

Of Endings and Beginnings

by ayerf

Written for richardgloucester.

Oneshot

Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: Thanks to septentrion for betaing.

For dickgloucester, who dared me to write R/Hr. This is as close as I could bear to come.

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"Mione," Ron Weasley hollered, banging open the front door of the house he shared with his wife. "I'm..." he trailed off, looking around the darkened hall leading to the equally dark rooms beyond. His face falling, he stomped inside and kicked the door shut behind him.

"Honey, I'm home," Ron muttered under his breath, a foul mood descending on him.

Storming into the kitchen, he dropped into one of the chairs, propping his feet up onto the table. "So nice to come home to find dinner on the table," he spat, working his shoes off and nudging them onto the floor. His coat was shrugged off, slowly sliding off the back of the chair to land in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Perhaps it was unfair for him to expect Hermione to do the cooking when she slaved away at her job like a house-elf, but he had been raised to believe it was a woman's place to cook for her man. It wasn't as if he expected her to be a housewife like his mother, raising an entire Quidditch team of children on top of all the housework.

In fact, Ron didn't want that at all. He certainly didn't want to share his wife with a brood the size of his own family. Maybe they could have a single, cherished child in a few years time, but for now he wanted Hermione all to himself. Not that he saw that much of her with the long hours she worked. Sometimes, like when she had brought her work home with her, he wondered if she considered herself more married to her job than to him.

It had been ages since they'd last had a good, passionate fight and subsequent tender make-up, which had peppered their relationship until their third year of wedded bliss... Oh, who was he trying to kid? Ron knew that he hadn't been the most important thing in Hermione's life even when he asked her to marry him. But at least she had accepted, so she must love him. He refused to acknowledge the gut-wrenching whisper of doubt that Hermione no longer loved him as a wife should. That the spark had left their marriage....

He sat there in the gloom, wallowing in self pity, only using his wand to light the fire in the grate across the room when he started shivering. Hermione finally arrived home at eight o' clock, two hours after Ron had stormed into the empty house.

At first Hermione failed to notice him in the flickering firelight when she trod wearily into the kitchen, only seeing him when she turned on the lights. Even then, her greeting was restricted to: "Ron, get your feet off the table, we have to eat on it."

Slowly, flushing angrily, he swung his long legs around so that he could drop his feet to the floor, resenting the way Hermione spoke to him as if he were a child to scold.

"Speaking of eating, have you?" Hermione asked, whipping her wand out to levitate his coat and shoes out of the kitchen, wrinkling her nose when his shoes passed her.

"Oi, leave off!" Ron squawked when he felt the tingle of a cleaning charm roam over his feet. Hermione ignored him, casting the same spell on the table where his feet had rested.

Before Hermione could repeat her question, his stomach rumbled loudly. "I'll take that as a 'no'. Why? Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes," Ron spat, watching with narrowed eyes as his wife moved over to the oven, opening the door to peer inside.

"If you were waiting for me, where's dinner?" Hermione turned to face him, frowning down at him.

"It's not as if I had any idea when you'd be home," he snapped, the chair legs screeching on the tiled floor as he stood up, towering over her.

"There are such things as warming charms to keep food hot," she said, crossing her arms.

Hands slamming down onto the table, Ron scowled as he leant towards Hermione. "Anyway, cooking is your job. Is it too much for a wizard to expect his witch to have dinner on the table after a hard day at work?"

Something seemed to chill in Hermione's gaze as she stiffened at Ron's words. "It is, when the witch in question works far harder and for longer than the wizard." Her lip curled. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that you ever have a hard day at work, playing around with Wizarding Wheezes?"

Ron's eyes gleamed. This was more like what their marriage had been like, now he could only hope that this fight would lead to physical clashing in the bedroom.

But Hermione's shoulders slumped, her usually expressive features slackening into a tired, cold mask. "Never mind. This argument is absolutely pointless when it can be resolved simply by getting a take away."

She walked past Ron into the hallway. He could hear her dialling a number on the bleeping number pad of the fellytone ("Telephone, Ron!") and speaking to the jabbering voice on the other end of the Muggle gadget.

Sighing, Ron sat down, pulling his chair back into position, leaning his elbows on the table as he dropped his head into his hands. Irritation seemed to be the only emotion Hermione felt toward him recently. Surely hatred would be better than this lack of feeling....

Ten minutes after Hermione had used the teletone, someone knocked on the door. Hermione had remained in the hallway, probably snagging a book to read from one of the bookshelves. Indeed, there was a pause long enough for her to mark her place and put the book down before she opened the door.

A delicious sweet and spicy smell wafted into the kitchen while Hermione paid the delivery man, growing stronger when the front door shut and Hermione carried in a bag full of foil boxes with cardboard tops.

"Chinese," she said, dumping the bag on the table.

Putting his hurt feelings aside, Ron tore open the bag and spread the boxes over the table, opening each one as he did so. He was about to dig into his dinner with his bare hands when Hermione swatted his fingers with a fork. Was it promising that she still cared about his manners?

Taking the fork, Ron dug in ravenously. After a few minutes of stuffing his face, he noticed that Hermione hadn't sat down, nor was she eating. Her eyes were fixed on him, an odd expression on her face.

"What is it?" Ron asked, his mouth full. Half chewed bits of rice flew from his mouth. He stuffed in another mouthful before he'd even swallowed his last.

Hermione's face twisted. "That's disgusting! Don't speak with your mouth..." She continued speaking, but Ron just ignored her, fed up with being scolded. He was vaguely aware of her voice growing shriller with every word she spoke. Shovelling another overloaded forkful into his mouth, his attention was only drawn back to Hermione when she thrust something at him, glinting gold in the bright light cast by the Muggle lights. Squinting at it, Ron had to reluctantly admit that his nagging wife might be right about his need for glasses.

"Mmm?" Not wishing to start her moaning at him again, Ron kept his mouth shut, his cheeks still bulging as he chewed.

"You weren't even listening to me, were you," Hermione stated, her voice curiously flat. At least she wasn't shrieking at him. She dropped whatever glinted in her hand onto the table, where it landed with the slightly muffled ringing clatter of metal on wood.

Ron shifted one of the food containers out of the way so that he could see the metal-something now that it was far enough away for him to see clearly.

"I'm leaving you," she said, even as he recognised the thing on the table as her wedding ring.

He choked, the sound muffled by the food still in his mouth. Flailing, he tried to reach for Hermione, the need to cough, the need to breathe overwhelming his shock, panic flooding him when he couldn't do either. Where was Hermione? He couldn't see her, couldn't hear her. Where was his wand? Fumbling, it slipped from his shaking fingers. Dropping from his seat to the floor, he blindly searched for his wand, spots filling his vision. Air, he needed air!

Finally he heard Hermione's voice, faint and distorted as if she were far away, calling his name. Then nothing.

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Molly's voice was still ringing in Hermione's ears when she staggered into her cramped flat three floors above Flourish & Blotts. For some bizarre reason, Molly seemed to regard Hermione's abode for the past year as if it were a room in a Knockturn Alley brothel.

Scowling at her reflection in the cracked Muggle mirror standing in the corner of her bedroom, she swiftly undid the fastenings of her concession to Molly's nagging: a drab, unadorned black robe. Black had never suited her, even when offset by the bright colours of a Gryffindor tie or scarf. It seemed to leach the colour from her skin and highlight the shadows under her eyes.

Tugging the robe off, Hermione hung it on the front of the worse-for-wear wardrobe next to the mirror. It promptly slid off the hanger, falling to the dusty floor as soon as she'd turned away to direct her attention to Crookshanks where he lay snoring on her bed. Puffing out an exasperated breath, she turned back and bent down to pick the fallen robe up.

As always, it came upon her suddenly, while she was doing perfectly mundane things. Like picking up fallen clothes. Last time, it had been a dropped book. Her treacherous mind took her back to the day she'd told Ron she was leaving him. When he'd choked on his food, and she'd only realised when she'd heard him fall to the floor while she was in the act of stalking out of the front door. It had been too late by the time she ran back.

She pulled her hands back from the crumpled robe as if they were burned by the coarse fabric. Even without the recurring memory, the robe was a reminder of her status as a widow, which the Weasleys, Molly especially, seemed to expect her to wear for the rest of her life. Perhaps if they were made aware of the fact that Hermione would have been a divorcee by now had Ron lived, the Weasley clan would stop haranguing her to wear a veil... but Hermione doubted it. Molly was impossible enough without knowing the truth.

A knock at the door distracted Hermione from her gloomy, guilty thoughts. Standing, she moved to peer through the spy hole, unwilling to answer it if her visitor was red haired. If said visitor was a middle-aged, interfering hag of a red haired witch, Hermione would be willing to risk Azkaban. Luckily for both Hermione and her visitor, it was

not the Weasley matriarch.

Glaring into the spy hole was Severus Snape, the distortion caused by the Muggle contraption making his nose seem even larger and more hooked than normal.

Hermione opened the door, opening her mouth to invite him in when he swept past her.

"So this is where you have been hiding," Severus said, his gaze roving around the room and returning to her. "Even Spinner's End is luxurious compared to this *Ms. Granger*."

She closed the door, ignoring the barb about her dingy flat. "Molly would tell you that it's still Mrs Weasley," muttered Hermione.

"I do not care for the opinions of that harpy. If you had any sense, neither would you."

Inhaling sharply, Hermione gestured to the dusty mourning robe still on the floor. "If I cared about what Molly thinks, I'd be wearing that all the time, and clothes beneath to match."

"Yet you wear it outdoors, acting the part of the grieving widow." Curling his lip, Severus shook his head.

"Severus, we've had this conversation before, many times. I may not have loved Ron anymore, but his death still hurt," she said, her voice a dull monotone.

"It was not your fault," he insisted, grasping her shoulders as though he wanted to shake some sense into her. "Hermione, it has been a year."

She laughed bitterly. "Not nearly long enough for the Weasleys to accept my moving on."

"During your marriage, and the times I have seen you after your husband's demise, you have chafed under their overbearing expectations. Would it be so bad if they never spoke to you again?"

Shrugging out of his grip, Hermione met his exasperated stare. "With the exception of Molly, they are my friends. Besides, the problem would be getting them to stop yelling at me if I moved on before I die."

Severus muttered something under his breath that sounded like 'Oblivate the lot of them'.

"Look, I know you have a right to want more from me than friendship. My feelings for you were part of the reason I was going to divorce Ron, but I need more..."

"Time?" he snapped, interrupting her. "You know that I will wait however long you need, but I will not let you wallow in your guilt."

"It was my fault," she whispered, looking away.

"Were your late husband's eating habits down to your influence?"

Hermione didn't even seem to hear him. "I should have waited until he'd finished eating."

Teeth audibly grinding together, Severus cupped Hermione's chin to draw her attention back to him. "When you are ready to put the past where it belongs, you know where to find me."

He bent down to kiss her on the cheek, and turned to leave, the stiff line of his back tense with anger and exasperation.

Before Hermione could gather her wits, he had opened the door and was striding away, his cloak billowing behind him. The door swung shut, banging loudly.

There was a protesting mew from the bed behind her. Crookshanks had woken from his place curled up on her pillow, and seemed to be eyeing her reproachfully.

"Don't look at me like that! It's bad enough from the Weasleys and Severus, I don't need it from you as well."

Crookshanks turned away and began to calmly clean himself, ignoring his human.

"I've had enough. Sod the Weasleys and their mourning expectations. Fuck Severus and..." Hermione trailed off, flushing. She sat on the edge of her bed, reaching over to stroke her cat. "You know, Crooks, it's high time we paid a visit to Spinner's End."