

The Letter

by phoenix

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 8

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A/N: This was written for the Winter Prompt Challenge, specifically #17. Hermione is contacted by the Ministry to say that she's been left some property in someone's will: Severus Snape! Why did he leave her his home and possessions? He's also left her a letter. What does it say or ask of her? Is he really dead?

JKR owns everything you recognize, but I had to change her ending somewhat, so just ignore the last chapter of *The Deathly Hallows*.

Chapter 1

Six months after the war ended, things were finally starting to return to normal. The wizarding world had been doing what it could to covertly repair some of the damage that had been caused by the Death Eaters, but it seemed painfully small compared to the massive devastation wrought by Voldemort's followers. So many lives lost, so much property ruined.

Even now the Muggles were still talking about the unnatural weather the Dementors had caused, trying to unravel the mystery. If only they could all be Obliviated, but magical correction on that immense scale was obviously impossible. The resulting chaos would only be a cure worse than the disease.

Hermione, Harry, Ron and many of the others had offered their services to the Ministry while they awaited a ruling on their status. After all, none of them had completed their seventh year at Hogwarts, but due to the damage to the school, none of their former schoolmates had taken their NEWTs either.

Her relationship with Ron had grown strained since the end of the war. She was sure that part of it was because of Fred's death and part of it was because she was stressing about their futures. Ron seemed unconcerned about their lack of NEWTs, but she could not help worrying about it, knowing how much of a wizard's future was determined by their NEWTs.

They had a flat together, but he had taken to spending a lot of time with George, helping out in the shop when he wasn't doing work for the Ministry. She was sure he would have spent more time with Harry, but he was occupied wooing Ginny. The two of them were nearly inseparable, and Hermione found that she was just a little jealous of how perfectly suited for each other they seemed. She had thought she would have that same future with Ron.

There was a tap at the window, and she let the owl in, hoping it brought the long-awaited ruling from the Ministry. Seeing the letter did indeed have a Ministry seal, she began ripping into it even as she made her way back to her favorite slightly worn but well-stuffed armchair. She was shocked by what she read.

Miss Hermione Granger,

The will of Severus Snape has gone through probate and you are named the sole beneficiary. You have been left Snape's property at 13 Spinner's End, Batley, West Yorkshire, the contents of Gringotts Vault 1199, and the enclosed envelope.

Sincerely,

Artemis Jones

Magical Probate Service

Without realizing it, she let the enclosed envelope slip from her fingers, and she was barely able to half sit, half slide into the chair before her knees buckled.

Why would Snape leave her everything? For that matter, why would he leave her anything at all? She was nothing more than just another of the students who had sat in his classes, and a Gryffindor and insufferable know-it-all to boot. Surely he would have left his things to a Slytherin, like Malfoy.

Rereading the letter, she was reminded that another sealed envelope had been enclosed. Looking around the floor, she saw that it had drifted under the coffee table. Getting down on her hands and knees, she retrieved the letter.

Examining the envelope, she saw that it was made from very unremarkable parchment and was sealed with the Hogwarts crest in green wax. Not entirely trusting Snape, she ran a series of charms on it to ensure that it was not cursed.

When she was reasonably certain that it was safe to open it, she broke the seal. As she was breaking it, it occurred to her that she should have Flooed Harry or Ron to let them observe the course of events.

Nothing happened, so she pulled the contents of the envelope out. There was a key wrapped in another piece of parchment. Flipping to both sides, she saw that it appeared to be blank, so she set it on the table. Examining the key, she thought that it looked very much like a house key. Probably his house at Spinner's End. It still didn't answer the mystery of why she had been named Severus Snape's sole beneficiary.

Leaning back against the chair, she tried to figure out what on earth this meant. Why would he wrap the key in parchment and seal it in an envelope?

She heard the Floo activate and hurriedly stuffed the key into her pocket. The last thing she needed just now was to answer questions from Ron about the letter.

He stepped out of the fire and shuffled over to the sofa before collapsing on it. "I'm exhausted. I can't believe that George has so many ideas. What's for dinner?"

Even though the routine was much the same every night, tonight she found it especially annoying. "That's all you ever think about... yourself. Never once have you asked me about my day!" She got up and stormed into the kitchen in a huff.

She wondered why she was still with Ron. He was the same frustrating, selfish person he had always been. His change during the war had been temporary, born of the stress of their situation. The disappointment that had permeated the very depth of her soul when he had abandoned both her and Harry had now returned and seemed to be taking up permanent residence in her psyche.

He entered the kitchen and demanded, "What is this?" while waving a piece of parchment at her.

"What is what?" she asked in exasperation.

"Why do you have a letter from Snape?"

"I don't have a letter from Snape!" she snapped.

"Oh no? Then what's this? 'Dear Hermione, I'm sure you are wondering why you have received this...'"

She snatched the parchment from his hand. It was the same one that the key had been wrapped in she could still see the imprint of the key in the middle of the page but it had been blank when she had last looked at it moments ago. She was sure of that. Now she realized that Snape must have charmed it so that the writing would only reveal itself after she had touched it.

"Why do you have a letter from Snape? He's dead, isn't he?" Ron asked suspiciously.

"Of course he is. He died in the Shrieking Shack." She wasn't sure how to proceed. Did she tell him the truth? What would he think? She still didn't know what she thought about this whole situation. "He left this letter through his will, and it just arrived from Magical Probate today. I hadn't had a chance to read it yet."

"But why did you lie to me when I asked you why you had a letter from Snape?" he asked suspiciously.

She realized her half-truth wasn't very convincing. She had never excelled at deception. "Because the page was blank when I took it out of the envelope. It must have fallen to the floor when the Floo activated because I was startled. Obviously it was charmed so that the text would appear only after I touched it." It was the truth, and she hoped that the truth would satisfy him.

"So what does it say?"

"I don't know. I'd like to have the chance to read it in private first. He obviously meant this for me and no one else, or it wouldn't have been protected."

"You know, no matter what he became, he was still always a big git," Ron announced before turning on his heel and leaving her alone in the kitchen.

Hermione stared after him for several seconds, remarking on how little he had changed over the years. Looking down at the parchment, she forced her eyes to focus.

Dear Hermione,

I'm sure you are wondering why you have received this letter and the key to my house. It is quite obvious that the worst has come to pass and that my will has been executed.

I know that you have many questions, especially given my behavior towards you over the years. You are the one person whom I can trust with this task. The one person who has the knowledge and skill for what I need accomplished. For safety reasons, nothing further will be put in this letter, but go to my house and hopefully all your questions will be answered.

Your servant,

Severus Snape

After staring at the letter for several seconds, she reached into her pocket and grasped the key. She had to choose between seeing what answers awaited her at Snape's house and staying here and arguing with Ron. It was an easy choice to make.

Passing through the living room, she grabbed her cloak.

"Where are you going?" asked Ron.

"Out," she replied shortly and slammed the door before he could ask any further questions. Taking the letter from the Ministry out of her pocket, she looked at the address one more time before Disapparating.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 8

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 2

Hermione arrived at Spinner's End with a small pop. She wrinkled her nose at the stench in the air there was obviously stagnant water somewhere. Noting that the street was deserted, she removed the Disillusionment Charm and looked around. Most of the houses were dilapidated and in fact appeared deserted. Only a few at the far end of the street were lit.

Checking the house numbers, she moved down the street until she found number 13. It appeared no different from any other house on the street. In fact, it looked like one of the worst. She hoped that it was merely a magical disguise and that she would not be risking her life by entering the house.

Once again checking that the street was deserted and that no one was watching her, she pulled out her wand and ran through a series of incantations, checking to see if there were any defensive charms on the property. She didn't detect anything, but she still approached the front door carefully. As she drew near the door, she could feel the key growing warm in her pocket.

Withdrawing the key from her pocket, she noticed that her hand was shaking as she moved the key towards the lock. The key slid easily into the lock, but she was struck with second thoughts before she turned it. Removing her hand from the key, she tried to recall what the letter had said and once again wondered why Snape would have entrusted her with his possessions. And what was this thing he needed accomplished? It didn't make any sense. Draco Malfoy was the one it would have made sense for him to choose as his beneficiary. Or any of his other Slytherins, but not a Gryffindor, especially an 'insufferable know-it-all'.

She was brought back to the present when she heard the click of the key turning in the lock of its own volition. Once unlocked, the door slowly swung open, revealing the space beyond.

Peering inside, she was struck by the darkness the light from the stars barely penetrated the grimy windows. It was clear that no one had been in the house for a very long time, since long before the war had ended. "Well, there's nothing to do but go in," she said to herself, building her resolve, before removing the key from the lock. As she crossed the threshold, several lamps lit.

A layer of dust covered everything. The sparse furniture was well worn, definitely having seen better days. Books lined the walls. She would have expected nothing less from someone as knowledgeable as Snape.

Tucked against one wall was a small secretary desk, and she decided that was the best place to start her investigation of her new house. Flipping down the writing surface, she saw that the desk was empty except for a quill and a half-empty bottle of ink. The only things in the drawers were the remains of a spider's meal.

"If this was so important, why didn't he leave me more information?" she mused aloud. This whole endeavor made less and less sense. Was this all some final cruel joke he was playing on her, leaving her this wreck of a house? One that probably would never sell and would end up costing her money in property taxes? If that was the case, she was surprised he didn't leave it to Harry.

At that thought, she realized this had to be a serious bequest. She resumed her search of the house. Looking around she realized that there were no doors. From the exterior of the house, she knew that it had two stories and that it should be deeper than just one room. Some of the bookcases obviously concealed doors.

Since the room appeared as wide as the house, she started at the bookcase on the back left wall. As she rubbed her hand along the side of the third shelf over, she heard a soft click and the door swung open, revealing an eat-in kitchen that looked as dilapidated as the rest of the house.

On the right side of the room she found a second doorway that led upstairs where she found two desolate bedrooms and a dingy bathroom. The state of the house was reminiscent of what they had found at Grimmauld Place.

She spent the next hour going through the house, checking in every drawer and cupboard and under every bit of furniture for any clue as to why she had been his beneficiary. There was nothing.

Exhausted, she threw herself into a rickety chair only to regret that decision when she was engulfed in a cloud of dust that produced a huge coughing fit. With a quick flick of her wand, she banished the dust and decided the house could do with a good cleaning.

Using the cleaning spells she had learned from Molly, she went after the dust, cobwebs and other detritus. It took close to an hour and some manual labor, but she was finally getting the house to the point that it was almost livable, not that she would want to live here.

In fact, the sooner she could leave, the better. No matter what she did to the windows, they were still reluctant to let light enter, leaving the house with a very gloomy feel, though one that was very much in line with Snape's personality. Being in this house was giving her a lot of insight into his personality, and she didn't entirely like what she was discovering. But with him gone, it didn't really matter, did it?

Even in cleaning, she had found no clues as to why the house was now hers. In fact, she found very little to suggest anyone had lived here in a long, long time. The kitchen cupboards were empty except for a few pieces of dinnerware and the barest cooking implements. All the drawers and cupboards were empty, and there was not even linen on the beds. It was all very strange.

As she was trying to think, she found herself wishing she had some tea. There was a kettle, but nothing to brew in it.

Looking around the main room, she saw the hundreds perhaps thousands of books,

and she wondered if the answer was in one of them. Moving to the nearest shelf, she began reading the titles. Oddly, they were all Muggle books though there seemed to be no one predominant category. There were novels both classic and modern history books, biographies, a true cross section of Muggle publishing. None of this was something she would ever have expected from Snape.

She knew that he had a Muggle father and that perhaps he would have been exposed to some Muggle literature that way, but the breadth and range of the books, as well as the sheer number of them, was still astounding.

Moving to another part of the room, she finally found the books that she had expected to find in Snape's library. Many of them focused on the Dark Arts, and she was sure that she saw several that were on the banned book list, meant to be kept only in the most secure archives of the Ministry. There were even a few that she was almost positive were bound with human skin.

A shiver ran down her spine, and she continued her exploration of the books, moving quickly away from the Dark Arts section. Those books would have to be turned over to the Ministry; she wanted nothing to do with them. Though perhaps she should talk to Harry about that first and see what he thought she should do with them. After all, he had the experience of dealing with similar tomes from Grimmauld Place.

A majority of the remaining books covered the major magical disciplines of Charms, Arithmancy, Transfiguration, and obviously, Potions. Unsurprisingly, it appeared that he had every book on Potions that had been written in the last five centuries. Even so, there were not as many Potions books as there were Dark Arts books. Although in the end he had proven to be on their side, she had a hard time believing anyone with such an interest in the Dark Arts could truly have been in Dumbledore's service.

Perhaps he understood her love of books and realized that she was one person who would take care of his collection and put it to good use. But that still left the mystery of the nature of the task that Snape had felt only she could be entrusted with.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door.

"Who could that be?" she wondered aloud. She supposed it was possible that Ron had gone to see Harry and the two of them had tracked down the exact address where Snape used to live. After all, Harry was undergoing limited Auror training while they awaited the Ministry disposition and had access to Ministry records.

Wiping a damp strand of hair that was stuck to her cheek and tucking it behind her ear, she stormed to the door, ready to deliver the two of them an earful.

Whom she saw standing outside the door shocked her into stunned silence. Lucius Malfoy was at her door.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 8

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Chapter 3

"May I come in?" Malfoy asked politely.

After a few seconds, Hermione found her voice. "What are you doing here?" she asked tersely.

"I prefer to discuss this in private. May I come in?"

Still in shock, she stood aside to allow him to enter, but he remained on the stoop.

Before she could ask, he replied, "There are charms on this house, and I must be verbally invited in by the owner."

"Come in," she replied, starting to get annoyed. Malfoy had once again managed to avoid any prosecution for his actions while serving Voldemort. The Wizengamot had believed his assertion that Bellatrix had placed his whole family under the Imperius curse and that they were forced to cooperate with Voldemort under threat of death. These circumstances had been seen as extenuating enough that he had been pardoned after turning in several other Death Eaters.

While they had all been disappointed, she had to admit that after watching the Malfoys in their home while they had been imprisoned there, the Wizengamot decision had probably been the right one.

Once the door was closed, she asked again, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

Now she was getting even more irritated by his inability to provide more than the barest answer to her questions. She hoped this would not continue. "This will go a lot faster if you provide more information with your answers. "Why did you come to see me and how did you know that I was here?"

He looked around the room, scanning the bookcases. "There was a charm on the house meant to notify me when someone entered. Since only you could have safely unlocked the door, I knew that you were here. As to why, I have been sent to deliver a message." Apparently finding what he was looking for, he selected a book from the shelf. Tapping it with his wand, he muttered an incantation that she could not decipher. After he opened the book, he picked up a letter and handed it to her. "Severus instructed me to deliver this to you should the house pass to you."

She eyed the letter warily, resenting even more the postmortem scavenger hunt Snape had set her on. "Why you?" she asked, still not taking the letter.

"I was told that this letter would answer all of your questions. I can say no more than that."

"Can't or won't?"

"Cannot."

Realizing that he must have taken some sort of oath and admitting to herself that she could see no reason for Snape to want to kill her, she finally took the letter. Malfoy

moved away from her, giving her privacy to read the letter.

Breaking the seal, she opened the parchment and was once again met with Snape's tiny scrawl.

Hermione,

I'm sure you are wondering why I chose to leave my house to you. This letter should provide you all the explanation you need.

Obviously, the war is over. I have no doubt that the truth of the Elder Wand has been discovered. I also presume the Dark Lord incorrectly believed me to be the wand's master as I was the one to carry out Dumbledore's final wish. I will presume that the truth of that matter has come to light. If it has not, ask Albus's portrait. Now that the war is over, it should be available for consultation.

Voldemort's trust in me was always tenuous at best, but then again, you could say that about his trust in anyone who was not Bellatrix Lestrange. I do not think he suspected me of being a double agent, or else I would never have survived as long as I did.

Lucius has come to you at my request to ensure that you receive this letter. He is only here because what I expected must have finally come to pass: Voldemort has set Nagini on me. You see, I knew that he would never kill me with his wand. After creating the Horcruxes, he lost the taste for killing, realizing what it did to his soul. That is not to say that he would not kill, just that he preferred someone else to do the deed if possible.

I have never sought death, even though I knew that absolution would be difficult to gain, especially with Albus gone. But no sane person seeks premature death. As such, I tried to develop an antivenin to Nagini's bite. Unfortunately, that was impossible without a sample of the snake's venom something I have never been able to attain.

If Lucius has done as I asked, he has obtained that sample and will provide it to you once you. You may wonder why this is important.

You see, I am not dead.

She stopped reading and sank slowly to the floor as her knees refused to hold her upright. How could Snape not be dead? Harry had watched him die. She had seen his lifeless body in the Shrieking Shack.

But then again, she could not recall anyone mentioning finding his body, and to the best of her knowledge, there had never been a burial service. It hadn't seemed important with the vast number of other war dead he had just been a forgotten casualty. Returning her attention to the letter, she continued reading.

Since Lucius is there with you, my anti-toxin was at least somewhat successful at staving off my death. But no matter how good the anti-toxin, all it can do is keep me alive, likely comatose. That is why I left the house to you.

It has the books and the laboratory to brew the antivenin, and you are the only one who has the skill to do that... and the will. No other apothecary would want to save my life. As pathetic as it is, I do not believe you will let me die. Your vaunted Gryffindor honor will finally benefit me.

By now you have had time to investigate the house, and I'm sure you are wondering about the laboratory I mentioned. In the basement, next to the water heater, you will notice a particularly red brick. Tap it twice, pause, and then tap it four more times with your wand. It will reveal my laboratory, which should be fully stocked, though depending on the amount of time that has passed, some of the ingredients may need replacing.

I know that you can do this. My life depends on it.

In your debt,

Severus Snape

She had no idea what to think. Snape alive? Could he possibly still be alive after so much time had passed? And why had Malfoy simply not taken him to St. Mungo's? After all, Snape seemed to assume that he would have been exonerated surely the Healers at St. Mungo's would be better suited to saving him than she. After all, she had yet to even settle on a career and had no experience in Potions besides her schooling.

Looking up at Malfoy, she saw he had moved closer to her.

"Severus truly is alive. I have been entrusted with his safety."

"Take him to St. Mungo's," she said simply.

Malfoy shook his head. "That is not what he wants. They would have little motivation and even less ability to save him. This has to come from you."

"Me? I'm just a novice witch, one who hasn't even taken her NEWTs. And even if I had, I have no experience with complex potions." That was not entirely true since she had brewed Polyjuice Potion during her second year.

He moved closer to her. "But you have a keen analytical mind, and a rare natural talent for potions. Snape said so on more than one occasion. And you have all of the reference materials in this house. There are books here that St. Mungo's... does not have. That even the Ministry library does not have copies of. He assured me that with these books and his equipment, you would be able to find the antivenin using your keen intellect." His voice was smooth and velvety, the praise easily rolling off his tongue.

She ignored his flattery. "I want to see him."

This threw him off balance; it was clearly not the response he had expected. "It would do no good. He is unconscious..."

She interrupted. "Either I see him or I do not work on the antivenin." There was no way she would allow Malfoy to have the upper hand.

He considered her words for a few moments. "Very well. Though I will have to Apparate you there and back."

She was uncomfortable with this suggestion, but she knew that he would never let her know Snape's location. "Fine," she replied sharply. She had no idea why she was trusting him other than the fact that he had been entrusted with vital pieces of the puzzle, and she could not let this mystery go unsolved.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 8

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Chapter 4

Hermione did her best not to let her apprehension about trusting Malfoy show externally, but she wasn't sure that she was entirely successful. Taking hold of his arm, she prepared for the highly unpleasant sensation of Side-Along Apparition. The part she hated most was that she would be completely giving up any control of the situation. And since she had no idea where she was going, she would not be able to Apparate back out by herself.

Though the logical part of her mind realized that it was highly unlikely to be some sort of trap. After all, she would be easy enough to kidnap in her day-to-day life if that were the point.

After they arrived and the unpleasant sensation in her stomach finally subsided, she looked around and saw that they were in a rather unremarkable room. The only things in the room were a hospital bed very much like the ones in St. Mungo's, a table and chair next to the bed, and in the bed, a very silent and unmoving Severus Snape.

At first glance, he appeared very much as she remembered him from Hogwarts, but looking closer, she noticed he was not breathing. Cautiously she moved closer and reached out tentatively to touch him. She found his skin cool to the touch. "Is he...?" She knew he had to be alive, but she could see no sign of it.

"He is in stasis. Think of your Muggle fairy tales of *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty*," he offered, unable to completely keep the smugness out of his voice.

"But those are... Right. And I can treat him when he's like this?" Once again she realized that her magical education had been woefully incomplete.

Malfoy patted his pocket. "I have the antidote to his stasis. When you have the antivenin ready, I will administer that, and then you in turn can treat him."

"Uh-uh-uh. I haven't agreed to treat him. I just wanted to see him, to make sure you were telling the truth."

He dramatically placed his hand on his heart. "I am wounded that you would doubt my veracity."

"Quit the dramatics. Why don't you just take him to St. Mungo's. Time is clearly not of the essence." She wasn't sure that was entirely true not being familiar with the state that Snape was in.

He sighed. "As I have explained, you have the curiosity, the innate intellectual prowess to find the antivenin. Not to mention the laboratory now. And no one doubts that you will honor any commitments you make to the very best of your ability. As Severus remarked, you are indeed Gryffindor to the core."

"Hire a Healer to use the laboratory."

As he spoke, he walked around the other side of the bed so that he was facing her over Snape. "That's not possible. It is your laboratory and you are the only one who can use it."

"What are you talking about?" she asked defensively.

"I realize that you may still not be aware of all the intricacies of the magical world, so allow me to explain. Due to the nature of the laboratory and its contents, it may only be accessed and used by its owner. That is now you."

"So give me the name of a Healer and I'll leave it to him."

He chuckled in a slightly condescending way. "Magic does not work like that. The only way for ownership to be transferred is through the death of the previous owner."

She pointed at Snape. "He's not dead, yet I now own his house. It can be done."

"That's not entirely true. As far as the wizarding world is concerned, he is dead. His will was executed by Magical Probate. The house, and by extension the laboratory, are yours until you depart this world for the next. You are the only one who has, and will have, the resources necessary to find the cure. His life is in your hands."

"What are you saying? If I refuse to help...?" She was starting to feel trapped, as though someone else had suddenly taken control of her life.

"If you chose not to help, he has left instructions that heroic efforts to keep him alive are to be ceased."

"You would take out his feeding tube? Let him starve?" She was outraged by this thought.

"Is that not the humane thing to do? Why should someone with no hope of recovery be forced to cling to the fragile human frame?"

Her head was starting to hurt with all the information she was being fed. She knew that she could not just let him die. Her Gryffindor sensibilities were forcing her to realize that she had to do something for him, had to at least try to cure him.

"Give me a couple of days to get things in order so that I can start work."

"I'll deliver blood samples and Nagini's head as soon as you are ready for them."

"The head?" The thought of working with the head of a snake, and especially that snake, made her slightly queasy.

"It was the best way to preserve the venom for analysis."

She didn't want to dwell on this thought. "Fine. I'll send you an owl when I'm ready. Can we go now?"

"Of course, my dear." He extended his elbow for her to take hold.

As she reached out, she focused on how much he had changed since the war so that she would not think about the gut-wrenching feeling she was about to experience again. She was brought back to the present when he said, "Miss Granger?"

Realizing they were back at Spinner's End, she quickly released his arm.

"I shall await your owl," he said before Disapparating with a pop.

Looking around the deserted street, she tried to decide what she wanted to do next. The house here was clean, but not really fit for occupation. It would be easy enough for her to spend the night going through the books in the library, exploring the laboratory – see if it was as dangerous as Malfoy claimed it was. But she knew that she also had to face Ron at some point, and the longer she took in returning, the angrier he would be. It would be easy to return to the house, pop out in the morning to get a bite to eat and bury herself once more in her research, but that would not make Ron go away.

After taking a deep, cleansing breath, she Apparated back to her flat. She stood staring at her door for several minutes before she worked up the courage to open it. As she had expected, Ron was sitting in the chair, waiting for her.

"It's about time you got home. Where have you been?" he demanded angrily.

Rubbing her temple, she replied, "I don't want to argue, please?" She knew there was no chance of her being allowed to go to bed without talking with him.

"Fine," he snapped. When she glared at him, he tried to moderate his tone further. "Where have you been?"

Knowing that telling him the truth was a bad idea, she settled on a half-truth. "I needed

to be alone for a while to take in what the letter said."

He opened his mouth, as though to start arguing, closed his mouth, and then opened and closed it several more times before asking, "Why would Snape leave a letter for you?"

She thought that it was a very well asked question. From the tone of his voice, she could tell that he was still angry with her, but he was at least holding his temper. "He was in the midst of a research project and his letter asked that I complete it."

He eyed her suspiciously. "And because of this you ran out of the house?"

The excuse had sounded better in her mind. "Well obviously the details of the project couldn't be put in a letter. He left instructions regarding where I could find the research. I was eager to see it for myself."

"So are you going to do it?"

She sounded very excited as she replied, "Oh, most definitely. He has postulated several new theories on the uses of—"

Ron cut her off. "Spare me the details. How long will this take?"

"I have no idea. It's very complex. Since I'm still waiting to hear from the Ministry, reading through the notes from the preliminary research will give me something to do to keep my mind off it." She could see his eyes losing focus. Her deception was working and she was elated. She didn't even mind that they slept with their backs to each other hugging their respective edges of the bed.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 8

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 5

The following day when Hermione entered the lab, she was somewhat surprised by what she saw. There were several complex apparatuses set up on the four tables in the center of the room. It looked as though at least one experiment had been interrupted in progress. The walls were covered with shelves filled with every conceivable Potions ingredient and some items she never would have considered for use in Potions. She could only assume they were meant for Dark Potions.

Finishing her survey of the room, she found several lab notebooks. One happened to have an inventory of everything in the lab. As she flipped through the book, she felt a hum. Looking at the back cover, she saw a note that the notebook was charmed to keep inventory automatically. It was not something she had ever considered, but given the large volume of supplies, it made perfect sense. Clearly there was much more to Snape than she had initially thought. He was turning out to be a most intriguing man.

The other notebooks chronicled the experiments he had left unfinished. Each apparatus contained one of the more common bases for antidote potions and had been placed under a Stasis Charm so they would remain viable. He had also postulated several theories for each base. It took her several hours just to skim through all the journals, and she found herself more and more in awe of his intellect. She could now understand why he had seemed so bitter teaching at Hogwarts, it really was a misuse of his rather impressive talents. The teenage scribbling in the margins of the Potions book Harry had used sixth year had only scratched the surface of his brilliance.

He had also meticulously outlined steps to be taken to analyze Nagini's venom. She was wondering why it had been necessary for her to be the one to find the antivenin. It seemed as though any competent Potions master should be able to follow his research steps. And someone with actual experience researching antidotes would probably have been a better choice.

As she flipped to the next page, she saw it was addressed to her.

Hermione,

As you have presumably already perused my admittedly voluminous notes, I am sure that you are wondering why I insisted you be the one to work on the antivenin. I know that you have a very meticulous and perfectionist nature. Some would say that is a curse. In some fields of magic, that is a gift, and a necessary one. I also know that you

have a

natural aptitude for Potions one that exceeds your mere ability to follow directions if you will only follow your instincts. This is an even rarer gift, one I have only encountered a handful of times throughout my entire teaching career.

While everything may seem straightforward, I believe that Nagini's poison is like none other that has been encountered in the wizarding world. The fact that you and Potter have eluded capture means that you have the critical thinking skills that will be essential if you are to succeed.

I hope that you believe me when I say I have the utmost respect for you. While everyone is surely lauding Potter, without your help, he never would have been able to succeed. You are proof that family heritage is no measure of the quality of the person.

Severus

She was dumbstruck by the praise. This was the same man who for years had taken such apparent joy in belittling her. Now she was doubly motivated to find the cure so that she could ask him about this dichotomy in his personality.

Days turned into weeks as she followed his instructions for breaking the venom down. As the steps progressed and her results diverged from what he had anticipated, she came to understand why he had insisted her problem-solving skills would be invaluable. Even combing through all the books at her disposal, she sometimes could only make an educated guess on what to do next.

During that time she had stocked the pantry and brought some of the other basics for living such as dishes and linens to the house. While it still didn't feel like home, at least she could be reasonably comfortable. Which was good because she was spending more and more time at her new house.

Sometimes it would be two or three days before she returned to the flat she shared with Ron. After a few of her extended stays, he stopped asking her about what she had been doing. He did not care about the technical details involved in researching a potion. The distance between them grew, but she rarely noticed as she was so completely engrossed in her research.

The lab tables were covered with books. She had to be very careful with her research because she had a finite supply of the venom, so she had to ensure that she did not waste any of it.

After spending several hours one afternoon perusing the books and notes that she had been studying, she determined that what she needed was the distillate from Acromantula venom. Checking the inventory, she saw that there wasn't any. This was one ingredient that she knew she would not be able to find in Diagon Alley. Not only that, but she knew that it was incredibly expensive. She did not have that sort of gold.

She slumped back in the chair in frustration at having come so close only to fail. Suddenly she remembered that Severus had also left her his vault. Once she had found out he was alive, she had put the vault out of her mind. Now it appeared she had no choice.

Quickly, she cleaned herself up, determined to get to Gringotts before they closed. Just as she was about to leave, it occurred to her that she didn't have the key to the vault, and she had been over every bit of this house. Should she contact Malfoy and see if he knew where the key was, or should she just go to Gringotts with a copy of the will and hope for the best?

Not wanting to deal with Malfoy, she opted for the latter. Worst case, she could probably get Bill to help her out.

Walking into Gringotts, she approached the nearest Goblin. "I have inherited the contents of Vault 1199, but the key was not included with the will." She slid the copy of the letter from the Ministry across the counter.

The Goblin scrutinized the letter. "Wait here."

It seemed to take forever because she was incredibly nervous that they wouldn't allow her access to the vault. Or that it wouldn't have enough money in it for her to get what she needed.

Finally the first Goblin returned accompanied by a second. "You are Miss Hermione Granger?" the second one asked.

"Yes. Severus Snape left me his vault."

"The Ministry paperwork appears to be in order, yet you have no key."

She didn't like the tone of his voice. "It wasn't included in the letter from the Ministry, and it wasn't left at his house. Does this mean I cannot access the vault?" She knew that Goblins were not always straightforward and just wanted to get to the end of this conversation as soon as possible.

"Normally there is a fee charged for a lost key. But there are special circumstances, and this is one. You will need to fill out a lost key form, and then you will be escorted to your vault."

For a moment she thought about arguing that she had not lost the key, but then she realized that would only prolong the process. "Fine."

Once they arrived at the vault, the Goblin handed her a key. She couldn't help the nervous feeling after her last visit to the bank. She was actually surprised they hadn't thrown her out. Then again, they probably had not recognized her as one of the people who had caused them so much trouble and embarrassment.

As she opened the vault door, she closed her eyes and said a silent prayer. Opening them, she was shocked at what she saw. There were piles and piles of Galleons. More than enough to purchase the Acromantula venom and still make only the barest dent in the savings. She never would have guessed that Severus could have amassed such wealth.

She paused, wondering where exactly the money had come from. Was some of it Death Eater spoils? It seemed unlikely he could have accumulated this much gold from teaching. While she did not know what the salary of a Hogwarts' professor was, it surely could not account for this much wealth. It was just one more question to add to the list she had for Severus once he was revived.

After leaving Gringotts, she proceeded directly to Knockturn Alley. She had only been there once before, and she certainly didn't feel comfortable there, but she didn't seem to have much choice. In the notes, Severus had told her that he procured all his ingredients at Donovan's. He had also included the warning that Donovan could be quite surly and prone to taking advantage of new customers and that she should use his name to ensure a fair deal. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. After all, everyone thought that Snape was dead. Why would his name carry any weight anymore?

Walking down the alley, she scanned the dingy shop signs, looking for Donovan's. When she finally found it, she grimaced at the disgusting things displayed in the window. They rivaled anything that had been in Snape's office.

Entering the shop, she headed straight for the counter, hoping the quickest way out of the shop would be to just tell the shopkeeper what she was looking for. Producing a small list, she slid it across the counter. "I require the following," she said in the most confident voice she could muster.

He looked at her list. "Difficult. Very difficult. And expensive. *Very* expensive. I'd say it'll take... at least two weeks, possibly as long as four for me to get everything. And it will cost 250 Galleons. Of course I'll be requiring that up front," he said in an unctuous voice.

"Two weeks! What sort of a business are you running?" She was shocked at what he was telling her. "And 250 Galleons is quite excessive."

"You're talking about Acromantula venom. Not an easy thing to get."

"I believe that you are taking advantage of me. I shall take my business elsewhere." She could have used Snape's name, but she felt that would be betraying the secret of his survival.

"Be my guest," he said in a derisive voice.

She turned on her heel to storm out, but instead found herself bumping into Lucius Malfoy. Startled, all she could say was, "Oh."

"Having difficulties, my dear?" he asked smoothly.

It took her several seconds of waffling to try to formulate an answer, and in that time Lucius swept past her and approached the counter. "I believe the lady gave you a list," he said firmly, in a voice that dared argument.

"She did, and I quoted her a fair price. She turned up nose at it." Donovan tried to sound confident, but his voice cracked slightly.

Malfoy looked every bit as menacing as he ever had as he loomed over the shopkeeper. "I heard your price, and I don't believe it is fair. You wouldn't be trying to take advantage of her, would you? I will have you know that she is working on a rather important potion for me."

He stammered, "F-f-for you? Well, let me check my books. It is possible that in my haste I misquoted." He pulled a book from under the counter and began flipping through it. "Oh, yes. I was quite mistaken. Everything she has asked for should come to 125 Galleons." He could no longer conceal the fear in his voice.

Malfoy slammed his hand on the book to stop the incessant page flipping. "I believe you meant to say 100 Galleons."

"Oh, yes. One-hundred Galleons. That's what I meant, Mr. Malfoy. And I can have everything ready day after tomorrow," the man replied nervously. He turned his attention back to Hermione. "Come back day after tomorrow and everything will be ready for you, Miss."

"Thank you," she said quietly, startled at how easily Malfoy had gotten his way. Obviously his power had not diminished. Eager to be out of the shop, she pulled her cloak tightly about her and rushed toward the door and the fresh air beyond it.

Malfoy caught up to her as she paused a short way down the alley. "I hope you don't mind my interceding on your behalf, but I know that while Donovan is quite willing to take advantage of people, but his merchandise is also the best you will find here."

She didn't know what to think about his interference. "Thank you. You saved me the trouble of having to find another shop." Not wanting to spend time with him, she continued. "... think I should be getting back. There is plenty of work to be done before then."

He strolled beside her, shoulder to shoulder. "Are you making headway?"

"Slowly, but I'm getting there. If you don't mind, I really do need to get back to my work." There was still something about him that she didn't quite trust. There had to be something more behind his desire to help Severus, and not knowing what it was bothered her. Unfortunately, she was expending all her energy on curing Severus and had no time to spend deciphering Malfoy's behavior.

"Of course," he said silkily. "I shall check on you in a few days to ensure that Donovan procured the appropriate goods for you. If there is anything else you require, my dear, please do not hesitate to ask for my assistance." He gently brushed her cheek and grinned gently before heading in the opposite direction.

Thankful for his departure, she Apparated back to Spinner's End, anxious to finish getting everything set up for the arrival of her Acromantula venom.

About a week afterwards, she was engrossed in her newest set of experiments, which seemed to be going very well. Suddenly, she became aware of someone knocking at the door... "Who could that be?" she asked herself. She quickly washed up and went upstairs to the front door. Wand at the ready, she slowly opened the door. "Ron? Harry? What are you doing here?"

"We could ask you the same thing," replied Harry.

"Yeah. This is Snape's house, isn't it?" Ron asked.

"First off, what are you two doing here? Then I'll answer your questions."

"Can we come in?" Ron asked.

She wasn't sure this was the wisest thing to do. She didn't want them to know what she was doing. "Not yet."

Harry tried to force his way in, but was repulsed at the threshold. "What the bloody hell?"

"Look, what are you two doing here and how did you find me?" She hated being interrupted and wanted nothing more than to get back to her research.

Ron sighed and launched into the explanation. "The Ministry owl came two days ago. When you didn't come home, I used a seeking spell to find you. This area looks kind of dodgy so I asked Harry to help me figure out what this house is."

"I did some research and found out this used to be Snape's house. Ron told me about the letter you received, so we were wondering what's up?" asked Harry. After a few minutes he added, "Hermione, please. Can we come in?"

She took a few seconds to reason with herself. On one hand, she really didn't want to get into it with them, but on the other hand, she was almost positive they were going to camp out on her front stoop if she didn't let them in. "For a little while, but I'm quite busy and can't take a lot of time to socialize with the two of you." She stood aside and said, "Come in."

They took seats in the living room and she purposely didn't offer them tea, not wanting to prolong the visit any more than was absolutely necessary.

"So what are you doing in Snape's house?" Ron asked.

"He left me the house because he had a very important research project in progress that he wanted me to finish. I just didn't think it was a good idea to tell you that he left me the house because I knew that you would make a very big deal of it."

"A big deal? Of course it's a big deal! Snape would just leave you his house to finish a research project?" Ron said, the volume of his voice steadily rising.

"Don't yell. This is exactly why I didn't want to tell you. And yes. Just a research project. It was being done here, so that's why."

"It just seems odd. A house is a big possession."

"Well, it's not like he had any family to leave it to, did he?"

Harry stared at his feet and Ron looked slightly embarrassed. "That's true. But you could have just told me."

"I was excited by the challenge and I just didn't want to get into an argument with you. If I had told you, you would have started asking a lot of questions that I still don't have the answers to. Right now you know everything I know."

"Are you sure? You aren't keeping any more secrets, are you?" Ron asked in a demanding tone.

"Yes, Ron. I'm sure." She normally didn't like lying, but in this case, she really wanted to keep the fact that Snape was still alive a secret for a little while longer. She wanted to wait until she had all the answers before she told Ron and Harry. The two of them would react poorly to her keeping that secret, but at this point she didn't care. Telling them would only raise more questions that she could not yet answer. And knowing Harry, he would insist that Snape be treated by professional Healers at St. Mungo's instead of by her.

"Don't you want to know what the owl said?" Harry asked.

"What owl?"

"The Ministry owl. The ruled on our disposition."

She had forgotten they had mentioned that. "Oh, right. So what have they decided?"

"They are going to award NEWTs based on our last grades at school."

"Well, that seems fair," she replied quickly.

Ron eyed her suspiciously. "That's it? You aren't going to bemoan the loss of a whole year of classes and all the wonderful things you could have learned?"

"Well, look at what we did while we were on the run. I would say that we learned much more about Charms and Transfiguration than we would ever have learned in a classroom, not to mention Defense Against the Dark Arts. It would be a waste of time and then having to tailor the tests... it makes perfect sense. And I can always look up anything I might have missed. I mean I have been reviewing Arithmancy texts..." As she had hoped her quick stream of thoughts on academics were enough to bore Ron.

"Okay, okay. I get it. I'm just surprised by your reaction. You were always so upset when exams got cancelled. Tell you what... join us for dinner to celebrate?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. I've found this great new place in Glasgow. I can send a message to Ginny to meet us at your place before we go," Harry added.

She really didn't have a reason to say no. In fact, it would draw even more suspicion if she did. And maybe she needed a break. "Okay. Just give me five minutes here to get stuff cleaned up so that the research isn't ruined."

"Five minutes," Ron said sternly.

Rushing down to the basement, she knew he meant it. And she didn't want them in the lab. It was good that NEWTs were being awarded based on their last marks. It would give her more time to work on her research without having to worry about studying for useless exams.

She paused. Ron was right. She really had changed. The old Hermione never would have thought of an exam as 'useless'. Well, it was a change for the better. There were definitely more important things than tests. And then once she had finished the antivenin, she could start looking for a proper job.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 8

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 6

Harry and Ron were in a great mood as they sat down to eat. They were laughing and talking excitedly about what they would do now. Harry had entered the official Auror training program. As far as Ron was concerned, that sort of thing didn't matter much to him. He had decided that his calling was to work with George, not to be an Auror.

Hermione just pushed her food around the plate. Now that she had her NEWTs, it meant that she could do anything she wanted, but she now realized that she no longer had any idea what that was. A few weeks ago, she would have told you that she wanted to work for the Ministry, to further her SPEW agenda. But working on Severus' potion had been far more rewarding than she could ever have imagined.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" asked Ron.

"What?" she asked, startled back to the here and now.

"I thought you'd be happy, but you aren't really here with us, are you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to think about the future, about what I want to do."

"I thought you were going to go to work for the Ministry. You've been talking about the house-elves ever since the war ended, not to mention the Centaurs and the Goblins," said Harry.

"I do. I've just been rethinking how I want to go about it. Perhaps the Ministry isn't the best place to start. I just don't know." She didn't want to tell them the real reason. It almost felt as though she had a real mentor with Snape's notes. There were times when it seemed as though he were actually, physically talking to her. Though in a way, he was. He had written the notes with her in mind. "I was thinking that the cause should be more visible for a while, get more attention from folks, and then once I have people thinking seriously about it, I can go to work for the Ministry to accomplish what I think is right." She knew how un-Hermione she sounded, but she really didn't care.

Ron eyed her suspiciously. "Does this have anything to do with whatever it is you are doing at Snape's house?"

How to answer that question? It had *everything* to do with her work at Snape's house. He had been correct she was a natural with Potions. She had only been afraid of failure and had never strayed from the exact formulae in the books; her aim had been exactness, not creativity. Now, with his encouragement, she was using her keen analytical mind (and amazingly, the occasional inspiration) to deconstruct and neutralize the toxins in Nagini's venom. "No. It's just that I've had a lot of time to think about what I want to do while we've been waiting. Everything is starting to calm down from the fuss at the end of the war, and I've just had some time to reflect on how everything has changed."

"Oh, right. Good point," said Ron, once again oblivious to the obvious.

"So when are you going to tell us what you're working on?" asked Harry.

"When I've finished the project. And before you ask, it has nothing to do with the Dark Arts. It's a Potions project. A very important one that could be of great benefit to the wizarding world, but unless I succeed, I don't want anyone to know about it. And I know if I tell the two of you about it, it will be hard for you to keep the secret. Can you respect this decision?" She knew that if she told them what she was working on, they would not leave her alone until they knew why. And once they knew why, she wasn't sure they would let her continue her work.

Harry and Ron shared a quick glance. Ron replied, "Yeah, we can do that. But, do you think you could spend a little more time at home? I know you get absorbed in your work, but I haven't been seeing much of you lately. Or maybe I can join you there?" he asked hopefully.

"I'll do what I can to spend more time at home. I'm just nearing completion, at least I hope so, and if I wake up with an idea, I like being able to test it out right away." She reached across the table and took his hand in hers. "Just be patient for a little while longer. Now, I think I should get some rest. I'm pretty tired." Before they could respond, she pushed away from the table and left. For a moment she considered returning to Spinner's End, but decided that after the conversation they'd just had, she should return to their flat.

When she arrived, she fell into the bed, fully clothed, and was almost immediately asleep.

Hermione was in the lab, but her mind was only half on her work. She had received an owl that Malfoy would be stopping by at three to check on her progress. Knowing that she would soon be interrupted, she just couldn't concentrate. That and she was still feeling uncomfortable after their last meeting.

As the clock struck three, there was a knock at the door. She took her time making her way upstairs to answer the door. When she opened it, Malfoy was waiting patiently.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

"Come in," she said. Once they were seated, she automatically asked, "Tea?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

She resisted the urge to sigh and conjured up a tea set. Hot water poured forth from the tip of her wand and into the pot. "It will take a few minutes."

"Quite alright. I prefer freshly brewed to conjured tea. I do appreciate the effort." He leaned back on the sofa, completely at ease. "Since I have not heard from you, I assume that everything Donovan procured for you was in satisfactory condition?"

"Yes. My research has been progressing quite nicely. I could have answered that in an owl." There had to be more to his visit than just asking her about her research. "How is Severus?"

"The same. His condition does not change. At least not in this short amount of time."

Deciding the tea was ready, she poured for them both. Interestingly, they both took their tea black.

After he took a sip of the beverage, he remarked. "Excellent tea. Darjeeling I believe?" She raised an eyebrow at him, and he took another sip of tea before continuing. "I'm sure that you are wondering why I am here."

"That question had crossed my mind. I'm also wondering what interest you have in this. It doesn't seem like you to help out of the goodness of your heart."

He dramatically placed his hand over his heart. "You wound me. How much do we really know about each other? Very little. Though I daresay I know more about you through Draco than you know of me."

She almost snorted tea out her nose. "Draco? You expect me to believe that he told you anything that was true about me?"

A dark look crossed his face. "Do not ever accuse my son of being a liar." After a few seconds, he relaxed. "And yes, he told me what a skilled witch you are. Severus clearly knew what he was doing when he chose you to cure him."

"And why are you helping him? What do you get out of it?"

"Is it so hard for you to believe that he is my friend and that is reason enough for me to aid him?"

She looked into his eyes, trying to gauge the truth of his words, but she quickly gave up, realizing that he had been practicing deception for decades. "It doesn't seem like you to do something unless there is gain in it for you. Is it money? Severus has quite a lot of it, and I know that Ministry has leveled many fines against you."

He gave a low chuckle. "Those fines are inconsequential. I assure you, any money that he has saved is a pittance compared to what I have at my disposal. Severus has done many favors for me over the years, not the least of which was saving Draco's life. Saving his is the least I can do for him. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"I suppose. But why are you here today?" She was still highly suspicious of his motives.

"I know that you are a very dedicated person, and I imagine that you have been working nearly non-stop on the potion since you took up the task. I thought perhaps you might like to take a break, refresh your mind, join my family for dinner."

She choked on her tea. "You want me? To join you for dinner?"

"I have treated you with nothing but respect since you started this endeavor, have I not? It should not be so difficult for you to believe that we would enjoy your company. I know that in the past my attitude, and that of my family, towards Muggle-borns has been... well, something to be ashamed of, but that was what the times required. I have always respected the talents of witches and wizards over the mere detail of their heritage... thus my close friendship with Severus."

She could see no obvious reason to refuse him. And while she remembered all the horrible things he had done to her friends and her, he was still a powerful wizard, and it would not be prudent to turn him against her. "Tonight?"

A broad smile crossed his face. "Excellent. We will see you at seven." Rising to his feet, he crossed the room and softly kissed the back of her hand. Before releasing it, he said, "I'm look forward to it."

When he let go of her hand, an uncontrollable shiver crept up her spine. She was more sure than ever that he wanted something from her, something above and beyond her services on behalf of Severus, but she still could not imagine what that might possibly be.

Hermione stormed into the house, slamming the door behind her. She had known that Malfoy was up to something, but she had never expected it would be that. Just thinking back on what happened sickened her.

Dinner had started innocently enough. The Malfoys had been uncharacteristically polite, and even she had trouble doubting their sincerity. It had started off very surreal since the last time she had been at the manor, they had been going to kill her. The only mention of that incident had been a statement by Lucius Malfoy that he hoped her visit would be much more pleasant this time around.

They had taken dinner in the garden, which she had to admit was quite lovely. She didn't think she had ever seen such a collection of magical flora in one place. It really had made a lovely setting for dinner and took her mind off her previous experience at the manor.

They sat at a small table she was across from Narcissa with Lucius on her left and Draco on her right. She had to admit that Draco looked much healthier than when she had last seen him.

Conversation during dinner had been quite pleasant. They had discussed the changes in the Ministry, and both Narcissa and Malfoy had asked sincere questions about her transition from Muggle to magical world and whether she thought the Ministry was doing enough. They seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say.

Draco had been surprisingly quiet through most of dinner. She would catch him watching her from time to time, but he would always look back to his food when she caught him. Before desert was served, Lucius and Narcissa had excused themselves.

That was when the trouble had started.

Draco moved his chair closer to hers and reached his hand across the table to place it over hers.

"Hermione, I have waited a long time, far too long, to tell you this." He paused for a few seconds, looking at their hands before meeting her eyes. "I have always been attracted to you. You are a remarkable witch." She tried to interrupt, but he stopped her. "Please, listen to what I have to say first. Because of who I am, what my house was, I was forced to hide my true feelings. But the teasing... It was more than teasing. It was as close as I could get to flirting with you." He slid even closer to her. "Hermione... I want you; I need you," he said in a breathy whisper as he leaned toward her to steal a kiss.

For a moment, she froze, having had a bit too much wine. She wasn't quite sure this was really happening. Just as his lips were about to brush hers, she pushed him back and scrambled to her feet. "Draco..."

He was on his feet, approaching her. "I am absolutely serious. We would be perfect together. We are both bright, ambitious, want to make the wizarding world together. I represent the past reborn and you the wave of the future. Together we will be wonderful, we can remake the wizarding world." There was a sparkle in his eyes as he laid out their future.

Through the fog of the wine, his words made some sense. Her rational mind was fighting against them, looking for the lies. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "So that's what it is. You don't love me; you only want me because it will make people think you've changed."

A pained look crossed his face. "No, not at all. I am attracted to you. Is it love? I don't know, but I long to find out. Please, just give us a chance. Get to know the real me," he pleaded

Before she realized what was happening, he had his arms wrapped around her and was pulling her into a passionate kiss. For a few seconds, she found herself returning the kiss before she regained her senses. "Draco, no!" She tried to fight free of his embrace.

"Hermione, I know you felt it the spark." He sounded almost desperate.

"I have to go." She did her best to look dignified and not run out of the garden. Her mind was reeling at what had just happened.

"Think about it. I'll wait for you," he called out to her as she left.

It had all been a set up. Lucius Malfoy was every bit the manipulator she had suspected. The Malfoys were only interested in her because of the prestige they could gain from associating with her. Just thinking about Draco's kiss made her skin crawl.

Retreating to the cellar, she decided to bury herself in her work. Unfortunately anger and inebriation did not make good companions to potions brewing, and it didn't take long before she broke her last bottle of dragon's bile. And since it was a highly reactive substance, she could not recover any of the spilled liquid.

Slamming the notebook closed, she stormed upstairs and decided to take a cleansing shower and see if she could get some rest. In the morning she would purchase more bile and continue her work. She was incredibly close and hadn't needed this sort of setback.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 8

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 7

Hermione jerked awake, having had an epiphany about how to neutralize the last compound. Jumping from bed, she picked up her wand and summoned her shoes. This was exactly why she had wanted to stay at Severus's house and not the flat she shared with Ron.

Ron roused to a half-awake state. "Huh? Who?" he mumbled.

"Go back to sleep," she said softly.

"M-kay," he muttered as he rolled back over, pulling the blanket along with him. Almost instantly, he was snoring loudly.

She contemplated him a moment before leaving. What was she doing with him? The euphoria of having survived the war was well past, and she was forced to admit that they really didn't belong together. Harry and Ginny belonged together in a way that she and Ron never would.

Pushing that painful thought from her mind, she returned her attention to the revelation that had just come to her about the toxins and the antivenin. She rushed out of the house.

Once safely ensconced back at the lab, she lost herself in the potions and their ingredients, using the precious remains of the venom to test her theory. She ~~just~~^{new} this would work. It had to, because she would not have enough venom remaining for any further tests. Any follow-on testing would have to be done with the samples of Severus's blood, and that would not be nearly as effective.

She lost track of the time as she mixed and percolated ingredients. Her hair was matted to her head by perspiration and her clothing was stained, but she didn't care. She could just feel that the end was nearly here. She could hear Severus's voice in her mind, encouraging her.

In her mind, she imagined how proud he would be and how he would react to finding her at his bedside when he finally awoke. And a part of her reveled in the fact that it would be a Gryffindor who revived him. He truly was a different man from his public persona as a teacher at Hogwarts and she looked forward to finally getting to know the real Severus Snape.

For the second time, she conducted the test on the blood sample, and once again all indications were that the poison was neutralized.

Rejoicing in her victory, she ran upstairs, penned a quick letter to Malfoy letting him know she was ready to see Severus again. She rushed to the nearest owl post to send it on its way. She then returned to Spinner's End and began pacing, waiting for him to come and take her to Severus.

As she paced, she realized that she was now referring to him by his first name, and had indeed been doing so for some time. She had no idea exactly when it had happened, but it had. She had long since stopped seeing him as the greasy git he had seemed to be at Hogwarts, but as a trusted colleague, even though they had never actually worked together.

Finally there was a knock at the door and she looked through the peephole before opening it, ensuring that it wasn't Ron who stood there. Seeing that it truly was Malfoy, she let out a deep sigh as she threw open the door. "Let's go," she said quickly.

"You have worked out the antivenin?" he asked.

"I think so. I want to test it out as soon as possible."

He smiled warmly at her and extended his elbow to her. "Of course."

She was so excited at the prospect of reviving Severus that she didn't even mind the normally unpleasant sensation of Side-Along Apparition or the fact that she was standing so close to Malfoy.

Once they arrived, she rushed to Severus's bedside, pulling the phial of antivenin out of her pocket. Only then did she recall that Malfoy was the one who had to reverse the stasis before they... she... could proceed any further. "I'm ready," she announced.

Lucius stood on the opposite side of the bed, turned Severus's head to the side and placed several drops of a blue potion in the unconscious man's ear. At her inquisitive look, he proclaimed with a slightly sardonic note, "As you might imagine, placing liquid in the mouth of one who is unconscious might be rather counterproductive."

It wasn't long before Severus started breathing and twitching. He was obviously still suffering from the poison. She propped him up on pillows and gently poured the antivenin down his throat. As she waited for results, she found it odd that Malfoy had not questioned her. Having Malfoy trust a Muggle-born so readily still unnerved her.

After a few minutes, Severus's breathing calmed and his eyes fluttered open. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but instead started coughing.

Realizing there was no water in the room, she turned to Lucius. "Can you get him some water?"

Malfoy conjured a pitcher and glass, and she felt foolish that she had in that moment completely forgotten all about magic.

She took the glass and tipped it up to his lips, gently nestling his head against her breast.

"Water will make it better."

The coughing soon subsided and he whispered, "Thank you, Hermione. I knew you could do it."

He smiled weakly at her, and she returned the smile. Even with his gaunt appearance, the smile softened his features. She reflected that he didn't look half bad when he smiled, not at all like she remembered him from Hogwarts.

Hermione. He had called her by her first name. True, all his notes had been addressed in that fashion, but she had never actually heard him utter her first name before. She was about to comment on that when she realized that Malfoy was still in the room, calmly observing them. "Would you like some more?"

He tried to raise his hand to hold the glass, but it didn't rise more than a few inches. After

Hermione helped him to take a few more sips of water, he was finally able to croak, "How long?"

"Nearly seven months. It took six months just for your will to pass through probate."

"It only took you a month?"

"About three weeks. It was a challenge I couldn't turn away from." She smiled warmly at him, still stroking his hair. Remembering that she had brought something else to help him, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small flask. "I brought a Reviving Potion. Since you've been... gone for so long, I thought you could use something to help in your recovery." She held it to his lips and slowly poured the elixir into his mouth.

He leaned back against the pillow and closed his eyes. Hermione thought that his breathing sounded a little bit less labored. She looked around the room and noticed that they were alone. Malfoy must have slipped out.

"Always the Gryffindor," he said quietly.

She turned back to face him and could see the playfulness in his eyes. "But you wouldn't want it any other way would you?"

"That is why I chose you. I knew that you would not fail me." His voice was growing stronger moment by moment.

"But why me and not Draco Malfoy. He was just as good at Potions as I was." It pained her to make this admission, but it was the truth.

He tried to sit up and she adjusted the bed for him. "That may be true, but as you have learned, there is more to Potions than following directions. He did not have that spark. I could always see it in you. That was why I pushed you in class. I wanted you to think beyond the instructions, to discover that part of you. And you did so when you would help Longbottom and the others, but I never dreamed at the time that I would need you to save my life.... Besides, I needed someone whom I could trust with my life."

"But how did you know I was the one? I mean, you treated us horribly, treated Gryffindors horribly and everyone thought you were a traitor."

"I knew the truth would be revealed. I had not imagined that Potter would be there to receive my memories, but if he had not, Albus's portrait would have made clear my role in the war and in the years leading up to it, and absolved me of the guilt for his death. And I was counting on the fact that you are Gryffindor to save me. I knew that your sense of honor would compel you to do so."

She laughed softly. "You were right about that. Along with my love of a challenge."

"We are more similar than you might think, Hermione." His eyes locked with hers.

"I learned that from working with your notes." She tried not to fall into the dark pools, but she was finally forced to look away. They sat in awkward silence for a few moments. "So what now? I mean, you are alive, so I guess we have to go to the Ministry and invalidate your will. And we have to decide how to deal with the questions that are going to arise. I mean Malfoy kept your survival secret..."

He interrupted, "Lucius did so at my request and out of necessity. The nature of magical wills makes that abundantly clear."

"But then I knew of your survival, and I kept it secret. What sort of trouble will that cause?"

"I cannot see that it would cause any trouble. Why would anyone care now that I am alive? I am guilty of no crimes."

Considering his words, she replied, "That's true." After a pause, she added, "So what now?"

He pondered a moment. "I think that it would be best for me to continue my recovery in private. The Ministry will have to be informed. I believe that Lucius can help them see to keeping my survival quiet for the time being. I have saved enough gold from my time at Hogwarts that I will have ample time to recover."

"So I noticed. I was forced to make a withdrawal to purchase supplies."

"That is why it was willed to you."

"About the money..." she started tentatively.

"Another time, if you don't mind," he interrupted, his demeanor showing it was an uncomfortable subject. He watched her for a few minutes. "You are wondering how I survived."

"Yes. I mean, you looked dead in the Shrieking Shack. And that venom is incredibly toxic. How did you survive?"

"With the help of Felix Felicis and a house-elf who brought me the stop-gap antidote."

"You used Felix Felicis?" She was shocked that he would resort to such a powerful potion.

"I did not wish to die, and I had a feeling that my time in service to the Dark Lord was growing short. It sounds very trite, doesn't it?" He sounded ashamed as he asked that question.

Reaching for his hand, she reassured him. "Not at all. You've been a prisoner your entire life. You knew that with the war, that imprisonment would end. I can't blame anyone for wanting to finally live a life free from those constraints."

Quietly, he said, "Thank you for understanding. Now, I think I would like to rest. I will have Lucius take me home... if that is agreeable to you."

"Of course it is. It's your house." Even though she could hardly bide the house when she had first crossed its threshold, she had over time grown accustomed to it. Now, she actually felt more comfortable there than at her flat, though she wondered if that had something to do with the fact it was a sanctuary from Ron.

"Technically, it is yours until I am declared alive. As such..."

She could tell that it was still difficult for him to ask a favor of her. "I'll be there." Due to the nature of the charms on the house, she would at least have to be there to let him in.

"I hate to ask that of you after having asked so much already. I know that you must be trying to get on with your life after the war, and I have interrupted that."

Once again, she placed her hand on his in a reassuring gesture. "This hasn't been an imposition. It was actually something I needed. It has given me a sense of purpose and accomplishment. I'll see you this evening." Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed his forehead. As the color flushed her cheeks, she rushed out of the room and found Malfoy waiting for her down the hall. "I'm ready to go now," she said quickly.

"Of course. If you would like, I can keep you apprised of his recovery."

"Actually, he'd like to recover at home; I'll be waiting for him there."

"I see. Then once he is well enough to travel, I shall bring him home to you."

After returning to Spinner's End, she went into the house and began to pace the sitting room. Why on earth had she kissed him? Why hadn't she just left it at holding his hand? What must he think of her for having done something so impulsive? Of course she had to be here when Severus arrived, but then what? How strong would he be? Would he need someone here to care for him?

She found a very large part of her hoped that he would, that he would require her further assistance for a very long time. This house had become her home. Ever since she had seen the extensive library, she longed to spend hours exploring the books and learning from them. And now she realized that she wasn't sure she would get that

opportunity.

But if Severus needed assistance, she would be here to offer it, and they could spend the days having intelligent conversation about the books. She could also find out why he had collected so many books on the Dark Arts. She would get to know the real Severus Snape, not just the teaching persona he showed to the students. What she had seen of the real Severus in his notes to her, she liked very much.

Then there was the question of what to do about Ron. They had definitely grown apart since the end of the war. But it was probably best not to burn that bridge too soon since she might also not have a place to live much longer. Though she was reasonably sure that Harry would offer her to let her stay at Grimmauld Place until she could make other arrangements. It wasn't ideal, but it was an option. Of course, that might change too if he found out that she had been working on a potion to save Severus and had not seen fit to tell him.

The will had definitely complicated her life in ways she could never have imagined.

The hours passed and finally there was a knock at the door. Rushing across the room, she threw the door open. "Ron? What are you doing here?" she asked, surprised to see him and hoping to get rid of him quickly before Severus and Malfoy arrived.

"I think I've been more than patient with you. I've let you do your research or whatever it is you've been doing without asking hardly any questions. The one thing I have asked is

that you do spend at least some time at home with me."

"Doing what? You come home late, ask about dinner and then either go visit Harry or listen to the Quidditch Update on the Wireless. You never ask me how my day was, and you aren't interested in anything that I am interested in, or anything I do. Truthfully, I'm not really all that interested in the same things you are, either."

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"You are thick, aren't you?" This isn't how she had wanted it to happen. She didn't want to break up with him on the doorstep of Snape's house, but he wasn't really giving her much of an option. Before she could say anything else, there was a pop on the street and her heart sank. She hadn't gotten rid of Ron soon enough.

Ron spun to face the new arrivals. The color drained from his face at what he saw. Pointing a finger at Snape, he stammered, "Y-y-you're d-d-dead!"

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 8

The war is over, and as everyone settles back into a normal life, Hermione begins to realize that perhaps she and Ron aren't as well suited as she thinks. When she receives strange letters from the Ministry and deceased Severus Snape, she begins to rethink her options.

Chapter 8

Hermione shoved Ron out of the way. "Of course he's not dead. You can see through ghosts," she said matter-of-factly. Placing Severus's other arm over her shoulder, she helped Malfoy support him. "Come in, the two of you," she said as she shoved past Ron again. "Let's take him upstairs." She really wouldn't have needed to help support him. Malfoy was more than strong enough, but it gave her an excuse to get away from the argument with Ron.

Ron tried to follow, but found he could not pass through the door because he hadn't been invited in. "Hey, let me in!" he shouted at her.

"We'll talk later," she called over her shoulder.

"You should go to him. Lucius can get me settled upstairs," Severus said, some of the earlier vigor gone from his voice.

"He's not important." It was the truth. She and Ron might be able to salvage their friendship, but it would never be anything more than that. She had realized that she was looking at the man who could be much more than a friend.

Once they got Severus settled in his bed, Lucius asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" He looked between Hermione and Severus.

She started to wonder how much Severus had told Malfoy. "I think I can handle it from here. Thank you for all that you've done for him."

Malfoy smiled and nodded his head. "I owe much to Severus. It was the least I could do."

Once they were alone, Severus asked, "So, Weasley is not important?"

"Not as much as I had once thought. We just aren't... meant for each other." She almost couldn't breathe. She was in a room. Alone. With Severus. And he still hadn't brought up the kiss.

"And when did you come to this realization?"

She tried hard not to blush. "I've known it for quite a while. I just wouldn't admit it to myself. You've helped me to finally admit the truth."

"The truth?" he asked.

"The truth of who I am. The proof that I had the academic prowess I always thought I did. The ability to see the real me. And the real me does not belong with someone like Ronald Weasley." *I belong with someone like you* she added silently. "Would you like some tea or something to eat?" she asked, eager to change the subject.

"Tea and perhaps sandwiches. Nothing heavy." She turned to leave and he added before she stepped through the door, "It is not necessary for you to care for me. Lucius can arrange for a caregiver."

"I won't hear of it." He opened his mouth to protest and she raised her hand to stop him before continuing. "Since I was the one who worked on the antivenin, it's best that I be your caregiver. Just in case there are any complications. Not that I expect any, but it's best to be prepared for the worst, don't you think?"

He gave her a small, knowing smile. "Yes, it is." In the silence they could hear knocking at the door. "Are you going to answer that?"

"It's just Ron," she said dismissively.

"You will have to deal with him sooner or later, and I prefer sooner. Both to stop the knocking at the door and to prevent him from revealing my existence to the wizarding world. I will survive without the tea."

She went downstairs and opened the door, only half-surprised to find both Ron and Harry.

"Ron told me Snape was alive and that he's here. Is that true?"

"Can we go someplace else to talk about this? Grimmauld Place perhaps? I don't want to get into it here."

After nearly two hours Hermione had finally given up on convincing them of her point of view. They were both upset about her decision to keep Snape's survival secret. Unfortunately she hadn't been able to get a promise from either of them to keep that fact quiet.

She figured it would only be a matter of time before Harry reported Snape to the Ministry. While she trusted Severus's wards on his house, she still didn't want to leave him alone for the onslaught he was about to receive. She also had no idea what would happen when his will was invalidated. Would the house revert to his ownership or it would become property of the Ministry while there was an investigation?

After making a quick stop at the flat to pack her belongings Ron has made it clear that she was no longer welcome there she returned to Spinner's End. As she had come to expect, the street was deserted. A part of her wondered what the other residents would think about a swarm of wizards descending on this sleepy street.

Rather than going straight to Severus's room, she stopped in the kitchen to make the tea she had offered hours ago.

She found him sitting in bed reading a book. "Where did you get that?" she asked.

He closed the book and placed it on the nightstand. "I am not a complete invalid, and my strength is slowly returning."

With a wave of her wand, she moved one of the small tables closer to the bed so that she could set the tray down. "If you'd like a larger meal, it would be easy for me to make something."

They ate in uncomfortable silence for several minutes. She still could not understand why he hadn't brought up the kiss.

"Hermione..." he started.

She blurted out, "I don't know why I did it; it just seemed like the right thing to do."

He froze, obviously caught off guard. After an awkward moment that seemed to drag on and on, he said, "If you had let me finish, I was going to say that it is getting late and that you should be getting home."

Her face warmed as she blushed. "Oh. Well, er, I sort of..." She was having a hard time composing her thoughts, something unusual for her. "I thought I would stay here." She wondered if she should tell him that she and Ron were through.

"That will not be necessary. My strength is returning quite nicely."

"That's very good to know, but I just don't think you should be alone right now. While I don't anticipate anything going wrong, it would be good to have someone here just in case, don't you think?" She had been working on this reasoning for quite a while and found it very logically sound.

He arched an eyebrow, clearly not fully convinced. "Is there something you aren't telling me?"

She cursed herself for her carelessness. She was used to dealing with Ron who was incredibly obtuse about personal relationships. Obviously Severus wasn't. Looking down at her lap, she started examining her fingernails.

"Hermione?" he asked gently.

"It wasn't going to work out between Ron and me anyway. We've been growing apart since the war, and I just needed to realize that I need something else in my life. Working on this potion made me realize that." She finally looked up, meeting his dark eyes and almost falling into their depths. "I need someone better. Someone with an engaging intellect. Someone like you," she finished quietly.

When he didn't reply, she started to feel foolish. She felt she had come to know the real Severus Snape through the notes he had left her, but she began to think that she must have been wrong.

"You hardly know me. The real me."

She reached out and clasped his hand in hers. "But I do know you. From the notes you left for me. That is not Professor Snape who wrote that, but Severus Snape. The man who I have grown quite fond of. The man I want to get to know better. Surely the feeling must be mutual for you to have chosen me."

Now it was his turn to look away from her. "It is, though I hardly dared hope..." He looked into her eyes. "Are you serious? Me? Someone twice your age?"

"Age doesn't matter. That kiss was no accident." And to prove her point, she leaned forward to kiss him again, this time deeply and on the lips.

~The End~

... or is it? *eg*

A/N: While I cannot yet reveal myself, I would like to thank all those who read and reviewed the story. I am slowly making my way through the reviews and will respond to them. The response to this story has been overwhelming in a good way. *g*

I would also like to thank my wonderful beta, nota, for helping me get this finished, even if we did buzzer beat the deadline. You helped me sort through those little plot quandaries that pop up from time to time.

2 April - Once again, many thanks to my kind reviewers. Your encouragement has spurred the muses, and hopefully not too long after voting is closed, a sequel will be posted. I hope that it will answer many of the questions folks have been asking. :D