for that matter. I know that you're upset, I am, too, but perhaps this happened for a reason, Harry."

"A reason you say? No, the only *reason* this happened was to satisfy you."

"That's not fair. You're the one who left that stupid wine...*adark* wine, mind...out where anyone could find it!"

"Oh, so now it's *my* fault?" Harry jumped from his chair, spilling his drink all over the floor. "You dare try to put this off on me?" He jerked his thumb at his chest. "Go ahead and do that if that eases your conscience."

"I don't need to ease anything, Harry James Potter!" she lied, knowing she felt extremely guilty. Stomping her foot in aggravation, Hermione said, "If we could just try to..."

"I was finally going to be part of a family! Don't you see that? I was going to belong to a family who loved me! Wanted me!" He kept pounding his chest as he spoke, and his voice rose louder with each sentence.

Hermione paled and took a step back. "Don't you see that you're already part of a family who loves you, Harry? ~~I~~ love you! You're closer to me than any brother could ever be."

"Oh, yeah? Well, gee, thanks, sis. I really appreciate how you show your love. Snape's got himself a winner with you!" Harry told her, stumbling back a bit.

Fury spiking, Hermione informed him, "Maybe you should be thinking on why Ginny wanted to do the charm in the first place, hmm? There had to be a reason. And let me tell you another thing. You're sounding as if you wanted to marry Ginny just to have a family. If that's the case, if you aren't truly in love with her, then you are a selfish prat!"

Harry slumped down in his chair and buried his head in his hands. "Hermione. Hermione, you're wrong. I love Ginny."

"Am I?" she whispered. Going to his chair and crouching in front of him, Hermione laid her hands on his knees and said, "Harry, I know that you love Ginny. But you also love me. Ron. All of the Weasleys. What I want you to ask yourself is, are you *in love* with Ginny? Does your stomach clutch when she walks into a room? Do you think

about her all day? Do your palms sweat, and does your heart beat faster when you kiss her?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Is that how it was for you and Ron?"

"Not on my part," Hermione admitted. "Actually, to be completely honest with you, I have been having these little doubts for some time now."

"You have?"

"Yes, I have. Frankly, Harry, I'm not sure that I would've gone through with the wedding to Ron." Hermione shrugged. "I dunno. I do know that I love him and don't want to lose his friendship, but it's in the same way as I love you, and you can't make a marriage work on that...not in the long run. I wanted to make it work, and God knows I would have tried. But..."

Harry rested his head on the back of the chair and closed his eyes. "I just feel so alone right now."

"Understandable," Hermione assured. "Promise me something. Promise me that once you get over the shock and anger, you will seriously analyze your relationship with Ginny. You may be surprised at what you discover."

"Why do you sound so unaffected? You've just crushed Ron, you know."

Hermione turned away from his penetrating gaze. "I'm not unaffected at all. I hurt. My life, as I'd envisioned it, will never be the same after this." She turned back to look at Harry. "As I was packing at my flat, I had some time to think though."

"Don't stop there!" Harry told her impatiently. "What did you think of?"

"The charm. It's a *soul mate* charm, Harry. That has to mean something. Honestly though, Snape?" Hermione shuddered. "I just hope and pray I didn't do anything wrong, skip an ingredient... something!"

"You?" Harry asked in mock astoundment. "Never!"

Hermione smiled slightly. "Don't hate me, please, just don't hate me."

The smile faded from Harry's face, and the sadness returned. Nevertheless, he held his arms out to his friend. Hermione ran gratefully into his arms.

"You've hurt me and so has Ginny. It won't go away overnight, but I could never hate you or her."

Hermione nodded and silently wept on Harry's shoulder...for all of them.

~*~

After showing Luna where his flat was, Ron slammed into the shop hard enough to have the doors rattle.

"Oi!" Called George. "What slug crawled up your arse, little brother?"

Ron walked into the back lab where George stood working on a new sweet designed to cause its eater to lose speech for a time. "You're not going to believe what happened today. Never in a million years."

"Oh?" George asked, looking up, and Ron felt a great stab in the center of his chest for the loss of George's twin, Fred. George seemed... incomplete somehow. "Don't keep me in suspense! Tell."

Coming out of his thoughts of Fred, Ron said, "You may want to sit down. It's a killer."

"My, my! It can't be as bad as all that, can it? Surely Harry and you have managed all the mischief you can for one lifetime? What? Did the two of you pick up some randy ones on holiday and have them follow you back here?" George teased.

"No," Ron said and brooded into the tea his brother suddenly set in front of him.

"Come now," George coaxed. "Tell me everything. Perhaps I can help."

"Unfortunately, there's nothing you, or anyone, can do," Ron informed him and then quickly told him everything.

Once Ron was finished, George leaned back on the table, folded his arms across his chest, and whistled low and long. "Man, that's something. I would really hate to be Oliver Wood right now for two reasons. One, Harry is going to want to kill him, and two, well, he had to marry Ginny."

"George! This is not the time to joke! It's a God-awful mess! I honestly don't see how or why Hermione could do this."

Pulling up a stool, George sat directly in front of Ron. "It's time for some tough love, brother dear."

"Oh no you don't! I am not eating anything you try and force on me!"

"No, you git! It's time we had a talk, you and me. And for once, I don't want you to blow up before we can finish. Ron, do you honestly, deep down, think Hermione was the one for you?"

"Of course I do! I love her!" Ron narrowed his eyes. "What are you trying to say? You don't like 'Mione?"

"No, nothing of the kind. I love Hermione. I just happen to love you more. Ron," George said with some exasperation in his tone, "it never would have worked. You're too different."

"Humph! A lot you know! Haven't you ever heard the phrase *opposites attract*?"

"I'll go you one better. Haven't you ever heard *like calls to like*?"

Ron paled. That was exactly what Looney had said at the Ministry when talking about their auras or some crazy shite. "Maybe once or twice, but the opposites phrase is a better one."

"Not if you're so opposite that you have anything at all in common. Ron, Hermione angers you, and worse, she aggravates you. Gets on your nerves because you don't understand her."

"You know so much? What about Ginny and Harry then? They're a lot alike!"

George shook his head. "Harry is just another brother to me, and whether he is married to Ginny or not, he always will be. But let me tell you, Ginny is no political wife. Harry is going to be wrapped up in the Ministry for the rest of his life, and one day, he'll make Minister. Ginny's not cut out for that because she'll need more focus on her."

"Why have you never said anything before? If you felt all of this, why not tell us?"

George laughed. "You never would've listened. You three, well, four counting Ginny, went through a lot of shite together starting at a young age. There is a deep bond there. None of you would've heard what I said. Especially me because you view me as a prankster."

Ron shook his head in denial. "There is no way Luna Lovegood is my soul mate."

"Weasley. That's Luna Weasley to you."

"Oh bloody hell! Don't say that!"

George shrugged. "I like her. I always have."

"Fine. You marry her then!"

"Can't. I'm for Angelina, although I could see her wanting me. I am the charming male Weasley in the family." George's smile faded as he thought of Fred, who, to him, had always been the more charming of the two.

"I miss him, too. It's hard to look at you and not."

"Yeah, well." George rubbed a hand over his heart. "I have to go. You coming?"

"No, I have some things I want to get done. I'll lock up before I go. I'm on a timeframe, you know," Ron told him sarcastically.

George laughed, and Ron punched him playfully on the shoulder. "That's right. Laugh it up!"

When Ron was alone in the shop, he went to the back room. Noticing the cot there, he decided to lay down a bit. He was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

AN: We'll see what happens once everyone is settled in during the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Dealing With Fate

Chapter 5 of 17

The couples settle in together.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Hermione made her way into Hogwarts, glad to see that there was nobody about, especially Filch and his horrid cat. She slightly jumped when Winky appeared before her.

"Master Snape said I is to get your things, miss. You is to go have tea with the headmistress."

"Thank you, Winky, but that won't be necessary. I can take them myself. I don't have much..."

The house-elf became distressed. "No, miss! I is to take your things! Master Snape told me! I have to!"

"All right! Calm down, Winky." Taking her satchel out of her pocket and using her wand to enlarge it back to the normal size, Hermione handed to Winky. "Tell... er... Professor Snape I'll be down shortly."

With a slight nod, Winky took Hermione's bag and popped away.

Smiling, Hermione made her way to Minerva's office. She was at the statue of the gargoyle before she realized that she had no idea what the password was.

Suddenly, the gargoyle leaped aside, and Hermione stepped on the staircase to ride to the office. When she reached the top, the headmistress was waiting by the large oak door for her.

Saying nothing, Minerva opened her arms, and Hermione gratefully ran into them for comfort. "Oh, Professor McGonagall!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears. She'd not cried this many times in one day in years.

"It's not as bad as all that now, child," Minerva comforted. "Come on in and sit. I've had some tea sent up, and I dare say, I am adding some brandy to yours!"

Hermione nodded and walked into the room. After she'd sat, she took the tea Minerva offered her and drank long and deep.

"Better?" Hermione's former head of house asked.

"Yes, much. Thank you." Hermione sighed and sat back, closing her eyes. "I suppose you already know."

"What, that you're now Mrs. Snape? Oh, yes, Severus burst in here with the joyous news earlier today. Well, you've gone and done it now, haven't you?" Minerva asked as she delicately sipped her tea.

"I know. But how could I have known that the charm would pick *Snape* as my soul mate? You don't suppose I did the potion wrong or missed something, do you?"

"Highly unlikely. Hermione, I know you're upset now. I was too when I first heard, but I've had some time to think on things, and I have to say that the idea of the two of you doesn't seem wholly bad. A much better match for you than Mr. Weasley, as I'm sure you know."

"Are you mad? This is Snape we're talking about here. He hates me and all of my friends! He's always been beastly to all of us! Especially those of us in Gryffindor."

Minerva nodded in mock sympathy. "Yes, true. And the lot of you were such well-behaved and exemplary students too."

Hermione snickered. "Right, that was us! The *golden trio* would never give anyone a moment's trouble."

"He's a decent man, Hermione. You could do worse," Minerva told her, becoming serious. "He's been through so much, and I would really like to see him happy for a change."

Hermione laughed bitterly. "He won't be happy with me. You should've seen him at the Ministry. I'm surprised he didn't kill me on sight. He may yet."

"Nonsense! He can hold out a year, and so can you. Who knows, the two of you may be surprised. Like I said, he's a good man."

"Humph! Can I ask you something? How did he survive? Minerva, I saw him. I saw what that snake did to him. I watched him die!"

Setting her tea down, Minerva leaned forward. "He was not dead, but very close. After the defeat of the Dark Lord, and while all the hoopla was going on in the Great Hall, Neville Longbottom found him. There was a specific plant that he had... Can't remember the details, but suffice it to say that Neville saved your husband's life."

"Oh, that's rich! He owes Neville a wizard's debt? I just bet he loves that!" Hermione made a mental note to visit Neville sometime soon.

Minerva smiled. "Shouldn't you be off, dear? I wouldn't want you to miss your deadline and end up in Azkaban."

"Oh, my goodness! I didn't realize how late it's getting! We'll do this again soon!"

"Count on it," the headmistress agreed.

Once Hermione left, Minerva looked towards Albus' portrait. "Well? I'll be surprised if they last three months."

"It's early days yet, Minerva. Early days."

~*~

Hermione slowly made her way to the dungeons. She had no idea where Snape's living quarters were, so she decided to head for his office.

Before she could reach the door, Winky once again appeared before her. "I is taking you home, miss."

"Home?"

"Yes, to Master Snape's."

"Oh, right. Thanks." When Hermione reached his door, she hesitated after Winky popped away and then knocked.

"Enter," Snape's muffled voice came from inside.

Hermione gently opened the door and slowly walked in.

"So very kind of you to grace me with your company, *Wife*," Snape said sarcastically. "Perhaps you would like a stay in Azkaban. I, however, would not." He pointed to a closed door. "Let's get this done."

"What? Wait!"

"Wait? I'm afraid all of your dallying today has made it quite impossible for us to wait."

Hermione looked around the room frantically. Spotting a clock on the mantel, she said, "We've got three hours left!"

Raising an eyebrow, Snape told her, "I do not wish to be up all night. I have Slytherin and Gryffindor first thing in the morning. You've made your bed, now let's go lie in it," he said as he leered at her.

Hermione shakily followed him to his bedroom, wanting to both put it off and get it over with at the same time. Once inside, she looked around the room. Average size, nothing overly special. Average bed, average furniture.

"It suits my needs," her husband said, as if reading her thoughts. Perhaps he was. The thought sickened her. He began to unbutton his coat, his movements in tight, angry jerks.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, her voice rising.

"Don't be absurd. We have to fu...er...consummate this farce of a marriage, and in order to do that, we have to remove our clothes!" He threw his coat on the ground. "What took you so long getting here anyway? How long does it take you to drink a cup of tea?"

"Not that long!" she defended herself. "I had to go by Harry's first, and we..." She stopped at the look coming from him.

"I see," he said as he removed his shirt and slung it down on top of his coat. "We're on a deadline, and you took the time out to coddle Potter because Merlin knows, his needs come first!"

"No! It's not like that! He blames me..."

"As well he should!" Snape shouted.

When he went for his trouser buttons, Hermione yelled, "STOP!"

"Stop? No, I think not. Undress."

"No, not while you're like that! Perhaps you should shower first."

Snape snapped his head up, and Hermione took two full steps back. It looked to her as if lightning was coming from his eyes.

"A shower?" he asked in a voice so dangerously low it was almost a whisper. "Too greasy for you, am I?"

"NO! Not at all! I didn't..."

"Just realizing you're going to have to shag the bat of the dungeons?"

"I really didn't mean..."

"You think I'm nasty? Dirty? Ill kept?"

Hermione backed away from him as he stalked towards her. When he got too close, she put her hands on his chest. "Please, listen to me! That ~~isn't~~ what I'm trying to say! You're angry, and I've... Well, I'm... Damn it! I've never done this before," she pointed towards the bed, "and I didn't want you to hurt me! I thought a shower would calm you down a bit!"

Snape stopped his pursuit. "You expect for me to believe that you dated Weasley all this time, ~~was engaged~~ to the boy, and the two of you never had sex?"

"I don't care what you believe," she said with false calm. "It's the truth. I know you're angry, but I don't want you to hurt me any more than what's necessary."

Severus sighed and turned from her. "Christ, girl! You have to know everything about everything else, and you weren't the least bit curious about this?"

Hermione folded her arms defensively. "I never said I wasn't curious! I just wanted to wait for my wedding night!"

Snape clapped his hands mockingly. "Well, bravo! Congratulations! You've done it, Granger. It's your wedding night." He stood and began to remove his trousers once again, suddenly realizing he still had his boots on. He sat down on the bed and looked up at her as he took off his boots. "It's time. I won't hurt you."

"That's reassuring!" she complained.

Severus sneered. "If you wanted words of love, then you should have stuck with Weasley. You won't get them here. It's been a long day, and I'm tired. You've stalled long enough."

"Fine!" Hermione started to pull her jumper over her head and stopped. "Would you mind turning the other way? I don't want you watching me when I undress."

Rolling his eyes, Severus stood and walked to the other side of the bed. After he'd completely undressed, he turned the covers down and got in. "All right, Granger."

"Okay," Hermione said, grateful he'd closed his eyes. "Would you mind putting out the candles?"

"Nox," he said, and the room was blessedly dark.

After she'd undressed, Hermione stood where she was a moment longer to get her bearings and then slowly made her way to the bed. Once there, she quickly got in and pulled the covers up to her chin.

Severus sighed and laid his head on her stomach. When he didn't attempt anything else, Hermione asked, "What are you doing?"

"Getting you used to my touch."

"Oh. Well, that's okay. Let's just, you know, get on with it."

"I'll need to make sure you're ready."

Huffing out a breath, Hermione informed him, "I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be."

"Not mentally. Physically." He slowly slid his hand down her belly and lightly rested it at the top of her curls. He left his hand there until she wiggled her impatience.

Slowly going lower, he bent his head closer to hers and dipped one finger into her.

Hermione gasped at the intrusion and tried to lock her knees together.

"Easy," her husband whispered in her ear.

She shivered at the sound of his voice so close to her skin and slowly opened her legs, bit by bit.

When he felt moisture, Snape inserted another finger. He began to work his fingers faster, noticing she was beginning to move her hips just the tiniest bit. He positioned himself over her, and when he felt she was wrapped up in the movement of his fingers, he pushed himself inside of her.

"Ahh!" Hermione cried at the sudden thrust and stilled her hips immediately. She felt a slight burning sensation. What was curious to her, though, was the *click* she'd felt the moment he'd entered her.

Snape stilled for a moment, looking down at her with a surprised expression, then began to slowly move in and out of her.

Hermione tried desperately to see the expression on his face more clearly, but she could barely make out his features in the dark. The thought suddenly occurred to her that she should probably do something. Not sure what that something was exactly, she tentatively began to match his thrusts and was rewarded with a slight moan.

Just when she was beginning to feel her body pushing her towards something, Severus stiffened, and she felt hot spurts of liquid shooting inside of her.

Severus lay there a moment, still inside of her, breathing heavily. When his wife began to slightly tremble, he slipped out of her and rolled to his back.

He pointed to a door on the other side of the room. "The loo's through there. Go ahead and bathe." He pulled his wand out to clean himself and asked, "Would you like me to Scourgify you as well?"

Hermione simply nodded. *Did he not feel that... click? That bonding? He seems so aloof and disconnected.*

After Severus had used his wand to clean her, Hermione tightly wrapped the sheet around her body and stood, intending to go bathe herself.

Severus stood, obviously comfortable with his nudity, and told her, "I am going to my private lab. Had I known you'd never done this before, I would've been better prepared. I have a potion that will help with any burning sensations and soreness."

"All right," Hermione said and walked into the loo, shutting the door tightly behind her.

Once his wife had closed herself in the loo, Severus sat on the bed, stunned. He'd definitely felt a connection the moment he'd entered her. He shook his head and ran his fingers through his lank locks. He simply would not allow that girl to get to him. After Lily, Severus felt he just did not have anything more inside himself to give to anyone...especially to a little know-it-all such as his wife.

~*~

Oliver opened the door to his room and ushered his bride inside. Ginny looked around the room curiously. "Why do you stay in hotel rooms while you're here?"

"Because the Harpies pay for it, and we travel too much right now for me to invest in a place of my own. It's just me... Well, it's been just me until now."

"Oh, right. Makes sense." Ginny twisted her hands and looked around the room, moving from one foot to the other, fidgeting.

When her husband walked up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, she jumped and let out a small squeal.

"Relax," he ordered.

"It's just, well, I really don't want to do this. Nothing against *you*, but I'm not ready."

Oliver stood there studying her a few seconds and came to a decision. "You know, we could go about this several ways. Now, I really did not want to be married at this point in my life...no secret there...and I still don't, but the way I see it, we have to be married for a year, so we may as well make the best of a bad situation."

Ginny nodded. "What you're saying makes perfect sense, but I keep thinking that this is not right because it's supposed to be Harry. I hate that I've let him down."

A few silent tears slipped from her eyes, and Oliver wiped them off of her cheeks with his thumbs. "And yourself? Did you let yourself down?"

"I think we both know that I did."

"Not from what you told your mum, who is one scary witch by the way."

Ginny smirked. "I told you! What do you mean by what I told her? I didn't say anything about letting myself down."

"No, what you told her was that you'd been doubting Harry's feelings for you. What, did you think you could feel or love enough for the both of you?"

"I don't know! I just know that this is very uncomfortable for me."

"Are you a virgin then?"

"That's none of your business, Oliver Wood!"

"I think that it is. I'm about to bed you, and I need to know." God! He'd not bedded a virgin since Katie Bell, and at the time, he'd been a virgin as well.

"No, I'm not a virgin."

Oliver nodded. "I really didn't think that you and Harry would go without...you know...as much as you seem to love him."

"It wasn't Harry," she whispered regretfully. "It was Dean."

Oliver stood, gobsmacked. "You mean to say that you and Harry never..."

"No! We'd both decided to wait. I don't want to talk about this anymore if that's all right with you. It's weird speaking about the man I was supposed to marry with the man I did marry."

Oliver nodded. He really didn't want to talk about Harry either. Holding out his arms, he said, "Come here."

Ginny hesitated a moment and then walked into his arms. She closed her eyes when he bent his head and took her mouth in a slow, drugging kiss. She shivered. She'd never felt this way from any of Harry's kisses...not lately anyway. Feeling guilty, she decided to put Harry out of her mind.

Oliver slowly started backing her towards the bed. When her knees hit the mattress, he laid her down, never taking his mouth from hers. He began to rub his hands over her body on top of her clothes.

When he placed his hands under her shirt and onto bare flesh, they both shuddered. "Clothes off, now," he told her.

"Mmmm," Ginny said, not seeming to comprehend his words. He pulled her shirt off of her and began using his mouth on the tops of her breasts spilling from her bra.

Ginny grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled him closer. He raised his head and looked into her deep brown eyes. "Tell me if I do anything you don't like."

"So far, so good," she assured. "Make me feel instead of think, Oliver. I don't want to think."

Saying nothing, he bent his head again and started kissing her, tenderly at first, then, as sensations took over his body, more demanding. He rose up on his elbows and looked down at her. She really was quite lovely.

"Ginny," Oliver whispered. "Let's finish undressing. I want you."

Ginny simply nodded, confused by her wants and actions. It was as if her body was taking over her mind, and she couldn't seem to stop it, nor did she want to at that moment.

After they'd undressed, Oliver eased on top of her and gently kissed her face, eyes, and finally her mouth. For long moments, he did nothing except kiss her.

Ginny started rubbing her hands up and down his back, slowly at first and then more demandingly. She finally lifted her hips in blatant invitation. "Oliver."

He stopped kissing her, wanting to watch her eyes as he slipped into her. "Look at me." When she opened her eyes, he slipped inside. They both froze in shock at the sensation.

"Do you feel it?" Ginny asked, stunned.

"I do, yes. I feel it."

"What is that... kinship, that... link I feel?" Ginny asked.

"Dunno, but I feel it, too," Oliver told her and began moving in good solid strokes.

Without hesitation, Ginny began to thrust with him, and before long, they were lost in the moment, too far gone to think of anything more than finding completion. Oliver soon felt her tighten around him. That was all it took for him to explode within her.

As soon as he finished, Oliver collapsed on top of his wife, breathing heavily. After a bit, she shoved at his chest.

"Can't breathe here," she said, and he rolled to his side, placing his arm around her.

Guilt returning tenfold, especially after what she'd just shared with her husband, Ginny turned on her side with her back to his front and closed her eyes. *I'm sorry, Harry. So, so sorry!*

~*~

Ron lay on the cot in the shop, tossing and turning in a fitful sleep. He couldn't let his mind and body relax. He kept dreaming of mystical creatures chasing him, demanding they needed his body parts for potions and whatnot.

He turned to his side and suddenly jerked awake when he felt a familiar tug pulling from behind his navel.

"What the bloody hell?" Suddenly, he landed on the floor, face down, on top of his new bride.

"What is going on here?" Ron demanded.

"We've missed the deadline, silly. We're in Azkaban apparently," Luna told him, her face both distressed and amused at the same time. "Did you change your mind then and decide you wanted prison over me after all?"

Scrambling off her as quickly as possible, Ron ran to the door to their cell and called, "Guard!"

A/N: We'll see what happens with Luna and Ron in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: First Day of Many

Chapter 6 of 17

Ginny wakes up to a shock while Hermione tries to speak with Snape. Luna and Ron finally get things going.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Ron stood at the bars, rattling them while calling for the guard over and over. Luna sat quietly, watching him through hooded eyes.

"Guard!" He gave the bars one final shake and started to pace back and forth.

"What's all this racket in here?" a burly guard asked as he made his way down the corridor, obviously irritated. "You'll wake the whole lot!"

Ron quickly ran back to the bars. "Oh, thank God. You've got to get in touch with Kings... er... the Minister before he leaves for Italy."

The guard looked him up and down, clearly finding him lacking. "Son, it's after midnight. What would the Minister be bothering himself with you for? Say, I don't remember you from last check. What's going on?"

"We were brought here because we failed to consummate our marriage," Ron explained through gritted teeth, impatience dripping from every pore.

The guard let out a barreling laugh. "Oh, right. I heard 'bout that. Three couples havin' to wed today because of some charm three witches performed. You'd be one of them couples then?" he asked, looking back and forth between Ron and Luna.

When his ogling gaze held on Luna, Ron stepped in front of her so he'd be the one the guard was looking at. "That's right. I need to see the Minister before he leaves the country to wed us again so that we can get out of here."

The guard tore his gaze from Luna to look at Ron. He folded his thick arms over his chest. "You will have to wait for mornin'. This is not an emergency situation." His gaze

shifted to Ron's crotch. "Trouble with the consummation, eh?"

"NO!" Ron yelled, placing a hand over himself. "I mean to say, I fell asleep and... Hang on! It's really none of your business."

The guard looked over at Luna. "If you need a real man, lovey, I'd be happy to..."

"You shut your filthy mouth! Don't you speak to her or even look at her!" Ron pointed at the guard through the bars. "Does the Minister know the way you talk to prisoners in here?"

Chuckling, the guard told Ron, "As long as it be consensual, it's not rape or nothin' of the kind."

"Go on!" Ron shouted. "Just let us know as soon as the Minister arrives!" Ron turned his back to the bars, clearly dismissing the guard.

"Waste of a perfectly good woman if you ask me," they heard the guard murmur as he walked away.

Ron walked over to the cot and sat down. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Okay. I started to come to the shop for you, but I wasn't sure of my welcome. Thank you for holding off that guard. He gives me the creeps." Luna shuddered violently.

"It's all right." Ron sighed. "I don't want this! I don't want to be married to you. I want my life back."

Luna nodded. "Your life with Hermione."

"That's right," Ron spat. "My life with Hermione. It'd have been bad enough for her to have called off our wedding, but for me to be forced to marry *you*, well, that's the icing on the cake."

"I repulse you that much then?" Luna asked as her eyes filled. "You truly hate me?"

"At this moment, close enough. I just don't understand why!" Suddenly, Ron realized what he'd just said to his wife. "No," he whispered, "I really don't hate you. I'm sorry; all of this just upsets me."

Luna nodded and turned her face from Ron, not wanting to see the contempt in his eyes for her. "Mostly it was the wine. From what I gather, it brings out your dark side and pushes you to act on it."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that I thought Hermione loved me." He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Luna got up off of the floor and walked to sit beside him. Touching his arm, she said, "She does, silly. She loves you very much." She stared into his eyes a moment. "There are all kinds of love, Ronald."

He looked at her as if she'd grown another head. "Not enough apparently. She had to have known that that stupid charm wouldn't have picked me!"

Luna cocked her head to the side. "Well, *you* sure seem to. Why is that?"

Ron huffed out a breath. "We'd better get some sleep. Hopefully, Kingsley will get here in the morning before he leaves so that we won't have to stay here until he comes back. I think this cot is big enough for the both of us."

Ron lay down on his side and closed his eyes. He immediately opened them again when Luna lay beside him because she snuggled back to him as far as she could. "Should've gotten the rings today..." He heard her utter before she drifted off. He shrugged and placed his arm about her and fell asleep.

Abruptly, Ron was awoken by a loud shout. "Up, you two! The Minister's here, and he hasn't got all day!" the same burly guard yelled into the cell.

"All right, all right, keep your trousers on! We're up!" Ron gently woke Luna. "Kingsley's here. You ready?"

His wife merely nodded.

Ron stood and saw Kingsley studying him. "I was very clear about this, Ron. I told you that you only had twelve hours."

"I know. It's my fault," Ron admitted. "I fell asleep. Don't worry; this one will be consummated straight away."

"I know that it will. You have to do it here before you can leave."

"What?" Luna asked, speaking for the first time. "Here? Why?"

"Because, Luna dear, once you've been placed here for failure to comply with the rules, you may not leave again until it's certain that the rules have been followed."

Luna nodded, broken-hearted. She'd wanted to shower first and make herself more presentable for Ron.

Ron turned to speak to her, but Kingsley cut him off. "Let's begin." Once he'd completed the ceremony, he told Ron, "There's a room you will be led to that has complete privacy. It will lock once you enter, and silencing charms will automatically place themselves around the room. Once you've... finished and dressed, the door will open for you."

Ron nodded and thanked Kingsley profusely. Once the Minister remarried them and left, the guard took them to the room they would use. "You sure you don't want me instead, lovey?"

"No, I do not!" Luna told him.

They both turned and walked into the room, the door closing behind them and cutting off all outside sound. "I want you to know, I truly am sorry that your first time has to be in a place like this."

"Oh, it's not my first time. Though it is *our* first time. I'm sorry I couldn't make myself prettier for you though."

Ron heard only one thing. "What do you mean it's not your first time?"

Luna turned to him and cocked her head to the side. "Nor is it hardly yours if Lavender Brown is to be believed. Is it different for you then?"

"Who?"

"That's not important..."

"You know who I've been with." Ron folded his arms in a childish gesture. "It's only fair."

Luna shook her head and sighed. "Dean."

"Thomas? But Lavender told me he'd been her first and..."

"Do you know another? Really, let's just get on with this so that we can go home, all right?"

"When?"

"Stop it, Ron!"

"When?"

"After the final battle. He'd just come back from the battlefield, looking extremely pleased with himself, and when I walked by, he grabbed me and kissed me, right on the mouth. Then one thing led to another... Anyway, that's all I'm saying about it, whether you like it or not."

"Fine," he spat, unsure of where his anger was even coming from. It was unreasonable, he knew, but all he could think about was that Hermione had saved herself...for him, and now, bloody Snape was the one benefiting from it. He shook his head to clear it and then walked up to Luna, jerked her to him, and kissed her possessively. He might not be her first, but for now, she was for him only.

She immediately wrapped her arms around his neck and began kissing him back passionately. She stepped closer into him, wanting to get as close as she possibly could.

Ron stopped kissing her and looked around the room. Once he spotted the bed, he took her hand and walked towards it.

When she saw her husband start to undress, Luna quickly followed suit. Soon, they were both standing there in their altogether, breathing heavily.

Ron looked her up and down and smiled appreciatively. Luna blushed. Saying nothing, he walked to her and started kissing her again, just as possessively as before.

Luna fell back on the bed, pulling her husband with her. She opened her thighs to cradle him there, wanting to ease the ache he'd started. She began grinding herself against him. She'd wanted him for so long...

Suddenly, Luna used her strength to flip him onto his back. When he looked at her startled, she simply said, "Let me love you, Ron." Then she positioned herself over him and sank down. Both let out appreciative groans.

Luna sat still atop him, gazing down into his wide eyes, watching him watch her, and wondering if he'd felt the connection. It was very erotic the way his aura glowed brightly. He placed his hands upon her hips and gently urged her to move. She was more than happy to comply.

She started moving slowly at first, then, as passion overcame them, more urgently. "Ooh, Ronald, I'm almost there." Suddenly, she went very still and tightened around him before moving on in erratic jerks.

Ron let her ride it out, but once she started coming down, he deftly flipped her onto her back and pounded inside of her urgently. It wasn't very long until he found completion. After a moment, he eased out of her and lay on his back.

"We need to get dressed and go," he told her. "I've got to be at work by nine."

"Yes," Luna agreed. "I do as well."

They both stood and dressed, neither mentioning the instant bond that they'd felt once they'd joined.

~*~

Ginny woke early, not sleeping well in the unfamiliar bed. She stretched and looked at the man she'd married...been forced to marry. She felt twin feelings of longing for what he could make her feel and guilt that it wasn't Harry who'd awoken those feelings within her.

She rolled out of bed as quietly as she could and went to the loo. She wanted to be finished in there before Oliver woke. Ginny knew that it wouldn't be long because he had practice early this morning.

Ginny startled. They were leaving for France at the end of the week. She supposed she could look at it as some sort of honeymoon... Cringing at the thought, she moved from the loo, past the bedroom, and into the small sitting room to order their breakfast.

While she waited, she spied a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on the table and picked it up to read. Just as quickly, she dropped it onto the floor, horrified at the front-page story.

The Boy Who Lived Dumped for a Famous Quidditch Star

Rubbing her hands roughly over her face, Ginny cried, "No! No! No!"

She reached down and picked the paper up, devouring the article.

It appears that Ginevra Weasley, daughter of the Ministry's Arthur Weasley, threw over our favored Harry Potter for Oliver Wood, the famous and only male player for the Harpies.

This reporter has further learned that the newlyweds married in a hush-hush ceremony yesterday afternoon at the Ministry of Magic, along with her brother, Ronald Weasley, to Luna Lovegood, whose father is the proprietor of the highly questionable Quibbler rag mag.

Completing the marriages at the Ministry were none other than murderer Severus Snape and the fickle Hermione Granger, who was, until yesterday, engaged to Ronald Weasley. (For more on Hermione Granger and the string of broken hearts in her wake, including Harry Potter, please turn to page five.)

Ginny groaned and threw the paper back onto the floor. Harry's prediction had come true. One thing was for sure: Harry was going to explode when he read that!

~*~

Severus woke with an armful of witch. They were front-to-front, legs entwined. He blew through his nose loudly, trying to disengage her hair from his face.

When he fully woke, he became aware of something else. He was hard as a rock, and she was *right there*. He immediately moved his groin back, not wanting her to wake and realize his predicament.

He gently untangled himself from her and went to shower. He looked over his shoulder as he walked to the loo and watched as she grabbed his pillow in her sleep and snuggled closer to it.

He went through his morning ritual quickly, wanting to be finished before she awoke. The fact that he felt the need to rush angered him.

He went into his sitting room to read the paper before breakfast and laughed out loud at the front-page headline. Yes, his name was in the article as well, but he highly doubted that many would even get that far down.

He looked up when he heard his wife clearing her throat from the doorway. He was glad to see that she was fully dressed. "Is there something you need, Granger?"

"Breakfast?"

"Don't act as if this is the first time you've ever seen Hogwarts, girl. You know exactly where to go if you want to eat!"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Where should I sit? Never once have I ever seen a... a... *spouse* in the Great Hall! You want I should sit at the Gryffindor table?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Her mouth opened widely. "You know *Gone With The Wind*?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's a very popular Muggle book by Margaret Mitchell. Anyway, that's beside the point. Should I sit by you then?"

Severus sighed and looked around the room. Shrugging, he told her, "Sit where you will. Do what you want. It matters not to me."

Hermione nodded and glanced down at an invitation on the table beside Severus' chair. "Oh, are we going to Malfoy and Parkinson's wedding?"

He looked up once again, agitated that she kept interrupting his morning reading. "I was unaware that you'd received an invitation."

"Oh, well, I didn't. I just assumed that since we're married, I'd attend with you."

"Assumed that, did you? Well, don't. We are married in name only, as you are well aware."

"Professor, I know that you would not have chosen this..." He snorted, and she ignored him..."but here we are. Do you have to continuously be at odds with me?"

"Let's get this straight because I do so hate to repeat myself. I don't like you. I don't want to be married to you, and I don't want you here. We merely need to co-exist for one year. We are both intelligent adults... Well, you are when there's no alcohol involved, so I think we should be able to pull this off. Just stay out of my way, and I'll grant you the same courtesy."

Hermione took a deep breath as if gathering her courage. She paused, looking at him intently, then seemed to come to a decision. "Are you going to honestly tell me that you didn't feel something last night during..."

"During?"

"Stop being an arse! During intercourse! There was some sort of connection between us, and you know it."

"I felt nothing."

"You're lying."

"Do not stand here in *my* home and call me a liar, Granger!"

"Then don't sit here in *your* home and lie, Snape!"

He stood and slowly walked to her, towering over her in a menacing way. "Understand this well, woman. My feelings and thoughts are none of your business. How dare you presume to know what I did or did not feel and then stand here and call me a liar?"

Hermione shrank back, but only a little. "Don't you wonder? This was a soul mate charm! What if there is some sort of merit to it?"

He stood leering at her with his arms crossed, refusing to speak.

"Okay, fine! I apologize for calling you a liar. Perhaps you didn't feel what I felt, but I felt something. Like an instant connection or some sort of a bond when we... joined."

"You felt something, did you? More's the pity for you then. I didn't feel anything when we joined," he easily lied, "and I never will. Don't try to make this into something its not."

"What about the charm?"

"Smoke and mirrors to force unwilling people to wed. I don't believe in *soul mates*. And if I ever had one, she died years ago," he spat, turning from her.

"You mean Harry's mum, don't you?"

"Do not speak of it or her! It's none of your business!"

"Don't speak of her?" Hermione asked incredulously. "How ridiculous. Harry and I talk of her all the time. I know you loved her because I saw..."

Hermione stopped speaking at once when he whirled around and fixed his bottomless black eyes on her. "I can see that I didn't retrieve my memories back from Potter quick enough. How dare he share my most private, intimate thoughts and feelings?"

"NO! It wasn't like that! He wanted everyone to see the man you truly are!"

"Oh? And what type of man am I, Granger?"

"A hero."

Severus laughed so hard that he had to sit back down. "I am no hero, nor do I wish to be. I will leave all of that to the one who truly desires it. Don't romanticize me. You'll be sorely disappointed."

"When it comes to you, I romanticize nothing. I was merely stating that I felt a connection. I thought that you did, too. I see I was mistaken," she said stiffly. "I'm going to breakfast and then to work."

When she'd left for the Great Hall, Severus laid his head on the back of his chair and sighed. He would never tell her he'd felt anything. He didn't want her to have any false hopes where he was concerned. Once this year was up, so would their time together be.

A/N: I do think that Severus and Ronald protest too much!

Chapter 7: Coming to a Realization

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione has an epiphany concerning her husband and then runs into Ron and Luna at the Ministry while Ginny gets miffed over her husband's fans. We also see how Harry is doing.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Hermione grumbled to herself all the way to breakfast. *Didn't feel anything my arse. He can deny it all he wants, but know he felt something! It couldn't have been only me who felt that!*

Her face lightened when she opened the doors to the Great Hall and spotted Neville sitting at the staff table. In her anger at her husband, she'd forgotten that since he was now the Herbology professor, Neville would likely be there! She quickly made her way to him. "Neville! It's so good to see you! How are you?"

"Great! Here," he told her as he reached beside him and pulled out a chair. "Have a seat. I read about your... marriage in the *Daily Prophet*. What happened?" he asked, surprised. "I thought you were for Ron?"

Hermione sighed and told him of the wine and the charm. "The next thing I knew, we were all at the Ministry at the same time, and since Kingsley was leaving for Italy the next day, we all decided to get married right then."

Neville nodded. "How did Ron and Harry take it?"

"Bout like you'd expect." Hermione lowered her eyes to her plate. "I'm afraid Ron hates me. Harry and I, well, we made some sort of peace, but Ron..."

Neville placed his hand over Hermione's and squeezed gently. "Don't worry. Ron will eventually get over this mad spell. You know how he is. Besides, I've noticed him watching Luna for some time now. I don't even know if he realized he was doing it, but I've noticed his looks all right."

"Really?" Hermione asked disbelievingly, a little put out.

"Yes," Neville told her truthfully. "I'm not surprised about you and Snape either, truth be told."

"Please! Don't tell me you noticed him watching me or, heaven forbid, me watching him. There's no way."

"No," Neville said, laughing. "I never noticed anything like that, but I know the two of you, and I was just saying that I'm not surprised by it, that's all."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Hermione decided to change the subject. "What about you? Anyone special you're seeing right now?"

Neville blushed. "Well..." Taking a deep breath, he told her, "I've been seeing Hannah Abbot these past few weeks."

"Really? Neville, that's wonderful!"

"She's most certainly wonderful. I ran into her one day when she was buying supplies for a garden she wanted to start at her house. She asked my advice, one thing led to another, and we just really hit it off. It's funny, I never noticed her while we were in school, but the two of us have quite a lot in common actually."

Hermione leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'm very happy for you. You deserve to be happy." She grinned wickedly. "Especially after saving my husband's life. Tell me, how does it feel to be owed a Wizard's Debt by the snarky Potions professor?"

Neville's eyes widened. "He told you that?"

"No," Hermione laughed. "Minerva did. Tell me all about it," she insisted as she put her elbow on the table and propped her chin on her fist.

He looked at her disapprovingly. "Hermione, I would've expected better from you. I won't talk about that. It's not a joke, you know!"

Sitting up straight, she said, "I never thought it was a joke! I just thought with the way he's treated you all these years, you would like to brag a bit about him owing you, that's all."

"No, I wouldn't. Yes, he treated me horribly. I won't deny that. But let's face it. I'm a klutz when it comes to making potions. He was a spy in the middle of a war between two very dangerous wizards, and he had a lot of pressure on him. So, no, I don't want to brag about any such thing, nor will I talk about it."

Hermione suddenly felt ashamed. Neville was right. "Oh, God, Neville, I'm sorry. You're absolutely right!"

"It's okay."

But Hermione didn't feel okay. She felt repulsed at herself. No wonder the man was so closed off to everyone. If everyone else acted as she did, getting pleasure out of his pain, Hermione really couldn't blame him for his actions towards her.

She vowed to herself right then that however nasty he was to her, she was going to do her best to break through the protective shell he'd placed around himself. No longer would she act in such a childish manner. If she wanted him to treat her like an adult, a *wife*, then she would behave as one!

She didn't care what anyone said; what Ginny, Luna, and she had performed was *soul mate* charm! She refused to believe it was rubbish! Hermione really wanted a chance to discover if it had merit.

"Hermione," Neville said and gently laid his hand on hers. "Really, it's okay. I'm not judging you. Please don't look so put out."

Hermione smiled. "Thanks, Neville. I'm off for work now, but I want to get together for tea sometime soon."

"Sure. Hannah would love to see you!"

Hermione rose and left for the Apparition point, heart heavy and head full of her husband.

~*~

By the time Hermione had arrived at the Ministry, she'd decided to kill her husband with kindness. Not be sweet, but kind words, going out of her way for him, things such as that. Eventually, she would wear him down. Wouldn't she?

She had almost made it to the lift to ride to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures when it happened. She ran right into Ron. Hermione stumbled when they collided, and he grabbed her arms to steady her, then quickly released her and stepped back.

"Ron! Luna! What are you two doing here?"

"It's none of your business!" Ron said while Luna explained, "We had to remarry. Ronald fell asleep last night, and we didn't get to consummate the marriage. We were sent directly to Azkaban. They made us come here to retrieve our wands. They are sent directly here now if you are summoned to the prison."

"Oh, how dreadful! Are you all right?"

Ron sneered. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"It must have been terrible to have to spend the night in Azkaban!"

Luna smiled dreamily, looking off into space. "It was fine once we slept."

Hermione looked at her and drew her eyebrows together, frowning. "Once you slept?"

"Yes. Ron held me in his arms all night. Oh, Hermione, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking..."

"It seems you and *your husband* had no problems shagging, eh, Hermione? Or would you rather be called Mrs. Snape?"

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. "Listen, Ron, I know that you're upset with me, and I understand why, but there's nothing to be done. Couldn't we move past this? I care for you tremendously."

"Get past this? Are you mad? YOU BROKE MY HEART!" he screamed at her while hitting his chest with his fist and had heads turning to see what all the ruckus was about. "You slay me, Hermione. I loved you."

Tears gathered in Hermione's eyes, but she fought them back. "I loved you, too. Ron, can you honestly stand there and tell me that you think we would do well together married? Do you honestly love me enough to spend your entire life with me?"

"I dunno," he admitted. "But that's not really the point, is it? The point is that instead of taking me to the side and saying, 'Ron, I'm having doubts about us, I think we need time apart,' you went and did some charm that not only affected you, but me as well. Without even warning me!"

"I had no idea you would be for Luna! And besides, if I had come to you, you would have argued with me!"

"Yes, I realize I would've argued with you, Hermione, but at least I would've had some warning of your feelings. As it was, I went on holiday with Harry thinking we were great, and suddenly, I get a letter from the Ministry. And me being for Luna is not the point. The point is that your performing that blasted charm while knowing that it wouldn't pick me has most assuredly affected me."

Hermione sighed, tired of going over it. She swore to herself that this was the last time she would. "It. Was. The. Wine. Otherwise, we never would've done it, and I had no idea it wouldn't pick you!"

Unconsciously, Ron grabbed his wife's hand. "Right. We've got to go. We both have to be at work soon. Goodbye."

Ron quickly walked to the door, dragging Luna behind him. She turned back to look at Hermione. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

Hermione nodded and watched them leave. Sighing again, she thought that this was another relationship she would have to work on. She refused to lose Ron all together.

She made her way to her office, thinking of the latest case she was working on. A werewolf had bitten a thirteen-year-old boy, and people were lobbying to have the boy killed. After learning about Fenrir Greyback, the populace was terrified of anything to do with werewolves.

Hermione shook her head. Not only at the ignorance but also at the unwillingness to learn! All the child needed was the Wolfsbane Potion once a month!

The problem was it was extremely hard to make, and the average person didn't know how to make it every month. She opened the door to her office, promising herself that she would find a solution if it killed her.

~*~

Ginny sat in the stands and watched her husband and soon to be teammates practice. She had to admit, he was magnificent. He flew with such grace, as if he'd been born on a broom. She only knew one other person who flew like that: *Harry*.

Ginny closed her eyes and shook her head. Whenever she thought of Harry, her chest constricted and her stomach knotted. She had to find a way to get past this! She hated to think of Harry despising her, but there was no doubt he did.

Fighting back the tears, Ginny looked up as a group of witches came barreling up the bleachers and sat to watch the practice. Wondering if it was usual for the public to

watch, Ginny turned to the women. "So, do you guys come here often?"

"No, we never did before. We only started coming when Wood started playing for the team. He's gorgeous, he is. We read in the paper where he's gone and got himself married though. Ah, well, that's no never mind to us! He's still just as cute as ever."

"Oh, he is, is he?" Ginny studied the women...there were three of them...and then turned to gaze to her husband. She noticed the change immediately. When he'd noticed he had an audience, he began to perform. Showing off and doing unnecessary stunts.

Ginny shrugged. "A bit of a show off if you ask me."

"I don't recall asking you," one of the women told her. "Besides, we've never seen you about before. Getting a look yourself, are you?"

Snorting, Ginny told them, "Hardly. I just found out that I will be playing for this team in just a few months, so I wanted to watch them in action."

"Right. Whatever you say, dear."

Just then, Oliver flew over to where the group of women sat while watching him. "Ladies," he greeted. "It's good to see you again today."

"Oh, we wouldn't miss your practices, Ollie! Not for anything!"

Oliver winked saucily at them. "Glad to hear it! I play better with my fan base keeping a check on my abilities!" Giving his wife a smirk, Oliver flew to the ground and headed for the locker room to shower and change.

After he left, one of the women sighed. "Ah, I bet he's a complete animal in bed!"

"Naa," Ginny said nonchalantly, "I got a glimpse in the locker room." She held up a pinky and wiggled it. "Some men are great at sports for a reason, girls!"

~*~

As soon as the hotel door closed behind him, Oliver grabbed Ginny and pushed her against it, crushing his mouth with his. "A great practice gets me worked up!"

She shoved at his chest and pushed him off of her. "A great practice, is it? Truly? You're sure it's not your little groupies you're thinking of?"

Oliver cocked his head, studying his wife. "Careful there. Although green usually looks great on you, this particular shade is very unbecoming."

"You think I'm jealous?" she asked incredulously. "As if I'd be jealous over you! I just refuse to be made a fool of, that's all! Those hags were talking about reading of your marriage!"

"So? And I don't think *hag* is the term I'd use to describe them..."

"You be careful, Oliver Wood! The fact remains that those *ladies* know that you're married, and you just slobbered all over them, going over there and disrespecting me! I won't be made a laughing stock!"

Oliver cleared his throat to disguise a chuckle. "Yes, dear," he said, placing his hands on either side of her head on the door she was still leaning against. "Although, in my very humble opinion, this is what happens when I slobber all over someone." He leaned in and began nibbling her bottom lip playfully.

"Hmm," Ginny said. "I do see some difference."

"Here," he said as he took her hand and led her towards the bed. "I want to make sure you see all the difference. I wouldn't want there to be any doubts left when I'm through with you."

"All right," Ginny said as she allowed herself to be dragged into the bedroom. "For the sake of comparison, mind." She was laughing when he slammed the door closed.

~*~

Harry sat in his sitting room, gazing into the fire. He'd gotten drunk the night before and was nursing a hangover.

He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face roughly. He should really be at work, but he didn't feel like going in, so he sent an owl saying he was sick. He couldn't do that everyday, especially when Kingsley returned, but for today, he would stay home.

Harry looked at the Charms book he'd thrown across the room the night before. For one brief moment, he considered performing the charm himself, but then decided it wouldn't be fair to ruin someone else's life as his had been.

And that's just what those three women had done. They'd ruined his life. His dream of finally belonging to a family that he loved was shattered.

He sighed when he heard the knock on the door. He decided to ignore it, and after a few moments, Ron walked in.

"Harry! What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Harry said, feeling guilty for staying home from work. "What are you doing here, Ron?"

"I was at the Ministry earlier and stopped by to see you. They told me that you were sick and wouldn't be in today, so I came to check on you."

Harry shrugged. "I'm fine. I don't need you coming over here to baby-sit me. Why aren't you working yourself?"

"Because," Ron said as he smiled, "I came over here to baby-sit you." He put his hands on his hips as he surveyed the messy room, noting two empty firewhisky bottles lying on the floor. "Looks like you really tied one on, mate, and got right pissed."

"So what if I did? It's my business, and I'm entitled after what *your sister* did to me."

"Hey." Ron threw his hands up in surrender. "I lost my fiancée, too."

Harry guffawed. "Ron, let's be serious. I know that you loved Hermione, and I'll never try to say you didn't. But you know as well as I do that you two wouldn't have lasted."

Ron fisted his hands at his sides while his face reddened. "You know, I'm getting really sick and tired of everyone telling me that Hermione and I couldn't make a go as a married couple. I may not have been her soul mate, but I reckon a lot of people marry someone other than their soul mate. Regardless of what everyone else seems to think, I think we had a shot."

Harry dismissed this with an impatient wave of his hand. "You couldn't go a day without arguing about something. You had no interests in common. If she even mentioned something studious, you lost it, and if you mentioned anything on Quidditch or about the shop, she did."

"Oh, and I supposed you and Ginny had everything in common?"

"A hell of a lot more than you and Hermione did!"

"So you say! I lost as much as you did!"

"Sure you did! I lost a family! You may have lost Hermione as a wife, but she still cares about you! And you have Luna!"

"You *did not* lose a family! Ginny still cares for you, too! We are still your family and always will be, you git! And I don't want Luna!"

"Liar! You may not want to be married to her, but you sure lusted after her. I noticed, Neville and me both, that last time we were all at the Leaky Cauldron for drinks. Every time she walked by, you watched her."

Ron's face became redder. "I suppose you're going to say that since Ginny you never found another woman attractive?"

"Of course I did. I'm just saying that you got picked. You were still chosen."

"Harry, this is ridiculous. Don't tell me that you're upset at not being chosen."

"I'm upset that Ginny did this stupid charm to begin with!"

"Well, so am I! This is not a contest. We've both been wronged. But, Harry, you have to know, you're always going to be part of our family."

Harry said nothing for a moment, then asked, "Did you see the *Prophet* this morning?"

"No. Um, I suppose you should hear this from me. Luna and I spent the night in Azkaban last night for not consummating the marriage. I fell asleep, and the next thing I knew, I woke up in a cell with her."

"Ron! How could you do that to her?"

"Geez, you're sure full of judgment today! I didn't do it on purpose, you know!"

Harry just shook his head. "Anyway, the marriages are in there. All three, but Ginny's to Wood is what made the headlines." He nodded towards the paper. "Have a read."

After reading the article, Ron balled up the paper and threw it in the fire. "Sorry, mate. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, not really. Go on to work. I'll be fine."

"You sure? You want to meet me for lunch or drinks after work?"

"No, not really. Honestly, Ron, I just want to be alone for a while. I'll be okay, but I need time. Go on then. Off with you."

When Ron left, Harry got out of the chair and went to lie on the couch. Moments later, an owl pecked at the window. It seemed that Kingsley had sent an owl to the Ministry requesting Harry and a couple other Aurors go to Italy to help on a certain case if they had the time. As his eyes drifted shut, Harry thought that sounded like a perfect idea to him at the moment. He'd look into it when he woke.

AN: We'll be moving forward a month in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Time Marches On

Chapter 8 of 17

Time passes and our couples are learning to cope with their situations.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Hermione sat at the little desk that Severus had finally allowed her to put into his office in their quarters. It wasn't much, hardly bigger than a student's desk really, but she'd desperately needed somewhere to work while at home.

Surprisingly, the office they shared had become a great place for her to get to know her husband. It had been one month since they'd wed, but Hermione felt they had come

a long way since that horrid argument they'd had where he'd lied to her about not feeling anything. She was positive he had lied, though she knew that he'd never admit it. They'd even started calling each other by their first names in the past week, rather than Snape and Granger.

He was talking to her a little more and a time or two had even started a conversation himself. These past couple of days, he seemed to enjoy showing her articles in the various journals he kept and discussing them afterwards, much like she did. Ron always hated discussions such as those. She could talk to her husband about her work, and a few times he had offered her sound advice.

The only problem right now, as far as Hermione could tell, was that her husband had still not touched her in any kind of romantic way, not even so much as a kiss, but many mornings they woke wrapped in each others arms, and Hermione had *felt* certain parts of him responding to her. But he never acted on it.

To her utter amazement, Hermione found herself willing him to her lately, not daring to make the first move herself. Severus seemed like the kind of man who would want to make the moves himself, and she didn't think she could bear it if he rejected her.

Her fantasies of her husband seducing her were interrupted when she heard the door to their chambers slam shut. She quietly walked out of the office to see what was going on and found her husband standing at the mantel, tossing a drink back, then pouring himself another. Something was terribly wrong. She'd never seen him drink alcohol before dinner before.

"Severus?"

"What is it?"

"Um, are you all right?"

He turned to look at her then, and the look in his eyes caused her insides to turn to ice. "I'm just fine and dandy," he said sarcastically as he downed his second drink.

"No, you're not. Please tell me what's bothering you."

"I don't want to tell you! I don't want to speak with you about this or anything else this night. Leave off, Hermione."

So back to square one it seemed, but damned if she'd not know why. Folding her arms across her chest, she told him, "Obviously, I've done something to anger you. I can't correct it if I don't know what I've done. Or, if not correct, then at least explain it!"

Severus threw his glass in the fireplace and whirled on her. "You, you, you! Not everything is something to do with *you*! I realize that I have tolerated you this past month, but that does not give you the right to begin prying into my personal business!"

Hermione reared back as if he'd slapped her. "*Tolerated* me? Why, you arrogant arse! You've enjoyed this past month as much as I have; don't even try to deny it. I realize you're very upset about something, but damned if I'll stand here and be your punching bag." She turned then and walked out the door, heading for the Great Hall.

Try as she might, Hermione couldn't think of anything that she'd done to upset her husband that way. As soon as she opened the doors to the Great Hall and saw the decorations, it hit her. It was Halloween...the anniversary of Harry's parents' death. More specific to her husband, Lily Evans' death. It should have occurred to her, she'd sent an owl to Italy for Harry from work that morning.

Hermione turned to go back to Severus, but stopped short when she watched him walking down the hallway towards her. "Severus, I'm so..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "No. Don't say whatever you were about to say. Just leave it, as I told you before. If I wished to speak of it, I would go to Minerva."

Hermione's heart fell. "All right," she said and walked inside. She sat beside Neville and ate without tasting anything.

After eating, both she and Severus went back to their quarters. He walked straight into his office, and she decided to stay in the living room and read. He'd hurt her, and even though she'd understood why, it didn't make her pain lessen at all.

Hermione startled when she heard a slight tapping on the door. When she opened it, she found an owl with a letter. Thinking it must be a reply from Harry, she went to take it, but the owl flew past her and into the office.

After a bit, curiosity got the better of her, and she went to investigate. Severus was just finishing a reply and tying it to the owl when she walked to the door. "Something from Minerva?"

"No."

She stood a moment longer, not saying anything, and he finally looked up. "Something else, Granger?"

Granger. She lowered her eyes to hide the pain in them and told him, "No. Nothing else." Sighing, she went to take a shower and ready herself for bed.

After she'd laid there about an hour, Severus finally came in to go to bed. She didn't say a word while he changed and got into the bed, and after his breathing steadied, she got up and walked into their office. She spotted the letter and picked it up to read it, but she then dropped it just as quickly. It was from a woman...a lover...wanting to get together!

"Curiosity killed the kneazle, Granger."

Hermione jumped as if he'd hexed her. "Oh! Um, I was just, er..."

"Nosing in things that are none of your affair?"

She turned to him then and couldn't stop a few tears from falling. "Yes. I'm sorry. For everything."

"Oh, for the love of Merlin! Are you crying?"

Finally, Hermione couldn't hold her anger in any longer. Throwing up her hands in defeat, she screamed, "Yes! I'm crying! Unlike you, I am a human with feelings, not some doppelganger! When I am hurt or upset, occasionally, I cry!"

"Damn it! There is no need to cry over that letter. I don't plan to go out with her, or anyone else, during the year I have to be married to you, so calm yourself this instant. It was not a serious entanglement at any rate. I don't have anyone I see seriously, so there is no need for your jealousy."

"You think that is what I'm upset about?"

"You're standing here crying after reading that invitation, so what else am I to believe?"

"God, Severus! You had a life before me! You dated, had lovers! Now, because of me, everything is ruined!"

He raised an eyebrow, the only show of emotion on his face. "You seem surprised that I had friends of the female persuasion."

She shrugged. "I am."

This time, it was Severus who crossed his arms over his chest. "Indeed? Impressed that the bat of the dungeons could get a date?"

Hermione stomped her foot in frustration. "Why do you *do* that? Of course I didn't mean that I thought you couldn't find a date. I just never thought of it! You've been my professor most of my time here. Students never think of their professors as having a personal life. That's all I meant...nothing more!"

"I see. Well, now you know."

She buried her face in her hands. "I've ruined your life," she mumbled.

"Stop the theatrics, Hermione. It's one fucking year. I hardly think that constitutes the ruination of my entire life. Furthermore, feeling sorry for yourself is not very attractive."

Hermione! "You mean as you were before dinner? Can I just say, sounding heartless notwithstanding, it's been a little over twenty years, Severus. Stop the theatrics," she told him, mimicking his words. "She would not want you to despair like this."

He nodded and went to sit behind his desk. "You think that I feel she is the love of my life, and with her gone, I won't allow myself to be happy."

"Actually, yes, that's exactly what I think."

"You couldn't be more wrong."

"Oh, after your behavior earlier tonight, I beg to differ."

"I see." Severus steeped his hands under his chin and looked deeply into her eyes for a moment. "Close your eyes, Hermione."

"Close my eyes? Why..."

"*Close them!*"

Hermione sighed and obeyed his command.

"Imagine this, if you will. You've been very close friends, and more, with Weasley since you first came to Hogwarts. I met Lily before we started, but just as the two of you, she and I were very close and at one point more than mere friends. Much, much more.

"I refuse to go into all of the details with you, but suffice it to say that when I started in with what she considered the wrong crowd, she became closer to James and his lot. We had many arguments and grew apart. Inevitably, she married.

"Now, picture if you will, hearing a prediction. Although you have no idea of the identity of the people that the prediction is about, you are so eager to please, to be accepted, that you run to your *Master* to tell him what you've heard. Irrefutably, this causes the death of one of the people you cherish most, such as you do Weasley...even Potter.

"A person that you loved with your whole heart is dead...*dead*, mind you...leaving an infant son in her wake because of your actions. Define irony? Joining a group who believes that only pureblood witches and wizards are worthy, when you are only a half-blood yourself, that is *controlled* by a half-blood madman."

Hermione shuddered. "Oh, Severus. It's too much. If I had purposely caused Ron or Harry to be killed, I'd..."

"Yes. Exactly. So, everyone can think that I'm pining because I'm still in love with Lily. As a matter of fact, I do still love her, and I always will. If it were merely that, I would have been able to move on long ago, but the depth of my pain goes way beyond that. Simply put, she is dead because of me, and that is something I will always have to live with." He shook his head. "Obviously, I'm too much into my cups this night. I'm off for bed."

When he walked past her, Hermione grabbed his arm. "Regardless, she still wouldn't want you to grieve this way."

"You know this how?"

She shrugged. "Because if it were me, I wouldn't." She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "'Night."

He nodded once and then left for the bedroom, leaving her standing in the office, brain too busy to sleep.

~*~

Ron lay in his bed, arms locked behind his head, gazing at the ceiling. He couldn't believe he'd been married a month! At first, he'd tried being cold to his unwanted wife, but his unwanted wife made it almost impossible.

Besides the fact that after a couple of weeks, she'd informed him that although she understood she was at fault where their marriage was concerned, she would not be his doormat...no matter how much she loved him. He'd decided not to comment on that last part; he refused to believe that she could've actually been in love with *him* all those years.

It seemed that Luna made it home before him every night and prepared his favorite dishes. She chattered away while they ate and, to his amazement, even seemed to know quite a lot about Quidditch.

On the few occasions that he'd mentioned a problem with a new product that he and George were trying to create, after a couple days, she'd come up with a solution. It was easy to forget with her unusual ways that Luna had been sorted into Ravenclaw and was extremely smart.

Ron sighed, rubbed his eyes, and got out of bed. Perhaps some warm milk, or hell, a Butterbeer, would help him rest. He'd been restless the past few days and unable to keep Luna off of his mind.

Walking into the kitchen, Ron stopped short when he spied Luna sitting at the table, chin propped on her fist, stargazing out of the window.

What struck him first was her beauty. Her long blonde hair looked positively luminous in the moonlight, and her silvery eyes practically glowed. He shook his head to clear it and stepped behind her.

"What's that Howler doing here? I thought I burned it."

"Oh!" Luna jumped. She turned to her husband and smiled dreamily. "It wouldn't burn. When I came into the kitchen, it was lying on the table."

Ron winced remembering the harsh words his mum had yelled: "RONALD WEASLEY! HOW COULD YOU? HOW COULD YOU DO THAT TO THAT POOR GIRL...FORCING HER TO STAY THE NIGHT IN THAT PRISON! AND THEN HAVING TO CONSUMATE THE WEDDING THERE? YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED! I KNOW I AM! YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE UNTIL YOU RECTIFY THIS!"

Then, the Howler had turned to his wife and said: "Hullo, Luna dear. Welcome to the family."

Ron had waited and waited for it to burst into flames, and when it hadn't, he'd simply thrown it into the fire himself. He had no idea what he could do to rectify what had happened.

"The sky is lovely this time of night. Wouldn't you agree?" Luna asked.

Ron looked out of the window and shrugged. "I've never thought that much about it."

Luna nodded. "Not many people do, but I simply adore the stars and moon. Rings are on sale at Regency Jewelers," she added and threw him off guard.

Ron let out a breath. "Luna," he said kindly, "there's no need for us to have rings. After a year, we'll be divorcing."

His wife went on as if he hadn't said anything, although he noticed a hitch in her voice. "The wedding sets are buy one, get one half off. I went to see, but I really wanted you there."

Ron shook his head at her. "Do we have any Butterbeer?"

"Sure. Have a seat and I will get you some."

After they were both seated, she asked, "Trouble sleeping?"

"Some."

"Horrid thoughts?" she asked with resignation.

"Just thoughts," he said, not wanting to admit that it had been thoughts *other* that were keeping him up.

Luna nodded. "You miss her terribly, eh?"

"Don't, Luna. I don't want to talk about, or even think about, her."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing!" Ron screamed. He felt guilty all of the sudden. He'd been an arse from the get-go, he knew that, and with her apologizing night and day, it only added to his guilt.

Luna threw up her hands and then slammed them down hard on the table, causing their bottles to shake dangerously. It was the first sign of anger she'd shown since they'd married the month before. "What the hell do you want me to say to you then? I'm trying to be understanding and sympathetic, but you make it so damn difficult."

"So stop it! I never asked you to be understanding or sympathetic, did I? I never asked for any of this, yet here we are."

"Come off it. This 'poor me' routine is getting old. You've said several times that you knew that charm wouldn't have picked you for Hermione, so you know what that tells me? It tells me that deep down, you knew something wasn't quite right between the two of you."

"Okay, I'll admit it. I did know her feelings were changing. But why couldn't she just come to me?"

"She may have done before the wedding if we hadn't done that charm. Who knows? My question is this: why didn't you say something to her? You're quick to lay blame and judge, but when will you take responsibility for your own actions? Or could it be you like playing the victim?"

Ron's face reddened with embarrassment and fury, and he balled his hands into fists in his lap. "Well, one thing's for certain. I'm certainly the victim in this relationship, having to be married to *you!*"

Luna jumped up from her seat hard enough to knock her chair over. Angry tears fell from her eyes as she yelled, "That's it!" and flung her arms out, much like an umpire yelling, 'Safe!'

"I have tried and tried with you. So far, because of how guilty I feel, I have overlooked your snide comments about how disgusting it is for you to be married to me. I'm finished overlooking! Do you hear me? Finished!"

Her last word broke on a sob, and Ron couldn't stand it any longer. He stood and pulled her roughly into his arms and kissed her. When she tried to pull away, he only held onto her tighter.

Soon, her protests turned into passion, and she was kissing him back with equal fervor, biting, nipping, and sucking his lips, mouth, and tongue as if she couldn't get enough of him.

When she groaned, Ron came to his senses and pulled back as he gently pushed her away from him. Knowing he was about to contradict himself, he told her, "I think that shows you just how disgusting you are to me." With that, he turned and walked back into his bedroom.

Despite herself and her raging hormones, Luna shakily smiled after he'd walked away and thought, *Well, you have to start somewhere, and passion isn't that bad of a place to begin.*

~*~

It had taken him a month, but Harry had finally gotten his desk cleared enough so that he could go to Italy. Kingsley had returned home a couple of weeks before and briefed him on the case there.

It seemed that there was a serial killer on the loose, something that was highly unusual in the wizarding world. When he'd asked Kingsley how long he would be there, the Minister had informed him it would be indefinitely...until the case was solved.

That was just fine with him; it would do him good to get out of England for a while. It seemed he couldn't open the *Prophet* here lately without seeing Wood in there for his *amazing* Quidditch skills.

And in every fucking picture, there was *his* Ginny in the background, smiling proudly.

Harry shook his head. He was tired from making the trip and a bit hollow inside, especially after reading the owls from Hermione and Ron earlier, but he wanted to stop by the Ministry of Magic to touch base and inform them he had arrived before settling in at the hotel.

He smiled when he realized that the Auror department there was not much different from the one at home. Once he entered, he introduced himself to the receptionist, silently thanking Kingsley for the chain around his neck that helped a person to understand different languages.

As he waited for the Head Auror in charge, Harry suddenly heard a very familiar voice lividly say, "Harry effing Potter. What in the name of Circe are *you* doing here?"

A/N: Well, well. Who could be so displeased to see Harry?

Chapter 9: Making Adjustments

Chapter 9 of 17

Harry confronts the mystery person, Oliver comes face to face with his past, Ron discovers he has feelings after all, and Severus finds amusement from Hermione's feelings.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Harry sat at his desk in the Italy's Ministry of Magic Auror department tired and frustrated. He should have left a few hours ago. He'd only been there a few days, but he was well put out because it seemed he was no closer in finding the killer, no matter how many hours he put in. He blew out a whoosh of breath and ran his fingers through his hair.

"You could go back home, you know," came a statement from the livid voice he'd heard on his first night there. It had not changed its tone at all.

"No, I can't. The Minister wants me here for one thing, and for another, I finish what I start, Cho."

She snorted disbelievingly. "Not from where I'm standing. Look, I was sent here two months ago, almost from the beginning of this case, and we don't want or need you here. Go. Back. Home."

He looked up at his ex-girlfriend, irritated. "I concede that *you* don't want me here, but it seems that you're the only one. Everyone else I've encountered seems pleased to have my help."

"You arrogant, egotistical arse! If you were actually helping, I would back off, but your presence here has done nothing of significance."

"You mean like yours has done? Refresh my memory. When did you make an arrest then?"

"Bugger off!"

"Now, Cho, is that any way for a lady to speak?"

She growled deeply in her throat. "If you would just use me as bait like I asked, then we could..."

"NO!" The killer only murdered women with very long, dark hair. Wanting to stop her from thinking that he didn't want to risk ~~her~~, Harry quickly amended, "We can't afford to lose an operative right now."

"Just how many women have to die before you will see my idea has some merit? Seven have died in the past three months! And furthermore, what makes you so sure you would lose me, eh? I went through the same training that you did!"

"Same training as me, you say? Which Dark Lord did you kill then?" he asked sarcastically. "No, I won't risk it, but I have considered taking some Polyjuice myself."

Cho sighed, deflated. "I see. So that all the glory can come to you? Killing You-Know-Who wasn't enough fame for you then?"

Suddenly the stress and anxiety had taken its toll on Harry, and he jumped up, causing his chair to topple over and came nose to nose with Cho. "What the hell is your problem? I am sick to death of your treatment towards me these past couple of days! First, you go out of your way to avoid me, and when you finally do speak to me, it's to tell me to go home? What did I ever do to you?"

"*My* treatment of *you*? You abandoned me, you bloody wanker! You left me high and dry when I needed you the most, even when you learned that I hadn't ratted you out, but Marietta had! It was always Hermione with you. I'm surprised you didn't marry her!"

Harry's eyes widened in shock. "You mean to tell me that you're still harboring anger over something that happened years ago? Jesus, woman! Like you said, it was *your* friend that ratted us out to begin with! And for the record, I've never wanted Hermione that way. She is like a sister to me."

"Right. *My friend...not me!* Yet you and your little buddies, especially Hermione, acted as if I had committed some crime. Treated me like I was guilty through association. I thought we were going to be together, but after that happened, I ceased to exist for you. Besides, you and Hermione always seemed more than friends to me."

"Cho... you have to understand the pressure I was under during those times. And let's be honest. You were using me as some sort of replacement for Cedric while trying to hear of his death at the same time. It wasn't me you wanted, not really. And as for Hermione, you were seeing what you wanted to see. She was for Ron back then."

"I did want you! You never gave us a chance. Now I hear you're to be married to Ginny Weasley. Well, bravo for her! She's followed you around enough that you finally decided to take the stray in."

"That'll do. Your bitterness and jealousy are highly unattractive. What I do and who I do it with isn't your concern. You had a chance, and you blew it, plain and simple."

Cho threw up her hands. "That's just it, Harry! I made one mistake...one! And you throw me over. Well, guess what? We mortal people do make mistakes. Everyone can't be perfect like you. Do you know what your problem is?"

"No, but do tell. I'm hanging on the edge of my seat here."

"Oh, I'll gladly tell you. You think that you're perfect, and you hold everyone else up to the same standards."

Harry stiffened, reminded of something Ginny had said once about how he expected her to be perfect. "That's absolutely not true. I don't think that I'm perfect. I do, however, live by a certain set of standards, and I don't think it's too much to expect the people I'm involved with to have standards as well."

"Yes, I agree everyone should have standards. But what you really mean to say is that you think that they should have the same standards as you, never once considering that your standards may be too high or, heaven forbid, wrong."

"I'm honorable, honest, loyal..."

Cho held up a hand to stop him. "I don't need a list of your credentials, Harry. Trust me; I am familiar with each and every one. I'm done here. Just do us all a favor and leave!"

"What you mean to say is *do you* a favor!"

"Fine! *Do me* a favor then!" She turned from him then, determined that she'd let him see enough of her feelings, and she'd make damned sure in the future he wouldn't see any more of them. First thing in the morning, she was going to the Head Auror and offer to let them use her as bait, as she should have done in the beginning, rather than going to Harry; then they'd see what they'd see.

~*~

Ginny sat in the restaurant quietly eating her lunch while watching all of the women there ogle her husband *Just like everyone did with Harry*, she thought morosely.

He continued to eat as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. When a starry-eyed witch asked for his autograph, he happily complied without so much as losing a crumb.

So when his face went dead white, Ginny was startled enough to turn around and see what he was staring at behind her. Standing just inside of the doorway was a very lovely woman. She had long, dark hair and eyes so blue they looked purple.

"Um, do you know her?"

"Yeah, you could say that," Oliver all but whispered. He visibly paled even further when the woman started towards their table. "Let's go, Gin. Now."

"Ollie!" Phoebe yelled and had all heads turning in their direction. "It's so good to see you," she drawled. "Why, I haven't even had the chance to congratulate the happy couple."

When she looked pointedly at Ginny, Oliver merely rubbed his hand roughly over his face but said nothing. Seeing that he was going to offer no introductions, Ginny turned to the woman and said, "Hullo. I'm Ginny..."

"Wood," Phoebe finished for her. "I read you've recently married this past month. How... unusual."

Ginny smiled at her with confusion, looking back and forth between her husband and this woman. "Unusual?"

"Oh, definitely unusual for a man who claimed that marriage, or even commitment, was the last thing on his mind."

Ginny sighed. "I take it that the two of you know each other then?"

"Oh, indeed. Intimately."

"Okay, Phoebe, that's enough," Oliver finally said.

"NO!" Phoebe yelled with hurt in her voice, eyes shining from unshed tears. "It's not! You used me!"

"I didn't. I know that right now it seems as if I have, but you don't understand."

"You're right. I don't. You told me that right now you needed to focus on your career, and then not a day later, I read that you've wed this woman!" Phoebe pointed an accusing finger at Ginny. "You're nothing but a liar, and it appears that I'm well rid of you, Oliver Wood!"

Ginny's heart ached for this woman. When she'd first walked in, she'd appeared poised, but now she was beginning to break. Trying to explain, Ginny asked, "Phoebe, is it? There really is a logical explanation..."

"Oh, I think I can figure that out myself. Oliver here is a two-timing, black-hearted womanizer!"

"Now wait just a damn minute! I never cheated on you! Nor am I a womanizer! I never ran with several women, hell or even two women, at the same time! I told you the truth when I said I didn't want a serious commitment right now!"

"Oh, I can see that," Phoebe said acidly.

"Okay, enough," Ginny said. "If you truly want an explanation, there's one to be had."

Phoebe picked up Oliver's drink and threw it in his face. "No thanks," she said and ran out of the restaurant.

"Let's go," Ginny said quietly. She was beginning to understand the ramifications the charm had, not only *other* life, but everyone else's that was involved.

Oliver threw some Galleons on the table, and then they stood and walked out quickly. "Don't start," he said as soon as they were outside.

Ginny was shaking. "Start what?"

"I dated her, all right? We were intimate."

"I think I could see that for myself," she told him softly.

"I'm not going to say that she meant nothing to me because she did, but I was never in love with her, okay?"

Ginny stopped and turned to her husband. "I see that you think that I'm resentful of Phoebe, but that's not it at all. I'm not stupid enough to think you've not had scores of girlfriends." Her shoulders slumped in defeat. "It's that I'm beginning to see all the people that our thoughtless actions have affected. If not for me, you would still be dating her."

"Not necessarily. She was right in the fact that I'd told her I didn't want any serious entanglements right now, and we'd had a bad row the night I received my Ministry letter. She'd left my room right after I'd read it and didn't know what it said. And now, everything has happened so fast... but still, I see I should've let her know. Perhaps I ought to speak with her."

"No, that wouldn't be a good idea, Oliver."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I thought you said you understood that there were others before you. Not scores, mind, but a few."

"I do. That's not it. It's just that she won't believe you right now, and you'll only make her feel worse. She will think you feel sorry for her, and a woman who thinks she's been thrown over for another does not want pity from the person who did the throwing."

Oliver let out a deep breath. "I suppose you're right. I just hate to see her that way."

Ginny nodded. "Trust me, I know." Wanting to change the subject, she said, "I'm very happy that our team is going to the World Cup this year. Did they make a decision where it will be held?"

"Oh, right. I forgot to tell you! Italy!"

Ginny stopped walking at once and covered her face with her hands. She'd found out from Ron that Harry had gone to Italy to help with some case there. "Merlin, help me! Can this day get any worse?"

~*~

Ron had gotten home an hour early, and for once his wife wasn't there before him bustling around in the kitchen, cooking. He felt... odd. He was used to her being there when he got home.

He went to the kitchen and got himself a Butterbeer and sat down to drink it. He had to admit, he was beginning to enjoy his wife's company. Suddenly, Ron felt extremely guilty. Caring for Luna felt oddly like betraying Hermione.

He knew it was nonsense. It had been Hermione who'd researched the charm, and Hermione who'd performed the charm, and even Hermione who'd never said a word to him about having doubts.

Of course, he hadn't said anything either.

That was beside the point, Ron thought furiously. At least he hadn't ruined her life by doing some stupid charm causing him...and her...to have to wed someone else. Well, Ron granted, *ruin* was a bit much. He only had to be married to Luna a year. It wasn't the end of the world.

His eyes drifted to the Howler that they'd moved to the mantel, wondering what it would take to get that thing to disappear. His musings were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Wondering whom it could be, he hurried to answer it and was gobsmacked by the huge bouquet of flowers that greeted him. "Delivery for Miss Luna Lovegood," the delivery boy said.

"Weasley," Ron said automatically and took the flowers from him. Reaching into his pocket, he handed the boy a Galleon and closed the door. Without one thought for her privacy, Ron opened the card and began to read: "Beautiful flowers for a beautiful woman. I know that Lunaria actually means wealth, but the name reminded me of you. The innocence of the daisy also reminded me of you. However, the tulip represents my true feelings for you and what I wish our relationship to be. I hope you will reconsider having dinner with me. Always, Stanly."

Ron vowed to look up the meaning of tulips at the first opportunity. His wife certainly had enough books on flowers that he shouldn't have any trouble finding it!

Slamming the vase of flowers on the table, Ron threw the card in their wake and began pacing the floor, waiting for his wife. After thirty minutes, he went to her room to look up the meaning of tulip.

Shaking with fury, he threw the book onto the floor after reading the meaning. "The symbol of perfect lover, is it? Sod that! She ~~is~~^{isn't} my wife, damn it!"

When he heard the door slam shut, he hurried into the living room to find his wife's arms loaded with bags. "Ron? A little help please?"

"What do you have here?" Ron asked.

"Dinner. I want to try my hand at that roasted lamb your mum says you like so much. You're home early."

"My mum? You've talked to my mum?" Ron asked, forgetting the flowers for the moment.

"Of course, silly. How do you think I know all your favorite dishes?"

Ron shook his head and, after taking the bags to the kitchen, gently took her arm, guiding her back into the living room. Pointing at the flowers, he demanded, "Explain that, please."

"Oh, Ronald! They're lovely! You shouldn't have really, but I adore them so!"

Ron scowled at the dreamy look in his wife's eyes over the flowers. ~~I~~^I didn't. Some bloke named Stanly did. Just who is this Stanly?"

Ron watched as Luna visibly deflated. "Oh. Stanly. He's just a flower expert who came by my work today. Well, he's been by a few times in the past year actually. His company is searching for a very rare breed of flower that is supposed to grow only once every seven years and only here in England. He was looking for people to aide him in the search."

"I suppose you volunteered?"

"Naturally, I did. This is a rare opportunity!"

"Oh, to be sure it is," Ron said, "but I don't think he needs to have dinner with you in order to find it!"

Luna laughed, beaming at her husband. "No, that was strictly personal on his part. No worries, I declined, obviously."

"And yet he feels the need to still send you flowers? What did he say when you told him you were recently married?"

"Ah, well, I didn't exactly tell him that I'm married. Perhaps if I had a wedding band he would have known? At any rate, I simply said, 'No, thank you,' when he asked."

Ron growled. "We don't need wedding rings for only one year of marriage!"

"I need to get started on dinner," Luna said and walked away.

"Did you hear me, woman? We don't need rings for one only year!"

"Yes, I heard you. There's never been anything wrong with my hearing! Perhaps *I should* go out to dinner with Stanly! At least he's actually interested in me!"

"Over my dead body," Ron said in a deceptively calm voice.

Luna swept by him to answer the knock on the door, both confused and elated by his dominating manner. When she opened the door, she called out, "Stanly! What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see if I could change your mind about dinner, Miss Lovegood. I..."

Ron stomped up and laid a possessive hand on his wife's shoulder. "It's Mrs. Weasley! And, no, she won't be having dinner or anything else with you!" Turning, he picked up the flowers and threw them outside. "Now go, and take your weeds with you when you do!"

When Ron slammed the door, he looked down into Luna's stunned eyes. "Let's go out to eat tonight," he said as if nothing had happened. "There's a new place near the shop I've been wanting to try."

"All right," Luna agreed and wisely decided not to mention the little scene that had just played out. Although she didn't care for his behavior, possessiveness in small doses could be thrilling! She reveled in the fact that her husband had been bothered that much by the thoughts that another man wanted her.

~*~

Hermione was still sitting on the floor by the fireplace, books spread all around her, when Severus had completed his rounds. She'd missed supper, and it was nearly ten. He sighed. "Hermione, you need to eat."

"Sure," she agreed absently. "In a moment. I just want to finish up this reading."

"It's ten, Hermione, and way past time for nourishment. You have to put that to rest for tonight."

"I said in a moment!" she told him irritably. "I need to go over each of these books and make sure that there is not a precedence for this case! I want no surprises if I can help it." She looked up at him then with bloodshot eyes. "He's only a child, Severus."

Severus nodded and walked to the fireplace. Hermione once again buried her head in a book, paying him no attention. She was surprised when he placed a plate with a thick roast beef sandwich and a tall glass of frothy milk on the floor beside her.

She sighed. Picking up her plate, Hermione went to sit on the sofa to eat. She hadn't realized just how hungry she was until her husband had placed the food by her. Grudgingly, she said, "Thanks."

He nodded and began to read the evening paper. Hermione decided to waste no time and picked up a different book and stuck her nose in it as she chewed. Suddenly, she felt his black eyes boring into the top of her head.

"What is it? It's hard to concentrate with you glaring at me, you know!"

"I was hoping you'd satisfy a curiosity of mine. Would you enlighten me by telling me the poem you said when you performed the charm?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Do you remember what you said? I understand that you were quite drunk."

"Yes, I do. I'll not forget it, I think. Why do you want to know?"

"Just humor me, if you don't mind."

Hermione blew out a loud breath and said, "Fine. I said: 'I want a man who's witty and clever with a burning desire to learn. Who won't ridicule, who's never the fool, and will give me all that I yearn.' Happy now?"

Severus burst out laughing. Once he'd caught his breath and saw the unbelievable look on Hermione's face, he laughed again. "You said that and actually thought the charm would choose Weasley?"

Hermione stood and placed her hands on her hips. "For someone who has continually chastised me because of lack of research on this particular charm, you sure seem to be unknowledgeable about the poem aspect of it!"

"Do I indeed? Explain."

"The poem itself is inconsequential! It's not the words that you say. If that were the case, then Ginny's would have picked Harry for sure. She could have simply said, 'Say a poem? Why bother? Just pick for me Harry Potter!' I could have said inny, minny, miney, moe, and it wouldn't have mattered. You still would have been selected."

"The charm chooses your soul mate, not the person you wish to be with. The poem is merely... an ingredient, if you will."

"I see. Makes sense, if you buy into that soul mate poppycock."

"You've said before that you don't. Why?"

"I just find it difficult to believe that there is only one true love for someone. From my observations, people fall in and out of love many times."

"True, but I think there are different kinds of love. I did...do...love Ron, but it's not the deep abiding love that I think it takes to make a lifetime together. Nor do I believe that he loves me in such a way. Molly and Author come to mind when I think of deep abiding love."

"Yes, they seem to have lasted and remain reasonably happy. What of Weasley and Lovegood? You don't seem too terribly upset by that match."

"Oh, it hurt. I won't lie. But I can really have nothing to say on the matter, considering my own situation. And, after all, I performed the charm. It's rather disconcerting, though, seeing him and not being with him."

"Habit?"

Hermione nodded. "Partly. But some of it is that he was mine before. Still, it feels more as if my... jealousy, I suppose... stems from the fact that he was mine first and not that I was so in love with him."

"That is not love. That is ownership."

"If you will," Hermione said coolly.

Severus smirked. "Not if I will. If *you* will. What will you do when this year is up? Go back to him? Marry him?"

Hermione shook her head sadly. "No. I don't really think we are meant to be. Besides, Ron wouldn't have me back, even if I wanted to. I've hurt him terribly, and that is what really bothers me the most. I never intended to hurt him."

"Um hmm. Well, you know what they say about intentions."

"Yes." Hermione set her empty plate and cup down. Directing her gaze at the books, she told him, "I really need to finish up here. Do all these books bother you? Should I move them into the office?"

"No, you stay here. I have some papers to mark, and with all of this, it would be too crowded. Don't stay up too late," he advised.

"No, I won't. A couple more hours should suffice."

Severus shook his head. She was already lost in her books, barely noticing that he was leaving the room. He chuckled, remembering her poem. Regardless of what she'd claimed, there was no way that Ronald Weasley was on her mind when she'd recited that poem.

A/N: Everyone seems to be moving right along! Sorry to all of you Drarry fans! I'm not a big slash writer...

Chapter 10: Accepting The Situation

Chapter 10 of 17

Everyone seems to be a little more accepting of the situation--for now.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Harry stormed into the Head Auror's office and slammed the door so hard that it shook, not even trying to conceal his anger.

"Mr. Potter?" Auror Rossi asked.

"I cannot believe you went behind my back this way!" Harry spat at Cho, ignoring Signor Rossi. "I told you no, Cho, and that's final."

She snorted, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at Harry. "The last time I checked, you weren't in charge of this investigation, and you certainly have no authority over Auror Rossi! I don't need your permission, Harry, and I no longer seek your advice. This is something that I can do to help, and if allowed, I'm going to do it. You can't stop me."

"Wanna bet?" Harry turned to the Head Auror. "Sir, I highly advise against using her as bait."

"So I've gathered. Please, call me Alfonso. What is your particular concern, Mr. Potter?"

"If I'm going to call you Alfonso, you can call me Harry. She's not ready for something such as this. We are dealing with a very sick person and if something were to go wrong..."

"How do you know that I'm not ready, Harry? You don't know anything about me really!" Cho demanded. "We've worked together almost two years, but can you tell me the last case I was involved with?"

Harry shrugged off her question, once again turning to the Head Auror. "I would be more than willing to take Polyjuice."

"I have considered that option, Harry, and decided against it. Too many things could go wrong. Polyjuice only works for a limited amount of time. If our killer is watching...stalking...then it would be inevitable that he would realize something is amiss."

"But, sir, I really think..."

Rossi held up a hand to stop Harry's protests. "I am well aware of your thoughts. I have weighed the situation heavily and come to the conclusion that Miss Chang's idea has merit. I am going to allow her to do this."

Cho beamed at Auror Rossi while Harry scowled. "Have the details been worked out?" he asked, barely containing his fury.

"No. I am going to arrange a meeting with the head team in the morning, and we can plan our strategy then, if it pleases you," he told Harry, amused.

"Fine." Harry turned to Cho. "A word, if you please?"

Cho absently nodded at Harry as she looked at Auror Rossi. "Thank you, sir! You won't regret this!"

"Let's just hope *you* won't," Harry grumbled under his breath.

After they'd stepped out of the office, Harry turned to Cho and said, "Your room or mine? You're going to want this conversation to be private, trust me."

Cho shrugged. "It makes no difference to me. We are in the same hotel anyway."

"Great," he said sarcastically. "Apparate to room 2022," he instructed and left with an audible pop.

Cho soon followed him, and as soon as she entered his room, he grabbed her roughly and slammed her against the wall. "Fight me, Cho. Protect yourself from me."

"Harry! Stop this now!"

"No! You want me off of you?" he asked as he pressed his body into hers, using his weight and strength to keep her against the wall. "Then get me off!"

They struggled for a few moments, and in her aggravation of not being able to budge Harry, Cho shouted, "GEROFF ME!" and hooked her foot around his ankle while throwing her head forward. She connected with Harry's nose, breaking his glasses, causing him to fall backwards.

He pulled her with him, and she landed on top of him with her wand at his throat, smiling smugly. Harry growled deep in his throat and deftly flipped her, only to find her knee in his crotch.

They both lay there, breathing heavily, and then suddenly they were battling for dominance of a different kind. Harry grabbed Cho's wrists and held them above her head as he descended upon her mouth, biting, nibbling, licking, and kissing her, anger warring with lust.

She moaned deep and low, and he allowed her to flip him. Straddling him, she rose up and quickly removed her shirt and bra, wanting him to see and want her with the same desperation she felt. Harry reached up and roughly palmed her breasts, instinctively knowing that slow and gentle was not what either of them wanted or needed at the moment.

Cho bent down and began to lightly bite his throat, moving her way down to his shoulder where she purposely left a mark. Harry suddenly sat up and removed his shirt, throwing it across the room.

When she pressed herself against him, skin-to-skin, Harry roared and laid her back, making quick work of the buttons on her trousers. "Get," pant, "these," pant, "off!"

Cho chuckled, a deep feminine sound of power that only a woman at such a time had over a man, and deftly raised her hips, sliding down both her trousers and knickers at the same time. "You too," she demanded. "Get your trousers off!"

Harry quickly stood then and removed the rest of his clothing, watching her watching him with want and need in her eyes. He felt elated, powerful. His cock throbbed and twitched at the same time with impatient anticipation.

She held her arms out, an unspoken invitation, and he lowered himself to her rapidly. As soon as their bodies touched, Cho wrapped her legs around him, deftly causing him to slide into her, and Harry's question of whether or not she was ready for him was answered.

They both moved at an accelerated speed, each searching their release. "Cho," Harry ground out between thrusts, "it's been a while for me... I... I won't last long."

She flipped them again, wondering why it had been awhile for him, but was too close to lose her orgasm now, and once more rose above him. Cho grabbed his wrists and placed his hands on her breasts while she moved her own hand lower to circle her swollen and aching nub.

The sight of her touching herself was a catalyst to Harry, and he exploded into her with sweet abandon, which caused her to quickly follow. They both stayed where they were, breathing heavily.

Suddenly, Cho jerked as if she'd been slapped. Her eyes widened, and she looked accusingly at Harry. "What the fuck was this?"

Harry shook his head slightly and gazed at her smugly. "I think that it would be obvious, Cho."

"You bastard!"

"Come again? You won't put the blame all on me, Cho; you wanted this as much as I did."

"True. I won't try to deny it, but *I'm* not engaged. Damn you! I hate being put in 'the other woman' category! How could you do this? Of all the things I've thought about you over the years, cheating bastard was not one of them until now. God, what have we done?"

Harry folded his arms behind his head and studied her. "You've thought of me? How flattering. Tell me, have you read the *Prophet* lately?"

Cho breathed heavily through her nose. "NO! What does that have to do with anything? I've not read that paper since coming here because all of my focus has been on this case."

"Ah, that explains why you have been wound so tight," Harry said mockingly.

Cho looked at him with a hurt expression. "I'm ashamed of myself, Harry!" She quickly looked away. "I despise women who take what they want, regardless of whom they may hurt. Don't you even care that you've just cheated on your fiancée? Doesn't that bother you *at all*? Where are your standards, your *honor*, now?"

Deciding that this had gone on long enough because he didn't want to hurt her, Harry reached for her. "Cho, you don't understand. Ginny and I..."

"Stop!" she yelled as she jumped up. "Don't touch me! As a matter of fact, you just stay away from me unless it's work related!" Cho hastily grabbed her clothes and Apparated to where Harry assumed was her room.

He sighed and picked up his glasses, repairing them as Hermione had taught him years ago. As he dressed, Harry decided to just leave her be a while. She was too hurt and angry to listen to reason right now. But he had discovered something today. He still found her very attractive and wouldn't mind exploring that. He was, however, not

looking forward to working the next few weeks with Cho Chang.

Oliver and Ginny walked the streets of Italy, taking everything in at once. Ginny had wanted to do some shopping...Christmas was just next month...so they were looking into all the shop windows.

She had her brow furrowed, and Oliver looked at her with amusement. "I'm sure your friends will love whatever you get for them, Gin."

"I know that, but I like to take the time when choosing a gift. I like for it to reflect the person that I buy it for."

Something occurred to Oliver just then. "Um, Ginny? Do you have enough money? I could lend you some if you need it."

She smiled. "Thank you, but no. I do have enough. I got my bonus this week for signing with the team."

"Ah, yes. That's right. I hadn't thought of that."

She smiled. "You don't have to stand by me the whole time, you know. You can look at other things while I look here."

"Right. Okay, well, I want to go over here and look at these robes. I've never had a set of Italian robes before."

Ginny hummed a non-committal reply. She could just imagine how good he would look in Italian robes.

As she shopped, she moved to the lingerie section, thinking of Luna. Ginny knew that Luna actually loved Ron, and she thought her friend might appreciate a lovely gown and robe set. Suddenly, she wondered if it would be betraying Hermione to buy Luna lingerie to wear for Ron. She sighed, fingering a beautiful silver gown.

Hermione had not only agreed to do the charm but had also actually researched it. Had she known, even then, that Ron was not for her?

"Ah, not that shade, Bella, this one," a man's voice said from behind Ginny, interrupting her thoughts. She turned around to see a man holding up a sheer, very dark green, silk nightie.

"Oh," she said as she blushed. "Well, it's not... um, for me, you see..."

"Why ever not? You would look beautiful in silks, no? I would be happy to sit while you model these and help you decide on the best styles and coloring," the man teased her.

Ginny's blush deepened. Here was this man...a very beautiful man...flirting with *her*! She silently thanked the team's owner, who had given each player, plus spouses, a chain very much like the one the Aurors wore to help with translations. It wouldn't do for someone to yell instructions during the game and have the players not be able to understand the command.

Just as she was about to graciously decline his offer, her husband's clipped and angry voice sounded behind her. "She already has help on that score, mate. She won't be needing yours for that or anything else for that matter."

"Ah, you're taken it appears. Too bad."

"Do you often come on to other men's wives then? Habit of yours, is it?"

"Wife? Pardon me, Signor." The man pointedly looked at Ginny's left ring finger. "I see no adornments to show to me that she belongs to another. Please forgive the misunderstanding. Arrvederci."

Once the man had left, Oliver grabbed Ginny's hand and led her out of the lingerie store. "I cannot believe the nerve of some people! Just who did that man think he was?" In an exaggerated Italian voice, Oliver mimicked, "I see no adornments to show to me that she belongs to another." Well, we'll just fix that right now," he informed her as he led her into a jewelry store.

Laughing, Ginny said, "Oliver, wait! What are you about?"

"Getting you a wedding band, what did you think?"

She stopped abruptly. "Why?"

He threw his hands in the air as if she were dim-witted. "Are you daft? Because! That man was making passes at you, Ginny! He *wanted* you! I can't believe I didn't consider it before now, considering how lovely you are."

Sobering considerably, and feeling foolishly complimented, Ginny said, "Women ogle and make passes at you all of the time, Oliver. Were you planning on getting a band for yourself as well? Because if not, then forget it."

"Ginny," he said, exasperated, "I'm a famous Quidditch player! Of course women look at me and make passes. Good Lord, look at Viktor Krum! Even with his looks, that bloke could have any woman he wanted."

"Hmm, true. And just think, in a few short weeks, I will also be a professional Quidditch player. Just like you... and the other women on the team." Ginny stood silently, letting that implication sink in. She knew he would be thinking on all the offers the women players seemed to get.

"Fine!" he surrendered. "We'll get a bloody matching set. Will that make you happy?"

Ginny raised an eyebrow and folded her arms across her chest. "Me? Will that make *me* happy? Oliver, *you're* the one who's insisting on a wedding ring after seeing one man casually flirt with me. I have had to deal with hordes of woman blatantly throwing themselves at you from day one!"

"Touché." Suddenly feeling embarrassed, he told her, "Look, I think that since we have to be married for this year, and I for one do not share, it would just be prudent to wear rings."

"Agreed," Ginny said, unsure why she suddenly felt relieved. "Just something plain and simple, eh? Like you've said, it's only for this one year."

"Right then. Here," he said, pointing to a pair of plain gold bands with a simple infinity symbol engraved on the top. "I like these."

Ginny looked down at the rings, then whipped her head up to look into his eyes. *The infinity symbol?* "Why those?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. They're simple without being too plain. Look," he told her, irritated, "if you don't like those, just pick out another set. It really doesn't matter to me."

"No, those are fine." She reached for her purse, but he stopped her.

"I'll take care of these." She started to protest, but he stopped her. "I insist on purchasing them both, not just my own, since the idea was mine." He walked away from her and told the salesperson of his choice of rings.

After they were paid for, Oliver handed Ginny her ring, and they both slipped them on. They magically sized themselves to fit their fingers.

Feeling confused about the smugness he felt, Oliver led his wife outside. "Ready for a spot of lunch? I'm famished."

"Sure," Ginny agreed, unable to keep her eyes off of the gold band while pondering the symbol and all that it meant.

Ron walked to the door of his wife's bedroom and shivered slightly from the coldness. His wife had been going into her room every night right after supper for the past week to study on that blasted flower that Stanly and his lot were trying to find.

She was bundled in a very thick, white terry cloth robe, studying one of the many texts she had spread out before her.

"Busy?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Umm, yes. Did you need something?" she asked distractedly.

"What are you reading on?" he hedged.

"Oh, this? Ireland. It seems that Stanly was mistaken. We discovered earlier this week that the flower actually grows in Ireland, and I am studying the flora and fauna. The flower will bloom in the next couple of weeks, and I want to familiarize myself with the area."

"Are you planning on being there? Going to Ireland?"

"Of course! What a silly question."

"With *Stanly*?" he asked her angrily.

"Well, naturally, he'll be there, but no, not just Stanly. The entire team of researchers is going actually."

"I don't like it. That man, he has designs on you, he does."

"No worries. I know how to handle unwanted advances. Although, maybe a ring would go further in dissuading him... Nonetheless, he knows that I'm not interested and has stopped his pursuits."

This time, Ron didn't make any comments on her ring remark. "I dunno; I don't trust the wanker. Once a man wants a woman, he usually doesn't just back off his perusal of her. Is he aware of our circumstances? Mayhap I should go with you."

Luna coughed into her hand to hide a chuckle. "No, our business is our own, so I wouldn't confide our... situation to him. And I would love for you to come to Ireland with me. All of the other spouses are coming along, you know."

"You mean to say that everyone else's spouse knows of this trip, is in fact coming along, and you didn't see the need to tell, much less invite, me?" he asked, irritated.

His wife shrugged. "I didn't see the need because I didn't think that you'd care. We'd have to share a room there, lest everyone know our *circumstances*."

Clearing his throat, Ron told her, "Oh, right. That's something else I wanted to talk to you about. With the weather becoming colder, I think...if you wanted, that is...that maybe you should just sleep in my room with me. This room gets too cold at night, and you don't even have a fireplace in here."

"Yes, I can see the logic in that. I do get very cold during the night, and when I have to get out of the bed most mornings, the floor in here is barely tolerable. I would appreciate it. Thank you."

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Ron nodded. "Er, when is the trip for Ireland planned? I need to let George know to make sure the shop is sufficiently covered with it getting closer to Christmas and all."

"Two weeks. You're sure it wouldn't inconvenience you overly much?"

"It wouldn't inconvenience me at all, Luna. I don't trust Stanly around you. Married or no, I don't think it matters to that tosser."

"Okay. I will let the rest of the team know that you'll be coming along."

"Yes, you do that. In the meantime, I've moved another wardrobe in my room for you, for convenience's sake. It wouldn't do for you to have to continuously go back and forth."

"Thanks, Ron. I'll start moving my things directly."

"All right." With that settled, Ron went to Floo George to inform him of his upcoming trip. Halfway there, he couldn't help but think that somewhere along the way, he'd lost control of the entire conversation.

Hermione gratefully walked into her quarters. Today had been grueling for her, and she was glad to be home. She set her briefcase down and looked around the sitting room.

It struck her then how lucky she was that she didn't have to come home and clean or cook. The fact that house-elves took care of those things for her was something that she'd learned to live with. They seemed happy with their station in life.

Sighing, she walked to the study to see if her husband was home. She came to the door and paused, watching him mark papers. She glanced at the romance novel on his desk, but said nothing for the moment because she was distracted when he suddenly grabbed his left arm and winced in pain.

"Severus? All right?"

He jumped slightly and looked at her. "Yes, fine, thank you. It... burns at odd moments."

"There's nothing you can do? A salve wouldn't help you?"

"Unfortunately, no. It's a burning from the inside out, such as the way it would burn if Voldemort were still alive and calling the Death Eaters to him."

"You mean, like a phantom burning? Like when someone has lost an arm or leg, but still feels the pain from the lost appendage?"

"Precisely so. He is no longer alive and calling us, but at odd times I can feel an immense burning sensation."

"Oh, God, you don't think he could still be..."

"No, don't worry yourself on that. When we thought he'd died the first time, I actually did wonder because there was a constant tingling there. This feeling is entirely

different."

Hermione relaxed some and then said, "Well, why don't you come up with some sort of potion to ease the burning yourself? You'd likely make a fortune from the remaining Death Eaters, especially those that escaped serving time in Azkaban."

"You mean the way that I did?"

"No, I don't. I never felt that you deserved to go, and I don't want to get into all of that now. I have something I want to talk to you about. A favor, if you will."

"Oh? You've peaked my curiosity. What is it that you need?"

"Do you remember the case that I'm working on? Seth, the thirteen-year-old boy that was bitten by the werewolf?" He nodded that he did. "Well, I've been thinking, the main problem the child has is not having Wolfsbane accessible to him. I think you could help me there, yeah?"

"You want me to brew the Wolfsbane Potion every month and give it to this family?"

"No, I know that it's not a simple potion, Severus. But I remember hearing you say once that it was damn shame to have to brew an entire cauldron of the potion for only Remus and have the rest go to waste. Well, why don't you brew it and sell it at a reasonable price so that everyone can afford it, but yet, you'd still make a profit from it?"

"It's so expensive because it's so hard to brew, and we both know that you're one of the only people who can properly brew it. Would you at least consider it?"

"Hmm. Intriguing. I have never thought of it before. Perhaps I will teach you to brew it as well. The idea does have merit, but I think I would rather sell it to St. Mungo's and let them deal with the populace of werewolves."

"But would St. Mungo's make it affordable? That's the whole point of you making it to begin with."

"I would put a stipulation in the legal papers." Severus scratched his chin. "All in all, not a bad idea. Yes, I will think on it. Both potions actually."

Hermione smiled at him brilliantly. "Thank you, Severus! That you would even consider it means so much to me." She nodded at the romance novel on his desk. "Light reading?"

He scowled. "No. Some nitwit second year dared to read that in my classroom once she'd finished her potion."

Hermione giggled. "Oh, my. Detention?"

"Yes, with Hagrid."

"Well, it's for the best you nip those notions in the bud anyway. I find those books highly exaggerate the actual sexual experience."

Severus raised an eyebrow at that. "Oh, indeed? How so?"

"Well, for one thing, the women in those books always have at least two orgasms."

"Yes, continue."

She snorted. "I didn't even have one."

Severus folded his arms across his chest and leaned back into his chair. "Are you implying, wife, that I cannot cause you to have an orgasm?" he asked in a dangerously low voice.

She put her hands on her hips and thrust her chin out. "Not implying...saying. Considering I've only had sex once and that one time was with you, and I did not have one, I think the statement is obvious."

Severus slowly rose from his chair and walked towards her. "Are you challenging me?"

Hermione backed up a bit, frightened in an aroused way. "Not challenging, per se, just merely stating a fact."

"Do you wish me to prove something to you, Hermione? Would you care for another go?"

"Would *you*?"

"Well, I wouldn't turn one down," he told her saucily. "Why does that surprise you?"

"I never thought... You never tried... Well, you've not touched me since our wedding night."

"Nor have you touched me. However, had I known my advances would be welcome, perhaps I would have. I'm assuming from our little tête-à-tête that they would be?"

"Well," she said cheekily, "I wouldn't turn you down."

"I see. Shall we finish this discussion in our bedchambers?"

Suddenly nervous that the playful banter was ending and they were about to get serious, she only nodded and followed him to their bedchambers.

Once they'd entered, Severus began undressing while Hermione stood watching. He raised an eyebrow. "You did say you wanted this?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry," she said and began unbuttoning her shirt.

Hermione quickly undressed and climbed into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

Severus chuckled. "Excited or nervous?"

"A little of both actually."

"No need for nerves," he informed her as he slowly made his way to the bed, wearing nothing but an arrogant smile. "Excitement is expected, considering I can guarantee at least one orgasm."

"Cocky," she accused and then instantly regretted her choice of words as they brought her gaze to the one part of his body she was trying to avoid staring at.

"Indeed, I am," he agreed as he climbed into the bed with her, pulling the covers off of her. She bristled and tried to pull them back up. He simply threw them to the floor. "Those will only get in my way."

He lay on top of her, keeping most of his weight on his elbows and began thoroughly kissing her. Soon all thoughts of nervousness fled her mind, and Hermione became lost in the moment.

He started kissing his way down, lightly nipping her jaw line, licking his way to her throat. Once he found the very sensitive spot where her neck ended and her shoulder began, he exploited it meticulously, causing her to buck her hips without ever realizing it.

Giving that spot one last long lick, he worked his way to her breasts, pulling one taut nipple into his mouth and laving it with his tongue, then languorously moving to the next. He pushed them together and then nuzzled them both with his nose, licking in between them.

He then slowly, torturously, moved down her belly, sucking and nibbling as he went. When he reached her center, Severus gently blew on her, and she moaned deeply.

When he stopped, she raised her head to look at him. He grinned confidently and told her, "Prepare for your first, my dear."

She closed her eyes and lay back. The man already had her nerves strung so tight she thought that she might blow at any moment. When he plunged into her with his tongue with wild abandon, she grabbed his hair and pulled him closer. "OH. MY. GOD!" she cried out, arching her hips, searching for more. She'd never felt anything like this in her life.

When he took her tight, aching nub into his mouth, first sucking hard and then biting gently, Hermione immediately orgasmed long and hard, throwing her head back and arching her back up.

After she'd started coming down, Severus lifted his head and told her, "That's one," as he slowly made his way back up her body in the same excruciating manner as he'd made his way down. Once he was over her again, he positioned himself and thrust into her completely.

"Ahhh," she simply said.

He started to say something teasing, but stopped and simply looked at her. Getting impatient, she started moving her hips while he stayed still, watching her use him to please herself.

"What is it?" she finally asked.

"You can be very erotic."

Hermione stopped moving, embarrassed that she'd let herself go so completely like that.

"No, don't stop," he demanded. "Take your pleasure"

She tentatively started moving again, and this time, he moved with her, sliding in so deeply that he hit a spot that gave her small explosions of feeling with each thrust. Their pace became purposeful and quickened. It wasn't long before she felt her walls tightening around him, and the feeling caused her to cry out. This time, he went over with her. "And that, wife, would be two."

Hermione sighed, happily sated. Fighting her awkwardness, she teased, "Perhaps I'll bring you another book tomorrow."

He chuckled. "I think I can fumble my way around without one."

This time, he held her as she drifted off.

A/N: My, my! The heat is on!

Chapter 11: Making Progress.

Chapter 11 of 17

Harry and Cho can't come to an agreement, Oliver leaves Ginny feeling confused, George pokes fun at Ron, and Severus and Hermione have a bit of play time.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Harry stood in the back of the room, leaning against the wall, arms folded, trying to contain his anger. They were all discussing strategies and possibilities, except they were forgetting the most important thing. After a couple hours, he couldn't take it any longer.

"You know, all of this is fine and good, but what I want to know is what we do if...likelywhen...she's taken."

All conversation stopped as several eyes turned to stare at Harry. Auror Rossi tried to assure him, "It is highly unlikely that Auror Chang should be abducted, Harry."

Harry snorted. "Highly unlikely still means a slight possibility."

"I'm a big girl, Harry. I can take care of myself." Cho folded her arms and looked Harry in the eyes. "I've been through the training, just as you."

"Yes, you demonstrated just how well you can take care of yourself yesterday, eh?" Harry raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner, daring her to elaborate.

Cho cocked her head. "I thought we came out even on that score actually."

"Perhaps we did. However, even, if you are captured, wouldn't be near good enough, would it?"

"Harry," Auror Rossi chided, "you are redundant, yes? It is not as if we do not know what to expect. She will be well guarded, and with the tracking device around her neck, if she is taken, we will be able to follow her."

Harry started to speak, but the Head Auror held up his hand to stop him. "The decision is made. Now, on to a more, shall we say, pleasant topic. I have procured World Cup tickets for us all!"

"Oh, yes," Harry said sarcastically. "Let's forget all about using one of our own as bait and head to the World Cup tomorrow!" Harry threw his hands up in disgust and walked out the door, slamming it in his wake so hard that it rattled the frame.

When Rossi stood, Cho placed her hand on his arm. "Please, sir. Allow me." He nodded, and Cho stepped out and quietly closed the door behind her.

"Harry!" Cho called out. He stopped, but didn't turn. When she reached him, she said, "I think we should talk."

"Again? Ready for another go, are you?"

"Stop it! Must you make things with me seem so... sordid? I know, all right? I know what sleeping with you makes me, but this isn't about that!"

Harry sighed. Cho honestly felt bad about things, and at least he could calm her fears on any guilt she'd been feeling over him and Ginny. "Listen, Cho, about last night..."

"Ssh!" she quieted him, making sure nobody was listening. "Look, I don't really want to re-hash all of that. I just want to say that I am getting pretty tired of you continually trying to thwart my work. This is something I want to do, and I *will* do it, with or without you."

"Damn it, Cho! Of course it will be *with* me! Are you completely mad, woman? It's just that this man is dangerous; I've seen what he does to his victims. Do you think I want him to be harming you that way?"

"Were his other victims trained Aurors, Harry?"

"God! Do you think that simply because you're an Auror you're immune to danger? That sort of thinking is dangerous in itself. Won't you just consider letting me do this?"

"No, I won't."

"Well, that's that then, eh?" Harry softened his look and touched her cheek. "Cho..."

Tears filled her eyes, which surprised Harry. "Harry, please don't be too kind to me right now. Give me some time to... forget last night, would you?"

"If you would just listen, you would realize you don't need to forget anything."

Just as quickly as they'd filled with tears, her eyes hardened. "I don't understand you. You're certainly not the person I thought you were."

Harry drew in a hurt breath and stepped back from her so abruptly that she stumbled back. "If you honestly believe that, Cho, then we're done...on a personal level. On a professional level, I won't say another word about all of this. I'll be where I'm assigned to be, and I'll watch out for you with all that I am, but if you truly think me so... so... devious, then I see that you don't really know me at all."

Cho drew her brow together, looking completely confused. "How could I think otherwise? When a man cheats on his fiancée, he is devious. And to add injury to insult, you're acting as if you wouldn't mind continuing with us."

Harry smiled at her coldly and said, "I wouldn't have. It would've been nice to see where we could've taken this. But here you are, judging me without having all of the details, and you've decided I've fallen short." He shrugged. "I just hope you don't turn out the fool, Cho, on several accounts."

He turned and walked out, leaving her staring after him. Harry knew that he should have made her listen to him where Ginny was concerned, but she was damn quick to judge him, and he had to admit that her thoughts about his character stung a bit.

It didn't matter now. What mattered was that starting next week, they would be using Cho for bait, and he needed to be focused on that. The rest would have to wait.

~~~

Ginny lay in the bed, looking at her wedding band. It was very lovely. She wondered at the infinity symbol, though, and if Oliver knew what it meant.

He was currently singing in the shower. They had one last practice this morning before the big game tomorrow. Ginny wondered if Harry would be there... She shook her head. *I can't think of Harry right now. But, Merlin, how I wish I could make this up to him!*

When she heard the shower stop, she dropped her hand and lay on her side, watching as he walked out of the loo. Oliver walked out nude, unembarrassed and comfortable in his body.

"Enjoying the view, love?" he asked, smirking.

"Actually, yes I am," she told him. "Oliver, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," he told her, distracted as he searched for his practice uniform.

"Do you realize what the symbol on our bands stands for?"

Her husband stopped, frozen mid-reach for his jersey. Then shrugging nonchalantly, he said, "The infinity symbol? Yes, I'm aware of what the symbol itself means, but I just thought they were nice bands. Don't... um... read anything into it," he quickly said as he pulled the jersey over his head and reached for his trousers.

Ginny couldn't have said why that statement hurt her as she felt the same, but it did. "I see."

He turned to look at her as he was fastening his pants. Cocking his head, he asked, "Do you... Does it... mean something to you then?"

"NO!" she lied, a little too quickly, and he frowned. "No, not really. I just wondered if you were aware when we purchased the rings of the symbol's significance. That's all."

"Ginny..."

"I don't think I'll go with you to practice today. I'm going to finish my Christmas shopping while you're busy," she said, quickly changing the subject. It was getting too serious for her.

"I don't know about that. I don't like the thought of you going out alone. No, I think you should just come with me, and I can go with you after."

Ginny laughed. "Why ever not? Besides, I wasn't asking permission; I was letting you know of my plans."

"Because," he said through gritted teeth, "the last time we went shopping, some Italian Stallion tried to pick you up!"

Laughing harder, she asked, "*Italian Stallion?* Oh, my! Oliver, I can rebuff unwanted advances from men and stallions alike. You needn't worry about that at all."

"Unwanted? Shouldn't all advances other than mine be unwanted?"

Ginny sobered quickly. "That goes without saying."

"Does it? Does it really?"

Her husband was confusing her. "What are you on about?"

"If say, Harry were in Italy, would his advances be unwanted?"

Ginny's stomach twisted in knots. Did Oliver somehow know Harry was here and that she hadn't told him? And where was this sudden jealous possession coming from? "I don't want anyone except you, Oliver. That's the truth of it."

He turned from her as if he didn't want her to see his face. "I don't believe you. I think you still love him."

"Yes, I do still love Harry. I will always love Harry. He's like family to me. But it's not..."

"I see," he cut her off.

"No, I don't believe that you do. What I mean to say is that although I will always love Harry, obviously I don't love him in the way that a wife should love a husband, else I would never have done the charm, drunk or no."

Oliver cleared his throat. "Do you... Never mind. I need to go or I'm going to be late. If you want, wait until after practice, and I'll go shopping with you."

"I really want to go now. Honestly, I'll be just fine. I can't buy your gift with you right there, now can I?" she teased. "But I wouldn't mind going out to dinner after your practice."

"Okay. Fine. I'll see you afterwards then."

After he left, Ginny lifted her hand and studied her ring once more, more confused than ever. How could she possibly be feeling the beginnings of love for her husband when she still hurt so badly for Harry that it made her physically ill?

~\*~

Ron stood scowling at his brother George. He'd gotten to work before eight that morning, needing to quickly distance himself from Luna. When he'd awoken, the little chit had been wrapped tightly around him, causing him to remember their more pleasant activities.

"So, little brother, you're going to run off to Ireland with your new bride! Well done! Belated honeymoon, is it?"

"Stop being a wanker! It's nothing like that. I just don't trust that Stanly bloke around her is all."

"What do you care if the specialist makes time with her? It would just take her off of your hands if he did succeed, eh?"

"I don't care! She's just... I dunno... too trusting, I suppose."

George smiled and then quickly placed a confused expression on his face. "She didn't strike me as the addled sort."

"What? I never said *that*! She's not addled! She's quite brilliant, actually, in an unassuming sort of way. You know, the kind of brilliance that just kind of sneaks up on you before it hits you between the eyes? Not scary, but definitely brilliant."

"So you say," George teased. "If you have to take the time off to go all the way to Ireland with some wench that you can't stand to be around just because she can't handle a pass or two..." he said, letting the sentence hang.

"George! What's wrong with you? Luna is not a wench! I thought you said you liked her? And she can handle herself and unwanted passes; it's just that she gets all caught up in her work and forgets to pay attention. And this Stanly, well, he's just the sort who would take advantage of that. That's all I'm saying."

George coughed, covering a chuckle. "I like your wife just fine, brother dear. And, well, if you don't mind sacrificing the time, I'm sure Angie can help us out for a week or so."

"Okay, thanks. I'll..."

"There you are, Ron!"

"Luna? What are you doing here?"

"Well, you left so early this morning! I know how cranky you get if you skip breakfast, so I wanted to bring you this plate of bangers and toast. Oh, hello, George. There's enough in there for you, too."

"*Luna*," Ron groaned. "You didn't have to do that. Really, you didn't."

"Oh, I know, silly, but you get so hungry! And you were so sweet, offering to share you bed with me because of the cold weather, even getting that extra wardrobe. I wanted to thank you."

"Offered to share his bed, did he? Rather noble of him, huh?" George razzed. "Cold weather my arse," he mumbled under his breath.

"No, really," Luna said, all seriousness. "It is rather cold in my room, what with no fireplace and all. All in all, it was very considerate of him."

"Oh, right. That's Ron! Considerate bloke, he is!"

"Anyhoo, I have to run. We've an early meeting this morning, and then I'd like to pick up some things for Ireland. Ron, is there anything I can get for you?"

"Meeting? With that Stanly fellow?"

"Ron," Luna said, exasperated. "Stanly is heading up the search. Naturally, he'll be there."

"I don't like him."

"So you've said. Many times. Now, is there anything that you need?"

"Not that I can think of right at the moment." As if suddenly remembering he didn't want them to act as a married couple would, Ron said, "I can pick up my own things, Luna. There's no need for you to do that. Or to bring me breakfast."

"Well, the food is a 'thank you,' and I was only offering to pick up something for you because I am already going to be out. Don't get yourself in a bother! Oh, I'm sorry to say that the wedding bands are no longer on sale. Hmm. Perhaps in Ireland. We can see."

Before Ron could comment, George burst out laughing, and Luna hurried out the door. "Silly woman," Ron said after she'd left. "We won't be needing wedding bands."

"If you say so, brother," was George's reply. "If you say so."

~\*~

Hermione lay in the bed with her husband, awake while he slept for the first time since they'd gotten married. She was no fool and took advantage of the situation by studying him.

Or trying to study him, rather, as a part of his anatomy that she was very quickly becoming quite attached to began poking her in the stomach, feeling ready and eager to her.

She remembered what his reply was when she'd told him he'd not made any advances towards her. He'd told her, "Nor have you." She wondered if that meant that were she to make an advance, he would welcome it. Hermione highly doubted that he would refuse her.

Her only reluctance was that she didn't know how his moods were first thing in the morning, as he was generally up and about before her. She desperately wanted to find out. She desperately wanted a repeat of the night before...

Feeling bold, Hermione reached down and wrapped her hand around her husband, gently but firmly, and started to stoke him slowly.

"Mmm," he said without opening his eyes, and she became emboldened, stroking him a bit faster.

"Is there something that I can do for you, dear?" he teased as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her a little closer, but not so close that she couldn't continue her attentions towards him.

"You do something for me?" she asked with mock aggravation. "It seems to me that/ am doing something for *you*."

"So it would. But, please, do continue."

She laughed delightedly and scooted up some so that she could kiss him. The playful kiss soon turned heated, and Severus turned from his side to his back, lifting Hermione atop him. After positioning her, he slowly slid home, pushing into her. "I'm afraid you'll have to settle for one orgasm this morning, wife, as we are short for time. But, please, do enjoy."

She stayed still for a moment, placing her hands on his chest to balance herself. As she looked down into the smug face of her husband, Hermione's heart melted. It was obvious to her that he not only enjoyed the sex, but he was enjoying pleasing her...simply enjoying *her*.

She started rocking, slowly at first, loving the sensation of him filling her.

"Hermione," he said. "You feel so damned good. I love watching you ride me."

Her rhythm faltered, and she blushed a deep scarlet. "You... er... you feel good to me, too," she whispered.

He smiled and placed his hands on her thighs, rubbing small circles to add to her pleasure. The sensation caused her to pick up her pace. The faster she moved, the closer he circled to the place of their joining, until finally his thumb found her clit and he stroked furiously.

She bent slightly forward, curling her fingers into his chest as she chased her orgasm. Suddenly, she stiffened, and he grabbed her hips to still her as he pounded into her so that he could finish with her. They both cried out and stilled a moment later. Afterwards, she lay back beside him, placing her hand on his chest.

Sighing contentedly, Hermione told Severus, "I could get used to this."

"You know, I wouldn't mind waking this way a few days a week myself, provided I have potion in stock for these scratch marks."

Hermione jerked her head up. "Oh, my God. Severus, I'm so sorry. I didn't even realize."

"It's all right. I don't mind the scratches. I rather like them."

Hermione snorted. "You would."

Severus smirked. "Hermione, would you mind if I asked you a personal question I've been wondering about?"

"No," she answered, "but I reserve the right to refuse to answer."

"Fair enough. Tell me, why were you a virgin when we married?"

"Because I was saving myself!" she said indignantly.

"Saving yourself? For what?"

"For *Ronald*! What else?"

Severus laughed. "No, you weren't."

"How dare you? I most certainly was!" she informed him angrily.

"Hermione," he said gently, "if you'd been saving yourself for Weasley, then you would've slept with him long before now."

"I wanted us to wait for marriage. I wanted my wedding night to be special."

"If you truly loved...or even wanted...him, then it would have been special to you, virgin or no. No, something else held you back. What was it?"

She rolled on her back and slightly moved away from him so that they were no longer touching. "It just never felt right with him."

"I see."

Hermione laughed bitterly. "Do you? Because I don't. Make no mistake, I did love Ron. It's just that when we were alone, and things started to progress, it just felt... wrong to me, and I could never do it."

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad, Hermione. I apologize."

"It doesn't matter now, does it? We're both with someone else, and I'm sure with the way Luna feels about him, he's not been wanting for sex."

Severus stiffened. "This bothers you?"

"I don't know because I've never thought of it before." She thought a moment, then said, "No, I don't think that it does. I mainly feel guilty that I've hurt him."

"Yes, as you've said before. And as I've told you, it's understandable. But, at some point, you need to let that go."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "I know. Now, I'd better get up and get into the shower. I don't want to be late."

Getting up as she did, Severus told her as he followed her into the loo, "I think I'll join you." At her raised eyebrow, he told her, "To save time, of course."

"Of course," she agreed.

"I think I've changed my mind," Severus said as he stepped into the shower behind her. "I want you to come to Draco's wedding with me this weekend after all."

"*Tomorrow?*" she asked, panicked.

"Yes. What, do you have plans?"

"No! Nor do I have anything to wear! Damn it, Severus! Couldn't you have given me more notice?"

"If you'd rather not go, I'll understand," he told her in a clipped tone.

"Naturally I want to go with you!" Pulling her hair a bit, she said, mainly to herself, "I'll just have to send an owl and go into work late, that's all. Take an hour or so and stop by to pick up some new dress robes. Yes, that's what I'll dooo!" She squeaked the last word. "Ahhh, Severus! What are you doing?"

"Washing you, my dear. You seem too preoccupied to do so yourself."

Hermione stopped talking as she leaned back against the wall and let him wash her, very thoroughly. When he'd finished and handed her the cloth, she returned the favor, thinking that this had been her favorite morning as a married woman...so far.

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A/N: So sorry for the long wait! RL is kicking my arse at the moment!

## Chapter 12: Discovery

*Chapter 12 of 17*

Cho finally learns the truth. Harry and Ginny come to an understanding, Ron has some thinking to do, and Hermione and Severus attend a wedding.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR. I make no money from this.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern\_Witch\_69!



Harry sat in the box seats that Auror Rossi had gotten for Aurors at the World Cup away from the rest. He'd had no intentions of even attending, but at the last minute thought better of it. He refused to let Cho Chang, or even Ginny Weasley...Wood, keep him from one of his favorite things.

He watched the other Aurors sitting around, excitement filling the stands. Cho was sitting by one of the top Aurors; he couldn't remember his name, and she purposely ignored Harry. That was fine. What bothered Harry was her blatant flirtation, obviously done for the benefit of bothering him. It was working, but damn if she'd know it.

All conversations stopped as the wives and significant others entered the box. Harry's gaze locked with Ginny's, and for a moment all else faded away...it was just him and her together in the box.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

"I don't doubt it," he told Ginny as he looked at Cho several moments before turning his eyes back to Ginny.

Ginny looked over her shoulder to see what her ex was staring at so intently, and her eyes widened. She started to greet Cho, but Cho scowled and looked away. Seeming confused, Ginny sat by Harry.

"How have you been?" she asked him quietly as she laid her hand on his arm, not even realizing that the players were being introduced and the game was about to begin.

Harry jerked his arm away, glaring at her with disgust. "Do not touch me."

Ginny jerked away, tears filling her eyes. "Don't touch you? What rubbish is this? You hate me that much then?"

Shaking with rage that wasn't all directed at Ginny, but she was convenient, Harry told her, "You have some nerve! ~~Wood~~, you know that? First you ruin my life," he looked down at her left ring finger and then back up at her, revolted, "then you want to come here and act as if nothing major has happened? Let me tell you, lady, you really take the cauldron cake!"

Ginny jumped out of her seat then, oblivious that the game had started or that everyone around them was listening intently to everything she and Harry were saying. "I'M SORRY! Okay? I'm sorry! Forgive me for having a few doubts and not being perfect."

Harry stood then as well. "You're sorry? Sorry? Gee, Harry," he mimicked in a sing-song voice, "I've had a couple of doubts and totally changed the direction of your life without even giving you any warning. WHATSOEVER, taken the only family you've ever known away from you, but, hey, let bygones be bygones, eh? I'm happily married and have it all, but you just go right along on your merry little way." He looked her up and down with disgust. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"That's not fair, Harry. I never..."

"Let me tell you what I've discovered, Gin. Life is very seldom fair." Harry went to leave the box and accidentally shoved Ginny back, causing her to lose her footing and fall on her arse.

He stopped immediately. "Oh, God, Gin. I didn't mean for that to happen!" He held out his hand to help her up, but she only shook her head. She started to speak, but was suddenly interrupted.

"POTTER!" Oliver yelled as he'd completely left his post by the goals and had flown over to the box. "Get the hell away from my wife...NOW!"

Harry lurched around and glared at Oliver as Ginny quickly stood, wiping the dirt off the back of her bottom, her face reddened from anger mixed with embarrassment. "Don't you have a Cup to win, Wood?"

"Wood!" his coach cried out. "Get back to your post! THIS INSTANT."

Ignoring his coach, Oliver turned to his wife. "All right, Gin?" Ginny simply nodded, unable to speak at first.

Clearing her throat, she finally said, "Please go back to the game. They've scored three times since you've left. Please," she begged when he seemed reluctant to go. "I'm just fine. I promise."

When her husband reluctantly left, Ginny looked at Harry. "Harry," she quietly said. "This isn't the place for such a conversation, but I want to say this to you. I love you. I've loved you since I was ten, and I will always love you. My family will always consider you a part of our family, and Mum would be devastated to hear you say otherwise."

"But, if you're honest, you will admit, at least to yourself, that you did not love me like a husband should love a wife. You love me like a sister, Harry. Did you think that I couldn't tell?"

Harry slumped back in his seat, deflated. Truth be told, he was angrier with Cho and that situation than with Ginny. And though he hated to admit it, Ginny was right. "I suppose I've just been with you and your family for so long, I just expected certain things. Being with you, for me, was a given. But though I did love you, you're right, at the end, it was more like a sister."

Ginny hastily wiped a tear from her cheek. "I don't want you to hate me now or avoid my family because of me. I would even be willing to make sure I'm not there when you want to visit if you let me know in advance. They all love you, Harry, and miss you terribly."

Harry felt ashamed. "Merlin, Ginny! That's really not necessary. I can be such an arse!" He grinned. "Well, you were sort of an arse, too, you know. You should have talked to me rather than doing that idiotic charm, but I understand the part that tainted wine played in everything. I don't hate you; I couldn't. It's just so hard for me, seeing you with him." He nodded towards Oliver, who seemed to be blocking the other team while keeping his eye on Harry and Ginny at the same time.

Ginny sighed. "I know. If the situation was reversed, I would hate it, too." She absently looked down at her ring. "Nothing has turned out the way we've expected, has it? But, Harry, sometimes change is good, right?" she asked hopefully.

Harry turned to look at Cho then, just remembering she'd been there to witness everything, to find her staring at him with her arms folded and a murderous look in her eyes. "Right. And sometimes, change kicks you right between the eyes."

Ginny looked back at Cho, who was glaring at Harry, when she suddenly heard "...has caught the Snitch just as Wood blocks yet another goal! HARPIES WIN THE WORLD CUP!"

~\*~

Ron felt miserable. They'd made it to Ireland to find cold, rainy weather. He had automatically assumed they'd be staying at the wizarding hotel there, but no, they were camping in a very secluded area.

The tent Luna had brought for them was big enough, he supposed, but he'd not been prepared for camping out. After months of the same with Harry and Hermione...whom he refused to think about...he'd had his fill for awhile.

"Luna, the hotel is not that far from here. Why do we need to set camp?"

"I've told you! First of all, it saves money, and secondly, there are other things besides the one flower that we can get while we're here that is only available in Ireland. It makes more sense and saves more time to be here in the thick of it. The way you go on, one would think you'd never been camping before."

"That's just it. I have many times, and I'm rather sick of it."

Luna glared at her husband. "Ron, I'm tired of your complaining. Listen, why don't you just go on back home? It's obvious you don't really want to be here with me," she said as she averted her eyes from him. "It really shouldn't take any longer than a week, and you'll have some alone time without me underfoot."

Ron's heart sank, and he felt slight panic. "No, it's fine. I can tough it out a week. I brought a project to work on while you're busy. I'm sorry about the complaints, Luna, truly. I'm just really tired of camping."

Luna smiled at him so brilliantly that he couldn't help smiling back. She placed her hand on top of his and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, Ronald. If you like, I can help you with your project later. A few of us are going hiking in a few moments to look at some of the different flora here."

"Who are these few?"

Luna shook her head. "Yes, Stanly is coming. You've really got to get over that. I honestly don't want Stanly. I thought it would be completely obvious to you by now who I truly want. What more can I do or say to you to reassure you about that?"

Ron's face reddened in anger mixed with embarrassment. "You know, Hermione used to say the same thing...that it was me she truly wanted. But, as you very well know, it wasn't. So, forgive me if I seem a little leery right now. Besides, I don't need reassurance from you because you only have to stay the year with me, and then after, well, we'll both be free."

"What exactly are you saying to me?" Luna demanded.

"I'm saying that while I do find you attractive...I always have...don't expect me to give over my heart. You remind me of her some, you know. Not in looks, mind, but you're definitely brilliant, just as she is. You and I, we have much more things in common and all that, but I'm not the sort of bloke to come home and discuss journals and such with you."

Folding her arms defensively across her chest, Luna asked, "When have I ever asked you to? The difference is, I know the things we do and don't have in common, and I don't try to change the things that we don't. If you've already decided not to open up to me or trust me, then what are you doing here?"

Ron threw his hands in the air. "You need me here! That man..."

"ENOUGH!" Luna yelled, surprising her husband into silence. "Stanly is just an excuse, and we both know it. We've been married almost three months now, and it seems I can't break through your shell. You don't even want me to. I can't tell if it's because you're truly still in love with Hermione or if it's because you truly have no feelings for me in that regard.

"Either way, I grow tired of it all. I can't be the one always giving in and making the sacrifices here." She pounded her chest. "Regardless of what you may think, *do* have a heart, and it can be broken. I know that all of this happened because of me, and perhaps that causes you to hate me, I dunno. But, I will say this. I won't go on like this much longer."

"I have made sacrifices! Are you mad? I've had to sacrifice my entire life! *I had* to with no choice on the matter. I had to give up the woman I love and marry someone I didn't. You can't just expect me to welcome you or this situation with open arms, Luna. It's not fair."

"I am talking about the sacrifices in *this* relationship! I don't have time to talk about this anymore; they're waiting on me. I didn't mean to get into it in the first place. Not here anyway. Just... just think about everything and what you want." Luna sniffled, wiping her eyes.

Ron stood. "I'll go hiking with you."

Luna none too gently shoved him back. "No, you won't. I don't want you there, Ron. I need time away from you."

Ron was confused because he was hurt by her rejection. Shaking his head, he said, "This is what I mean. Exactly what I was talking about. Hermione often needed the same. So, you just go on your little hiking trip. You're obviously just fine without me."

Luna softened then. "No, I'm not. I'm independent; a person like me has had to be. But, I'll never be 'just fine' without you."

"A person like you?"

Luna laughed. "Do you honestly think I don't know what people have said, and still say, actually, about me? Do you think that I'm deaf? 'Looney Luna' is just one of the nicer things I've been called. I know all of that. But for some reason, I thought you were different. Or different when it comes to me at least. We did start out as friends." She lowered her eyes as if she didn't want him to see. "Hopefully, we can end friends." Luna ran out of the tent before Ron could answer her.

He rubbed the ache in his chest, but it wouldn't leave. Against his will, he was starting to have deep feelings for his wife, no matter how he fought against them. The question was, what did he want to do about them?

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Hermione and Severus walked into the ballroom that the Ministry of Magic used for special events. It was the only place big enough to hold the Malfoy-Parkinson wedding reception.

Severus bent down to whisper into his wife's ear, "You look very becoming in your new robes."

"Thank you," she said, smiling nervously. "You never said anything before we left, and I wasn't certain you approved." This was their first outing as a married couple, and Hermione wanted to make a good impression.

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "Do you need my approval for your wardrobe?"

"No! It's just that these are your friends, Severus, not mine, and I wanted to be sure you thought I looked all right."

"I see. Yes, I think you look lovely," he told her in reassuring tones.

Hermione was surprised that when they entered the room, a man took Severus' invitation and formally announced them to the room at large. It seemed so...*old fashioned*, but then, a lot of things in the Wizarding world did to Hermione.

Her husband led her inside and procured a drink for them both. Just as Hermione started to look about the room to see who was in attendance, she heard Lucius Malfoy's drawl. "Severus, old chap! Good to see you. Come, there are a few friends here you haven't spoken to in a while." Turning to Hermione, Lucius said, "You will excuse us, won't you, dear?" Without waiting for her reply, Lucius dragged Severus off and left Hermione standing alone.

Leaning down to whisper to Severus, Lucius told him, "No need to thank me. I knew you would want me to rescue you as soon as possible."

"Actually, Lucius, I..."

"Severus, darling! There you are!" Narcissa happily greeted him. "We're so happy you could join us! It's a shame you couldn't get away from your... little wife for a bit, but

not to worry. We shall keep you occupied."

"Really, Narcissa. That's hardly necessary," Severus told her, exasperated.

"Nonsense! It must be rather droll, living with *her* day in and day out."

"You'd be surprised. She's really quite interesting actually. I'm starting to enjoy her. She's quite the conversationalist."

Lucius chuckled. "Conversation is not what I would be having with a new wife. But I see your dilemma; you have to do *something* to pass the time with the girl."

Just then a friend of Narcissa's approached. "Cissy! The wedding was absolutely adorable! Your son made such a handsome groom, did he not?"

"Naturally," Narcissa agreed. "Severus, I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine, Madeleine. Madeleine, meet Severus Snape."

"Aah, the illustrious Severus Snape." Madeleine held out her hand. "I'm so pleased to meet you at last. Cissy has told me so much about you."

"Illustrious? Not at all," Severus assured. Taking her hand, he gently shook it. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Isn't she absolutely delicious, Severus? If you had only listened to me, you may have been dating Madeleine, possibly even happily married by now, and then you never would have been forced into an absurd marriage to some Mudblood!"

Turning to her friend, Narcissa explained, "Severus is not married now by choice, but was forced into it due to his wife performing the Plight Charm. Can you imagine? Well," she waved a hand in the air, "it's of little significance. He only has to stay with her for a year. After that, you two can get to know each other better. If you *want* to wait, that is," she said, now addressing Severus.

Severus turned a stony glare to Lucius, then Narcissa. "Let me make myself perfectly clear. I will not have you speak of my wife, or my marriage in such a way again. I do not want nor need you meddling in my affairs. Now, if you cannot speak to me with respect, or of my wife with respect, let me know, and I shall rid myself of your presence. I won't have Hermione mocked." He wasn't positive, but Severus thought he saw a hint of approval in Madeleine's eyes.

"Now see here!" Lucius said, face reddened with fury. "How dare you speak to Narcissa that way?"

"How dare she speak to me that way?"

Laying a hand on her husband's arm, Narcissa said, "I apologize, Severus. It was not my intention to offend you. Let's have no more talk of such matters." Changing the subject, she said, "Madeleine teaches Charms at the Wizarding school in France."

"Indeed?" Severus asked with fake interest. As Madeleine began to speak of her job, Severus' eyes wondered the room looking for his wife.

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Hermione wandered over to the refreshment table. There weren't any people at the reception that she was well acquainted with. She knew a lot of people there, but had never really associated with them during her time at Hogwarts.

"Well, well, well," said Pansy Parkinson, now Malfoy. "Look what the kneazle drug in, Draco! If it isn't Hermione Granger."

"Snape," Hermione automatically corrected. "It's Hermione Snape now."

Draco laughed. "For this year anyway. Don't expect that to last."

Hermione looked him up and down. "What do you know about it? You know nothing of Severus and me or of our marriage."

"I know he was dining at Malfoy Manor when he received the Ministry letter informing him that he would have to marry the likes of you. I've never seen him so furious. What do you say, Pans?"

"Absolutely furious." Pansy looked around the room and zeroed in, smiling evilly. "Likely because Narcissa was going to introduce him to one of her best friends, Madeleine." The new Mrs. Malfoy nodded towards Severus and Madeleine talking together. "She teaches Charms in France. Comparing you to her, naturally, he would be livid. Now he has to wait a whole year."

"Not necessarily, love," Draco said maliciously. "Why wait? He could get to know her now, then when his year with Granger is up, he can move on to better *purrr* things."

Pansy laughed and clapped as if Draco had cured lycanthropy. "Oh, better. Your mum will likely help things along there."

Hermione slammed her drink down on the table, suddenly feeling nauseous. "How dare you? You loathsome, evil ferret! You know nothing about my husband or our marriage. I won't stand here and listen to this rubbish any longer!"

"You don't have to listen to us," Draco said with a gleam in his eye that should've warned her. "Just turn around and look at your *husband*."

Against her better judgment, Hermione turned and looked. Her heart fell. Severus looked to be quite enthralled with Narcissa Malfoy's very beautiful friend. Without a backwards glance, Hermione started walking towards the foursome. She stilled when she heard:

"...Severus is not married now by choice, but was forced into it due to his wife performing the Plight Charm. Can you imagine? Well, it's of little significance. He only has to stay with her for a year. After that, you two can get to know each other better. If you want to wait, that is..."

Hermione bent slightly and placed her hand on her stomach, trying to quell the nausea and ache she simultaneously felt *it's true! He's just spending the time required with me, then moving on to someone better!* Running outside, she quickly Disapparated back to Hogwarts without so much as a 'goodbye' to her husband.

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"Excuse me, won't you, Madeleine? I need to find my wife," Severus told her. Narcissa and Lucius had left them to 'see to their guests,' but Severus knew it was only a ploy to leave him alone with Madeleine.

"Not at all, Severus. And, for what it's worth, I had no idea Cissy was going to do that... you know... Introduce me in such a way. I'd not heard of your recent marriage."

"Think nothing of it. I'm well aware of Narcissa and her ways. Have a pleasant evening."

Severus circled the room with no sign of his wife. Walking up to offer his congratulations to the bride and groom, he shook Draco's hand and briefly hugged Pansy. "Have either of you seen my wife, per chance?"

"Oh, Granger left about an hour ago," Pansy gleefully informed him.

"What do you mean she left? Why would she leave? Was she sick?"

"We just gave her a little dose of reality," Draco proudly said. "We saw you conversing with Madeleine. Quite a step up, eh, Professor?"

Severus narrowed his eyes only a fraction, but the newly-weds knew him well enough to realize they'd just made some sort of mistake. "Step up? What ever do you mean by that, Draco?"

"Well, Mum said that you would be very pleased to finally meet Madeleine after spending these past three months with Granger. She said how horrid it's been for you and all. I just assumed that you'd spoken with my parents about it."

"No, I have not. And Hermione's last name is Snape. In the future, I would advise you to remember that."

Severus left the reception full of fury. True, he'd not spoken to the Malfoys, or anyone really, since he'd married Hermione, and he was furious about having to wed her at first, but now... Well, now things had changed. And if they wanted to remain friends, they'd have to adjust.

He quickly Apparated home and went in search of his wife. "Hermione?" he called out once he'd entered their quarters.

"In here," she answered.

Severus spotted her sitting in front of the fire, drinking a glass of wine. "Are you all right?"

Ignoring his question, she had one of her own. "Finally tore yourself away from your paramour? I've been here a little over an hour. When did you even notice I'd left?"

"Paramour? Hermione, that's ridiculous!"

Hermione jumped up out of the chair and spun around to face her husband. "You left me there! You just walked away and left me!"

"I did nothing of the kind!" he defended himself. "It's quite common for married people to mingle separately," he told her, forgetting his concern for her in his defense of himself.

"True, if there are people there that both the husband and wife are both acquainted with!"

"You knew almost everyone there!"

"Knowing and associating with...or hell, even liking...are two different things!"

"YOU WANTED TO GO!"

"TO BE WITH YOU! As your wife," she whispered the last part. "It was our first social as a married couple. Obviously, it'll be our last."

"What are you on about? Why our last?"

"I heard her! I heard what Narcissa Malfoy said about our marriage to that woman you had hanging all over you. I noticed you didn't seem to mind that one bit either!"

"I refuse to dignify that with an answer."

"Naturally. What would one say to his wife after cavorting with another woman? Right in front of her, no less."

"You're being foolish, Hermione, and I've had enough."

She couldn't stop the tears from falling. "Enough?"

"Of this preposterous conversation. Dry your tears," he said roughly. "There is no need for all of that."

"I'm emotional! I cry when I'm happy, sad, or mad! Don't try to change the subject. You are in the wrong here!"

"I most certainly am not. I am going to retire now. Stay here and blubber all night if that makes you feel better."

Her eyes widened in shock, and she shook her head. "You truly don't see how walking off from me, leaving me alone with people who've hated me all of my life, and spending time with some other woman was wrong?"

"No. You're an adult now, no longer in Hogwarts. I thought that by now you'd have ended your petty little grudges."

"Me?" she asked in disbelief. "Perhaps you should talk to your prized ferret. And what of you? You hated Harry from day one because of some grudge you had against his father!"

"Ferret?" Severus shook his head as if disappointed in her. "That's just what I mean, Hermione. And as far as my grudge goes, it was not quite the same, wouldn't you agree? Stay here if you want to wallow, I'm for bed"

"Go then! I don't really care what you do!" she lied.

Once she heard the door to their bedchamber shut, Hermione turned to the fire, placed her face in her hands, and sobbed. She only stopped and stiffened several minutes later when she felt her husband's arms come around her.

He whispered into her ear, "Please, forgive me."

She shivered, but didn't speak.

"I'm not used to having a wife, and I wasn't thinking when I walked away from you with Lucius." It was as close to admitting that he was wrong as he would say.

Hermione didn't trust herself to speak, so she simply nodded.

"Come, let's get some rest. It's been a trying day."

Still not speaking, she simply took her husband's offered hand and walked with him into the bedchamber. He quickly rid them of their clothes and got into bed with her, holding her close only. He wanted her to understand she was worth something to him, something more than just sex.

He gently kissed her lips and said, "Good night."

"Night," she murmured as she drifted to sleep.

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A/N: Looks like each of our couples have some thinking to do, eh?



## Chapter 13: Two Steps Back

Chapter 13 of 17

Cho reacts to learning the truth about Harry and Ginny. Oliver is not pleased with Ginny. Ron discovers he may have feelings for Luna after all, and Severus has a talk with the Malfoys.

**Disclaimer:** All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks go to my awesome beta, Southern\_Witch\_69!



After the game, Harry was exhausted and simply wanted to go back to his room and sleep. However, once he arrived, he discovered that no such luxury would be allowed him. Cho Chang was in his room waiting for him.

Harry sighed. He just wasn't up for another emotional confrontation today. "What are you doing in my room? What is it that I can I do for you, Cho? I'm rather tired and would like to rest. Is it something that could possibly wait?"

"You lied to me," Cho accused.

"No, I didn't. I simply let you believe what you would. After several attempts to set you straight, I might add."

"How hard is it to say, 'I'm not with Ginny any longer?' You knew how I felt about myself after being intimate with you!"

"Yes, I did know. And I was also aware of how you felt about *me*. Quite the opinion of your old flame, eh?"

"You bastard! Obviously my opinion of you is spot on if you couldn't even coerce your little puppy dog to go through with the marriage to you!"

If Cho had taken a knife and slashed through his heart, Harry couldn't have been more hurt. "Bitter Bitch. If you were a man, I'd hit you for your remark about Ginny. As it is, I would like for you to go."

Cho's face reddened. Harry wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment, and frankly, he didn't care. "Okay. I'm sorry. I'll admit I went too far."

"Fine. You've apologized. Now go. I'm tired of your endless judgment of me. We were fifteen, Cho. Let it go already."

"You think all of my anger and hurt are directed at you?" she asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "I'm the only one at the receiving end of it. I know that you miss Cedric, Cho, but I am not the one who took him from you. If I could, I'd do anything to bring him back."

"Harry, it's not just Cedric, though I do miss him terribly. Do you realize that after that incident with Marietta I was essentially ostracized? Even though it was her and not me, I was basically treated no differently than she was. Even by you and your two sidekicks."

"What did you expect? You gave your word."

"And *I* didn't break my word! *She* did! But you're right, that was then. You call me bitter? I suppose that I am. I've had to work much harder than most. Do you know what it's like to walk into the locker room with the other Aurors and have all conversations stop? To hear someone say, 'Better hush, the *snitch* has entered the room.'

"To have no one want to go on missions with you because they don't trust you? To question your Superior Officer when raids are being planned because you're in the room? I jumped at the chance to come here, to get away from all of that, and then you come...just another reminder."

Harry chuckled, then bending over grabbing his stomach, laughed out loud. "You are going to stand there and say that don't know what it's like to be ostracized?" Harry thumped his chest. "*Me*? I have been an outcast my entire life! In both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. So, if you want to feel sorry for yourself, be my guest."

Cho stared at him, gobsmacked. "You're mental! You're adored!"

"Now I am. What am I saying? I won't defend myself to you because I shouldn't have to. You were there and you know, whether you'll admit it or not." He waved his hand in the air. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. That was then, this is now. How about growing up?"

Cho turned her head. "You think grown-ups don't have feelings?" She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Soon, I will go undercover and do whatever I can to help solve this case, and then maybe, just maybe, the other Aurors won't see me as some... some... Umbridge in training."

"Hold on! Is that why you're doing this? Because if it is, I don't think you're emotionally available to be objective."

"How dare you? I can do this job as good as anyone!"

"Cho, this one little thing could get you killed! Why won't you see that?" he asked her, exasperated that she wouldn't listen to him.

"Saying that I'm too emotional to do my job is *not* one little thing! It's implying that because I'm a woman, I get emotional and can't perform!"

"I NEVER said that! Now, you're putting words in my mouth! Damn it!" Harry stormed to his dresser and grabbed the photos he kept there. "Look at these, Cho." When she averted her face, he demanded, "LOOK!"

She glanced down at each photo and then looked up into Harry's eyes. "I've seen these, Harry. They're one of the reasons I'm so determined to stop this maniac!"

"This is what that sicko does to his victims, and you're willingly putting yourself in the position to be next when you don't have to."

"What kind of Auror would I be if I only took the easy or non-dangerous cases? I'll tell you. I'd be the kind that all of my co-workers already think I am. Look, I fit the description, I am trained, and I can do this. Why are you being so stubborn about this? I'm not going to back down, so why can't you just support my decision?"

"Because I care about you!"

Cho laughed. "You care about all the Aurors you work with, and I don't see you trying to dissuade them from taking the more dangerous cases."

Harry sat on his bed, deflated, putting his head in his hands. "You don't understand, Cho. I mean, ~~dare~~ about you. I want to be with you. I want to give us another chance."

Cho glanced around the room, nervously twisting her long hair around her finger. "Could we possibly talk about this after this job is finished?"

"That's just it. I'm scared to death that there won't be an after. Couldn't you just..." Harry sighed and lay back, throwing his arm over his eyes without removing his glasses. It had been hard to admit that, but since he'd had her, she'd been on his mind constantly.

Cho walked over and gently sat beside him. "Harry, this is something that I have to do. I know you think I'm being careless and that I don't understand the risks. But I do, and because of that, I will be even more careful." She smiled sadly. "Can't you just break from the rest and have a little faith in me and my abilities?"

Harry's chest hurt so badly that he couldn't breathe. "I do have faith in you."

Cho stood and walked to the door. Just as she was walking out, she turned and looked at him. "Prove it," she challenged and closed the door quietly behind her.

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Oliver walked into his and Ginny's room and slammed the door behind him. Slinging down his gear, he stormed into their bedroom. "Why did you leave after the game, Gin?"

Ginny looked up from her book, startled. "Oliver! What are you doing here? You've not even showered! I assumed you and the team would be celebrating the win. Congratulations on winning the World Cup by the way!"

Ignoring her congratulations, he asked, "Why would I want to celebrate without you...mywife...with me? Why didn't you stay?"

Ginny shrugged. She was glad that she and Harry had talked, but she felt unsettled still. "To be honest, I didn't think you'd even notice my absence. I thought you would be out, partying with the rest of the team."

"I see. No, I don't actually. Why wouldn't I have noticed that you'd left? Why would I want to celebrate without you? As a matter of fact, why wouldn't *you* want to celebrate, too? Not only does your husband play for the World Cup winners but you will also be playing for the winning team in a few months. Does it have anything to do with Potter being there? Did you even know that he was in Italy?"

Ginny's stomach clenched. She knew Oliver was going to misinterpret everything. "I knew he was here working on a case, but I had no idea he'd be at the game. Ron had told me that he would be here upon Italy's Ministry of Magic's request."

"And you didn't tell me? Why?"

Ginny shrugged. "I didn't see that it mattered. It had nothing to do with us."

Oliver raised his eyebrow. "Nothing to do with us, yet you looked pretty damn happy that he was there, clinging all over him the way you did."

"Clinging to him! That's absurd, Oliver! I was merely trying to explain things to him, trying to make him understand. He's still so upset about everything. I think at the end he seemed to..."

"Right. And he showed his understanding by knocking you on your arse?"

"No! That was an accident! He was walking past me and accidentally pushed me. I'll admit he was angry at the time, but he didn't mean for me to fall."

"Well, accident or no, I don't want you seeing him anymore, Ginny. Actually, I'll have to insist that you don't."

Ginny's mouth gaped open. "Now see here, not you or any other man will forbid me anything. I'm a big girl, Oliver. I can take care of myself just fine."

"Oh, yes, so fine that you got pushed." He held up his hand when she started protesting. "I clearly saw him push you down. And then when I came to defend you, you dismissed me as if I was insignificant."

"I was *not* dismissing you! I was embarrassed that I'd fallen. You're blowing this completely out of proportion."

"Look, you say that I need to respect you by not flaunting *orinnocently* flirting with my groupies? Well, I expect you to show me the same courtesy. I don't think that it's too much for a husband to request that his wife stay away from her ex-fiancée, Gin, especially when all parties involved are constantly in the public eye."

"But our situation is different! You know that. Harry is not simply an ex. He's family to me and to my family as well."

"Then, you're going to have to decide who means more to you. Him or me."

"That's not fair! I've done nothing wrong! Why are you being so unreasonable?"

"Unreasonable? You've done nothing wrong, except lie to me about him being in Italy!"

"I. Did. Not. Lie!"

"Keeping it secret is a form of lying. You're not getting off on a technicality."

Ginny growled. "I suppose that in this, we're just going to have to agree to disagree because although I won't purposely seek him out, I refuse to say that I'll not see Harry anymore."

"Then you've made your choice, I see," he told her as he turned to leave.

"Stop! I did no such thing! Don't you walk out on me, Oliver Wood!"

He said nothing, simply took out his wand and Disapparated. Ginny fell back onto the bed with a choked sob. She had no idea how her life had become such a huge mess.

~\*~

Ron sat in the tent, alone and brooding. Luna had gone hiking with her co-workers earlier, and when they'd returned, she'd stayed outside with them by the fire, talking shop and roasting what smelled like marshmallows. She'd not even poked her head inside to let him know she'd returned.

It was getting rather late, and Ron was tired. Deciding enough was enough, he opened the flap to ask Luna if she planned on sleeping outside just in time to see Stanly lean down and eat a toasty treat off of a stick offered to him from his wife.

Ron flung the flap to the side and stepped out. Folding his arms across his chest, he said, "Don't mean to interrupt, but it's getting late. Ready for bed, Luna?"

"No, I'm not tired, but you go ahead, Ron."

Ron's face reddened. How dare she opt to stay out here with that Stanly? "I wouldn't want you to overdo. From what I've been hearing, you have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow."

Luna huffed out an irritated breath. "I've already got one father, Ron; I don't need another. I can decide if I'm ready for bed, thanks."

This time, Ron turned red with embarrassment. She'd just very thoroughly dressed him down in front of everyone. "Luna, I really think that..."

"I don't recall her asking what you think, mate," Stanly told Ron in a deceptively kind tone. "She's perfectly capable of coming to bed when she's good and ready."

Ron lowered his head and raised his eyes in a very threatening manner, clenching his fists at his sides. He didn't bother trying to hide the hatred in his voice as Stanly had done. Taking one step forward, Ron said, "That'll do, *mate*. I'll thank you not to be butting into any business I have with *my wife*."

Luna jumped up quickly, placing herself between Ron and Stanly. Yawning hugely, she said, "You know, *am* getting quite tired. I think I will call it a night. See you all in the morning!" She quickly made her way to the tent and slipped inside.

After she'd left, Ron told Stanly in a low voice so that only he could hear, "I'd watch my step if I were you. The sooner you realize she's not for you, the better off you'll be."

"Oi!" Stanly yelled very loudly, causing a few of the others to look in their direction. "Are you threatening me, Weasley?"

Ron stepped close so that he and Stanly were nose to nose. "Damn right I am."

Stanly immediately backed off. Lowering his voice, he informed Ron, "If you didn't treat her like shite all the time, then you wouldn't need to worry about me, would you? You don't even know how lucky you are, do you? But that's just fine with me because once you hurt her, and I've no doubt that you will, I'll be right there, picking up the pieces."

Ron looked him up and down with blatant loathing and said, "You seem like the type that would settle for someone else's leftovers. Let me give you some... friendly advice. Stop sniffing around my wife because you won't get any there." He left then to have a talk with Luna.

Once he walked inside their tent, she was already in bed with her eyes shut. "What's going on, Luna?"

"Nothing. You went on and on about it being time for bed, so I came to bed. Happy?"

"No, not really. What was that outside with Stanly?"

"I wasn't just with Stanly! Most of my co-workers were there, too!"

"Whatever. I didn't see you personally feeding anyone but him. You were practically sitting in his lap!"

"For heaven's sake, Ron." Luna sat up, and the blanket slipped down to her waste revealing her white tank top. Ron wondered what was under the blanket. "I am not going to say this to you again, so listen to me very closely. I don't want Stanly."

"Then I have to wonder how you act with someone you *do* want!"

"OH!" Jumping out of bed and allowing Ron to see that she only had pale pink knickers on under the blanket, Luna yelled, "Well then let me tell you how I act! I make sure that I'm home before he is every night so that dinner can be waiting! I go out of my way to find out the dishes he likes, I clean his home and keep fresh flowers around. I do his laundry. I bring him breakfast to work! In short, I bend over backwards to make sure he is happy at the expense of my own happiness! That is how I act when I want someone!"

Breathing heavily as if she'd run out of steam, Luna quietly said, "I'm tired, Ron. Okay? Let's just go to sleep now."

Ron was on her in two strides. Taking her face into his hands, he kissed her with all the built up frustration he'd had all day while she'd been gone. She didn't respond at first, and then he licked her lips, seeking entrance, and she suddenly opened her mouth and answered his kiss with frustration of her own.

She started backing towards the bed, but he pulled her to the floor, sucking her nipple through her tank top. She moaned, jerking his shirt off, and he felt powerful that she seemed to want him as much as he wanted her. He lay on top of her, holding her head in his hands and cradling himself between her thighs.

"Ron," Luna groaned, and he started kissing her face and eyes while slowly making his way to her jaw and neck, grinding his hips into hers as he kissed her.

Never speaking, he lazily moved his hand over her body, hitting all the right spots on his journey down. When he slipped a hand inside of her knickers and found her wet and ready, he quickly slid them off, along with his jeans.

He slid inside of her tight heat and thrust instantly, enjoying the feel of her around him. Wasting no time, she hurriedly met him, pound for pound, and before long, they were both spent and sated.

Ron sighed happily and fell halfway on top of her, mindful of his weight. When he felt her trembling, he opened his eyes and looked at her face. He was shocked to see tears. "Luna?"

His wife gently pushed his chest. "Let me up, okay?"

"All right?"

She shook her head. "I'm serious, Ron. Let me up."

He reluctantly moved off of her, and she hastily jumped up and ran into the loo. Soon after, Ron heard the shower running.

When she came back into the bedroom, she had on a pair of pajamas. "Come to bed, Luna," Ron told her, and she jumped when he spoke.

Saying nothing, she walked to the bed and got in, careful not to touch him. "Luna, listen..."

"No. I don't want to listen to you any more tonight. I'm tired, and I want to go to sleep. Please, respect my wishes... just this once."

Nodding once, Ron turned on his side facing away from her. He felt that she'd done the same. *What's wrong with her? If she's been wanting me so badly like she says she has, then why isn't she happy? Just like Hermione, nothing I ever do is good enough. Claims she wants me, but when I'm not around, looks quite happy to be with someone else!* Punching his pillow, Ron drifted off in a fitful sleep.

~\*~

Severus sat in the sitting room, staring into the fire, sipping his tea. Hermione would be up any moment, and he wasn't sure how to act.

Yesterday had been one of the most emotional days he'd had since... well, since Lily. He didn't care for it one bit. Scowling, he placed his tea on the table and leaned his head against the back of the chair. Closing his eyes, he thought back to the reception.

After thinking on it, he didn't think he was totally at fault. Yes, he'd let Lucius and Narcissa monopolize his time, but if Hermione had felt that he'd abandoned her as she'd claimed, why hadn't she gone over to him?

He shook his head. Naturally, she wouldn't have. Nor would he have done if the situation had been reversed. He supposed that his conversation with Madeleine could have looked untoward, but he desperately hated having to defend himself to anyone, including Hermione.

Sighing, he picked up his cooling tea to take a sip when he heard a tentative, "Severus?"

"In here."

Hermione walked into the room and took a seat in the chair beside his. "Fire gazing?" she asked, seemingly as unsure as he was.

"More like woolgathering. Do you feel better this morning?" he asked. He'd still not really looked at her. He was a little embarrassed by the emotional apology he'd given her the night before. He'd held her all night for Merlin's sake!

She simply nodded, looking down at the hands she'd been wringing in her lap. "Um, actually, I'm a bit hungry."

"Shall we have breakfast sent to our chambers this morning? I don't really feel like the Great Hall."

"Yes, that would be lovely."

After the house-elf had set their food up, they both sat down and began to eat. Picking up the *Daily Prophet* by his plate, Severus handed Hermione the society page.

She hadn't been looking at it long when he heard a loud gasp and his wife say, "I'm going to kill her! I am going to squash her like the little bug she is!"

"What is it?" he asked. His stomach filled with dread.

Hermione turned the paper around so that he could read the headline.

Trouble in Paradise?

Then beneath was a half page picture of him speaking with Madeleine with her hand placed on his arm. She was leaning into him speaking. It looked very intimate. Below that was a smaller picture of his wife, standing alone with, if he was not mistaken, tears in her eyes. He could just make out Draco and Pansy behind her, snickering.

"Bloody fucking son of a whore!"

"It's all right, Severus. We know the truth. Rita hates me and takes every opportunity to deface me publicly."

"This article is making it seem as if..."

"I know that!" Hermione snapped, cutting him off. "I can see! That horrid cow! I didn't even know she was there! Did you?"

"No, but I'd bet my right nut the Malfoys knew. It wouldn't surprise me if Narcissa didn't see the opportunity and ask her to take the picture."

Hermione slumped back. "I will be giving Rita Skeeter a piece of my mind." She started biting her lower lip.

Severus stood abruptly. "No, don't bother with her. I'm going to settle this, once and for all."

"How? Where are you going?"

"To have a word of prayer with Lucius and Narcissa."

~~~

Lucius jumped slightly and placed his fork on his plate when Severus came barging into his dining room. "Oh, please, come right in. Have a seat. Eat a bite."

"Stop your prattling, Lucius! A word, please."

"Severus, please do sit down and join us," Narcissa invited.

Severus sat and gazed at his two friends. "You can't honestly be surprised to see me."

"No, not surprised to see you. We are, however, surprised of your actions yesterday," Lucius answered.

"In what way?"

Narcissa patted her mouth daintily with her napkin and turned to Severus. "Come now, darling. Your defense of your wife, of course."

"Why would that surprise either of you? She is *my wife*, after all!"

Narcissa had the audacity to chuckle. "Severus, lest you forget, you were sitting right here at this table when you received that Ministry letter informing you of your upcoming nuptials. Your reaction was less than stellar."

"Also," Lucius continued, "may I remind you of your constant complaints of the girl? During Draco's time at Hogwarts, if I wasn't listening to his complaints about Potter, Weasley, and the Granger girl, I was listening to yours."

"Honestly, Severus," Narcissa said as she laid her hand over his, "Lucius and I thought that we were doing you a favor. Of course, had we known different, we wouldn't have dared to interfere."

"Bollocks! You've wanted me to meet your friend for months. Do you know what I think? I think that the two of you saw an opportunity and took it." He pointed at the paper. "I don't appreciate that at all."

"Now see here, man! We do not dictate what that woman publishes. I tolerated your harsh words to my wife last night. I won't tolerate them this morning," Lucius warned.

"Same goes for my wife. If the two of you, and your son for that matter, cannot treat Hermione with respect, then the best thing would be for you to stay away from me and mine."

Lucius stared at Severus in utter shock. "You can't be serious? You would end a life-long friendship over a woman you will only be with a few more months?"

"I am with her now, and that is what matters!"

Narcissa laughed softly and clapped! "I have the most fabulous idea! Why don't the two of you join us for dinner next week when Draco and Pansy return from their honeymoon? That way, we can get to know your wife better, Severus!"

"I don't know that she'd agree," he said thoughtfully, "but if she does, you must promise that nobody else will be in attendance. I won't have her hurt by you again."

"Of course," Lucius said.

"Fine. I'll ask her and get back to you. You know, it would really mean a lot to me if the two of you would truly try to get along with Hermione."

"Anything for you, Severus," Narcissa purred.

Severus nodded and stood. "I need to get back. Owl me with the arrangements," he instructed as he left.

Lucius turned to his wife and raised an eyebrow. "What are you up to, pet?"

"Lucius!" she said with mock hurt. "Why, I'm not up to anything at all!"

A/N: Ah, it seems we've hit a few bumps in the road...

Chapter 14: Admissions

Chapter 14 of 17

Cho finds herself in trouble, Oliver digs himself in deeper, Ron realizes something important, Severus worries about Hermione.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belongs to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Harry leaned against the wall of the alley, biting his thumbnail despite the blood from his continuous nibbling. He wanted to pace, and he wanted a fag. But he could neither smoke nor pace due to his Disillusioned form. He was undercover, watching Cho.

Three months had passed since the last woman had been taken, and the Aurors in Italy had lessened the security on this particular project, thinking the killer had either stopped or moved on.

Kingsley was getting antsy for him to return to England. He talked him into letting him stay awhile longer and was even considering taking a vacation or an extended leave until the mess was wrapped up.

Harry couldn't bear the thought of leaving without Cho, especially while there was still a slight chance that she could be in danger. He doubted very seriously that the killer had stopped completely. It was more likely that he just hadn't found the right type of woman he wanted to take. As far as he was concerned, the killer would likely be more dangerous since it *had* been so long.

Harry had to grin despite his concerns as he watched Cho walking. A few blokes had mistaken her for the prostitute she was pretending to be, offering her Galleons for various acts. She blushed every time. Harry had started to wonder if she'd only been with Cedric before him.

He'd convinced her to go out to dinner with him a few times during the last three months. They were getting much closer, but she was still holding back. The last time they'd gone to dinner, she'd let him come in for a nightcap when they'd returned. She'd almost given herself to him again, but had stopped him before things could get that far.

God, how he *wanted* her. He'd always found her attractive, even without really *knowing* her, but lately, as he'd gotten to know her better, he found that she could really be the one for him.

As much as Ginny and he had had in common, he and Cho had even more. She better understood the demands of his work and the odd hours he occasionally had to put in.

Watching her walk around like that was creating some pretty awesome fantasies. He briefly wondered if she'd play them out with him once he convinced her that they belonged together. He shook his head to get his mind back on the job where it needed to be and out of the bedroom where it didn't.

He stood up straighter when an extremely nervous man approached Cho. Thanks to the newly improved, invisible extendible ear, Harry could hear what he was saying.

"How much?"

Harry watched as Cho looked him up and down and noticed when she had the same thoughts as he did *think this could be him! Is he an American?*

Clearing her throat, she told him, "Depends on what all you're wanting. What would you like?"

The man leered at Cho. "Everything."

Smiling broadly as she played her part, Cho said, "Oh, everything, is it? Well then, that's going to cost you."

"No need to worry about money. I have plenty." The man began looking around nervously, wiping his sweaty upper lip and running his hands through his hair. He reminded Harry of a junkie in need of a fix, and in a way, he supposed the man was.

"All right..." Cho hesitated. It seemed that she didn't know where to go from here.

"We... we can go to my place. It's not far, and I live alone." When Cho seemed reluctant, the man said, "I'll pay you extra."

Harry knew what Cho was thinking. She was told under no circumstance to go anywhere with this man other than the assigned room.

"Why don't we just get a room in that motel there?" She pointed to the one across the street. "The rates are reasonable."

The man looked like a scared rabbit. Looking left and right again and seeming to come to a decision, he grabbed Cho roughly by the arm and began to drag her to the alleyway next to where they'd been talking.

"What are you doing?" Cho demanded.

Harry came off the wall and ran towards them, still Disillusioned. Before he could get there, he heard sounds of a scuffle, what sounded like a kick, the unmistakable sound of a slap, and then, "Harr!" The last thing he heard was the pop of someone Disapparating.

"CHO!" he yelled as he canceled the spell so that he would be visible. "Okay, no problem. She has her tracking device on. I can find her directly."

As he ran down the alley, he heard something crunch under his foot. Looking down, he found the tracking device that Cho had been wearing around her neck.

"BLOODYFUCKINGSONOFAWHORE!" he screamed. People were stopping at the entrance, looking to see if they could find out what was going on.

"All right down there?" someone asked.

"Leave off!" Harry yelled, trying to get his anger under control so that he could think of what he needed to do.

"Damn it. I *knew* it! I knew something would happen. But does anyone listen to me? No!" Running his hands through his hair, he walked further down the alley and Apparated back to Italy's Auror Headquarters.

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Cho woke with a splitting headache, highly confused. Groaning, she tried to get up, but her body wouldn't cooperate. "What the..."

She tried moving her arms and then realized that she was chained to something. "What's going on? Where am I?" Suddenly, things started coming back to her. The nervous man. The alleyway. The fight. The Apparation... "Oh, God! No"

"Ah, I see you've finally woken, Chantel!"

Cho jerked. "Wh-where am I?"

"Why, you're home of course. I knew you wouldn't stay gone for long. You never could."

He slowly walked towards her and violently grabbed her hair. She gasped when he raised a knife and cut off a chunk of it. Rubbing it over his crotch, he said, "Do you remember when you had your mouth around my cock and all of this lovely black hair would tease me?" He shivered in anticipation. "Soon."

He held up a foul smelling cloth and lowered it towards her face. "Don't, please! It...it gives me a horrid headache." *God, don't let him put me back to sleep. He could do anything to me then...*

He chuckled, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. "I have to go out for a bit. Need some... supplies. I wouldn't want you to try anything while I'm not here, Chantel, like you did the last time. I would have to punish you again, and we've just got started." He bent his head and kissed her mouth. "I won't be long," was the last thing Cho heard before total darkness overcame her.

~\*~

Ginny stood on the Quidditch fields, listening to the coach give the instructions. Practice for the upcoming year had started a month before. She sighed. It'd been three months since the World Cup.

Oliver was still so angry at her, thinking she'd chosen Harry over him. It seemed like nothing she did or said convinced him otherwise. Damn it, she missed her carefree, fun-loving husband. She missed sex with him as well, as he'd not touched her since then either.

"Wood! Wood!" the coach yelled. "WEASLEY!"

Ginny jumped and was startled from her thoughts. When she looked up, everyone on the team was watching her. Her face reddened from the embarrassment. "Sorry, thought you meant Oliver."

"This won't do, won't do at all," the coach said. "Get her a new jersey; one with Weasley on the back."

"NO!" Ginny screamed, louder than she'd meant to. "I mean, I'm not Weasley now, right? Wood is my name."

"No, it's too distracting. Two Woods on one team could cause too much confusion, especially during games. We need the person we are speaking of to act without any hesitation." The coach snapped her fingers at the assistant coach. "Make haste! I want to get the practice underway!"

Ginny looked up at her husband to find him smirking at her. *Prat! He probably asked her to do that. Something has got to give!*

Suddenly, she heard, "Hi, Oliver!" from the stands and turned to see those three witches watching her husband with unabashed admiration. "We missed you while you were in Italy! We wanted to *personally* congratulate you!"

When Oliver sent them a charming smile and said, "Thanks, ladies! We usually go for drinks after practice..." Ginny seethed *What does he think he's doing?*

"Oliver?" Ginny called out to get his attention.

"What?" he asked irritably.

"Could I speak with you a moment?"

"No."

Ginny actually growled. "Listen here, Wood! I'm tired of..."

"Okay, here you go, Weasley. Put this on," the coach commanded as she handed Ginny her new jersey.

Ginny looked down at the jersey in her hands and then up at her husband. Smirking at him as he'd done earlier, she simply took off the jersey she had on to replace it with her new one. It was done very quickly, but there were still a couple of catcalls coming from the men in the stands who enjoyed watching the women practice.

Oliver mocked bowed to her and then started practice as if he didn't care at all about what she'd just done.

Ginny fumed and threw herself into the practice, wanting it to be over with as soon as possible.

Ginny Disapparated to her and Oliver's rooms as soon as the coach called an end to their practice and let them know what time to be there the next morning.

Stripping quickly, she ran a hot bubble bath and sank in, wanting to be done before her husband got home. She was sitting on the bed reading when he returned home drunk three hours later.

"Where have you been, Oliver?"

He shrugged. "You heard me say we were going for drinks after practice."

The room was dim, so she couldn't see the expression on his face. "I know, but I thought..."

"Thought what? That because you didn't go I wouldn't go?" He laughed. "Well, I no longer care what you do or don't do."

He walked past the bed to go to the shower, and she smelled perfume on him. *God, how cliché!*

She stopped the door before it could close and walked in behind him. That's when she spotted lipstick...two different shades...on his jersey.

"Gin, I need a shower, if you don't mind. Would you leave, please?"

"What is that on your jersey?" she asked, pointing to his chest and ignoring his request.

Oliver swayed a bit and looked down. "Looks like lipstick." He shrugged. "I'm tired and need a shower." He looked at the door pointedly.

"How did you get lipstick on your jersey, Oliver? And why do you reek of perfume?"

Sighing, he started removing his clothes. "Must've been the groupies hanging all over me."

She looked into his eyes then, her chest so tight it felt like it would burst. "I see. And you and the rest of the team stayed in a bar and drank for three hours, knowing we have to start practice at six?"

"No, not the rest of the team, just me," he informed her.

"You drank alone?"

He raised an eyebrow. "No."

"I see," she said again. "You're punishing me, aren't you?" Ginny accused.

Oliver leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his bare chest. "What would I have to punish you for?"

"Technically? Nothing. But you *are* punishing me for what *you* think was a lie, but it's not! I just simply didn't tell you that he would be in Italy!"

"Lie, omission, same thing to me," he said, waving a hand in the air. "It all boils down to the fact that...for some reason...you didn't want me to know. You didn't trust me enough to tell me. And I'm not punishing you...you chose Harry. Live with it."

"I did not choose him!" Ginny said, stomping her foot in her frustration. "I just refuse to say I'll never see him again, that's all. He's family, Oliver!"

Pushing himself off of the wall, Oliver turned on the shower and stripped off his trousers and boxers. "Well, there you have it. It was no choice, not really then, eh?" He started to get in, but turned to his wife. "When this year is over, I hope you and Potter will be very happy together because I won't play second to him or anybody else."

After he got into the shower, Ginny covered her face to hide her tears and turned and walked out of the bathroom, gently closing the door behind her. When she was in the

bedroom, she quickly dressed. Oliver never heard her leave.

~\*~

Ron walked into his empty house and sighed, laying down the briefcase he used to bring work home in on the table. He'd left work early due to George telling him he was scaring their customers away with his scowling.

Ever since that blasted trip to Ireland, Luna had been distant and cold.

She only spoke to him if he spoke to her first. She still slept in his bed; he supposed that her room was too cold for her to move back in, but she made sure to stay on her side and far away from him. The growling of his stomach reminded him of the dinners she used to have waiting on him when he returned home.

He looked around. The house was clean enough, but it no longer felt like *ahome*, the way she'd made it feel. He buried his face in his hands. What was wrong with him?

He felt so confused and alone. On the one hand, he was glad that Luna seemed to be distancing herself from him because it would make things easier when their year was up. On the other, his heart ached every time he thought of her actually leaving when their year was up.

And when he thought of her with another man...

No, there was nothing else for it. There was somebody he needed to speak to, and he was going to do it today...right now.

He walked out the door and Disapparated.

~~~

Hermione was sitting behind her desk, furiously researching cases. The mob outside the Ministry was escalating and starting to become violent. She wanted to end this case once and for all. She jumped when she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in," she tentatively called out, knowing that no mob member would be allowed in this area of the Ministry. Her mouth opened wide when Ron walked in. "Ron! What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you, Hermione. Can you spare a few moments?" he asked, looking at all of the papers she had strewn across her desk.

"Yes, I can for you." She smiled warmly at him. Gesturing to the chair in front of her desk, she told him, "Have a seat."

He nodded and then stopped mid seat. Her hand movements brought his attention to her hands. He nodded with his head. "Is that what I think it is?"

Hermione blushed, realizing that he'd seen her wedding band. "Um... Yes. Well, Severus gave this to me for Christmas."

Ron scowled and then thought of the locket that he'd given to Luna that he'd not seen around her neck one time. "Anyway," he said, as if it didn't matter, "I just need to ask you one question."

"All right."

"Why?"

Hermione didn't even pretend she didn't understand what he was talking about. Sighing deeply, she softly said, "Ron, you know that our relationship was changing. I could blame it on the wine, but that was only part of it. We'd stop thinking of one another romantically, and I suppose I just wanted to be sure."

"But couldn't you have talked to me about things? Did you *have* to go behind my back?"

"I thought about talking to you, and tried a couple times, but always chickened out. You would've argued with me."

"Of course I would have! I love you, Hermione. I thought you loved me, too."

"I do! That hasn't changed! What *has* changed is the way in which I love you. If you're going to be honest, you'll admit that you changed in that regard as well."

"What about your husband? Do you love him?"

"That's personal, Ron, and between my husband and myself."

"I can't help but feel like you betrayed me, and I can't seem to get past that. It's messing up things with..." He suddenly looked up as if he felt he'd said too much.

"Luna loves you. I do know that. She has for years. Please don't compare what we had to that. Don't compare ~~her~~ to *me* because it's not the same thing."

"Yeah, so you say. How can I be sure that she won't leave me high and dry...like you did?" He looked her in the eyes, and she lowered her head, feeling horrible.

"I'm so sorry! I really should have come to you; I know that now. But don't let my short-comings ruin what happiness you can find with Luna."

Ron continued to stare, asking her, "Saying that doesn't bother you at all, does it?"

"Actually, yes, it does. My feelings for you didn't go away just like that," she said as she snapped her fingers. "But they're not strong enough to last a lifetime. Can you honestly say that yours for me are?"

"I wanted to believe so."

"Yes. But does wanting to believe make it true?"

Hermione looked into Ron's eyes and placed her hand on top of his. "Do you love Luna, Ron?"

"That's personal, Hermione, between my wife and myself," Ron mimicked, using her earlier words, but with a smile.

"Touché," she said. "Just let me say this. These marriages only have to last a year. What you need to decide is if you want yours to end when that year is up."

"Will you tell me one thing? Do you want yours to end?"

"Don't base your decision with Luna on mine with Severus. It wouldn't be fair."

"I'm not doing that!" he said. "I know things are over for us regardless. I was just curious."

"No, I don't want my marriage to end."

"Then that answers my questions as to whether or not you love your husband."

"Perhaps it does. But as I said, don't base any of your decisions on mine, okay? You and Luna both deserve better."

Ron stood up, walked around her desk and hugged her. They weren't totally back to where they used to be before... well, before she'd cast that charm, but at least he had some much needed answers. "Goodbye, 'Mione. I'll miss you."

"I'm not going anywhere, Ron! We can still..."

"Be friends?" He smiled sadly. "Maybe someday," he told her and left.

He'd figured out two things while talking with Hermione. One, though she'd hurt him terribly, he wasn't truly *in love* with his ex-fiancée, and two, he very possibly could be falling for his wife. Now all he had to do was woo her back.

He only hoped it wasn't too late.

Shortly after Ron had left, Hermione's co-worker came running into her office. "Hermione! Come quick!"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"It's that mob! They're becoming physically violent!"

Quickly making sure that she had her wand, Hermione ran outside. Before she could say or do anything, she felt blood splatter all over her chest.

~*~

Severus had been pacing in his room for thirty minutes. It was eleven o'clock at night, and Hermione was not home. She'd not Flooed or owled to inform him that she'd be so late. *Where the devil is she?*

He'd tried Flooing her at work already, but to no avail. She was clearly not there, so where could she have gone?

Severus thought back to the argument after the Malfoys' reception. Things were still slightly awkward between them, but not overly. Slowly but surely, the awkwardness was fading away.

She'd been more hurt than Severus had realized. Mostly because she'd felt that he'd abandoned her. Perhaps he had, but it had been unintentional. He'd just never took the time to think about the fact that she'd had no friends there as he'd had, though he now understood that he should have. Not only had she not had friends there, but those that had been there had never liked her during school, and for her, the feelings were mutual.

It was sometimes hard for him to remember that she'd not really been out of school that long and that some of the prejudices were still strong.

Severus shook his head. Look how long Lucius and Narcissa had been out, and yet they still held fast to old prejudices. He knew that they'd thought they were helping him. When he'd received that Ministry letter, he'd made his feelings about Hermione very clear. It was just that his feelings were not the same as they'd been then.

Severus went to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a shot of Ogden's, downing it in one gulp. Slamming the glass on the table, he said, "This is ridiculous!" He went to the door and flung it open, almost knocking over a blood-covered Hermione in his haste.

"Hermione! Oh, my God! You're hurt. Here, let me see," Severus demanded, pulling her inside and running shaking hands all over her.

"Severus..."

"Where's the wound? I can't find it!"

"Severus, stop! It's not..."

"God, with the amount of blood on you, I'm surprised you can even walk! Where is the fucking wound?" In his impatience, Severus grabbed the front of her robes and ripped them down the middle.

Hermione took his face in her hands. "SEVERUS!"

He stopped his searching and looked into her eyes. "Hermione?"

"It's not my blood."

Severus sank to his knees on the floor in his relief. "What's happened?"

"The mob I've been telling you about took action today. This," she said, sweeping a hand over her, "is apparently werewolf blood."

Severus slowly stood, running a still shaking hand through his hair. "Where have you been?"

"Susan Bones was badly hurt. I went with her to St. Mungo's."

"Is that so? And you never once thought to owl or Floo me to let me know?"

"No, I didn't think. I was so worried about Susan. She's still not out of the woods. I told..."

"You are over five hours late, you come home covered in blood, and you never once considered I may be worried about you? You never considered me at all, did you?"

Hermione looked down, abashed. "Well... I... That is to say, I didn't... Severus, I'm sorry. My only concern at that moment was if Susan was going to live or die."

"Funny. I had the same concerns here regarding you."

"You're absolutely right. I should've contacted you. Please, let's not fight about this right now. I desperately need a bath."

"Why did you not Scourgify yourself?" he asked, disgusted with the entire situation, but most of all himself for being so worried about her when she'd obviously not given him a moment's thought.

"I tried to. This blood is spelled somehow to withstand that. I washed what I could off at St. Mungo's, but it wasn't enough. Severus," she said quietly, noting the look on his face, "please don't be angry with me over this."

"I was worried sick!" he admitted. "The more time passed, the more terrible things I imagined happening to you. And then when you walked in here, covered with blood..."

Hermione ran to him and threw herself into his arms. "I'm so, so sorry. A thousand times sorry. I never meant to worry you so. I didn't think I could."

He gently pushed her back. "Explain that."

"As I was leaving to come home, I knew you would likely wonder where I'd been, but I never thought you to be this distressed over me."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Looking into his eyes, she challenged, "Why would you be?"

"Because, you silly twit, I I..."

Severus was interrupted by a frantic pounding on the door. "Hermione! Professor Snape! Let me in!"

Hermione groaned. She whispered, "Not now, Harry!" Looking up at her husband, she said, "You..." as she moved her hand in a circular motion, wanting him to continue.

Severus sighed in relief at the sudden interruption. Good Lord! What had he been about to admit to her? He shook his head. "See what that dunderhead wants! I can't think straight with all of that pounding!"

Hermione grabbed her robes, pulling them together, and then went to the door and threw it open, her agitation obvious in her face. "What is it, Harry? I thought you were in Italy?"

"Hermione! What's happened to you? Why are you covered in blood? Did he hurt you?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Harry! No, he did not. It happened at work, and it's not my blood. Now, it's late. What's wrong?"

Harry came inside and walked over to Professor Snape. "Sir, I need to ask you something. Can you make a tracking potion with this?" He held up a strand of long, black hair.

"Indeed, I can."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "What's going on, Harry?"

"Do you remember the serial killer case I've been working on?" Hermione nodded that she did. "Well, he's taken Cho, and the tracking device she had around her neck was torn off in the struggle. I have to find her," he said desperately, looking at Snape. "Will you help me?"

When he didn't answer, Hermione looked at her husband, pleadingly. "Severus?"

Severus sighed. "Yes, of course. Hand me the hair, and I will get started."

The last thing Severus saw before walking to his lab was his wife hugging Potter, assuring him that everything would be all right."

A/N: Well, a lot going on here. Emotions are running high...

Chapter 15: Power of Love, Part One

Chapter 15 of 17

Cho manages to get away, but what do she and Harry learn about the condition she is in? Oliver and Ginny come to an understanding.

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Part One

Cho shivered, cold and disoriented. Panic was setting in because she couldn't move her arms or legs, but Cho instinctively knew not to give away that she was waking up. She struggled to stay awake and figure out where she was at the same time. Then suddenly, it all came back to her with vivid clarity.

"Chantel?" She heard this from the psychotic monster that was holding her captive. "You've slept long enough. Wake up now, it's time."

Time? Time for what? How long have I been here? Where are the Aurors? Where's Harry? No, I won't think about him now. I need to concentrate.

"I'll admit I must've given you too much chloroform. How's the head?"

Cho slowly opened her eyes because she knew that he realized she was awake now and glared at him, turning her face away, trying to look around the room and get her bearings.

He swiftly walked to her and soundly slapped her face, causing her already aching head to explode with pain. "You're going to want to answer me when I ask you a question, my dear. Now, how's the head?"

"How the hell do you think it is?" Cho answered defiantly. She was terrified yesterday, and truth be told, she still was today, but damn if she'd go down without a fight.

He slapped her again...on the other side this time. "I demand respect! A wife must respect her husband, Chantel! You know this! I've told you time and again!" He began pacing, lightly smacking his own cheeks, and mumbling to himself.

"Why can't she *listen* to me? She purposely provokes me! I can only come to one conclusion." He turned to her then and smiled the smile of a demon. "You like the pain, don't you, my dear? You... get off on it. I can oblige you."

He grabbed up the hair he'd cut off the night before...unless more time than that had passed...and began rubbing the obvious bulge in his pants that Cho hadn't noticed before then. Cho turned away, sickened, but more determined to find away out of there. She needed to *think*, but her headache and nerves were making it very difficult.

He walked over during her distraction and kicked the table she was lying on, and it made her whole body vibrate with pain. It also made her realize for the first time how tightly her wrists and ankles were bound.

"Watch me!" he commanded. "You used to get yourself off on it!"

Cho struggled not to look away from the grotesque sight of him pleasuring himself with her hair in his hand. She really didn't want him to knock her out again...with the chloroform or his fists.

After a few moments, he growled, closing his eyes, and stiffened. "So... damn... good!" Then he opened his eyes and looked furiously at Cho, throwing her hair on the floor. "How dare you deny me? How dare you *laugh* at me! I wanted you so badly!"

He swiftly walked to her and punched her in the ribs, and Cho was certain that one had cracked, if not broke. "You returned my gifts! Burned my letters! Scorned my proposal! Threw my ring in my face! I wanted to make you my *wife*, Chantel! The highest honor a man can bestow a woman! You are nothing but a lowly WHORE! I could've taken you out of that life, given you everything. But no, no, you laughed at me. Ahh... but you learned quickly enough, didn't you? The laughter didn't last long, did it?" He punched her low on her thigh, causing her ankle to vibrate with pain against the chains. "You learned that I'm a force to be reckoned with, didn't you?" When she was silent, he screamed, "DIDN'T YOU?"

"Yes, yes! I learned!" She had to think, had to act.

"Stop talking like that!"

She shivered. "L-like what?" Cho was trying her best not to provoke him. She was beginning to wake up more, but her head felt like it was being split in two.

"With that ridiculous accent! What are you doing, role playing for your Johns?"

Johns? "N-no... I'm sorry. This headache... It makes it hard to concentrate."

He chuckled softly and gently stroked her hair, as if she were a child. He walked away from her and pulled out a wand. Cho winced, wondering what spell he was going to use on her. "Now, this here is a wand. I can do things with it that you wouldn't believe." He flicked it towards the counter in the room and a knife slowly floated to him. He looked at her with anticipation on his face.

He thinks I'm a Muggle! Cho quickly placed an awed expression on her face, trying to buy some time. She concentrated, trying to feel if her wand was still in her boot, but she couldn't tell. Her legs and arms had gone numb.

He laughed. "I can do all sorts of things with this wand." He pointed it at her and yelled, *Crucio!*

He'd only held the spell a few seconds, but Cho felt as if every nerve ending was on fire. "Now maybe you'll understand. Now maybe you'll take me a bit more seriously. I hope I won't have to teach you this lesson again, Chantel."

He walked back to her and gently rubbed her cheek. She flinched, thinking he was going to slap her again, and watched his smile turn into a frown of anger. "You flinch at my touch? Last time, you were begging me to touch you! You wanted my touch here!" He told her as he roughly cupped her sex through her skirt.

She couldn't help it, one tear escaped. He backed away, looking at her with disgust on his face. He kicked the tray and sent knives scattering all over the floor. "Look at what you've made me do!" he screamed as he pointed to the knives on the floor. Furious, he ran to her and drew his hand back, but then he lowered it and suddenly walked over to where the knives lay scattered on the floor.

"I'm going to have to sterilize these again! I shouldn't! I should just use a dirty one. How would you like that?" She said nothing, not sure if she was supposed to answer him or not. "Tell me!"

"I-I wouldn't. I'm sorry."

He glared at her. "I'm going to sterilize them this one last time, but I warn you, I won't again. *You will* obey me, Chantel. I'll come back when they're done, and I'll bring something for you to eat. It's your own fault that you're going to have to go hungry."

She didn't reply, simply watching him gather the knives off of the floor. He began murmuring incoherently to himself as he left the room. He didn't put her back to sleep, and Cho didn't know if it was because he forgot or not, but she didn't want to take any chances.

She closed her eyes, concentrating hard. They'd practiced wandless Apparating in training, but she'd never had to do it with pain and injuries before. They had also been warned it was to only be used in extreme situations, as the ramifications could be dire if anything went wrong. It didn't matter; she had to get out of there. If she could just get outside, then she could get her wand and Apparate the long distance back to Headquarters.

Deciding to act before she could worry herself too much on the consequences should she mess up and before her captor could return, Cho closed her eyes and suddenly popped outside.

Stumbling to the ground due to the numbness of her legs, she took a moment to get her bearings and then clumsily grabbed her wand out of her boot. The last thing she saw before Disapparating was the man running outside, wand at the ready, screaming, "CHANTEL!" as loudly as he could.

~*~

Harry paced around in front of the Snape's fireplace, pulling his hair and biting his thumb.

"Harry," Hermione said gently, as if not to startle him. "Do you want me to see if Ron can come over?"

"Ron?" he asked incredulously. "Why? What the hell can Ron do that I'm not already doing? What is taking so bloody long! It's been over twenty-four hours!"

Hermione walked to him, rubbing his arm. "This potion is a complicated one. You want it right, not fast. And I thought Ron might be of some comfort to you. I know there's nothing we can do right now."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, 'Mione. It's not necessary to owl Ron." He hugged her. "It's just that I feel like I'm going crazy here. I have to find her! You don't know what this man is capable of." He walked to the wall and started beating his head against it.

Hermione gasped, and Harry turned to her. "What? What is it? Did you think of something?"

"No. No, but I've realized something."

When she didn't elaborate, Harry growled in frustration. "Well? What did you realize?"

"That you're in love with Cho. What you're feeling is more than concern for a co-worker."

Harry nodded. "We've been dating these last three months, and I've come to realize that I do love her. And if anything happens to her..." He closed his fist over the tracking necklace that she'd been wearing, and a bit of blood trickled down his hand.

"Harry! Stop that! You're bleeding!"

He turned to comment but didn't speak when he realized that Snape was walking wearily into the room. "Here you go, Potter. There's enough in there for two, possibly three, uses."

"Thank you so much, Snape." Harry turned to run out of the castle.

"Harry!" Hermione called after him. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"NO!" came twin shouts, one from her husband and one from her best friend.

"Thanks for the offer, but I have to concentrate on what I need to do, and I can't do that if I'm worried about you, too." Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Snape slightly nod with approval, and for some strange reason, it made him feel proud.

"Okay," Hermione said reluctantly. "But promise to owl me as soon as you find her."

Harry walked back to her and kissed her cheek. "I promise." Then he turned and sprinted for the door. He heard a gentle, "God speed," as he closed the door.

Once he got to the Apparation point, he briefly considered going to Italy's Headquarters and then decided not to. He had to go directly to Cho. She'd been with that man too long, and there was no telling what had already been done to her.

He swiftly swallowed some of the potion that would take him directly to her and screamed in pain because it suddenly felt as if he were being pulled in two directions. After a bit of time, he felt the familiar tug behind his navel and a falling sensation. He landed at Cho's feet.

"Harry!" she yelled and then instantly regretted it, grabbing her head.

"Cho!" Harry said with relief and rose to his knees to hug her, only letting go when she cried out. It was then that he really looked at her and noticed her bruised and battered face.

He looked around to discover that he was in Headquarters. "How did they find you, love?"

Suddenly, Cho burst out crying, and Harry very gently took her into his arms. "Ssh. Don't. I'm so sorry. I'm here now," he soothed.

"Nobody found me, Harry," she told him between sniffles. "I got out by myself using wandless Apparation."

Harry started to speak, but Auror Rossi interrupted him. "I really must insist now, Auror Chang, that you go to the hospital."

Cho sniffed and wiped her nose with the tissue Harry handed her. "I can help you!" she insisted. "I don't know the exact location, but I can help you find it."

"You will do no such thing!" her superior commanded. "You are hurt, so I am relieving you of your duties until you are cleared by a Healer. Is this understood?"

"But, sir..."

"Enough!" Turning to Harry, Auror Rossi asked, "How did you know that Chang would be here? You said you would not return until you found her."

"Oh, I sent an owl to his room," Cho explained.

Harry smiled sadly at her, hating to see the damage that had been done to her. "Thank you, love, but that is not why I came here. I went to Snape and had this tracking potion made with a hair of yours that I found in my room."

Cho winced when he said 'hair,' but otherwise said nothing. Then an idea came to her. "You know... He chopped off some of my hair. I bet ~~f~~took some of that, it would take me directly to him."

"Absolutely not!" Harry said. When she started to speak, he held up his hand. "Not because I think that you can't handle yourself. Obviously, you can. It's just that you're not in any condition to. I insist on taking it this time."

"But, Harry, it wouldn't work for you! Because I am here and only my hair is there! It would pull you ~~tome~~, the biggest source of my body."

It made sense, and Harry growled in frustration. Then an idea came to him. "You could take it, and I could hold onto you when it took you to him!"

"Harry," Auror Rossi gently said, "she's hurt. She needs medical attention."

Cho stood and looked at her superior defiantly. "Nonetheless, ~~lam~~ going to do this. He has to be stopped, sir. He's mental, and I couldn't live with myself if he took another girl in rage from my escape and harmed her. It will only take a matter of minutes, and then I promise that I'll go be checked out."

Rossi sighed in defeat. "I will allow this on two conditions. That you let Harry accompany you and that you take the tracking device so that a team can be there shortly after you arrive."

"Agreed," Cho simply said.

Harry began pacing once again as Rossi put together his team. "Harry," Cho said, "I'm okay. Please don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault that the device came off in the struggle."

"We should've have put it in a more secure place! When I think of what he's done to you..."

"Don't think of that! Think of the fact that I got away." She cupped his face and gently kissed him, which surprised him because she'd always been adamant about keeping things between them a secret.

"Cho?"

Cho sighed. "I'm tired of secrets just now, Harry. I've decided that I don't want to put off our actually being together any longer. I discovered life is too precious."

"I love you, Cho."

"You do?" she asked, stunned. "Really?"

"Absolutely, I do."

She laid her head on his chest. "I love you, too."

"We're ready," Rossi said. "Auror Chang, are you certain that you wish to do this?"

"Oh, yes. Positive."

"Okay, let's go."

Harry gently took Cho into his arms while she picked up the potion and quickly swallowed it. This time, he immediately felt the tug. They both landed in a heap at the feet of her captor.

"Chantel! You naughty girl," he spat, seemingly not even seeing Harry. "You will pay dearly for this." Before either could act, he went for Cho's throat, choking her.

Harry quickly gained his feet and wrapped his arms about the man's waist, acting on instinct and forgetting his wand. Once Harry had pulled him off of her and Cho caught her breath, she quickly raised her wand and shouted, "*Petrificus Totalus*!" The killer froze and fell limply to the floor just as three Aurors popped into the room.

Harry walked over to the man and kicked him in the stomach. He ordered, "Take him out of here," before turning to Cho and gently wrapping her in his arms. "Ready for the hospital now?"

"Yes," she agreed, shaking uncontrollably. "I think I'd better."

Harry quickly pulled out the Portkey he'd had Hermione make for him while he'd been at her home that would take them directly to St. Mungo's. He'd had enough of Italy. He was worried that Cho was going into shock now that things seemed to be over. She was shaking uncontrollably.

Once they arrived at St. Mungo's and the Healers had taken Cho back, Harry owed Hermione to let her know that Cho was safe. Now, there was nothing to do except wait... and wait some more. Finally, the Healer came out into the waiting room.

"Mr. Potter? Could you please come back here with me? Miss Chang is asking for you."

"Yes, of course." Harry quickly stood to follow the Healer into Cho's room.

"Have a seat, Mr. Potter. I was just about to give Miss Chang the results of her tests. Now, your rib was not broken or cracked; however, it was extremely bruised. The slight shock that you were in when you arrived seems to be under control now. Your other injuries are somewhat minor, especially compared to what they could have been.

"But our main concern, of course, was the baby, especially after the Tracking Potion you took. Fortunately, Professor Snape immediately owed us the list of ingredients used, and with the amount of each, we don't believe that it will have any ill effects. We would like to monitor you closely for the next month, though, just to be on the safe side." She stopped speaking because of the quiet and glanced up to see if either Harry or Cho had any questions.

"Er... did you say *baby*?" Harry asked, gobsmacked.

~*~

Oliver sat on his broom fuming. Ginny had left while he was in the shower the night before and hadn't bothered to come home. Now here she was for practice, sitting on her broom, acting as if nothing was wrong. Well, they'd just see about that.

As soon as the coach called an end to practice, Oliver grabbed his wife's arm before she could leave again. "A word, Ginevra."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "I think we said all there was to say last night."

"Then you'd be wrong, wouldn't you?"

Ginny sighed. She felt horrible, having had no sleep the night before. She was afraid that if she spoke with her husband, she'd break down, and after he'd been out with those other women drinking and Merlin knew what else, she just didn't have it in her.

"I think that you made yourself crystal clear last night, Oliver."

"No, I didn't. Now let's go back to our room, Gin, or we can do this here and now."

"Our room?"

"Yes. Our room," he told her impatiently. "Why are you acting daft?"

"You told me it was over!" Then she said in a mimicking voice, "When this is over, I hope you're happy with Potter..."

"That's it!" he yelled as he picked her up, slung her over his shoulder, and Disapparated back to their room.

Once there, he immediately dropped her on her bottom onto the couch. "Where the hell were you last night?"

Ginny stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest and looked away from him. She shrugged indifferently. "Maybe I have some groupies like you do."

The image of her changing jerseys at practice the day before and the catcalls from her 'groupies' flashed through Oliver's mind, causing his anger to double. "Did you go to the bar?" he asked, remembering that he'd seen at least a couple of those guys there when he'd left for home.

"Last night, you told me that you no longer cared what I did or didn't do, so why the inquisition now?"

"Just answer the damned question!"

"NO! First, why don't you tell me who you were with last night?"

"I wasn't *with* anyone, per se..."

Ginny turned her head. She couldn't look at her husband any longer without either crying or scratching his eyes out. "Neither was I. Nor did I come here reeking of cologne."

"Ginny..."

"I wasn't with another man," she told him. "Happy now? Can I go?"

"I've not been with another woman!"

Ginny looked at her husband skeptically. "Oh yeah? Then why did your jersey have ~~two~~ different shades of lipstick? Why did you smell like a perfume factory? Why is it that when I specifically asked you, you blew me off. I know you knew what I was thinking, yet you did nothing to defend yourself or placate me. You seemed to want me to come to the conclusion that you'd been unfaithful actually."

Oliver sat down beside his wife, and she moved a little further away from him. "You're right. I did want you to think that. But, Ginny, I wasn't with another woman last night or any other night since I've married you."

"Do you expect me to believe you? You told me you want to end things, so why wouldn't you be with another woman?"

"Because I was only saying that to protect myself!" he admitted and then instantly regretted giving away so much of his feelings for her.

"Protect yourself? From what?" she asked, confused.

"From you!"

"From *me*? You're the one talking about leaving me and this marriage once our year is up!"

"Right, so that you can go running back to Potter!"

"Oliver, it's over between Harry and me. There won't be any reconciliation there, even if we don't stay married. I know that you think otherwise, but honestly, we're only friends now. Nothing more. If you want to know the truth, I think there's something going on between Cho and him...if I read the signs correctly during the match in Italy."

"Then why didn't you tell me he was in Italy? Why the big secret? It made me feel as if you were trying to hide something from me, Gin."

Ginny let out a long breath. "I wasn't keeping it a secret, not really, I just didn't mention it. I honestly didn't see the point, but you can bet your arse I do now. In the future, I won't keep anything to do with Harry Potter from you." She gasped. "I mean to say... I wouldn't now, but it doesn't matter anymore."

Oliver took Ginny's hand and attempted to pull her closer, but she held her ground. "Come here."

"I don't think that's a good idea." She stood suddenly. "I'm going to go ahead and get the rest of my things... to go back to the Burrow. That's where I stayed last night, if you still want to know."

He grabbed her waist and pulled her down onto his lap. "Like hell you will!" he informed her and passionately kissed her until she was breathless.

When he'd had his fill, he slowly moved his gaze from her lips to her eyes. "What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing! Let me up. I have to go!" She struggled against him, but he only held her tighter.

When she tired herself out, she sagged against him. "Oliver, I cannot do this. You've got to let me go. I can't stay here knowing that when our year is up, you will be ending things with me. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay. I don't want us to end things. Not now, and not when our year is up."

Her eyes were full of doubt when she looked at him. "You... You don't? But what about Harry? What about the fact that I can't promise never to see him again?"

"Can we compromise there?" he asked, uncertain.

"Compromise how?"

"Would you be willing to let me know as soon as you know if he is going to be where we are or if he'll be attending any of our games? And would you try to make sure I am with you if you know in advance that he'll be at your parents' house the same time as you are? I'm never going to like the fact that he's a huge part of your family, but I do understand it, I suppose."

She studied him a moment and hesitantly said, "Yes, I think I could agree to those terms. However, I do have a few of my own."

"All right, I'm listening."

"Okay, well, I really don't want you to go drinking after every practice, especially without me being there. If we do discuss it, and you do end up going without me, I want you to promise that if *any* groupies get the urge to hang all over you, you'll come directly home. I... I don't like seeing lipstick on your jersey, especially when it's not mine!"

"Okay, I can understand that. So, we've come to a compromise then? Nobody's leaving?"

"It appears that we have."

"Good!" he told her as he picked her up and headed for their bedroom. "It looks as if we have some serious making up to do."

A/N: Okay, part two up in the next couple of days, promise. :) This chapter was getting to be too long!

Chapter 16: Power of Love, Part 2

Chapter 16 of 17

Ron has an epihany and tries to make things right. Hermione and Severus share an evening with 'friends.'

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



Part Two

George watched his brother brooding for the better part of the day and decided to have another talk with him. "What's up, little brother?"

"What do you mean? Nothing," Ron told him defensively.

"Ron, you've been moping around here ever since you got back from Ireland. Why is that? You would think that camping alone with your wife in such beautiful surroundings would put you in a better mood."

Ron shrugged. "We weren't alone, and besides, she won't be my wife much longer."

"Why do you say that every single time *your wife* is mentioned?" George asked, irritated. "Who are you reminding? Me or yourself?"

"Nobody! I was just saying, that's all!"

"You're a fool. I hope you realize that. A complete and utter fool."

Ron's face reddened. George didn't know if it was from embarrassment or anger and didn't much care. "You have an incredible woman who, for some unknown reason, loves you. And what do you do? Continuously remind her and anyone else who mentions her that you're ending things as soon as you can when what you should be doing is thanking your lucky stars she even wants you to begin with!"

"It'll just make things easier in the long run for everyone to realize that this isn't forever."

"Why do you say that? If she loves you, and you obviously have strong feelings for her, then why does it have to end?"

Ron shrugged, trying to act nonchalant, but his brother saw right through him. "Because it will. With me, it always does, right?"

"Ooohhh," George said in an exaggerated drawl, "I didn't know that we were having a pity party. Hold on, let me get my party hat!"

"Shut it, you! I've had enough advice, thanks!"

"Who else is trying to talk some sense into you?"

"Um... I went to visit Hermione," Ron admitted.

"I see. What did she have to say?"

"That she did love me...blah, blah, blah...but it wasn't the kind of love to last a lifetime and all that rot. Said that she hopes we can be friends again one day."

George nodded encouragingly. "There you go. Same thing I've been telling you! I know you won't get over her overnight, but that should at least alleviate any guilt you may have been feeling for falling for Luna," he told Ron pointedly.

Ron growled. "You don't get it! Nobody seems to get it! Don't you understand? Hermione loved me once, George. Enough to accept a marriage proposal. Then just like that," he snapped his fingers, "she decides that it's just not enough to last forever."

"And the thing is, I had no idea. I was happy with her. I would've married her never knowing she felt that way. How do I know that after time passes, Luna won't fall out of love with me, too?"

"Ron," George said gently, "there aren't any guarantees in love or life. But I've always known that Hermione didn't love you with a lasting kind of love. And if you're honest with yourself, you'll admit you didn't love her like that either."

"The two of you had become comfortable with each other and, dare I say, a habit. She was easy to be around because you knew her so well, but where was the passion? Where was the spark? You and Hermione acted no differently than you and Ginny half the time."

"So, you really think things are different with Luna?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Sure, don't you? Can't you *feel* the difference?"

Ron stood suddenly, almost overturning his chair. "I need to go. I've some things I need to take care of before Luna comes home. Will you be okay here if I take off early?"

George looked around the shop that only held three customers. "Oh, I think I can handle it. Just one last piece of advice, then I'm done. Follow your heart, little brother. Follow your heart."

Ron looked nervously at the table he'd set, trying to remember if it looked the same way as when Luna used to set it for him. He ran a mental checklist. Candles? Check. Flowers? Check. Plates and silverware? Check. But still... it seemed as if something was missing. He gazed a little longer and then slapped his forehead with his hand.

"Bloody hell! I forgot to put the table cloth on the table." He turned to the Howler that still kept residence on his mantel, refusing to burn itself out. "You should have said something," he told it as if it could answer him. Instead, it shimmied further down the mantel.

Before he could rectify his mistake, he heard his wife coming through the door. She looked tired and pale, and Ron mentally cursed himself because he knew that was mainly his fault.

She'd been working later and later, and he knew it was to avoid him. Ever since they'd made love in Ireland, she'd withdrawn from him completely. After thinking on it for endless hours, he came to the realization that he'd somehow hurt her terribly. If only he knew exactly *what* had bothered her, he could try to start fixing it!

She had loved him and had no qualms about letting him know, and he supposed that it did seem as if he'd used her and manipulated her feelings for him there. If that were the case, he truly hadn't meant to. It was just at that moment, he couldn't remember wanting another woman more. Even... Hermione. Certainly never Lavender. His wife seemed to stir feelings in him he never knew he'd had.

His musings were interrupted by a soft, "Ron? What's going on here? Please tell me we're not expecting company!" she said wearily.

"No, we're not. I just... I dunno. I wanted to do something nice for you."

"Why?"

He winced. His wife found it difficult to believe that he'd wanted to do something nice for her just for the hell of it. What an arse he'd been. His gaze quickly darted to her chest to see if she had his locket on, and he discovered she still wasn't wearing it. He cleared his throat and quickly said, "No reason. I just felt like doing something for you, okay?"

He watched as Luna took in the table and slowly lifted her haunted eyes to his. "Ron, don't do this. It's not necessary. We've only got a few more months to go, and then you can be well rid of me. Don't try to soften the blow."

"I'm not! That's not what this is! Luna, can we talk?"

Luna began to fidget, something her husband had never noticed her doing before, and told him, "Not tonight. I have to finish this research, and then I'm for bed. It's been a tiresome day."

"You need to eat. You're losing weight. And though I agree that you do need a good night's sleep, staying up for thirty more minutes won't hurt. I have some things I'd like to say to you."

Luna started backing away towards the loo as if she didn't want to hear what he had to say, and Ron admitted she likely didn't because she thought he was going to hurt her again. He roughly dragged his hand through his hair. "Please, Luna?"

Luna sighed, seemingly defeated, and went to sit at the table. She began to pile her plate with food, hardly noticing what she was even getting. "Well? Aren't you going to join me?" she asked irritably as if she just wanted to get this ordeal over with. "I thought you said that you wanted to talk to me? Well... talk!"

Ron sighed. This wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought it would be. "I hardly know where to begin," he admitted as he watched her playing with the food on her plate.

"I've told you already you don't have to let me down easily. When our year is up, I'll go." She motioned towards the food on the table. "All of this was truly unnecessary."

"What would you say if I told you that I don't want you to leave when our year is up?"

Luna eyed her husband skeptically. "I suppose I would ask you what's changed. I know that you don't love me, and even more, you're still in love with Hermione Snape."

He winced involuntarily when Luna used Snape in connection with Hermione, but told her, "One of the things I wanted to talk to you about was that I went to see Hermione, and we had a long talk about things. Luna, I do still care for her, I imagine I always will, but I'm no longer in love with her."

"I find that very hard to believe, Ron."

"I know it seems sudden, but really, I've been doubting my feelings for her since..." His face turned a deep shade of scarlet, but he forced himself to continue, saying, "Since Ireland."

Luna shook her head. "You can't equate having sex with love. I think you're confused about things because of that."

"You're wrong! I'm not! It wasn't merely *sex*, Luna! We made love, or I did, at least."

"So you're saying that you *love* me now?" she asked disbelievingly.

"Well, I'm not sure if it's love that I'm feeling, but I care for you very deeply and..."

"Just like you care for Hermione?"

"No! As my feelings for her are fading, my feelings for you are becoming deeper. I just needed to officially end things with her. It was just feeling like she and I had unfinished business, you know? I had to end with her so that I could begin with you... er... if you still want me, that is. I dunno." He stood, pacing and running a frustrated hand through his hair again. "I don't think I'm making much sense."

Luna slightly smiled. "No, I think I am starting to understand what you're trying to say."

"You do?" he asked her, surprised.

"Yes. The main thing is: you want to give our marriage a real chance?"

"Yes, I do. Do you still want me, Luna?"

"I love you. Of course I still want you."

"That's terrific!" He went to her to take her into his arms, but she laid a hand on his chest to hold him off.

"Not so fast. It's not that easy. You hurt me terribly, you know. I have to be sure this time. I won't give you my heart on a platter to be broken again."

Ron immediately sobered. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. I know that I've been a complete arse, but I promise I'll try harder if you'll just give me another chance."

"Well, this situation is not entirely your fault. I do understand how your life was completely turned upside-down. In other words, I know what it's like to be hurt and disillusioned by the one that you love. Only, in your case, it was also by someone that you trusted. I do get that. It's just... I'm tired of being punished because Hermione didn't love you enough and I loved you too much."

Ron walked to his wife and gently took her into his arms. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he told her, "I'm tired of punishing myself by refusing someone that I already care for and could possibly be in love with. I'm stubborn and prideful, and as you know, I sulk and brood. But I really don't want to lose you, love. Will you take another chance on me?"

When she didn't answer, Ron placed his hand under her chin and wiped the tears falling from her eyes with his other one. "Luna?"

"I will agree to take things slowly. I have to guard my heart this time. But, I agree to stay here with you and see where this takes us."

Ron gently kissed her. "That's more than I deserve. Thank you."

Luna was beginning to feel awkward, so she stepped out of her husband's arms and went to sit at the table to finish eating. "Come join me," she told Ron. "This is actually pretty good."

"I found the recipe in the box you keep there on the counter. Can I ask you something?"

"It depends on what you want to know," she answered.

"Would you tell me why you won't wear the locket I gave you for Christmas? If you don't like it, we can exchange it for something else," he added quickly.

Luna grinned and pointed her wand at her neck. "*Finite Incantatem*," she said, and Ron watched as his white gold heart-shaped locket came into view.

"You're wearing it?" he asked, surprised.

"Of course I am. After all, *you* gave it to me. And it's really rather lovely." She opened it to show him that she had his picture inside.

He smiled. "I'm going to make up the past few months to you, Luna. I promise."

Luna laid her hand over his. "Let's just take things slowly and go from there."

"Right," he agreed. "And after dinner, it's a warm bath and off to bed for you."

When she raised an eyebrow at him, he quickly clarified, "To sleep! Just to sleep! Unless..."

"Unless?"

"You'll let me hold you. Just hold you...nothing more. I mean, if you wanted, I would give you more, naturally, anything you wanted, but all I'm technically *asking* for is to hold you."

"Ron! Stop rambling! I would like to sleep in your arms," she said dreamily. "But sleep only!"

"Right," he said again. "No problem." Ron knew he would suffer that night, not being able to do more than hold her, but he also knew that she was worth the wait.

~*~

Hermione sat at her desk, tiredly going over all the forms she had to fill out and submit. Ever since she'd heard from Harry that Cho was safe and being examined at St. Mungo's, she'd decided that she really needed to get these pesky little forms taken care of.

Severus had agreed to supply St. Mungo's with the Wolfsbane Potion so that they could administer it to all that came in asking for it at the lowest price possible. His fee would depend upon the number of people...or werewolves, rather...that he had to brew the potion for, but he was really only making a small profit. Most of his asking price covered his supplies only, and Hermione knew that he was doing this for her.

He'd decided to teach her to brew it that weekend, however, and she couldn't blame him. With them both working on it, it would cut the brewing time in half. She looked up to watch him grading papers with a scowl on his face and smiled. That was her Severus.

Her admiration of her husband was interrupted by a soft, "hoot, hoot," so she rose to let the owl in. She started to take the letter, assuming that it was from Harry with an update, and was surprised that the owl flew directly to Severus.

"Who's that from? Harry?"

"No, Narcissa, confirming our dinner plans for tomorrow evening."

"Dinner plans? What dinner plans?"

Severus looked up from the letter and stared at his wife. "She asked us to dinner and I've accepted. Is that a problem? Had you already made other plans for us?"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, aggravated. "Well, you'll just have to send our apologies. I've not made any other plans, but I don't want to go."

"Hermione," Severus said patiently, "this is the Malfoys' proffered olive branch for the way they treated you at the wedding reception. To refuse it would be like a slap in the face."

"I have no problem with that. I've slapped one in the face before."

"I don't understand you! These are my friends! I want you to learn to, if not like one another, then at least try to get along."

Hermione walked to her husband's desk. She placed both hands on it and leaned forward. "Tell me, Severus. Has any of your *friends* ever told you about what happened when Harry, Ron, and I were captured and taken to their home?"

"No. I was only told that they'd held you there once, but I was not given any details."

"Let me enlighten you then. Harry and Ron were taken to a different place from me, which I learned later were the dungeons, where they'd found Luna, that goblin, Dean, and Mr. Olivander. While I was alone, Bellatrix Lestrange took great delight in holding me under the Cruciatus Curse until the boys got me out of there.

"Do you know what your *friends* did during that time? Nothing! They let that woman torture me! Lucius couldn't wait to contact that monster to let him know they had us!"

Severus sighed and rubbed his temples. "You've got to understand the amount of pressure and the difficult circumstances that they were in, Hermione. There was a war going on. In times such as those, people do what they have to in order to save their own."

"So you're saying you *condone* their actions! Or lack there of rather?"

"I'm saying that if I had a choice of cursing someone or possibly saving your life, I'd curse someone! Their lives were at stake!"

"Because of the choices they made! They chose to follow Voldemort!"

Severus winced when she'd said 'Voldemort' but didn't correct her. "As did I. Think for a moment. What if someone evil and extremely powerful told you that they'd kill you unless you performed certain tasks? Or better yet, that they'd torture or kill your child?"

"That's entirely different! The Lestranges didn't have any children! Besides, you're not like them. "

"No, they didn't, but the Malfoys do have a son. And, trust me, my dear, at one time I was very much like them. Never forget that."

"You're different!" she insisted. "I can't see you torturing or even allowing someone else to torture someone just to save yourself." She laughed bitterly. "I remember Harry telling me that you gave Ginny and Neville detention with *Hagrid* while you were the headmaster. So don't tell me that you're anything like them! Honestly!"

"No, not to save myself; I'll concede that. However, to save you or any child of ours? Most certainly. I'd do anything in my power to keep either of you from harm."

Hermione let out a deep breath, a warm feeling coming over her when he'd mentioned them having a child, even if it was hypothetical. "You really want to go? What if they treat me as they did before? You wouldn't abandon me this time, would you?"

"They won't. And I promise not to leave your side the entire night. We only have to go this once and that should suffice. What say you?"

"Okay... for you. But I'm telling you now, if Draco Malfoy or his little wife treat me as they did at their reception, I won't be held responsible for my actions. I can only take so much from him."

Severus chuckled. "All right, it's a deal." He rose from his chair and took her into his arms and kissed her. "Let's go seal it in a more enjoyable way."

"What do you have in mind?" she teased.

"Seeing if I can make you have three orgasms," he whispered suggestively in her ear.

"Now that's an offer I can't refuse," she said playfully as they hurried to their bedroom.

Hours later while Severus slept contentedly with his wife in his arms, he was suddenly awoken by her thrashing about. "What in the world?"

She was frantically moving her head from side to side, sweat rolling down the side of her face. "NO! No, no, no! Stop! Ahh!"

"Hermione! Hermione, wake up!" Severus said as he gently shook her.

She was crying in earnest now, screaming out in pain. Severus' chest tightened as he watched her, feeling helpless to alleviate her pain. He bent his head and kissed her lips gently, coaxing her to slowly awaken. "That's it, love. Come on, wake up now."

"S-Severus? What is it? Where am I?"

"Ssh, you're okay now. It was just a bad dream."

Hermione wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the back of her hands. "It must've been all that talk about Bellatrix, reminding me. It brought everything back."

"That's it. We're not going. I'll make my excuses to Narcissa."

"You'll do no such thing. I think you were right. These are your friends, and one night in their home won't kill me. It's not like I'll be cursed again."

"No, you wouldn't be. You can count on that. But still, if it affects you this deeply, perhaps we should meet them somewhere instead."

"Are you kidding me? Take away Narcissa Malfoy's chance to show off to me? She'd never forgive you. Besides, I'm made of stronger stuff than that. I'll be fine. I'm just a bit shaken from my nightmare, but I'm okay now. Sleepy, but okay."

"Come here," he said, and she settled back into his arms. "Rest now." As she drifted off, Severus wished he'd never accepted that blasted invitation. As it was, they'd just have to go there and leave as soon as they possibly could. He didn't want Hermione to suffer unnecessarily.

The next evening, Hermione stood in front of the mirror where she'd been the past thirty minutes. "Stop that," he snapped irritably. "You look absolutely fine!"

Hermione glanced down at the navy robes she'd rushed out to buy earlier that day against her husband's wishes. "You better believe that the Malfoy women will be thoroughly dressed up. I want to look the best that I can."

"You look lovely, Hermione, and if we don't leave now, we'll be late."

Taking a deep breath for courage, Hermione said, "Okay. I'm ready."

After they'd arrived and were seated around the table, Hermione began to relax. So far, everyone had seemed cordial to her. She had noticed Pansy and Narcissa exchange knowing glances every so often, but had decided to ignore it. She had no idea what they were on about, but she felt confident as long as Severus was with her.

Suddenly, their dinner was interrupted by a loud but familiar voice. "Cissy?"

"Oh, Madeleine! What a pleasant surprise!" Narcissa exclaimed as if she'd had no idea her friend would be there.

Madeleine looked uncertain. "Oh, um, sorry to interrupt your dinner party. Don't you remember? I told you that I might stop in and visit you this weekend?"

"Oh, was that *this* weekend? I don't know where my mind is! But it's quite all right, isn't it, everyone?" Narcissa looked at everyone around the table. "We've just barely started really. Have a seat and join us. Severus? Move down a bit so that Madeleine can sit."

Severus sat still for so long looking at Narcissa that everyone in the room was becoming uncomfortable. Finally, Madeleine broke the silence.

"Well, I've brought someone with me. That isn't a problem, is it?"

"No, of course not," Lucius said, cutting off his wife before she could object. He'd had no idea that she'd been expecting her friend that weekend. *Little minx.*

"Great. Let me go and get him. He's waiting in the study because I wasn't sure if it was still okay for us to drop by."

"You're always welcome here," Lucius assured.

Once she left the room, Severus demanded, "What's the meaning of this, Cissy?"

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked innocently.

"You know damned well what I mean!"

"Here now, Severus. That'll do. I've warned you once before about bellowing at my wife!"

"Then tell your meddlesome wife to *stay out of my affairs!* This is uncalled for!"

Hermione placed a hand on Severus' arm, and he immediately calmed. "Severus, don't. Please. It's fine."

"It most certainly is not fine. She..."

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet William," Madeleine said proudly, and Hermione beamed at the couple.

"William?" Narcissa asked, chagrined. "Why, you never said a word!"

"Because I wanted to surprise you." Madeleine held out her ring finger. "We're engaged!"

"You've become engaged since the wedding?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Well, we've been seeing one another off and on for a year, but nothing ever got serious between us until I came and spent the weekend here. He realized then that he couldn't live without me, and we made it official!" she told them, bursting with happiness.

"How wonderfully romantic!" Hermione said.

"Oh, it was," William agreed. "I swept my Maddy off her feet, I did!"

"Well, have a seat," Pansy said, and everyone made room while the house-elf brought out extra plates.

Hermione and Madeleine soon became engaged in a conversation about Charms while William enjoyed a conversation with Draco about Quidditch.

Severus smirked at Narcissa. "Don't pout, Cissy," he told her. "It's very unbecoming."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," she huffed.

"Oh, but you do, and so do I. You might as well give it up," Severus told her in hushed tones. "Hermione is here to stay."

Lucius studied Severus for a moment and then looked about the table to make sure everyone else was otherwise engaged. "But, Severus, Cissy and I thought that you were looking forward for this marriage to end."

"How could you after my last visit here?"

"Well, we understood that while you were married you were going to remain devoted, but what about when your year is up? Won't she be leaving and going back to her own place? Won't the marriage be dissolved?"

"Absolutely not!" Severus yelled, causing everyone at the table to stop talking and look at him.

"Severus?" Hermione asked questioningly. "All right?"

"I will be once I straighten this one thing out, love." He turned to his hosts and looked them both in the eyes, and then looked at Draco and Pansy in turn. "I would like a word in the study, if you wouldn't mind." Turning to his wife, he said, "Hermione, I'll be right back. Will you be all right?"

"Yes," she told him, confused. "Will you?"

"Yes. I won't be long." He nodded towards the other two guests and followed the Malfoys to the study.

Once they were in the study, Severus told them, "Hermione and I are married, and once our year is up, we shall remain married. If this is something that you can't handle or get used to, inform me now. I would hate to dissolve our friendship, but I cannot allow this type of behavior towards my wife any longer."

"You mean to say that you would choose her over us?" Lucius asked, shocked.

"Absolutely. She is my wife. Would you choose me over Cissy?"

"Well, that's not a good comparison, Severus!" Draco said. "My parents...and Pans and I, for that matter...are in love. Can you claim the same?"

"What I claim regarding my wife is not your business. You only need to know that we'll be remaining married. Now, can you deal with that and behave accordingly?"

"If that's what you wish," Narcissa said.

"It's what I wish," Severus assured. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to gather my wife and take her home. Perhaps next time we dine together, we can meet in a restaurant?"

"As you please," Narcissa said, saddened that he was leaving. "You don't really have to go now, do you?"

"Yes, I think we've all had enough tonight." Turning to Lucius, he said, "I expect our lunch later this week is still on?"

"Certainly," he said. "I'm looking forward to it."

Severus nodded. "Until then."

After he and Hermione left and the other guests were seen to, Lucius lay sated in his wife's arms. "Well, we never would've chosen her for Severus, but he truly seems to care for the little Mudblood."

"Yes, he does. Just like that other one. What was her name? Tulip?"

"Lily," he told her. "Yes, like Lily, but... more. He never chose her over his friends. He did join with us after all."

"True." Narcissa sighed. "I suppose I shall have to make some sort of effort with the girl."

Lucius chuckled, rolling on top of his wife. "I think you'll survive it."

Her eyes widened when she felt his arousal on her belly. "Again?" He nodded. "True, I may survive her, but I'm not sure I'll survive you!" she teased as he slipped inside of her.

"You've done a bang up job of it so far, my dearest," he told her as he rocked them both to bliss.

A/N: Well, this fic is wrapping up, I say. One more chapter to go, which I hope to have sent to my beta by the weekend!

Epilogue

Chapter 17 of 17

And how do our couples end their year together?

Disclaimer: All things Harry Potter belong to JKR.

A/N: Many thanks to my awesome beta, Southern_Witch_69!



George stood around, gazing at all of the guests mingling in the ballroom. His mum had insisted on throwing an anniversary bash, guiltig his brother and sister into it by claiming she'd not gotten to have proper weddings or receptions, so the least they could do was allow her this. They'd both given in to her, albeit reluctantly. Then somehow, she'd suckered the Snapes into her scheme as well.

Kingsley had allowed them to have the party at the Ministry's ballroom, and for that, George had been thankful, even if Molly had been slow to agree. Kingsley talked her into it by saying that he'd married all three couples, not to mention the Potters the month before, and it would be his pleasure to have the bash there. George believed what made her relent was that the Minister told her that with Arthur working there, it was perfectly fine. The Burrow was just too small for a party of this size, no matter how much magic was used to alter it.

George glanced at Angelina, speaking with Hermione, Luna, and Ginny, and smiled fondly, remembering their wedding. His wife had let his mum make a lot of the decisions concerning their wedding, which only endeared her to him more. George shook his head and decided to do some mingling himself.

He stopped at the first couple he came across, which was Dean Thomas and some girl named Phoebe. "...Can't believe that they've lasted *this* long," she was telling Dean. "Oliver always was a ladies man, and that girl he's married to doesn't look like the type that would know how to hang on to a man."

Oi! That's my sister you're talking about

"Actually, Phoebe, Ginny's a great person. I've dated her meself, and I can vouch that she knows how to hang on to a man."

"Humph! If she's so great, then why aren't you still with her? Why did you break things off with her then?"

"I didn't. She broke things off with me to be with Harry."

Before she could answer, George stuck out his hand. He didn't want to hear her say anything else negative about Gin. "George Weasley at your service. How do you do?"

"George!" Dean said, obviously pleased to see the prankster. "How are you, mate? It's been awhile!" Turning to Phoebe, he said, "Let me introduce you to George. He's Ginny's brother. But don't let his wholesome look fool you...never take anything he offers you."

Phoebe looked him up and down as if she found him lacking, but George knew it was because of whom his sister was. "Charmed, I'm sure."

"Not exactly," he said dryly.

Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted by a few loud voices on the other side of the room. "You say it was Dean?" That sounded like Harry to George, and he looked at Dean and raised an eyebrow, but Dean only shrugged.

Wanting to find out what the commotion was about, he casually walked over to the group of men to see what they were talking about. "Right," Ron was telling Harry. "Luna

told me he was her first when I asked her that night we had to spend in Azkaban."

George quickly glanced at his sister-in-law, who was ignoring those around her in favor of admiring the wedding band that his dim-witted brother had finally gotten around to giving her. Ron had told him the day before at work that he wanted to leave early and purchase one for her, but as he looked at his brother's left ring finger, it looked as if he'd gotten them a matching set. George grinned at the dreamy look on Luna's face, but quickly turned his attention back to the conversation the men were having.

"Odd," Harry was saying, "Cho told me that Dean, not Cedric as I'd believed, was her first."

"You know," Ron continued, "he was Lavender's first, too, come to think of it. Man, what is he, the stud of Hogwarts? Wonder if he's ever been with Hermione?"

"Oh, I can answer that," Snape told them smugly. "My wife was untouched when we were married."

Ron turned to Snape and scowled, but was too afraid to say anything in response.

"Hey, what are you lot over here scowling about?" Ginny asked as she and her husband, along with Hermione and the dreamy Luna, approached the group. George could tell she was being cautious around Harry. They'd become hesitant friends, but at times it was still hard for the two of them to be in the same room.

"Talking about Dean Thomas and his many conquests," Ron answered.

"You told your brother that you slept with Dean?" Oliver asked, astonished.

"What? What did you say? Not you, too, Ginny?" Ron demanded.

"Gin?" Harry questioned. "You've been intimate with Dean?"

George snickered as his sister gave her husband a very nasty look. "Once! It was only the one time! And no," she turned to Ron, "*did not* tell my brother!"

"Sorry, love. The way he was going on, I just assumed that he knew."

George briefly wondered if he should tell them all that Dean had been Angelina's first... No, definitely not.

He looked over at Snape and Hermione then. He was standing extremely close to his wife with his hand possessively low on her back while whispering something into her ear that had her smiling knowingly.

They were ignoring the little Dean Thomas drama and seemed to be in a world of their own. It amazed George to see the two of them so obviously in love. He shook his head.

When he heard his sister gasp, he quickly looked in the direction she was, trying to figure out what was the matter. Did seeing Dean still bother her?

"Oliver! It's Phoebe!" She grabbed her husband's arm and pointed. "Look! She's with Dean!"

"I'll be buggered!" Oliver said, surprised. "I didn't know they even knew each other. Stop staring, they're coming this way."

"Ollie! How are you, darling?" Phoebe asked as she kissed his cheek, lingering a little longer than was polite.

George covered his grin with his hand at his sister's disgruntled look.

"Fine, just fine. And you?" he asked politely.

"Oh, I'm just dandy!" she exclaimed as she held out her left hand and flashed a diamond ring.

"Oh!" Luna said, obviously oblivious to the tension around her. "How lovely! A diamond. I've just gotten a wedding band myself," she told Phoebe proudly.

"Did you show it to Stanly?" Ron asked his wife.

"Honestly, Ron!" Luna admonished, but was apparently pleased with the question.

"Where did the two of you meet?" Ginny asked.

"When did you shag Ginny?" Harry asked at the exact same time, and an awkward silence followed.

George didn't want the good mood to disappear, so he asked Harry, "When is the baby due, Harry?"

Harry smiled a truly contented smile and told George, "Three months." He looked at his wife lovingly, who was walking towards him. "I can hardly wait."

As they'd been talking, the other three couples gathered around so that they were standing in a crude circle. Angelina walked up to her husband, slipped her arm through his and laid her head on her shoulder.

"What about the rest of you?" George asked. "Any baby plans in the works?"

"George!" Angelina reprimanded. "That's certainly none of your business!"

"What about you?" Snape asked. "The two of you have been married much longer than we have, and yet I see no offspring of yours. Thank Merlin," he whispered, but everyone heard him.

George inclined his head. "Touché, Snape. Touché. I have to say, it doesn't seem like any of you are in any hurry to end your marriages now that your year is up. Going to stay in wedded bliss, are you?"

This time, Angelina held her tongue, wanting to hear the answer to that question George knew. She was as big a gossip as his mum was, and the two of them together could go on for hours.

"Well, we're absolutely staying together," Luna said proudly. "I've never been so happy."

Ron hugged his wife close to him. "Without a doubt."

Ginny and Oliver looked into each other's eyes. It was Oliver who answered George's question. "We're sticking it out. Besides," he teased, "she's too much of a hellion to let her loose on other unsuspecting blokes."

Phoebe, who was standing behind Oliver and Ginny with Dean, snorted. "More like you are."

The group seemed to ignore her, and all eyes landed on Severus and Hermione. "That question is quite obtuse, Weasley, as we are here...at our anniversary party...together. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'll take that as a yes, you're staying together," George affirmed, and Hermione laughed.

Just then the lights blinked off and on three times, and Arthur announced that it was time for the dancing to begin.

~*~

Harry took his rounded wife into his arms and sighed contentedly. He finally had the family he'd wanted, but with Cho, it was so much better. He loved her with all of his heart. "Tired, love?"

"A little," she admitted.

"Happy?" he asked.

"A lot!" she told him. "You?"

"Never been happier. I think that we owe Ginny a huge thanks."

"Oh?"

"Yes. If she'd never done that charm, I never would've come to Italy and found you again." He leaned his forehead against hers. "You're everything to me, Cho. You and our baby."

She tightened her grip around his neck and laid her head on Harry's shoulder. "I can't imagine anyone more happier than I am at this moment."

Ginny sighed contentedly in her husband's arms. It was her favorite place to be. "If someone would've told me a year ago that I would be so happily married to you, I would have laughed in their face."

Oliver laughed. "I should be offended, but I know what you mean. I hadn't planned to get married for another ten years at least. But look at us now." He bent his head and gently kissed his wife.

"I won't say it's been easy, but it has been awesome being 'Mrs. Oliver Wood.' I've wondered if working together would be difficult for us, but it doesn't seem to be."

"No, it's not. I love watching you play." He leaned in and licked her neck. "It turns me on actually."

Ginny shivered. "If you don't stop that, we're going to have to find a loo quick," she teased. "I can't get enough of you it seems."

"Ginny!" Oliver groaned. "Telling me *that* does not make me want to stop! It makes me want to Apparate you home and bury myself in you."

"Oh, God!" Ginny looked around and found her mum deep in discussion with Narcissa Malfoy of all people. She knew that most of the Ministry employees had been invited, but she never dreamed that the Malfoys would actually come, even if they were good friends of the Snapes.

"Mum's occupied, let's slip out for a quickie and come back," she suggested.

"No," Oliver disagreed. "When I get you home, we're not coming back. I'm going to love you all night long."

"That's it!" she said, taking his hand and walking up to her dad. "Daddy, Oliver and I need to go. We've... er... got practice early in the morning."

Arthur turned to speak to his daughter and suddenly turned scarlet. "Oh, right. Too right. Wouldn't want to keep you." He patted Oliver on his back. "Good man. See you Sunday at dinner," he said and quickly walked away.

Giggling, Ginny called to her father, "Make our excuses to Mum!" Then turning to her husband, she whispered, "I think he's onto us."

"I don't doubt it. You have 'I want to shag my husband within an inch of his life' written all over your face," he informed her, and Ginny blushed, quickly glancing towards her father.

Arthur simply waved and kept going. Turning to her husband, Mrs. Wood asked, "Ready?"

"Words cannot describe how ready I am," he told her as he grabbed her hand, quickly led her outside, and Disapparated them both home.

Ron was holding Luna as close as he could while he buried his nose in her hair. They were truly a married couple now, in every sense of the word. Though he'd not told her, he was completely in love with his wife.

"Do you really like your ring, babe? If not, we can exchange them for another matching set."

Luna quickly jerked back. "We absolutely *will not* exchange these! They're even more special to me because you chose them! They're perfect." She snickered. "I can still see the look on your face from when you placed the ring on my finger and your mum's Howler burst into flames."

Ron smiled and pulled his wife back into his arms. "It must've been waiting for me to finally show my true feelings for you. I can't believe how stubborn I acted those first few months." He shook his head. "I'm still sorry, Luna."

"Ssh," she told him as she placed a finger on his lips. "It's the past, and truly, your actions weren't wholly unwarranted. You were honestly wronged, even though it's all turned out for the best," she teased.

"Oh, it's definitely turned out for the best." Ron took a deep breath. "I love you, Luna."

Luna looked up at him and stared into his eyes for what seemed like an eternity to Ron, and then she finally told him, "I love you, too. I've always loved you."

"I don't get that part," he admitted. "Why?"

Luna smiled. "Because I think you're brave, handsome, loyal, and you've a big heart. You've stood by Harry and Hermione all this time. Oh, I know the three of you have had your spats, but nothing ever kept you apart for long. Even now, though you're not as close as you used to be, you and Hermione still love and care for one another. All the qualities I admire and love."

Ron squeezed her. "I don't know what to say to that. I don't think I've ever been loved the way you love me, and it humbles me. I can't say that I've always loved you, but I do love you now."

"That's what counts," Luna said and stopped dancing to give her husband a kiss. And then she began humming *Weasley is our King*.

Severus held his wife possessively, already wishing that they could leave and spend the rest of their anniversary alone and...preferably...in bed.

"Having fun?" she asked.

"I'm having fun holding you," he conceded, "but I'd rather be engaged in more... pleasurable activities."

Hermione flushed, which pleased him. After everything he'd done with her and to her, she still flushed when he spoke suggestively to her. He made sure to do so at every opportunity.

"Perhaps we can leave early. Within the hour?"

"If you're asking me, I would go now."

"NO! We can't leave now. That would be rude."

"There's the wife I know and love. Always proper, aren't you?"

"Not always," she teased and then flushed even deeper. Then suddenly, she looked up at him. "Love?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "You sound surprised. You know that I love you."

"No, I didn't. I mean, well, you've never said that you do..."

"But I show you, don't I?"

"It's not the same," Hermione informed her husband. "It's very nice to hear the words...to know without a doubt."

"Well then, let me assure you that I do love you without a doubt."

Hermione beamed. "And I love you." She looked about the room. "Although I think that everyone in here is surprised that we're staying together."

"Hmm. Likely."

"I noticed you speaking with the Malfoys earlier. Everything all right there?"

"Perfectly fine. Actually, Narcissa was saying how she'd like to get to know you better and wondered if I thought you'd be amiable to having lunch with her."

"And what did you tell her?" Hermione demanded.

"That she could owl you later in the week. Whether you go or not is entirely up to you."

Hermione nodded, satisfied with his answer. "I'll think about it."

"What did you decide to do about that job promotion that was offered to you?"

"I'm going to take it, I believe. What do you think?"

"Again, it's entirely up to you, but I think taking it's a good decision. You'd be good at it, and it would challenge you the way you need to be challenged intellectually."

"Agreed. Say, what was Minerva doing taking all of those pictures? I can understand some, but she looked as if she was trying to capture the whole party on film. I haven't seen her take that many since Neville and Hannah's wedding."

"She'd promised Albus' portrait that she'd photograph as much as possible for him to see," Severus said, rolling his eyes.

Hermione said, "They've always supported our marriage. Too bad we couldn't bring him here enjoy things."

They danced a bit, enjoying the feeling of being in each other's arms when Severus told her, "You know, I believe you're right. People are staring at us as if surprised. What say you we give them something to be surprised about?"

"Well, that would depend on what you have in mind..."

"Oh, only this," he said as he twirled her away from him and then spun her back quickly, gathering her close in his arms.

Hermione was laughing until he bent her backwards over his arm, leaned in, and kissed her long and hard. Then she was breathless.

When he'd kissed her his fill, he glanced up and looked around the room. Most of the dancers had stopped dancing and were staring at them both, gobsmacked. Severus smirked.

"That concludes our entertainment portion for the evening," he told the room at large. "Now, we're off for some private entertainment."

Severus righted his flushed wife and led her none too discreetly to the door. Once they had their cloaks, he turned to face the party, bowing as he swept his wife out the door.

As soon as they were inside their quarters, Severus told his wife, "Our union may have begun as a Magical Betrothal, but I am very glad it's turned into a true marriage. Soul mates, indeed."

A/N: I hope you enjoyed my fic! Off to write another...