

Full of Grace

by livvy6

Hermione Granger has lost everything. She is trying to make sense of her life in a world that has turned upside down.

Oh Darkness, I Feel Like Letting Go...

Chapter 1 of 11

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Hermione Granger

A/N: Okay, this is my first EVER HG/SS fic! I am as scared as I can be. Some of you know that I've said I could never do HG/SS because I didn't think I could write Hermione. Then a reviewer for another fic of mine told me to try and gave me the courage to do it. So if you are reading, Cissy_n_Snape, this fic is dedicated to you. I was inspired partly by listening to Sarah McLachlan's song, "Full of Grace".

"Ron?"

"Hermione, what are you doing here?" Ron asked while rubbing his eyes.

Hermione walked closer to the side of his bed. She nervously smoothed down her uniform and toyed with the frayed edging on her apron.

"I always come and see you this time of the day. I'm sorry I woke you. I thought you'd be expecting me," she whispered.

Ron's eyes glanced away from Hermione's and fixed on the shabby curtain covering the one window he had in his room as his body fell back on the bed. Hermione lowered her head, placed one hand on her hip, and rubbed her forehead with the other in frustration. Things were not getting better. In fact, things were worse. Ron kept telling her not to come back, but she did. Every day. She loved him.

Ron was not well. Ever since he had been wounded in the final battle two months ago, he had not been himself. He suffered from "extreme melancholy" as he was diagnosed. He had fought bravely, but had seen so much death and carnage that it rendered him...a gentler soul than most...unable to cope and deal with life. He had cast the Killing Curse against Rodolphus Lestrage, and his wife, Bellatrix, in her fury, cast the Cruciatus Curse on her husband's executioner in order to torture him before killing him. Thankfully, Molly and Ginny Weasley had come to his aid and killed Bellatrix, but the effects of the curse left him extremely depressed and suicidal.

Once his wounds were healed, Ron had come back to the Burrow. The family tried to pick up the pieces and carry on. Fred had died, but Percy was now reunited with his family. Hermione, having learnt her parents died in a boating accident in Australia, was left destitute...emotionally and financially. She had nothing left after settling her parents' estate. It was one thing to have lost them, but for them to have died before she could restore their true identities and give their memories back to them made the loss double-fold. She had nothing now, except Ron's love, which was more than enough for Molly and Arthur, and so she came to live permanently at the Burrow.

While emotions were still high from the victory over Voldemort, she and Ron had decided to get married as soon as things could settle down. The war was newly over and

their relationship freshly begun. The excitement and the fame that had come with being the best friends of Harry Potter kept them busy during the first weeks, but only delayed the depression that was creeping over Ron. Hermione felt it her duty to protect Ron from those who would try to exploit him. She knew Ron was now a fragile soul. He would never be the laughing boy she once knew, but she loved him and was determined to stand by his side. She had loved him since she was thirteen, and he had loved her since their second year. During the Yule Ball their fourth year, he finally admitted it to himself, but it took him until just before the final battle to tell her. She would never forget how passionately he had kissed her. It was maddening and insane! Harry couldn't believe the audacity of their timing. After Fred's funeral, they planned to finally be together; then the stress of parties and interviews consumed their time and energies. So they kept pushing back time and time again for them to finally make love. It was just understood that they would always be together. Even with the "Lavender/Won-Won" incident, Hermione never gave up hope. She would not give up and abandon him now...just when he needed her most. She just regretted that they had waited. She started to wonder if she would ever be able to be with him in that way.

Unfortunately, Hermione, Harry, and the Weasleys hadn't realized just how deep Ron's depression was. Hermione had come home from a walk, to find a house full of friends and family. She had spent a great deal of her alone time trying to deal with her losses by taking long walks alone. As soon as she had stepped into the house, she'd known something was dreadfully wrong. Molly was weeping in a corner, and she had never seen a sadder sight since Fred's funeral. She had demanded to know what was happening.

Harry had taken her by the shoulders and sat her down in the living room. Ron had tried to commit suicide, and Arthur and Molly decided it best for Ron to be committed to St. Mungo's for a while.

"No," she had said roughly, pushing his hands off her. "Ron wouldn't do that!" She had looked at the faces around her and realized it was true. *Why? Why is Ron so unhappy? How can he do such a thing? What have I done to displease him? Perhaps I should have just been more passionate and showed my desire for him more.* She had sat down uneasily as Harry tried to tell her the details. All she had comprehended was that Ron was back at St. Mungo's, and it didn't seem likely he would be coming out soon.

Harry had sat next to her and put his arm around her, pulling her close to him. "We just don't know what is going to happen, Hermione," Harry had whispered honestly.

She had sat there in the living room for hours it seemed, staring off into nothingness. The whole world had been blown to hell as far as she was concerned. Nothing seemed to matter. Her parents were gone, Ron was intent on finishing what Bellatrix had set out to do, and no matter what she did, she was completely powerless to stop it.

She had gotten a job as an assistant to a mediwitch at St. Mungo's so she could be near Ron and also work towards her goal of becoming a mediwitch herself. She had worked long and exhausting hours, to the point of making herself ill, but she could do nothing else. She had visited Ron every day, but he just didn't seem to be getting any better. The distance between them was growing rapidly, and just when she thought things could not possibly get worse, Ron had told her not to see him anymore.

At first she had been devastated and walked out of his room crying. But the next day she returned and had told Ron that she was not giving up on them, that she loved him too much to desert him. She had thought that might shake and perhaps elicit a spark from him, but he remained listless and melancholy. Hermione was at her wits end.

Finally, it had been Madam Pomfrey with the newly appointed Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, who came in the middle of the night to the Burrow to inform the Weasleys that Ron had succeeded in committing suicide. The screaming and wailing had been awful. Hermione had remembered just sliding down the floor and closing her eyes. She had been in complete shock. Madam Pomfrey had stayed for a couple of days to watch over Molly and Hermione, as both were not handling Ron's death well. Molly would not stop her crying and wailing, while Hermione, on the other hand, seemed unable to emote at all.

She spent a month just sitting in the living room, staring out the window. She did not return to work, Harry and Ginny took care of that end with St. Mungo's. She barely ate and scarcely slept. It seemed to the Weasleys that Hermione might be joining Ron soon if she did not snap out of her grief. The Burrow was so quiet now. For hours she would sit, listening to Molly's knitting needles work their magic, and listen to the clock ticking in the background. The ticking went on forever, it seemed. Days blurred and Hermione would vaguely be aware of Ginny periodically walking her to the bathroom to shower. Hermione just wasn't Hermione anymore. She didn't read or nag Harry over his lack of studying for his Auror Training. He wished she would just once roll her eyes at him and tell him to study! Bill and Fleur got their own place and left. Percy returned to his flat in London, closer to his job at the Ministry of Magic. George, still reeling from his own pain, over Fred's death, could not take seeing Hermione like she was and avoided being the same room with her. Harry stopped coming round to the Burrow; he couldn't take it anymore. He had stood in the living room and in front of everyone yelled at her to stop her nonsense. He had begged her to get on with her life because that was what Ron would want. But his yelling and mentioning Ron had just made her crumple into a ball on the couch, holding herself, her face contorted in pain. But still she could not cry. Finally, Harry couldn't take anymore and left.

But just when the family had started to accept the real possibility of Hermione's approaching death, she finally found her voice. She was furiously angry with Ron, Voldemort, the Ministry, and everyone it seemed. The month of shock was over now, and she had settled into seething rage. Once the floodgates had opened, she screamed and cried, cursing Ron Weasley and the day she met him. She raged against Harry, why, she didn't know, but he was the closest to Ron she could get and she wanted to scream at *Ron*, but *he* was gone! Harry was happier than he'd been in months and welcomed the abuse she heaped on him. Once, he proudly walked into the Burrow, grinning ear to ear, after he and Hermione had a fantastic row, sporting a black eye. He declared it was all for the best. She would be better now that she could get her anger out. Ginny decided to remain silent on the issue. She gave neither her approval nor disapproval of Hermione's ranting and railing over Ron. She would only say to Hermione that she was glad she was finally getting her feelings out, and she did not judge her for what she said against her brother or how she treated Harry.

Hermione sat in the kitchen at the Burrow trying to endure yet another Weasley weekly dinner. She was silently looking at her adopted family, the only family she had left, the family she had hoped would become truly hers through marriage, trying to be happy, trying to pretend that all their lives hadn't been ripped to shreds. She watched the once handsome, Bill, lovingly stroke his wife's belly. Fleur was six months along, and they seemed to be the only ones truly happy.

She then looked at George. Funny George, who was now permanently disfigured due to a hex that had not been intended for him, wasn't so funny anymore without Fred. He was only half alive it seemed. He was quiet most of the time...most of the time he wasn't crying that is. Once Hermione started her grieving, he started coming around. She would spend hours comforting George as he mourned his twin, and he comforted her in her loss of Ron. He just wasn't himself, and no one could say when or if he would ever be again.

Percy and Charlie forced smiles and tried their level best to be model sons. Charlie had decided to stay in the country and be close to home now the war was over. Percy, still dealing with his guilt over rejecting the family for those three years before the final battle and also for fighting alongside Fred and not being able to stop his death, came dutifully every Sunday and stayed the entire day. They both doted on Molly and were always on hand to do whatever she needed. "Mum, do you need the garden degnomed? Mum, do you need help with making dinner? Mum, do you need anything from the cellar?" They were so attentive it bordered on the compulsive. It was starting to drive Hermione nuts.

Then there was Ginny. She and Harry had officially become a couple, and it was only a matter of time before their engagement was announced. Hermione hated them. She hated their happiness, the looks they gave each other that said, "I love you," without a sound. And what she hated the most was that she had that once, if ever so briefly, but now it was over.

So, as Hermione sat taking stock of her family over dinner, she realized she needed to get out. She needed to leave the Burrow and start over. She had finished school, opting to sit for her N.E.W.T.s early while she worked at the hospital and looked after Ron. There had been the option of a Transfiguration apprenticeship with Professor McGonagall, once the school reopened, but there was no way she could face going back there and be reminded of all the memories of her and Ron every time she walked the halls. But she was unaware that Harry, George, Bill, Charlie, and Percy had met and devised their own plan of how Hermione could sort out things in her mind: hard work.

They had come to her a week ago, talking about the reconstruction of Hogwarts. There had been so much carnage there and at Hogsmeade that needed to be cleared and rebuilt. Some of the old crowd had already arrived to stay for the summer in order to work and help out; using their magical talents to help in whatever capacity they could to help the process along. They had urged Hermione to go back. They had said with her wanting to be a mediwitch, she would be able to help Madam Pomfrey with all the various injuries and such that came with re-building. It would give her a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to practice her skills, and in the meantime, she could find her purpose

again. She could also just help with cleaning up the debris, even, Percy offered, if she did not want to work in the Infirmary. Hermione had given him a suspicious look when he had said that. *Why would I not want to work in the field I've specifically chose?*

There was housing for girls and boys in separate quadrants outside, since the castle had not yet given approval for residence by the Ministry. That had given George and Harry a laugh, thinking of McGonagall having to live in a tent! Hermione had only given a weak smile at their attempt at mirth. It had stuck in her head though, and she mulled it over and finally decided that hard work might be what she needed to get her anger out of her system. Besides, they were right. She was dedicated to her desire to become a mediwitch and this seemed to be a golden opportunity not to be missed. Also, she felt it would only be the right thing to do: helping re-build. It was actually quite symbolic. She would in the process perhaps be able to re-build her life as well, if she were fortunate enough.

After a couple days of mulling it over, she had decided to take the offer and go back to Hogwarts. Over dinner seemed to be the perfect time to let them all know her decision.

"Molly, Arthur," she announced, "I have decided I'm going to go back to Hogwarts and help with the rebuilding."

Harry and the Weasley brothers beamed. Arthur and the women, however, were not happy at all!

"Hermione," Molly began, "it sounds good, but in reality I don't think it is safe. I don't want you going. I realize you are an adult, and I am not your mother. But I consider you as much a daughter as Ginny is to me. I love you, this is your home!"

Hermione, who had never been a shrinking violet in her life, grew furious at Molly's words and exploded at her.

"Has it occurred to any of you that I may not want this place to be my home? That every day is another reminder that the life I thought was to be mine will now never come true?" Hot tears rolled down her face as she tried to share and explain her deepest pain. Molly's face went white with shock and began to cry. Hermione had never spoken to her in such a disrespectful manner. And what was worse was that her words had cut her to the quick.

Bill, ever the diplomat, broke in to settle Molly and Hermione down. "Mum, Hermione is of age and has her own mind and wishes for her life. We would not have suggested it if we did not think it would be safe."

Harry broke in as well. "Look at her, Mrs. Weasley! She's going barmy in this house! She needs to get out there and experience things...things bigger than herself."

Percy agreed as well. "I also think it would do her good. It'll get her mind off her own hurts while focusing on others. And she would be doing a good service for the school. And from what I've learned about Hermione, a good cause has always been a sure-fire way to get her excited."

Molly finally cut back in. "And what do you say about the prisoners? Death Eaters are on that property! I do not want Hermione working alongside those who tried to kill us all!" She broke down crying again, and everyone knew she was thinking about Fred and Ron.

To everyone's shock, George spoke up. "Look, Mum, it's not like the bastard who killed Fred is there. The prisoners are low level, non-threatening to anyone."

Ginny challenged George, since she knew Mrs. Weasley did not have the heart to argue with him.

"Severus Snape? Not a threat? I disagree wholeheartedly!" she spat venomously. She was not able to move past that terrible year with Snape as Headmaster. Even though she knew it had all been an act, the damage still remained.

Arthur spoke up this time. "I have a lot of reservations about Hermione going, but I have to say, as a Ministry worker who has been privy to Snape's case, he is not the man he once was. All the vicious torture he endured under Voldemort all these years has left him just a shell of which he had once been. All the prisoners are. And the Aurors are, if I may take a page out of old Moody's book, 'vigilant.' There have been no incidents of uprisings or problems in their sector. There would be no reason for Hermione to ever fear Snape anyway. Yes, being an assistant to Madam Pomfrey would at times bring her into contact with Snape, but the charms that bind them are so powerful, she would never have to fear for her safety."

"What charms?" she asked with dread in her voice. She did not like the sound of what she had heard.

Arthur elaborated. "Each prisoner is bound with an invisible circle around their necks, like a necklace, but how the charm works is if the prisoner touches another non-prisoner, without an Auror disabling the charm first, they will begin to choke and suffocate, as if they were slowly being choked to death."

Hermione's face went white with rage. "That's completely barbaric!"

Percy spoke up and solemnly said, "It's the only way to ensure the safety of those working at Hogwarts. If a prisoner follows the rules, no harm will come to him. Besides, each prisoner has an Auror watching over him at all times. If something were to happen, such as an accident, the Auror can stop the process."

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head, thinking of Professor Snape and all those men living like that. It was all so sad. Perhaps she could help conditions, perhaps...

Arthur looked Hermione straight in the eye and pointed a finger at her, like any other concerned father. "What I am concerned about, young lady, is that your heart is broken. I don't want you living there amongst all those men working with the Ministry. They may try to take advantage, and I still think you are vulnerable."

That infuriated Hermione the most. She stood up and threw her napkin on the table. "I can not believe what I'm hearing. It seems some people who claim to love me think they also know what is best for me. I have already had one person who said he loved me make his decisions without me, now I have the only people I love more in the world wanting to keep me their dead son's fiancée forever! Well, it's over. Ron's dead, and I can't keep living in the past. I'm going, and the discussion is over!"

She marched from the table and bounded up the stairs. The discussion wasn't over, though, as the Weasley clan bickered the case amongst themselves.

The Reconstruction and Restoration Project, known as the RRP, was a massive government program to rally the Wizarding community to pool their collective talents and knowledge in order to get Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the town of Hogsmeade back on their feet and with doors open again for the students and families who had been displaced and evacuated during the war.

So much damage had been done to the 1000-year-old castle it seemed it would take a miracle to restore the enchantments and Old Magic back into the school. Much of the damage was not just the felling of stonework and masonry but the complex magical bindings that encompassed each and every rock that had been decimated. It was going to take a massive conglomeration of strong minds and powerful witches and wizards in the fields of Charms, Potions, Transfiguration, and Arithmancy to conjure up the Old Magic needed to infuse into the new masonry, and also skilled architects to repair and reconstruct the more mundane things, such as plumbing and re-roofing the damaged turrets.

The once proud city of Hogsmeade, a magical community all of its own, had suffered so many losses that most businesses were forced to shut down. Families fled for their lives when the Ministry had collapsed and Scrimgeour had been assassinated. Those who had been brave enough to stay after all that finally fled for their lives when Severus Snape became Headmaster at Hogwarts, bringing with him the Carrows...both feared Death Eaters...and established martial law over the city. Death Eaters had patrolled the streets and kept a tight reign over the lives of the population. To encourage those long-time citizens to come out of hiding and return to Hogsmeade was going to be a tentative and slow process that deserved tact and patience for all the sufferings that had been endured.

That was only a modicum of the problems that the Ministry would have to overcome in order for the RRP to be a success. The centaur uprisings delayed the first month's work. A liaison was desperately needed to bring harmony and balance back between the Wizarding World and the Magical Kingdom in the Forest. Hagrid could only do so

much, and Firenze was strictly forbidden to approach the herd: on pain of death. They had plenty of damage to their beautiful forest due to the War. Now the giants, who had come to fight, some for Voldemort, some for the Order of the Phoenix, had started to lay claim to portions of the Forest. There was talk of another war, the centaurs threatened, if their land would not be respected. Each time a unicorn was found dead, the centaurs would rise up and talk of mounting attacks against the giants, and all of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade held their collective breaths. It seemed at any moment all the planning and progress made could be destroyed. There had to be a person who could diplomatically handle the volatile situation that was developing next to the school. Finally, Headmistress McGonagall took up the cause and worked tirelessly alongside Minister Shacklebolt to win the Centaurs over to the idea of allowing Firenze back into the Forest to work as a liaison. The process was slow and tenuous, but the Ministry was hopeful that another war now would be avoided with McGonagall and Firenze to lead the delegation to persuade the giants to leave the Forest with levelheaded fair-mindedness.

The Ministry was open to all sorts of ideas in order to make the RRP a success. There were two major issues that lay heavy on the hearts of the Wizarding Community. One was to get a semblance of normalcy back by re-opening the school as soon as possible, and the second was how to start the healing process once the first wave of war criminals were released from Azkaban. One idea that seemed the most plausible was the Prisoner Work Release (PWR) from Azkaban. The idea was the brainchild of the Minister himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt knew that there were some men who were rotting in Azkaban who did not belong there, but for either lack of evidence to exonerate them, or extreme prejudice from the Wizarding Community at large, these men could not hope to evade imprisonment. One of these men was Severus Snape.

Harry, who had been mostly silent while Hermione railed about her decision to help the RRP, was one of Shacklebolt's fiercest supporters. The case for Snape was at the forefront of the Wizengamot meetings over the decision to pass the legislation. Harry Potter, who had hated Snape for years, led the cause for his release because of memories he had received from Snape made him believe fully that Snape was indeed a double agent and worked loyally for Dumbledore in the name of his deep love for Harry's mother, Lily. Harry had tried on numerous occasions after Snape's memories had been restored to him while recovering at St. Mungo's to get him to talk about his mother. Snape could not, it was too painful, but Harry never gave up hope that as time went by, Snape would be able to talk to him about her. He railed and argued tirelessly to exonerate him, but nonetheless, the idea of euthanasia still bothered many on the Wizengamot; coupled with the irrefutable proof that Snape had indeed been a Death Eater with only Dumbledore standing between him and Azkaban...it was now ludicrous that Dumbledore's executioner go free with no punishment!

Yet, Shacklebolt and Potter stood firm. The Pensieve evidence, before given back to Snape as he recuperated at St. Mungo's, was reviewed and the Wizengamot concluded that Severus Snape be sentenced to five years in Azkaban for manslaughter. Shacklebolt, being the politician he was, saw the five years as a victory. Although Snape would be branded forever as a killer, at least there was proof it had only been a mercy killing and not a vengeful one. Then, after five years when the memories had waned and the war was not so fresh in the public's mind, he would come back into the Wizarding Community and be able to have a life again.

Harry took the sentencing badly and was devastated that he could not save Snape from Azkaban. He and Hermione were granted a few minutes alone with Snape before his departure for the desolate prison. Harry had been in close contact with the professor during the time his memories were given back to him. He had been the one to explain how so many people played a pivotal role in saving his life. From Hermione, who had poured dittany on his wounds and stayed by his unconscious side, to the Healers at St. Mungo's who never gave up when it seemed at times all hope was lost. Snape had never thanked Harry or Hermione for their help. Harry didn't want thanks anyway, he had joked. It just would have ruined his memory of the Greasy Git of the Dungeons and he wanted to remember him that way. In reality, both men knew it was just too difficult for Snape to thank the son of James Potter. Some wounds ran far too deep and were too relentless to be healed. He was relieved by Potter's light-heartedness, however, and Snape finally began to think of Harry Potter, from that day forward, as a real man, full of compassion and grace. It might even be enough to build a respectful relationship upon.

So when Harry stood in front of Snape to say their farewells, it was an awkward moment. Hermione had been at the sentencing but had been far too concerned about Ron to notice the covert glances coming from the accused. Snape watched the somber woman, her large brown eyes full of pain, but rock solid in her ability to keep herself under control. She sat with a straight back in the gallery with her hair up. He was shocked to find she was no longer a little girl, but a beautiful young woman. He was overcome with the realization. She had given a perfunctory good-bye to the stoic Professor, and he drank in the sight and smell of her...what he felt would be the last time he'd ever see Miss Granger again. He found himself wishing he could just once pull her close to him and kiss her, just to once to feel the woman against him and breathe in her scent. For by the time he would be released, she surely would be Hermione Weasley. He watched her walk out, and he was pained by her departure.

Finally, the two men faced each other alone. Harry could not fight back his anger over the sentencing. His beautiful and vibrant green eyes were full of tears and pain. He grasped Snape's shoulder and said, "Sometimes, I wish my father would have been more like you. You were never afraid of the truth, and no one ever coddled you. My dad had everything...it was all so easy. Perhaps if he had known a portion of the pain you've known, perhaps things would have been different. Professor, you are the bravest man I've ever known." He turned and walked out.

Snape felt the tears slowly slide down his cheeks once he had left and whispered, "Thank you" to the closed door.

The "charm" on the prisoners was an idea I borrowed and tweaked to make it my own from "And So It Comes To This" by OdoGoddess. If you have not read this HG/SS fic, Oh! It's lemony smutty goodness! And I take my hat off to her! (This was given by permission to use by OdoGoddess).

The RRP and PWP are my own creations.

You

Chapter 2 of 11

Hermione arrives at the Reconstruction site and sees the former Professor Snape for the first time since he was sentenced. They both have strong reactions to each other's presence.

A/N: Thanks again to my wonderful beta, MadBrilliant. Please review!

And you, you make me run,

And you, you make me want to live...

"You" by Fisher

Severus Snape was working in the outdoors, digging ditches for the Hogwarts plumbing system. He worked while magically bound to the other prisoners on either side of him. They all worked silently and in tandem. He was grateful for the hard work. He had positively wasted away during the last year. He had not been well for quite some time, due to the stress of being Headmaster, and working even more precariously for the Dark Lord had left him with various kinds of digestive and ulcerative disorders...and all this before Nagini had gotten to him! But the fresh air, manual labor, and rugged meals of raw vegetables and beans helped to ease his pain and cure his ulcers, and with time, he no longer suffered physically from the effects of the many Cruciatus curses he had endured at the hands of the Dark Lord and Nagini's vicious attack.

Now that his physique was returning, the weedy emaciated look of him disappeared. He was stronger now than he ever had been before in his life, even when he was healthy. All his life, he had been scraping by, and for years, he had worried over his cover as a spy being blown. Now he knew the simple value of hard work...back breaking work that did not require him to use his brains, and he was a better man for it. For far too many years, he had lived on mental overdrive to the point of mental exhaustion that had threatened a total physical and mental breakdown. He realized as he worked that he had spent far too much time in his head for his own good. So, he took a mental vacation and it quickly changed him. Severus Snape was no longer the petty, spiteful, and bitter man he had once been. Although his personality would always be sardonic and distrustful, he found sanity in his work; a kind of 'occupational therapy' to stave off the bouts of melancholy and brooding he was prone to suffer from time to time. So, he worked very hard to rid his soul of all the poison he had held onto for twisted comfort. Even the Aurors, who guarded the prisoners, had grudgingly noted in their reports to the Ministry that Snape was turning out to be a model prisoner. Of course, Snape was known for his duplicity, so two months was not going to be a rounding endorsement that Snape was rehabilitated. He would be scrutinized for a long time coming before that would happen!

But Snape realized he didn't care about the Ministry or what anyone else thought of him anymore. He was so used to having to look over his shoulder constantly, wondering if someone was laughing behind his back, or plotting to execute him. Those days were gone. It was now a general consensus...Severus Snape was a pitiful coward, a *murderer*...ah, no, a man who had committed *manslaughter*, a weak person who had aided another to commit suicide. There were no massive black robes to wrap himself up in, no one to fear him so he could be safe from ridicule. He had been stripped and laid bare for the Wizarding world to see and have a go. All that remained now was a singular protective wall around him that refused to budge. He had erected it at such a young age it was a part of him now as much as his brain, his foot, or his torso.

And all the people he once loved, served, or had been his friends, even those who had just shown him kindness in the face of his disdainful attitude towards them, were all dead. Lucius' death had been the hardest to accept along with Draco's and Remus'. How he wished he could have a few moments back so he could tell that werewolf how much he had appreciated his friendship! After all the hateful, spiteful things he had said and done, not once did Remus ever side with Sirius against him during those blasted Order meetings. Now, he was truly alone. Those who worked alongside him were men he had very little knowledge of, or were only acquaintances at best. The ones who had known him, *really known him*, and had *truly cared* about him, were dead. The people who knew him who were alive now and living free lives were people who only knew the worst parts of his personality: the Death Eater who had killed Albus Dumbledore. But he had refused to fight against the Light and bear arms with the Dark Lord, so he was saved from a lifetime sentence in Azkaban. There, in the dank and dreary prison were some that lived who knew him, and he knew if they ever crossed paths, he would be dead.

No, Severus had decided to give up his former prejudices and grudges against his old childhood enemies. They were all dead now. He had paid his debt to save Lily's son, and now Harry was, from what he heard, happily dating Ginny Weasley and working to become an Auror. Everything he had held onto was meaningless. All his devotion for Lily, his precious books, the black robes he hid behind and used to intimidate, his profession, and his grudges, hell, even his title of Potions master was gone. He owned nothing and had nothing to give. He had resigned himself to his fate, working as hard as he could during the day so he could collapse into a deep sleep of pure exhaustion at night. Life was basic and uncomplicated at its best; a day-to-day existence with nothing really to anticipate anymore. And that was the blessed part of it. Severus Snape actually had never been happier in his life. He no longer had to think four steps ahead of everybody else. No one wanted anything from him. He no longer had to fear for his life. It was simple, quiet, and easy. For that, he was grateful.

Hermione walked from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts where she was greeted by Madam Sprout and taken to her quarters. She bunked with several other girls in a magical tent, similar to the one she had stayed in during the Quidditch World Cup. After getting settled in, she changed into an older robe and pinned back her hair. She wanted to make sure she looked like an adult, capable for the task she had set out to do: to be a Mediwitch assistant. She set her mind to the task and decided she was not going to take no for an answer.

She marched off, bold as brass, to see Madam Pomfrey. The Mediwitch surely had to be in over her head, dealing with the various ailments of the Death Eater prisoners. She knew she could stand up to the task. After all, she had fought in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries and the 1st and 2nd battle of Hogwarts. She was a war veteran, for the love of Merlin!

She approached the Mediwitch's tent and took in its surroundings. It was a large tent, magically temperate inside and protected from the elements. The floor was wooden and had a vast number of cots for whomever needed them. There was a running cabinet on one side of the tent, and at the end a large bureau stood. Hermione knew by glancing at it that it was magically sealed. On the back wall near the back entrance where Hermione walked in was Madam Pomfrey's desk. One could tell she had her hands full with massive amounts of paperwork. She called for the Mediwitch. "Hello? Madam Pomfrey?"

"She's gone. Stepped out for a mo'." A disgusting man in rags of filth she hadn't noticed at first glance leered at her. "What's your name, love?" He was standing near her with his arm in a sling. He also looked as if he had been brawling.

Hermione whipped out her wand and aimed it between the man's eyes. She was calm and collected. "I'm not your love, and my name is none of your business!" she snapped angrily.

Madam Pomfrey came in from the main entrance at the other end of the tent and shrieked. Hermione was not affected by it.

"Hermione Granger! What on earth are you doing?" she chided.

"She was probably putting Mackenerney in his place," answered a cool voice.

Hermione stepped back from the man and looked over towards Madam Pomfrey. Beside her was Severus Snape. He was dressed in the same striped prisoners' rags, but looked cleaner than the filth in front of her. He was carrying a crate of sorts, and she noticed he did not look her in the eye. *Strange, Professor Snape always looks someone in the eye...he bores his eyes into yours by way of intimidation. What is this about?* she thought.

"Severus, place the potions down there and report back to Auror Bedford. He is expecting you," Madam Pomfrey said with a superior air.

"Certainly," he whispered and walked out.

Hermione was outraged. That man was Severus Snape? Sure, he still had his long black hair, tied back, of course, and his face and height were still the same, but his build was stronger, the pale sallow color was gone from him and had been replaced with sun-blown skin. His entire demeanor was so unlike him as well! He acted as if he were lower than both of the women present. Whatever had happened to the sneering Potions master she had always known?

Poppy Pomfrey noticed her shock as she unpacked her parcel. "Yes, dear, that is the *former* Professor Severus Snape. It is remarkable. The man who for years made men cower in his presence is now humbled." She smirked as she spoke.

"What do you mean 'humbled'?" Hermione asked, puzzled by the remark.

Poppy's eyes went huge and gave Hermione her full attention. "My dear, didn't you know? After Lucius was finally found dead, Narcissa committed suicide. Lucius' death along with Draco's death in the war; her grief was too much to bear. Severus was devastated. He had been so close to all of them. After all, he had done so much and *risked* his life to save Draco from Voldemort. Such a waste! Draco had fought so well for our side in the final battle, it was just a shame for him to die! Then when he found

out that so many of the Order also had perished, it was as if his heart finally had been broken beyond repair. He especially took Remus Lupin's death hard. He had been a good friend to Severus, but Severus had wasted all his chances to tell Remus how much his friendship had meant to him. Severus is no longer the same man...thank heaven for that! I, for one, am glad he is here. It will do him well to eat some humble crow after all the sneering and snarking he did around here for so many years!"

Hermione was taken aback by Madam Pomfrey's cavalier attitude towards the professor. Most of what he did had been an act, a part of his cover as a spy. Sure, he had been a sarcastic and moody person whom she had been absolutely terrified of ever since her first year when he had snapped at her for having her hand up in class and called her a "silly girl." But the last two years of school, coupled with the events of Dumbledore's death, she had known he was really not the abhorrent, vile, loathsome man she had thought him to be.

Hermione was mystified at Madam Pomfrey's lack of compassion for the wizard. Hermione refused to believe he had murdered Dumbledore out of evil intentions. She trusted and believed in him. After all the years of believing in the Potions master's strength, it was another crumbling of the life she had known. She didn't want to believe the man, who had for two decades stood as a double agent against Voldemort, was the man she had just seen. He shouldn't be a prisoner! He should be with the others, inside the castle, brewing potions, and helping to restore the Old Magic back into the stones. As if any of them up there had half the knowledge and talent for potion making! But because of prejudice and politics, he was instead only fit to dig ditches for the castle's plumbing! *What a waste indeed!* she seethed while looking at Madam Pomfrey. She slowly walked to the edge of the tent and followed him with her eyes. He met up with someone who seemed to be an Auror. An Incantation was whispered and a circle of gold flashed around Snape's neck and vanished. He went back to working on the line. She watched him dig with his shovel, hiding half her face behind the tent. She gripped the canvas in her anger and sorrow. She finally turned away from the sight. It hurt too much.

She came back to herself and said, "Madam Pomfrey, do you need help with the prisoners? I can assist you in whatever you need. Being a former Mediwitch assistant at St. Mungo's and living with the Weasleys has given me a lot of practice in healing charms and basic first-aid."

Pomfrey's eyes widened. "Why on earth would you want to expose yourself to the likes of that?" She pointed at the smarmy Mackenerney as she spoke.

"Madam Pomfrey, this the career path I have chosen, and I figure not only will I be helping out Hogwarts and Wizarding kind, I also will be gaining some practical applications under my belt." She stole a glance at the filthy Mackenerney and looked back at Madam Pomfrey. "Besides, a Mediwitch does not look at the body, nor the state of mind, to determine if a person is worth saving. All life is sacred."

Pomfrey smiled. "Well, it's not like they can hurt you. Each prisoner has a charm on them. If they even so much as touch another person who is not a prisoner, they will start choking as if they are being hanged until an Auror can take off the curse. Unfortunately, the language and behavior is still most vile, not for the ears of a young lady like yourself!"

"Please, Madam Pomfrey, I'm begging you, give me a chance...a trial period, and if I don't make the cut, you can send me packing back to Madam Sprout."

Pomfrey looked the young woman over again. She sighed as she tried to make some sense of the massive pile up on her desk. *don't have time to babysit these monsters and deal with their whining over silly ailments. Why not let the Granger girl do it?* Finally, she spoke. "All right, it's not as if I have offers coming out of my arse! No one wants to work with these poor beggars, not to mention heal them. And as you can see, I'm up to my neck in administrative matters. You'll learn soon enough that this 'program' runs on its paperwork! Well, let's get you started. I'll introduce you to the Aurors. You'll know most of them, I'm sure."

She followed the Mediwitch out of the tent and went around to meet the Aurors. There were a large group of them congregating around the main entrance of the Prisoners' sector. Hermione recognized only a couple of them. Most of the Aurors she had known died in the war.

Madam Pomfrey called out to the group of wizards. "Hello!" she shrieked. "I want you to meet my new assistant, Miss Hermione Granger."

The Aurors, who were all men, lit up like fairy lights at the mention of her name.

"Hermione Granger, you're the friend of our Mr. Potter, eh?" asked one large man.

"Yes, Harry and I have been friends since our first year at Hogwarts," she replied.

"So modest!" laughed another Auror. "I don't s'pose you 'meber me?"

Hermione gave a shy smile and politely shook her head.

"Me name's Dawlish, Miss."

"Dawlish! Of course, I'm sorry. You were at Order meetings sometimes!" Hermione instinctively grabbed hold of his arm and gave a sincere smile. "It is so good to see familiar faces!"

The other Aurors chuckled warmly. They knew exactly Hermione's meaning. There had been so much death, so much loss. The Auror department had been hit hard during the war. Most of them now consisted of new recruits who had been held back during the final battle so the department would not be completely decimated.

Dawlish continued. "The four of us is all's left, Miss...of the old crowd, tha' is. This is Proudfoot; 'e was wi' Tonks two years back, 'elpin' Dumbledore guard 'Ogwarts. 'E's the Senior Auror in charge 'round here."

Hermione shook the hand of the large wizard who had spoken earlier. She did not remember him, but was grateful to meet someone who had survived after so much.

"This here is Savage and Williamson. Savage was also wi' me, Tonks and Proudfoot. I guess you ladies would be wantin' a tour o' the place, eh?" he asked.

"Please," asked Madam Pomfrey sweetly. "Hermione needs to be completely aware of the comings and goings, rules, regulations, and whatnot."

"Very well, Mum. Let's ge' on it then. Cheerio, lads!" he called to the group.

Although Dawlish was to give the tour, Madam Pomfrey interrupted him at will to add in her comments. Hermione was given the rules of prisoner treatment. Every examination and healing had to be done in the presence of an Auror, because physical contact was necessary. She was never to allow herself to be alone with a prisoner without express permission. And it was pointed out to her that since she was an *assistant*, not a Mediwitch, there would be no reason for *herever* to be alone with a prisoner.

Everywhere Hermione walked, she saw the ravages of defeat. Each prisoner had had his wand confiscated and was forced to live like a Muggle. Their sector was both bound magically and visibly. Barbed wire enclosed them. They lived in tents, and the place was filthy and muddy. The men she saw here were broken and without hope. They huddled in groups, murmuring softly, or sat in the filth with a blanket around them, looking as if they had been given the Dementor's Kiss. There was so much loneliness here, so much pain and hopelessness. She felt so very sorry for them. They all reminded her of Ron. She must have had a very grim look about her face because Poppy pulled her aside and spoke to her sharply.

"Look, Miss Granger, you had best pull yourself together! I understand having sympathy for another human being, but you have to keep an emotional distance, or you will find yourself wrung out over all the pain here. Believe me, I know," she said with a hard glint in her eyes.

"Madam Pomfrey," Hermione whispered, lifting her robes as they weaved their way through the muck and mud of the Prisoners' sector, jumping over puddles and avoiding piles of rubbish, "this seems to be completely barbaric for men who are supposed to be 'low-level risk' prisoners! I thought the idea behind Shacklebolt's program was to give these men a better alternative to Azkaban!"

Poppy barked a laugh. She grabbed Hermione tightly by the arms and furiously ripped into her.

"Do you know what kind of hell-hole Azkaban is? I've seen it, and whatever putrid filth these men must live in now is far superior to what they'd get there! At least they get the fresh air and clean food!"

Hermione looked at Dawlish. He looked sheepish as he scratched the back of his head, trying not to notice Madam Pomfrey scold her new assistant. He seemed uncomfortable with the prisoners' treatment as well, by the way he spoke of it, but he never actually said anything derogatory. It seemed to Hermione that one could go ahead and *think* what they would, but never *speak aloud* anything contradictory to the rules.

Hermione was not placated by this epiphany. "And what will happen to these poor men, exactly, when the cold settles in? It's practically fall now, and I don't see any way these men are going to survive in the elements like this!" she challenged Madam Pomfrey.

Madam Pomfrey jabbed her index finger into Hermione's chest. "You, my girl, will leave that up to the Aurors! They are the ones in charge here, not us. We will clean, tend, bandage, heal their wounds and diseases, but we are not into politics! I know all about you and your *causes*, Miss Granger," the mediwitch spat scornfully. "If I catch one whiff of conspiring against the Aurors here, you will be pushed off this site altogether!" She was yanked back in line with Dawlish, and she kept her mouth shut, but her eyes and ears were very open.

She continued with Madam Pomfrey and Dawlish as they continued her tour of the Prisoners' sector. She passed by where a group of men were digging a ditch outside the perimeter. The men were in a right tidy row, working close beside one another. She shielded her eyes from the glaring sun and saw Professor Snape again and noticed how strong he was. He had always been thin and trim, but he seemed slightly stronger-looking. Perhaps the healthy shade of his skin gave him a robust look. Dawlish spoke about the prisoners' work outside the sector, but Hermione couldn't hear him. She was mesmerized by her old teacher. She was grateful she was standing slightly behind Pomfrey so she wouldn't catch her looking at the black-haired man as he worked. She found herself wishing he would look at her with his onyx eyes. It still hurt to see him reduced to such a life, but now, seeing how calm his face looked, all the tension released from his face, surrounded by the beautiful outdoors, it seemed like the best solution for now. At least that was what she decided to tell herself. She found herself longing for the days when he had been the formidable bat of the dungeons. She couldn't have him in his black robes, but he still had those eyes that could sear right through you. She longed for one of those looks again. Why, she did not know. Finally, they moved on, and she turned her back to him.

What Hermione had not realized was that Snape had noticed her. It seemed ages since he had seen her last. She had imprinted herself on his memory as a scrawny little girl with impossible hair and a know-it-all attitude. Yet, when he had last seen her, he realized she was a beautiful, albeit sad, young woman. Now, she was a woman who carried herself with poise and strength. The odd feeling inside him at the sight of the adult Hermione Granger had returned. He had not felt it since he saw her at his sentencing. She was beautiful. He put more force into his work and cursed that she was here. He did not want her seeing him like this. He did not want to complicate the simplicity and peace he had finally found.

He lay in bed that night, staring up at the stars, and tried to sleep with an irritating erection annoying him. Some men didn't give two shites about decorum and would masturbate in front of anyone. Severus would not do that. He would do it while relieving himself in the woods, which meant an Auror would be near-by. Most of them would just turn their heads and pretend nothing was happening, while some would jeer at him. He had quickly learned who was sympathetic and who was not. He prayed a sympathetic Auror would be the one to take him to the woods in the morning.

Auror Carson nervously stepped a distance away from Snape so the prisoner could relive himself of what seemed to be a very painful erection. Snape knelt down and pictured Hermione as he did yesterday. He imagined her skin, lips, and her curly hair. He imagined her undoing her hair and allowing her unruly curls to cover his groin as she took his cock in her mouth. He shouted as he spilled his seed onto the forest floor. It was something he tried very hard not to do with an audience nearby. However, Carson was a young Auror, and unmarried. Snape didn't feel too humiliated. He was sure Carson did the same thing every other day.

Nevertheless, Snape was bothered by his reaction to Hermione. His happy, meaningless life was quickly becoming meaningful, and that bothered him. As the days passed, he found himself looking out for glimpses of her while she walked back and forth from the castle to the makeshift infirmary tent. She was so beautiful. She wore a crisp white apron covering the traditional burgundy bodice and skirt. She kept her hair up, but her impossible curls would never stay completely fixed. The wind would always whip the wavy strands loose. She was, as always, focused, hardworking and helpful. She was constantly running back and forth from the infirmary to the Prisoners' sector to help out with whatever they needed. There were times she looked dead tired and exhausted, her hair half down from the confines of her pins, great dirt or blood smears on her apron, and dark circles under her eyes. But she was beautiful. There just was no other word he could think to describe her. He contemplated even injuring himself on purpose just so he could have an excuse to have her touch him. His desire for her was growing at an alarming rate. Although he knew he would never be able to touch her; it would be impossible...not with the Untouchable Charm over him.

One day with his mind elsewhere, he finally got his wish. Except another prisoner had cut Snape's hand with his shovel while Snape had been distracted watching Hermione. Auror Dawlish, who knew Hermione, was more than happy to pop round to see a friendly face and ushered him in. Snape was so happy he could have cried. But no one would have known by the look on his face. He sat stone-faced while she chatted away with Dawlish. She was unaware of her unnecessary touching and holding of his hand. He watched her smile and laugh; he even could make out a more distinct outline of her breasts outlining her shirt close-up. He had never realized how truly remarkable she was and always had been. He had always short-changed her in Potions. She was *truly* a gifted witch. But he could never have allowed the small stirring of feelings to be encouraged. Even as he sat, watching her, a part of him wanted to run from her, to forget the seed of hope that was buried deep inside and starting to grow. At the same time, however, that same seed of hope made him feel exhilarated. This once insufferable girl made him want to live for more than what the existence he had now gave him. Although he truly believed her smile was what caused the sun to rise each morning, it was too painful and too joyful all at the same time to contemplate.

He was still, no matter what indignities had been forced upon him, a master at subterfuge and an expert at masking his true feelings. He decided that until he could work out these conflicting emotions, he would have to keep them under control. He was shaken out of his thoughts when another Auror called Dawlish to the tent opening. Snape found himself left alone with Hermione. She looked into his expressionless face and locked her eyes onto his piercing, dark ones. He held hers for a moment before lowering them back down, as he should.

Hermione worked in the silence as Dawlish continued his chatting. She wanted so badly to say something to the professor...no, *Severus*, now. However, he was so unapproachable and distant. He acted as if neither of them were there. He did not, however, resist her treatment of his hand. The long pale fingers were now tanned and hardened from the manual labor he preformed every day. She held his large, strong, powerful hand in her own small, white ones and trembled inside at the reality of being able to touch him. If it were not for his hair and face, she just wouldn't believe it was truly him. Nonetheless, here he was, and the moment he gave of staring into her eyes gave her thrills beyond compare. He was in there. He was just playing the game to survive. She suppressed an urge to laugh. Why would she want so desperately to have her snarky, spiteful Potions master back, sneering and verbally cutting into her?

"Is there something you find amusing, Miss Granger?" he murmured barely above a whisper.

"No," she replied as she finished his bandaging. A smile crept on her face. It was so good to hear that sarcastic voice again!

He stood up and she followed suit. Auror Dawlish was back at Hermione's side.

She continued to look at her teacher as she told Dawlish she was finished tending to him. Snape looked away from her gaze, as he knew what was required. She smelled delicious. *She is so beautiful.* He had heard through the grapevine that Weasley had committed suicide. Therefore, she was all alone and unattached. She was still Miss Granger, *his* Miss Granger, who had fought for his life in the Shrieking Shack and later for his freedom.

Each evening after that day in the infirmary, he allowed himself to fantasize about a life with her, making love to her. He would look up into the clear sky and watch the stars

twinkle and shine. He never had inclinations before towards stargazing and other such romantic nonsense. But then he had been choking with hate and rage. Now, the absence of it left an emptiness that was uncomfortable. It would never happen, she would never want him, but, perhaps he wasn't completely dead inside if he could still feel such desires. Hope: the pain and the joy of it all. He wanted to run from it, to embrace it, and to accept all its possibilities at the same time.

Just Like I'm Sinking

Chapter 3 of 11

Hermione uncovers a conspiracy of graft and prisoner abuse. She becomes determined to help Snape as much as she is able.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, MadBrilliant! Please review, I love reviews!

Hermione worked hard with the prisoners during the next two months. She checked each prisoner personally every week for lice, dysentery, and other illnesses that could cause epidemics. The first thing that caught her attention was the nervousness that each prisoner exhibited. Since each and every examination had to take place in the presence of an Auror, any questions she asked about their care were stunted. Questions such as, "Have you enough to eat?" "Are you warm enough at night?" "Do you require a new toothbrush?" "How are you being treated by your Auror-in-charge?" It was a joke! Each question she asked got a shifty glance towards the Auror and then a hearty, happy remark from the prisoner that he was doing fine in need of nothing. Hermione was beginning to feel her work was manipulated in some fashion. Her service towards the prisoners seemed basic and rushed. She was to help the hurting, but the hurting seemed to be too afraid to tell her the truth of how desperate their plight was!

Still, due to her age and prettiness, there was one area that caused a lot of trouble for the prisoners and Hermione felt responsible. The men were, for the most part, far too afraid of the Aurors to make any overtures to her or show how her presence affected them. Yet, there were still some who did; their desperation for female attention caused many an embarrassing moment where just being in her presence would cause them to become aroused. The Aurors forgave those who showed their humiliation and apologized, and no was punishment given. Some, though, were just either too touched in the head, or were not broken enough to keep their wits or manners about them. Mackenerney was one of those whose overtures were unbelievable. He literally one day exposed himself and began to fondle his privates in front of her. She sat frozen in disbelief and horror at the display in front of her. Auror Banes had been distracted, talking with another Auror when he heard Hermione cry out in disgust. He reacted swiftly, grabbing the prisoner by the scruff of his collar and threw him out of the infirmary. Mackenerney was soundly thrashed, and although she did not witness the beating, she heard it all from her seat in the infirmary...every crack of the leather strap on flesh and the screams that seemed to never end. Hermione was told later that he was sent back to Azkaban.

Auror Banes was a force to be reckoned with. He was by no means the oldest Auror, nor did he have the most seniority. That title belonged to Dawlish, but the man's kindly nature was not conducive to being a leader. So, Auror Proudfoot was the Senior Auror in charge on the site. Proudfoot had his own unique way of dealing with his staff and the prisoners: he didn't want to hear bad news. He didn't want to hear complaining. If he got bad news, the prisoner went back to Azkaban. He just didn't want the trouble. Proudfoot did give the prisoners a schedule that kept them busy enough, which in Hermione's estimation was a good idea. To keep the prisoners' minds occupied with routine and scheduling would keep tempers in check and maintain discipline. He was an excellent administrator, but lousy at building morale and maintaining control over his men. So the Aurors were a law unto themselves and were given free reign. They treated their charges as they saw fit, and if that included a sound thrashing every once in a while, so be it. Banes, being the very large and most physically intimidating Auror on site, rose in the ranks as the right-hand man of Proudfoot. As long as Proudfoot didn't hear complaints, everything went along fine. And Banes made sure everything was fine. Punishments were meted out with the attendance of all prisoners, as an incentive to be "good." Whippings were commonplace, and if the infraction was bad enough, after the thrashing, they were still shipped off to Azkaban. It made quite the impression on the inmates. So no one was about to complain with the threat of prison hanging over his head.

This was the world Hermione had stepped into, and she, being the quick study she was, soon learned the warped politics of the PWR. What had started an opportunity for some prisoners that the Ministry *knew* were not criminals to experience a lighter load than their fellow prisoners in Azkaban, turned out to be nothing more than exploitation of the worst kind. Every week conditions became worse. The Aurors were not merely guards; they were also perpetrators of various tortures. Hermione was no fool...she knew torture when she saw it. Aside from the public whippings, she started to notice mysterious markings. Burns, curious bruises, and gashes that were very suspicious...and it was getting worse. Then to complete the hopelessness of the situation, fall officially had arrived. The temperature at night was dipping precariously low. Hermione worried fiercely over the health of the prisoners. Since she had arrived two months before, ten men had been sent back to Azkaban. If they could not work, they could not stay in the program. When they left, no new men came to replace them. The ones left behind had to pick up any slack so the work did not suffer. After one month, Hermione was just about at her limit. She refused to stand idly by and allow this barbarism to continue!

She approached Madam Pomfrey about the injuries she was seeing. Pomfrey pursed her lips and went about her paperwork. Hermione set her jaw and crossed her arms. She would not be dismissed!

"Madam Pomfrey, I demand that you answer me! What are we to do about these attacks?"

"Attacks!" she laughed. "My word, you do have a dramatic streak in you. You always did, Miss Granger. I don't see anything in this infirmary that is out of the ordinary."

She turned her head down back to her paperwork. Hermione slammed her hand on top of the papers, interrupting the Mediwitch's work.

"Madam Pomfrey, I am not stupid! I know abuse when I see it, and you've not been around enough I've noticed to give a proper assessment of any patient's condition! Why are you so set on covering up the Aurors' brutality?"

Madam Pomfrey looked up at Hermione with a fierce coldness that sent shivers down the young woman's back. She stood and faced her, her rage and anger written all over her face.

"I do not appreciate your accusations! My business is just that...MINE! I have more important things to do than stay here in this canvas joke of an infirmary and listen to the whines and bellyaches of prisoners who should not even be here in the first place! But I had no say in the matter. And if I want to retain my post as Mediwitch when the school reopens, I must stay and accept things as they are. At least now I have you to do the work I'm so loath to do. Now, I have already warned you, Miss Granger, and now I'm ordering you. Stop this now or I will have you tossed out!"

Hermione wanted to lash out at the bitter old cow, but she knew it would only get her kicked out. She wasn't in this position for money (it was never for money, as she was a volunteer) or honing talents (that flew out the window as soon as she first saw the wounds she had to heal and turn a blind eye to...or more to the point...*be complicit in covering up Auror prisoner abuse*). She *had* to be here. Who else would be able to speak for these men when it was now so obvious they had no voice? She was

determined that she would keep her eyes and ears open to see what was really going on around here. Pomfrey had so much to do outside of the infirmary? Really now? Well then, what was it?

Anytime Madam Pomfrey stepped out, or when she knew she'd left for the night, Hermione ransacked her desk and looked at her paperwork. It was a good thing she loved Arithmancy! She made quick work of the figures. She looked at the invoices for the clothing, food, and potions/medicinal allotments. She snorted at the figures. This did not add up! These prisoners had not seen a scrap of new winter clothing since the fall when they were given coats. The figures went on and on for replacement shoes, gloves, scarves, hats, socks, shirts, pants, etc.

The food invoices were much worse shape. For two months now, the food allotments had become substantially smaller and poorer in quality. Hermione had not seen a prisoner with a vegetable in three weeks. Yet there it was cataloged. What was happening to the clothes and food?

She looked around the infirmary. There were a couple of patients, but they were asleep. The Auror on guard was outside. She took her wand and went to the large store cabinet where, *supposedly*, clothing, bandages, medical supplies were kept and cataloged. She snorted at the ease with which she broke through the simple wards set up. It was in complete disarray. She went back to the desk and snatched the papers. She nervously glanced around to make sure no one was coming, and she did a fast inventory. It was enough. It was apparent that there was graft occurring on this site! What was she going to do? She had no authority to check the kitchens in order to see if the same problem existed there, but Hermione was a logical person. She knew the vile food the men had been eating lately. And it was even more apparent by the increased cases of dysentery that was coming into the infirmary.

She looked at the medicines list. Merlin! This was outrageous! Hermione had taken over making the potions, since Pomfrey hated doing it, but the potions Hermione brewed were only the most common and basic. She had fretted over not having a larger selection of ingredients in order to make more complex potions that could be more effective in the healing process. She had cursed the Ministry in her heart for their cruelty and insensitivity. Now, she knew the truth!

Over the next days, Hermione watched and carefully made innocent inquiries about the overall Reconstruction Program. It was best not to ask about specifics. She asked how materials needed were delivered. She was sure to talk to people like Hagrid, who would slip and say more than they meant to and would inadvertently give over the answers she truly was seeking without them being any the wiser. So she discovered that all the clothing, food goods, bandages, ingredients and potions already pre-made for the Prisoner Work Release Program were delivered to Hogsmeade, but for some reason, never managed to fully find its way here! Hermione was so angry she could barely see straight. What was she going to do? This was potentially dangerous, not to mention *illegal*! She didn't know how far up the corruption went. Surely Minister Shackbolt wouldn't be in on it! But anyone else was up for grabs as far as she was concerned!

Dawlish brought in Professor Snape one morning. It was apparent he had been beaten...badly. After she got him settled in a cot, she whirled around on Dawlish and demanded to know exactly what had happened.

Dawlish was very reluctant to explain. "Look, miss, its not so simple! Some o' the lads like a bit o' sport. Things get out of order sometimes. I try to do what I can, but it ain't easy being one dissenter out of the whole bunch!"

"Dawlish," she threatened. "You tell me now!" She bent over her patient and did a diagnostic scan with her wand to ascertain the extent of the damage.

He took a breath and said, "'E was the sport last night. Snape 'as a very bad reputation 'mongst us Aurors. 'E wasn't the most polite person o'er the years... 'e made lots o' enemies. Barnes, Bedford, and some o' the other younger lads took turns beatin' on 'em all night."

"As if Barnes or Bedford or any of these younger 'lads' ever really *knew* Professor Snape!" she bit out sarcastically. She made quick work of tearing off the rest of his threadbare shirt to expose his chest. She continued to rail at Dawlish. "This man was risking his life for the whole of the Wizarding world when most of those 'lads' were just learning to walk!" she huffed.

She was incensed! She grabbed her wand and started to probe deeper into certain areas where there seemed to be the most damage. He was a filthy mess. He had broken ribs, burns on his stomach, a broken cheekbone, and massive facial injuries from repeated blows. His hands had been broken in several places, as if they had been stomped on. Also, as if that weren't enough, he had been urinated and defecated on.

She burst into tears and yelled at Dawlish. "He could have *died*! How could you let them abuse him like this! What else did they do...I don't want to discover without being prepared...did they...?"

Dawlish stepped back and a look of horror crossed his face. "No, Miss Granger, nothin' like that! They just thrashed 'em real bad. I'm sorry; things are jus' not like t'was. I su'pose I'm too tired from decades o' war. I don't got wha' it takes enymore. I know I should 'ave stopped 'em, but it's politics, miss!" He looked pitiful and ashamed.

"Well, where were Savage, Proudfoot, and Williamson? Surely they all didn't approve!" she demanded.

"Ah, well, miss, you see, there's only the small band of us, an' we ain't all together. 'Ere's a lot of men to look after, you see, and we try our best to look out...well, for the younger lads, who's only fault was havin' fathers as Death Eaters and such. Now, Snape, e's no innocent bystander! Oh, no! e's not a *priority*, iff'n' you get my meanin', miss. One must pick one's battles, eh?"

"Quite," Hermione replied stiffly with cold eyes. The sight of the Auror sickened her. She watched as he shuffled his feet ashamedly and bowed his head. It was clear he didn't like what he was a part of, but Hermione could not summon the feeling to sympathize with him. She decided she had her hands full with taking care of Snape's wounds that needed immediate attention than deal with Dawlish's pain that ran deeper and unseen, but not life threatening.

It took her a very long time to heal and clean him. Dawlish came and went during the next few days. Madam Pomfrey left Snape alone with Hermione to be dealt with. He slipped in and out of consciousness. Hermione was disgusted with the apathy that seemed to choke the hope out of everything. But she would be damned if she were going to let it happen to her!

After a week, Snape was well enough for a proper bath. He was loath for her to tend to him, but she stood her ground. Snape was petrified. The last thing he wanted was for her to see him become aroused, and he knew if she started touching and washing him he would.

"For the love of Merlin, woman, I am perfectly capable of washing myself!" he snarled.

"Professor Snape, you have had multiple broken bones! I need for you to allow enough time to pass before you start exerting your body and risk doing damage to what is already delicate!"

"NO!" he thundered.

"Professor...please!" she yelled back sharply.

"DO. NOT. CALL. ME. THAT!" he roared.

Dawlish and Pomfrey dashed into the curtained off area where the bathtub was and saw a partially naked Snape standing in the tub faced off with an irate Hermione who stood solidly with her hands on her hips. She didn't back off for a second. With her eyes fixed on the surly man, she told the both of them to get out, and she would deal with the prisoner. Pomfrey shrugged and left while Dawlish hemmed and hawed about it.

"Get out, Dawlish!" Hermione threatened as she stared down Snape, which was difficult because he was much taller than she. If it weren't such a serious situation, it would have been hilarious to watch this woman bully a man who towered over her and could toss her aside like a rag doll if he were so inclined.

Dawlish finally left them alone, and they resumed their standoff.

Hermione took out her wand and said, "Do not make me place *Imperio* on you, Severus! I understand this is humiliating for you, but I shall make necessary arrangements for you to have some privacy from my eyes."

"Afraid seeing my manhood will make your eyes disintegrate?" he said sarcastically.

She blushed furiously. "Of course not! I-I just believe every person deserves the right to some pride. I wouldn't want to be exposed against my will if our roles were reversed."

The thought of him washing a naked Hermione made his worst fear come true. He started to feel himself respond to her verbal picture as he sat in the tub with a towel covering his growing erection. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with one hand, not believing the situation with which he found himself.

He looked away from her as she washed his hair and worked her way down. He was so grateful for the towel. Just her touch was making him rock hard. By the time she reached his legs, there was no hiding his erection. She bit her lip and continued, but worked faster, as so to end the torment he must be feeling. He was not looking at her, but she could see the color flushed on his cheeks. He was humiliated, and she felt bad for him, but nonetheless, she was finding herself very aroused by his arousal. It was impossible not to notice the huge tenting from underneath the towel. He tried to cover it with his hand, but he only managed to hurt himself. He winced, and she gasped. *He is at full attention!* she thought. He turned and glared at her when she gasped and caught her looking at his erection. She knew she was blushing, and her breathing was getting shallow. He glared at her fearsomely. She rose weakly and said with a shaking voice, "I'll be right outside. Y-you let me know when you are ready for me to help you back to your bed."

"Am I that disgusting and wretched to you, Miss Granger?" he spat out at her.

She knew his ego was on the line, and he was completely humiliated, so she decided to allow herself to be humiliated with him *After all, it's only honest. I'm aroused. It's just not as obvious with women as with men.*

She turned her head to her side and glanced at him. "Severus, I have to leave or I may do something foolish," she whispered, her voice still shaking.

"Like?" His silky voice carried to her like a caress.

She turned around and opened her mouth to say something, but instead, without thinking, she walked quickly to him, bent over, and kissed him shyly on the mouth. She went to withdraw slowly, and a hand clamped around her head, and he forced his tongue past her lips. Hermione sank down on to the floor next the tub and gave herself over to his demanding mouth. She placed one hand on the forearm of the hand holding her head. Her other hand grasped the edge of the bath as he passionately delved into her mouth. She was aware of something happening, but her head was roaring. Suddenly, he gasped '*Hermione*' in her mouth. She felt her body tingle all over and felt slick between her thighs. He released his grip but not his hand from her. They sat shaking, mouths open, their foreheads touching. Her hair was coming undone from where he'd grabbed her. It seemed ages before they both calmed their breathing to normal. Hermione closed her eyes as they breathed in each other's breath. Finally, she broke away from him and hurriedly tried to re-pin her hair while murmuring, "I'm sorry if I took advantage." Then she left him alone.

She stood outside the curtain shocked and excited at the same time. She couldn't believe what had just occurred, but she had kissed him *He was aroused...and he...he...* It was unbelievable! She should feel humiliated and disgusted, but she didn't. She felt she had helped him, given him relief. She slid her arms around her, accidentally grazing her nipples in the process. She noticed her nipples were so hard; they were painful to the touch.

Snape couldn't believe what had happened. He was horrified at his display of passion. He couldn't believe he masturbated in front of her! Yet, he was thrilled about her response. At least she hadn't screamed. She seemed excited during his climax. She was panting and had allowed his forehead to rest against hers. Still, he had acted so insanely! He hadn't thought; he'd just reacted. He had to apologize to her for his gross inappropriateness!

He came out, dressed in his clean prisoner uniform, and Hermione helped him back into his cot and pulled the blanket over him. His face was so very sad. He grabbed her wrist and her eyes found his. They were sparkling and bright. She wasn't angry or repulsed. He couldn't believe his good fortune at his beautiful Hermione, so full of grace. "Hermione, thank you," he murmured, his voice like silk.

"Sleep now," she whispered. He caressed the back of her hand with his thumb and closed his eyes.

She sat and watched him sleep after she told Dawlish to go ahead and leave. He was so pale and exhausted. She was terrified of the feelings he awoke in her. What had happened? What was this strange turn in life, that she should be here, sitting by his sick bed, feeling there was no place on earth she'd rather be? She felt so much guilt. She should feel nothing; after all, Ron was dead. Yet, this man was making her want to live, really live...again...

After Snape was healed sufficiently and sent back to the prisoner's sector, she decided to launch her own private crusade. She was determined to start with the one man who would in all likelihood refuse her help: Professor Snape. He spent the last three days of his stay shy and withdrawn. Hermione knew he was a very private man and also an honorable one. What had occurred in the bath was a very private and personal act. She was sure he was feeling embarrassed and ashamed.

Snape was ashamed, but not embarrassed. It was the most erotic and satisfying act he had experienced in years. He just felt as if he'd taken advantage and didn't want her to think he was like the others who had no brains, but just randy animals with no self-control. He cared deeply for Hermione, wanted to be with her properly, not just use her so he could get off. He was positive that was how she'd come to view it when the excitement wore off. Then she would be angry, humiliated, perhaps cry, and then he'd be back in Azkaban. He didn't want to be around for that shoe to drop! He decided to keep his distance emotionally. He couldn't avoid her physically, but he could build a mental and emotional wall better than anybody. So, he kept to himself and refused even to look at her. He certainly did not need a repeat performance!

His aloofness was not unnoticed, and she felt very sad for the professor. But, she couldn't allow his issues to stand in the way of her plan of action! Since Dawlish had proved himself too inept and weak to stand up for others, she made a deal with Auror Carson (who was sympathetic to the prisoners' plight) to come and bring Severus round every other day so she could "check-up" on his health. Actually, she was smuggling him food and giving him extra potions to boost his energy and keep him healthy.

The first time he came he was very suspicious and cautious around her. He still was afraid she would have him carted off to Azkaban. Carson stood guard at the door after removing the Charm and let them alone. Hermione handed him a small bundle and held his hands in her own as she gave it to him.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"Food. You need your strength, Professor."

"Damn it girl, I am no professor! What is all this? Pity? Do you find me weak and incapable of survival?" he snarled quietly.

"Don't be absurd!" she snapped. "I am not blind as to what is occurring around here. You do recall you spent the better part of a fortnight here, don't you? Now you will come here, and I will get you some extra food, and I also want you to take these potions." She handed him two phials. He immediately knew what they were, but was suspicious.

"Who was the Potion maker?" he demanded.

Hermione sighed. "I have taken over the task of making the necessary potions needed for the infirmary. Madam Pomfrey does not like to make potions, and I daresay, I am more than competent to brew even for *you*, Professor."

"I don't want you calling me that, Miss Granger," he said sadly with no bite in his voice at all.

Hermione glanced at Carson. He was still facing away. She stepped closer to Snape and placed her hand on his chest. She noticed he was surprised by her closeness and perhaps...was that fear in his eyes? She gathered all her courage.

"Please, Severus, take the food and the potions. I can't bear the thought of you suffering. I care about you so much. I don't know why. You were a horrid man to me for years, but I have always known you are also a very special man. Let me take care of you, please." Her eyes were full of tears as she leaned into him. She wanted to embrace him and comfort him. She wanted to take him away from all this and give him his dignity back, but it was impossible. Some things must be borne. But, perhaps, they needn't be borne alone. She couldn't do everything he needed, but she could do this.

His face relaxed, and he reached up and placed a hand on her cheek and caressed it. Hermione closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. He wanted nothing more than to gently kiss her and slowly make love to her. The wanting to live part of him was overcoming the need to run. He mused how could it be that he, of all men, should find such a woman, so full of grace and forgiveness?

Carson interrupted their silence by clearing his throat, and Snape hurriedly drank his potions. He agreed to come dutifully every other day. Hermione smiled, knowing she would be keeping him safe.

As he left, he stopped at the entrance and said, "I am very sorry about the death of Mr. Weasley. Your loss must be great."

Hermione swallowed and gave him a nod. Her throat somehow would not allow her to speak. He walked out and she turned around, covering her mouth, silently weeping alone in the infirmary.

When fall was in full swing, the first frost arrived, and the construction on the castle still was not complete. The Ministry was loath to send the prisoners back to Azkaban when so much work needed to be done. The Aurors still expected the prisoners to work as hard as they did in the summertime, but the windy, rainy, Scottish weather was wearing them thin. Shoes that were worn out were now stuffed with cloth to protect their feet. Each prisoner received a coat, but no gloves or hats to truly warm them.

Hermione watched from her tent as the poor men struggled with their labors. It infuriated her to no end. All of what they did could be done with magic in a scat! But, the part of their "rehabilitation" was to work hard. This place, *Hogwarts*, was becoming a place she didn't know anymore. It reminded her more and more of another place she had read about: Auschwitz. The Nazis had their own motto too: "*Arbeit macht Frei*," meaning, "Work makes you free." How eerily similar it all was. Then she remembered Grindelwald's political prison. The motto there was "For the Greater Good." Was this what this was? For "the greater good?"

Severus came every other day like clockwork. Hermione watched as he wolfed down the food like the starving man he was. She noticed the disgusted look on Auror Carson's face as he watched the man eat without any grace or manners. She was livid.

"Oi!" she barked at him. "Don't you dare stand and judge him. It's because of your people that this wizard is reduced to this!"

Carson lowered his head in shame. Hermione sized him up. Finally she said, "You left Hogwarts just before I started. What house were you in?"

"Ravenclaw," he muttered.

"You, evil...no, I can't believe this." She pointed at Severus and continued to rail at Auror Carson. "This man was your professor. You *know* how brilliant he is, you know how talented, regardless of his attitude and anti-social behavior, this man taught you and played a role in you becoming an Auror. He should be up in that castle brewing potions instead of living in this rubbish tip! You should be ashamed of yourself for your reproachful thoughts and attitude!"

She turned her back on him and focused on Severus. She wished she could give him more food, better tasting food, but bland was better. His stomach might reject anything rich or with too much fat. He took his potions and said, "Thank you, Hermione. Despite what people believe, I am capable of showing gratitude."

Hermione glanced at Carson, who had his back to them. "Well, let's get a look at your teeth then. I'm going to give you a thorough going-over!" she announced.

Snape watched as she touched him. It wasn't sexual at all, only clinical, but she was the beautiful Hermione, who wanted to fight for him and defend him. It was impossible for him not to be aroused by her touch. It was so unconditional. He had been so cruel to her as her teacher, and now he had nothing to offer. Yet, he mattered to her. She favored him over the other prisoners. She looked at him with such tenderness, it was as if spring had already come into his heart and soul, and hope was flourishing inside.

She finished her examination and watched him button his shirt. She stood there and watched him, as if she couldn't look away. He tentatively lowered his head, and she wrapped her hands around his arms. He kissed her forehead and caressed her cheek with his thumb. She grasped onto his forearms, not wanting the contact to end, but it had to.

Come and Lift Me From This Place...

Chapter 4 of 11

Hermione reaches her breaking point after a confrontation with Madam Pomfrey over Pomfrey's hatred over the prisoners and the new directive from the ministry about the caring for the prisoner lice epidemic.

A/N: Thanks to the reviews, I LOVE REVIEWS! Also, thanks to my beta, MadBrilliant.

The number of lice cases finally grew to an epidemic level. The Ministry sent an owl ordering Madam Pomfrey to cut and shave the heads of each prisoner. Hermione read the scroll and slammed it down on Madam Pomfrey's desk. "I can not believe this! This is abhorrent! How can the Minister condone such behavior?"

Pomfrey sighed and looked hard at her assistant. "Why do you continue to allow yourself to become so riled up over these men?" she asked with amazement.

Hermione stood shocked with her mouth open. Finally, she found her tongue. "I would think that it would be apparent! These men are human beings...yet they are being treated worse than animals, and no one seems to care about their health or wellbeing! Well, somebody has to care! *Somebody* has...to..." She broke down crying. These

hollow men that she cared for, nursed, and treated were as if she were treating Ron. She couldn't save him but she could save these men.

Madam Pomfrey frowned, stood up importantly, and picked up her wand. "Come now, Miss Granger, pull yourself together!" she snapped. "There's work to be done!"

Hermione gathered herself together and gave Pomfrey a scathing look. "How can you? Professor Snape is one of 'those men'! How can you turn your back on him? How can you ignore the fact that so many of them shouldn't be imprisoned in the first place?"

Madam Pomfrey puffed herself up and unleashed a torrent of hate upon the young witch. "You know *nothing* about Severus Snape! I have cared for him since he was a boy. I healed his wounds and helped him back from death time and time again because I take my oath seriously 'to do no harm.' No matter the doubts that screamed in my head about the purposes behind Snape's missions or his motives, I just went ahead and cared for him as if he were my own. I trusted Dumbledore that Snape had turned from Voldemort and how did Snape repay him? What he did to Dumbledore was *unforgivable*! After all I did to save his life, he used me! I shall never forgive him. The guilt and pain he suffers...what they ALL suffer is nothing short than what they deserve! They are all alike: selfish, greedy, self-serving, and it's high time they were all taken down a peg or two. I'm done caring and pouring my heart over men who are just evil, miserable bastards at heart! Now, let's get on with it, shall we?"

She turned from Hermione and readied her station without another word or glance. Hermione was speechless. There was no more that could be said. The woman was fixated on her hate and her own perception of reality. It obviously did not register with the Mediwitch that the Wizengamot had accepted what Professor Snape did was not out of hate, but from a vow. However, it was no use trying to get through to her. Hermione was too weary to exert her energies to change Madam Pomfrey's mind.

Hermione numbly readied her station and tried to steady her wand hand as the men came in by twos. "Do no harm indeed!" That was a bag of shite. It took everything to not call Pomfrey out on her defrauding the Ministry. She just had to bide her time until she could get enough proof against the Mediwitch and figure out whom her accomplices were. Hermione and Madam Pomfrey began their work, spelling the prisoners' hair short and, in most cases, shaving. The work was mind numbing and tedious. All of this lice could just be fixed through magic without having to degrade them by shearing them like sheep! *But no!* These men had to suffer like Muggles...no, worse than Muggles, in Hermione's estimation. The first few had been difficult. The men looked at her with either sad eyes of defeat or cold eyes of hostility. Either way, it was all the same. Hermione Granger was just as much a prisoner to the Ministry as they: both were helpless to stop the continued humiliation.

She worked until her back ached and her eyes hurt. Finally, after she finished with one prisoner, she paused to rub her eyes and clear her head. She sensed the presence of another prisoner sitting in the chair. When she turned to him and focused her eyes...it was Professor Snape!

He regarded her coolly with detachment. There was no hostility or sadness: it was business. *Well, after all he endured with Voldemort...this must be a cakewalk* she thought. But that insight did nothing to make her task easier. She untied the string that bound his hair, and she slowly pushed the sides forward. She ran her fingers through his dark hair, framing it on either side of his face, the backside of her hand sliding down his cheeks as she slowly curtailed his face. Now he looked like the Professor she knew. His eyes flashed and pierced hers as they both looked at each other into the mirror. She didn't think he minded but perhaps he thought she was mocking him?

Nervously, she took up her wand and began the process. His piercing eyes never left hers. As she stripped him of his hair, tears were streaming down her face. She felt as if she were being tortured. Slowly, she worked her way around, indulging herself in touching his scalp. She didn't know why she wanted to touch and caress him so...she just *needed* to do it as if she were compelled. However, the tears kept falling, and his eyes still burned into her.

Finally, he spoke in a soft growl, "Save your tears, you silly girl. I do not require your pity."

So, that was it? He thought all she did for him was out of pity? *But of course, it's always about him. Never forget, Hermione, underneath everything, he still is neurotic as ever!*

"No, Severus. I am merely indulging in my own self-pity," she replied sadly.

His left eye twitched, and he continued glaring at her. Finally, she was done, and his hair was very short but as he had no lice, she did not need to shave it.

"You are finished, sir," she whispered as her eyes focused on the floor.

"Miss Granger," he whispered softly. "I am still me. Hair or lack thereof shall never change that. So, stop your sniveling."

There was softness in his eyes and a lack of venom in his tone that Hermione had never seen or heard before. She wanted more than anything to hug him and find that mysterious connection that kept her always seeking him for safety and security. He moved away and rejoined the line back to the Prisoners' Sector. He stood tall and unbreakable. *That is it, she decided, I want and need someone who hasn't been broken. He has faced Hell and he did not break. He still is the same right bastard underneath it all, and I just love him all the more for it...what?*

Hermione started on the next prisoner's hair in complete shock and disbelief. *Love? Did I just think love?*

After all the prisoners' hair had been spelled short and/or shaved, Hermione decided to go and meet with Harry for a chat about the prisoners' treatment. She Apparated to the Ministry and demanded to see Auror Potter. She was told to wait in the hall. When Harry came out, he looked concerned. She was a sight. Her face was thin and had a pinched look to it. Her eyes were blackened around the rims. She looked as if she hadn't slept or eaten in days. In reality, it wasn't far off the mark.

"Hermione, are you okay?" He placed a hand on her arm. His eyes looked troubled.

"No, Harry, I'm not fine. Actually, I'm quite upset at the moment. I need help, and I think perhaps you, being who you are, might be able to speak with Minister Shacklebolt or at least get me an appointment to see him."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "What's wrong, Hermione?" he demanded as he sat them down on a bench.

"This ridiculous Prisoner Work Release Program, Harry! That's what is bloody wrong. Look, you grew up in the Muggle world. You recall the Holocaust, don't you?"

He blinked in confusion. "Well, yeah, of course, I know about the Holocaust. What are you talking about?"

"Harry, the prisoners are being treated like vermin...lower than animals!" Her voice was growing more hysterical with each word. "They live in diseased filth, worked like dogs, and today *I had...I had to...cut off Professor Snape's hair!*" She burst in tears and threw her head onto his shoulder. She took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Harry, it is all just so horrific. Winter is coming, and no one seems to care that these men are going to be exposed to the elements. Every day another prisoner is sent back to Azkaban. They aren't getting the proper nutrition anymore. The Aurors don't care...well, except for Carson...he's all right. At least he allows me smuggle food to Professor Snape."

Harry snapped to attention at the second mention of his name. "Snape? How is he?"

Hermione looked sorrowfully at her best friend. "Harry, he was doing so well but now that they've cut their food rations and haven't given them clothing to replace their old ones. Well, he's as pale and thin as I've ever seen him. Harry, we've got to do something! We've got to let the Minister know about the prisoners' treatment! It has to stop!"

"Is it as bad as all that?" he whispered.

"Harry, it's like Hogwarts has its own little concentration camp. I see these men every day, defeated and weary. Every day, I'm seeing evidences of torture. Also, they are terrified of speaking up...for being thrown back into Azkaban! It is terrible! This can not be what the Minister envisioned when he developed this program."

"Okay, Hermione, I'll speak with Kingsley." He gave her a reassuring hug. "We're going to get Snape out of there. Don't worry."

She sat up stiffly, looking indignant. "Harry, I care about each and every one of these poor men!" she retorted defensively.

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry said with concern. "But you cried when you told me about Snape's hair, and...smuggling food? Hermione, don't try to hide from me. You care about him."

She slouched and lowered her head. She felt stupid and foolish.

Harry hugged her. "It's okay, Hermione. It's okay. I understand. I really do."

Hermione returned to Hogwarts...back to *Hell* as far as she was concerned. She waited for Harry to bring her some news about a meeting with the Minister. While she waited, the weather was threatening to turn into winter, and every day she felt she was battling against nature. Sick men unable to work were pouring into the infirmary at an alarming rate. All Hermione could do was give them some nutrition, heal whatever sickness or wounds they had, and hand them over to the Aurors for transport back to Azkaban.

It was a disgrace! When Hermione had arrived, there had been over 200 men at the camp. Now the number had been slashed to a little over 100. It galled her to no end. These low-level security criminals...in Hermione's book...were only prisoners through either guilt by association or prejudice from the Wizarding community. They were living an existence that was far crueler than they deserved. Sure, some men were downright foul...but to strip all these men of their wands and force them to work like Muggles in terrible weather conditions with substandard food was nothing more than intolerable cruelty! She watched from her tent as the Aurors started to build the barracks for the men to sleep in for the duration of the winter. Obviously, *someone* had spoken with Minister Shacklebolt!

She trudged out there and demanded to know what type of accommodations the prisoners would have. She wanted to know about their heating, bedding, and if they would be allowed more additions to their clothing. The Aurors had simply laughed in her face. Hermione was furious! She then stood up to all of them and demanded as a medical professional to have her questions answered.

The senior most Auror, who was also the most vicious towards the prisoners, Auror Banes, stepped up to her to assert his authority. He had been trained by Old Mad-Eye Moody and seemed to have taken up Moody's prejudice that "once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater." He stood in his warm clothes and his smug face and told Hermione that he knew all about her and that just because she was best friends with Harry Potter and for all accounts Ron Weasley's widow, he wasn't going to allow her to question his authority.

"Besides," he sneered. "I know all about your radical methods of trying to help pathetic creatures who aren't worth two shites!"

She burned with anger and knew she would get nowhere with this evil pig. He didn't care at all about the lives of these poor men. She would have to undermine and determine how to wield her position in the infirmary to the prisoners' advantage.

Aurors Carson and Dawlish were a good pair to get information from. She learnt there would be no Warming Spells allowed on the outside or inside the barracks. There was a potbelly stove in the middle of each barrack, and the men would sleep on wooden shelves, one built on top of the other. Once the men moved in, it quickly became disgusting and rancid. Vermin abounded, as did dysentery, with all manner of bedbugs, rashes, and the like. The similarities between Hogwarts and Auschwitz were growing exponentially by the day.

One day, Harry showed up and took a look for himself over what Hermione had been raving. He stood from a distance and watched the prisoners work in the cold with sparse winter clothing. He could smell the barracks from where he stood. It was an abomination. He was furious! He walked into the infirmary and saw Hermione, careworn, ragged, trying to nurse a dozen or so men at the same time. He saw how exhausted she was and went to her, opening his arms to comfort her.

"Harry!" she cried. "I'm so glad you came. Have you seen the camp?"

"Yes," he answered grimly. "The concept of having the barracks built for the prisoners to sleep in was the Minister's solution for keeping the men warm at night. I see they are lacking in appropriate attire for this climate, and you certainly have your hands full."

She snorted. "Don't I know it! And this all could have been avoided, you realize," she snapped as she walked him though the infirmary. "These are diseases that are caused by all sorts of uncleanness: foul water, improper toilet facilities, lack of a proper diet, and also exposure to the elements! And as the weather grows colder, it shall only get worse."

She looked at him full in the face. "Harry, we've lost over half of the prisoners to Azkaban. My only solace is that no one has died here. But what ~~of~~ there? I have no information or hope to receive any on how the men who leave my care are being treated once returned to Azkaban."

"How is Snape?" Harry asked. His green eyes were full of worry and concern.

Hermione looked weary. "He is holding his own. Strong...for as frail as he looks. I'm trying to get him more food as the weather turns. I try hard to get him in here every other day so I can check on him. Thank goodness the Auror to whom he is dispatched is a kind man...fresh out of Auror Training! But, Harry, there is so much corruption here; it is appalling! These men should not be wanting for anything, but the supplies are being pilfered, food goods, clothing, even potions that I need here in the infirmary are disappearing!"

She pulled him to a corner of the room and whispered, "I've taken to hiding some things from Madam Pomfrey. I know she is in on it. I looked over her invoices...it's graft, pure and simple! She's changed, Harry. Even about Severus. She worked so hard to save his life, and now she couldn't care less if he lived or died! Harry, you've got to get the Minister to release these men or at least come to a better arrangement...*something*!"

"Well, I have my suspicions," confided Harry. "The Head of the Aurory, Gawain Robards, was not happy that I went over his head to Kingsley. I have a feeling if I weren't Harry Potter, I would have been kicked out of Auror Training. He seemed, oh, I dunno...guilty, perhaps? I'll go back and try, Hermione, you know I will. The thought that corruption of this sort could go up so high disgusts me. After all we had to endure with Voldemort!" He shook his head and gathered himself together. "Now, can you bring Snape here? I want to see him with my own eyes."

Snape came into the infirmary, and Harry was so angry, Hermione thought he was going to kill Shacklebolt, Robards, or both.

His green eyes snapped furiously with anger, and his face was white with barely concealed rage, his fists in balls at his side. "I don't know what to say, sir. I feel I have let you down. This is not how things should be here. I don't know how it all could have become so corrupted."

Snape gave a snort. "Potter, your Gryffindor nature has always blindsided you. I, for one, am not surprised because I realize that whenever people have an opportunity to exploit the weak for one's own gain, it will inevitably be done," he said smoothly.

"I'll get you out of here, Snape. I promise." Harry said as he stared intently into the professor's eyes.

"I will completely understand if you are unable to keep that promise, Potter," he whispered calmly.

Harry turned to Hermione and grasped her hand. "Take care of him, Hermione," he said to her.

"I shall," she answered with strength in her voice.

Harry left to return to the Ministry. As he walked past them, Hermione and Snape caught another moment to hold each other with their eyes. The feelings that passed between them, despite the distance were unmistakable. They both accepted the depth of caring that had grown between them. Hope was thriving in both of them, and the woman before Snape who was able to demonstrate so much grace towards him had yet again overcome him with joy.

The Winter Here Is Cold And Bitter...

Chapter 5 of 11

Winter has arrived, and Hermione is faced with her first real casualty of the Ministry's neglect.

A/N: Thanks to those who left me the lovely reviews! Keep 'em comin'! I LOVE reviews!

One winter evening, Snape barged into the infirmary carrying an unconscious young man in his arms. Auror Carson was at his heels and told Hermione he had released the charm for their treatment. She had thought things just could not get any worse for them until she saw Snape standing before her with what looked like a dead body.

"My God, Severus!" she exclaimed. "Bring him in here and place him on the cot!"

She made quick work of the young man's clothes to ascertain his condition. He was terribly cold. "Hypothermia," she mumbled. She looked at his white hands. They were frozen to the touch. She quickly started to unwrap the boy's feet.

"What are you doing?" Snape hissed at her.

She continued stripping his feet. "I am checking for signs of frostbite, Severus." She felt his bloodless feet. "Well, might as well try and see what can be done." She grabbed a pail and returned with some fresh snow. She grabbed a handful of the snow and started to gently pack it on the boy's feet with it and wrapped his feet back up with clean cloths.

"Severus, I want you to do to his hands what I'm doing to his feet. If we're lucky, we may be able to save his hands and feet from frostbite."

"Why are you not performing a Warming Charm on him?" he snapped. "He is freezing to death, you stupid girl!" he hissed while looking over his shoulder to see if Auror Carson could hear him speak so disrespectfully to her.

Hermione was unfazed by his tone. "Professor, his condition is so advanced that if I were to introduce warmth on his extremities it would ensure the loss of his limbs. Utilizing the snow out there to protect his hands and feet seems odd, but ironic as it seems, it is precisely what he needs to preserve them. Then after a while, heat can be applied...in small increased doses."

She grabbed her wand and said, *'Ennervate!'* The boy woke up and was disoriented. Soon though, the feeling of pain in his bloodless feet caused him to groan and moan.

"What is his name?" she asked absentmindedly as she continued to wrap his feet.

"Theodore Nott," he mumbled.

"No!" Hermione said in disbelief.

"Why do you find that so hard to believe, Miss Granger?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Nott went to school with me...sure he was a real prat, hanging about Draco, but he wasn't a Death Eater!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, but his father was, and when he was hunted down by the Aurors after his escape during the final battle he was being hidden by his son."

"And now look at him!" Hermione said angrily.

"Pity for only non-Death Eaters, Hermione?" he said with a biting edge.

"Theodore is so young! I-it's just not right!" she stammered out.

"So, it is perfectly acceptable for older men to be treated like vermin...save the young, but fuck the others? Does that explain your logic, Miss Granger? Is that your motto? I know it's all the rage with our blessed Aurors!" he bit out at her, his anger rising. He knew he was being a bastard, but he was so afraid. He had found young Nott unconscious and unresponsive to his ministrations to rouse him. He truly thought he was dead. He hated this whole place and damned it to hell, along with Robards and every bloody Auror here! But instead, what was he doing? Yelling at his beautiful Hermione!

Auror Carson spoke up. "Look, Snape, I give you a lot of leniency because of Potter and Miss Granger here. I don't like most of the shite going on here either, but if you don't stop bickering with Miss Granger, I'll put a Silencing Charm on you! I'm not going to let you ruin my career and lose my job for me!" he yelled.

Snape backed down and mumbled his apologies. That just made Hermione angrier. She started talking out loud, mostly to herself, just to vent her rage.

"Of course I don't think what is happening to any of you is right! I hate all of this! And what I hate the most is this!" At this she stood and directed her ire right at Auror Carson. "Severus Snape can say anything he damn well wants to say, you stupid prat! He can kowtow and play your humiliation games outside this infirmary, but this is my domain when Pomfrey is gone. And if he wants to call me an 'insufferable-know-it-all' or a 'stupid little girl,' he can! Because that's the Professor Snape I know and want to talk to! Now, have I made myself clear?" She didn't know what else to say. She felt like an idiot and was certain Snape thought she was mad as a hatter.

Auror Carson backed down and whispered, "Alright, fine. But you keep it low key. It's not my business if you want to be insulted by that right bastard!"

She glanced up at Snape. He had an expression she couldn't place. It probably was a positive one, since he had barely ever shown her those *Damn right, he is a right bastard! But he's my right bastard, and I wouldn't want him any other way!* she thought. *I can't believe I'm thinking this way about Professor Snape! I must be barmy*

She swept back down to her patient and finished wrapping up Nott's legs in cold, wet cloths. She then turned to her former teacher. "Right, now, Severus, your turn," she urged.

He stood in his pitiful rags and crossed his arms across his shoulders. "Whatever are you babbling about, Miss Granger?" he said coldly.

Hermione was tired and in no mood for his penchant for drama this night. "Get in the cot, and take off your shoes, or whatever the bloody hell is left of them. I want to check you for frostbite as well!" she ordered.

He reluctantly obeyed. All of a sudden, Nott came to his senses and started moaning in earnest because of the pain. Hermione rushed to his side and spoke to him calmly. She couldn't hold his hands, because they were wrapped in the snow-packed cloths, so she stroked his face.

Snape watched Hermione intently as she tried to soothe the suffering young man.

"Theo, it's Hermione Granger. You are in the infirmary. You have frostbite. Now I know it hurts, but it is a good sign that your circulation is returning! Okay? I'm going to give you a Calming Draught, but I can't give you a Sleeping Potion or a Pain Potion, because your pain will help tell me how good or bad the damage is. We're just going to have to do this the Muggle way."

"It hurts...so much!" he moaned.

Hermione continued to stroke his face and forehead. "Welcome the pain, Theo. It means you'll be able to keep your fingers and toes. Try to relax. When I'm done with Professor Snape, I'll come back, and I'll help you get through the pain...just hold on, okay?"

"Okay," he managed to grit out between his clenched teeth.

After she administered Nott a Calming Draught, she checked Snape's hands and feet. His feet weren't so bad. They were extremely cold, but there was no frostbite. Snape watched her as she deftly washed, stroked, and massaged his feet with her small hands. It had been so long since he had been touched so intimately. Come to think of it, he doubted whether any woman had ever touched him as sweetly and with as much care as she was at that moment. He closed his eyes and enjoyed her touch. He was reacting again to her touch but he could have cared less. He imagined what those pretty little warm hands could do to other areas of his body, and he desperately wished she would slip her hand inside his pants and stroke him. He looked at her with pure lust as she began to bundle his feet in warming cloths and tucked him in some heavy blankets. She was too focused on her work to look at him to see how desperately he wanted her. She murmured a Warming Charm over his feet so they would stay toasty. She gave him a Sleeping Potion and told him to sleep well.

Snape was ensconced in warmth and hovering over him was his beautiful Hermione. Her wavy and curly hair was escaping her bun, falling into her face. Her face was shiny and oily, and she smelled so sweet and musky at the same time. Her perfume and the day's sweat lingered on her after a hard day's work. He had never seen a lovelier woman. He gazed on her neck and collarbone that was exposed to him as she leaned over him to tuck him into his blankets. He wanted to run his tongue along that collarbone and taste her. He watched her as she sat with Nott and whispered to him, stroking his face and the stubble on his head where there once had been hair. He watched the outline of her body as she moved to make Nott more comfortable. He would never tell her how good it felt to snark at her and to have her defend his right to do it. He wanted at that moment to grab her and kiss her until she begged for more. He sank into unconsciousness with the picture of her hovering over him in his mind.

Beautiful Hermione. *His Hermione.*

Clawing For Solid Ground

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione and Snape are trying to survive the winter. The tension between them is growing as they spend more time together. Finally the Ministry acts, and the Aurors undergoes a mass purge.

A/N: Thank you to all who left me the wonderful reviews! Keep 'em comin'! Also, BIG thanks to my beta, MadBrilliant!

The threat of Azkaban kept the majority from outright mutiny during the winter. They knew this was their chance to escape a lifetime of imprisonment. If only they could hang on and work hard enough, then freedom would be given to them eventually. This was the hope Snape clung to now. He prayed and hoped that she might consider him once he was free. He came to her aid when she asked for assistance, and he also helped her to keep unruly prisoners in line in the infirmary.

The Aurors noticed his respect for the young Miss Granger and her devotion for him, and it made them edgy. Gossip abounded amongst them except for Auror Carson. He knew just how much Snape cared for her. He had started speaking to Snape when he had noticed Snape was having more and more difficulties keeping his erections down. He had decided to test him by goading him with lewd and nasty comments as Snape strove for privacy as he tried to relieve himself. It was humiliating to be jeered at by a young whelp that held his life in his hands. And he had once thought him to be one of the "kinder Aurors"!

Auror Carson was fresh out of Auror Training. He had left Hogwarts the year before Harry Potter came. It had taken him a few years to figure out what he had wanted to do with his life. He had traveled some, but when Lord Voldemort came back, he came to a major crossroads of life. He had wanted to help the Cause, and he had joined the Auror Department. It was true that he had been in Ravenclaw and did rather well in school. He, with every other student who wasn't a Slytherin, had hated Professor Snape. But for all intents and purposes, he should have been a Gryffindor! He had such noble illusions of who the "good guys" were and who the "bad guys" were. So at first, he was just as pleased as the other Aurors when he had realized Snape was going to be a prisoner under them. It had satisfied his sense of justice. But the novelty wore quickly off when he had finally witnessed the humanity of it all. He had heard the rumors, that Snape had been a spy for Dumbledore and that he had been cleared of murder but was still guilty of manslaughter. He had also heard fantastic rumors of Snape working as a double agent for 20 years and that he had been responsible for saving Harry Potter's life on a number of occasions. He had wanted to believe the worst of him, that Snape was no more than the bastard he had known and had made him out to be. But then he had seen how devoted Miss Granger was to Snape. It was so apparent that she was in love. He had suspected the old bat was in love with her, but he had been such a git...*what if he is just messing about?* he thought. *Can such a cold-hearted man even love?* He had to know for sure if Snape truly cared for her. He knew about Ron Weasley's suicide and that he and Miss Granger had been sweet-hearts. He deeply respected Miss Granger, and he would not have her heart broken if he could help it!

Carson had started by saying lewd comments while Snape tried to relieve himself. He had made comments about Miss Granger, about how pretty she was and how he

was sure if Snape were left his to his own devices, he would take the first opportunity and rape her. When he had said the word "rape," Severus' erection had disappeared, and his black eyes had bored into his in fierce anger. Auror Carson had watched while Snape had arranged his trousers and said in very plain terms that he never wanted Carson to *ever* speak about Miss Granger in such a way again. He had then taken a deep breath, lowered his eyes, and had said he was finished. That had impressed Carson to no end. So the worries that were plaguing his fellow Aurors about their relationship during the daily gossip sessions ceased to concern the young Auror.

Carson watched Snape intently as he continued to assist the young Miss Granger whenever she needed help. Carson arranged to get Snape to help out more in the infirmary after the near-death of Nott. At first, the witch and wizard had been extremely formal, but soon a familiarity came over them that came easily when alone, and he could watch from a secluded corner their little dance of love. She obviously favored him over the others; she could not hide her depth of feeling for the wizard. Carson had watched for months throughout the winter as she day after day saved bits of food and potions for him. Snape, in return, silently kept himself available for whatever she needed. He answered any questions she had about her potion making. Carson noticed how by simply *asking* for Snape's opinion or direction made the wizard feel a little more important, like he *mattered*. As a man himself, Carson could see how Hermione delicately stroked his ego. And it showed in Snape's demeanor.

He really had to give Hermione credit, for Snape was not the type of man who could be flattered easily. Some men fell apart at the mere sly smile and batting of a woman's eyelashes, but not Snape. He was by nature suspicious, so she took the direct approach and did not lie or make up stories to build him up. When she needed help, she went to Snape and asked for help. When she had a too much in her hands to carry, she asked Snape for help. It was honest and true. That was what Snape could respect.

As for Hermione, she respected Severus' concern for her own health and deferred to his chastisements over her lack of eating or sleeping. She knew now that his snarky attitude was his way of expressing his care when he became overwhelmed with his deeper feelings. She was notorious for neglecting herself to help the needs of others, so Snape took it upon himself to watch out for her. Again, as a man, Carson silently praised the young Miss Granger for her wisdom and perception with delicate touches and simple murmurs of appreciation. She had come so far with him! Snape had barely spoken two words to her other than "thank you" when she had begun giving food and potions. Now he was chastising her whenever he felt she was not taking care of herself, and for Snape, that was just as good as a declaration of love.

Now, at the end of the winter, Carson knew beyond a doubt that Snape was deeply in love with Miss Granger, and likewise, she was deeply in love with him. Their quiet conversations grew to little spats over potion making, and that had scared the Auror at first, but now he realized what was happening and could not help himself from laughing whenever they bickered. More than once, they had both turned to him at the same time and yelled, "WHAT!" He would then laugh harder and shake his head saying, "You two are the limit!"

He desperately wanted to enlighten them to the building sexual tension, but what could they do about it anyway? So, they bickered and snapped at each other once in a while to relieve that tension. By spring, Carson decided to forgo the Untouchable Charm whenever Snape was in the infirmary (secretly hoping perhaps they would do something and stop their bickering!) for he could not help but notice once the charm was released, the small touches and delicate caresses which passed between the witch and the wizard.

The winter had been a hard one, despite the Ministry changing their directives on Warming Spells in the barracks, clothing, and food rationing. Working hours were also cut, due to the cold, and the Aurory went through a shakedown. Minister Shacklebolt sent down a new batch of Aurors to replace the ones who had been so corrupt. Hermione had never been happier than to see the back of the bastard, Banes, who had been the worst of the lot arrested with the other younger Aurors who had terrorized the prisoners. Harry wrote her about the uncovering of the corruption and graft that had been occurring behind the scenes. The corruption went to the highest level in the Aurory, all the way to Gawain Robards himself! Harry assured Hermione that Banes, Robards, *and* Pomfrey would face the Wizengamot for their crimes, as well as any of the younger Aurors who had been participating in the maltreatment of the prisoners, which sadly included Proudfoot, who would face Azkaban all because he couldn't be bothered with bad news!

The firing of Madam Pomfrey from her post as Hogwarts mediwitch was the worst blow of all. Hermione knew she had been involved with the disappearances of food, clothes and potions, but did not want to relish in her downfall. The day she was arrested by the Aurors, she gave a scathing look of hatred to Hermione that sent a shiver down the young woman's spine. Hermione knew then that the mediwitch knew what she had done, and Hermione feared for the retribution to come.

A Healer from St. Mungo's came to take over Pomfrey's position, and she was a very wise woman. Healer Lucking sensed immediately the respect and preference the prisoners had for Miss Granger. She was their angel, the one person they could trust. Healer Lucking stayed out of the way for the most part and did not interfere with the schedules and patterns Hermione had set. The infirmary ran smoothly under her care, and Healer Lucking told Hermione many times that she was going to make a fine mediwitch one day.

The new Aurors put an end to the graft and corruption, but the damage had been done. There were now only fifty prisoners left. Thankfully, Snape was still with them, and Hermione was sure it was due to her diligence in feeding him and supplying him with extra potions. She started wondering now that the winter was coming to a close, would Harry be able to keep his promise and get Snape out and give him his freedom?

I Can't Get It Out Of My Head

Chapter 7 of 11

The long winter is over, and Hermione has received sad news from Azkaban. She goes to tell Severus the bad news, and they are able to spend an intimate interlude together.

A/N: Thanks again to MadBrilliant, my wonderful beta. I am really enjoying the reviews. Please let me know how you like this chapter. Warning: Severus and Hermione get some alone time, and you know what that means! Small lemons ahead!

And I can't get it out of my head

No, I can't get it out of my head.

Now my old world is gone for dead

'Cause I can't get it out of my head...

"I Can't Get It Out Of My Head" ELO

Hermione got her answer when Harry owed her in March with the Minister's response. There was no way public opinion would allow Severus Snape to go free only after eight months imprisonment. Harry promised he would keep fighting for Snape's parole. Hermione was terrified that he would be sent back to Azkaban. She didn't want to lose him now. Her only consolation was that spring was coming and with it, better weather, better food, and sunshine that could replenish what had been lost. The reconstruction itself, overall, was going well. It would not be for much longer. The goal was to have the Reconstruction over by September, just in time to re-open the school.

Hermione received another owl one April morning from Harry. It was bad news. Theodore Nott had died in Azkaban due to complications from the conditions with which he was admitted. Hermione was devastated. He would have lived if he could have stayed here where she could have continued to care for him! She folded the letter and put in her pocket. She would have to tell Severus the bad news.

She saw Dawlish with a group of prisoners working on the cement mixing crew. Hermione could not help but admire how the old castle was shaping up. Although she heard talk of the problems and complications the witches and wizards were having harnessing the Old Magic to absorb into the masonry, she was sure a solution would be found and the school would re-open on schedule. She shouted over the din at Dawlish for where Prisoner Snape would be working. He told her he was in the forest with the wood cutting crew. She made her way back towards the forest, the letter burning in her pocket. She really did not want to tell him this news.

She found them by the sound of chopping. Auror Carson was there and came to her side. She told him she had news for Snape. He was collected, and Carson quickly, without drawing attention to himself, sidled them off to a covered area and removed Snape's magical binding. He stepped a distance away and gave them their privacy.

At first, it was a dream come true. It was the first time they had ever truly been alone, with no eyes on them, and no one to barge in. For a few moments they considered one another. Then Severus grabbed her and held her close. It wasn't a hug...it was a desperate feral need to have her body pressed against his. His hands pressed into her back and they slid up and down. Her breasts were crushed against him, and she felt light-headed from the strength and desire radiating from him. She could feel his desire for her soak into her skin. She had to take control of the situation before he lost all control.

"Severus, I have bad news."

He tensed and pulled from her. She handed him Harry's letter. She watched his face as he read it. He finished reading, and his hand holding the letter fell to his side. He looked away towards the morning sun, his face squinting. His face hardened, and Hermione thought perhaps he might cry. Then he started to speak.

"Living in those barracks, lying on those slabs for beds...there was no particular allotment for personal space. You slept where you could. It was actually better that way, you see. You survived off the body heat from the person pressed next to you. You get to know those people you share your body with like that."

"At first you are repulsed because of the smell, the filth, lice, and the fact that they are men, not women...which for me would be preferable. Not that I ever was a part of any sexual relationships, although some men did indulge. After all, no matter what the Aurory believes, we are human. I made sure young Nott stayed with me. I didn't want him to be anyone's victim. I also knew better than anyone that he was no Death Eater. He was just the son of one. I spent so much time talking with him about Lucius and Draco. They were friends. Not like Crabbe or Goyle, who were just glorified bodyguards. Nott was his best friend. He was a connection, my last connection to the Malfoys."

He turned to Hermione and shook his head. "I know you never liked the Malfoys. Lucius was not a good person. Narcissa was a spoiled snob. But before...I knew a young man and woman who cared for this eleven-year-old boy who had nothing." He prodded his index finger into his chest as he spoke.

"Draco was a little shite...but when he turned his back on his father and joined me in the fight, I saw the man he could have been, should have been, if only he had lived. I miss the good things. Nott reminded me of the good things. He never should have been here."

He raised a hand to his eyes, shielding them from Hermione. She slid her arm around his waist and embraced him. He broke apart, his pride shattered, and fell to his knees, sobbing. Hermione held the back of his head as she knelt with him. She rocked slightly and tightened her hold on him as he grasped onto her.

"I love you, Hermione," he sobbed. "Please love me."

Hermione closed her eyes and moved her head to face his. She kissed his cheeks, nose, chin, eyes, and forehead. She gazed intently into his red-rimmed eyes and saw the fear in the black orbs.

"I already do, Severus." She kissed him softly on the lips. He let her love him in this way. She continued to brush her lips across his. A light moan came from deep inside him, and she sighed into his mouth.

"*I love you. I love you. I love you*" she whispered into his mouth as she continued to brush her lips against his.

He brought his hand to cup her face. She covered his hand with her own. They looked at each other and drank in the sight of one another. Hermione ran her hand through his black hair, so glad it was growing back long.

"I want to touch you, Hermione," he murmured.

"One day, Severus, you'll be able to do that and so much more. I promise. Harry and I aren't giving up on you."

She stood up. He joined her. "I must go now before anyone gets suspicious." She saw the longing in his eyes, and it pained her. He wanted her to stay or to go with her. She changed her mind and hugged him, looking up at him. "Kiss me, Severus, please."

She was so beautiful, so open and loving. He was overcome with his desire for her. He kissed her passionately then, and she took his hand and unbuttoned her shirt a little, just enough to guide his hand through so he could touch her. His fingers grazed her nipple, and his hand clamped down and kneaded the flesh, gliding his roughened palm against her already hardened nipple. She shuddered at the sensation, and he plunged his tongue into her mouth ferociously. He pushed her back against a nearby tree. She became emboldened and slipped her hand down into his trousers. His body clenched, and she murmured for him to relax. He slid the material of her blouse to the side and slipped down her bra to expose her nipple. He lowered his head to capture the rosy bud she had offered so willingly as she gripped his hardened cock. He thrust himself against her harder and harder. She moaned as he sucked and lapped her peak. He growled his pleasure, biting down on her nipple as he continued to thrust into her hand. Then he was upright, his hands bracing the tree above her head, thrusting wildly while panting and moaning. Suddenly he embraced her, bent his head, and kissed her neck, nipping and gliding his tongue along the length. His mouth was driving her mad with desire. He came with a guttural sound emitting from deep within. He breathed her name over and over. Finally, he broke contact and kissed her on the forehead before releasing her.

"Thank you, Hermione."

She blushed her reply. She was shaking as she buttoned up the two she had undone. He looked at her pensively. She knew what was on his mind. He didn't have to say. He gently and slowly gathered her skirt. She was trembling. She and Ron never had the chance to go beyond kissing. She didn't know what to expect. He caught her lips in a searing kiss and lifted one of her legs to hook around his waist. He slid his hand into her knickers, and she squealed into his mouth. He chuckled into hers, amused by her innocence. He deftly slid his middle finger into her slit, up into her channel and watched as she moaned her pleasure. He kissed her lips, which were so full, open,

inviting, and red with arousal. He teased her nub, and within a minute, she was groaning and panting as she writhed against him, her hands clawing into his shoulders. He pushed her harder against the tree and stroked her in earnest with one hand while with other held her thigh in place against him. She rested her head against the tree and cried out her orgasm. He kissed her cheek and nuzzled her ear as she shuddered, coming down from her high.

"I love you, Hermione. You are so beautiful," he whispered deeply into her ear.

When she finally came to rest, she opened her heavy eyes to a man who was looking at her with a searing gaze of want. She was trembling from what he had done to her; it had been so easy for him to please her, she was embarrassed. He lowered her leg and held her to him.

"Please don't be shy, Hermione. You have pleased me greatly, I can only hope I have pleased you in return."

"Yes," she murmured, unable to look him in the eye. "I just have never done that before."

He looked into her sweet face and locked his eyes onto hers. They were burning her with such intensity, she felt literally naked. He spoke to her gently. "Then I must thank you again, Hermione, for such a gift."

She squeaked out a "you're welcome" as she smoothed herself down and left. Carson nodded as she walked by. A few minutes later, Snape rejoined the Auror. He went back to work, relieved in more ways than one. He watched her walk away and closed his eyes. One day, what he thought was impossible would now come true. He allowed himself to believe that now.

All the Strength and Courage

Chapter 8 of 11

Hermione is called to testify before the Wizengamot about the assault on Severus Snape.

A/N: Again, a big thank you for my beta, MadBrilliant. And huge thanks to all who have been giving me such lovely reviews. I do hope you enjoy this chapter.

Madam Lucking came to Hermione where she was restocking the potions for the infirmary. She had a very serious look on her face, and Hermione immediately sensed the worst.

"What is it, Madam Lucking?"

She produced a scroll that was branded with the Ministry of Magic's seal on it. "You are going to London, Hermione. Auror Banes' trial is taking place on Friday, and you have been called to testify before the Wizengamot."

Hermione read the scroll. Her eyes flew open wide as she read. "I'm to testify about Professor Snape's assault!"

She lowered her hands and looked off into the distance. She knew Harry had to be behind this. Oh, God! Could she begin to hope that Severus might be released? Even if on parole, just to get him out of here! She started nibbling absently on a fingernail.

Madam Lucking slapped her hand down. "Silly girl! You are so transparent it is just plain sad!"

Hermione looked at her confusedly. "Why do you say that, Ma'am?"

She wrapped her arm around the young girl and gave her a motherly squeeze. Then she whispered, "I know all about you and Severus Snape, you minx! It's the worst kept secret here!"

Hermione's eyes grew wide in horror. *No! Could it be that someone saw us? Oh no! Carson! He could lose his job*

"H-how do you know?" she whispered.

Madam Lucking smiled and whispered back, "I am eighty years old, my girl! I have seen how he aids you, helps you around here. He would rope the moon for you if he could. And I see how your face lights up whenever he comes near you."

Hermione knew she was blushing furiously. Madam Lucking laughed. "It's alright. I think the world of Snape. I only know of him through rumors and what the newsrags say, and it's all contradictory! 'Victim or Villain?' All I know is that enough people I trust and believe to be good judges of character think highly of him, and I trust what I experience with *my own* eyes and ears. He's a good man, not particularly nice, but still a good man."

Hermione laughed. "You're right about not being nice! He has a particular nasty streak and a temper to match, but I do love him, and I never thought after Ron I would be able to love again."

Hermione walked into the Ministry of Magic and waited for Harry to meet her. She was so nervous she couldn't eat her breakfast. She also had a fitful night's sleep. She tried her best to look sedate and in control, but she couldn't tell how she was faring. Harry greeted her with a warm smile and a big hug.

"Hermione, you look wonderful. Are you nervous?"

"Is it all that apparent?" she asked with a tremor in her voice.

"A little, but I think it's just because I know you so well. Look, the trial has been proceeding like clockwork. All you need to do is tell your side from a mediwitch's point of view. You'll do fine!"

Before she knew it, she was facing the doors, waiting for her name to be announced. She fidgeted with her hair a little and tugged at her robes. Finally, she was nervously pacing. Harry jumped up and held her shoulders steady.

"Just breathe, Hermione. It's going to be fine," he assured her.

Just then the door opened, and a pleasant looking witch called her name. She walked in with Harry hand in hand until they had to part ways. She sat in the witness chair, facing the Wizengamot, and Harry sat in the gallery. It was a packed house. The accusations of graft and corruption in the Aurory had the nation's entire Wizarding community up in arms.

There was a slight buzz in the courtroom, and Hermione felt intimidated being scrutinized by the entire Wizengamot. She sat with her hands folded together in her lap. She saw Banes sitting at the defense table looking decidedly smug with his solicitor by his side. The solicitor, a middle-aged witch, looked fierce and predatory. Soon, Hermione was clenching her hands hard to calm her nerves. Minister Shacklebolt was in charge of the proceedings and banged his gavel to call the chamber to order.

"Miss Hermione Granger, that is your name, correct?"

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"You are working as a volunteer at the reconstruction sight of Hogwarts Castle in the infirmary, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were brought on by mediwitch Madam Pomfrey around three months after the end of the war. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you volunteer to work in the infirmary, Miss Granger?"

Hermione took a deep breath and began to speak. "I was confused and upset over the suicide of my fiancé, Ronald Weasley. His brothers encouraged me to help out where I could at the site. My goal is to be a mediwitch one day. When Ronald was in St. Mungo's, I worked there as an assistant. I decided to share my abilities to help with the rebuilding effort and at the same time, hopefully, get my mind off my own pain and grief."

"There was an incident where a prisoner, one Byron Mackenerney, exposed himself in front of you, and he was reported to have been beaten severely by Auror Banes. Can you corroborate this story?"

"Partially. It is true that the prisoner exposed himself in front of me, and Auror Banes dragged him out of the tent rather forcefully. I also immediately started hearing the sound of a whipping and screams...but I saw nothing."

The members of the Wizengamot whispered amongst themselves. Shacklebolt continued.

"Auror Dawlish testified earlier this month to a beating that took place last winter where the victim had been Prisoner Severus Snape. He also testified that he brought the prisoner to you the following morning. Were you the mediwitch assistant who attended to Prisoner Snape?"

"I was, sir."

"Would you please explain the physical findings you assessed?"

"Prisoner Snape was very badly beaten. He suffered multiple contusions, four broken ribs, a broken cheekbone that I concluded came from a boot due to the distinct break pattern, and bruising on his face. His hands were also broken in various places, but the most vile finding was that he had been urinated and defecated on."

The entire chamber gasped, and there was a mixture of cheers and outraged shouts from the gallery.

Minister Shacklebolt banged his gavel. "I will have silence in this court!" he bellowed.

Once the din hushed, he commenced, "Miss Granger, did Auror Dawlish tell you the names of the men involved with Prisoner Snape's assault and also the situation surrounding the event?"

"Not specific names, no. He told me many of the 'younger lads' did this often for a 'bit of sport,' he called it. There was a system in place. He said that he and some of the older Aurors looked after the younger prisoners, whom Auror Dawlish believed were really innocent. He said Prisoner Snape was not a priority because he had been a Death Eater and he had angered so many people over the years."

"So, it is your opinion this assault was an act of vengeance?"

"I believe it to be so."

Shacklebolt sighed audibly. "Auror Carson testified about the events surrounding the admittance of Prisoner Snape and Prisoner Nott. What was the extent of the physical damage Prisoner Nott suffered?"

Hermione cleared her throat and willed herself to remain calm. "Prisoner Nott was carried into the infirmary by Prisoner Snape in late January. Auror Carson was present as well. Prisoner Nott was unconscious, suffering from extreme hypothermia. His extremities were frozen, but immediate treatment with Muggle first aid followed by various warming spells, he was on his way to a full recovery. I assessed Prisoner Snape's state as well. He had some minor circulatory problems with his feet, but it was not as severe as Prisoner Nott's. I spent two weeks nursing Prisoner Nott, but before the prisoner was fully recovered, Auror Banes authorized his transfer back to Azkaban."

Shacklebolt continued. "What of any evidence did you see of torture and/or abuse of the prisoners?"

"I saw many instances of the acts of torture and abuse and also treated injuries of prisoners who came into the infirmary under the guise of 'work-related injury.' A medical professional can see telltale signs of abuse rather easily. I saw numerous instances of burns, cuts, bruises, and I did on more than one occasion witness the disciplining of the prisoners.

"Disciplining?" he asked.

"Yes, the prisoners were ordered to stand at attention while the prisoner who had committed an infraction was whipped. It seemed very strange to me that great pains were taken to inflict pain in non-magical ways. I could only assume it was because a wand can be traced, but Muggle methods of punishment and torture can not."

"Thank you for your testimony. Is there anything you would like to add, Miss Granger? Auror Potter has informed the Wizengamot that you would like to plead on the behalf of Prisoner Snape. Due to the testimony of Auror Carson on his actions to save the life of Prisoner Nott and taking into account his exemplary record as a prisoner, I have decided to hear any pleas you may have for his case."

Hermione was excited at the chance to tell all those present what a travesty it has been to keep Severus imprisoned.

"Yes, thank you, Minister. More than 75% of the convicts participating in the Prisoner Rehabilitation Program have been sent back to Azkaban, for reasons that could have been avoided if only proper hygiene, clothing, and food had been available. And I know for a fact that the Ministry provided such necessities, but unfortunately, for the greed of certain witches and wizards, these men suffered unjustly and inhumanely. I have spent a great deal of time with the prisoner, and he has suffered immensely. Prisoner Snape has been a model prisoner and has never caused trouble or dissention and went to great lengths to try and save Prisoner Nott's life. I beg of you, please reconsider his imprisonment. Even if to just release him on parole...he does not deserve to be there, working in that capacity. He can best serve our world by allowing him to resume his work in potion making, using his expertise and knowledge in the rebuilding of Hogwarts. We all know here that Severus Snape is the most gifted Potions

master in Britain!"

She stopped talking and allowed the Wizengamot to deliberate amongst themselves. There were a lot of nods and animated whispers. Hermione felt the tide was finally turning. Then the Minister acknowledged the accused's solicitor: Madam Brindage.

Madam Brindage stalked over towards Hermione, her face smiling but her eyes cold as ice. She was a tall woman, with dark hair pulled back into a tight bun. She had a long face with a long thin nose. Her wiry glasses were pulled halfway down her nose. She had thin lips and large eyebrows that moved a lot when she spoke. She wore severe-looking robes, and in a kind of a demented way, her sneer reminded her of Severus. It was apparent she had taken great pains to make herself look intimidating, but she underestimated the young witch. Hermione had faced many things in her young life: from facing a mountain troll as a first year all the way to fighting against Voldemort and now to being in love with the most irascible wizard in creation...well, the woman had her work cut out for her. Hermione was not a woman to be intimidated easily.

She began to speak. "It has been placed before the Wizengamot that you have a relationship with the prisoner that is less than savory."

"Whatever do you mean?" Hermione said coolly.

"I mean, Miss Granger, that Madam Pomfrey testified here that you and Prisoner Snape have been carrying on an illicit affair, and that Aurors Dawlish and Carson had been abetting and aiding you and he in this *endeavor*."

"What exactly are you accusing me of, Madam?" Hermione demanded angrily.

The severe looking witch peered down her thin nose and replied, "I think you want Severus Snape released because you are besotted with him, or he has deceived you into taking up his cause by manipulating your emotions and planting false memories into your mind. For many years I have represented various persons in front of this court and am very familiar with Severus Snape and his abilities to control weak minds!"

Hermione looked the Minister directly in the eyes. She would not stoop to even look upon this woman! *Weak mind, kiss my arse!* she thought angrily.

She ignored the haughty witch in front of her and spoke directly to the Minister.

"Minister, I shall not even attempt to persuade anyone here how profoundly misguided Madam Brindage's last statement was! I do care for and respect Severus Snape very much. I have for a long time, since I know for a *fact*..." At this she glanced around accusingly at the entire Wizengamot with contempt. "Yes, it is a FACT that Severus Snape for *twenty years* worked as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix and risked his life on a number of occasions for our Cause."

Hermione paused. She was furious that she had allowed that old hag to anger her. She felt the older witch's statement tarnished her ability to sway the members of the Wizengamot. She was going to have to do something drastic: *very drastic*.

"Now, if my word is not enough that I am not having sex with the Prisoner Snape, I will consent to be administered Veritaserum to prove my claim," she said calmly.

Madam Brindage laughed. "Miss Granger, we know very well there is an antidote for Veritaserum. Your relationship with an accomplished Potions master does not quell any doubts I have on the truthfulness of any statements you might say under the potion."

"Very well," Hermione replied smoothly. "A physical examination can prove my virginity, and that is irrefutable evidence."

The chamber went berserk with gasps and yelling. It took a long time for order to resume.

Once he had sufficiently silenced the chamber, Minister Shacklebolt was grave in his next statement. "Miss Granger, we are very aware that some witches and wizards can fight off the effect of Veritaserum, not to mention that an antidote does indeed exist. I assume that is why you would be willing to actually allow a Healer of this court to examine you to prove your word that you are not having relations with the prisoner?"

"I would." Hermione's face was set in stone.

"Preposterous!" spat the older witch. "Young woman, it has been made clear to this court that you and the prisoner have a relationship. You have been seen in his company on a number of occasions with an air of familiarity about you. Countless Aurors and *including* Madam Pomfrey have testified to this end. You, yourself, have just testified that you care for the prisoner! It does not matter if you are *actually* having relations or not. It is more than clear that you favor the prisoner, and I believe you will do or say whatever it takes to have him released, even if it means committing perjury against an innocent man!"

"That is quite enough Madam Brindage!" boomed the Minister.

Hermione was livid. Of course, the Aurors who lost their jobs and careers because she had dared to stand up to their cruel mistreatment of helpless people would have been more than happy to regal the Wizengamot with sordid tales of secret clandestine meetings! But, in fact, deep down, Hermione felt guilty. It wasn't as if there wasn't love between them. In fact, twice they had crossed the line into 'sexual misconduct,' as they would call it!

She found her voice again, stood, and challenged her. "I think it is quite abhorrent to waste this court's time with this matter! The physical evidence speaks for itself that Prisoner Snape was tortured, and a trusted Auror, who corroborates my story to the letter, witnessed it.

"In reality the only reason Severus Snape is in prison is because he was found guilty of assisted suicide. We also know from the testimony of Harry Potter and the memories left in Dumbledore's Pensieve that he only committed the act under the compulsion of the Unbreakable Vow! And that he made that vow to protect his cover as a spy for the Order! He not only tried to spare the life of Draco Malfoy, but he worked tirelessly for years protecting Harry Potter's life. And we all know when Voldemort returned during the end of the Triwizard Tournament was when the second war truly began! Acts committed in times of war cannot be held against a soldier! If that were the case, we all who fought in the Final Battle against Voldemort should be locked up as well! How many Unforgiveables did you cast, Minister? I know I cast the Killing Curse more than once during the battle! So why not arrest me as well?" Her face was alight in righteous indignation and a pride beyond her years. She was an impressive sight.

The chamber again erupted into pandemonium. The gallery rocked with cheers and shouts of contempt alike. Some members of the Wizengamot were arguing amongst themselves while others stared into the gallery in terror at the outcries.

Minister Shacklebolt fixed his warm brown eyes on Hermione. He was unconcerned with the chaos around him. Hermione felt the entire chamber disappear. She set her face firm and defiant. The Minister regarded her with a look she could not quite place, but it seemed akin to respect. A ghost of a smile played around his mouth. Finally, he tore his eyes off her and banged the gavel, demanding for silence.

Only when the gallery was silent did Hermione realize she had been yelling at the Wizengamot! She meekly sat down and tried to look calm and in control. She did not dare look at Harry for fear it would show on his face that she had gone too far.

The Minister then dismissed her from the court. Hermione walked out into the hall and sank onto a nearby bench, clutching her chest. She was shaking like a leaf. Harry came to her side and saw the Weasley brothers with him. They were beaming with pride at her. She smiled shyly and fidgeted with her robe.

"Did I bollocks it up that badly?" she joked sarcastically.

George sat on the other side of her. "No, Hermione! I think you were ruddy brilliant! I thought I'd never see the old fire in you again." She looked up at him and grinned, her face hot. She knew she was blushing.

She turned to Harry and his eyes were misty. "Hermione, I don't know what has been going on this past year with Snape, but I think it was clear to everyone who knows and loves you that he brought you back to us. And another four years won't change what is real between you. It's okay to love him."

Bill, Charlie, and Percy knelt down and beamed at her. Bill spoke up. "I think I can speak for all the brothers here that we are proud of you, Hermione. We will always remember what might have been for you and Ron, but we all love you enough for you to be happy. You'll always be a sister to us. Always, Hermione."

Hermione burst into tears and allowed herself to be enveloped by the sweet men in her life, the ones who would always remind her of Ron, the Ron she had loved and who had been her best friend. She also was wise enough to know they were giving her their blessing to start over again. As she hugged each brother, she was overcome by the fullness of grace she had been shown. She would have another chance to be with a man who loved her and she him, whenever it may happen, and she would not have to lose the only family she had left in order to do so. She would wait for Severus, but she would not have to wait alone. She was still their sister.

It's Better This Way

Chapter 9 of 11

The infirmary is moved back into the castle. Hermione is isolated from Severus more than she's ever been before. How will she react if the ministry does not parole him?

A/N: Thanks again to MadBrilliant and all of you who have kept on with this fic and have left reviews. It's been 'a hard row to hoe' for Severus and Hermione, but I hope you all like this chapter. We're not done yet, but the light is starting to shine!

Chapter 9 – It's Better This Way

The spring came to Hogwarts, and Hermione waited for news from the Ministry. She had kept a clear distance from Severus now that word had spread about their 'relationship'—whatever that was. The rumors ran the gamut. She stayed close to Madam Lucking and followed the rules to the letter on interactions with prisoners. It was torturous to be separated from him. She missed their talks, his help with her potions. She knew it had given him an outlet to be around what he loved so much, but now he was stuck working back on the line, in whatever capacity the Aurors saw fit.

Daily now, she watched them march off to Hogsmeade to help with the reconstruction there. Hogwarts was looking like its old self, although the mason work was a slow-moving process. At least the debris and carnage was gone, and the new plumbing system was up and running. It seemed the September deadline would be met and the school would be able to reopen. Hermione was sad to think what would become of Severus after the work was finished. The thought of him rotting away in that prison angered and frightened her immensely. Four years! What would he be like in four years? Would he be broken? Would he still love her? Would she still love him? Well, that was silly. Of course she would. But the ache of separation ate away at her. She watched him go off every morning and come back to camp every evening. All they had now were a few precious moments to look into each other's eyes...

Madam Lucking came into the infirmary and announced that they were moving back into the castle. Hermione was elated for the normalcy that was returning, but the happiness she felt was short-lived. The only chance she would have to see Severus was only if he were ill, and she did not want that. So with a heavy heart she began to start packing up. She wished with all her being she could have just another minute to tell Severus good-bye, but by the time he returned from his work in Hogsmeade, the infirmary would have been taken down and all he would see was an empty field where he once had spent happy moments with her while she would be up in the castle without even so much as a window to look through to see him. She was on the other side...

She moved from her tent into the castle as well. She wanted so badly to go to the dungeons, just to be near where she would be reminded of him. As the days dragged on, rumors floated around that the prisoners would be taken back to Azkaban before the students arrived on September 1st. The Ministry did not want to deal with another winter debacle. Hermione resigned herself to her fate: Severus would be gone, and she would not be able to be with him for four long years. She decided to stay on as Madam Lucking's apprentice. Then after two years, she could work at St. Mungo's again and get a small flat in Muggle London, so when Severus would be released, he would have a home to come home to—that is if he wanted to make a home with her. She decided when he left for Azkaban, she would visit him every chance she possibly could. Then hopefully, they could keep their love alive.

Snape was distraught over Hermione's distance. Carson explained to him what had occurred at Banes' trial, that Hermione's virtue had been called into question. That nearly sent him over the edge. He hated that she had to keep her distance but understood it was the only way to save face and also to keep any hope alive that he might be set free. But the days passed and no word came from the Ministry. Every day he lived for her eyes that sent him off to work in the morning and welcomed him silently at night when he returned.

Then came the terrible day when he came back from a grueling day's work to find an empty field where the infirmary had once stood. There was no trace that it had ever been there, and Hermione was nowhere in sight. Carson told him she was in the castle now. He was devastated, and that evening he wept silently for her. He needed her so badly to hold him and to love him. He replayed their moment in the forest again and again. How long before he would be able to touch her again? What was this cruelty? He had found acceptance with her only for her to be taken away from him! This had been what he feared most. That was why he wanted to run from her in the beginning! But she had planted that seed of hope and to live inside of him. Now, it was withering away. If he had to go back to Azkaban, he didn't know if he'd be able to crawl his way back out again. He feared he would always remain on the other side.

Hermione was working alone in the infirmary. It was quiet, no patients. It was a perfect time to do her inventory on her potions stores. It was important these days to keep busy. She was looking forward to a vacation. She was going to the Burrow for two weeks, and Ginny, Harry, and all the brothers promised her the time of her life. George was going to get her drunk and make her play Quidditch ("Not necessarily at the same time—but why the hell not?" he had joked). She had felt guilty about having fun while the man she loved was suffering, but Harry had nipped that in the bud. He kept his own tabs on Snape. He had told her that Snape had ordered her to have fun and enjoy herself. Hermione had laughed at the message.

"Severus said that?" she had asked, not fully believing him.

"Upon my honor!" Harry had sworn. "It's okay Hermione, he's doing okay. The weather's nice, he's eating better again, and he's reconciled himself to the possibility of another four years."

Hermione had burst into tears. "What is taking so bloody long!" she had screamed at him. Then she had crumpled into a heap into his arms. Harry just held her and had tried to soothe her. She was truly in a desperate way. She really needed to get away from here and have a break from all this if she were going to have to face a four-year stretch.

Hermione thought of her vacation plans as she worked her inventory. She heard the door of the infirmary burst open, and she jumped, thinking an accident had taken place and someone was injured.

Instead, she was faced with an angry-faced, black-haired man in a flowing black robe, sporting a very distinct and menacing scowl that she would know anywhere.

"No wonder it has taken so *darned* long to rebuild this ruddy castle! My dungeons have been overrun with the most *dunderheaded* group of idiots I've ever had the ill-fortune to meet!" he thundered.

My Love

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione goes to the Burrow for her vacation. Little does she know a surprise awaits her there.

A/N: Well, folks, here is the last chapter! I will be posting an epilogue with a beautiful basket of juicy lemons for ya! ;) Thanks to my beta, MadBrilliant, who truly is brilliant and who gets my crazy writing and helps to turn it into something beautiful!

Chapter 10 My Love

Hermione broke into a smile and ran to him. He grasped her tightly and lifted her off the ground. She kissed him all over his face, and he begged for mercy. She gave him a scowl of her own, and he laughed a rich throaty laugh that sent tingles down her arms and across her stomach. He captured her lips in a searing kiss and then set her down.

"How...I...I mean..."

"Miss Granger," he warned in his most evil professor's voice, "I do not have the patience to listen to sub-human conversation coming from you...especially since I must whilst working on this project!"

His scowl is even back! she thought with glee.

"What happened?" she asked with wide-eyed confusion as she looked and grasped at his black robes. "Am I dreaming? Have I lost my mind?"

"No," he whispered as he pulled her closer. "The Wizengamot, in their infinite wisdom, decided my time would be best served working with those idiots trying to restore the Old Magic into the masonry."

So, you are not acquitted, just *paroled*?"

"Yes, I shall stay here and finish with the reconstruction and retain my old living quarters because I also shall be taking back my old post as the resident bat of the dungeons." He smiled wickedly at her as he spoke, and Hermione hugged him tightly, thinking she had never heard anything more wonderful in her life.

Hermione left for the Burrow four days later heavy-laden. She had Severus back where he deserved to be, but now she was leaving for the Burrow for two weeks! It just seemed the universe was conspiring against them being together!

Dinner back at the Burrow brought back so many memories; Hermione could barely get any food down her throat. Everything tasted of sawdust. Her throat was dry, and her mind and heart were still back at Hogwarts. She kept going over and over in her mind the past four days. She had watched Severus take his rightful place amongst the finest Potions masters and mistresses in Europe. He was by far the youngest in the room, but surpassed them all with his knowledge and expertise. She watched in fascination as he tackled every complication that had hindered them along the way. She stole away from the infirmary every chance she could to observe. At first, she had been refused admittance, but Severus firmly stated he needed a trustworthy assistant to document their progress for his personal records. She sat in a corner and wrote furiously, documenting his suggestions and solutions to their various problems. She beamed with happiness as he snarked and snarled his way through each of his colleagues. More than once, his temper blew as debates over various ingredients carried on. Finally, he had laid down the law with all of them, stating that since it was their incompetence that had landed them in this quagmire, it would be best if they all shut their mouths and let him get on with getting them out of it.

Egos were bruised, and he did not endear himself to anyone, but they grudgingly respected him since he had the goods to back it up. He worked long and hard, starting hours before anyone came into the lab and stayed hours after everyone had left. Hermione came and went as she could, for she had her own responsibilities to attend to in the Infirmary. But it did her heart good to see her dear, evil-tempered Potions master back in his element. He never spoke to her, even if they were alone; his focus was consumed with the enormous task at hand. So many times, she wanted to speak up and suggest an ingredient or a variation on a technique, but she bit her tongue and let him be. Everyone in a while, though, he would glance at her with a burning lust that she could only read in his dark eyes. Each look made her shiver in anticipation.

These were the thoughts Hermione flitted around in her head as the dinner talk rose and fell around her. She was so engrossed; she did not realize that covert smiles and winks were being passed back and forth around her. She did not know it, but a surprise was on its way.

After dinner, Molly and Ginny went to get dessert. There was a knock on the door, and Arthur got up to answer it. Hermione was in the kitchen chatting with Molly and Ginny. She did not realize there were two additional guests in the house. She saw Molly and Ginny stop and smile beyond Hermione. She turned and saw Severus standing there with Minister Shackbolt.

She rose slowly. "You? How?" She was so shocked she couldn't even speak properly.

The Minister cleared his throat and said, "I thought Severus deserved a vacation after all he has been through and the progress that has been made on the castle. He has whipped them all into shape these past few days...nothing short of miraculous!" Kingsley clapped Snape soundly on the back in appreciation. He gave a curt nod and stood with his arms folded across his chest. His face was non-expressive.

Hermione was still confused. Molly and Ginny came to her side.

"We had it all planned out, Hermione," Ginny whispered. "Harry is going to 'watch over' Professor Snape as his 'Auror', and you both will spend your holiday together with all of us."

Hermione burst into tears. Molly embraced the young woman while Severus and the Minister exited the kitchen to join the men for a drink.

Fleur came in with baby Victoire, and they all filled Hermione in on their surprise.

"I 'ope you are ready, 'Ermione!" Fleur burst out.

"Ready?" Hermione asked in confusion.

Molly took the young woman's hands into her own. "Hermione, I love you. I wanted you to be my daughter so much. It wasn't your fault that Ronald was so troubled."

Hermione broke down again at the mention of Ron.

Molly held her close. "Oh, my dear, don't cry! It has been such a year for all of us. But you and Severus suffered terribly! We know...Harry has been keeping us all informed of the work you did for Hogwarts and how you helped to bring some justice and integrity back into the Auror Department. Ronald would have been so proud of you! We all are."

Ginny interrupted. "And we know how much you and Professor Snape have come to care for each other. So, Kingsley decided if you and the Professor want..."

"...You can be married tonight!" Fleur finished for Ginny.

"What? This is insane! Professor Snape has never even asked me to..."

"Professor Snape never had an opportune moment to ask," a deep velvety voice murmured from across the room.

Hermione and the other women turned to see a very relaxed Snape leaning against the doorjamb with a smile toying at his lips.

"I would rather fancy a walk, Miss Granger, that is if my *Auror* will allow it?" he jerked his head in Harry's general direction.

Ginny stepped up and said, "That sounds lovely. I shall join you as well."

"My joy is complete," Snape bit out sarcastically.

The Weasleys watched as the two couples headed out for an evening constitutional. When the coast was clear, the preparations began. Flowers were arranged, linens shook out, candles brought out, and a wedding cake came out of its hiding spot.

"Well, this is an amazing turn of events!" Hermione mused as they walked out underneath the starry sky.

"Quite," Severus answered.

They walked on together, their hands brushing each other's occasionally, enjoying the cool spring night. Hermione's eyes gazed over to Severus and she smiled.

"And what is so amusing, Hermione?" he asked.

"Oh, I was thinking how much nicer your hair is. It's almost as long as I remember it."

He stopped walking and Hermione turned to face him. The moonlight shone handsomely on him.

"I know how much it hurt you witness all that occurred. You are a very strong woman, Hermione."

He offered his hand and she took it.

"Thank you, Severus. I haven't even had the chance to talk to you about the outcomes of all the Auror Trials. I'm so glad all of them will never leave Azkaban as long as they live!"

"Yes," he said softly. "Although there is no love lost between me and 'the lads', I would be remiss if I didn't say Poppy's guilty verdict did not sadden me."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, it is terrible to what depths people can sink. What they all did, not just her, but the Aurors, how could they turn *sobrutal*?"

He withdrew his hand and hugged himself as if he were cold. Perhaps he was just still raw from remembering.

"War does horrible things to people, Hermione. You know that from experience. People change, some for the better, some not." His voice trailed off and became strained when he spoke again. He moved closer to Hermione. Their bodies were almost flush against one another.

"I don't want to waste anymore time. I know I'm not Mr. Weasley..."

Hermione flung her arms around him and kissed him hard on the mouth. All the feeling and desire she felt for him, she emptied into her kiss. When she pulled away, they rested their foreheads together.

"Ask me, Severus," she pleaded.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Yes."

"Be with me, Hermione. Be my beautiful Hermione, and I will live to love you."

Epilogue – You Make Me Want To Live... For You

Chapter 11 of 11

The Wedding night for our favorite couple commences.

A/N: Thanks to all who reviewed. This fic so far broke 100. That was a first for me. I'm so glad my first SS/HG fic has been received so well! Now, on the the wedding night! Lemons ahead!

Husband and wife lay down on the bed the Weasleys, had given them for their wedding night. If it had not been for the happiness and planning they all done for her and Severus, she didn't know if she would have been able to spend her wedding night with Severus under the roof of Ron's childhood home. But Arthur and Molly, along with all of the Weasleys had been so happy for them and had gone to such lengths to get Professor McGonagall to come and transfigure Charlie's old bedroom into a beautiful, bridal suite for them to enjoy. Hermione could not begin to express how deeply touched she had felt.

It was finally their time. There was nothing now to keep them apart. Severus held his bride in his arms and slowly kissed her. Time ceased to exist. The world slipped away. Hermione ran her hands down his face, memorizing each contour and shape, committing him to memory.

He followed her lead and ran his hands down her breasts, stomach, and legs. It was as if it was all a dream, and soon they both would awaken to the hard life that seemed to have still such a hold on both of them. This was all too wondrous to be true!

"How can it be?" he whispered into her ear.

"How can what?" she whispered.

He ran his hand back up her thigh and pressed onto the mound between her legs.

"Oooh!" she moaned with longing.

Severus was overcome with his emotions and could no longer hold them in. "I never should have been given all this: your love, your acceptance, everyone here who have accepted *us*. Oh, Hermione, there were days I believed in my heart you made the sun to rise and set. How you can love me, my beautiful Hermione—you are the most grace-filled, forgiving woman I've ever known." He kissed her cleavage and traveled down to kiss her more intimately.

She opened her legs wide for him, and he softly caressed her with his mouth. She moaned and trembled with pleasure as he slowly drew out from her an orgasm that left her weak and sated.

He rose up and kissed her passionately and then whispered into her ear, "Hermione, I wanted to run away from you when I realized how much I was falling for you. But at the same time you would make me feel a need to live—to *really* live. I swear I will live and die for you."

He nipped and teased her nipples until she was shifting her hips underneath him. He touched her again at an agonizingly slow pace, and she begged him to make her come. He made her melt into his hand as he stroked his fingers inside her. He captured her cries of release in his mouth. He felt her grinding her hips against his hand and as she climaxed, he entered another finger inside her and broke her barrier. She gasped as she felt a hard pinching inside her, and he smiled against her mouth.

"Was that—?" she asked in a small voice.

"That was it. Now don't worry, I will be cautious," he murmured softly as he pressed himself against her opening.

"Just love me, let me feel you—all of you, please!" she begged as she grasped onto him—first his arms and then his back. She nestled her head into his neck. She couldn't get him close enough to her.

He eased into her as he kissed her lips tenderly. She felt completely enveloped, covered, and filled with his love. Her mind reeled, and all she knew was the fullness of passion her husband lavished on her.

Breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat, they became one. As they moved together, Hermione could not help but feel so much gratitude for the wonderful gift of Severus. They held onto each other so close, every moan could have been either one or both. He slid his arm down behind her and lifted her up by the small of her back. She thrust her hips higher, and he began to stroke a place inside her that made her feel as if she was going to shatter into a million pieces. As he neared his completion and she hers, she couldn't hold it back any more. She arched her back as she felt an orgasm building.

"Severus, I—ahhh—*finally!*"

Severus was pushed over the edge by her abandon. The beautiful woman writhing beneath him and moaning his name captivated him. The fantasy had become reality. She began to come undone in gasping screams that climbed higher and higher. He cried out a keening passionate release, "*Oh—God—Hermione!*"

Afterwards, they lay intertwined, and Severus drew a lazy circle around Hermione's left breast. She giggled and whispered, "I think I hurt myself. My voice wanted to scream higher, but I couldn't!"

He laughed so hard the bed started to shake. His laugh made her start to giggle. He wiped the laughing tears from his eyes as she continued to giggle while stroking the fine black hairs on his chest. Then he fell silent.

"What you said before. 'Finally.' What did you mean?" he asked softly.

She sighed and snuggled deeply into his embrace. "So much destruction, lives lost, love lost. I felt so empty, as if nothing could ever grow again. My heart and soul was barren. And the situation we lived in made it worse. But during the worst of it, I discovered this ray of hope, these tiny graces amongst all the little deaths. For example, a

part of me died having to cut your hair, but you gave me grace when I cried and held your head high. You gave a measure of your strength with a little of your snark. You gave me what I needed most: a reminder you were still you. I needed that so much!"

Severus laughed softly. "And you yelling at Carson that if I wanted to call you an 'insufferable-know-it-all,' I could because that was the man you wanted to talk to. You fought for my dignity; you never wanted me to be anything else than what I was. *What I am*. All those men now being released from Azkaban have to start over. Some are alone, and I'm sure they are scared and unsure. But, look at me! I'm the most unworthy of all and what have I received? Nothing I deserve or have earned," he whispered as he held her to him.

More words and acts of love and declarations of faith and hope were passed between the wizard and witch that night, who by through their individual brokenness found a way to heal and come together at last. For each one at various points wanted to run, but they wanted to live more. It was the grace they offered to each other that helped them to stay, and not only for this one night, but for the rest of their lives, always through grace.

Your smiles

Well they make my day

You don't know it yet

But you're everything

This little song – well

It's for you

These lovely years

here with you

And you

You make me run

And you

You make me want to live... For you

"You" – Fisher

A/N: Thank you to all who have enjoyed this story. HUGE thanks to my wonderful, brilliant beta, MadBrilliant. Hugs and chocolate for everyone!

Livvy