

Three Blooms in the Cauldron

by melusin

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place.
Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

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A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and help. Full acknowledgments at the end of the story.

Blinking against the sunlight, Hermione opened one eye and groaned. Nope, not her bed then. She moved her hand to push herself into a sitting position. The floor... somewhere...

'*Ohhh...God,*' she moaned, shielding her eyes. 'What the *hell* was in that punch?'

She pressed her temples with her fingers as the room lurched, struggling to remember the previous evening's events. There had been a party; she could remember that much... Ginny and Luna... 'Oh, my God.' Hermione pressed the palms of her hands to her head and turned it to the left, only to discover her friends passed out on the floor beside her. She remembered now. The explosion.

Gingerly, Hermione crawled towards the still forms of the other two girls, trying to avoid the green goo that was liberally splattered over the carpet...and the walls, the furniture and... she touched her hair, *ew*, them. *Please let them be alive. Please let them be okay... Please...*

Hermione reached one hand out towards Ginny's neck to check for a pulse, just as her red-headed friend twitched and opened her eyes. Hermione breathed a huge sigh of relief. She turned her attention to Luna, who snored on cue, but showed little sign of waking up just yet.

'Wha-what happened?' Ginny asked a little croakily.

'The cauldron exploded. Don't you remember?'

'Vaguely,' Ginny replied, grimacing as she shook a dead leg, trying to ease the pins and needles.

'All right... Let's recap...'

Unfortunately, it proved impossible to concentrate due to the unholy racket that was coming from the landing outside. Raised male voices were shouting angrily about something. Hermione palmed her wand, intent on casting a silencing charm.

'Open this door, at once! Hermione Granger, you've got some explaining to do.'

'Oh, dear,' said Ginny, recognising the voice. 'He doesn't sound very happy.'

'No,' Hermione agreed, wincing at the noise of fists banging on wood. 'I suppose we'd better let them in before they break the door down.'

Seconds later, two angry wizards were each waving a piece of parchment at Luna and Hermione respectively. A third just looked a little bemused.

'Hello, Draco,' said Luna, smoothing her robe down as she sat up. 'Where's Neville?'

Draco's face was purple with rage. 'What,' he said quietly through clenched teeth, 'is the meaning of *this*? He thrust the parchment under her nose.

Luna took the sheet off Draco, her eyes bulging even more than normal as she read it. 'It appears to be a betrothal contract,' she said eventually. 'For you and me.'

'Precisely,' said Draco, forcing a smile and showing an alarming amount of teeth. 'So, tell me, Lovegood: when, exactly, did I propose to you? Because I can't for the life of me remember.'

'You didn't,' Luna said matter-of-factly.

'EXACTLY,' Draco roared in her face. 'SO WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?'

The three girls groaned and clutched their heads. It was then that Hermione noticed Ron holding a similar piece of parchment and looking none too happy, either. 'Oh, God,' she said.

Ron scowled. 'Is that all you can say? You've somehow managed to ensnare me into a magically binding betrothal contract, and all you can say is "Oh, God"? That's very helpful, Hermione. Thanks for that.' He looked to Harry for support, but he only had eyes for Ginny.

'There was no need to do this, Gin.' Harry grinned sheepishly. 'I was going to ask you anyway, once all the fuss had died down about Voldemort and everything.'

Ginny smiled back adoringly.

Draco shuddered. 'Spare me, *please*.'

'All right,' said Hermione, still trying to kick her brain into gear. 'First of all, I'm going to take a headache potion, and then we are going to get to the bottom of this. Granted, we all had a bit too much to drink last night, but I can't imagine any of us being so stupid as to bind ourselves to you three. Something must have gone horribly wrong.'

'How convenient,' Ron scoffed. 'Really, Hermione, you expect me to believe that it wasn't deliberate? Lavender told me you might try something, but this...' he threw the parchment on the floor '... is taking the piss. How am I supposed to explain *that* to her?'

'You can tell that boyfriend-grabbing harpy whatever the hell you like,' she spat, glaring up at him. Hermione had recently found out the hard way that a week was a very long time in the life of a teenage boy, particularly one who was now a famous war hero and could have his pick of witches. She scrambled to her feet. 'Don't worry, *Won-Won*. I fully intend to find a way to reverse this spell as quickly as possible. You'll be back sucking Lav-Lav's face before you know it.' She turned to the girls, feeling quite ill. 'Do either of you have anything for a headache?'

Luna shook her head mournfully while Ginny rummaged in her sock drawer. 'Here,' she said, handing a phial to Hermione and another to Luna. She uncorked a third and downed it in one.

The world snapped back into focus as the potion took effect. 'Much better,' said Hermione briskly. 'Now, let's sort this mess out.'

~ * ~

The week before 'The Incident', as Hermione came to call it, had seen a whirl of parties to celebrate the end of the war. Those who had actually fought in the Great Battle, however, had not felt much like partying since they were the ones who had suffered the severest losses: friends, family, teachers... Despite the relief that victory brought, for them it was more a time of mourning than of celebration.

Hermione looked back on it as an almost surreal time, a mixed-up jumble of images: Harry returning from the dead, Neville cutting the head off Nagini. The Great Hall: the wounded, dead and dying. The portraits applauding Harry in the Headmaster's office, watching in amazement as Harry used the Elder Wand to put his old wand back together. She could, however, quite clearly remember wondering afterwards, as they descended the spiral staircase, if anyone really knew what the limits of magic actually were...or indeed, if there were any. It was a question she had still been pondering when the three of them entered the Great Hall to join the survivors. But then Ginny had run to Harry and thrown herself at him, clinging to him in her grief, and Ron had been gathered into the group that surrounded George and his mother, leaving Hermione standing on her own. At first, she had felt excluded, but it suddenly occurred to her that for the first time in many years, she was free. Voldemort was dead; Harry didn't need her anymore, and neither, apparently, did Ron. Quietly, she turned her back on the scene, deciding she needed to be somewhere she could grieve and reflect in peace.

'Tell them not to worry,' she said to Neville on the way out. 'If anyone asks, that is.'

The west coast of Ireland had seemed the obvious place to get away from it all...the childhood home of her mother was isolated and unoccupied. Although Hermione's grandparents had died when she was quite young, her mother had kept the house as a hideaway from the stress of her busy dental practice. Hermione stayed several days, enjoying the blissful solitude, only leaving her little haven when an owl arrived with news of Fred's funeral.

It was only then that the cost of the war really hit home, up close and personal. The sight of a devastated George Weasley standing by his twin brother's coffin was something Hermione would never forget, neither was the look on his mother's face. But George had a special surprise for his family. After the funeral, he presented Molly and Arthur with a portrait of Fred, which was immediately given pride of place over the mantelpiece in the Burrow.

'Right,' said Fred. 'That's enough wailing and gnashing of teeth. We won, didn't we? It's high time we had a party.'

'Well, all right,' Molly conceded, dabbing her eyes. 'But just a small celebration...Order members and close friends only.'

Fred winked at his brother. This would be the perfect opportunity for testing their new improved, virtually tasteless, Fix-O-Drink Inhibition Relaxant. All George had to do was slip it in the punchbowl, stand back and evaluate the results.

Glad to have something to occupy her mind, Molly threw herself into the preparations and cooked enough food to feed a small army. Hermione pitched in too, helping Ginny with the decorations and rearranging the furniture to accommodate the dancing on the afternoon before the party. Ron, Hermione couldn't help but notice, was conspicuous by his absence and had generally been acting rather strangely since her return. For some reason, while Harry had been relieved to see her home safe and sound, Ron seemed to be making every effort to avoid her. And, whenever Hermione tried to corner him, he would blush crimson and make some excuse about helping in the shop.

The party had been in full swing for a good couple of hours before Hermione had the sense to stop drinking the punch, but the sight of Minerva McGonagall letting her hair down and limbo dancing with Kingsley Shacklebolt had left her in no doubt that it had been spiked. And Ron had given her the slip...again.

'Have you seen your brother?' Hermione grabbed Ginny's elbow as she waltzed past with Harry. They looked at each other and shrugged.

'Hermione, I think you should know...'

'If you won't tell her, then I will,' shrieked an all too familiar voice.

Lavender? And why is she holding Ron's hand?

'Well, you see, Hermione, it's like this,' Ron began.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Lavender interrupted. 'I haven't got all night. The point is, Hermione, when you left Ron mourning for his brother to go swanning off God knows where, I was available. We got chatting and... well, we decided to give it another go.'

'I see,' said Hermione quietly.

Everyone within close range had the sense to back away...with the exception of Lavender. In the blink of an eye, Lavender's normally flawless complexion was covered in pus-filled boils that began to erupt everywhere and showed no sign of stopping anytime soon.

'You *bitch*,' Lavender screamed. 'Ron! Help me!'

But Ron was too busy clutching his groin, courtesy of the constricting hex Hermione had sent his way.

Ginny grabbed Hermione's raised wand arm before she could inflict any more damage and steered her towards the door. 'Come on,' she said. 'You need to cool down.' Ginny nodded to Luna, who picked up a bottle of Ogden's Old and followed her friends up the stairs.

'That brother of yours is an absolute fucking *bastard!*' Hermione screeched as soon as Ginny had closed the door to her bedroom.

'Well, not technically,' Ginny replied conjuring three tumblers. 'But, I understand the sentiment.'

Luna opened the bottle of firewhisky. 'Don't be too upset, Hermione,' she said. 'Ron wasn't really your type.'

Hermione sat down on the bed, rolled her eyes and held out her glass towards Luna. 'Really? So tell me, O Wise One, what *is* my type? I don't see a selection of eligible wizards queuing up outside the door awaiting my pleasure. Do you?'

Luna opened her mouth to reply, stopped, then said in a dreamy voice. 'There's someone for everyone.'

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. 'Whatever.' She was in no mood for platitudes.

'Luna's right,' Ginny said, sitting beside her. 'No, listen,' she added hastily when Hermione glared at her. 'Much as I love my brother, I never thought you two would make a go of it as a couple. You're too different. He needs... he needs encouragement, someone to tell him how wonderful he is on a daily basis...'

Hermione snorted and took a glug of whisky.

'...not someone who'll give him a row at the drop of a hat for not coming up to their exacting standards.' Ginny looked at her friend pointedly.

'If by that you mean I should behave like Lavender, calling him 'Won-Won', and not grimace every time he shovels food in his mouth like it's going out of fashion...'

'No, that's not what I mean, at all.' Ginny sighed. 'Look, Ron wants a replacement for Mum; it's as simple as that. Someone who'll always be there to make sure he's got clean socks and have supper on the table when he comes home from work. He loves kids almost as much as I do and wants a big family...and if his wife could find the time to discuss Quidditch tactics on top of all that, Ron would be set up for life. Now, be honest, Hermione. Is that the kind of life you want for yourself?'

Hermione shook her head slowly and held her glass out for a refill. No, it most definitely wasn't, but that didn't really make her feel any better. She had been eighteen before she'd had a proper boyfriend...eighteen! Even if he had been a two-timing *toe-rag* of a boyfriend. Hermione sincerely hoped she wouldn't have to wait another eighteen years before the next one came along.

She sighed. 'After all I did for him... All that bloody *camping*.'

Wisely, Luna and Ginny mumbled their sisterly sympathies, clinked glasses and agreed that all men were bastards.

'Not only that,' Hermione added, 'all wizards are bastards with wands.'

'Except Harry,' said Ginny.

Hermione considered this. 'Agreed.'

'And Neville,' Luna chimed in.

There was no arguing with that. 'True,' Hermione conceded. 'Neville is *awesome*. Who'd have thought he'd have the muscles to wield a sword like that, eh?'

Her two friends nodded enthusiastically, Neville's formerly hidden attributes were thoroughly analysed, and the three of them drank a toast to both their heroes' continuing good health.

On top of the punch they'd already drunk, it didn't take very much whisky for the girls to get rather mellow.

'Plenty more fish in the shee,' Hermione announced, reaching for the bottle. 'Lavendersh welcome to 'im. And I have to shay, Gin, that your dear bruzzer wasn't mush cop in bed.'

Ginny pulled a face and shook her head. 'No, no... don't want to hear that... Definitely not that... And... Hey, who've you got to compare him with anyway? Have you been doing it with someone else?'

'If you mean Harry, no.' Hermione shook her head vehemently. 'No, no, no. Definitely not. No.'

'Then how do you know?' Luna looked at her keenly.

'Dunno.' Hermione shrugged. 'But from what I've read...'

The other two girls keeled over, doubled up with laughter. 'Oh, Hermione,' Ginny gasped, 'you can't learn about *that* from a book!'

'You can learn *anything* from a book,' Hermione declared stubbornly. 'Even shex. Even how to find your perfec' wiz-zard...and keep him indef... indif... indil...for good.'

'Hermione,' Ginny said warningly, 'have you been pilfering number twelve's library again?'

Hermione looked shifty. 'Nooo...'

Ginny sighed. 'Hand it over.'

Hermione fumbled for her bag. Opening it, she put her whole arm inside and fished around until she felt what she was looking for. She extracted a small, black, leather-bound book and dropped it into Ginny's outstretched hand.

Ginny whistled through her teeth. "'Damelza Dalrymple's Fyndinge and Byndinge your Wizzyrd: A Witch's Guide to Love, Courtshyppe and Matrymonie.'" She looked inside the cover expecting to find a bookplate, but there was none. 'Where did you get this, Hermione? It's not from the Black's collection.'

'S'mine. I... um... picked it up in a bookshop... i' n'Ireland.'

Drawing her wand, Ginny cast some basic curse detection charms which Bill had taught her over the book. The result was negative. She flicked through the pages, perusing the spells in silence.

Luna, reading over Ginny's shoulder, murmured, 'I've never seen spells like these before.'

Ginny shook her head. 'Me, neither. I wonder if they work... I mean, look at this: "The Irresystible Aroma Elixyr"...judging by the ingredients, it would keep a Manticore at bay, not attract the man of your dreams. What do you think, Hermione?' Ginny turned to her friend. 'Hermione?'

But Hermione was flat on her back and fast asleep.

~ * ~

Hermione's nostrils twitched at the smell of something burning. She was awake in an instant, wand gripped in a slightly shaky hand. She blinked at the sight before her, wondering if she was still dreaming.

'Are you two mad?' she asked, staring at the bubbling cauldron on Ginny's dressing table. 'Are you trying to burn the house down, or something?'

Ginny turned around. 'Oh, good. You're awake. The next stage is a bit tricky.'

Feeling like a Niffler had been nesting in her mouth, Hermione conjured a glass of water and pushed herself off the bed. 'It's one o'clock in the morning! What the hell are you two doing?' She still felt a bit tipsy, but at least her tongue seemed to have returned to its normal size.

'Tell her, Luna,' Ginny said, stirring the cauldron. 'I'm counting.'

Luna held the book out so Hermione could read the potion they were brewing. 'We decided to find you a man... and to... er, push things along for ourselves.'

'What?'

Luna grinned at her friend's shocked expression. 'This book is amazing, Hermione. She was a genius, this Damelza... whoever she was. Look.' Luna pointed her wand at the top of the page.

'A Pairing-Plight Troth Charm...' Hermione read. 'What's that when it's at home, and why do you need to brew anything?'

'A-ha,' said Ginny, putting the stirring rod down. 'The Charm is actually the incantation that binds the Potion.'

'A Charm and a... potion.' The words 'wand-waving' and 'foolish' sprang readily to mind. 'Isn't that a *little* bit unconventional, not to mention, dangerous?'

'I told you she was a genius,' said Luna passing the book to Hermione. 'Don't worry. I've put a shielding charm up in the room. Now, have a read while I prepare the ingredients for the next stage.'

Hermione's eyes wandered from the book over to the bedside table. 'Where on earth did you get all this stuff?'

Luna picked up a silver knife. 'There's an all night apothecary's I know in Bristol. I Apparated there when you were sleeping. Oh, and seeing as I didn't know what flower you wanted, I bought a selection.'

'Flower,' Hermione repeated slowly. 'Right.' Hermione flopped back down on the bed and propped herself up against the headboard. She didn't really feel up to it, but seeing as Luna and Ginny had gone to all this trouble and were almost ready to progress to the third stage of the potion, she thought she should at least try to appear a little bit grateful. She pushed her hair off her face and began to read:

This charm moste potente will assuredly fynde,

The wizzyrd moste close to thy heart and thy mynde.

Hermione looked at the date on the title page. *1922? Is this woman for real?*'She continued reading.

Imagine the mage, let love be ignited,

In under a twelvemonth, thy troth will be plighted.

Hermione snorted and glanced up to check on the girls before reading the list of ingredients:

Sugar and spice and everything nice...What the... that's a bit general isn't it? Slugs and snails and... Oh, God...

'Luna, please don't tell me I have to drink that!'

'No,' Luna replied, 'you just have to dab some on the third finger of your left hand.'

Hermione got off the bed to inspect the cauldron. It seemed to be the desired sage green colour described in the book. 'So, how did you manage to get "Everything nice" into that small cauldron?'

'We improvised,' Ginny replied, adjusting the flame. 'We just added some of that nice perfume of yours.'

'What? Do you have any idea how much that stuff cost me?'

'It'll be worth it, Hermione,' Luna reassured her. 'You want a new man in your life, don't you?'

'Ye-es, but...'

'And we couldn't get any dog tails either. They were clean out. They're becoming quite rare, you know...since people have stopped docking them,' Luna added helpfully. 'So, we substituted Sweet Flag instead, which looks a bit similar...and it has the added advantage of being aphrodisiac, which is more than I can say for puppy tails.'

Hermione nodded. She couldn't fault Luna's logic on that one. 'So. What's next?'

'We each have to select a flower that represents our feelings at the moment,' Luna informed her. 'Ginny has already chosen a white rose for eternal love, and I think I'm going to go for a camellia.'

'For longing?' Hermione asked.

Luna nodded. 'Yes. Now it's your turn.'

'Just... one thing,' said Hermione, wagging her index finger. 'Is this legal? I mean, getting a man this way? It's a bit like the Imperius Curse, isn't it? And I for one don't want to end up in Azkaban.'

'No, no,' Ginny assured her. 'There's no compulsion. There has to be a mutual agreement...and plighting a troth only means giving a solemn promise. It's not like you have to marry him, or anything.'

'Well, that's all right then.' Hermione looked at the available choice of flowers. 'I've got no intention of getting married for a good few years yet, in any case. So, what do I have to do?'

'Try to choose with your heart,' Luna replied. 'Move your left hand over the flowers; close your eyes and think loving thoughts.'

Hermione did as she was told, although it was very difficult to think loving thoughts when she wanted to strangle Ron Weasley. She felt a warmth under her hand and stopped. She opened her eyes.

'Forget-me-nots?'

'Oh, good choice,' said Ginny. 'They signify memories and true love. How wonderful!'

'O-kay, now what happens?'

'Now we have to make up a verse which summarises the qualities we want in a man,' Luna replied. 'Then, we throw the flower into the cauldron while we think of bringing love into our lives.'

Poetry was not Hermione's strong suit. 'I'll have to think about that for a minute.'

'Fine,' said Ginny. 'I'll go first.' She picked up the rose and started to chant in a sing-song voice:

'My love and my soul-mate reveal unto me,

A champion, a knight, my husband-to-be.

A Witch Weekly pin-up, he couldn't be hotter,

Rich and endearing, in short, Harry Potter.'

Luna and Hermione laughed as Ginny threw the rose into the cauldron. The contents hissed and let off a pink vapour.

Ginny shrugged and giggled. 'I don't see the point in leaving it to chance. I know exactly what I want.' She nodded to Luna. 'Your turn.'

Luna picked up the camellia, screwed her eyes closed and began:

'A prince amongst wizards, noble and pure,

For House and his kin will hardship endure,

Heart of a dragon, masterful, strong,

Umm... and who'll... put up with my weirdness...'

She tossed the flower into the cauldron.

'Oh, Luna,' said Hermione, clutching her sides. 'Please, don't ever change.'

There was a sudden draught of air, and the three girls spun round as the door opened, but no one entered the room.

'Strange,' said Ginny, stepping outside and looking up and down the landing before closing the door again.

'Must have been the wind, I suppose... Oh, well...'

She turned to Hermione. 'Ready?'

Hermione nodded, turning back to the cauldron. 'I think so.'

She picked up a handful of forget-me-nots and closed her eyes:

'Brave as a lion with the heart of a lamb,

Willing to take me for all that I am.

A friend and a lover with a mind just as smart,

To love and to cherish 'til death do us part.'

Hermione threw her flowers into the mix.

'Hermione, that was lov...'

The rest of the sentence was drowned out by an almighty 'boom' as Hermione's world went black.

AN: I chose the following prompt:

7. Hermione, Ginny and Luna, sharing a girl moment, decide to cast a Pairing-Plight Troth Charm on themselves. (Each places in a cauldron one flower with sugar and spice and everything nice, and a snail and puppy-dog tail (could be a magical plant), and they each have to say a rhyme. Make it up; be silly and original to fit the girl that says it. Only the results don't come out as the girls expected. Who is now Betrothed magically to whom? How do the men react, especially since it's a MAGICAL BINDING? And just why is the Ministry so pleased?)

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

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They couldn't have been that careless, could they? Hermione stared at the book in horror.

'Well?' Ginny asked.

Slowly, Hermione turned towards her two friends. With the book floating open in front of her, she carefully peeled apart the two pages that had somehow stuck together. Luna and Ginny, now equally horrified, moved to stand either side of Hermione so they could see just how badly they had messed up. Dreading what she would find, Hermione quickly scanned over the pages they had missed:

... to show his heart is of pure intent,

And that he's not on mischief bent.

Ensure thy mage stays always true;

Etyrnal Lauelte is the Charm for you...

Hermione's mind was reeling as she tried to assess the damage and consider the implications, but Luna beat her to it.

'We've managed to combine a potion to find a man we'll want to give a solemn promise to with a Charm that ensures eternal loyalty and devotion. The flowers in combination symbolised longing, eternal and true love. Ginny was specific in her request; but I'm guessing that your verse ending with 'til death do us part,' somehow sealed the troth plighting...' She trailed off, staring into space.

Hermione nodded since she had been thinking along similar lines, had come to the same conclusion and was at a complete loss as to how to proceed. They had created what appeared to be a life-long, watertight, magically binding betrothal contract. This was a balls-up of epic proportions.

The boys had been silent up until this point, but now, sensing the scale of the disaster, they began to all talk at once:

'Doesn't change anything, Gin...'

'If you think I'm marrying you, you're even madder than you look...'

'I'll go all the way to the Wizengamot if I have to...'

They moved towards the girls. Harry reached for Ginny's hand; the other two tried to grab the book to examine the evidence with their own eyes.

'It wasn't a trick, Draco,' Luna pleaded. 'I wasn't even thinking of you.'

'That goes for me, too, Ron.' Hermione touched her ex's arm gently. Ron recoiled, throwing her hand off as if scalded. This hurt Hermione more than she was prepared to admit. 'Do you think, perhaps, your father could find a solution...?' But Ron wasn't looking at her. She followed his gaze to...

'Ginny?'

Hermione stared open mouthed as Ginny pouted and fluttered her eyelashes at Harry while lewdly running her tongue around her lips and thrusting her chest out.

'Oh, ye-sss, Gin. I love it when you do that.'

'Harry, mate, what do you think you're doing?'

'Gorgeous, isn't she?' Harry replied, rubbing his crotch and ogling Ginny. 'Sucks cock like a pro, too.'

'That's my *sister* you're talking about, you perve!'

Realising what was happening, Hermione moved quickly between Ginny and Harry to break their eye-contact. It seemed they had failed to take into account the aphrodisiacal nature of the Sweet Flag. If they couldn't control this side-effect, they'd be in big trouble. There had to be a way of neutralising it, but at the moment it was just another unwelcome complication.

'What...? Harry?'

'It's all right, Ginny.' Hermione grabbed Ginny's shoulders and attempted to reassure her. 'Try not to look directly at Harry, okay?'

'What the *hell* was that all about?' Draco had been watching the scene in dumb fascination and could no longer contain his curiosity.

Hermione turned to answer him only to find herself locking eyes with Ron. It suddenly seemed very hot in the room. Surely she didn't need to be wearing all these clothes? Hermione giggled at Ron's lustful expression as she undid the fastenings on her robe.

'Like what you see, Ronniekins?'

'Yeah,' Ron replied. 'Got to hand it to you, Hermione. Those tits make Lavender's look like two eggs in a handkerchief.'

'RON!'

He ignored his sister and leered at Hermione. 'Been missing Mr Porky, have you?'

Fortunately, Hermione was spared the embarrassment of having to answer the question as Ginny chose that moment to give her a sharp slap across the face.

'Ow.' Hermione shook herself, noticed she was showing rather a lot more cleavage than she would have liked and quickly covered herself up. 'Thanks for that, Ginny.'

'Any time.'

'At the risk of repeating myself,' drawled a bored voice, 'would one of you morons explain to me what the *fuck* is going on?'

'It's the green goo.' All eyes turned to Luna. 'We've all either got some on ourselves or touched someone who has.'

'Luna,' Hermione warned. 'Don't look at Malfoy.'

But it was no good. Luna had already hitched her robe up past her knees. 'Draco,' she whispered huskily, 'would you like to see my fa...'

'NO! Put it away, Lovegood, for God's sake!'

'Hmm...' Hermione chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully as Ginny went to Luna's rescue. 'You don't seem to be affected, Malfoy, even though you have some of the potion on your sleeve, I notice. Why is that...?'

Draco shrugged. 'No idea.'

'Might be nothing... Then again... it might provide a clue that could get us all out of this sorry mess.'

Harry and Ron looked at him quizzically.

Draco stared back. 'What?'

The boys said nothing.

'All right, all right.' Draco sighed and threw his hands up in defeat. 'I'm gay. Satisfied?'

Harry and Ron took an involuntary step backwards.

'Told you,' Ron said under his breath. 'That's ten Galleons you owe me.'

Draco clenched his fists in fury. 'That is *it!* I've had it up to *here* with you lot.' He threw open the door. 'You two can carry on making goo-goo eyes and playing pocket billiards for the rest of your lives for all I care. I'm going to see my father. He's going to have something to say about this.' He turned to Luna, shielding his face from her. 'I'd never thought I'd say this, Lovegood, but you're the sanest person in the room. Perhaps you can keep your *friends* from mauling each other long enough to break that love/lust... *thing* before I see you again. I do not want a repeat performance of-of... *that!*' Pulling his cloak around him, he nodded curtly at Hermione and Ginny before flouncing out of the room.

'Good luck, Draco,' Luna called after him. 'Tell your father I don't want to marry you, either.'

~ * ~

Nervously, the house-elf poured the vintage port from the decanter under the critical eye of his master, but for once, Lucius Malfoy's attention was elsewhere. He had listened to his son and heir's tale of woe with a growing sense of incredulity, and once he had got over the initial shock, a keen ear for the potentially advantageous political, not to mention personal, opportunity it afforded. He tapped an immaculately manicured forefinger thoughtfully against his lips. Yes, it would pay dividends in spades if he played his cards right. But now Draco was looking at him in that annoying way he had when things went tits up and dear old Dad was expected to pluck his trophies out of the fire. Well, not this time.

'I have no objection to the match,' Lucius said after a long silence.

Whatever Draco had been expecting his father to say, that was definitely not it.

'You WHAT?'

Ignoring his son's outburst, Lucius picked up his wine glass by the stem and examined the purpley-red colour of its contents in the candlelight. Perfect. Unhurriedly, he took a sip, savouring the rich taste on his tongue and sighed in pleasure. 'Draco, it has not escaped my attention that you have yet to show the slightest interest in the fair sex.'

'Father, I've been rather busy this past year, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Lucius' upper lip curled slightly. 'That is beside the point. I have long suspected that there is a... how can I put this delicately... a touch of the lavender about you, Draco...and I don't mind that...'

'You don't? I mean...'

Smiling at his son's unintentional confession, Lucius dismissed the house-elf. 'You wouldn't be the first and now, thanks to this contract, I am assured you won't be the last Malfoy to be that way inclined.'

Draco's heart sank. 'You want me to produce an heir.'

'Of course...and a spare if at all possible. And I'm afraid you'll need a witch to do that.' Lucius leaned forward in his chair. 'Miss Lovegood is a pureblood...'

'She's bonkers.'

Lucius tutted. 'That is no way to talk about the future Mrs Malfoy. Anyway, eccentricity is to be expected in a family such as ours...if not encouraged.'

'Don't you think Aunt Bella was enough of an 'eccentric' for this family for a generation or ten?'

'Bellatrix was a member of your mother's family, Draco. Nothing to do with us.' Lucius took another sip of port. 'Now, to business. What do the other couples embroiled in this... fiasco intend doing about it?'

Draco shrugged. 'Potter and Ginevra Weasley are going along with it, but her brother and Granger will probably oppose it. Why?'

'I see. Interesting...' Lucius' mind went into overdrive. 'No doubt Arthur will stick his two Sickles in... Well, we can't allow that to happen. I won't let old Xenophilius use it as a precedent to ruin my son's happiness...or my chances of having a grandson or two, come to that.'

'Sorry, Father, you've lost me.'

Sighing, Lucius sat back in his chair and briefly closed his eyes. Why did he always have to spell things out? 'I backed the wrong horse, Draco. The fortunes of this family are at an all time low; the Dark Lord is no more, and we are in a vulnerable position. We may expect a visit from the Aurors at any time, despite your mother's involvement in saving Potter's life...' He paused. 'That said, the situation is not completely unsalvageable. I still have money tucked away, debts to call in...even now, I am not without influence.' Lucius took another sip of his port before continuing. 'This is a time to retrench, my boy: take stock, lick our wounds, swallow our pride and make new alliances...'

Draco pointed his wand at the firewhisky decanter and helped himself to a large one. He could feel a headache coming on. 'And me getting married would be one way of doing that?'

'Quite.' Relieved that his plan was not being met with outright opposition, Lucius refrained from commenting on the plebeian way his son was knocking back his best whisky. 'Marriage is about founding dynasties...forging bonds of blood between families... consolidating wealth, social status and so forth. Did you think all of this...' he waved an elegant hand airily '... was a result of generations of Malfoys following their hearts?'

Draco shook his head. 'No. Of course not. But...'

'But nothing.' Lucius got up and refilled his glass the old-fashioned way. Port this good needed to be treated with respect. 'Love matches are for Muggles...and Mudbloods. It is not, nor ever has been, our way.'

'I know...' Draco stared into the bottom of his glass. 'I know... So... How did you feel when your marriage was arranged?'

'Resentful at first, certainly,' Lucius admitted, carefully replacing the stopper in the decanter. 'But while it is true that your mother and I were not romantically in love, I have come to both admire and respect her...in fact, I am inordinately fond of her, and there is no reason why the same could not be true for you and your wife, given time.'

Draco snorted.

'Draco,' Lucius sighed as he turned to face his son, 'your life will be relatively unaffected. You would still be able to have your lovers...this contract only enforces a bond of fidelity on the witch. You may do as you please...'

'Yes, but Luna Lovegood? What possible advantage is there in marrying her?'

A wicked smile graced Lucius' lips. 'Miss Lovegood's father, as you know, is the editor of a scurrilous rag which is doing its level best to send me to Azkaban for being a Death Eater. I think it is high time there was a change in editorial policy, don't you?' He watched Draco's face as realisation finally dawned.

'Oh...'

'You must understand, Draco,' Lucius' voice dropped to a whisper, 'that I am prepared to move heaven and earth to restore the reputation and position of this family in pureblood society. All I am asking from you is that you marry...that your betrothed is a friend of Potter is an added bonus.'

'You're not going to ask me to make friends with him as well, are you?'

'Have you not listened to a word I've said?' Lucius hissed. 'We have to make 'friends' with the winning side...in as much as it suits our purposes, anyway.'

'Yes, I was listening,' Draco replied. 'And I understood you perfectly. I have to bed a witch, produce an heir and suck up to Harry bloody Potter!'

'Good,' said Lucius, choosing to ignore the anger in his son's voice. 'I'm glad to hear it. Now, what else was there? Oh, yes. Remember also that, as the injured party in this affair, you will be able to ensure the terms of the marriage are favourable to us. Naturally, you will bring your bride here after the wedding...where she will set up home. Perhaps this is as good an excuse as any to redecorate the East Wing?'

'Father, I hate to point out the basic flaw in your little scheme, but before you incarcerate me with Loony Lovegood in the East Wing, there is still the small fact that I don't like witches. I can't, you know... *do it with... girls.*'

'A minor detail, dear boy.' Lucius chuckled. 'It's nothing that some first class pornography and an erection potion can't sort out before you have to do the deed... Don't look so shocked. How do you think you were conceived?'

~ * ~

'Thank you for seeing me, Kingsley...Minister. I-oh, dear...' Arthur stared at the mountain of paperwork on the Minister of Magic's desk. 'I'm sorry. I can see you're really busy...'

'Not at all, not at all,' Kingsley Shacklebolt replied. 'I'm just sorting out some of the junk left by my er... predecessor.' Kingsley indicated a chair that was relatively free of clutter. 'Please. Sit. What can I do for you?'

Arthur moved the chair closer to the Minister's desk and sat down. 'It's a family matter. Ron and Hermione...'

'Splendid! And how are the happy couple?' Kingsley beamed.

'Well, that's just it. They're...'

'Just what the country needs,' Kingsley interrupted. 'What better way to cheer us all up after a war than the weddings of Harry Potter and his friends. I couldn't be more pleased for you all.'

'Well, I'm afraid there's a bit of a problem.' Arthur tried again. 'While Harry and Ginny are very keen on the idea, Ron and Hermione can barely stand to be in the same room as each other.'

'Cold feet, eh?' Kingsley pointed his wand at a pile of parchment. '*Incendio!*'

'I'm afraid it's much more serious than that,' Arthur replied, brushing the ashes off the sleeve of his robe. 'My son is in love with someone else and...this being a magical engagement, as you know...is unable to break his ties with Hermione. I was wondering if there was any chance that you might...'

Kingsley slowly shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Arthur. I've just had to turn down a similar request from Xeno Lovegood.' He picked up his quill, put his name to a piece of parchment and threw it into the out tray. 'You see,' he continued, 'I would have to involve the Wizengamot in order to annul those contracts, and they're at full stretch prosecuting war criminals...and dealing with people seeking restitution from the atrocities committed by Voldemort and the Death Eaters. I can't trouble them with something as trivial as this...it would look like favouritism towards an old friend. And as I have just taken office...'

Arthur sighed and scratched his head. 'I understand, and I'm sorry to have to ask, but after all they did, all the sacrifices they made, surely they deserve some personal happiness?'

Kingsley appeared to consider this. 'But from what I understood, young Ronald and Hermione Granger were virtually engaged, anyway. Perhaps, if they could be persuaded to sit down and discuss it, they might come round. You know what teenagers are like, falling in and out of love every five minutes.'

'It seems they may have no other option.' Arthur shook his head sadly. 'You were my last hope.'

'I wish I could help you, I really do,' Kingsley said, pulling another stack of old documents out of a drawer. 'But even if I did bring the case before the Wizengamot, have you thought about the possibility that it might prosecute Ginny and her friends for entrapment...you know how contrary that lot can be when they feel like it. They could end up even worse off.'

'No, I hadn't thought of that,' Arthur conceded. 'And of course, you're right. And the press would have a field day.'

'That's very likely.' Kingsley coughed. 'Talking of which... There is one other, er... small matter I would like to discuss with you before you go.' He handed Arthur a copy of the latest edition of *Witch Weekly*.

'Ah.' Arthur glanced at the cover and read: "'What First Attracted Me To The Millionaire Harry Potter: Ginevra Weasley Tells All".'

'No, no, not that,' said Kingsley, waving his hand impatiently. 'Further down.'

Arthur tried again. "'Hermione Granger: The Plight Of House-Elves And Other Enslaved Magical Beings. A Rita Skeeter Exclusive"?'

'Yes, that's the one.' Kingsley steepled his fingers and leant his elbows on the desk. 'This is rather a... delicate situation,' he began. 'Now, while Hermione is to be applauded for her, how shall I put it, revolutionary zeal, in reality the wizarding world would be plunged into financial chaos if we were to release the elves from their bondage right now. And, more importantly, such a move would interfere with my mission to heal the rifts between the various factions of wizarding society. To put it bluntly, Arthur, we cannot afford to further alienate the old pureblood families...we need their backing and support in order to build a stable future for us all.'

'And... what are you expecting me to do about it?'

Kingsley shrugged. 'She will be your daughter-in-law... and I'm afraid, it might reflect badly on you...' He stared at an interesting stain on the carpet.

'I see,' said Arthur. 'And... I wonder... Would my recent promotion be affected if I did not dissuade her?'

Kingsley couldn't look him in the eye. 'I am advising you as a friend to be careful. Your entire family distinguished themselves with honour during the war, and it is time for you all to reap the rewards for your bravery and loyalty. Don't wreck it.'

Staring incredulously at his old friend, Arthur got to his feet. 'It seems you have what it takes to be a fine politician, *Minister*.' He bowed stiffly. 'Thank you for your time.'

Feeling lower than a Flobberworm, Kingsley watched his old friend leave his office. Arthur did not look back. 'I suppose you heard all that, Malfoy?'

'You handled that very well, Minister,' Lucius replied, emerging from an adjoining room.

'That was probably one of the meanest things I've ever had to do in my life.'

'What nonsense.' Lucius walked around the desk and sat down in the seat recently vacated by Arthur. 'You acted for the greater good, putting the country before personal attachments.'

'Your greater good, you mean,' Kingsley retorted. 'Don't let's beat about the bush.' He slumped back in his chair, sighing heavily. 'Those poor young people...I've just condemned two war heroes to a loveless marriage. They deserve better than that...much better.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself. They'll soon get used to the idea once they realise they have no alternative. And just think, the public will go wild when the arrangements are formally announced...it will be like a double Royal wedding.' Lucius wagged a finger. 'You must use the opportunity for all it's worth...be sure to announce any tough measures you have in store at the same time...that way, they will get lost in all that warmth and good will.'

'Tough measures?' Kingsley repeated. 'What tough measures? I've done all you asked, Malfoy. Everything recorded in the Ministry regarding your erstwhile... activities has been destroyed...and Arthur Weasley knows where his bread's buttered as far as the house-elf issue is concerned. I assure you, nothing will be done to free the elves while I am in office. So, what else are you after?'

'Minister, you wound me,' Lucius mocked, putting his hand over his heart. 'Like you, I am only interested in what is best for wizardkind in this country.'

Kingsley held out his hand. 'Then give me the negatives.'

'As soon as I am assured that my family will be immune from prosecution, I shall deliver them personally.' Lucius rose gracefully from his seat. 'But now you must excuse me. As much as I've enjoyed our little chat, I have a luncheon engagement with the Chief Mugwump elect, and it would not do to keep him waiting. Good Day, Minister.'

Kingsley walked Lucius to the door but did not offer him his hand. Once the door had closed, he leant against the doorframe, banged his fist on the wood and let out a small grunt of frustration. 'The more things change, the more they bloody well stay the same.'

It wasn't meant to be like this. He was supposed to be a new broom, and putting that slippery bastard in chains had been high on his list of priorities. *Imperius Curse, my arse*. It was all too blatantly obvious that Voldemort could never have risen to a position of power without the backing of families like the Malfoys. The man had blood on his hands.

But Kingsley still had a job to do, and as much as it pained him, he would have to let Malfoy slip through the net in order to do it. Grimacing, he returned to his desk, took out the envelope from the top drawer and shook out its contents. The photographs were totally innocent: just him and Minerva McGonagall on the floor in the Burrow laughing...even if Minerva was showing rather a lot of tartan underwear. But Malfoy was right. Somehow, he didn't think 'We were only limbo dancing' would be the headline on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* if Rita Skeeter ever got hold of them. It would more likely be 'Sordid Affair at Ottery St Catchpole: Minister of Magic and Hogwarts' Headmistress in drunken orgy shock'. Angrily, he drew his wand and blasted the photographs to bits.

No, being in Lucius Malfoy's pocket was definitely not the way Kingsley Shacklebolt had intended to begin his tenure as Minister for Magic.

~ * ~

Molly Weasley was secretly elated, despite the glum faces around her kitchen table. Two good matches. She tried her best not to smile, but her daughter had snagged the most eligible bachelor in wizarding Britain, and she couldn't be happier for her. Yes, her Ginny was set up for life: she'd never have to scrimp and save; her children would never have to make do with hand-me-downs. And as for Ron, well... Hermione was good for him, whatever his feelings for her at the moment...and that Lavender had been far too flashy for her liking. Her youngest boy had always been lacking in self-confidence and in need of constant encouragement. His wife would have to be someone who would give him a bit of a push from time to time, otherwise he'd never make anything of himself in the world...and Hermione was more than capable of doing just that. Molly gazed affectionately at her prospective daughter-in-law. True, she could be a bit opinionated and spent far too much time with her nose in a book than was healthy for a girl of her age, but once the children started arriving, she'd be cured of that. Grandchildren. It was all Molly could do not to rub her hands in glee.

'Would any of you like some cake?' she asked.

They all shook their heads. Now, that was worrying. Ron was not one to turn down chocolate cake...and neither was Hermione, come to that. Molly decided not to push it; Arthur would be home soon. Then they could start making wedding plans.

Hermione stared at the piece of parchment that was hanging over her future like the Sword of Damocles, vainly hoping that some loophole would magically reveal itself. 'You know,' she muttered, not looking up, 'in the Muggle world, it takes two people to enter into a contract to make it legally binding. Neither of us signed this thing. Why

should we have to abide by it?' She grabbed the offending document, tore it up and threw the scraps into the air. The pieces circled around her head for a moment before reassembling themselves. Restored to its former state, the contract floated back down to the table.

'Because,' Molly replied, pouring the tea, 'in the wizarding world, a magically created contract is just that. You've bound yourself to Ron for life...unless, of course, the Wizengamot decrees otherwise. Now, dear, are you sure you wouldn't like some cake?'

'You had to go and mention death in your stupid rhyme, didn't you?' It was the first complete sentence Ron had spoken to Hermione since The Incident. 'We can't even get divorced.'

'How was I to know the effect it would have?' Hermione replied. 'And, as I've already told you I don't know how many times, I wasn't thinking about you.'

'Luna was thinking of Neville,' Ginny offered, 'and she got Draco.'

'Who were you thinking about?' Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. 'No one in particular. More a sort of... ideal. But... oh!' She covered her mouth in horror. 'I did think about how much I wanted to strangle Ron.'

'Well, there you go,' said Ron. 'There's your answer.'

Hermione turned and looked at him directly. Feeling the desire to rip his clothes off, she reached into her pocket, pulled out a small phial and swallowed the contents. The craving quickly subsided.

'All right?' Ginny asked.

Hermione nodded. The potion was effective but temporary. She had soon realised that the Plight Trothing Potion had created a state of intense longing, in addition to the more obvious aphrodisiacal effects, which was growing harder for her to resist. The only real cure was to sign the contract and give into the urge. Ginny and Harry had already done this and were now back to normal. Or at least, Hermione thought, as normal as two people madly in love could be.

She had observed them closely over the past few days, noting how they seemed to glow in each other's presence. Hermione did not feel that way about Ron...she had never felt that way about Ron and she very much doubted that she ever would feel that way about Ron. And yet, here they were. Stuck with each other for life.

The whoosh in the Floo announced Arthur's arrival. Five heads turned to him expectantly.

He shook his head. 'I'm sorry. I tried, but Kingsley...'

Hermione put her head in her hands. 'There *has* to be some way,' she wailed. 'Can't the charm be broken?'

Arthur removed his cloak and threw it in the general direction of the coat rack. 'Bill said there was no way he knew of separating the charm from the potion. So, no, I'm afraid it can't.'

Ron sighed. 'I never thought I'd say this, but I wish Snape was still alive. I bet he could have sorted this out.'

'Perhaps...' Hermione agreed. 'Although, even if he could have helped us, that doesn't mean he would have.'

'I'd have licked his boots if I'd had to.'

Hermione privately thought she'd lick a lot more than that, but then shook herself. What on earth was she thinking? 'Okay... How about this. Do we have to actually live together as husband and wife? I mean, we could get married, and then you could go off with Lavender, if you like. I don't care.'

There was a sharp intake of breath from the Weasleys.

'Are you nuts?' Ron yelled. 'Of course we can't do that. What do you take me for...What do you take Lavender for?'

'Do you really want me to answer that?'

'Hermione, dear,' Molly's voice was gentle but firm. 'I don't know how Muggles view marriage, but in our world we take it very seriously. You two are bound; your magic is interwoven with Ron's, and you will never be happy when you're apart from him for any length of time. You have no choice other than to make a go of it, so I suggest you stop bickering and try to resolve your differences. Starting now.'

'I meant what I said, Ron,' Hermione insisted. 'I'm offering you a way out.'

Ron snorted. 'Lavender is a *lady*. She'd never consent to being a bit on the side or to have children without a ring on her finger.'

'And besides,' Arthur butted in, sitting down at the table, 'where would such an, er... arrangement leave you? You see, the contract enforces a bond of fidelity on the woman...no other man will be able to so much as touch you outside the family.'

'What?' Hermione cried. 'Even though Ron could carry on as if nothing had happened?'

'In a word, yes.'

'Well, isn't that convenient.'

Ron sighed deeply. 'Hermione, we can't fight this. I promise you I will abide by my marriage vows, but I have one condition to add to the contract. I want a large family...'

'What about my career?' she protested. 'What about my NEWTs?'

'You can take your NEWTs, if you want to,' Ron replied, 'but you'll be too busy looking after our children to have a career...at least until they go to Hogwarts...and you'll home school them before that, of course.'

Hermione swallowed. 'How-how many children are you talking about, Ron?'

'At least... seven.'

Hermione thought she was going to faint.

'There is something else.' All eyes turned to Arthur. 'I don't know how to say this, Hermione, but I will be straight with you. The Minister made it very clear that my job...and Ron's future career...would be in jeopardy if you continue in your campaign for the liberation of the house-elves. I have to insist for the sake of my family that you never meddle in anything political.'

'But-but, I want to become a lawyer.'

'I'm afraid that's out of the question,' said Arthur.

'Cheer up, dear,' Molly said, smiling. 'We have your wedding to plan...'

'I want the least fuss possible,' Hermione said, cutting Molly off before she got into her stride. 'Seeing as we are already bound, a marriage ceremony is just a legal formality, and in any case, I see nothing to celebrate.'

'But, it's the happiest day of a young girl's life,' Molly spluttered.

Hermione just looked at her future mother-in-law as if she were deranged. 'Not mine, Mrs Weasley. Not mine.'

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

King's Cross: Nineteen years later.

Hugo's shoulders slumped as the Hogwarts Express gathered speed and chuffed its way out of the station. He had run alongside for a while, hoping at least to catch a glimpse of his twin brothers, but they hadn't so much as stuck their heads out of the window, the meanies. They could have at least said goodbye to *him*, even if they were cross with Mum and Dad. Hugo hadn't seen them in *ages*...seeing as they'd spent most of the summer holidays with Uncle George, earning pocket money in the shop. And now Rosie, too, was gone.

Panting slightly, Hugo turned and peered through the smoke and steam. All around him, the pops of Disapparition could be heard as those adults without additional children vanished from the platform. Hugo wished he could just disappear like that and didn't have to return home. What would it be like, he wondered, not to have brothers and sisters stealing his things and drawing over his precious books? He glanced down the platform, watching those people like his parents who had younger children in tow, making their way to the barrier. Mum and Dad were talking to Aunt Ginny and Uncle Harry while they waited for the crowd to clear. A very thin, pale lady stepped towards them, only to be pulled away by an equally pale, blond man who, Hugo assumed, had to be her husband.

Uncle Harry shook his head, smiled at Aunt Ginny, and brushed a stray cinder out of her hair. Mum looked upset; Dad stared at the clock. Even to Hugo's eight-year-old eyes, the difference in behaviour between the two couples was all too apparent, and this wasn't the first time he'd noticed it. He'd actually caught his aunt and uncle *kissing* in their kitchen once and had been even more appalled when Lily informed him that they did it all the time. Hugo had never seen his parents so much as touch each other, and these days, when Dad came home early enough to actually eat supper with them, all he and Mum ever seemed to do was argue. Hugo sighed. Rosie and the twins were lucky. They were out of the house now. He would have to wait another two years before he could join them. Hugo stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets and slowly made his way back down the platform.

~*~

'Gods,' said Ginny, staring after the retreating figure of Luna Malfoy. 'She looks like a wraith.'

Hermione couldn't dispute it. 'Is she ill, Harry? Does Draco mention her at all?'

'No.' Harry shook his head. 'Not at all, but I'm going to ask him if she's all right at the next trustees' meeting.'

'Do that,' said Ginny. 'I don't think I've seen her since the War Orphans' Charity Ball last Christmas...and even then, Draco didn't leave her side for a minute, so I didn't have a chance to talk to her.'

Hermione hadn't managed to get a babysitter for Harry's charity bash that year. 'I can't remember the last time I spoke to her. Does she ever leave Malfoy Manor unchaperoned?'

Ginny shook her head sadly. 'Not since she appeared at that fund raiser wearing a Brussels sprout necklace. Narcissa Malfoy accused her of trying to make a laughing stock out of the family...and you know how Luna usually says the first thing that comes into her head. Well...'

'I can imagine,' said Hermione. 'One careless word, and she could ruin all of Lucius Malfoy's attempts to make his family seem respectable. They must see her as a bit of a loose cannon.'

Ginny rolled her eyes. 'Lily, come here, please.' She reached for her daughter's hand. 'I think that's something of an understatement.'

'Aren't you worried that Harry's taking too much of a risk appointing Draco as a trustee of the Orphans Fund, though?'

'Well...' Ginny shrugged. 'Lucius did make a big donation, and Harry was willing to give Draco the benefit of the doubt.'

Hermione sighed, thinking that nothing good could come of it, and turned her head to look for Hugo. 'Three down, five to go,' she muttered, watching the small figure ambling his way towards them.

'Do you want a lift?' Ron asked.

'No, it's all right, thanks.' Hermione turned to face her husband, feeling the familiar tug of longing. 'I thought I'd go shopping...Hugo could do with some new shoes.'

Ron nodded. 'Okay. I'll see you tonight.'

'Will you be home in time for supper?'

'Erm... probably not.' Ron looked around everywhere but at her. 'There's this case I'm working on... I'll, um, have to work late.'

'Fine,' Hermione said, wondering whether it was the blonde case or the new redhead that was demanding his attention. Not that she was particularly bothered, either way. She just hated making excuses for him to the children. 'I'll see you when I see you, then.'

Ron waited for Hugo to catch up before saying his goodbyes and leaving for work. Harry lifted a squealing Lily onto his shoulders and followed through the barrier soon after.

'Come around for coffee and a chat tomorrow.' Hermione turned to Ginny. 'Your mother's taking the kids on a nature ramble.'

'Okay.' Ginny smiled at her nephew and ruffled Hugo's hair...much to his annoyance. 'See you tomorrow, then.'

Hermione watched her sister-in-law disappear in the direction of Muggle King's Cross. 'Right, then, Hugo,' she said. 'What's it going to be? Bus or Tube?'

Hugo's face lit up in delight. 'Tube!'

It looked like he was going to get a train ride today, after all.

~*~

Later that afternoon in Florean Fortescue's, as he prepared to tackle the enormous Knickerbockerglory on the table in front of him, Hugo came to the conclusion that today had been as close to perfect as any day could get. Mum had bought him a pair of Muggle trainers...with flashing lights on the heels, no less...which were attracting the attention of all the other kids in the ice-cream parlour. They were, by far, the coolest things he'd ever owned. Not only that, he'd been on the Tube twice...Mum had allowed him to handle Muggle money and pay for the tickets...and they'd visited an Art Gallery where the pictures didn't move. He couldn't wait to Owl Rose. Hugo grasped the long-handled spoon and picked off the cherry and some of the whipped cream while he pondered how best to attack his ice-cream sundae. He looked up and grinned. This was the *bestest* treat of the day; he had Mum all to himself and could talk to her about all kinds of stuff without anyone else butting in and spoiling it.

Hermione smiled back at her son as he stood up to plunge the spoon into the glass of ice-cream that seemed almost as tall as he was. Hugo was a good kid; in fact, he was probably the favourite out of all her children...although she would never have admitted to any such thing. He reminded her so much of her eight-year-old self...infinitely curious and endlessly asking questions.

This was just how she had once imagined motherhood would be: one or two intelligent and politely enquiring children, interesting days out, educational visits to art galleries, museums and the like... Unfortunately, the reality was quite different: eight children in six pregnancies, with a set of twins at each end, sibling rivalry, perpetual wiping of noses and bottoms and a never ending round of feeding, washing and tidying up...it was monotonous, unrelenting, drudgery. Hermione was rarely anything other than exhausted, and with the children simultaneously clamouring for her attention all day long, it was virtually impossible to give them the individual attention they needed. It was more like crowd control than parenting.

'Good?' Hermione asked.

Hugo nodded. 'Mmm...'

Hermione stirred her coffee and stared out of the window, savouring the peace. It wasn't very often she could sit down and do nothing, and she was determined to make the most of it. Molly could look after the four youngest children a bit longer.

Florean's hadn't really changed that much since Hermione had first come to Diagon Alley, although old Mr Fortescue had never recovered from his kidnapping by Death Eaters, and the shop was now run by his son. But the ice-cream, Hermione would have sworn on *Hogwarts: A History*, was not nearly as good...this may have been due to the fact that the new proprietor skimped on the ingredients or was more likely because the place reminded her of a more innocent time when life was sweeter and the future held all kinds of exciting possibilities. She took a sip of espresso and wiggled in her seat, wondering if the chairs had shrunk since she'd been in here last, or her bum had got noticeably bigger. She very much suspected it was the latter.

Nineteen years, Hermione thought bitterly. *Where had they gone? Another six before the twins go to school.* She'd be well into her forties by then, and it would probably be too late for her to start a career...not that she really knew what she wanted to do anymore.

Hermione glanced at Hugo, who now had a moustache of vanilla ice-cream on his top lip, resisting the automatic response to lean forward and clean it off. He was old enough and more than capable of wiping his own face. Instead, she sighed and sipped her coffee. *If only we'd stopped at four.*

Hermione had hoped after the birth of their two very demanding twin boys that Ron would change his mind about the number of children he wanted her to bear, but he'd remained adamant that he wanted seven. In fact, the only deviation from the original contract she had managed to negotiate was the timescale involved. Hermione had scored a small victory by persuading Ron that having children before they had both gained some qualifications was not a good idea. 'You want a big family,' she informed him, 'you're going to need a well-paid job to provide for it.' Hermione had also suggested, seeing as she'd obtained more N.E.W.Ts than him (with better grades), that she should become the breadwinner while he stayed at home with all the children he wanted her to have. But Ron wouldn't hear of it. As far as he was concerned, bringing up children was woman's work. Now, with a middle-management desk job at the Auror department, Ron was earning the kind of money that would have comfortably supported a small family, but with eight children to feed and clothe, Hermione had to budget her housekeeping money carefully.

So treats like visits to Florean's were few and far between, but on the rare occasion that she indulged herself or her children, Hermione refused to feel guilty about it...just as she refused to feel guilty about not loving Ron or being the dutiful wife her in-laws expected her to be. In the beginning, she had tried to make the best of a bad situation, but the forced intimacy demanded by the enchantment had killed off any chance of rekindling their love and destroyed what little remained of their friendship. The only good thing was that once the last of the children had been born, and Hermione had fulfilled her part of the contract, the charm-induced lust had dissipated. Unfortunately, the longing for Ron's presence had not.

It was a horrible feeling, continually needing the physical proximity of someone one would rather not have to see at all. Even though Hermione constantly reminded herself that it wasn't real, that it was spell-induced, the yearning persisted in spite of what her heart and intellect repeatedly told her.

If only I could break that part... If only...

But it was a component of the binding, this gnawing ache. A craving...together with the children...that made Hermione tolerate Ron's extra-marital affairs and prevented her from throwing him out of the house. It was the last flimsy, but unbreakable thread that held their travesty of a marriage together...a marriage that had been virtually celibate since the birth of their twin daughters. That, however, was a state of affairs which suited Hermione just fine since it was infinitely preferable to wanting to constantly jump a man for whom she had long lost all respect.

Hugo sat back contentedly and wiped his mouth with the napkin provided.

'We'd better be going,' Hermione said. 'Granny Weasley will be wondering where we've got to.'

'Oh, can we go and look at the owls first, Mummy? *Ple-ase.*

'All right.' Hermione took her purse out of her bag to pay the waitress. 'But remember; we can't afford to buy one.'

~*~

Hermione followed Hugo through the Floo, stepping into her kitchen via the inglenook fireplace. She quickly surveyed the scene as Hugo ran over to the table to show off his new trainers to his brother and sisters. Her four youngest children were sitting quietly at the scrub-topped pine table busily colouring in while Molly cooed over their efforts. The kitchen was spotless. It couldn't have been cleaner if a team of Hogwarts' house-elves had been let loose in there for five minutes. Hermione wasn't sure whether Molly cleaned up to highlight her inadequacies as a housewife and mother, or whether she genuinely thought she was helping, and in all honesty, Hermione couldn't care less either way. She had long ago stopped bristling every time her mother-in-law ran a finger over the mantelpiece, tutting at the dust she found there. In fact, she didn't so much as twitch anymore. Hermione took each day as it came...and went...drifting through the weeks and months that held very little to distinguish between them.

'Hermione,' Molly greeted her warmly. 'There you are at last, dear. Have you seen the news?'

'What news?' Hermione replied, gathering the twins into a hug.

Molly waved a copy of the *Evening Prophet* at her. 'It's in the paper. Look! Severus Snape is alive!'

'What!' Hermione grabbed the paper off her. 'He can't be. I saw him... With my own eyes... I saw him...' She trailed off as she took in the photograph on the front page, still not believing it. But it was him, all right. She'd recognise that nose anywhere, but he must be... what... in his late fifties by now, yet he could have passed for forty. Hermione's knees felt weak. She collapsed into the nearest chair, staring at the photo of a man she had watched bleed to death on a filthy floor a lifetime ago and shaking her head in disbelief. Snape peered back indifferently but without malice or any sign of the trademark sneer.

'He's changed a bit, hasn't he?' Molly began to tidy up the children's things. 'Those robes look like they cost him a Galleon or two.'

'Yes,' Hermione replied weakly. 'But how... I saw him... I saw him...' She tore her eyes away from the photograph to read the accompanying article:

A hero of the Voldemort war, presumed dead since the Battle of Hogwarts, presented himself to a shocked Ministry official yesterday.

'I thought it was a ghost,' said Mrs Hannah Longbottom. 'Or someone playing a practical joke.'

Mr Snape (Order of Merlin, First Class), 57, returns from a long exile in Eastern Europe, but was reluctant to elaborate further. Neither will he reveal how he managed to cheat death and leave the country undetected.

'Someone came to my rescue,' he said mysteriously. 'But I have nothing further to say on the subject since that person may wish to remain anonymous.'

The story of Severus Snape, once Potions master and later Headmaster at Hogwarts, Death Eater, spy and heroic soldier of the War, has almost passed into legend...

Hermione glanced back up at the photo, still not believing what her eyes were telling her. 'I need a drink.'

'I wonder why he's come back now,' Molly said, taking two wine glasses out of the cupboard. 'White, dear?'

'Yes, please, Molly,' Hermione replied. 'There's a bottle in the pantry.'

A green flash flared in the grate. 'Minerva, here. Can I come through?'

'Of course.' Hermione got up to greet her old friend. 'Hello, Minerva. I take it you've seen the paper.'

'Indeed, I have,' Minerva replied, beaming. 'I always suspected... but... Oh, well, never mind.'

Molly brought another glass over to the table with the bottle.

'I can't stay long,' Minerva said, taking the offered glass.

'I've just come to tell you that Kingsley and I have organised a little get together for Severus...mainly surviving Order members and a few old colleagues...for later this evening. You're invited, of course.'

'Oh...' Hermione thought for a moment. 'Okay...if I can find a babysitter at short notice... I'll see if Mum is free.'

'At the Ministry?' Molly asked.

'Yes, for about eight o'clock.'

'Arthur and I will be there for certain.'

'How about Ron?' Minerva turned to Hermione.

'I can't speak for him,' Hermione replied. 'If I see him, I'll tell him.' She raised her glass. 'To Severus Snape: International Man of Mystery.'

The older witches cackled.

'No doubt we shall coax the truth out of him tonight,' said Minerva, clinking glasses with Molly.

A fist clenched in Hermione's stomach making her feel queasy, but she put it down to the quality of the wine.

~*~

It didn't take long for Hermione to come to the conclusion that she had nothing to wear. Every robe she owned was now lying on the bed, discarded in a heap, rejected as either being too small or too unfashionable. The final one, the one she had bought for the last social event she had attended nearly two years ago, was her last hope. It was a bit dressy, she knew, but it fitted and with a few judicious lifting charms... She sighed. Robes had the advantage of hiding a great many faults with the figure, but there was a fine line between a robe and a kaftan. If you knew where to cinch and push up, a robe could create an alluring suggestion of well defined curves. But a sash belted in the wrong place, as she knew only too well, could make you look like a sack of potatoes.

Turning from side to side, Hermione assessed herself critically in the mirror. The robe had a russet, low-cut bodice and sleeves, which emphasised her good points, with an ochre coloured skirt that flowed over her ample hips. She picked up her wand and ruthlessly disposed of the brocade trimmings, leaving a simpler, less fussy effect. 'Better,' she muttered. 'Now for some uplift.'

Reaching towards her little bookcase, she took *Damelza's* book off the shelf. In spite of its part in the mess that was her life, Hermione felt no animosity towards the small volume of charms. It wasn't the book's fault, after all, that they had stupidly combined two spells, and over the years, she had found one or two useful little gems within its pages. She opened the front cover and stroked the leather lovingly, wondering as usual who had owned it before her. The only clues were the letters 'E.P.' written in a strong, but Hermione suspected, feminine hand. Flicking to the section devoted to 'Improvyng the Fygyre', Hermione set to work.

But there was a limit to what enhancing charms could disguise and how much a lifting charm could defy the laws of gravity. To Hermione's eyes, the end result was far from ideal. Undeterred, she rummaged for her cosmetics bag...a little charm to hide the dark circles under her eyes worked a treat, a light foundation evened out her skin tone; mascara, eyeliner and lippy, and she was done. Last but not least was the bane of her life: her hair. Hermione had worn it collar length since Rose's birth in an attempt to

make it easier to manage, but without the weight, her hair was even frizzier, sticking out worse than before, and she had long since stopped bothering to fight it. She gamely tried a few straightening charms and tried to flatten it a bit to make it look at least halfway presentable.

'That's the best I can do,' she said to the mirror.

'Very nice, dear,' the mirror replied.

Hermione's face crumpled. 'I look frumpy, fat and forty,' she declared, and promptly burst into tears.

It took a few minutes for Hermione to wonder why she was so bothered. She never normally made this much effort when she went out, so why was she worrying what Severus would think of her?

'Severus? Since when has he been "Severus".'

Pulling herself together, Hermione repaired the damage to her makeup and grabbed her evening bag. 'That will have to do,' she said, taking a final look in the mirror before making her way downstairs.

Her mother, who was making hot chocolate for the children, looked up as she entered the kitchen. 'You look nice,' she said.

Hermione smiled wanly. 'Thanks. Sure you can manage?'

'We'll be fine,' Mrs Granger replied. 'Won't we, Hugo?'

Hugo nodded.

'All right, then. I'll see you later.' Hermione Summoned her cloak. 'Tell the twins not to give Nana any trouble, or there'll be no nature ramble for them tomorrow.' She gave them both a hug, tossed some Floo Powder into the grate and stepped into the flames.

~*~

Quite a crowd had gathered in the Ministry Atrium by the time Hermione got there. She was ushered towards an official reception room where someone took her cloak, and she was offered a glass of champagne. Spotting Ginny and the in-laws in the corner, she went over to join them. There was no sign of Snape.

'Do you know who half these people are?' Hermione asked Ginny.

'Ministers, Ministers' wives... daughters...!' She caught Hermione's eye, and they both burst out laughing.

'Oh, the poor things.' Hermione wiped away a tear. 'Imagine being paraded in front of Snape, like so much... livestock.'

'Yes, but he's apparently quite a catch,' Ginny said, raising an eyebrow. 'Made his fortune in the East, or so they say.'

Hermione looked at Ginny, and they both dissolved into a fit of giggles again.

'Stop it!' Ginny fished in her bag for a hankie. 'You're making your mascara run. Here. Hold still.' Ginny dabbed at the splotch of black at the corner of Hermione's eye. 'Oh, there he is. Look!'

Hermione turned around in time to see Snape enter the room flanked by Minerva on one side and Kingsley on the other. A sea of people immediately surrounded them, and Kingsley had to call for order. Hermione hung back; after all, she only really knew Snape as a teacher. There were people here who had known him for years. She could wait her turn to personally thank him for all he'd done for them.

So Hermione patiently stood by and watched as people who could never know him at all, people who had despised him, people who had called him coward, tried to monopolise him, and she felt very angry on his behalf. She saw Harry shake his hand, but couldn't hear what words passed between them. Snape worked his way towards the buffet table, politely responding to all the well-wishers, and at the same time glancing about, scanning the faces in the room, obviously looking for someone. Hermione studied him surreptitiously. He looked lean and fit, and Molly had been right about his robes; they looked tailored and expensive. His hair was pulled back into a small pony tail, emphasising his sharp cheekbones, and while he would always be pale skinned, his face had a healthier, less chalky look to it.

Hardly surprising he looks healthier, Hermione mused. *Last time I saw him, he was a corpse. It's bound to be an improvement.*

It took a while for Hermione to pluck up the courage to approach him, but eventually the crowd thinned, and she saw her chance.

'Prof-er, Mr Snape,' she began.

'Yes,' he replied wearily, placing a chicken drumstick on his plate. 'And you are?'

Hermione flushed. 'I-I don't suppose you'd remember me, sir. Hermione. Hermione Weasley...Granger as was.'

Severus' eyes widened. Hermione noted a look of shock pass over his face, although he hid it quickly.

He swallowed. 'Miss-Mrs... Weasley,' he stuttered, offering her his hand.

Hermione leaned towards him to take it but stopped, letting her hand fall back to her side.

Face clouding in anger, Severus slowly withdrew his hand. 'Excuse me, Madam.' He started to turn away.

'I'm sorry,' Hermione said, dropping her voice. 'I didn't mean to insult you. I'm subject to a bond of fidelity, you see. I can't touch you.'

Severus blinked, and Hermione noticed a muscle twitch on his cheek. 'Weasley,' he said through clenched teeth, 'imposed a fidelity charm on you?'

'No,' she replied, 'no, he didn't. It's a long story...'

'There you are, Severus. The Chief Mugwump would like a word.' Minerva pointed in the direction of a short, bald wizard in turquoise robes. 'Would you excuse us, Hermione?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Forgive me.' Severus inclined his head and bowed slightly, holding her gaze for a little longer than was absolutely necessary before walking away.

A shiver went down Hermione's spine. For some reason, she had the most peculiar feeling that he was apologising for a great deal more than leaving her with only the canapés and cocktail sausages for company.

~*~

'Mummy, *tell* him.'

'It's mine!'

'But I want it.'

'It's *mine*.'

'Stop it!' Hermione screeched. 'Both of you.'

'She started it.'

'Did not.'

'Ow! That hurt.'

'Now, see what you've done? You've made your sister cry.'

The front doorbell rang twice.

'Hugo, would you see who that is for me, please?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'Where was I?' Hermione picked up her wand. 'Oh, yes. Which one of you did *that*?' She pointed to a stick figure of a man on a broomstick drawn in crayon on the wall.

'It was him.'

'You *fibber*.'

'Mum, there's a man to see you.'

Hermione spun around to see Severus Snape standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

'Have I come at an inconvenient time?' he asked.

'No, it's just...'

'Mum, he's doing it again.'

'How many times do I have to tell you? Stop pinching your sister.'

'But she kicked me.'

'I don't care.'

'SILENCE!'

Five shocked young faces stared at the tall, dark man.

Hermione immediately took advantage of the situation. 'You remember me telling you about Hogwarts and Professor Snape? This is him.'

'Yes,' Severus said with a smirk, 'and every word of it was true. So. It is a fine, sunny day. No doubt you can busy yourselves in the garden while I converse with your mother.'

There was a scraping of chairs and a mad rush for the door.

Hermione laughed. 'I see you haven't lost your touch. It's a pity you can't give them detention.'

'They're a little young for cauldron scrubbing, don't you think?' Smirking, Severus pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. 'Minerva told me you had eight children. I'm afraid I didn't believe it.'

'Well, it's true.' She ran her hands through her hair, feeling embarrassed. 'Please excuse the mess. I'll make some tea, shall I? And then perhaps you can tell me why you're here.'

'Thank you, yes,' Severus replied. 'That would be most kind.'

Hermione boiled some water and spooned the tea leaves into the pot. 'I'm glad you came by, actually. I didn't get the chance to thank you at the Ministry...for all you did in the War and so forth.'

'I did what I had to do.'

Severus did not volunteer anything further on the subject, and Hermione did not press him, but she could feel his eyes boring into her back as she moved around the kitchen. It was quite unnerving.

'Milk and sugar?'

'Just milk, thank you.'

Once the tea had been poured, Severus sat back in the chair and took a sip. 'I apologise for calling on you unannounced, but I only received my official pardon today, and my movements were restricted before that. I took the chance that you would be at home.'

'It's quite all right.' Hermione smiled and waited for him to continue.

'You must be wondering what this is all about.' Severus put his cup and saucer down and folded his hands in his lap. 'And I shall explain soon, but first I should like to know how one of the most intelligent witches it was ever my privilege to teach ended up *here*.'

Hermione would have normally been annoyed at being asked such a personal question, but the way he'd just managed to compliment her and sound so... disappointed in her at the same time totally threw her. 'What has Minerva told you?'

'Not very much,' Severus admitted, 'but I should like to hear it from you. You mentioned something about a fidelity bond at the Ministry.'

'Yes...! Hermione sighed and told him the whole story. Severus watched her closely as she gave him an account of the past nineteen years of her life, never interrupting her once. Feeling like she was back in school again, Hermione grew increasingly uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

Severus remained silent for a while after she had finished her tale. 'I have only one question,' he said eventually. 'If you had your time again, would you change it?'

Hermione snorted. 'Do you think I haven't pondered the "what ifs" over and over again? But what's done is done. I have to live with the consequences of my stupidity.' She sighed, gathering her nerve. 'There is one other thing... All these years, I have lived with the guilt that I did nothing to help you... in the Shrieking Shack, I mean. I want to apologise. I should have done *something*.'

'Oh, but you did.'

'Pardon?'

Severus rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'I wasn't sure what I would find when I returned home, or the welcome I would receive. Of course, I expected you would be married...' He dropped his gaze to the floor. 'I did not know whether it would be better to leave sleeping dogs lie...at least until I'd ascertained your circumstances... but, now that I have seen for myself... and I owe you my life...'

'Sorry, you've lost me,' Hermione said shaking her head. 'I don't understand...'

'You will.' Severus took a deep breath. 'I-I modified your memories, you see...'

'You did WHAT?' Hermione cried. 'When?' To her horror, Severus drew his wand. 'Wha-what are you doing?'

'I've no intention of harming you, Hermione. Trust me, please. Just close your eyes.'

And trust him she did. Without questioning him further, Hermione closed her eyes and let the magic wash over her, the wisps of a deceptively gentle breeze dancing through her mind, tickling the edges of her sub-conscious, poking, prodding...

Hermione's eyes flew open, wide with shock, as barriers she didn't know existed fell away, allowing the missing chunk of her life to crash back into place...her brain linking up formerly severed pathways, making connections, turning half-remembered dreams into fully-formed memories:

Images of the battle. The Shrieking Shack (blood, so much blood): Voldemort's voice, Harry coming back from the dead, Neville decapitating Nagini, the headmasters' portraits applauding, fixing the elder wand... Is there a limit to magic...? The Great Hall: Ginny running towards them, the Weasleys... Is there a limit to magic...? The headmasters applauding... all the headmasters... all except... Snape. The Shrieking Shack: blood, so much blood but... something else...a smell... almost masked by the stench...

Hermione groaned and put her head in her hands. 'Make it stop! Make it stop!'

Severus leaned towards her. 'What do you remember?' he asked gently.

'Everything, Severus,' Hermione whispered, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'I remember... everything.'

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

Pain. Excruciating pain. Too much...

The onslaught of conflicting images...some real, some planted...was more than Hermione's brain could handle. Stomach churning, the nausea and dizziness intensified, but Severus' voice called to her through the fog, cutting through the cacophony of sound and guiding her home like a beacon.

'Listen to me, Hermione,' he commanded. 'Focus on the sound of my voice. Start at the beginning, at the Battle of Hogwarts. Relive the events as they happened, one at a time. It is the easiest way to reabsorb the memories...'

She was back in the Great Hall. A pristine image of the scene, as vivid and clear as the day it happened, lay before her: the chaos, the devastation, the smell, the noise...
Smell...

'Oh, Harry.' Ginny threw her arms around Harry's neck and started weeping, but Hermione barely registered it.

Smell...

Ron was drawn to his grieving family like a magnet.

Smell... What was that smell?

It came to her in a flash. *Asphodel...? No, he couldn't possibly have. Could he...?*

Hermione was vaguely aware of her two friends drifting away from her but didn't attempt to stop them. Should she bother one of the Healers...or Madam Pomfrey? They were all working flat out to attend to the wounded, and if she were wrong, someone else might die... Mind made up, Hermione spun around and marched determinedly

towards the doors.

'Tell them not to worry,' she said to Neville on the way out. 'If anyone asks, that is.'

Hermione broke into a trot. *Time. How much time did she have?* She was unsure of the answer to that question, but if Snape had taken the Draught of Living Death as she suspected, there would hopefully be enough. *Think, Hermione. Think.* He had bought himself, what, hours? Days? But administering the antidote wouldn't be enough; he would die from his wounds for certain if she did that. Firstly, she had to heal the damage done by the snakebite, replace the blood he had lost and...what about the poison? Had he taken any anti-venom? While Hermione's brain had been calculating the permutations, her feet had made a good independent decision and taken her to the winding staircase that led to the headmaster's office. Yes, it was a reasonable enough assumption to make...that Snape had kept a personal supply of medicinal potions close to hand.

The stone gargoyle barely gave Hermione a glance as she ran past it and ascended the spiral staircase. Panting, she pushed the door open and stepped into the office. The portraits stopped their excited chatter at the sight of a slightly sweaty and out of breath Hermione Granger.

'Hello again, my dear,' said Albus Dumbledore. 'Have you forgotten something?'

'No,' Hermione replied. 'Actually, I've just remembered something.' She tried to catch her breath while she looked around the portraits again to double check. 'Where's Headmaster Snape?'

Dumbledore looked confused. 'He's dead, Miss Granger.'

'Then why isn't he here...with you lot?'

'Damned impertinence,' muttered Phineas Black.

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. 'I expect it's because he deserted his post.'

'Rubbish!' Hermione exclaimed. 'If it weren't for him, we'd all be dead.'

'Calm yourself, Miss Granger...'

'I don't have time, Professor Dumbledore,' Hermione snapped. 'Can you tell me, please, if Professor Snape had a first-aid box, and if so, where did he keep it?'

Phineas Black snorted. 'I expect he kept it in his bathroom like everyone else.'

The others sniggered.

Hermione rolled her eyes and counted to ten. 'And where is that?' she persisted.

'The Headmaster's quarters are through there.' Dumbledore pointed to a blank wall.

'Can you give me the password, please?'

'I'm afraid there isn't one.' Dumbledore smiled condescendingly. 'The door responds only to the touch of the incumbent headmaster. Until a new one is appointed, no one may enter.'

Hermione sucked in a breath and considered calling for a house-elf. But, knowing what they thought of her, Hermione didn't think one would answer the summons. Instead, she decided to appeal to the castle's better nature. She walked over to the wall and placed her hands on it.

'I know you're hurting,' she began, 'but the worst is over, repairs will be made, and soon everything will be back as it was.' Hermione rested her forehead on the cool stones and whispered, 'The thing is, I think Headmaster Snape is still alive...just. But he's terribly injured and alone, and I think what I need to help him is behind this wall. Please. Let me in so that I can try to save him.'

For a few seconds, nothing happened, then the castle seemed to heave a sigh, and an archway shimmered into view.

Hermione smiled. 'Thank you.'

Dilys Derwent was outraged. 'You can't go rummaging through the Headmaster's personal belongings. It-it's unseemly...'

Hermione didn't stop to listen. Passing over the threshold, she looked around the sumptuous apartments and approached the door nearest to her. Opening it, she discovered a small study/library in which, under normal circumstances, she would have loved to have lingered.

Regretfully, she closed the door and walked to the next one. This turned out to be the Headmaster's bedroom, which was dominated by a huge, ornately carved four-poster bed, resplendent in Slytherin green and grey. Hermione's attention was drawn to the simple, freshly laundered linen nightshirt laid out upon the quilt. It seemed out of place somehow, lost and small amid all the surrounding opulence. But there was no time to dwell on that now. Noticing another door in the corner, she made her way over to it.

Result, Hermione thought, gazing at the sunken, black marble bath that was the size of a small swimming pool. Glancing to her left, Hermione saw the washbasin, and to the right of that was a tall cabinet.

Again, she was struck by the simplicity of Snape's personal belongings: his razor, shaving brush and soap wouldn't have looked out of place in her parents' bathroom. *He's just a man*, she told herself, *and he'll be a dead one, if I don't get a move on.*

Luckily, there were no wards on the cabinet, and behind the talcum powder, toothpaste and (rather worn) toothbrush, she found what she was looking for. The box made an encouraging tinkling noise as Hermione took it off the shelf. She opened the lid carefully, afraid that she might damage the contents, but each phial was set in its own velvet-lined compartment. The only snag was, none of them were labelled.

Sighing in frustration, Hermione looked for somewhere convenient to put the box while she investigated further. It looked like she was going to have to do it the hard way. Deciding the best place for this was the floor, Hermione grabbed some towels and knelt down, arranging them so that they provided some cushioning on the hard surface. If she was going to have to use a Summoning Charm, she reasoned, they would provide a softer landing if she missed the catch.

Removing the lid completely, Hermione quickly examined the phials. Some were easy to identify: Blood-Replenishing Potion (two doses), Pepper Up, draughts for pain relief, Strengthening Solution...all of which could come in handy. She picked up a tiny bottle with some pearlescent liquid in it, and she felt a flood of excitement...and relief. Phoenix tears. How fresh they were was unknown as was their potency, but this...and the dittany...were both excellent finds. There were three phials left which Hermione could not identify. She pulled out the drawer that was at the base of the box, thinking she might find an inventory, but it was empty.

Hermione was also starting to consider the problem of administering the potions, seeing as Snape would be unable to swallow them of his own accord. 'Have to get them down his throat...' she muttered to herself. 'I need some sort of tubing...' As she spoke, the drawer clicked open to reveal exactly what she required. 'Now, that is handy.' She tried again. 'I need a bezoar.' Once more, the drawer came up with the goods. Wondering if it would work on the potions, Hermione said, 'I need the Wiggenswelt Potion.' She held her breath as one of the unidentified phials rose up an inch above the others, then let out a huge sigh of relief. She had found the antidote.

'Yes!' She tried again, checked that the phoenix tears were indeed just that and then asked for snake anti-venom. Unfortunately, there wasn't any. That was a blow, but

there was still the bezoar, the phoenix tears and, Hermione hoped, there was a reasonable chance that Snape had already dosed himself with anti-venom as a precaution beforehand.

Armed with the box, Hermione prepared to leave, but on last minute impulse gathered some of Snape's toiletries together and put them in her bag. On her way through the bedroom, she noticed a thick winter cloak hanging up and decided to take that, too. She would likely need something to wrap him in once she'd revived him. Now, was there anything else that might come in useful lying around? Candles. She would need more than the light of her wand to work by. Half a dozen ended up in her bag.

Casting her eyes over the room one last time, Hermione walked over to the fireplace. Luck was on her side; there was a small pot of Floo powder on the mantelpiece...at least she wouldn't have to go through that bloody tunnel again. There was nothing else she could think of and time was getting on. Gathering her courage for what was ahead of her, Hermione Flooed to the Shrieking Shack.

~ * ~

Hermione found Snape as they had left him: lying motionless in his own blood on the floor. It was as much as she could do not to retch at the sight. Shakily, Hermione fished the candles out of her bag and lit them while she steeled herself to touch the very dead-looking body in front of her. The flickering candlelight lent an even more eerie atmosphere to the proceedings as she opened the box of potions and prepared to administer them.

Rather than work on the floor, Hermione Transfigured a battered old chair into a bed and levitated Snape onto the mattress. Pushing some of his matted hair out of the way, she performed a cleansing charm to sterilise the wound. The puncture marks on his throat were now clearly visible. Gingerly, she touched his skin for the first time, turning his head to get a better look. *No Rigor Mortis! I was right. I was right!*

She worked quickly; the precious phoenix tears took no time at all to seal the torn flesh on his neck. With the utmost care, Hermione turned Severus' head gently back to centre, tipped it back and opened his mouth. This was the tricky part. Only too aware of her lack of medical knowledge, Hermione asked the box specifically to supply her with a tube for the stomach as she didn't want the potions to end up in his wind-pipe. The box obliged. As soon as the tube touched Snape's lips, it slid inside his mouth and down his gullet effortlessly. Relieved the procedure had been successful, Hermione poured one dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion into the tube, gave it a moment to work, then followed it with the Wiggewald Potion. She slowly removed the tube and waited for something to happen.

She didn't have to wait long. Snape's body gave a sudden, violent shudder, scaring Hermione half to death. She tried to hold his shoulders down as he convulsed uncontrollably, but he was too strong for her. Severus took in a huge lungful of air and coughed up some vile black substance. Hermione cleaned it up quickly.

'Where...?'

'You're still in the Shrieking Shack, Professor.' Hermione tried to sound reassuring even though she was shaking. 'Everything's going to be all right. I've just revived you.'

'Who's there? I can't see...'

Hermione waved her hand in front of his eyes. He didn't flinch. 'It's Hermione Granger, sir. Can you see my hand?'

'No... I...'

'Concentrate, sir,' she said, hoping he couldn't hear the panic in her voice. 'Have you taken any anti-venom recently?'

Severus swallowed, struggling to calm his breathing. 'Hurts...'

Hermione immediately reached for a pain relief potion and removed the cork. 'I'm going to help you to lift your head, and then you're going to swallow this.'

Severus took the potion without arguing. 'I can't feel... my legs...'

'I think you're suffering from the residual effects of the venom, but all I have is a bezoar. Do you think you can swallow it?'

'Ye-es.'

Sitting on the bed, Hermione conjured a glass of water, slipped the bezoar into Severus' mouth and cradled his head while she held the glass for him to sip from it. 'When you're ready, I've another dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion and some Strengthening Solution for you to take.'

'Stop fussing, girl.'

Hermione almost sobbed with relief. 'I see you're on the mend,' she said, grinning.

Severus' lips twitched slightly, and he blinked. 'You do not appear to have permanently damaged my vision with your amateur mediwizardry.'

'I still think you should take...'

'Potter! How long...!' Severus tried to sit up but collapsed back on the bed, groaning.

'It's all over, sir.' Hermione put her hand gently on his chest. 'We won. Harry killed Voldemort and survived. Neville decapitated Nagini...the last Horcrux. He's gone for good this time.'

Severus flailed his right arm across his body and uselessly clawed at his left sleeve, his fingers failing to grasp the material.

'It may take a little while to get full control... Oh...!' Realising what Severus was trying to do, Hermione pushed up the left sleeve of his robe. With one hand supporting his elbow and the other at his wrist, she lifted and turned his forearm so that he could see the unblemished skin for himself.

'It's gone, sir.'

Severus inhaled sharply, closed his eyes and shuddered.

Gods, now what? 'Sir? Are you...?'

Severus rolled slowly over onto his side and curled up into a ball, turning his back on her. 'Leave me.'

It was only the shake in his voice that clued her in to what was happening. 'Don't be embarrassed, sir. I won't tell anyone.'

'Fuck off and leave me ALONE!'

Hermione did not take it personally. 'And leave you defenceless?' She got up and shook out his winter cloak before covering his trembling body with it. 'It'll take more than a few tears...'

'I am n-not crying. I NEVER cry.'

'Of course you don't, sir,' Hermione said, busying herself with the empty phials. 'It must be a bugger, though, not having any tear ducts.'

There was a choking noise from under the cloak, and Severus turned onto his back, wiping his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, but then he noticed his makeshift blanket. He sniffed. 'Where did you get this?'

'It was hanging up...'

'You have been in my *bedroom*?' Severus pushed himself up onto one elbow. 'That's my medicine chest!'

'Your quarters seemed the most logical place to look for the antidote.' Hermione shrugged. 'Now, are you going to take these potions or am I going to have to stretcher you down the tunnel?'

Severus looked daggers at her. 'Don't ever become a Healer, Miss Granger. Your bedside manner is appalling.'

'You're alive, aren't you?' Hermione retorted, uncorking the potions. 'What more do you want?' She held the phials to his lips and carefully tipped the contents into his mouth. Severus grimaced at the foul taste.

Hermione let him rest a moment, taking the opportunity to cast some much needed cleaning charms. She ran her hand through his hair, raking his scalp, checking that all the congealed blood had gone. 'There. I hope that feels better. It should do until you can bathe, anyway.'

Severus stared at her. 'Why did you do that?'

'To make you more comfortable, of course.' Hermione could feel a blush coming on. 'Do you think you can sit up, now?'

Nodding grimly, Severus gritted his teeth and swung his legs over the side of the bed, managing to sit up with some effort. Hermione tried to help, but he swatted her hands out of the way. 'I do not need you to assist me, Miss Granger.'

Perching on the edge of the mattress, Severus experimentally flexed and clenched his hands, but his fingers were numb, and they barely responded.

'Feeling still not back?' Hermione asked gently.

Severus shook his head. 'No, and it should have returned by now.' He wiggled his feet. 'I cannot feel my toes, either.'

'You need a Healer.'

'I need a nerve regenerating potion.'

'Sir, you really should be checked over...'

'Miss Granger, the world thinks I'm dead, and that is the way I should like it to remain.' Severus fumbled for his wand but dropped it on the floor.

'Were you thinking of Obliviating me?' Hermione asked, picking it up.

'Give that to me, girl,' he snarled.

'Very well.' She handed the wand back to him, only for it to clatter to the floor once more.

'Nerve regenerating potion,' Hermione murmured, bending to retrieve the wand yet again. 'Do you have any?'

'Not on my person, no. But I can brew some.'

Hermione placed his wand on the bed. 'And how are you going to manage that when you can't hold your wand?'

'I do not need a wand...'

'No, but you need to be able to hold a knife.'

Severus rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. 'You are right, of course. I wasn't thinking...'

'I can do it.' Hermione sat down next to him. 'If you want me to...'

'Why?' he asked. 'Why would you bother? Why did you come back here, for that matter?'

Hermione shrugged. 'Well, for one thing, Harry told me about the memories, and... You risked so much to keep us safe. Besides, there have been enough senseless deaths... Moody, Remus, Tonks, Fred Weasley...'

Severus inhaled sharply.

'Oh, I'm sorry, sir. That was insensitive...'

'No.' He swallowed hard. 'You must tell me everything later, but first...if your offer of assistance is a genuine one...we must go to my home.'

'Do you think you can Apparate, sir?' Hermione asked.

'Not without Splinching myself...if I cannot feel my extremities, I am likely to leave them behind.'

Hermione nodded. 'Then how...?'

'Can you Side-Along, Miss Granger.'

'Yes, but...'

'Look into my eyes. I will cast *Legilimens* and show you our destination.'

A moment later, and Hermione had the picture in her mind that she needed.

Endeavouring to balance on his partially deadened feet, Severus cautiously stood and glanced around the room. 'Return everything to its former state, Miss Granger. We must leave no clues.'

Hermione nodded and complied with his request. Working quickly, she removed all trace of her ever being there. 'I think that's everything...' She looked around. 'Are you ready?'

'Just one more thing.' Severus gestured towards his wand. 'Snap it.'

'Sir? I can't...'

'Do it, Miss Granger. A registered wand is of no use to me. I have another at home.'

'If you're sure...'

'I am.'

'Very well.' Holding the wand with both hands, Hermione quickly broke it over her knee.

Severus let out a low keening sound and swayed on his feet. Alarmed, Hermione dropped the pieces and rushed to steady him but had the sense not to ask him how he felt. She slipped her arm around his waist. 'Now, sir?'

'I am in your capable hands, Miss Granger.'

Hermione pressed herself against him and Disapparated.

~*~

Appearing in Severus' living room with *apop*, they promptly fell in an undignified heap onto the sofa.

Hermione scrambled off him, hastily straightening her clothing. 'Sorry, sir. Are you all right?'

'I appear to be in one piece,' Severus replied drily, struggling to right himself. 'Although your Apparating technique leaves a lot to be desired.' He waved a hand to illuminate the candle sconces.

'I've never Side-Alonged over such a long distance before...' Hermione admitted, trailing off as she noticed the bookcases that were lining the room for the first time.

Severus followed her gaze. 'Medical potions texts are over there,' he said, gesturing towards the shelves nearest the window. 'Poynter's "Physick" should be on the third shelf down, nearest the door.'

Hermione negotiated the furniture in the cramped living space, squeezing between the dining table and the shelving. She found the book easily enough, just where Severus said it would be. Returning to the sofa, she sat down, perching on the edge with the book on her lap, and asked his permission to open it.

'You may proceed, Miss Granger,' he replied, nodding towards the clasp. 'It is not a particularly dangerous work. It won't bite.'

Reassured the book would not attack her, Hermione found the appropriate page quickly and scanned over the instructions. It looked simple enough to brew.

'Do you have all the ingredients here?' she asked.

'Yes,' Severus replied. 'And other than the preparation of the coca leaves, and the second stage where you need to add the salamander blood, it is a relatively straightforward potion.' He smirked. 'Even you should be able to manage it.'

Hermione ignored the barb and smirked back. 'Thank you for the vote of confidence.' Her smile faded as she noted his pallor once more. 'But, first things first. Is there any food in the house?'

'Miss Granger...'

'When did you eat last, sir?' she insisted. 'I don't think it would be wise for you to take any more potions until you have something in your stomach. And besides which, I'm ravenously hungry.'

'I-this morning.' He sighed. 'The kitchen is through there. You might find some tins in the cupboard next to the cooker.'

'Fine. I'll see what I can rustle up.' Rubbing her arms, she stood up. 'It's a bit chilly in here, isn't it? I'll light the fire, too, shall I?'

Tiredly, Severus rested his head on the back of the settee. 'You may.'

A quick flick of her wand, and the room was soon warm and cosy. Satisfied that Severus was comfortable, Hermione left in search of something to eat.

She opened the door onto a small, square, but surprisingly well equipped kitchen. Other than the row of cauldrons hanging over the sink and the old-fashioned units, there was no real difference from an ordinary Muggle kitchen, as far as Hermione could tell. The cupboard next to the cooker contained a selection of tinned goods, just as Severus had described. Hermione rummaged through them (there seemed to be an awful lot of baked beans and sausages) until she found some vegetable soup right at the back. Not ideal, but it was bland, fairly nourishing and unlikely to upset Severus' stomach.

A moment later and Hermione had two steaming bowls of soup on the worktop. She opened the drawer next to the sink in search of some cutlery, but changed her mind, thinking that the last thing Professor Snape would want would be her spoon-feeding him. Instead, she levitated one of the bowls and directed it towards the living room, following behind with her own meal.

'Here you...' Hermione stopped dead at the sight of Severus fast asleep on the couch...or at least, she hoped he was sleeping. His hair had fallen over the side of his face, so all she could see was his nose, and he was breathing very quietly.

'Professor, sir?' she whispered.

'Wha-where...? Oh, it's you.' He sniffed. 'Soup?'

'Yes. Vegetable.' Hermione moved his bowl closer to him as he dug the heels of his hands into the sofa to sit upright. 'I'll keep this here for you. Do you think you can manage to sip from it?'

'I will try.' Gingerly, Severus cupped the bowl with the palms of his hands and tilted it towards his lips. He wrinkled his nose up. 'Hot.'

'Would you like me to blow on it?... Sir.'

Severus choked. 'That will not be necessary, Miss Granger.'

'Good.' Hermione smiled to herself, noticing the suggestion of a smirk, even though he was trying his best to hide it. She watched him a moment, making sure he was able to drink the soup without spilling it, before hungrily turning her attention to her own bowl.

Hermione had never found soup to be particularly filling, but after the day she'd had, she doubted she could have coped with anything more. It was warm, calming and she felt a lot better for eating it. She glanced at Severus, who seemed to be relishing the soup, too...if the slurping was anything to go by. Peculiarly, she felt strangely indulgent towards his appalling manners...Ron would have been given short shrift for making such disgusting noises...but Hermione could only feel happy that Severus was able to eat unaided. Other than that, they ate in silence.

Alone with her thoughts, Hermione concentrated on all the positive things that had happened over the past twenty-four hours. Against all the odds, Harry had survived, and they had won. That was the main thing, she told herself firmly. But she had also done her bit by saving a brave man from certain death and by helping him recover from his

ordeal. This filled her with a sense of achievement, a sense of usefulness, far removed from the terror and helplessness she had felt earlier on in the day when everything seemed to be falling apart around her. Keeping busy and focusing her efforts on helping Professor Snape, she realised, was infinitely preferable to dwelling on the memories of all the carnage and devastation she had recently witnessed.

Severus gave a contented sigh. 'Thank you,' he said, releasing the bowl. 'I have finished.' He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'When you are ready...'

'Of course.' Smiling, Hermione grasped the bowl and removed the spell. 'Do you normally brew in the kitchen? Only, I saw the cauldrons and...'

'Yes, Miss Granger,' Severus interrupted. 'Your observational skills are as acute as ever.' He tried to stand up.

'I can manage it on my own, sir,' said Hermione. 'You don't have to...'

'But I insist,' Severus replied, still struggling to get to his feet. 'It's not that I doubt your ability as a brewer, but I do not have unlimited resources...I only have sufficient ingredients for one attempt. Therefore, I will supervise.'

'Okay.' Hermione sighed, knowing it was pointless arguing. Instead, she tried to think of a means of helping him get to the kitchen under his own steam. 'Just a minute.' She dragged one of the high-backed dining chairs over. 'Try using this for support.'

Severus raised his eyebrows, inclining his head slightly. Although he did not voice his approval of her idea, Hermione could see that he was pleased. She smiled. 'I'll steady it while you stand up.'

With some effort, Severus wrapped his arms around the back of the chair, gripping it with his elbows and pulled himself upright while Hermione knelt on the seat to counterbalance his weight. Once he had steadied himself, Severus leant over the chair slightly and experimentally tried moving by inching it forward with his body and taking careful steps behind on his heels. It was a laborious process; Severus' balance was unstable, and Hermione had to grab him a few times when both chair and Severus threatened to topple over. She wondered if she should offer to levitate him on the chair, but decided that would only injure his pride further. Instead, they took their time, making it to the kitchen without any major disasters.

'There,' said Hermione, helping Severus to sit down at the table. 'We did it. Now, can I get you anything else...a cup of tea, glass of water...?'

'Water... Please.'

Hermione quickly produced a glass of water and added a straw to it.

Severus looked at her keenly. 'Your ingenuity knows no bounds, Miss Granger.' He smirked, pointing towards the scullery. 'You should find everything you need in there.'

Hermione giggled and went to fetch the potions book.

~ * ~

'Well... That seems to be everything,' Hermione said, mentally checking the potions ingredients she had laid out on the kitchen table. Satisfied all was present and correct, she reached towards the cauldrons: a standard, size-two pewter should do the trick...

'Not that one!' Severus cried.

Hermione pulled her hand back as if she had been scalded. 'Sorry.'

'The bottom has almost worn through,' he said, folding his arms and scowling. 'The one next to it would be more suitable for our purposes.'

'Fine.' Hermione took down the cauldron and placed it on the table. She consulted the book again. 'Hmm... Strength and dosage. Full limb... no... Back... no... Ah, here we go... Fingers, toes and miscellaneous.'

Severus sighed impatiently. 'What does it say?'

'Um... "Cause of injury: curse, poison, other...";' Hermione read. 'Well, we know the answer to that one.'

'Yes, yes. Get on with it.'

She turned the page. "'Condition of skin: discolouration, blackening, etc...".'

Severus held his hands out. 'None.'

'What about your feet?' Hermione asked.

'The distribution of the venom will be the same,' Severus replied.

'Shouldn't you check?'

He pursed his lips and glared at her. 'The same. Take my word for it.'

'Very well.' She checked the book again, resisting the temptation to sigh. *They're your feet.* 'How far down the fingers does the numbness extend?'

Severus looked at his hands. 'That is... difficult to ascertain.'

'Let me see.'

Hesitantly, Severus held the palms of his hands out towards her. Grasping his left hand, Hermione began to firmly prod the flesh of his palm with her thumbs, starting near the wrist and methodically working her way up to the base of his fingers. She couldn't help noticing how warm his skin was.

'Any pins and needles?' Hermione asked. 'Or is there a definite line between sensation and numbness?'

Severus swallowed and cleared his throat. 'No,' he replied gruffly. 'No pins and needles. The loss of sensation appears to be from the third knuckle up.'

'Okay... But just to make sure...' Not letting go of his hand, Hermione reached into her hair and pulled out the slide that was holding it back. As it sprang from its confines and tumbled around her shoulders, Hermione heard Severus gasp. She looked up in concern and found herself staring into a pair of dark, fathomless eyes. *Oh, God.* Her stomach clenched, and she looked away quickly, hoping he hadn't been using Legilimency at the moment when she had felt such an unmistakable physical response to him. Simultaneously, the frightening thought struck her that she was alone, in an unknown location, with a dangerous man...a known Death Eater, in fact...and that no one else was aware of her whereabouts.

'Close your eyes or look away, please.' Hermione hoped her voice didn't betray how nervous she had suddenly become. She began to press the metal point of the hairgrip around the base of his thumb. 'Can you feel anything?'

'Yes.'

She couldn't look at him. 'How about now?'

'No.'

Hermione repeated the procedure around the base of each finger, establishing the extent of the damage. 'I think that's it,' she said finally. 'It should be easy to work out the potency needed. The instructions are quite precise for regenerating nerves in digits.' Self-consciously, she gathered her hair into a ponytail, twisted it into a bun and fixed it into place with the slide. She took a deep breath, picked up a knife and started to prepare the ingredients.

~ * ~

An hour later, Hermione sat down wearily and wiped her brow with her sleeve. Under Severus' critical eye, the three drops of Salamander blood had been added at the precise time and temperature, and the potion, a pale, lustrous mother-of-pearl concoction, was now simmering gently on a low heat. Hermione yawned and looked at her watch, trying to work out how long she had gone without sleep and being too tired to calculate. She had been running on adrenalin for hours now, and it appeared her reserves of energy were not going to last for much longer.

Severus seemed to read her mind. 'You are tired. There is a phial of Invigoration Draught in the storeroom, if you would like some.'

Gratefully, Hermione accepted. She walked into the converted scullery, rubbing her aching back, marvelling at how well-stocked Professor Snape managed to keep it. Spotting the phial, she swallowed its contents in one gulp. Seconds later, Hermione felt completely revitalised.

'The potion is almost ready, Miss Granger,' Severus called from the kitchen.

'Coming, Professor.' Hermione returned to the cauldron and extinguished the flame. 'It should be cool enough to take in five minutes or so.'

'Agreed.' Severus shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'Miss Granger, I would... appreciate it if you did not call me "Professor" any longer since my teaching days are well and truly over. Professor Snape died in the Shrieking Shack, and that is where I would like to leave him.'

'All-all right,' Hermione stammered. 'In that case, what would you like me to call you?' She wiped her hands nervously on her robe.

'My name is Severus, Miss Granger.'

'Okay... Severus.' Hermione blushed. 'But please call me, "Hermione".'

Severus inclined his head, smirking slightly. 'Hermione.'

There was that clenching again. Knowing she must be as red as a beetroot, Hermione began clearing away to take her mind off her embarrassment while they waited for the potion to cool down. 'I couldn't help noticing,' she said, breaking the awkward silence that seemed to have descended, 'you have quite a few phoenix feathers stored in there.'

'Indeed,' Severus replied. 'Fawkes was very generous. The tears you found were his last gift to me after I...'

If she had been embarrassed before, she was mortified now. 'Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean...'

'Don't be,' Severus spat out. 'I did what the old bastard asked me to do...like I always did.' He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. 'Attend to the potion. It should be cool enough for me to take.'

Hermione checked the temperature before picking up a small ladle and carefully spooning a measured dose into a glass tumbler. She held it to Severus' lips, and he swallowed it without complaint.

'You'll need to take another one in twenty-four hours.'

Severus nodded and sipped some water to take away the taste.

Silently, Hermione bottled the remainder of the potion into measured phials and carried the cauldron over to the sink. She turned the tap on and started scrubbing.

'There is no need for you to do that, Miss Granger. You may leave now.'

'Leave?' She turned around abruptly, splashing water over the front of her robe. 'But... It could be two days before you get the full use of your hands back. How will you cope on your own?'

'I am still capable of wandless magic,' he sneered. 'I am more than capable of taking care of myself.'

'Really,' Hermione said, drying herself with a flick of her wand. 'Prove it. Summon a glass of water and drink it.'

Severus growled in protest but silently conjured a glass of water. It crashed to the floor.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and cast Reparo. 'What if someone goes to recover your "body" and suspects you're alive? This is the first place the Aurors will look. You won't be able to defend yourself if they hex first and ask questions later.'

His face was like thunder. 'That is a chance I will have to take.'

Hermione sat down at the table, a plan forming in her head. 'Look,' she said. 'This is no time for bravado. I have somewhere you could go... Somewhere no one would think of looking for you.'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'And where might that be?'

'Ireland,' she replied. 'My Granny's old house. You'd be safe there, and you could stay until you recover...or as long as you like.'

'Are you serious?'

'Perfectly.' She smiled, warming to the idea. 'I've been meaning to take a trip anyway to check the place is all right. It's fairly remote; there are no neighbours close by, and the nearest magical community is thirty miles away.'

Severus looked at her quizzically. 'I am a wanted criminal, Hermione. You should have turned me over to the Aurors yourself...I would have been powerless to stop you. Yet, once again, you are going out of your way to help me, offering me shelter and risking your own liberty in the process. I'm still at a loss as to why.'

'In all honesty, I'm not completely sure.' She stared at the floor and picked at her robe, unable to return his steady gaze. 'I just know you're a good man who sacrificed a lot of his life to keep my best friend alive. You deserve another chance, and if you want a fresh start somewhere else with a new identity, I'll do whatever I can to help...'

Startled, Hermione's head shot up as she felt Severus cover her hand with his own, his eyes burning with some emotion that stole her breath away.

'In that case,' Severus said, 'we should hurry. There is much to be done before we can leave, and I will need your assistance to pack.'

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

Packing...? He's talking to you, Hermione. He said something about packing. Don't just sit there like a stranded goldfish, you idiot. Say something!

She gulped. 'I-yes. Of-of course I'll help you pack.' To her embarrassment, a large bead of sweat dripped off the end of her nose and onto his hand. Severus withdrew it immediately.

'But... Um, could I use your loo first, please?'

Severus sat back in his chair, his face impassive. 'You may. You'll find the bathroom upstairs...first door on the right.'

'Thanks.' Hermione got up and made what she hoped was a dignified exit, even though every instinct was telling her to leg it as fast as she could. She took the stairs two at a time, Summoning her bag as she went, ran into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. *What the hell must he think of me?* She groaned. *Did I really just drip sweat over him?*

Looking about her, Hermione quickly appraised her surroundings. Like most bathrooms in houses of that age and style, it was small and poky. Not even the rays of the early morning sun could alleviate the sense of gloom and neglect. The difference between it and the sumptuous facilities Hermione had glimpsed at Hogwarts could not have been more pronounced...Severus' bathroom seemed like a hovel in comparison, but then, whose wouldn't? Although, having said that, the fixtures and fittings appeared to be the original Edwardian, and her mother would have killed for the cast-iron, roll-top bath with the clawed feet. She wrinkled her nose up; the place didn't *smell*, exactly, but it could have done with a lick of paint and a damn good clean.

I don't suppose Severus has been here in ages, Hermione thought charitably, lowering the heavy, wooden seat on the toilet. 'Oh, well...'

Settling herself on the loo, Hermione pondered the night's strange turn of events. Could she really be attracted to Snape? And more importantly, did he fancy her? The feeling in the pit of her stomach had been unmistakable, but... Snape? No, not Snape... *Severus*... The image of him asleep and vulnerable on the sofa came to mind, and she caught herself smiling at the memory... And then there was the way he'd looked at her when... A shiver ran down her spine. 'Severus.' She rolled the name around her tongue, trying it out for size, prolonging the sibilant 's' at the end. A name to be savoured, whispered in a shared moment of intimacy or screamed in the height of frenzied passion. Hermione giggled as she stood up. Her thoughts were starting to sound like a really cheap romantic novel.

She pulled the chain and stepped over to the washbasin. Catching sight of herself in the mirror as she turned the tap on brought her up short.

'No wonder he was staring at me.' Hermione regarded her reflection with horror. Blotchy skin, puffy eyes, escaped tendrils of hair frizzed beyond redemption. Her robe, dirty torn and damp, had sweat stains under the armpits. She couldn't have looked scruffier if she'd been helping Hagrid muck out the Thestrals all night.

'I have been in a *battle*,' she declared to the grubby urchin in front of her.

'That would explain a lot,' replied the mirror.

Hermione stifled a yelp. For as long as she lived, Hermione doubted she would ever get used to mirrors that talked back...strange ones, at least. She splashed some water on her face and neck, sorted out the tangle of brambles that was her hair, and repaired and cleaned her robe.

'Scrub up nice, though, don't you,' the mirror commented, as Hermione fished a tube of moisturiser out of her bag and applied some. 'It's been a while since I've seen a young lady. Makes a nice change to see a pretty face rather than his nibs' ugly mug glaring at me, let me tell you.'

'Severus is not ugly,' Hermione retorted, rubbing the cream into her skin. 'I know he's not handsome, but he's... arresting.'

'That's rather, er... generous of you.' The mirror chuckled. 'Why, even his mother...'

'Go on,' said Hermione, all ears.

The mirror paused. 'No, I'm not going to gossip about the family, unless... You're not his wife, are you?'

'NO!' Hermione squeaked, turning pink.

'Ah, do I detect a certain... frisson?'

'No,' Hermione repeated, grabbing her bag. 'You don't. And I can't waste any more time standing here talking to you.'

'Pity.' The mirror sighed. 'Still, it will be interesting to hear his view on the matter when I see him next.'

Hermione stopped dead in the doorway. If she had been bursting for a pee, surely Severus must have...? The silly man was probably too proud to ask for help and... 'Oh, my God. How much help will he need?'

She went downstairs, trying to think of a tactful way of asking Severus if he needed any assistance. Entering the kitchen, Hermione found him asleep once again, slumped over the table, head resting on his folded arms.

She felt a wave of protectiveness towards him. *He must be knackered.* 'Um... Severus?'

He opened his eyes and sat up wearily, blinking at her.

'Are you sure you want to leave straight away?' she asked, feeling guilty for having woken him. 'You're exhausted and...'

'We cannot afford to stay here,' Severus replied, 'tempting though it would be to risk waiting another day until we could use the cover of darkness to our advantage.' He yawned, flexing his back. 'I am only delaying our departure as it is because I cannot imagine anyone bothering to go to the Shrieking Shack before breakfast to... But that does not mean we should be complacent about it.'

Hermione sighed, but she knew he was right. 'Okay. Can I get you anything?'

'If you mean a potion, no,' he replied, pushing his hair off his face with the back of his hand. 'I cannot take anything that may interfere with my recovery.'

'No, of course. I hadn't thought of that.' Hermione drew her wand. 'But perhaps a Cooling Charm might help. May I?'

Severus nodded and closed his eyes while Hermione used charms to cool and soothe his skin. He smiled when she had finished. 'That was most refreshing. Thank you.'

'You're welcome.' Hermione smiled in return. 'Now, about the packing. Shall we start upstairs with your clothes? You must need the loo as well. I'll Apparate us to the landing, shall I?' She hoped her voice sounded brisk and business like and did not betray her discomfort.

Surprisingly, Severus did not argue, but leant his hands on the table and stood up. This time, however, when Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed herself against him, she was only too aware of the masculinity of the wizard she was holding; the feel of his hard, thin body sent a jolt of desire through her. She pushed the feeling aside and Disapparated.

As they reappeared upstairs, Severus put his arm out to prevent them from falling over, but as Hermione let go, he allowed himself to slide down the wall. She looked at him quizzically.

'The easiest way for me to get around unaided is to crawl,' he explained. 'That,' he pointed to the door directly behind her, 'is the box-room. You will find some carpet bags in the wardrobe. Wait in there until I call you.'

'All right.' Hermione looked at him and blushed. 'Do you need any...?'

'I will manage,' Severus growled. 'Please, do as I ask.'

Hermione turned towards the room Severus had indicated, but then changed her mind and stepped towards the bathroom instead. 'Let me open the door for you.'

'Hermione!'

'Okay, okay.' She turned and fled.

~ * ~

It only took a minute for Hermione to find the bags Severus had asked her to dig out of the wardrobe. They were in a reasonable enough condition, although they were rather old and smelt of must and mothballs. 'Why wouldn't he put some sort of preservation charm on them?' Hermione wondered as she performed a freshening charm to get rid of the smell. Clearing away the dust on the lid of an old chest for somewhere to sit, it occurred to her that the room looked like no one had set foot in it in years. Sighing, Hermione sat down and waited for Severus to call her.

A moment later, and she shot to her feet again at the sound of an almighty crash and some inventive cursing coming from the bathroom. Heart pounding, Hermione stood with her hand on the doorknob, debating whether or not to intervene but thought better of it. Severus hadn't called for help, which meant she should stay put. But... It had gone terribly quiet out there... Was he okay? She was about to risk a quick peek when she heard the bathroom door scrape over the linoleum. Hermione sighed with relief.

But Severus didn't call for her. Instead, Hermione heard a shuffling noise outside and the creak of another door opening. 'What on earth is he doing?' she wondered out loud.

'Hermione, you may bring the bags now.'

She stepped onto the landing. 'Where are you?'

'In here.'

Hermione followed the sound of his voice into what turned out to be his bedroom. Severus was sitting on the bed. He smirked when he saw her. 'As you see, I am not a complete invalid.'

Hermione raised an eyebrow. 'Congratulations.' Her eyes scanned the room quickly. Like elsewhere in the house, the furniture was old, dusty and had seen better days.

Severus did not seem to be the least bit embarrassed by the state of the place. 'I have very few personal effects here that I need to take with me,' Severus began. 'Most of my good robes are at Hogwarts. However...' He waved his hand at the wardrobe which flew open at his command. 'I should like to take my Muggle clothing. If you wouldn't mind...'

It didn't take long for Hermione to shrink and pack the contents of Severus' wardrobe since an old robe, some shirts and a couple of pairs of jeans~~jeans~~ was all it contained. Next, she emptied the chest of drawers and packed the contents, apart from a long, slender wand-box.

She hesitated. 'Would you prefer to carry it?'

'I most certainly would,' Severus replied, holding out his left arm. 'If you would be so kind...'

Hermione carefully placed the wand inside his sleeve. 'There.'

Severus took one last look around. 'There is nothing more to be done here,' he pronounced. 'You may Apparate me to the living room.'

~ * ~

'I cannot take them all, much as I would like to.' Severus was sitting on the couch, scowling.

'And I still don't see why not.' Hermione folded her arms and tapped her foot in frustration. Packing his books was taking much longer than anticipated, and time was getting on. 'I know I wouldn't want to leave any of my books behind, if it were me.'

'Isn't it obvious?' he yelled. 'If the Aurors come looking for me, and they see empty bookshelves, they will become suspicious.' Severus narrowed his eyes and glared at her. 'I have to choose.'

Hermione was unperturbed. 'Tell me... How many Aurors or Order members have visited you here?'

'Only Albus,' Severus replied. 'Why?'

Hermione grinned. 'Then why not Banish the bookcases? No one would be any the wiser.'

Severus inclined his head. 'I must be very tired, or the venom has addled my brain. I should have thought of that myself.'

'That's settled then.' She raised her wand but hesitated. 'Do you think you can hold the bag steady? It would be a lot quicker.'

Hermione tried to be as delicate with her wand work as possible since most of the books were quite ancient and some of the livelier tomes squawked in protest at being lifted off their shelves, shrunk in mid-air and stuffed into a dark bag. One particularly spirited one, trying to struggle against the pull of magic, knocked another, mercifully small, book straight towards Hermione's head. She tried to duck, but the book glanced off her shoulder and landed, open and face down, on the floor.

'Sorry, Severus,' Hermione said, stopping to retrieve the small book. 'Hmm... "Damelza Dalrymple's Fyndinge and Byndinge your Wizzyrd: A Witch's Guide to Love, Courtshyppe and Matrymonie."' She looked at Severus and raised an eyebrow.

'It's not mine,' Severus said hastily. 'It belonged to my mother. Take it if you want it.'

It wasn't really Hermione's sort of thing, but Severus was offering her a book from his collection, which she knew was something of an honour. Turning it down would have been impolite, so she accepted it with a smile and a thank you and put it in her own bag.

Once the books were packed and the sitting room made to look like no bookcases had ever graced the walls, Severus announced that he wanted to take some of his rarer potions ingredients with him.

'Shall I Apparate us?' It was out of Hermione's mouth before she had time to engage her brain.

Severus smirked at her. 'Much as I'm sure that you're dying to get your hands on me again, do you think Apparating into a room full of glass and toxic substances is a very good idea?'

Hermione turned bright pink. 'No. Sorry. That was a really stupid suggestion. How about a levitation charm instead?'

Severus begrudgingly agreed that this was the most sensible course of action under the circumstances.

~ * ~

Standing together in the close confines of the storeroom, Hermione worked quickly, packing the jars, phials and sundry supplies (including the phoenix feathers) as Severus made his selection. After everything had been carefully stowed away, Hermione rearranged the shelves, spacing out the remaining containers, so that the place wouldn't look like it had been raided.

Severus nodded in satisfaction at her handiwork. 'I believe that is everything.'

Hermione helped him back into the kitchen where the other two bags were waiting on the table. She glanced up. 'What about the cauldrons?' she asked. 'It seems a pity to leave them behind.'

'I should take the silver one, certainly,' Severus agreed. 'And maybe one or two of the pewter ones.'

Hermione took down the silver cauldron and shrank it together with the pewter one she had used earlier. 'Which other one?'

Severus seemed undecided. 'The larger one next to it, and perhaps also... No... No, it doesn't matter.'

'Which? This one?' Hermione asked. 'I thought you said the bottom had almost worn through.'

'Yes, it has...' Severus trailed off. He shook his head. 'No, the other would be more useful.'

Hermione sensed something was amiss and looked more closely at the battered old cauldron. She smiled. 'It's your old school cauldron, isn't it?'

Severus nodded grimly. 'The first one I ever owned... I-Never mind. It is of no consequence.'

'But it obviously means something special to you,' she pressed.

'Yes.' He sighed. 'It does. But...no, really, it's not that important.'

'Now, why do I get the feeling that you don't really mean that?' Hermione smiled encouragingly.

'Oh, have it your own way.' He smirked back. 'If you must know... when my Hogwarts' letter came, and my mother and I went to Diagon Alley for supplies, my friend... Lily...' Severus' smile faded. 'Lily asked if she and her mother could come with us...' He paused again, staring off into space. 'So... we went and... Mum had saved up for ages to buy my wand, you see, but there wasn't much money left over for anything else. Mrs Evans, kind soul that she was, offered to buy me a new cauldron as a thank you present for taking them with us. I have treasured it ever since, even though it has long outlived its usefulness.'

For once, Hermione was at a loss for words. 'I don't think...of course it's important,' she stammered finally. 'You have to take it with you.'

'This is no time for sentimentality,' Severus retorted, frowning at her. 'It no longer has any practical purpose.'

'Perhaps not.' Hermione took the cauldron off its hook. 'But I still think you should take it.' She waved her wand and shrank it until it was the size of a walnut. In a flash of inspiration, Hermione Transfigured a teaspoon into a chain and threaded it through the handle of the miniature cauldron. She held it up so that Severus could see what she had done. 'I don't have anything to give you in exchange for the book, I'm afraid. This is the best I can do. May it protect you always and bring you good luck wherever you go.'

Severus' eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline. 'A talisman?' But he bowed his head anyway and allowed Hermione to fasten it around his neck.

'Yes.' She stepped back. 'Now, if that really is everything, we should be going.'

Severus put his hand on the little cauldron. 'Hermione, I...' He coughed. 'Have you ever Apparated to Ireland?'

'No,' she admitted. 'I haven't. It's over water and... no.'

'I see.'

'But we could catch the ferry from Holyhead,' she offered. 'I went there with the boys once to watch the Harpies. I know I can Apparate us there.'

Severus shook his head. 'No. Muggle transport would not be wise. The Ministry will be watching the ports, for one thing.'

'How then?'

'I have an idea, but it would be better to wait until nightfall.'

'Oh... Well, I suppose we could go to my parents' house,' Hermione suggested. 'I don't think anyone will come looking for me straight away. We'd be safe there for a bit, and we can get some sleep in the meantime.'

'That is an acceptable proposal.'

'Home it is then.' With a flick of her wand, Hermione shrank the bags and then put them in her pocket. Severus lifted his arms out to his side as Hermione, blushing profusely, stepped towards him.

~ * ~

'Sorry the bed isn't made up,' Hermione said, dragging a duvet out of cupboard. 'But, I thought you might be more comfortable in here, and there's an en suite bathroom...through there.' She helped Severus over to her parents' bed where he sat down looking thoroughly exhausted.

Severus waved his hand dismissively. 'It is fine. Luxurious, in fact. But would you mind... my boots?'

'Oh, no. Of course not.'

Hermione tugged off his boots, and Severus lay down with a contented sigh. She threw the duvet over him, making sure he was all tucked up, and drew the curtains. 'My room is across the landing. If I'm not here when you wake up, don't panic. I'll have gone to get us some food.'

But Severus' eyes were already closed. Hermione tip-toed out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

~ * ~

Hermione slept fitfully and woke up hungry. She took a long shower, scrubbing away all the grime and sweat of the previous day, although the smell of blood still lingered in her nostrils afterwards, and the hot water did nothing to quieten the screams that were ringing in her ears, courtesy of her troubled dreams. Once dressed, Hermione left her room and stopped on the landing, listening for any sounds from her parents' bedroom. If the snoring was anything to go by, Severus was sleeping soundly, just as she had hoped. Satisfied that it was safe to leave him alone for a little while, Hermione crept downstairs and out of the house.

In just over an hour, Hermione returned home from the supermarket laden with carrier bags full of groceries. Most of it was for their trip, but Hermione didn't intend going anywhere before they had both had a decent meal. Not knowing Severus' particular tastes, she had bought a bit of everything.

The sound of water hissing through the pipes alerted her to movement upstairs, and she went to investigate.

'Severus?' Hermione knocked on the door. 'Are you awake?'

'Yes. Wait a moment.' There was a loud "thump" and a rustle of bedclothes. 'You may enter.'

Hermione went in and wrinkled her nose up. There was a definite smell of unwashed male in the room. She pulled the curtains back and opened the window before turning towards him.

'How are you feeling?' she asked, regarding the pale wizard sitting up in the bed. He looked tousled from sleep, unkempt, and with at least a day's worth of stubble, rather roguish in a peculiar sort of way.

'Better, on the whole,' Severus replied. 'Although, I could do with a bath, a shave and something to eat.'

'Well,' said Hermione. 'If you can think of a way of achieving the first two while retaining your dignity and sparing me any trauma, I'd be happy to help. And, now you're awake, I'll go and attend to the third.'

Severus stared at her a moment, then threw his head back and laughed. 'Cleaning charms it is, then. I don't suppose you know the Shaving Charm as well, do you?'

'Fraid not,' Hermione replied, giggling. 'You'll have to wait until you can do it yourself.'

'Have you any idea what it's like having an itch you can't scratch?' he grumbled, pushing the duvet off him.

Oh, yes. 'Must be awful,' Hermione replied, performing the necessary charms. 'Now, I need to know if there's anything you don't like to eat.'

'Liver,' Severus replied without hesitation. 'And I'm not terribly fond of cabbage, either.'

'That's good because I haven't bought either of those things. Sit forward a minute.' Severus obeyed, and Hermione plumped up his pillows. 'I thought some scrambled on egg on toast, perhaps with a little bit of chicken. Does that sound all right?'

'White bread?'

'Yes.' She replied, putting the duvet back over him. 'It's fresh and soft. Would you like a cup of tea in the meantime?'

'Please. Milk, no sugar.'

'Okay. I'll go and put the kettle on.' Hermione walked towards the door.

'Hermione?'

'Yes?'

'Um... is there any chance of a chocolate biscuit... or two?'

Hermione glowered at him. 'Don't push it.' But she brought him some anyway.

~ * ~

'That-that *man!*' Seething with rage, Hermione dropped the tray on the draining board with enough force to make the cutlery bounce. *Of all the ungrateful...* She took a deep breath and let it out slowly before attending to the dishes.

The tea had been bad enough: 'Tea bags? Haven't you got any proper tea?' There was too much milk in it; it wasn't hot enough, and 'Did he have to drink out of a mug? Why couldn't she put it in a cup like a civilised person?'

She paused a moment, dishcloth in hand. There had been that one moment, though... when she'd fed him a piece of chocolate biscuit... and her fingers had touched his lips... and for a split second, she thought he was going to lick the crumbs off...

'Huh.' Hermione turned the tap on full force, splashing water everywhere. 'I prefer *dark* chocolate, Hermione,' she mocked in a whiny voice. 'This is a bit sickly, Hermione. Three-bags-full, Hermione.' Needless to say, she hadn't offered to feed him a second one.

'Bastard!'

Hermione dipped the frying pan into the hot water, squirted some washing-up liquid into it and angrily attacked the dried-on egg with the scouring pad. She had tried her best to think up a meal for him that would be satisfying but gentle on his stomach, something easy to digest. Had he been grateful for her efforts? Had he beggary.

'Adequate!' she snarled. 'I'll give him adequate.'

Getting Severus even to agree to being fed had been a battle in itself until Hermione had finally lost it and told him he could stick his snout in it and eat like a pig in a trough for all she cared. He'd hardly said a word after that and had meekly allowed Hermione to feed him forkfuls of egg and chicken while she sat and glared at him.

'Another two days of this, and I'll go stark-staring mad!' Hermione flicked her wand, sending the pieces of crockery flying to their appointed places in the cupboard. Huffing, she wiped her hands on the tea-towel.

Hermione was only too aware, that even with the best will in the world, she was not always the most tolerant of people, but Severus Snape, she decided, would try the patience of a saint. If someone had told her yesterday that she would be spending her first Voldemort-free day playing house-elf to her former Potions professor, she'd have escorted them personally to the Janus Thickey ward at St Mungo's and introduced them to Gilderoy Lockhart.

Hermione looked at the clock, poured herself a generous glass of wine and took it into the living-room. Time for the news. She had left her house guest resting upstairs with the promise to wake him as soon as it was dark, which meant she had a couple of hours to herself. Hermione put the telly on and flicked channels. There seemed to be an awful lot of reports of UFO activity, including a rather grainy picture of what looked like a witch on a broomstick, strange goings-on generally and concerns about very loud explosions occurring all over the country for which the military was denying all knowledge and responsibility.

She sighed and put her feet up. Wizarding Britain was partying like it was 1999, and she was stuck here. With Mister Personality. Hermione raised her glass and drank to Harry's continuing good health before downing a hefty glug of wine. She was so looking forward to Ireland.

~ * ~

By half-past ten, they were ready to leave. Severus asked Hermione for his winter cloak and advised her to also wrap up warmly.

'Why?' she demanded crossly. 'It's not that cold.'

'You will see,' Severus replied, smirking slightly. 'I will show you the memory of our final destination. Do you feel up to Apparating directly to Scotland, or would you prefer to do it in stages?'

Bastard! But Hermione knew short hops would be safer, as much as her pride wanted her to say, 'Of course I can Apparate to Scotland.' She didn't have a chance to say anything, however, as Severus was already looking into her eyes, showing her a picture of a rocky outcrop somewhere on the coast. Hermione memorised it: the salty air, the cry of the gulls, the sound of waves crashing on the rocks, and then, for the briefest of moments, she sensed a feeling of sadness, of remorse and knew that he was unhappy because she was still annoyed with him.

'I'd be happier to do it in stages, if that's all right,' she said, her anger melting. 'It was hard enough Apparating to your house from the Shrieking Shack. We're further south again, here.'

Severus inclined his head. 'A wise decision, Hermione,' he said, holding his arms out towards her. 'Shall we?'

~ * ~

Hermione was feeling distinctly nervous. Severus still hadn't told her his plan, but she was beginning to get a very bad feeling about it. They were standing on the cliff he had shown her...how close to the edge they were, she couldn't say, but by the sound of the waves crashing below, it wasn't very far. A nearby lighthouse flashed out over the sea, briefly illuminating the channel. Across the water, a row of twinkling streetlights was just about visible.

Hermione gripped Severus' robes, afraid to step away. 'Where are we?' she asked, looking up at him.

'*Maol Ceannaire*,' Severus replied, making no effort to remove her arms. 'The Mull of Kintyre...and over there...' He gestured toward the lights. '...about twelve miles away, is the coast of Ireland.'

Hermione swallowed. 'A-and how are we going to get from *here* to *there*,' she asked, although she was afraid she already knew the answer.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. 'We fly, Hermione.'

'I was afraid you were going to say that.'

He chuckled. 'Scared?'

'Terrified. I hate flying...' She trailed off, considering the implications. 'Severus, when they said you'd flown out of the window, I thought they were just making it up, but unless you're hiding a broom somewhere...'

'I do not need a broom,' Severus interrupted. 'And I am not a vampire either, in case you were wondering.'

Hermione was awestruck. So it was true. He really could fly. 'But can you, um, carry a passenger?'

'I can,' he replied, 'providing you make yourself weightless.'

'All-all right.' She drew her wand shakily. Best get this over and done with before she had time to dwell on it.

Severus stopped her. 'But, before you do that, get under my cloak properly and attach yourself to my side with a sticking charm.' He pushed the heavy material aside while Hermione cautiously stepped around him. She anchored herself by putting her left arm around his waist before casting the charms and then quickly wrapping the right one around his middle as her feet lifted off the ground.

'How do you take off?' she asked. 'Do you need to run, or anything?'

'Not in this instance, no,' Severus answered. 'I just have to do this...'

Then she was screaming as Severus stepped off the cliff, and the sea rushed up to meet them.

'You bastard,' Hermione gasped as they levelled off.

'Language, Miss Granger.'

When Hermione finally had the nerve to open her eyes again, they were out at sea. She had been clinging to Severus like grim death with her face buried against his chest for what seemed like hours, and she was freezing. Why on earth hadn't she thought to cast a Warming Charm? Hermione looked down but couldn't really see anything. The sky was cloudy; the only sources of light were the yellow necklace of Muggle streetlights that were growing ever nearer. It felt more like floating than flying she decided,

being buffeted like so much chaff in the wind, bouncing all over the place...rather like one of the more unpleasant rides in that theme park her father had insisted on taking her when she was little.

Severus looked down and grinned. 'Not much further,' he shouted over the wind.

'Good,' Hermione replied, teeth chattering. 'I feel sick.'

Severus held her more tightly. 'It's just motion sickness. You'll be fine once we land.'

'Can you go any faster?' Hermione asked.

'Yes,' he replied, extending his free arm out in front of him. 'But the prevailing wind is strong.' They started to pick up speed.

Hermione giggled. 'You'll be wearing tights next...with your pants on the outside. You didn't have to do that, really, did you?'

She was rewarded with a low rumbling chuckle. 'I'm hardly superhero material.'

Hermione thought differently. Severus might look thin and a bit weedy, but appearances were deceptive. She thought he was an extraordinary person; a brave, powerful wizard whose courage had been instrumental in securing a world safe for Muggle-borns like herself. Was it only last night she had found him at death's door? Now, here he was, flying...flying without a broom or any other sort of magical device. It went against every magical theory she had ever heard of...the only other wizard known to have mastered this feat being Voldemort himself. What more did he want? Of course he was a superhero...to her at any rate. No longer afraid, Hermione put her head on his chest again, relishing the contact while she still could.

Soon they were flying over the Muggle town, and Severus was looking around for a suitable place to set down.

'As I can't trust my feet to land properly, Hermione, we are going to have to roll. So, be prepared.'

'Now you tell me.'

'I will reduce speed as much as possible. Ready?'

Hermione opened her mouth to ask for more detailed instructions just as Severus touched down, fell to his knees and rolled to the left, dragging Hermione over him. They tumbled over each other once more, carried by the momentum, coming to rest with Severus sprawled on top.

'Are you... all right?'

Panting heavily, her nose almost touching his, Hermione gazed into Severus' eyes. He swallowed and moved imperceptibly closer, tilting his head...

'*Finite Incantatem!* Off. Quick!' In the nick of time, Hermione pushed Severus out of the way, turned on her side and was violently sick.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

Drip... Drip... Drip...

'*Look. At. Me...*'

'*Let's get out of here.*'

'*I'll just check his pulse...*'

'*He's dead, Hermione. Leave him!*'

'*But, Ron...*'

'*Come on!*'

Ron grabbed her wrist. The tunnel...? No. Not down there...

'*Severus!*'

Drip... Drip...

Rain. Seeping through the leaky guttering and splashing onto the concrete beneath the window. Hermione reached for her wand. *Harry...? No... Not the tunnel. Ireland.* She flopped back on her pillow, breathing heavily. Ron and Harry... Were they worrying about her? She hadn't given them as much as second thought since leaving Hogwarts. For some reason, this left her feeling strangely empty. Why? Shouldn't she be missing them? Did she really care what they were thinking? Ron was supposed to be her boyfriend, wasn't he? She put her hands behind her head and stared at the ceiling. Recent events seemed to have put paid to all of that.

Severus...

He had been about to kiss her; Hermione was sure of it. And then she'd thrown up. *Great*, she thought, shaking her head in disgust. *First I sweat on him, then I nearly puke all over him. What else can I do to impress him?*

Hermione fumbled for the clock and peered at it. Another forty minutes before she had to get up to give Severus his second dose of the nerve regenerating potion. The following twenty-four hours would not be pleasant for him; that much was certain. Re-growing nerve tissue was even more painful than growing bones once the feeling started to return, and he would not be able to take any potions to ease his suffering. She turned on her side away from the window and tried to blot out the sound of the rain falling. *I'll repair it... later...*

~ * ~

'Severus,' Hermione whispered. 'Wake up. It's time to take your potion.'

Severus' eyes shot open and darted frantically around the room. Seeing Hermione, he visibly relaxed.

'It's okay.' Hermione sat on the bed to put the phial to his lips. 'I didn't know where the hell I was, either.'

That earned her a small grin before he swallowed the potion in one gulp.

'Any improvement?' Hermione asked.

'Some tingling and pins and needles.' Severus attempted to move his fingers. 'No pain... yet.'

'That's good,' said Hermione. 'At least it's working.'

Severus nodded. 'But you look tired. Go and get some sleep. You've done all you can.'

'All right. But I'm leaving the doors open. Call me if you need anything.' Reluctantly, Hermione got up and returned to her own room.

~ * ~

I... I sssmell a Mudblood... Are you hungry, my pet?

'Nooo... Get off me...'

Hermione surfaced from a particularly unpleasant dream swathed in a tangle of bedclothes. She struggled free, rubbed her eyes and checked the time. It was almost ten...much later than she'd intended staying in bed. Annoyed with herself, Hermione dressed hurriedly. Severus hadn't called for her; at least, she hoped not. But whether that was a good or a bad thing, she wasn't entirely sure.

She knocked on Severus' door before entering, intending to ask him how he felt. But the words died on her lips as soon as she saw the state of him.

Eyes screwed closed, his jaw was clenched in pain, but he hadn't uttered a sound.

'Why didn't you call me?' Hermione immediately conjured some water and a cloth to bathe his forehead. He was soaked in sweat.

'N-nothing you can do,' he ground out.

Hermione tried to think of something...anything that might help alleviate the pain. 'Willow bark,' she mused. 'What if... What if I made a solution of willow bark and perhaps... menthol? Or a poultice, even? Would that help at all, do you think?'

'You could try. But... you didn't... pack any...'

'Don't worry.' Hermione wrung out the cloth and placed it on his forehead. 'I'll get some. I can Apparate to the nearest apothecary's and back in no time. I promise I'll be as quick as I can.'

It took Hermione less than half an hour to purchase the necessary items, return to the cottage, and set up a makeshift potions lab. Within minutes of her arrival, the kitchen was filled with the cleansing aroma of stewing willow bark, menthol and lavender as the rapidly prepared ingredients bubbled away in the cauldron. Stirring the concoction, Hermione decided that a liniment would be the ideal way of applying it...stronger than a solution but more easily absorbed than a poultice. She turned up the heat, reducing the potion until it was the consistency of runny cream. Happy with the result, Hermione left the lotion to cool and returned to Severus' bedside...only to find that his condition had worsened in her absence.

'Severus?' Hermione stared in horror at the rips and scorch marks on his robes. 'What happened?'

'Off... Poppy... Can't stand...!' A blast of magic shot across the room, igniting the curtains.

'Stop it!' Hermione extinguished the flames with a flick of her wand. 'You'll hurt yourself!'

'Off... please... burns... all over...'

Anxiously, Hermione cast a series of cooling charms, hoping that would help calm him down.

Severus' eyes flew open. 'You're not Poppy.'

'No, I'm Hermione.'

'What are you doing in my bedroom? Get out.'

'Erm... Poppy was called away.' Unfazed, Hermione sat on the bed, pressing the damp cloth to his face. 'But she told me to do this.'

Severus' breathing grew easier, and the manic look in his eyes diminished. 'Please. Can't stand it any longer...'

'It will be over soon. I promise. Try to...'

'Clothes. Off. Please...'

'I don't think...'

'Please... Hermione...'

'All-all right.' Nervously, Hermione pointed her wand at him. *You can do this... You can do it...!*Um... I'll just arrange the sheet over your middle.'

He grunted. 'Just... do it.'

Hermione kept her eyes on his face as she vanished away his clothing, making sure the sheet covered him from the waist down.

'Is that better?' she asked, trying not to look at his torso and failing.

'Much. Thank you.'

'What about your talisman?' Hermione reached for the clasp.

'Leave it.'

'All right... I'll... um... just go and check on the potion.' Hermione made a dash for the door, hoping yet again that he hadn't noticed just how much she was blushing.

Safely back in the kitchen, Hermione took a few deep breaths before splashing some water on her hot cheeks. Severus was ill. What on earth was she thinking, ogling his chest like that? She poured the cooled lotion into a bowl and noticed that her hands were shaking. *How can I touch him like this?* She tried to banish the vision that was burnt onto her retina: pale skin, wiry muscles, small pink nipples... *Hands and feet, Hermione. That's all you need touch. Hands and feet. Let's try and be a bit more detached about this, shall we?* Sighing, she picked up the bowl and took it upstairs.

'Now then,' Hermione said briskly, entering Severus' room. 'Let's see if...'. She gulped. The sheet had slipped below his navel revealing sharp hip bones and a line of sparse hair. '...this works.'

Severus did not open his eyes as Hermione sat down on the bed. 'Shall I start with your hands?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'I'll be as gentle as I can. Tell me if it hurts too much.' Hermione dipped her fingers into the liniment and picked up Severus' hand. He winced as she touched him, but he didn't tell her to stop. Watching his face for any signs of distress, Hermione began to lightly smooth the lotion over the back of his hand. She turned it over and spread some more onto his palm and fingers, unconsciously registering the calluses at the tips of the otherwise unblemished skin.

'That is... soothing.'

'Good.' Hermione picked up Severus' other hand and repeated the process. He let out a long sigh.

'Is the pain easing at all?'

'It is... bearable.'

Hermione smiled. 'That's something. I'll do your feet now.' She moved to the bottom of the bed and lifted the sheet to just above his ankles.

Now, Hermione had never been one for feet. After an extended camping trip with two teenage boys and their smelly socks, she thought they had an erotic potential as close to zero as you could possibly get. She could not imagine ever wanting to become intimately acquainted with Ron's feet...he had hairy toes, for heaven's sake...but Severus'...

Ginny had once told her that Harry had the cutest feet she'd ever seen, which had given Hermione a fit of the giggles. Cute? Not in her experience they weren't, but Ginny had smiled and said, 'Just you wait.' And now, Hermione could see where she was coming from. While 'cute' was hardly the word she would use to describe Severus' feet...or any other part of him, for that matter...they were... she struggled for an appropriate word... elegant. Yes, that was it. Elegant. They were lithe and strong and mercifully devoid of hair.

Hermione dunked her fingers into the bowl and started to spread the lotion over Severus' instep, relieved that she had her back to him. This way, she could stare as much as she liked and commit the sight and feel of him to memory without having to worry about being caught gawping. Smiling to herself, she applied a light pressure as she brought her hand under the sole and the underside of his toes, noting the absence of any corns or bunions. Severus had obviously taken good care of his feet over the years. Indeed, his skin was surprisingly smooth for someone who wore dragon-hide boots all the time... He jerked as she accidentally scratched a nail along the arch of his foot, pulling her out of her daydream. 'Am I hurting you?'

'No. Just, um... a little firmer... If you don't mind.'

Hermione had to bite her lip. Severus Snape was ticklish.

She transferred her attention to the other foot, which seemed to be a bit more sensitive, judging by the stifled moans Severus kept emitting from time to time. Glancing back to check that he was all right, Hermione was reassured to see that he seemed to be enduring the torment stoically. Once she had finished, she reluctantly removed her hands and replaced the sheet.

Severus opened his eyes. 'Why have you stopped?'

Hermione turned to face him. 'I don't want to cause you any more pain.'

'You are not. Continue. Please.'

'I-um...'. She swallowed nervously. 'Is there somewhere else you would like me to apply it?'

He smirked. 'I should like to say "everywhere", but... wherever you feel comfortable touching me would be fine.'

'I don't mind... That is, I... Oh, sod it! This is ridiculous.' Scooping up some lotion, Hermione hesitated briefly before depositing it on his chest. 'Do you want me to just spread it lightly or massage it in?'

Severus inhaled sharply through his teeth. 'Imagine a bad case of sunburn. That is how I believe my skin would feel.'

'Oh. Okay.' Carefully, Hermione moved the little cauldron to the side. Then, with the tips of her fingers, she slowly and gently smeared the liniment along his sternum and over his collarbone. 'Like this?'

'Yes. Just... That feels good.'

You're telling me. Feeling the tension ebb away, Hermione moved her hands over his shoulders and delicately traced a finger along the line of his stubble. It was quite easy to imagine now what he would look like with a full beard. *Not bad*, she thought. The designer stubble was really rather sexy. She wondered if he would wear it long like a traditional wizard when he grew old. 'I can't see any scarring,' she said. 'Is there any pain here?'

'No, none.'

'You can thank Fawkes for that.' Hermione touched his neck carefully.

Severus' lips twitched. 'And my nurse.'

She swallowed. *More lotion.* Hermione brought her hands gently down his sides to his hips, over his abdomen and back up over his chest in a broad sweeping motion. She could see and feel his ribs. How many skipped meals did that represent? Hermione bit her lip, avoiding the flat discs of his nipples, even though she ached to touch them. How sensitive were they? How would he respond if she rubbed her thumbs over them or used her tongue, or her teeth? Severus let out a shuddering breath.

More lotion. Hermione's hands moved down his right arm, paying particular to the elbow, noting the veins showing through the pale skin and the solitary freckle on his inner wrist...

More lotion. Such beautiful hands. Long, slender fingers. Musicians' hands. What would they feel like on her...in her?

'Are you all right, Hermione?'

'Hmm...? Oh, yes. Yes, I'm... yes.'

'You seemed far away there.'

Hermione gave a nervous laugh. 'No, I was um... reading your palm.'

Severus looked sceptical. 'Really? I did not take you for the sort of person who would give any credence to something as... unreliable as Divination.'

'I'm not normally,' Hermione replied, thinking fast. 'But I couldn't help noticing you have a long, er... life line.'

'How... fascinating.' Severus raised an eyebrow and smirked. 'Tell me more, O Wise One.'

Hermione would have swatted him if he hadn't been in such pain. She tried desperately to remember everything she could about Chiromancy. What had Lavender said to look for in a man's hand? She traced the curved line around the pad of his thumb while she thought of something to say. 'Your life line is long, but there is a break just *here* which indicates a sudden change of direction in your life's path.'

He snorted. 'I suspect you would not need to look at my hand to surmise that. Continue.'

'I can't remember much,' Hermione admitted. 'Only the things, um... girls look for.'

'And what may I ask would that be?' Severus seemed genuinely curious.

'Well...' Hermione turned his hand slightly. 'This line that runs from just under your little finger and curves up between your index and middle fingers is your heart line. A short heart line indicates a cold and unfeeling person. A long curving one like yours tells me that you have high expectations and high standards in relationships. You are emotionally intense, devoted to your loved ones...sometimes possessive, but always loyal and supportive. You would make any partner feel protected and safe...' Hermione risked a glance at him. Severus was looking at her intently.

'And, of course, the marriage lines,' she blurted out.

'Of course.'

Ignoring the sarcasm in his voice, Hermione continued, 'These little lines here at the side of your hand between the heart line and your little finger...' Hermione examined them closely. 'Two... not necessarily marriages, but deep um... relationships, and this little line that crosses your second marriage line means you will have one child.'

Severus grunted. 'Utter rot.'

'I know.' Hermione sighed. 'I mean, I have eight child lines on my left hand...the hand of possibility. *Eight.* What are the chances of that happening?' She picked up the bowl. 'Anyway, there's just about enough lotion left to do your other arm, but I can make more if you need it.'

Severus shook his head. 'That will not be necessary. I believe the worst is over.'

And that proved to be the case. There were two more episodes of intense pain and overheating during the day, which Hermione was able to counter with cold water compresses and cooling charms. Between the bouts of pain, Severus slept and Hermione kept watch, afraid to leave his side in case the delirium returned, but his sleep appeared to be uneventful.

Around midnight, Hermione started to feel a bit drowsy. She curled up in the comfy chair she'd Transfigured, tucking her feet under her and stuffing a cushion behind her head. Her eyelids started to droop. *Just for a minute... only a minute...*

Green smoke... Can't see...

Harry's voice: 'Hermione, where are you?'

She tried to scream...she really did.

Ron's voice. 'She's dead.'

'I'm not; I'm not.'

Rough hands were lifting her, throwing her onto a funeral pyre.

Fire. She was on fire. 'Help! Someone help me!'

'This one is alive.'

Strong arms were lifting her gently, enfolding her. Safe...

'Are you an angel?'

He chuckled softly. 'No one's ever called me that before. Go back to sleep...'

~ * ~

At least the rain had stopped.

Hermione turned her head towards the window where the morning sun was streaming through the gap in the curtains. Rubbing her eyes and yawning, she became conscious of the fact that she still had all her clothes on. How...? She kicked off the covers hurriedly and got out of bed. Hermione had no recollection of getting there, which could only mean that she'd been carried...and that meant a certain wizard had found his feet during the night.

Feeling decidedly grotty, Hermione yanked off her clothes and pulled a bathrobe out of her bag. A shower was well overdue. She tied her hair up out of the way as she padded barefoot towards the door, wondering if Severus was fully recovered. Yawning sleepily, Hermione turned the doorknob.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight that greeted her on the landing: Severus... A just washed, still damp Severus... Severus with wet hair clinging to a newly shaved face... Severus with a very small towel wrapped around his waist...

Close your mouth, Hermione. 'Oh,' she said. 'Have you, um... finished...in the bathroom?'

'Indeed,' he replied. 'I have.' Severus turned towards his room, giving Hermione a view of broad shoulders, a long back and narrow hips. 'And thank you for bringing my razor.' He looked over his shoulder and smirked. 'Have you raided anything else from my personal belongings that I should know about?'

Hermione rolled her eyes and sauntered into the bathroom.

~ * ~

'I think you may find,' Hermione said, leaning against the fridge, 'that the kettle generally works better when it's switched on.'

Severus glared at her. 'I have never seen the need to have an electric kettle when magic does the job more than adequately.'

'I was only teasing.' Hermione sighed. 'Look. I just think you need to take it easy for a bit longer...conserve your energy...and your magic.' She reached past him and flicked the switch. 'You know, I'm quite happy to do the cooking until you're fully recovered.'

'I was only trying to make some tea,' he grumbled. 'There's no need to nag.'

Hermione opened a cupboard and took out two cups and matching saucers. 'I'm not nagging,' she replied. 'You were almost killed, and even if you can walk again, that doesn't mean you can run a marathon, does it?'

Severus opened the tea-caddy and snorted in disgust. 'Tea-bags.' He stuck his nose in and sniffed. 'Floor scrapings.'

'Are you listening to me?' she yelled. 'You need to rest.'

'There is no need to shout. My hearing is not impaired.' He peered at the milk carton. 'Semi-skimmed? What on earth does that mean?'

Hermione slammed her hand on the worktop. 'That's it. Out of the kitchen. Go and make yourself comfy, and I'll bring the tea.'

'And biscuits?'

Hermione smiled sweetly. 'I thought you didn't like milk chocolate.'

He shrugged. 'I'll make do. This once.'

Hermione shook her head as Severus left the kitchen. She knew she shouldn't have shouted, but this was the first day he'd managed to stay on his feet for more than a few hours, and he was trying to do too much...

Be honest, Hermione. You lost it because you know he doesn't need you anymore.

Sighing, Hermione absentmindedly Summoned the milk carton and poured the last of the milk into the cups. It was hard for her to admit, but now Severus was well on his way to making a full recovery, there was no real reason for her to stay...other than the fact that she didn't want to go.

She had, of course, made it clear to Severus that he was welcome to use the cottage for as long as he wanted, but Hermione knew that he would leave as soon as he felt strong enough, and once he did, it was unlikely that she would ever see him again. Hermione reached for the kettle, blinking back the tears at the thought. Still, her feelings were not important; she had no right to take her frustrations out on him. It wasn't as if she meant anything to him, was it? He hadn't made any moves on her since they'd arrived at the cottage, had he? And no wonder; she was turning into Molly Weasley. Hermione came to a decision: for both their sakes, she simply had to stop treating him like an invalid.

Tea made, she carried the cups into the living room, floating the plate of biscuits in front of her. Severus took his cup and thanked her.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'I'm sorry I shouted, but you do look tired.'

'There is no need to apologise,' Severus replied, helping himself to a biscuit. 'It was inevitable that you would grow impatient with me.'

'That's not...' Hermione stopped, noticing the way the corners of his lips were twitching. 'Oh, you... you...'

'I was only teasing.' Severus grinned. 'But I am not as tired as I evidently look.'

'Is that so?' Hermione grinned back. 'In that case, you can make dinner.' She sipped her tea. 'We're out of bread and milk. I thought I'd take a walk down to the town and do some shopping. Is there anything you want?'

Severus drained his cup and handed it to her. 'Some decent tea if you can find it.'

'All right.' She laughed. 'I'll see what I can do.'

~ * ~

It was getting late. Standing on the little beach below the town, Hermione was watching the waves rolling towards the shore, in no hurry to return to the cottage. She had decided to take the long way home...to give Severus some time on his own, some space. It was better this way, she reasoned. Away from him, she could think more clearly...be more objective.

Closing her eyes, Hermione inhaled the salty air, feeling the sharp bite of the wind on her face. She smiled as the vision of Severus, standing in his old robe, performing his first successful spell and trying to hide his delight and relief...

Think of something else.

It made her want to scream with the insanity of it. Was it really only five days since Voldemort had been defeated? And now here she was, freezing to death on a beach, mooning over a man twice her age...a man she and the rest of the wizarding world had despised as a traitor barely a week ago.

Shaking her head, Hermione chided herself for being so stupid, for falling for someone who no doubt still thought of her as a child...and an irritating one at that. And she had fallen for him...big time. There was no getting away from it, and there was little hope of anything coming from it. Wrapping her jacket around her tightly, Hermione tilted her head back and shrieked into the wind, 'It's so bloody unfair!'

But the weather was indifferent to Hermione's plight; it toyed with her hair, whipping it around her face as she stood shivering. The pressure was dropping. There was a

storm on the way; she could sense it. And sure enough, as Hermione looked out to sea, the expected black clouds were gathering. She turned and started to walk quickly towards the road, heading for a sheltered spot where she knew she could safely Disapparate without fear of being observed.

Hermione reappeared in the small hallway just great splotches of rain were starting to pelt against the windows, driven by the gale force wind. In its exposed position, anything that came off the Atlantic hit the squat, stone house full force, but it had withstood many a storm in its day, and Hermione had no reason to worry that this time would be any different.

The smell of cooking teased her nostrils as she double-checked the door was secured against the weather, making her feel instantly hungry. Smiling, she shrugged off her jacket and smoothed down her hair. So, Severus was taking up the challenge to make dinner, was he? She took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full height, steeling herself to enter the kitchen. *Right. Be nonchalant. Be...*

Severus was standing at the cooker, stirring something...what it was didn't interest her in the slightest, but what he was wearing most certainly did.

'Ah, you're back,' he said, glancing in her direction. 'I took the liberty of opening a bottle of wine. I hope you don't mind.'

'N-no.' Hermione swallowed, trying not to stare at the sight of Severus in a pair of jeans and a Black Sabbath T-shirt. She put the shopping down on the table. 'Would you like me to pour you a glass?'

'Please.'

'The weather's turned nasty,' she said, picking up the bottle.

'So I noticed.'

Hermione poured two glasses of red wine and carried one over to the chef. 'I'd better dig some candles out...thunder and lightning usually equals power cuts in this neck of the woods.'

Severus smirked. 'I daresay we'll manage.' He picked up some parsley from the chopping board and threw it into the saucepan, turning his back to her.

'Yeah...!' Hermione was very glad Severus was wearing the T-shirt outside his trousers. She doubted whether she would have been able to control herself at the sight of a firm arse in tight jeans...correction, the sight of Severus' firm arse in a pair of tight jeans... 'Right. Candles. Um... Yeah, I think Dad usually keeps them under the sink.' She opened the cupboard and found the candles together with an unopened bag of tea-lights and a torch. 'These should do the trick.'

Severus grunted and continued stirring the sauce.

'That smells good, by the way,' Hermione said, picking up her wine glass. 'What is it?'

'There are two things I can cook reliably without the aid of a recipe book,' Severus replied. 'Spaghetti Carbonara and egg and chips. I trust your astounding powers of deduction can work out which this is.'

Hermione stuck her tongue out. 'I'll lay the table then, shall I?'

~ * ~

Severus' cooking was really rather good, but as they started to tuck in, there was a flash of lightning followed by a clap of thunder that shook the roof. As Hermione had predicted, the lights went out.

Neither missed a beat. Two synchronised wand movements lit the candles, and they carried on as if nothing had happened. They caught each other's eyes and laughed; Hermione's heart skipped a beat as Severus held her gaze just that little bit too long, the shadows dancing around his face in the flickering candlelight making him look dark and dangerous. Hermione knew she was lost.

'You make a mean egg and chips,' she said.

Severus looked thoughtful. Then, he inclined his head and raised his glass to her. 'Thank you, Hermione. For everything.'

'You don't have to thank me,' Hermione replied. 'I couldn't have just left you there to die.'

'Nevertheless, I am in your debt.'

'No.' Hermione leant forward and touched his hand. 'No more debts, no more vows. You're free, Severus. You owe me nothing.'

Severus smiled wryly. 'I'm afraid these things rarely work like that, although I appreciate what you are trying to say.' He withdrew his hand. 'Now. Eat up. I don't cook egg and chips for everyone, you know.'

~ * ~

Unable to sleep, Hermione stood in her pyjamas by the window watching the lightning and counting the seconds for the thunder. The gaps between the two were growing further apart as the storm rolled away, but Hermione didn't move. She had the most awful feeling in the pit of her stomach that dinner had been Severus' way of saying goodbye, and that by tomorrow morning, he would be gone.

Hermione chewed her lip to the point of pain to keep the tears back. She had hoped he would have said something, but he had not. Yes, there had one or two little looks that might have been taken as showing an interest but...

'Oh, who am I kidding? He's not in the least bit interested.'

She had obviously been imagining things, which was why she was standing here feeling miserable and not marching across to his room and throwing herself at him. Hermione snorted. Mercifully, she had a healthy fear of rejection, which was the only thing preventing her from making a complete and utter fool of herself.

Sighing, Hermione climbed into bed and picked up the little book Severus had given her from the bedside table. Well, she was sure she'd found her wizard, but binding him was something else entirely, and anyway, did she want to? Was it even ethical? Hermione flicked through the pages, glancing at the section on 'Wyfely Duties', and feeling distinctly aroused by some of the more explicit illustrations. *Let your inner seductress out to play in the bedroom...* It was all a bit more adventurous than she was used to, but it was all knowledge, and that was always preferable to ignorance, wasn't it? Who knew when it would come in handy? She closed the cover and kissed it. If she could only get him into bed, she'd show him her "inner seductress"... But, that wasn't going to happen. It was all just... hopeless.

'Nox!'

The Great Hall was silent as the grave. Hermione stared up at the gaping hole where the ceiling used to be, afraid to look down...afraid to gaze on the pile of bodies heaped on the Gryffindor table. But it didn't matter. She could still feel their lifeless eyes staring at her accusingly, outraged that she had survived when they all were dead. The Weasleys: dead. Remus and Tonks: dead. Professor McGonagall: dead. Harry: dead. She was the only one left alive...for the moment. But she wasn't going down without a fight.

'Ah... The Mudblood. Ready to join your friends?'

Hermione spun around, wand in hand, but Voldemort disarmed her without moving a muscle. The monster laughed hysterically at her feeble efforts.

'Children!' he cried. 'They insult me with children. Ava...'

'We destroyed your Horcruxes,' Hermione screamed. 'You are mortal, Voldemort. Severus Snape will kill what's left of you.'

'Snape? I think not.' He glanced towards the snake at his side. 'Will he Nagini?'

The snake hissed and burped.

'Apparently, there wasn't much meat on him, but what little there was, was quite tasty...'

Hermione screamed. 'Severus isn't dead. He isn't, he isn't.'

Someone was shaking her.

'It's all right, Hermione. Wake up. It's only a dream.'

Hermione's eyes snapped open to see Severus sitting on the edge of the bed. 'Severus? Is it really you? Oh, God, I thought that bloody snake had eaten you!' She sat up and flung her arms around him.

'Lumos!' He pulled her close and rubbed gentle circles over her back. 'Hush, now. It's all right. I'm here.'

'But it's not all right, though, is it?' Hermione wailed. 'It's n-never going to be all right. Fred, Remus, Tonks...they had a baby, and...and...' She was crying uncontrollably on his shoulder, great gulping sobs which seemed to be bursting from some unnameable horror within her, and now that she'd lifted the lid on the thing, there was no shoving it back down.

Stroking her hair, Severus murmured softly, 'Let it go, Hermione. Just let it go.'

Hermione clung to him. This was the only thing that made any sense in all the mayhem and bloodshed she had witnessed in the past year: being in Severus' arms, feeling his rapid heartbeat, the warmth of his skin... his bare skin. Her breathing quietened, and she lifted her head slowly, wiping away the tears. Through blurry eyes, Hermione stared in horror at the mess she'd made on his shoulder.

She groaned. 'I'm s-so sorry.'

'Whatever for?'

Hermione turned her head to face him. He was so close...too close. 'Because I-I...' Her courage failed her, and she dropped her eyes. 'F-first I sweat on your hand, then then I nearly throw up in your face, and n-now there's tears and snot all over your shoulder.' She dragged the back of her hand under her nose and sniffed. 'I c-can't imagine what you m-must think of me. I'm hardly sh-showing myself in my b-best light, am I?'

Severus' hand gently tilted her chin, and Hermione looked up...more in surprise than anything else.

'On the contrary,' he replied softly. 'These past few days, I have seen Hermione Granger at her kindest, bravest and most brilliant. You are an exceptional young woman. Never doubt that.'

For once, Hermione's mind was totally blank. She could only stare at him.

Severus chuckled and brushed a stray tear from her cheek with his thumb. 'As for this...' a brief flick of his hand cleaned up his shoulder. 'There... Gone. As for the vomit, the key word was 'nearly'. You gave me fair warning. And as for the sweat... Do you know what I did after you left the room?'

Hermione shook her head, not trusting her voice to speak.

Severus leaned in closer and whispered in her ear. 'I... Licked. It. Off.'

Hermione wasn't sure who kissed who first, but it didn't matter, just as long as there was kissing, lots of kissing, and there was no sign of it stopping anytime soon. Severus' hands were in her hair, clutching her head as his tongue explored her mouth, her face already stinging, thanks to his five o'clock shadow, but who cared? He tasted so damned good... Hermione ran her hands over his back, tracing the ridges of his spine down to the waistband of his pyjama bottoms, and dipped her finger underneath. Severus groaned into her mouth and broke the kiss.

'This is... madness...' he panted.

'No, it's called kissing.' Hermione lunged for him to prove her point, but Severus held her back.

'Hermione... You are distraught...'

He was touching her face, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her lips. Hermione opened her mouth enough to suck the tip gently.

Hissing, Severus drew his hand away. 'It-it is quite normal...' He swallowed hard. 'It is human nature to want... to need to... reaffirm life, after witnessing so much death.'

Hermione sighed. Did he have to be so bloody noble? Or, was there another reason? She reached for his hand and squeezed it. 'Is it... Is it because of... Lily?'

He looked at her sharply, then shook his head.

'In that case,' Hermione said, leaning closer, 'if you're not averse to... um... reaffirming life with me, and... as I would very much like to... reaffirm life with you, why don't we... um... reaffirm life together?' Not waiting for a reply, she kissed his lips gently. 'After all, who are we to go against human nature?'

Severus didn't move a muscle. Hermione searched his dark eyes for a clue, some tiny response...anything. He was so hard to read, but there was something there...she could tell, some battle going on behind that controlled facade. Hermione decided to go for broke. Maintaining eye contact, she slowly unbuttoned her pyjama top, took it off and threw it on the floor. His gaze dropped inevitably to her chest, but other than that, Severus remained as still as a statue.

Hermione touched his cheek. 'Severus?'

He leaned into her hand, eyes fluttering closed. 'Sweet girl.'

Smiling triumphantly, Hermione wrapped her free arm around him and lay down, pulling him with her. Severus did not resist, twisting around from his seated position to lie between her legs. This time the kiss was languid, sensuous, but there was also the sensation of his skin against hers to marvel at, not to mention the pressing hardness that was making its presence felt despite several layers of bedclothes and two pairs of pyjama bottoms. Arching into him, she slid her hands over his bony shoulder blades and down his back, slipping them under the elastic to fondle his arse.

Breathing heavily, Severus pulled away from her, a look of wonder on his face. 'Beautiful,' he gasped.

Me? Beautiful? No one had ever called her that before, and while she didn't believe it for a minute, Hermione quite liked the fact that Severus had said it. Feeling giddy with desire, she brought her hands back up to his head and gently guided him towards her left breast. Severus seemed to hesitate a moment before bringing his mouth down on her nipple.

'Ouch! Not so hard.'

'Sorry,' Severus mumbled before sucking it again. 'Better?'

'Mm... Oh, yes. Much.' Automatically, Hermione rocked her hips, seeking relief for the burning ache that was building between her legs. Severus gasped as she rubbed herself against his erection...a sound which Hermione found rather pleasing. So she did it again.

'Stop that, witch.'

Hermione giggled. 'I want you closer. Get into bed.'

Severus lifted his body, allowing Hermione to push the blankets out of the way, and scrambled around to lie on his side next to her. 'Hermione... Are you sure you want this?'

'Oh, Severus...' How much convincing did he need, for heaven's sake? 'Yes, I want this.'

Turning towards him, Hermione scooted down the bed a little. 'And I want this...' Severus inhaled sharply as she flicked her tongue over his right nipple... 'And this...' She kissed a trail down his chest to his navel and stopped. Bringing her hand up between his legs, she cupped his balls. 'And I want these... and I most definitely want... this.' She grasped his cock and squeezed.

Severus grabbed her hand. 'Don't. I'll...'

'It's all right.' Hermione smiled wickedly and winked at him. 'I don't expect you to last. Just lie back and enjoy it.'

Wide-eyed, Severus released his hold and rolled onto his back, obligingly lifting his hips when Hermione gripped the waistband of his pyjamas so she could pull them off.

'Very nice.' She beamed her approval at his naked form. Severus grinned back sheepishly.

Now, where to start...? Hmm...

However bold she might have felt about initiating their lovemaking, Hermione wasn't quite as confident as she would have liked to have been about what to do next. She wasn't a complete novice, though, and *Damelza's* book had given her a few new ideas, but this was Severus, and the last thing she wanted was to appear all girly and naive. Time to let out the "inner seductress". Wriggling around into a more comfortable position, Hermione leant forward and ran her tongue along the length of Severus' cock, delighting in the texture of the velvety soft skin. His entire body went rigid.

'Gods!'

Bemused, Hermione glanced up to see Severus clutching the sheet at either side of his body and looking as if he were in absolute agony.

'Relax...' She tried again, watching for his reaction as she swirled her tongue around the tip and licked off the pearly liquid she found there. Severus moaned, exhaling through his teeth.

'Hermione...'

He's trembling, Hermione thought in amazement. *It's probably been a while...* 'You taste good,' she said, hoping it would reassure him. 'Really good.'

She ran her fingertips down his shaft and fondled his sac, causing Severus to jerk under her touch. Encouraged, Hermione took the engorged head into her mouth and began to suck him gently, grasping the base as she did so. Severus' breathing hitched, his hips thrusting into her fist. He wasn't going to last much longer...even she could tell that; he was wound up tighter than a bow-string and liable to come at any minute. *And it's all my doing,* she thought, pleased that her simple technique was going to be enough to get him off. Humming, she applied more suction, taking as much of him into her mouth as she could...

'Com...*fu-uck...*'

Hermione gagged as a flood of hot semen hit the back of her throat, but she swallowed it quickly. With a smug smile, she turned to look at Severus, but he had covered his face with both hands.

'Was... that okay?' Hermione asked, crawling up the bed.

Severus groaned. 'I'm sorry. I should not have...'

'Shush. It's fine, honestly.' Hermione prised his hands away and kissed him. 'I think you needed that, and I enjoyed doing it.'

He looked at her incredulously. 'You enjoyed that?'

'Oh, yes. Very much.' She kissed him again. 'My turn?'

Severus sat up slowly and knelt beside her. Hermione went to push her pyjama bottoms down, but Severus put his hands on hers, shaking his head. Silently, he removed and discarded them, letting his hair fall over his face as he gazed at Hermione's body. She had absolutely no idea what was on his mind. Did he like what he was seeing? Hermione felt a bit panicky, and the inner seductress deserted her. She was just a plain, chubby teenager being judged and found wanting by a much more experienced...

'You are so lovely.'

The look of adoration on his face took her breath away, the need for his touch becoming almost unbearable. Hermione bent her knees and let her legs fall open.

'Please.'

'Hermione, I...'

'It's all right.' She hoped she didn't sound too disappointed. 'You don't have to, if you don't want to...'

'But I do want to.' He smirked, settling between her thighs. 'Move up the bed a bit. Just... tell me what you like.'

'Oh...' She wiggled up the bed and rearranged the pillows, making herself comfortable. 'Um... Well, I like to be licked...'

'Like this?'

Hermione arched off the bed as Severus swept his tongue over her clit. 'God, yes. Ooh, yes. More of that, please.'

'My pleasure,' he purred. 'You taste divine.'

'And... sucking is good, too... Oh, my *God*...'

Hermione shut up then, for fear of blurting out something inappropriate or talking complete gibberish. Severus easily slid one finger inside her, quickly followed by a second. They were so long and dextrous. Would they find her g-spot, she wondered? God knew she'd never been able to...and it hadn't been from a lack of trying. Keening in pleasure, Hermione raked her fingers through Severus' hair, grinding against him, urging him on. And there was his nose, and... gods, he was good at this... and oh, there it was, that delicious tingling... Almost there... 'Oh, yess,' she screeched, pressing her head back into the pillow as the convulsions ripped through her body.

Eyes closed, Hermione lay panting, happy but not yet sated...the orgasm having intensified, if anything, her body's instinctive need to have Severus inside her...and soon. She became aware of him moving up the bed, kissing, licking and nipping as he did so. His hair tickled, and she started to giggle only to be silenced by his mouth on hers. There was no mistaking the demanding passion behind this kiss; it spoke of want and longing and desire; it spoke of a man claiming what was rightfully his, and Hermione submitted to its message willingly. Reaching between them, Hermione fumbled for Severus' cock, hoping he was ready. He was semi-hard, but with a few deft strokes from her hand, he was soon fully erect.

Between ragged breaths, Severus kissed his way around her jaw-line and suckled her earlobe. 'Tell me you want me.'

'Of course I...'

'Tell me.'

'I want you, Severus. I want you now.'

'Oh, my precious girl.' His cock was prodding against her at the wrong angle, trying to find its target and failing. Severus groaned in frustration against her neck.

'Sorry.'

Sighing, Hermione decided to take matters into her own hands. 'It's okay,' she said soothingly, reaching for his shaft and rubbing it against her entrance. 'First times are always a bit awkward. Try now.'

Severus didn't need to be told twice. Snapping his hips forward, he entered her in one hard stroke, then lay still, face buried in the pillow next to her. All the air seemed to leave Hermione's lungs as her cunt adjusted to the intrusion, stretching to enfold him in its tight embrace. Indeed, she was so taken up with the sensation of having Severus inside her at long last, she almost didn't notice that he appeared to have stopped breathing.

'Are you all right?'

'No,' Severus mumbled into the pillow. 'Give me a moment.'

Hermione wrapped her arms around him tightly, grinning to herself, and gave his cock a squeeze.

'Fuck,' he spluttered.

Hermione lifted her legs up around his waist just as Severus started to move. He rocked his hips experimentally, lengthening his strokes and quickly establishing a steady rhythm. It felt incredible, but Hermione didn't expect to come again. This was enough. Just this. She was more interested in Severus, anyway, whose ragged breathing against her shoulder was growing more and more erratic. Hermione wanted to see his face.

'Kiss me,' she begged.

Severus raised his head, his hair obscuring his face yet again. Smiling up at him, Hermione tucked it back behind his ears, but still he refused to meet her eyes. She pulled him down to her then, kissing him tenderly, trying to convey without words just how much he meant to her. There was a moment's hesitation before she felt him surrender, then he was breaking apart in her arms, all restraint gone...

He's mine! Holding on tight, Hermione watched him as he fucked her harder, enraptured by the sight of Severus Snape completely out of control. She strained to latch onto a nipple; sucking hard, it proved to be his undoing. Crying out his pleasure, Severus gave one final thrust and collapsed on top of her.

Hermione cradled Severus' head while his breathing steadied, wishing she could stay like that forever. Her mind was racing, trying to make sense of this bone deep emotion, this overpowering, scary feeling coursing through her. She wanted to name it, pin it down, recognise it for what it was but dared not. She had no right, no right at all.

Severus shifted his weight and rolled off her, pulling her close to him. He, too, seemed lost for words. But did it really matter? Talking, Hermione decided as she drifted off to sleep, was distinctly overrated.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

Hermione opened one eye and scrambled around in the bed at the sound of loud squawking. She barely registered the owl on the floor due to the much more interesting

sight of her new lover standing bare-arsed by the window.

And a very nice arse it is, too.

'Sorry to wake you.' Severus smiled apologetically. 'I wasn't expecting the owl to keel over and collapse.'

Hermione tore her eyes away from him to look at the bird. 'Errol! They didn't send you all this way...'

Errol hooted pathetically.

'Errol?' Severus enquired.

'The Weasleys' owl. He's been on his last legs for years. I'm amazed this hasn't finished him off.'

Gently, Severus lifted the owl off the floor and put it on the bed. Lying on his back, Errol stuck one foot in the air, offering the attached parchment to anyone who cared to take it.

Hermione sat up and pushed her hair off her face, blushing as Severus' eyes raked over her breasts, but she did not attempt to cover herself up. He handed her the parchment.

'Oh, God. Fred's funeral,' she said. 'It's tomorrow morning. I'll have to go...'

'I know.' Severus crawled back into bed and pulled Hermione into his arms as she started crying.

'Oh, Severus...'

He felt so good. It would be so, so easy to lean on those bony shoulders... and that, a little voice told her, would be a big mistake. 'Will-you be here when I get back?' she asked, hoping her intuition was way off.

Severus' body stiffened before he let out a long sigh. 'No, love.' He kissed the top of her head, nuzzling her hair. 'It's time I was on my way.'

Hermione's heart sank, although his answer did not surprise her. 'Where will you go? An-and when will you be back?'

'The east, probably,' he replied. 'And... I'm not sure when I will return.'

'Oh... The... east.' Hermione hiccupped as she tried to steady her voice. 'Severus...?'

'Hm?'

Stroking his chest, she toyed with the sparse hairs between his nipples. 'I know I've no right to ask you this, and I know that... one shag doesn't make a relationship, but... could I come with you?' She looked at him pleadingly.

Severus closed his eyes briefly. 'Don't... cheapen *this*,' he choked out. 'And... tempting though your proposal undoubtedly is, I cannot allow it...no, listen to me.' He put a finger over Hermione's lips as she opened her mouth to object. 'I will be forever on the move, always looking over my shoulder, living on my wits and little else. I refuse to drag you around Europe with me, worrying whether there's an Auror around every corner waiting to cart me off to Azkaban. It's too dangerous, and I won't risk you or your good name being dragged down with me. I... care about you too much to let that happen.'

'Dragged down...? What on earth are you talking about? I understand you wanting to go away for a while, but your name will be cleared...'

He snorted. 'You have a far greater confidence in the workings of the Ministry and the Wizengamot than I.'

'I'll speak for you...Harry'll speak for you.'

Severus tilted her chin and kissed her softly. 'I know you would.'

'Then, stay. Please.'

'Hermione...' He caressed her cheek and sighed. 'Don't make this any harder for me than it already is. Last night was wonderful, and I don't want to leave you, but you must understand. I have spent half my life making up for past mistakes, trapped and forced to serve the purposes of others. Now, thanks to you, I have been given a second chance, and I will forever be in your debt because of it. But, I also owe it to myself to pursue the ambitions I put aside, and... it's time for you to resume your life, too.'

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. 'Do you think I could just forget...?' A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. 'You're going to Obliviate me, aren't you?'

'I think it would be... less painful for you if you forget all about rescuing me,' Severus replied gently.

'No,' she protested, trying to break away from him. 'Please don't.'

Severus held her closer. 'You would only try to find me if I did not.'

Hermione had to admit that he was right there; he knew her only too well. For an instant, she considered begging him to reconsider but decided just as quickly that it would be futile. He had made his mind up; he obviously had no room for her in his life, so there was little point in trying to fight him.

Catching hold of the little cauldron around his neck, Hermione whispered, 'Alter my memories if you must, but please don't take these few days away from me completely.' She kissed the talisman, silently blessing it. 'Just promise me you'll come back one day and return them to me. Please. It's all I ask.'

'All right. I promise.' He kissed her tenderly. 'Live well for me, Hermione. Now, close your eyes...'

Hermione awoke with a bit of a headache feeling slightly disoriented. Oh, yes. Ireland. And an owl looking at her expectantly. Oh, yes. Fred's funeral. She got out of bed and pulled on her dressing gown.

'I don't know what they were thinking, Errol, letting you come all this way. Well, don't you worry. I've got some nice bacon downstairs, and after that, you're travelling home with me. You just rest while I get ready.'

Errol ruffled his feathers and hooted his approval...

~ * ~

The clock, ticking noisily in the otherwise silent kitchen, was mocking her; she was sure of it. Hermione lifted her head slowly as the last part of her altered memory fitted seamlessly into the past she remembered all too well. It was an odd feeling; the memories were still fresh and raw as if Severus had just left...as were the emotions that accompanied them...and yet, they were like remnants of another life. It was going to take a while for her to take it all in, never mind make any sense of it.

Fidgeting in her chair, Hermione glanced at the man she had fallen in love with all those years ago and knew instinctively that nothing had changed. Severus was looking at

her expectantly. What the hell was she supposed to say?

'When I saw you in the Ministry, I felt...' She cleared her throat, managing a wan smile. 'So, that's why I went off milk chocolate digestives... All these years... the weird dreams... There were times I thought I was going mad... Why now? Nineteen years, Severus. Why bother to come back now?'

Severus hesitated before replying, 'Because I made a promise, and as you know, I owe you my life.' He reheated her tea with a flick of his wand before conjuring a handkerchief and offering it to her.

'I see. So... now I have a beautiful memory from a time in my life when I was free...' Hermione shrugged. 'Oh, well. Thanks for that.' Taking the proffered hanky, she got up and walked over to the window to blow her nose.

Severus observed her silently, at a loss how to proceed. He had come to Hermione's home expecting to have to deal with a hurt, angry witch, not this accepting, dispirited woman. Rage, he could have coped with; apathy was something else. And as for the pitiable situation he had found her in... He couldn't leave her like this; she deserved better, so much better. He pressed on, 'My feelings for you have never changed, Hermione. If I could, I would take you away with me. Now...with all of your children, if you wanted...'

She spun around. 'How can you say that? Look at me. Go on! Take a good, long look. Is this the girl you left behind? Is it?'

Severus was at her side in an instant. 'Do you think me so shallow as to care about appearances? Did you think I expected to find a nineteen-year-old girl waiting for me?' He clenched his fists at his sides, resisting the urge to touch her. 'Hermione, the woman you've become is just as lovely to me as the girl I remember...'

'Don't lie,' Hermione cried, rounding on him. 'Don't you dare lie to me, Severus Snape! I'm fat and ugly, and-and you didn't even recognise me at the Ministry...!' She threw her hands up in the air. 'Oh, what's the use? It's all academic, anyway. I'm bound to Ron; I can't leave, and that's that.'

'Nonsense!' Severus declared. 'You are neither fat nor ugly, and...!' His shoulders slumped. 'I... will admit that I was looking for someone with wild, bushy hair at the Ministry. How was I to know my Gryffindor lioness had shorn off her mane?' Severus' hand seemed to reach towards her hair of its own volition, but he checked its movement. 'Gods, I want to hold you so badly.'

That was more than Hermione could bear. 'Thank you for returning my memories, Severus,' she said stiffly. 'You can consider your promise fulfilled. But now, I think it would be better if you left.'

Severus didn't move. 'I'm not going anywhere until you have heard all I have to say.' He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a wristwatch. 'I asked you if you were to have your time again, would you change it. I am offering you the chance to do just that.'

Hermione took a closer look at the watch. 'Is this a...?'

'Chrononavigator? Yes, it is.'

'Where on earth did you get it?' she asked, intrigued. 'I thought there were only one or two left in existence.'

'Indeed, they are exceedingly rare,' Severus agreed. 'This one was a parting gift from a rather... talented witch I met in Germany...the Black Forest, to be precise.'

Hermione raised an eyebrow. 'Oh, really?'

'Yes, really,' Severus replied smirking. 'You'd like her. She is a Herbologist of some renown...her medicinal plants are sought by Healers from all over Europe. We collaborated on a rather... lucrative project. She gave me this as a token of her esteem.'

'How nice for you,' Hermione said, folding her arms. 'I suppose you've been given quite a few "tokens of esteem" from grateful witches over the years.'

Her little display of jealousy made Severus want to kiss her senseless. 'What do you expect me to say? I haven't lived like a monk, no, but there has been no one... nothing that ever came close to my...our... first time.'

It took a moment for that to sink in. 'What?' Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth as she started to giggle. 'I was... That was your first time? You never said anything.'

'I thought you'd worked it out for yourself,' Severus mumbled, blushing. 'You said something about first times always being a bit clumsy, as I recall.'

'I meant the first time with a new partner...not *the* first time.'

He glared at her. 'Did you expect me to admit to being a thirty-eight-year-old virgin? I felt out of my depth as it was.' Sighing, he reached inside the neck of his robes and pulled out the chain that was around his neck. 'Anyway, do you remember this?'

Still smiling, Hermione took a step closer to him. 'You still have the cauldron after all this time?'

'I have never taken it off.' With his thumb and forefinger, Severus carefully extracted the lock of hair that was inside it. 'Before I left, I took this while you were sleeping. Up until last month, I resisted the temptation, but I finally asked someone to take Polyjuice... and, well, when I saw 'you' in the flesh, I knew that everything I had worked for, all the wealth I had accumulated amounted to a grand total of nothing. All the true happiness I have ever known... I left it behind in Ireland. *That* is why I came back.' Unthinkingly, Severus touched Hermione's face. He leapt back with a yelp.

'Fuck, that hurt.'

'Are you all right?'

He nodded, rubbing his hand. 'Of course, once I realised what a fool I'd been, I was tempted to go back and change the past myself...and after all you've told me today, I would still gladly do it for you...after all, I am partly to blame for your predicament; if I hadn't given you that damn book, your life would have turned out very differently. But it is still your life, and the decision to change it must be yours, and yours alone...' Severus stopped, following Hermione's gaze out the window.

'My children...'

'Ah, yes.' He sighed. 'Your children.'

They stood together quietly for a while watching the youngsters playing in the garden. Eventually, Hermione spoke. 'It's one thing to wish to have one's time over again, but having the opportunity to actually do it...' She continued to stare at the scene before her. Wisely, Severus said nothing, but waited while she considered the choice he was offering her.

'I didn't want them,' she confessed. 'I wasn't ready for motherhood and being... compelled to have children with Ron was more horrible than you could ever imagine. But that doesn't mean I don't love them...I resent them, certainly... Although, that's not quite true... I resent the fact that they prevent me from having any kind of life. Am I making sense?'

'I understand you perfectly,' Severus replied, turning around and leaning against the sink. 'Hermione... Do you have any idea what it is like being an unwanted child?'

Hermione tore her gaze away from her children to look at him. 'No, not really.'

'Well, I can tell you from personal experience that it's not pleasant.' He shuffled his feet and stared at the floor. 'You see before you the product of a loveless union...gods, I knew from the age of six that my parents hated each other, and I thought it was all my fault...' He paused. 'The point I'm trying to make is that the lack of love in my childhood undoubtedly contributed to the man I became. What your children see around them...how they see their parents interacting...will influence their outlook on the world, not to mention their ability to form satisfying adult relationships in the future.'

'That may well be...' Hermione sighed. 'But it's beside the point, though, isn't it? I'm still responsible for bringing them into the world. I gave them life; I don't see how I have the right to take it away again.' Out of habit, she picked up a dishcloth and began to furiously wipe down the draining board.

'You wouldn't be. Not... really.' Severus returned to the table and sat down. 'Come and drink your tea before it gets cold again. You see, their existence is not dependent on you giving birth to them.'

Hermione threw the cloth in the sink. Wiping her hands on her robe, she joined Severus at the table. 'What do you mean?' she asked, picking up the teacup. 'You're talking in riddles again.'

'I realise that...' Severus grimaced, struggling to find the right words. 'It's going to be hard to tell you this. I've never told anyone but... between the time I took the Draught of Living Death and you reviving me, I had what I suppose you could call an out of body experience...'

'Don't tell me you saw Albus Dumbledore at King's Cross as well?'

'King's Cross? What are you talking about?'

'When Harry...oh, never mind. What happened?'

'Well...' he continued, 'I found myself walking the streets surrounding Spinner's End. But it was the town of my childhood...the rundown part near the canal, which was demolished years ago. The bakery was still there...I could smell the bread...' He looked wistful. 'Anyway, I suddenly realised where I was going, and I started to break into a run. Sure enough, I rounded the corner and there was the old playground...'

Hermione had a good idea where this was going. 'You saw Harry's mother.'

'Yes. How did...?'

'I saw the memories you gave him. Didn't I tell you?'

'Oh... yes, of course.' Severus swallowed hard. 'Well, we talked about a lot of... things. And-and she told me that I had to go back. That someone was waiting for me...someone I would grow to... love.'

'Love...?' she gasped. 'Me? But, in that case why did you leave? Why did you ignore what she told you?'

'I wish I could answer that, Hermione,' he replied, leaning towards her as close as he dared. 'God knows I've asked myself the same question often enough. I wanted what was best for you; that was certainly one reason. I was scared shitless; that was another. And Lily never said anything about being loved in return...all of these reasons and more. But, that aside... what I wanted to say was this: time had no significance there. We were outside it. I seemed to spend hours talking to Lily, but I was also aware that only minutes had passed on earth. It all made perfect sense then, but it is very difficult to explain it in the here and now...it was like how a dream appears perfectly logical when you're asleep, only to seem ridiculous when you awake. But... from what I can remember, all of time and space exists simultaneously, side by side, in an infinite number of permutations...linear time as we know it is an illusion.'

He gave Hermione a moment to absorb this before continuing, 'Now, when a soul decides to incarnate on this level of existence, it chooses the time and place and to whom it will be born. By changing your past, you will not deny your children 'life'. Those souls will merely be born to someone else. They will go on; no one can prevent that. It will not cause so much as a ripple in the great scheme of things. But, on a personal level, I fear it is *your* loss...as their mother...that you would have to come to terms with.'

'The transmigration of souls...' Hermione inhaled sharply as her brain wrapped itself around the implications. 'So, what you're saying is, that it would be my sacrifice...not theirs, if I choose to go back.'

'Yes,' he replied. 'And I would not blame you if you decided it was too big a price to pay.'

'I see...' She drank the last of her tea and sent the cups and saucers over to the sink with a flick of her wand. 'All right. Leaving the children out of the equation for the moment, one other thing occurs to me. If I did go back, I suppose I'd have to do something to wreck the potion, wouldn't I? So, how can I be certain that my actions wouldn't recreate the original problem?'

Severus grinned. 'Give me the book, tell me everything you did...in detail...and I will make sure that does not happen.'

'Then, in that case, won't that create a paradox?' she asked.

'No,' Severus replied, shaking his head. 'You're thinking linearly. As I said, time does not work like that.'

Hermione thought a moment. 'What if I went back to Ireland and persuaded you to take me with you instead?'

Severus shook his head again. 'No. I was tempted to do something similar but... with hindsight, and because of the reasons I just gave you, I don't think that it was the right time for us. You were too young, and I wasn't ready. Besides, I have touched so many lives since I last saw you; much has happened which I do not want to see changed.'

'But I'd still have to wait nineteen years for you to come back!' Hermione ran her fingers through her hair desperately trying to think of an alternative solution. 'Severus, can you think of any way I can break the binding? Would it be possible to separate the charm from the potion, do you think? I know it's a long shot, but it would save a lot of bother if the enchantment could be broken.'

'Doubtful.' He tapped his index finger against his lips while he considered the possibility. 'Not after such a long time... The children would have increased the strength of the bond, I suspect...no, I don't think it would be worth attempting.'

'I thought as much.' Hermione sighed. 'Okay. You've given me an awful lot to think about, but I can't even begin to give you an answer, I'm afraid.'

'There is no rush...none at all. Take your time...be sure that your decision is the right one.' Severus stood up and wrapped his cloak around him. 'I should be going. Owl me at the Three Broomsticks when you have thought it over. I'm spending a few days in Hogsmeade.' He gazed at Hermione longingly. 'I will abide by your decision, whatever it may be, but... know that I love you.' He smiled almost boyishly before Disapparating abruptly.

Hermione stared at the space he had vacated. 'Now he tells me.'

~*~

'You're home early.' Hermione barely glanced in her husband's direction before turning back to the casserole she was preparing for supper. 'Are you eating with us, or do you have a... case waiting for you?'

'Don't start, Hermione.' Ron's voice sounded weary.

'It's not that I particularly care, but the kids...remember them?...they always ask where their precious daddy is.'

'Hermione...'

'It's ironic, isn't it? You're the one who wanted them, but you can't even be bothered...'

'WHAT I WANTED WAS A FAMILY!' Ron yelled, trying to get a word in edgewise. 'What I wanted was to come home to a loving wife, not some sour-faced harpy who looks like she's trodden in dragon dung every time she sees me!' He took a deep breath, reining in his temper. 'Look, I don't want an argument. I'm back early because I've got some bad news. I think you'd better sit down.'

'Why? What's happened?' Hermione asked, immediately fearing the worst. 'Has someone been hurt?' She wiped her hands on a tea-towel before sitting down at the table.

Ron rubbed the corners of his eyes and sat down opposite her. 'It's... Luna. She's... I'm afraid she's dead. It looks like it may have been suicide, but we're treating it as suspicious.'

'Oh, my good God.'

Ron's hand reached for Hermione's, but she snatched hers away. 'I thought I'd better tell you before you saw it splashed all over the *Prophet*,' he said bitterly.

For once, Hermione swallowed her habitual resentment. 'I'm sorry. That was considerate of you, Ron. Thank you for taking the time to tell me.'

'Yes. Well...' Ron grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and stood up. 'I suppose I'd better be off. Draco is being brought in for questioning as we speak.'

Alone with her thoughts, Hermione did not look up until she heard Ron Disapparate.

~ * ~

It was getting on for midnight, but Hermione did not feel in the least bit tired as she sat, gazing with unseeing eyes into the dying embers of the fire. Putting the day's events into perspective wasn't easy; Severus, after all, had lived with those memories for nineteen years and had had time to analyse them, whereas for her... She had been a girl then: young, impressionable...she would have followed him to the ends of the earth if he'd asked her. Severus had been afraid, war-damaged, but had put her interests before his own personal happiness...at least in part...because he loved her. And now here she was, at the age he had been then: afraid, damaged, and facing a similar dilemma. Did she really want to be that nineteen-year-old girl again?

'Mummy?'

Hermione's head snapped up. Hugo was standing in front of her, rubbing his eyes. He looked so much like Ron, it was painful.

'What is it, darling? Can't you sleep?'

The little boy shook his head before crawling onto her lap. 'Where's Daddy?'

'Working late.' Hermione shifted his weight so that they were both more comfortable.

'He's never here,' Hugo grumbled, snuggling against his mother's chest. 'Mum?'

'Hmm?'

'Daddy doesn't love us, does he?'

Hermione's blood froze. 'Of course, he does, sweetheart. It's just that he's very busy...'

'Uncle Harry's always busy, but he comes home at night,' Hugo persisted.

'That's... different.' Hermione sighed and began to stroke his hair. 'Uncle Harry doesn't have to work, you see. But Daddy does, and his job is very important.'

'Oh.' Her answer seemed to satisfy him. He yawned loudly. 'I want a 'portant job, too, when I grow up. Just like Daddy.'

~ * ~

Hermione was beyond tears. *How many lives have been affected by that damn potion...?* She couldn't begin to calculate it. Hugging her son tightly, Hermione silently raged against its insidious nature, feeling powerless to protect her children from its influence. It seemed the misery it had created was set to affect a new generation.

In all her musings, Hermione had not allowed her feelings for Severus to cloud her judgment. She couldn't afford to; this was about her and her children. He wouldn't be waiting for her in the past; she would be alone and maybe as miserable as she was now. There were no guarantees that she would be any better off. Was it worth giving up what little she had? Would she wait for him...or try to find him? Would she even remember him?

Hermione bent her head, inhaling the scent of her child. Could she really live without this? Should she even be considering it...even though her children would be better off growing up in a more loving environment? Yesterday, such an idea would have been inconceivable, but which was more selfish? Giving up her motherhood and reclaiming the life she should have lived or staying put for moments like this, risking the future wellbeing of her children and living with the guilt that she could have done something to save Luna? Put simply, did she hate her life enough to change it, and did she love her children enough to let them go?

Hermione glanced at the clock. It was much too late to contact Severus now. She would owl him in the morning with her decision.

~ * ~

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes, absolutely.'

'You realise this will be a one-way trip?'

Hermione nodded determinedly. 'Yes. I understand.'

'Then let us make plans.' Severus was sitting once again at Hermione's kitchen table, this time with several pieces of parchment spread out in front of him. 'I've studied the book, and from what you have told me, I conclude that the explosion was caused by the combination of the ingredients and the Charm...nothing more.' He produced a small phial from his pocket and handed it to Hermione. 'Dragon's bile. That will easily and quickly destabilise the potion, but you must add it before the last flower goes in the cauldron.'

'Okay,' said Hermione, frowning. 'But that will still cause an explosion, and there's the small matter of how am I going to pour it into the cauldron without being seen.' Nibbling her bottom lip, she leant forward in her chair and drummed her fingers on the table. 'I could ask Harry for a lend of his Invisibility Cloak, I suppose...'

Severus waved his hand dismissively. 'No. You would end up with two Invisibility Cloaks in that time. Besides, I have something better.' He produced another phial from his pocket. 'This is my latest invention...the one that has made my fortune. It's still top-secret.' He smirked tapping his forefinger against his nose. 'It's an Invisibility Potion.'

'You've achieved...Complete Invisibility?'

Severus nodded.

'Wow. That's... impressive.'

He inclined his head. 'Thank you. Now, the next thing is for you to learn how the Chrononavigator works.'

Eagerly, Hermione leaned forward as Severus explained, 'You see the twelve hands and the little planets around the edge?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes.'

'Each of the hands stands for a sign of the Zodiac. Now, you'll have to find out the exact position of the constellations for the night in question, but once you have that, you move the little hands and modify the positions of the planets accordingly, like... so.' He delicately adjusted the device to demonstrate how to set it. 'Once you've done that, a spin at the rim will activate it in very much the same way as a Time-Turner. The hands and the planets will start to revolve, faster and faster until they reach the day when the heavens were in the exact position you have pre-set.'

'Fascinating,' Hermione breathed. 'How accurate is it?'

'It will take you to the day in question,' Severus replied, setting the device down on the table. 'I would suggest that you activate it in the early evening. That should ensure you arrive in plenty of time for the festivities.'

'Sounds sensible.' Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. 'So, what happens when I blow up the cauldron?'

'Make sure you cast a Shielding Charm on yourself first and take cover...'

'I know that,' she scoffed. 'I'm not stupid.'

'I didn't say you were,' Severus retorted. 'I'm just going over the plan. Now, once your younger self is unconscious, go and touch her. As two versions of the same person cannot exist in the same time and space, the two of you will merge. But before you do that, I think it would be wise for you to destroy the Chrononavigator.'

'Okay...!' Hermione sighed. 'Are you sure I can't come back and merge with myself in this time?'

'And miss out on the life you should have lived?' Severus smiled ruefully. 'Go and make your mark on the world, Hermione. Live up to your potential. You won't remember saving me, of course, as you will be merging with your Obliviated self. And, hopefully, your experiences in this timeline, if you have any recollection of them at all, will just seem like a half-remembered dream.'

'I was afraid of that,' she said. 'But if I don't remember, I won't know that you're alive. And if I think you're dead, I'm unlikely to wait for you, am I?'

'That is a risk I am prepared to take.' Severus began to gather up the parchment on the table. 'You may; you may not. You and Mr Weasley may resolve your problems, or you may marry someone else. But whatever happens, it will be your choice.' He pointed to the time device on the table. 'Your fate is in your hands, my dear, which is how it should be.'

~ * ~

Standing in the lane near the entrance to the Burrow, Hermione was having second thoughts. However much she told with herself that she was acting with the best of intentions, it did nothing to assuage her conscience; despite everything Severus had said, effectively, she was abandoning her children.

It still wasn't too late to go back. Ginny wouldn't be worried yet that she hadn't called by to pick the kids up. Hermione hadn't seen Ron for over twenty-four hours either, which was irksome, as the urge to be in his presence was growing stronger, pulling her in the direction of home. *Home*. That was a laugh. Angrily, Hermione fought the lure of the spell with all her might; if she was going to change her mind now, it would be because she had made a conscious choice to stay and not because of this vile enchantment that had kept her in its thrall for half her life.

Dusk was already falling, but Hermione had set the co-ordinates on the time-travelling device before she'd left the house. She took it out of her pocket and stared at it. All it needed was one spin, one tiny spin, and all of her past suffering...not to mention that of her friends...would unravel.

She took a deep breath...

A/N: The Chrononavigator made its first appearance in Sylvanawood's excellent Time-turner fic *Arachne* and is used here with her kind permission.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

Be careful what you wish for; you never know what you might get. ***Third Place. Potterplace Post DH Challenge 2007***

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

A/N: All praise and much thanks to my betas, Alienor and Septentrion, for their kind words, hard work and input.

The world around her was dissolving into a swirl of colour, creating the sensation of flying backwards very fast. Hermione's eardrums felt like they were going to burst under the pressure as an icy-cold wind whipped against her face, robbing her of her breath. There was a moment of blind panic when she feared she might lose

consciousness...or worse, then the ground was rushing up under her feet again, and she had to stagger to retain her balance. She was back in the lane. Gasping for breath, Hermione grabbed hold of a nearby tree trunk, fighting down the nausea as she tried to orientate herself. All she knew for sure was that it was dark. But at least the moon was out, helpfully illuminating the way as she cautiously approached the entrance to the Burrow.

Judging by the noise coming from the house, the party was still going strong. Hermione sighed with relief; the Chrononavigator had done its job. Warily, she hung back a little longer while she made doubly sure that there was no one else around outside.

A sudden flash of light near the window made her choke back a gasp of surprise. *What the...?* She watched as a cloaked and hooded figure stepped out of the shadows, his features briefly highlighted by the moonlight before he Disapparated. Mundungus? What was he doing skulking about the place at his hour? She shrugged. There was no time to worry about that now. On tip-toe, Hermione approached the same window and peeped inside. There was no sign of her younger self, but there was Harry...oh, God, Harry! He looked so young. And Ron, holding Lavender's hand and smiling. Ron, before he'd started to lose his hair. Ron, looking happy.

As she stood there, transfixed by the scene, it occurred to Hermione that the persistent urge to be close to Ron wasn't tugging at her. The spell had lifted, or rather, it had yet to be cast. Hermione momentarily closed her eyes and gave a small prayer of thanks; there was still time to stop the disaster from happening.

She was still marvelling at her new found freedom when a *softpop* announced someone else's arrival. Hermione leapt back into the shadows. *Luna*. If memory served, she was returning from the apothecary's. So, that must mean her younger self was asleep upstairs, and it would not be long before Ginny and Luna started brewing. Hermione decided it was time to take the Invisibility Potion and go inside. But before that, she took out her wand and Banished the Chrononavigator.

Ooh... Peppermint. A warmth spread through her body as the potion took effect. Hermione watched her hands, waiting until they had faded clean away before walking around to the back of the house. Glancing through the kitchen window, Hermione checked once more that the coast was clear before quickly opening the back door and slipping inside. It closed behind her with a loud click, which made her jump, but luckily, nobody was around to hear her squeak. Heart beating furiously, Hermione approached the door that led to the rest of the house, straining her ears for the sound of footsteps or voices on the other side. Hearing nothing, she slowly opened the door a crack and checked that no one was there before stepping into the hallway.

The sound of a heated argument coming from the living room made her pause a moment out of sheer curiosity. The door flew open suddenly, and Hermione just had time to press herself against the wall before Molly Weasley stormed past, muttering something under her breath. She could hear Ron and Harry yelling now, and, occasionally, Lavender's voice butting in, trying to calm things between them. They were talking about her, Hermione quickly realised, and it wasn't hard to guess what about.

'I told you to tell her yourself, didn't I? How did you expect her to react?'

'Have you any idea how much this *hurts*?

'Oh, Ron...'

'Think yourself lucky. Now go and apologise, you twat.'

Hermione smiled wickedly to herself. It was a pity, really, she hadn't cast a more permanently damaging spell. It might have saved her a lot of trouble. Still, there didn't seem much point hanging around to listen to Ron whingeing; she'd had enough of that to last her a lifetime. Turning her back on her friends and their woes, Hermione made her way up the stairs.

Up on the first-floor landing, Hermione remembered to avoid the creakiest of the floorboards as she inched towards Ginny's bedroom. Pressing her ear against the door, Hermione tried to make out the muffled voices coming from the other side. Someone giggled.

'I don't see the point in leaving it to chance. I know exactly what I want. Your turn.'

A pause.

'A prince amongst wizards, noble and pure,

For House and his kin will hardship endure,

Heart of a dragon, masterful, strong,

Umm... and who'll... put up with my weirdness.

'Oh, Luna. Please, don't ever change.'

Downstairs, the front door slammed, the resulting current of air making the bedroom door rattle on its hinges and open with a *softwhoosh*. It was time. Hermione stepped quickly over the threshold and stood to the side as Ginny came to investigate. While the other girls' attention was diverted, Hermione uncorked the phial of dragon bile and poured it into the cauldron.

'Strange...' said Ginny. 'Must have been the wind, I suppose... Oh, well... Ready?'

Hermione followed Ginny's gaze and was momentarily transfixed by the sight of her younger self. *Was I ever that young and... thin?* She shook herself, cast the shielding charm and crouched down at the side of the bed. She watched as young Hermione picked up the forget-me-nots.

'Brave as a lion with the heart of a lamb,

Willing to take me for all that I am.

A friend and a lover with a mind just as smart,

To love and to cherish 'til death do us part.'

Oh, you silly, silly girl. If only you knew... Hermione screwed her eyes closed and covered her ears, bracing herself for the inevitable.

The explosion shook the room. Hermione lifted her head warily and slowly surveyed the devastation; it was just as she remembered it from before. There was her other self, out cold, lying a few feet away. Reaching out, Hermione touched her, only to see her hand disappear into the unconscious body. She had time to gasp in surprise before she felt herself being pulled down a dark tunnel. Her last thoughts were of Severus. *He's alive. He's alive.* And then, nothing...

~ * ~

Blinking against the sunlight, Hermione opened one eye and groaned. Nope, not her bed then. The floor... somewhere. *That has to be the most weird dream I've ever had* she thought, moving her hand to push herself into a sitting position.

'*Ohhh... God*,' she moaned, shielding her eyes. 'What the *hell* was in that punch?'

She pressed her temples with her fingers as the room lurched, struggling to remember the previous evening's events. There had been a party; she could remember that much... Ginny and Luna... 'Oh, my God.' Hermione pressed the palms of her hands to her head and turned it to the left, only to discover her friends passed out on the floor

beside her. She remembered now. The explosion.

Gingerly, Hermione crawled towards the still forms of the other two girls, trying to avoid the red goo that was liberally splattered over the carpet...and the walls, the furniture and... she touched her hair, *ew*, them. *Please let them be alive. Please let them be okay... Please...*

Hermione reached one hand out towards Ginny's neck to check for a pulse, just as her red-headed friend twitched and opened her eyes. Hermione breathed a huge sigh of relief. She turned her attention to Luna, who snored on cue, but showed little sign of waking up just yet.

'Wha-what happened?' Ginny asked a little croakily.

'The cauldron exploded. Don't you remember?'

'Vaguely,' Ginny replied, grimacing as she shook a dead leg, trying to ease the pins and needles.

'All right... Let's recap...'

'Ginny?' *Knock-knock*. 'Are you coming down for breakfast? It's getting late.'

'Come in, Harry,' Ginny called. 'Just do it quietly.'

Harry stuck his head round the door. 'What the hell happened? Are you three all right?'

'Think so,' Hermione said, massaging her temples. 'But my head is splitting. I don't suppose you know if George put some hallucinogenic drugs in that punch, do you?'

Harry looked at her blankly.

'Could be worse,' said Luna, sitting up and picking some of the red goo out of her hair.

'I think I've got some Headache Potion here somewhere.' Ginny rummaged around in her sock drawer. 'We're in luck,' she said triumphantly. 'Here you go, girls.' She handed them a phial each.

'What the fuck...?'

Hermione scowled at the sight of Ron in the doorway. 'What do *you* want?'

'I-um, I came to apologise,' Ron mumbled. 'I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry.'

'Yes, you should have.' Hermione palmed her wand and started clearing up the mess on her clothes. Snatches of the dream she'd had came to her mind...her and Ron unhappily married. A houseful of children. She shuddered. 'But it's probably for the best. I hope you and Lavender will be very happy.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Yes, Ron, I do.' Hermione smiled up at her old friend and held her hand out. 'Mates?'

Ron grinned and pulled Hermione to her feet. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Mates. Now, how about some breakfast? I'm starving.'

~ * ~

King's Cross, nineteen years later.

Hugo Weasley was hoarse from shouting his goodbyes as Rose and his twin brothers waved from the rapidly disappearing Hogwarts Express. He had run alongside the train almost to the end of the platform and was now clutching his knees, panting from the exertion. He wished he was going with them; he'd never been on a proper train, and it would be another two years before he would be old enough to go to Hogwarts.

Hugo turned and peered through the smoke and steam. All around him he could hear the pops of Disapparition as those adults without additional children vanished from the station. It must be funny, he thought, not to have any brothers or sisters. It was going to be very quiet with just the five of them at home. And now he was the oldest; that was going to be *really* weird. Hugo glanced down the platform to where Uncle Harry, Aunt Ginny, Dad and Aunt Hermione were standing, chatting to one another. He saw Uncle Harry nod briefly to a pale blond man and a very thin blonde lady, who vanished shortly afterwards.

Dad said something and the other three laughed. Hugo grinned. It looked like they were all in a good mood. If he played his cards right, there might be an ice-cream in it for him. He stuffed his hands in his trouser pockets and made his way slowly towards the barrier.

~ * ~

'Blimey,' said Ginny. 'I know there's a saying that you can never be too rich or too thin, but Draco's wife looks like a wraith.'

Hermione shivered, feeling like someone had walked over her grave. 'Positively anorexic.'

'Indeed.' Ginny patted her matronly stomach. 'I know I could do with losing a few pounds, but I'd hate to look like that.'

'You look fine,' Hermione said. 'Oh, and while I remember, I had a postcard from Luna this morning.'

'Oh, yes? How is she?' Ginny asked. 'Lily, come here, please.' She reached for her daughter's hand.

'Fine as far as I can tell,' Hermione replied. 'She's met a fellow believer in the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, and they're hot on the trail in Latvia.'

Ginny laughed. 'So it looks like Luna may have finally found her soulmate.'

'It would be nice for her, wouldn't it?' Hermione glanced up the platform, watching the small figure of Hugo ambling towards them.

'Do you want a lift?' Ron asked.

'No, it's all right, thanks.' One white-knuckle ride through the streets of London was enough for one day. 'But, I've got the rest of the day off; I could take Hugo off Lavender's hands for the afternoon, if you like.'

'Are you sure?' Ron asked. 'I'm sure she'd only be too happy.'

'I wouldn't offer otherwise.' Hermione smiled at her friend. 'You know he's my favourite godson.'

Ron grinned back. 'You're really good with kids, Hermione. It's a shame...'

'Now don't start,' Hermione interrupted. She was very fond of all her friends' children, and it was nice to borrow them from time to time...it was also nice to return them to

their parents after a few hours of their entertaining company and go back to her flat. Alone.

Ron waited for Hugo to catch up before saying his goodbyes and leaving for work. Harry lifted a squealing Lily onto his shoulders and followed through the barrier soon after.

'Can you do lunch tomorrow?' Hermione asked Ginny.

'Sure.' Ginny smiled at her nephew and ruffled his hair...much to Hugo's annoyance. 'That would be lovely. Meet you in the Leaky?'

'Great. Twelve-thirty suit you? We can decide where to eat from there.'

'Sounds fine. See you tomorrow, then.'

Hermione watched her friend disappear in the direction of Muggle King's Cross. 'Right then, Hugo,' she said. 'What's it going to be? Bus or Tube?'

Hugo's face lit up in delight. 'Tube!'

It looked like he was going to get a train ride today, after all.

~ * ~

Hermione wiped the ice-cream off Hugo's mouth with a paper hanky in spite of his protestations that he could do it himself. She wasn't going to take the risk of getting it on her business robes while she Apparated them to Ron and Lavender's home. The Floo was out of the question; knowing the state of Ron's chimney, she'd be covered in soot. It was an undignified mode of transport at the best of times, anyway, and as a possible future member of the Wizengamot, Hermione could not afford to be seen looking anything other than immaculate...you never knew when there was a photographer lurking around the corner.

Arriving at the house, Hugo rushed through the back door, eager to tell his mother about his afternoon in Muggle London and the enormous ice-cream he'd had all to himself.

Lavender struggled out of her chair and waddled to greet them. 'Thanks for taking him, Hermione. But there was no need to spoil him so much.'

'Nonsense,' Hermione replied with a dismissive wave. 'He's always a pleasure to be with, and besides you needed the break. Sit down, and I'll make us some tea.'

Gratefully, Lavender eased herself back into her chair and stuffed a cushion behind her lower back. 'I know Ron and I both wanted to go for an even ten, but I think this is going to be the last.' She patted her swollen belly affectionately. 'Octavia, darling, that's a lovely drawing of Daddy on his broom, but do it on some parchment, not the walls, will you? There's a dear.'

'If you don't mind me saying so, Lav...' Hermione frowned with concern as she spooned some leaves into the tea-pot, 'you don't look so well on this one.'

Lavender grimaced as she tried to get comfortable. 'No, you're right. I suppose it must be my age, but this one is really taking it out of me. I think I need to persuade Ron to call it a day.'

Tempting though it would have been to say, 'I think you need to persuade Ron to visit a vasectomy clinic,' Hermione held her tongue. This was probably just as well since the Floo activated at that moment, and Molly Weasley stepped into the kitchen.

'Lavender, have...' She stopped short. 'Hermione! How lovely to see you, my dear. It's been ages since we've seen you at the Burrow.'

'Hello, Molly,' Hermione replied. 'I know, and I'm sorry. But I've been so busy lately...'

'You work yourself much too hard,' Molly said, wagging a finger. 'You need to get out and socialise more...after all, you're not getting any younger.'

'Molly,' Lavender admonished. 'Leave Hermione alone. She enjoys her work. Not everyone is cut out to be a wife and mother.'

'Thank you, Lavender.' Hermione smiled, pouring the tea. 'But there's no need to defend me. Molly's quite right; I should get out more.' Her friends were well-meaning, she knew. They just didn't like seeing her on her own when they were all paired off and raising a brood of children apiece. Lavender was the only one who understood that she had never met anyone she wanted to share her life with...at least, not yet.

Molly huffed. 'Well, anyway, the reason I called round is this.' She brandished a copy of the *Evening Prophet*. 'Look! Severus Snape is alive!'

Hermione had an overwhelming sense of déjà-vu. 'But that's not possible. I saw him... with my own eyes, I saw him.' She picked up the paper and looked at the photograph. It was unmistakably him...she'd recognise that nose anywhere. Snape stared back at her, looked her up and down and smirked.

'It can't be him...' Hermione whispered, still not believing what her eyes were telling her.

'But it is,' said Molly. 'Minerva called just before I came over, and she's spoken to him. It's not an imposter; she assures me.'

Hermione read the article and shook her head. 'Does she know what happened? He's not giving anything away here, is he?'

'No,' Molly replied. 'But no doubt we'll find out tonight. Minerva and Kingsley are holding a small party for him at the Ministry...you're invited, of course.'

'Damn,' said Hermione. 'I can't make it, but please, pass on my regards.'

'I will,' said Molly. 'It's a shame you can't come. He's really made quite a name for himself by all accounts...and some money, too, judging by the cut of those robes. He's really quite eligible...'

Lavender and Hermione burst out laughing. 'Oh, Molly,' said Hermione. 'You're never going to give up, are you?'

Molly sighed. 'I just want to see you happy, Hermione. That's all.'

~ * ~

Hermione turned down the gas as the spaghetti sauce came to the boil, stirring with the same concentration as she would for the most delicate of potions. She had come to view cooking as a form of relaxation from the stress that was her job, and even though Hermione cooked for one most of the time, she saw no reason to let it spoil the pleasure of eating good food.

She let it simmer for a moment before putting the water on for the pasta and uncorking a bottle of Merlot. Pouring herself a glass, Hermione gazed out of the window over her small, terraced garden with its pots of herbs and potions ingredients. One day, she thought, she'd have a proper garden and maybe even a dog.

It had been a long week. Having been embroiled in a lengthy, but successful, court appeal to reduce Lucius Malfoy's sentence and grant him parole, Hermione was looking forward to a well-earned weekend of relaxation. She was quite rightly proud of her performance: her legal argument had impressed the Wizengamot...enough hopefully for them to consider her as a suitable candidate when the next vacancy came up. But even more than that, Hermione felt a great sense of personal achievement in that she had done something positive to put the past to rest. After all, the world had moved on; the man had served his time, and despite his failed attempt at blackmailing the

Minister for Magic, Malfoy was entitled to the same justice as everyone else.

She sighed and sipped from her glass. Not bad. A pity that she had no one to share it with or talk to about her success, but Hermione was used to her own company and refused to get maudlin about it. For in spite of her friends' attempts at matchmaking over the years, and a couple of ill-fated short-term relationships, she'd never met anyone that was special enough to allow into her life. And, being Hermione, she refused to settle for second best.

A sharp rap on the front door shook Hermione out of her reverie. Wondering who it could be at such a late hour, Hermione put her glass down and went to answer it.

Severus Snape was standing on her doorstep. 'Good evening, Miss Granger. Have I come at an inconvenient time?'

'Prof-Mr Snape!' Hermione could scarcely believe her eyes. 'Come in. Please.'

Severus followed her into the hallway. 'I apologise for calling on you unannounced, but I only received my official pardon today, and my movements were restricted before that. I took the chance that you would be at home.'

Hermione laughed. 'I'm rarely anywhere else in the evening. I was just making dinner.' She led the way to the kitchen. 'Please. Take a seat. Would you like a glass of wine? I've just opened a bottle.'

'If it is no bother...'

'No bother at all.'

'Then thank you. That would be most kind.'

Hermione handed him a glass and checked the sauce. 'So, what brings you here?'

Severus sat back in the chair and took a sip. 'Minerva has been telling me about her star pupil's progress. I hear you are likely to be elected to the Wizengamot in the not too distant future.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows. 'That remains to be seen.'

Severus smirked. 'It pleased me greatly to learn that one of the brightest witches it was ever my privilege to teach has accomplished so much.'

Hermione felt herself blushing at the compliment. 'Mr Snape...'

'Severus, please.'

'Severus.' The name seemed oddly familiar on her tongue. 'Would you like to stay for dinner? I've made far too much sauce as usual and...'

'I would like that... Hermione.' He sniffed. 'Is that Spaghetti Carbonara?'

'Yes,' Hermione replied in surprise. 'It's become a sort of staple sauce for me. How did you know?'

'It is... a favourite dish of mine.'

Slightly disconcerted, Hermione unwrapped a lettuce and started tearing some leaves into a salad bowl. 'I'm glad you came, actually, seeing as I couldn't make it to the reception that was held in your honour...'

Severus harrumphed. 'You didn't miss anything. Bloody sycophants.'

Hermione giggled as she took the oil and vinegar out of the cupboard to make the vinaigrette. 'But still, I would have gone, if only to thank you for everything you did for us during the war, keeping us safe all those years...'

'I did what I had to do.'

Hermione did not push him further. She sighed, gathering her nerve. 'There is one other thing I wanted to say, though... All these years, I have lived with the guilt that I did nothing to help you... in the Shrieking Shack, I mean. I want to apologise. I should have done *something*.'

'Oh, but you did.'

'Pardon?'

Severus rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'I wasn't sure what I would find when I returned home, or the welcome I would receive. I expected you would be married...' He dropped his gaze to the floor. 'I did not know whether it would be better to leave sleeping dogs lie...at least until I'd ascertained your circumstances... but, now that I have seen for myself... and I owe you my life...'

'Sorry, you've lost me.' Hermione turned the gas off, frowning uncertainly. 'I don't understand...'

'You will.' Severus took a deep breath. 'I modified your memories, you see...'

'You did WHAT?' Hermione cried. 'When?' To her horror, Severus drew his wand. 'Wha-what are you doing?'

'I've no intention of harming you, Hermione. Trust me, please. Just close your eyes.'

And trust him she did. As the barriers fell, and the memories came tumbling back, Hermione grabbed the back of a chair and sat down heavily. Groaning, she put her head in her hands. 'Make it stop! Make it stop!'

'What do you remember?'

'Everything, Severus,' Hermione whispered, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'I remember... everything.'

~ * ~

Raising her head from her hands, Hermione risked a glance at the man she had fallen in love with all those years ago and knew instinctively that nothing had changed. Severus silently offered her a handkerchief; she took it and walked over to the window to blow her nose.

'All these years... all those strange dreams... there were times when I thought I was going mad... Why now, Severus? Why come back now?'

Severus got up and stood beside her. 'Because I made you a promise. Because I owed you my life. Because... as much as I tried to forget you, there has been no one... nothing that ever came close to my...our... first time.'

It took a moment for that to sink in. 'What?' Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth as she started to giggle. 'I was... That was your first time? You never said anything.'

'I thought you'd worked it out for yourself,' he mumbled, blushing. 'You said something about first times always being a bit clumsy, as I recall.'

'I meant the first time with a new partner...not *the* first time.'

He glared at her. 'Did you expect me to admit to being a thirty-eight-year-old-virgin? I felt out of my depth as it was.' Sighing, he reached inside the neck of his robes and pulled out the chain that was around his neck. 'Anyway, do you remember this?'

Smiling, Hermione took a step closer to him. 'You still have the cauldron after all this time?'

'I have never taken it off.' With his thumb and forefinger, Severus carefully extracted the lock of hair that was inside it. 'Before I left, I took this while you were sleeping. Up until last month, I resisted the temptation, but I finally asked someone to take Polyjuice... and, well, when I saw 'you' in the flesh, I knew that everything I had worked for, all the wealth I had accumulated amounted to a grand total of nothing. All the true happiness I have ever known... I left it behind in Ireland. *That* is why I came back.' Unthinkingly, Severus touched her face. He leapt back with a yelp when she gave him a good, hard slap.

'Fuck, that hurt. What was that for?'

'That,' Hermione said, 'was for leaving me for nineteen years.' She took a determined step towards him. Severus warily took a step back and found himself up against the wall. 'And this...' Hermione slid her hands over his chest and around his neck. '...is for coming back.' Pulling Severus' head down towards her, Hermione pressed her lips to his and kissed him until the necessity for oxygen broke them apart.

'Hermione,' Severus panted. 'Oh, gods, I've missed you.'

'Off,' she demanded, yanking at his robe.

'Don't be so...ouch. Careful, that cost me a fortune...'

'Don't care,' Hermione said, reaching for her wand and shredding the offending garment.

'Hermione, the window... Gods, you little witch... oh, *fuck*.' Severus felt his knees buckle as Hermione put her hands in his pants and squeezed his cock.

'I want you now,' she growled as they both slid to the floor.

'Don't be so bloody bossy. Ow, my back. For fuck's sake, woman, I'm nearly sixty.'

'What part of "I want you now" do you not understand?' Hermione summarily disposed of his underwear before making short work of her own clothes and straddling him.

'Don't... I won't... last...'

She sighed. 'Story of my life.'

'No, don't... Oh, Hermione... please...'

'Hmmp?'

'Don't... stop...'

~ * ~

Severus was lying on the kitchen floor with a very soppy grin on his face.

'Well, old man,' said Hermione, prodding him in the ribs. 'I'm waiting...'

'Less of the old.' He grabbed her wrist and kissed it. 'I'll have you know I'm in my prime, but do you think we could take this to your bedroom? A comfy bed would be nice...'

Hermione grinned. 'Poor baby. Shall I Apparate us?'

He yawned. 'Good idea.'

~ * ~

Hermione was afraid to fall asleep in case the wizard lying by her side vanished from her life as abruptly as he'd managed to elbow his way back into it. *A Tracking Charm would be too obvious*, she thought. *He'd spot it immediately. Perhaps I should dig Damelza's book out and see if there's a section on keeping tabs on your wizard.*

Hermione shook her head, amazed at how much life had changed in the space of a few hours. *He looks so peaceful*, she thought, drinking in the sight of her... beloved's features.

Beloved...?

Hermione turned the concept around in her head. Yes, an apt and accurate description, she decided, smiling to herself.

It had been a long time since Hermione had allowed someone to sleep in her bed; she'd never really liked sharing...it has always felt like an intrusion, somehow. Oddly, that feeling now made a peculiar sort of sense: her mind may have forgotten Severus, but her heart had not...and neither had her body, for that matter. Snoring softly next to her, he looked like he belonged there...like he'd always been there. Hermione hoped with all her heart that his feelings really hadn't changed, either. He had certainly been as intense and passionate as she remembered, although his technique had dramatically improved in nineteen years. She was still aching and sore as a result...though in a nice, I've-been-well-and-truly-shagged-into-the-mattress sort of way. She decided she would have to quiz him about the where and the how later...amongst other things.

Severus had told her some incredible stories between bouts of fabulous sex of his travels and work in Eastern Europe. *An Invisibility Potion...* That was truly amazing. No wonder he was loaded. *And Lily... an out of body experience.* The mind boggled. Nineteen years...it had seemed like such a waste...she still hadn't completely forgiven him for leaving her for so long, although she had to agree that it probably hadn't been the right time for them to be together then. If she had gone with him, how long would it have taken before she'd got bored, missed her friends and family, or wanted to pursue her own ambitions? As it was, they had followed their own paths, done what they had wanted to do and now, here they were. Still... she wasn't about to let him off the hook that easily... Hermione's stomach grumbled.

'I can hear your thoughts from here.'

'That was my stomach, actually,' she replied. 'I was hungry before. Now, after all that humping, I'm absolutely ravenous.'

He grinned smugly. 'You need to keep your strength up. The sauce did not spoil, I believe.'

'It's a bit late for spaghetti, don't you think?' Hermione yawned, settling back onto the pillow. 'And I'm not sure if I can walk as far as the kitchen... Mm... thirsty, though.'

'How about a cup of tea?'

She laughed. 'Any chance of a biscuit... or two?'

'Depends,' he said, leaning over to kiss her. 'I don't suppose you have any dark chocolate ones?'

'As a matter of fact, I do.' She kissed him back. 'I went off milk chocolate digestives years ago.'

~ * ~

War Heroes Wed in Secret Ceremony.

Attended by only their closest friends and family, debonair, wealthy entrepreneur, Severus Snape, 58 (Order of Merlin, First Class) married bookish spinster and Wizengamot member, Hermione Granger, 38, in a Civil Ceremony. The bride, wearing a simple, pale-blue robe, carried a posy of Forget-me-nots (pictures, page 3). It is believed the happy couple are spending their honeymoon in Ireland...

~ * ~

Gazing out to sea, Hermione leaned back against Severus as he wrapped his arms around her waist. 'I've always loved this place.' She sighed contentedly. 'Particularly at this time of day.'

'Indeed, it is very beautiful. Like my wife.'

Hermione laughed. 'That still sounds strange... I think we managed to shock just about everyone by getting married so quickly.'

'Hmm.' Severus placed his chin on top of her head. 'I think we waited long enough.'

'True...!' She closed her eyes. 'And... I don't think our world is *quite* ready for an unmarried mother sitting on the Wizengamot.' She heard Severus catch his breath before he slowly moved his hands downwards to cover her abdomen.

'How long...?'

'I've only suspected a few days, but I didn't cast the spell until this morning.' Hermione shivered in the evening breeze. 'I wanted the wedding to be just about us... Do you mind? Only, I'm not getting any younger, and this might be our only chance...'

Severus was very quiet, but Hermione could feel his Adam's apple bobbing against her head as he swallowed repeatedly.

'It is getting cold,' he said eventually. 'What do you say I take you home, give you a massage and hand feed you chocolate?'

'I think we'd like that.' Relieved, Hermione placed her hands on top of his. 'But I want to watch the sunset first. This is one of those perfect moments, don't you think? I don't want it to end just yet.'

He could only sigh in agreement. Standing on that little beach, holding his world in his arms, Severus doubted there would be another one quite like it. He pulled Hermione closer, and together they stood in silence, watching the red sun as it dipped towards the horizon, sending its dying rays across the ocean.

'The first of many, my love,' he murmured into her hair. 'The first of many.'

~ * END * ~

A/N: As well as my betas, I would like to thank Maggie for checking over the original synopsis for plot holes (anyone who's ever done a Time-turner fic will know what a nightmare it is) and Sylvanawood for her enthusiasm for the story, keeping me going when I was set to give it up as a bad job and for the lend of the Chrononavigator. I can now tick 'Time'-Turner' and 'Snape Rescue' fics off the list.