

Climate Change

by sylvanawood

Hermione and Severus are both heads of their houses and compete for the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup. However, a few things have changed since Hermione was a student. Prompt: May be DH-compliant. Hermione and Snape are both heads of their houses at Hogwarts and their houses are neck and neck for the Quidditch cup. Humor, romance, snark.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 3

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A/N: This story was written for the SS/HG exchange, winter round 2007/2008.

I wish to thank my beta readers, Maggie and Melusin, for their patience, support and hard work. There wouldn't be a story without them.

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"Rennervate!"

The body of the lifeless man on the ground twitched slightly. That had to be good enough, Hermione Granger thought. She took a phial out of her bag and gently prised Severus Snape's lips open. She poured a few drops of the liquid onto his tongue and then massaged his throat, repeating the process again and again until she noticed him swallow on his own. Then she fed him phial after phial of the potion.

Eyes that had been staring blindly only a moment before were now blinking rapidly, trying to moisten the dry cornea, trying to see again.

"Lie still," Hermione hissed when Snape struggled faintly. "Not a sound." She took another phial out of her bag and poured its content carefully onto the still bleeding wounds on Snape's neck. The wounds healed instantly.

"For good measure," she whispered. Pushing a bezoar into Snape's mouth, she commanded, "Swallow!"

He did as he was told and continued to stare at her confusedly.

"That first one was a blood replenishing potion. The second was a phial full of phoenix tears. It was in Professor Slughorn's private quarters. The third was a bezoar; I don't know what other effects the snake venom still has. All three together should get you back on your feet in an instant." Hermione was still holding Snape's head and looking at him warmly. The last few hours had changed her view of the man completely.

"Lily?" he whispered and then pulled her head down for a kiss. Hermione was so surprised that, at first, she couldn't resist and later didn't want to resist. It wasn't a passionate kiss; Snape was still far too weak for that, but it was a kiss filled with a tenderness, love and devotion she had never experienced before. It made her head spin and her knees weak.

After a long moment, she gently pushed him away; she didn't want to deceive him.

"Not Lily. Don't you remember?"

Snape's eyes were clear and faintly glittering now. "Miss Granger?"

"Yes," she nodded and stroked his cheek. He didn't object.

"Why?"

"Why what? Why am I not Lily; why did I help you; why are you here?"

"Nagini. The Dark Lord. Potter! I must..." He started to struggle, trying to get up.

Hermione held him by his shoulders and gently pushed him back to the ground. "You did. Harry saw. We won. Or will win, whichever way you want to see it. And this is thanks to you, your bravery and devotion. Everyone knows what a hero you are. Harry told everyone."

"Bloody hell," Snape whispered and closed his eyes with a grimace.

"Do you remember anything?" Hermione asked curiously. "After you gave all your memories to Harry?"

"Of course, I do," he rasped. "I didn't give him all my memories. They were filtered for the boy to understand, just in case, but then... Why are you here?"

"I couldn't leave you like that. We should have helped you right away, but Voldemort... and Harry... There was no time, and we were scared. We thought you were..."

"I know what you thought. Why are you here?" he snapped impatiently.

Hermione was actually glad to hear him snap at her. That meant he was feeling better. She gave him a faint smile that widened when she saw his scowl.

"When we won, there was chaos. And so many died... Remus and Tonks... and Fred... and Colin..." Hermione's voice faltered, suppressed tears threatening to choke her. "Later, when everyone was celebrating, Harry went to sleep and Ron stayed with his family." She wiped her face; some tears had managed to spill over. "I was restless, and a bit drunk... and I felt guilty... about you, you know. I couldn't stop thinking about you how brave you were, and how we didn't help you."

Snape shook his head and looked pained.

"I borrowed Harry's cloak and went to the Headmaster's office. The gargoyles were drunk, you know they would have let anyone in. And there was the Pensieve with your memories still in it. The portraits were empty; the headmasters were celebrating. And your portrait hadn't appeared. I was wondering about that, I mean, you were accepted by the castle, else you wouldn't have been allowed in the office, like Umbridge, you know?"

"Stop babbling, Miss Granger, and get to the point."

"Sorry, sir," she whispered. "I saw the memories, and then I cried a bit." She sniffed when she saw his angry look. "Be as angry as you want; it doesn't matter, sir. Then I ranted a bit, because I thought if anyone deserved help, it should have been you, and no one ever made an effort. And then I had this idea that there might be a Time-Turner in the office. There had been, in my third year. So I Summoned Time-Turners, and they came."

"Just like that?"

"Well, it worked once before with the Horcrux books, didn't it?"

"Horcrux? Merlin help us... that's how? Merlin, Potter! He... You have no idea. I must..." He tried to get up again, but Hermione restrained him. "It's over. Harry knows, and the Horcrux in him was destroyed. All of them have been destroyed, Voldemort is dead. Gone, and won't come back. The last one... It was Neville, you know; he killed Nagini with Gryffindor's sword. Nagini was the last Horcrux."

Snape closed his eyes again and leaned back. "Longbottom, of all people, killed the snake? Will the humiliation never end?"

"You're free, sir, free from both masters. Doesn't that count?" She smiled at his surprised look. "You can live your own life now, accountable to no one. I refuse to believe that you don't have any other interests besides Lily Potter."

Snape stared at her thoughtfully. "Not bad, Miss Granger. Finally, an independent thought..."

Hermione smiled. "Whatever. I was thinking about your injuries, and what I would need to help you. I figured if I travelled back to the moment in time when we'd just left you, it might not be too late. So, I looked in the hospital wing for blood replenishing potion. There wasn't all that much there because of the many injured, but I took what I could find. Then, I went to Professor Slughorn's office and Summoned a bezoar. I was worried about the venom, though, and not certain if you had taken anti-venom..."

"I had, but proceed. A bite in the neck will kill you faster than the anti-venom can kick in."

"That's what I thought. I wondered if I could Summon Fawkes, but that didn't work. And then I remembered how Professor Slughorn had always collected precious and expensive potions ingredients, so I went to his private quarters, broke his protective charms and Summoned phoenix tears. I had guessed right; a phial came. And here I am. At the moment, Harry will be pretending to be dead. He was connected to Voldemort, you know. They were each other's Horcruxes, or something like that. I don't really understand it..."

"Spare me," Snape whispered. "This is an amazing tale." He took her hand. "I have to thank you, I think."

"There's no need. We can't ever thank you enough for everything you did for Harry, for all of us. You kept us safe and because of you, we won." She squeezed his hand, her eyes shining. "In about an hour, when everything is decided, you can go wherever you want, sir. Just not now, that would mess up time. Badly."

Snape just stared at her quietly. Hermione remembered his kiss while she stared back, mesmerized.

"I have some strengthening potions. You should take them, sir," she whispered. He nodded and swallowed everything she fed him. Then they sat quietly, their hands still clasped, listening to the sounds from the battle.

After some time, a triumphant roar, shouts and singing told them that the victory was theirs, that the wizarding world could go through another period of imaginary safety again.

"That's it," Hermione said. "Now you can go wherever you want. You're free. Will you come to the Great Hall and celebrate with us?"

"No bloody way," Snape croaked, his voice still weak. "I could never live up to... Merlin, everyone knows? That silly boy..."

"He meant well, sir," Hermione said with a huff. "He wanted everyone to know what a hero you are. And Voldemort knew, in the last minutes of his miserable life, that you'd fooled him all this time." She smiled wickedly.

"He did?" Snape seemed relieved. His lips twitched. "That's... something."

Hermione took two more phials out of her bag. "I have something for you." She handed him a small phial with a shimmering silvery substance in it. "These are your memories."

He took the phial and stared at her with an odd expression.

"And this..." She gave him the second phial. "...is Felix Felicis. I found it in Professor Slughorn's office, too. It's full; I only took a small sip before I came here. There should be many more lucky moments for you in it."

He took it. "You surprise me, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled. "So what will you do now?"

"I shall go to my house, get what I need, and disappear somewhere. Perhaps travel the world. Enjoy my life. None of your business." He smirked at her.

"Very good," she said and used his weakened state to modify his memories as she had modified those of her parents. She told him to forget that it was she who had saved him that she was there at all. He would remember everything else. Stepping carefully back while he was still unconscious from her spell, she hid under Harry's invisibility cloak.

Snape woke up, blinked a few times, looked around confusedly, touched his lips with his fingers and Disapparated.

Hermione went back to the corridor where she had used the Time-Turner and waited until her younger self arrived. When she saw herself pull off the invisibility cloak and disappear into the past, she slowly walked back to Hogwarts. Only now, their triumph over Voldemort had become a true victory for her.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 3

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Twenty Years Later.

"... and that is why I want you all to act as if all the houses were one, using all the skills and talents each house represents. I want all the students to be cunning and ambitious, brave and daring, clever and studious, loyal and caring. The house that wins the House Cup this year should do so by combining the qualities that together make us all great, and not just by playing to their individual strengths.

"We have to put a stop to the old prejudices, and now is the time. This is a time of change at Hogwarts: teachers have retired, Heads of Houses have changed. It's now or never. I'm counting on you."

"You can't be serious, Minerva!"

Four voices uttered their protest more or less simultaneously.

"I am. And that is my last word on the subject. So come now. Let's go to the Welcoming Feast."

Shaking their heads in confusion, the four Heads of House followed the Headmistress to the Great Hall.

Hermione sat down at the High Table still confused, amused and surprised. This year, her second year of teaching Charms, promised to be interesting. She studied the Great Hall, filled with excited and happy students, while the Sorting took place. There weren't any children of her old acquaintances among the first-years, but the other years contained enough of them. There was Ginny and Harry's brood, except for little Lily, who would be coming next year. Luna and Ron's daughter, Rose, her own goddaughter, had started last year, together with Albus Severus Potter and Scorpius Malfoy. Several Longbottoms, Dursleys, Abbotts and many more Weasleys were haunting the school, evenly distributed throughout the years.

Hermione wondered what the newest addition to the staff thought about all this, but her thoughts were interrupted by Minerva McGonagall's welcoming speech.

"... and may I remind you that the students taking Muggle Studies will once again be able to make a fieldtrip to the Muggle home of Professor Dursley's husband and her mother-in-law. Conversely, the Muggle-borns taking Wizard Studies will be invited again to the home of Professor Longbottom and his wife.

"And now, I ask all of you to welcome our newest addition to the Hogwarts staff. You all know that Aberforth Dumbledore decided to retire from teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts after teaching it for twenty years. Thus, I am delighted and honoured to introduce our new Defence Against the Dark Arts Teacher, Professor Severus Snape."

The Great Hall almost exploded from the noise made by all the clapping and hooting students. It was just as good as her own welcome had been, if not more so, Hermione

thought. A sideways glance at her neighbour at the High Table showed her a very surprised face, for once without the customary sneer. A faint smile lit up Snape's face when he nodded his thank you to the students.

They all knew that he was a war hero, of course. His name had become famous, even though nobody really knew whether he had survived the war or not. His body had never been found; a headmaster portrait hadn't appeared it didn't take long for the rumours to start flying. From time to time, 'Snape-sightings' were reported, and his fame had become even greater for the mystery surrounding his person. The Boy-Who-Still-Lived had publicly proclaimed him to be a great hero, of having fought the Dark Lord Voldemort bravely for most of his life, and for having been essential for Voldemort's defeat. Harry told everyone who was ready to listen what a brave and honourable man Severus Snape had been and how he had fulfilled his duty up to the last moment of his life.

However, the mystery of the missing body and portrait remained, and the rumours did the rest. By now, Severus Snape had become a legend, and the students were excited to have him as a teacher. Hardly anyone remembered that his reputation from the past had been that of a stern, unfair and demanding teacher who could silence a classroom with a glare and who had favoured his own house faithfully. They were in for a few surprises, Hermione thought with a smirk. Snape was more relaxed now than he had been during the war years, but he was essentially the same sarcastic and witty man she had known during her own student years. Favouring his own house would be interesting to watch with Minerva's original idea for more house unity, an idea that she'd just now explained to the students, who had listened in shocked silence.

"And so I trust that you will all remember, while you work hard to win the Cup for your House, that it is only together that we can be truly strong; as one school, and as one wizardkind. Now, let the feast begin."

Excited whispers followed her speech, and only the first-years paid the food on the tables its due attention.

"So where have you been hiding all these years, Severus?" Hermione noticed with a frown that Cho Cho Dursley, for she had married Harry's cousin had sat down at Snape's side and was talking to him almost constantly. However, Hermione had wondered about the same thing, and so she decided to just listen instead of asking her own questions. Meetings in the staffroom had become a bit of an event since Severus Snape had rejoined the staff.

"I travelled the world. I assure you, I was out in the open rather often," he uttered, looking over his lesson plans and not paying Cho any attention. Hermione suppressed a snort. He really hadn't changed much. And that was a good thing.

Or maybe that wasn't true at all, Hermione reconsidered while she watched the man in question quell the advances of the Muggle-and-Wizard-Studies teacher. He had changed quite a bit, although subtly. He still was stern and sarcastic. However, he wasn't as unforgiving as he had been. He still didn't suffer fools gladly, but he seemed to have developed a kind of curious and amused detachment, watching the follies of the people surrounding him with a newfound tolerance that made his reactions less cutting, but still amusing to those who understood his wit.

His looks were also slightly altered. The years had been gentle with him. At fifty-nine, he was approaching the second trimester of a wizard's life. He was in his prime and had reason to hope to stay there for many years to come, just approaching middle age.

He looked better, much better than he had during his tenure as Potions teacher, Hermione thought. He was still very slim, but not so sickly thin any more. He was well-groomed; that was another thing. His hair was shorter, still limp, but not so greasy. It had greyed becomingly, a colour that gave his pale and sallow skin a softer look and set off his eyes and remarkable nose. He had become attractive in a rugged way, and Hermione wasn't the only woman on the staff to notice this.

Where he had been slighted and disliked by most of his colleagues in the past, he was now being sought after as an advisor and conversationalist, and people were offering their friendship. The female members of staff, especially, went out of their way to make his time in the staffroom memorable and comfortable. He was never without tea or Firewhisky or a witch sitting at his side. What a difference the status of war hero makes, Hermione thought cynically as she watched the spectacle with amusement.

Hermione found Snape rather irresistible herself, but she would be damned if she was going to join the queue of adoring witches. She had been excited and delighted when she had learned that he was coming back to Hogwarts. She had been as clueless about his whereabouts during these past twenty years as everybody else.

Hermione had never forgotten that kiss he had given her, thinking she was Lily Evans. She had dated other men, but in the most inopportune moments, the memory of glittering black eyes and that kiss had reminded her of what she really wanted and couldn't have, and none of her attachments had lasted for very long. In a way, she thought, she had become as obsessed with Severus Snape as he himself was with Lily Evans. She, however, knew that the object of her obsession was alive and well, and she found that thought rather reassuring.

In the meantime, Cho had been nattering on, and Snape had treated her with polite indifference.

"And are you getting along well as Head of House?" Cho insisted on not being dismissed.

"That's not the question, is it?" Snape had now looked up from his work and was studying her with a slight smirk on his lips. "The question is, how does the house get along with me? And I can assure you that the house will learn soon enough."

"I wouldn't be surprised if your house won the House Cup in your first year of teaching again, you know, Severus. With all of your experience..." Cho gushed, looking at Snape admiringly, who frowned back at her.

"My House has won the Cup in the past and will no doubt win it again, sooner or later. Much depends on the Quidditch team, as you should know. Didn't you play Seeker yourself, at some time?"

"Yes, yes, I did indeed." Cho was flattered by being remembered. "And my house has a decent team as well. We shall be your strongest competition; I shall see to it personally."

"Whatever you say." Snape bowed slightly in his chair and returned his attention to his lesson plans.

"How's Dudley?" Hermione asked Cho, who happily went into a tale of domestic bliss, Muggle family life and all the advantages that living in a modern Muggle society offered. "And I do get on very well with Petunia, you know. After her divorce, she took a liking to me. She adores our children and keeps telling me how she would have loved to visit Hogwarts, but that the only witch in the family had been her sister."

That wasn't a place where Hermione wanted to lead the conversation right now. A sideways glance at Snape revealed his pained look. He listened, although he pretended not to.

With the arrival of more staff members, Cho's attention was thankfully diverted. Hermione turned back to Snape.

"Gryffindor has won the House Cup three times in a row, you know," she informed him.

"Is that so?" he commented politely. "We shall see how successful it can defend the Cup then, shall we?"

"I'm looking forward to it." Hermione smirked.

He raised an eyebrow, smirked back and asked, "How are you getting along?"

"No problems so far. I get funny looks from the older students, but I think I'm rather capable of handling problems if they arise. I survived almost twenty years at the Ministry. Being Head of House feels like being on holiday after that."

"If you need advice, don't be too shy to ask."

"Thank you. Advice is always welcome. Know thy enemy and all that." She laughed.

He nodded and smiled slightly, and then they sat through the staff meeting in amiable companionship.

"If they give us more homework, I'm going to be sick." Albus Severus Potter yawned and stared blandly at the pile of books in front of him. "I don't know what's got into them. All this to win points by 'using all the attributes that make us strong...'" He mimicked the way the Headmistress had spoken and rolled his eyes. "Even Auntie Hermione..."

"Don't call her that," Rose squeaked. "If she hears you, you'll only get more work."

"Yeah," the third member of the trio added. "If you don't call her 'Professor', she'll deduct points. She's a tough nut, that one. My dad knows stories about her, I'm telling you..."

Rose giggled. "She told me that she punched your dad on the nose once. Did he tell you about that, too, Scorpius?"

Scorpius Malfoy snorted. "Yes, he did. They didn't like each other when they were in school. But now she visits us from time to time. Mum and Dad like it when she visits. They say she's a useful acquaintance."

"No matter," Albus said. "She makes us work so hard now. What's this silly thing with the houses anyway? We're supposed to be brave, clever, loyal and cunning. She wants us to win the House Cup, and she won't let us rest until we have."

"True. And that means winning points and winning at Quidditch. You'd better always catch the Snitch, Al."

He grinned back sheepishly. "I'll try."

Sighing, they went back to their homework.

"That would be twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter. *Levicorpus* is a spell for self-defence, not for mockery, nor for bullying. Now, let Mr. Greengrass down this instant."

"As you wish, sir." James winked at his friends and ended the spell abruptly. His victim, a Slytherin fourth-year, fell to the ground with a loud 'thump' and a soft cry of pain.

"And that's another twenty points from Gryffindor and detention with Shunpike this Saturday morning."

"But, sir, the Quidditch game..."

"Silence... Miss Longbottom, you will help Mr. Greengrass to the hospital wing. Let Madam Pomfrey give him a check up; tell her I sent you. And you, Mr. Potter, will have detention and points deducted until you learn that 'because I don't like his looks' is not an excuse for your behaviour. Now, get out of my sight, all of you."

"Bloody hell, James, you're losing us too many points. Stop it, it's not funny," one of his housemates chastised.

"Aw, just look at little Greengrass, always that sleepy expression on his face," James mocked. "He needs a bit of a wake-up call from time to time. I'm only doing my duty as a fellow student."

The bystanders laughed, but the girl who had spoken first was not amused. "We have so much homework because of this house unity thing, and we are supposed to win as many points as possible. And here comes James Potter, throwing all our hard work away."

James scowled but couldn't keep up his anger for long. "Come on, Ellinor, I'll make it up in Transfiguration. I'll win so many points that I can shake old Gregory there awake as much as he needs it."

The girl playfully hit him on the arm, but joined in with the chuckles of the other students.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Longbottom, to your dormitories, now. That'll be ten points from Gryffindor each for inappropriate behaviour and being out after curfew."

"But, Aunt Hermione!"

"Five more points from Gryffindor. You will call me 'Professor Granger' while we're at school. You will treat your teachers with respect. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor Granger."

"Hermione, Severus, if I could talk to both of you for a moment?" The voice of the Headmistress was stern and lacked its usual warmth. Both smirked slightly and followed her up the winding staircase to her office.

"I don't know what you two are so smug about," McGonagall reprimanded them. "The two other Heads of House don't behave like the two of you do. I never thought I'd see something like that from you, Hermione."

At that, Snape snorted loudly, which earned him a glare from Hermione.

"While it is commendable to patrol the corridors, don't you think it's a bit transparent when you follow the students of your rival house and wait for an opportunity to deduct points? You seem to know exactly who is dating whom and wait until you find them out of bounds and snogging. I haven't seen as many points deducted in one night since... since before the war when Severus used to prowl the castle. And to give their Keeper detention on a Saturday... that Saturday."

Hermione sniffed. "I learned from the best. And Hooper was giving me cheek. I couldn't let him get away with that."

"So you had to give him detention instead of taking points?"

Hermione merely shrugged; Snape smirked.

"I'm glad that this amuses you, Severus. I, however, am not amused. It's not as if your behaviour is any better."

He looked at her politely. "Whatever do you mean?"

Hermione snorted.

"Don't give me that nonchalant crap, Severus. How stupid do you think I am? Isn't it a strange coincidence that when Gryffindor duels Slytherin in your third-year Defence class, you allow them to only use one jinx each? One of them using the Jelly-Legs Jinx, the other the finger removing jinx? Strangely enough, the team from your house was the one allowed to use the finger removing jinx." The Headmistress gave him a vexed glare and continued, "Half the opposing team's third-years lost one or more of their fingers, and what do you know, one of their Chasers was among them. Such bad luck that the next day saw the infamous Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and of course the fingers hadn't grown back by then."

"A mere coincidence, Minerva, I assure you," Snape said. Hermione laughed out loud.

"Enough," McGonagall hissed. "As good as it is to see you two get along so well, I would have thought that there'd be more rivalry between you since it looks as if you're dead set on reviving the old Slytherin versus Gryffindor competition."

"Doesn't it always come down to Slytherin and Gryffindor?" Snape asked with a slight smile. Hermione nodded.

"That's how it was in the past, but this has to stop." Minerva looked at the two of them tiredly. "You're behaving like children; you should be ashamed of yourselves, you know? I'm trying to change things here. I'm well aware, Severus, of how much I wronged you while we were still competing with each other. In the past, I was too blind and too stupid to see how you always worked hard to protect everyone in this school. I wanted to turn around the old prejudice that being a Slytherin equals being a Dark wizard by default. I honestly wanted to change it..." She leaned back in her chair and watched the two teachers sadly.

Hermione felt ashamed. "I respect your wishes, Minerva. But Quidditch is all about competition, as you well know. I don't quite see how the lack of competition in Quidditch between our two houses can change the reputation Slytherin has."

"Neither can I," Snape added. "The only thing that will work is your idea to combine the attributes of the four houses to challenge all of them to not only use their own strengths, but to discover that of the other houses for themselves and, through that, get stronger. I can't quite see how winning a Quidditch match can affect that."

"Oh, go away, both of you. You're hopeless," Minerva said resignedly and waved them away.

On their way down the stairs, Hermione stopped, looked at Snape and smiled. "You know, that was a rather ingenious idea of yours."

"That goes for both sides. You've become quite formidable in prowling the corridors." He smirked. "Nevertheless, my house will beat yours. Goodnight, Hermione"

"In your dreams," she said to his back. "Goodnight, Severus."

"Hermione! It's so good to see you!" Hermione was almost drowned in the hug Molly Weasley gave her when she arrived at The Burrow for Christmas.

"Severus! I'm so glad that you decided to come, too. Do come in, make yourself comfortable. Have you two eaten?"

"Yes, we had dinner in the Great Hall before we left," Hermione said with a wistful smile. "It's been years... It's good to be here again."

"You were always welcome here, you know that. Just because you didn't marry into the family, doesn't mean that we don't love you." Molly smiled and took Snape's arm. He didn't resist. "The children have already gone to bed, but we're having some eggnog in the lounge. Come and join us for a chat, will you?"

Before they could enjoy their eggnog, there was a lot more hugging and welcoming, since most of the extended Weasley family had already arrived. Snape was greeted politely, from some even with warmth. Arthur Weasley beckoned him to sit at his side, and they were soon talking quietly.

"Say, Hermione, what's this rumour we're hearing about students having to use the strengths of other houses and all that?" Ginny Potter asked. Harry sat at her side and nodded, all attentive.

"It's a good idea, it really is," Hermione said. "The old prejudices are still there, even with you, Harry, and with Ron, and with so many others. May I just remind you of last year when we all met Draco on Platform nine and three-quarters?"

"We were polite."

"Yes, but nothing more. And you told your children not to be sorted into Slytherin. I'm very glad that they had more sense than you two." Hermione glared at Harry and then at Ron, who was sitting across from her with Luna at his side.

"Well, if we had known that you'd be their Head of House eventually..." Ginny said hesitantly.

"It shouldn't matter who their Head of House is, and that is exactly where Minerva's plan comes in," Hermione said heatedly.

"So it's true. You're the Head of Slytherin?" Luna stared at her wide-eyed.

"Yes, it's true, and Severus is Head of Gryffindor. Cho is Head of Hufflepuff, and Neville is Head of Ravenclaw. We will remain Heads of House for five years and then rotate. We will keep in close contact with the Houses we will manage in the future and have managed in the past, each Head of House helping their predecessors and successors with a smooth transition. That way, that exclusiveness, that elitist thinking should be quenched, hopefully. I think it's a good idea."

"Perhaps," Ron said. "But Slytherin, Hermione. You, a Muggle-born... Isn't that awfully difficult for you?"

"Not really. As I told Severus recently, I survived twenty years at the Ministry, and that teaches you a thing or two, as I'm sure Harry can confirm." Harry looked baffled, but nodded. "I get along. It's not really such a problem, even with the older Slytherin students. The one you really should pity is Severus. He has James."

Snape looked up from his conversation with Arthur Weasley and turned towards them. "That's true. I should get extra pay just for having to deal with him in my house."

Harry scowled. "I suppose he reminds you of me and my father. I don't know if that was such a wise move..."

"In fact, he doesn't." Snape's lips twitched when he saw Harry's surprised face. "He reminds me more of his uncles. He's a lot like the Weasley twins were when they were still in school. He's a prankster, but he does have some compassion, too. There's still hope for the boy."

"Now, that's a relief, hearing that from you," Harry said and smirked.

Snape smirked back. "I'm glad you think so, Mr. Potter."

The next morning, Hermione suppressed a chuckle when she met Severus on the staircase. Just like her, he was wearing a new Weasley jumper. "You look dashing," she commented with a smirk. His jumper hung around his thin frame, about two sizes too large. It was black with a huge "S" in gold and red on the front.

"Not as stunning as you," he retorted and looked her up and down, his lips twitching. Her own jumper was just a bit too small, hugging her figure tightly. It was dark green with the "H" in a silvery grey.

"I have to warn you. You've been adopted by the Weasleys now," she said, serious again. "Their offer of friendship is genuine, and it's too late to back out without hurting them. They're delighted to have the chance after all these years. If you hadn't been away for so long, they'd have invited you earlier, you know."

"Do you hear me complaining?" he asked, and together they went down the stairs.

In the kitchen, Hermione was attacked by Rose, Albus Severus and all the other children in the house, who dragged her away to show her all their presents.

Snape was sitting in the lounge reading the paper when George Weasley came in with his nephew, James, in tow. "Prof... ah, Severus! How good to see you again! If you have a moment, I'd like to hear your opinion on something."

James listened wide-eyed while his favourite uncle discussed items for Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes with his stern Head of House and was advised how to modify potions or how to use spells to bewitch and improve some of the magical devices they had in store.

"Professor Snape, aren't you afraid that we... er, I mean, the students, might use these items at school?"

"We're not at school now, are we? I trust that you know the difference, Mr. Potter. I've known George here for many years and been quite impressed by his, and his late brother's, ingenuity. He's developing some brilliant magic, and that's always worth discussing. We've been talking about several of his defence products during the last few months." Snape smirked. "So, you want to use what you learn here at school? Just try. Besides, you don't have to call me 'Professor' when we're not at school, James."

While George stared at Snape incredulously, James stuttered, "Uh, ah, thank you, sir. Mr. Snape, then?" Snape nodded.

"Uhm, if you don't mind... I had this idea..." And James jumped into a discussion about invisibility draughts with his uncle and his Head of House, someone he had only grudgingly respected up until now.

"You want us to do what?" James couldn't restrain himself; he was too shocked. "You can't be serious. I can't work with Greengrass on a project. I simply can't!"

"I'll not deduct points right away, Mr. Potter, but you'd better keep your temper in check. Yes, I expect you all to work in study groups of four with one student from each house. You have two months to finish one project, and if you work together, that should give you enough time to get full marks and still have plenty of time for yourselves. If you choose to work on your own and not cooperate with your study group, that's up to you. However, in that instance, you'll get a new assignment and will have to do the work of four in the same time. Your choice." Hermione shrugged. "Forming study groups from the same, or only two, houses is not acceptable. Each group will get their own unique assignment. You can now get on with your work."

With a slight smile, Hermione watched the fourth-years of all four houses scowl at each other, then come up and pick up the assignments for their groups. James grudgingly sat at a table with Gregory Greengrass and two other boys, one from Hufflepuff and one from Ravenclaw.

When she had presented her idea at the last staff meeting, most of the other teachers had been as sceptical as the students. They were afraid that it would increase their workload, but Hermione had reminded them that there were less assignments in total as there would be individually and that she would let the students from fourth-year up work on research topics that were of interest to her, but which she had little time to pursue herself.

Severus, however, had understood the advantages immediately and promised to adopt a similar method. He thought that forming mixed groups and letting them fight against each other would bring out their weaknesses and strengths perfectly. Hermione's heart skipped a beat when she remembered Snape's appreciative look after she had made her suggestion.

The other teachers were still sceptical, but agreed that it was at least worth a try with the older students.

The Headmistress was simply delighted.

"Merlin, Potter, what an idiot you are." Gregory Greengrass rolled his eyes when James jabbered on about the unfairness of the study groups and how he couldn't spend time with his own housemates because of it. "Can't you see that we actually have more time if we work together? If each of us researches a part of the project and we meet from time to time and combine what we've found, we'll be finished in no time. The rest of the time you can spend with your housemates, or your girlfriend." He smirked. Kevin Hopkins and Mark Bradley nodded their agreement, scowling at James, who was constantly interrupting their efforts to make a plan for their project.

"As if you didn't know that Lobelia is mad at me," James hissed. "Go ahead, gloat."

"Why would I care about you and your little girlfriend, Potter? All that counts for me is the project. But if you need advice?" He grinned. James scowled, and the other two boys snickered, watching the exchange interestedly.

"Some advice...?" James glowered. "Go ahead then, smart boy. Tell me why she was mad at me when I complimented her on hair this morning."

"She was probably having a bad hair day and felt mocked. Didn't you notice if something was bothering her?" Greg seemed interested, despite appearing indifferent.

"What do I know? I think it always looks nice, and it's so shiny and soft. It's just... My Uncle Ron gave this book to me at Christmas, and it says you should compliment her often."

"Book?" Greg looked appalled. "You use a book to impress your girlfriend?"

"'Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches'," James said. "Uncle Ron said it's an essential for every wizard."

"That explains a few things." Greg stared at James, horrified. "No wonder wizardkind is diminishing in numbers. You've got to wonder how Gryffindors managed to procreate at all in the past. Tell me, is your uncle married?"

"Uh, yeah... and Rose..."

"Oh, the lovely Rose Weasley, a beautiful flower in my own house, is his daughter, right? A smart girl. She must take after her mother."

"Aunt Luna was in Ravenclaw."

"As he said, a smart girl." Mark Bradley, the Ravenclaw in their team, snickered.

"But I think he had that book when he was dating Aunt Hermione..."

"Oh, well, didn't turn out, did it?" Greg smiled condescendingly. "Professor Granger has more sense than to fall for the primitive platitudes in such a book."

"Hm," James mumbled. "So what do you suggest, then, great Slytherin seducer?"

"You can laugh." Greg smiled lazily. "None of my girlfriends have complained yet."

"Girlfriends?" Kevin Hopkins asked, gaping. "We're fourth-years. How many girlfriends have you had?"

"Three." Greg shrugged. "Believe me, we're still best friends. But we're much too young for serious attachments. A wizard has to gain experience with the fair sex before he makes a choice, you know." His eyes sparkled with mirth at the wide-eyed stares of the three other boys.

"Oh, come on now, seriously!" He frowned. "You've all got mothers and sisters, aunts and cousins. Don't you talk to them to find out what they like and what angers them?"

"Uhm..." James said. "I'm not asking my MOTHER about, ah, THIS."

"Pity." Greg smirked. "Then at least watch them. Watch the girls when they interact try to understand what makes them tick. Then you won't need a book to be in their good books." He laughed when he saw the other boys' horrified faces.

"If Lobelia woke up with zits, something that can happen to the best of us, and she's barely managed to conceal them, you'd better not compliment her on her skin that day."

Likewise, when you notice that her hair is different. You may ask carefully if she's done something with her hair, and if she huffs and puffs about it, you retreat and talk about something else. If she seems pleased that you've noticed, you compliment her on it. If you expect a girl to like you, you listen and pay attention to her."

"But..."

"You asked for my advice, that's it," Greg said, shrugging again. "Shall we work on our project now, or is there something else you need help with, James?"

"Er, uh, no, uhm. Thanks, I suppose," James stammered, and they finally resumed their work.

"Damn, she caught us again. There simply isn't a place where you can have a decent snog with your girlfriend any more." James was outraged when he met the other three boys in his study group.

"Granger? Yeah, she seems to be everywhere. And if it isn't her, it's Snape. They seem to know every secret corner of the castle." Greg Greengrass was in full agreement with James.

"I wish I had my father's map, but he promised Aunt Hermione not to give it to any of his children. Damn," James cursed.

"The famous Marauder's Map? Oh, yeah, I'd like to get my hands on that, too," Mark said.

"Much good it would do you. Aunt Hermione is my dad's best friend, and she, Dad and Uncle Ron had all these adventures with the map..." James sighed. "Blasted fate to have war heroes as relatives and teachers, isn't it?" He winked at the other boys, who grinned. They were all secretly proud of their teachers and relatives, but would never admit it.

"You know, it's about time we did something about it. Valentine's Day is approaching, and where's the fun when you can't have a bit of a snog with your girlfriend without having house points taken before you can pucker up?" Greg grinned mischievously.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" James was all attention.

"Remember I had detention with Shunpike the other day? And there I found this..." Four heads bent over a piece of paper, and excited whispers indicated the beginning of a daring plan.

"They'll have to be seventh-years, one from each house. That'll even out the house points," James said.

"Brilliant! But won't they want to know where we got the passwords?" Kevin threw in.

"Of course. We can tell them that we overheard them," Greg said.

"They'll still change them..." James rubbed his forehead.

"Mmh, yes, but then there'll be a new list in Shunpike's office for emergencies."

"Right!" James eyes lit up. "And I'll sneak in and nick it, and then we can proceed to stage two."

Greg rolled his eyes. "Always so rash. At least let the three of us here make the plan and stand guard. Then you can rush in, all Gryffindor bravado and folly."

Kevin and Mark sniggered, and James grinned sheepishly.

"You know, Greengrass, you're quite brilliant," he acknowledged before they went back to their houses.

Greg stared in surprise. "You're rather useful yourself, Potter." They grinned at each other, aware that neither would be able, nor willing, to stop the friendship that was slowly developing between them.

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 3

Hermione and Severus are both heads of their houses and compete for the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup. However, a few things have changed since Hermione was a student. Prompt: May be DH-compliant. Hermione and Snape are both heads of their houses at Hogwarts and their houses are neck and neck for the Quidditch cup. Humor, romance, snark.

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I wish to thank my beta readers for their patience, support and hard work. There wouldn't be a story without them.

Chapter 2

On a quiet evening in late January, Severus Snape tiredly entered his private quarters after a long and exhausting staff meeting. He wanted nothing more than a hot and relaxing bath, followed by a glass of Firewhisky, a book and bed. He toed his shoes off, threw his teaching robes over a chair and walked to the bathroom while unbuttoning his shirt.

When he opened the door, the sight that met his eyes made him freeze on the spot, gape, and then purr silkily, "Stay right where you are; I'll be right back." He turned on his heels and left the bathroom, strode to the door and walked out into the corridor, looking up and down and quickly walking back towards the staffroom. At the top of the stairs, he almost ran into Hermione, who had discovered a pair of sixth-years snogging behind the statue of Ludger the Level-Headed.

"Professor Granger," he hailed. "I need your help. Can you come with me?"

"Of course. What is it?" Hermione gave the students a last stern look and then turned towards Snape, following him down the stairs. "Is someone hurt?"

"Not yet," he grumbled. "I need you as a witness, if you don't mind."

Hermione's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything and just followed him into his private quarters. She would have liked to have a look around, but he led her straight to the bathroom and opened the door.

"Now, Miss Thomas, Miss Zabini, perhaps you can explain to Professor Granger and me just exactly what you are doing in my bathtub?"

Hermione gaped. Two seventh-year girls were sitting in the bathtub, covered in foam and nothing else.

"We, ah, thought you looked a bit tense, Professor, and wanted to offer you a massage," one of the girls said boldly while the other one blushed crimson.

"Silence," Snape roared. "You can thank your lucky stars on bended knees that you're of age and that I found Professor Granger quickly enough to be my witness, else I'd have you expelled. That'll be one hundred points from each of your houses and detention with Goyle. If I wanted to see naked people, I'd go to a nudist beach. Now get out. OUT!" His face was red and spittle was flying everywhere.

"They need their clothes, Professor Snape," Hermione said, suppressing a smile. That rant had sounded so familiar.

"They can walk back to their dormitories as they are for all I care. If they want everyone to see them stark naked, let them."

The girls blushed and stared at Hermione pleadingly. Hermione tutted and shoved Snape gently out of the bathroom, grabbed some towels and urged the girls to get dressed.

"What got into you? Are you mad?" she asked them when she'd walked them to their dormitories. "That was extremely foolish. If someone had walked in on you before Professor Snape found me, it could have cost you your education and Professor Snape his job."

"I don't think so," Hortense Zabini said. "Dares like that are common, aren't they? I've heard of at least four former students who did something like that with one professor or the other."

"That's no reason to do it too. And now go to bed." Hermione shook her head when she was finally able to walk back to her own quarters.

Tiredly, she opened the door to her own bathroom and gaped, her eyes almost popping out of her head. Just like Snape's, her bathroom was occupied, too. But instead of two girls, two young male seventh-years were sitting in her tub. Unlike the girls, however, these two had obviously become bored and fallen asleep. One of them was snoring softly; the other one was drooling onto her floor tiles.

Hermione backed out quietly, wiping tears from her eyes, her body shaking. Outside, she took a deep breath but couldn't suppress her giggles any longer. She wanted to laugh loudly, but that would have woken the boys. Instead, she chuckled under her breath, went to the fireplace and took a pinch of Floo powder.

"Severus, do you have a moment?"

There was a soft curse, something was set on a hard surface with a clank, and a frowning Severus Snape was looking at her through the fire. "What is it?"

"Would you mind coming through? I need your help." Hermione was laughing again. He scowled some more, but stepped through. "You won't believe this," she choked out, shaking and wiping tears of mirth away.

"Are you quite well?" he asked, glancing at her suspiciously.

"Oh, absolutely." She opened the door to the bathroom, and Snape stepped in. Both of his eyebrows shot up, and his eyes widened as he stared.

"STEBBINS, FAWCETT!" he roared. The boys woke up with a start and jumped but quickly ducked back under the foam when they realised where they were.

"Oh, don't be so hard on them, Professor Snape," Hermione purred, still grinning. "I'm sure the two gentlemen had some relaxing activity planned for me, hadn't you, boys?" She walked over to them and stroked both their chins, licking her lips. The boys looked at her, horrified. Snape watched the display with glittering eyes.

"Now, what is it to be? Would you like to give me a backrub, or should I just admire the view? Perhaps you wanted to wash my hair?"

"Uhm, we..."

"THIS IS A PRANK," Hermione suddenly roared, which caused the boys to emit a frightened squeak. "This will cost you one hundred points from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff apiece. And detention with Shunpike for the next four weeks. I should have you expelled, but since we will have the pleasure of seeing the back of you this summer, anyway, I'll refrain... barely... And now get OUT OF MY SIGHT."

"Er, our clothes..."

"I DON'T CARE! Go naked for all I care."

"Tut, tut, Professor Granger, you can't do this," Snape murmured, barely able to suppress his own laughter now, and shoved her gently out of the bathroom. "Get dressed," he hissed at the boys. "And if one of you so much as puts a toe out of line before the end of the year, you will be expelled. The same goes for your female companions. Now get out."

The boys scrambled through Hermione's living room to the entrance of her private quarters and ran out. Hermione made a stern face while they passed her and uttered an, "I'm so very disappointed in you."

Once they were gone, she looked at Snape, and they both burst out laughing.

"Would you care to join me for a glass of wine, Severus?" Hermione asked, still chuckling.

He agreed and sat down in front of the fire while Hermione fetched the wine. She sat in the armchair opposite him, secretly enjoying the view since he had forgotten to button up his shirt again and was now sitting there with a part of his chest exposed. Hermione quite liked what she saw and felt a warmth spreading through her when she fantasized briefly what she would like to do with that exposed skin.

Snape had poured the wine while she had been watching him, and after toasting each other and drinking, he asked, "What was that all about? You did notice that each of the culprits was from a different house? And since all of them had the same amount of points deducted, no one has really lost anything."

"I did notice indeed," Hermione chuckled. "Won't Minerva just love this? We have our first perfect example of an inter-house prank. They all planned it together; they found seventh-years willing to risk detentions, and they carried it out. I wonder why?"

"Hm," he mumbled. "If I hadn't found you, the whole affair would have likely taken hours because I would have had to Floo the Headmistress, and it would have become complicated. Likewise for you."

"And since we're the ones who usually patrol the corridors and find students snogging in their hiding places after hours, they'd have had us off their backs and been able to enjoy a quiet evening with their boy and girlfriends. Except, of course, for those four unlucky heroes who had to, ah, divert us."

"Indeed," Snape murmured. "I have a good mind to go and patrol a bit..."

"Oh, let them be for once. Have another glass of wine," Hermione pleaded. "It's late, and we should call it a day."

Snape smirked and raised his glass towards her. Smiling, she filled it up for him.

"Stage One successfully executed," Greg Greengrass announced gleefully when the conspirators of all four houses met two days later. "And now for Stage Two."

"A hundred points and detention. That's a lot, though," Kevin Hopkins, the Hufflepuff, threw in.

"True, but their names will be forever tied to the first inter-house prank Hogwarts has seen in a long time if ever, given the crap the Sorting Hat usually spouts when it Sorts. They may yet make it into 'Hogwarts: A History'."

James snorted. "Right. Did you hear about the noise coming out of the staffroom the next day? I asked Peeves, and he said that the Headmistress was howling with laughter. Shows you that they do have a sense of humour, after all. But anyway, how do we proceed?"

"Well, since everything has worked perfectly up 'til now, why shouldn't we just go through with our original plan?"

"So, I'll nick the new list?"

"Yes, on Wednesday. Shunpike will be busy overseeing the Detentions, and so we'll have some time."

"OK, fine. So we can move to Stage Two on the fourteenth for sure?"

"I don't see why not," Greg said. "Now, let's get some studying done."

Valentine's Day was a day Severus Snape was definitely not looking forward to. As if it wasn't enough that students sent each others musical messages with silly pink and red envelopes and were found kissing in every corner, no this year, for the sake of house unity, Minerva McGonagall had decided to extend curfew for older students by two hours. All this overload of sweetness and pink was giving him a headache. Tiredly, he went to his quarters after dinner. He would take a headache potion, rest for a bit, and then start to patrol the corridors.

And thus it transpired that he was once again toeing off his boots, throwing his teaching robes over a chair and on his way to the bathroom. When he opened the door, a familiar scent hit his nose. Closing his eyes briefly, he took a calming breath and looked inside the room.

"Not again." He grumbled barely audibly at the sight, turned around and went to the fireplace.

"Professor Granger, a word, please."

"Go back to your Common Room now, Rose. You needn't worry about your grades; we can talk about this again some other time," Severus heard from afar, but a moment later, Hermione's head appeared in the fireplace.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Yes. One we've had before. Would you come through?"

"Of course." The green flame whirled, and she stepped out of the fireplace, brushing the soot off her shoulders. "Not again? I can't believe they'd try that stunt twice..."

"It's only one this time. Whatever that means." He led her to the bathroom.

When Hermione went into the room, she had to squint; there was so much steam that she could hardly see anything. Looking questioningly at Snape, who shrugged, she approached the bathtub. A slim figure was sitting in it, long, black hair obscuring the face.

"Who are you, and don't you think that this prank is getting old?" Hermione asked.

The figure let out a squeak and jumped out of the tub on the other side from Hermione and Severus, circled past them and ran out, leaving two open-mouthed teachers behind. With a bang, the door closed.

"What the...?" Severus went to the door to open it, but couldn't. "The little devil's locked us in."

"That wasn't a girl, and this was a set-up. He was wearing swimming trunks. That's a different kind of prank, and we're the victims once again." Her voice became shrill. "Wait until I get my hands on the culprits. They'll have extra work and detention until their grandchildren enter Hogwarts."

"Quite," Severus said and took his wand out. Hermione noticed distractedly that he was once again in shirtsleeves and barefoot. *Nice feet*, she thought and then focussed on what he was doing.

Alohomora didn't have an effect, which didn't surprise them. However, even the more advanced opening charms didn't make the door budge an inch. "Stand back," Hermione finally said when they couldn't think of any more curse banning and opening spells.

"*Confringo*." The whole force of Hermione's Blasting Curse hit the door and should have thrown it off its hinges, but apart from some dust and a bit of plaster falling from the ceiling, nothing happened.

"Hell and damnation," Severus cursed. "That is one powerful confinement curse."

"I did it, I did it, and they have no clue who it was." A dripping James Potter with a black wig in his hands ran into the Room of Requirement where his co-conspirators were waiting. They had moved their plotting to that room because half the students in the school were now involved in Operation Valentine as they called it.

"Perfect." Greg smirked and handed him a towel and his clothes. "And our little Rosie here accomplished her task admirably. Granger walked right into our trap." He squeezed the young girl's shoulders. Rose blushed and looked up at him adoringly.

"So now it all depends on your spell," Kevin said.

Greg nodded.

"Do you think they will be very angry?" Albus Severus asked.

"Who cares?" James shrugged. "As long as we all stick together, what could happen? They'll be busy trying to get out."

"Aunt Hermione will kill you if she ever finds out," Al continued worriedly.

"True." James grinned at his younger brother and ruffled his hair. "But no one is going to tell her."

Hermione sat down on the floor. "It's no use. We'll have to wait. Eventually, they'll let us out. It's three hours until curfew, and they wouldn't dare to leave us here all night. No one could be stupid enough to risk being expelled for some quiet time on Valentine's Day."

"I think you underestimate the extent of human stupidity, especially that of hormonal teenagers," Severus murmured.

"Merlin, I hate it that you're always right," Hermione said with a twisted smile when Snape sat down beside her. "So, what do we do now?"

"We can count the tiles, play chess in our heads, sleep or just be quiet, I suppose."

"Lovely." Hermione smirked. "Why don't we tell each other tales? Twenty questions or something like that. How about truth or dare?"

"We're past that age, don't you think?"

She shrugged. "You could tell me where you've been all these years. You never did, you know." Her smile was genuine now.

"If you wish... It isn't a secret. I travelled the world, lingering for a while wherever I felt like it. During these past twenty years, I've done exactly what I wanted, and no one else has told me what to do."

"Looks like you enjoyed it. So where did you stay?"

"My first lengthy stop was on Crete. I explored the old archives there and studied Minoan Potions lore with an old master. Did you know that the Minoans worshipped a snake goddess?"

Hermione's eyes went wide. "You still haven't had enough of snakes?"

"I learned a lot about anti-venoms. The ancient Minoan ritual dances required the handling of snakes, and bites were common. However, Nagini wasn't an ordinary snake. She was part Voldemort, soaked with his evil intent. I don't blame ordinary snakes for what Voldemort did to me."

Hermione let out a sharp breath. "You're very noble. I hate snakes, especially after..."

He gave her a strange look. "Do you? They're animals, driven by instinct. There's nothing to hate. After I left Crete, I slowly travelled south, through all of Africa, then north again, and east until I reached Eastern China. Then south to Australia and New Zealand, west to South America, north again, up to Canada where Minerva found me. At that time, I was feeling a bit tired of travelling, and so her plea to come back and teach again came at the right time. So I came back."

"That's an interesting story. I hope you'll tell me more about your travels in the future about your different stopovers. I always wanted to travel, too, but there never seemed to be the time." She looked wistful.

Severus glanced at her sideways again. "And all this time, I thought that you had married Mr. Weasley and were happily raising his children. Wasn't that the plan?"

"We did date for a while," Hermione said, intrigued by his interest in her private life. "But it didn't work out; we're too different. We are best friends still, better friends, in fact, than we were in our last two years at school because we now have the dating out of the way. But, how did you know?"

"It was rather evident, and the other teachers used to joke about the dream team finding their dream mates: Potter with Ginevra Weasley, and you with Ronald Weasley."

"Yes, Harry and Ron would have liked that, but I would have had to give up too much of myself to be the woman Ron wanted to be in love with. I couldn't do that to myself. I love Ron, but as a friend, never again as a potential partner. And after that... there were others, but I never found..." She paused, frowned and looked at him. "How about you? Why didn't you marry some Greek or Canadian...? Oh... uhm, I'm sorry..." She had forgotten about Lily Evans for a moment. With his all-consuming love for the dead woman, he wouldn't be interested in anyone else. That thought made her heart ache, as it had ever since she had seen his memories twenty years before.

"Don't be sorry," he murmured. "There were affairs, but I never got involved enough to make it permanent."

She nodded. "I understand."

"Do you?" he said and looked at her funnily.

She caught her breath at the strange heat in his eyes and lowered her gaze to her hands. "Well, perhaps. It's none of my business..."

He didn't reply to that and they sat in silence.

After a while, Hermione stretched her legs and yawned. "I wish those little criminals had found a more comfortable room for us. Something with a sofa or armchairs."

She hardly had uttered the words when the bathroom around them disappeared and they found themselves in a part of Severus' living room with armchairs and the sofa. The fireplace was obscured by an impenetrable opaque wall, likewise the doors and windows in the room.

"Bloody hell," Severus said, sitting down in one of the armchairs. "This strikes a note... I think I know... I wish we had a few snacks and a nice bottle of red wine with two glasses."

A table with the required items appeared at their side.

"May I?" Severus said and poured the wine when Hermione nodded. She took a sandwich and nibbled on it.

"I know what this is," Severus said with growing anger. "This is an old, old spell, a very powerful spell... There has to be a Slytherin involved. You don't have your house under control, Madam."

"What?" Hermione's eyes flashed. "How dare you... Don't give me that tone; I haven't been one of your students for a very long time." She glared at him and he glared back. "Besides, I'd bet anything that that culprit in the bathtub was a Gryffindor, rash and brazen as that stunt was. You don't have your house under control, either. Sir."

Severus didn't listen. "If you're incapable of keeping your house under control, you shouldn't be its Head," he hissed. "Didn't I know it? The house with the most deeply-set prejudice, the old and secret knowledge, the power... and they thought Slytherins would show respect to a Muggle-born." As soon as the words had left his mouth, Severus closed his eyes and put his face in his hands.

Hermione was very angry. But not angry enough to not notice the distress Severus was in after his last words. "Listen to me, you, you... Slytherin! Stop throwing your experience around and acting like no one else has ever had to deal with your precious pure-bloods before." Her anger faded while she ranted; she saw how he stealthily looked at her through his fingers. He looked like a teenager who was about to get detention, and it almost made her laugh.

"You deserve detention for your impertinence towards another Head of House, you know," she said, laughter making her voice shake slightly. Severus, however, mistook the shaking in her voice for tears.

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said that," he said miserably. "Your being a Muggle-born has nothing to do with anything. Please forgive me." He took her hand and looked

at her with his dark, sad eyes.

Hermione caught her breath, chastised herself and tore her eyes away from his. "Don't apologise, Severus. There's no need. We all say things when we're angry. We're both rather, uh, stressed at the moment. There's nothing to forgive, so let's focus on how to get out of the Harmonious Matrimony Charm, hm?"

"You know about the Harmonious Matrimony Charm?" He looked at her dumbfounded.

"Well, give me some credit, will you?" she growled. "Don't you think the know-it-all did a little research on all those precious pure-blood traditions before I became their Head of House? Of course I came across that charm, and a few nastier ones than that. All's fair to preserve the precious blood lines, isn't it?"

"Don't look at me like that! I'm not a pure-blood; I don't live by those traditions, nor do I approve of them. I'm just surprised that you..."

"That I, the Muggle-born, have learned about those kinds of traditions?"

"Please, Hermione, I'm sorry..."

"Oh, stop apologising, will you? Why are you so upset about this?"

He stared at her, frowning. "Weren't you acting earlier as if you knew all about me, my, ah, motivations? Didn't Potter show you my memories? You would know why I'm upset..."

"Oh." Hermione looked at him wide-eyed and shocked. "Uhm... No, he didn't show me... but I know..." She swallowed and studied his face. The deep, black eyes were staring at her pleadingly. Pleadingly? No, she must be mistaken. Why would he care? Just because of that memory, because Lily might have been offended? Probably. She sighed and looked away, her heart aching again because of the hopelessness of her attraction.

"There is nothing to forgive, Severus. You didn't offend me. As I said, we were both angry. And now let's work on the charm."

"Very well." He kept staring at her.

Hermione swallowed and tried to focus her thoughts on the charm instead of the wizard at her side. "This charm, as far as I know, was used to make arranged marriages work. Newlyweds were confined for some time and had to fulfil some kind of task together, even after the confinement had ended, before the spell fully released them. That was supposed to teach them how to live and work together in harmony, even if there was no love between them." She glanced at Severus, who nodded and frowned. "But quite frequently, one of them didn't survive the time in the confinement. It was forced on them, and some weren't interested in achieving harmony."

"That's correct," Severus said. "It has become unfashionable, but it is still well-known in the more traditionally minded pure-blood families. The question is: what does our version of the charm require from us? Some puzzle we need to solve together, or a task on which we must work together?"

"I wish I knew what the requirement was to be released from this charm," Hermione said hopefully, but nothing happened.

"Well, it was worth a try." Severus smirked and reached for his glass of wine, but knocked it over. Hermione Summoned a rag and mopped the spilled wine up. "Let me help you," Severus said. As he lifted the glasses and plate out of the way, a tingle, together with some sparks, flashed through and over them.

"Oh, what was that?" Hermione had Banished the rag and was looking at her hands and arms in surprise. A few glittering sparks were still clinging to her clothes.

"Listen to what I say. This will help you," Severus said with a smirk, and there was the tingle again.

"Oh, I think I can help you with this, too." Hermione smiled, and at that, both were showered in a bright light.

Peeves appeared. "Oooh, looky, looky, Granger and Snape, all cosy and alone," he screeched.

"Peeves, can you get us out of here?" Hermione pleaded.

Peeves blew her a raspberry and started to sing.

"Got yourselves caught.

Begging is for naught.

Promises made are not to be broken,

Promises, honest, have to be spoken.

Help for a desire of the heart

Is always better than a fart."

He cackled, swooped around them, and disappeared.

Severus and Hermione stared at each other. "Well, that was easy," Severus finally said, and Hermione nodded.

"So, what is the heart's desire that I can help you with?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

Hermione blushed, thinking frantically. What did she want from him? *Everything*, a treacherous voice in the back of her mind whispered, but was suppressed quickly. "Uhm, you know, I really would like you to teach me how to fly."

His eyes went wide. "Oh! You remember, hm? It's a very complex... but if anyone can learn how to do it, you can. All right. I shall teach you how to fly. I promise." A strong magical tingle swept over them.

"And your heart's desire?" Hermione asked.

He stared at her for so long that she became nervous. What she thought she saw in his face was insecurity and hope, but she wasn't too certain of anything any longer. His behaviour baffled her. She wondered if he was aware of the effect his new, mellower way of interacting with people was having on her or on other women, for that matter. Perhaps he was trying to find friends, she reasoned. That must be it; everyone needed friends, and he didn't seem to have any close ones. So, she would try to be his friend. If she could do that for him, she would. And if it broke her heart in the process, the effort would be worth it.

He still stared, but finally cleared his throat and said, sounding slightly insecure, "There is something. There will be an, ah, official function in about six weeks time. I would like it, uhm, if you would be kind enough to help me prepare for, and accompany me to, that function?"

"And will you tell me what kind of function it is?"

"Yes, when we work on the preparations. It involves potions. Will you go with me?" Again, that hopeful look. She couldn't interpret it any other way.

"All right. I will help you prepare for, and accompany you to, this function. I promise."

With a bang, all the doors flew open, and the mist that had obscured the windows, doors and fireplace vanished. Severus waved his wand to close the doors. Hermione went to the fireplace.

"This has been an interesting evening, Severus. I'm glad it was you with whom I was trapped. That certainly made the evening enjoyable despite the trap."

Severus' eyes widened, and a faint smile brightened his features. "The feeling is mutual. Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight, Severus." She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and spun back to her own quarters.

"The first step for independent flight is to memorise the different levels of the spell. You need to focus on your centre while you cast the levitation and acceleration charms on yourself. After much practice, a single thought will get you flying, but in the beginning, you need to be comfortable with the different elements. In theory, it's like the charms on a broomstick, only instead of the broomstick, the recipient is your own body, and you can trigger its reaction with a thought, instead of having to shift your weight, grab handles and such."

Hermione listened in fascination while Severus lectured her on the theory and practice of human flight. It had been a long time since she had heard him lecture, and his voice and mannerisms while lecturing were making her heart flutter. She had to call herself to task not to miss what he was telling her.

"I will give you a demonstration to show you what's possible in a tandem flight. Are you ready?"

Hermione swallowed and nodded. She wanted to do this. She hated flying on broomsticks and Hippogriffs, but she hoped that she would like a self-determined means of flying better. She'd have to rely only on herself with that, and not on some unpredictable device or the erratic actions of a winged beast.

"Now, the first step will be to secure you to me so you can't fall even if you let go of me." He cast a silvery rope at her, and the rope wound around both their waists, tying them together with enough slack not to hamper their movements.

"I'll cast a Levitation Charm on you next to make you float. *Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Hermione lost contact with the ground under her feet and floated upwards. Severus took her hands and prevented her from floating too high up.

"Now, put your hands around my waist and cling to my back, as if you were riding piggyback. Yes, like that."

Hermione felt rather ridiculous, but did as she was told. At least it gave her an excuse to be close to Severus...

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she croaked, suddenly frightened.

Severus ran a few steps, flapped his arms and took off.

It was a strange feeling to be so close to Severus, but it was also an exciting and elevating feeling, Hermione found. She felt his muscles move under his robes when he was flapping his arms to get them to the desired altitude and direction. They were shooting forward, propelled by magic. The arm movements, she determined, were mostly needed for changing directions.

It was strange and exciting, and Hermione loved every minute of it. Her fear of flying seemed to have vanished completely, maybe because she knew that she could trust the man who was carrying her on his back—a feeling she'd never had when she was on a broom or while riding a Hippogriff. The warmth of Severus' body made her feel safe. The fact that she could feel him, touch him, and smell his scent made her feel protected. It was a good feeling, and Hermione didn't want this journey to end. She leaned in a bit closer and wondered if she was doing herself a favour in spending so much time in Severus' company. Wouldn't that only increase her heartache once their charm-induced tasks ended? Perhaps, but she wouldn't have wanted to miss this for the world. She sighed and glanced over his shoulders, finally paying attention to what he was doing.

He was giving her a demonstration of his flying skills. At first he had soared high, almost sailing on the up draughts rising from the valleys. But now he was shooting down towards the rugged hills of the Highlands. He was flying parallel to a mountain range: rising, descending, slowly spinning them around their axis, and finally flying up to a steep hill, approaching a hidden cave facing southeast where he landed.

Hermione let go of him reluctantly. "That was exciting," she breathed, her face flushed and her eyes shining. "Thank you for that."

Severus gave her one of his rare smiles and motioned her inside the cave. To Hermione's surprise, it was comfortably furnished and had a protective barrier at its entrance that let the light in, but not the cold and the rain. There was even a small fireplace.

"*Incendio!*" Severus lit the fire and offered her tea and some chocolate digestives. "I put up Anti-Apparition Spells, but I asked a house-elf to bring a few provisions up here."

Hermione nodded. "A nice little hiding-place."

"Yes. I discovered it the year I was acting as Headmaster. No one else knows about this place. You're welcome to it whenever you feel a need to get away from it all."

"Thank you." She grinned. "At the end of a school year, that would be a rather desirable prospect, I'm sure."

"Now, when we've finished our tea, I'll fly us back, and that'll be the end of the first lesson. You'd need to practice the spell's elements first before you could control the completed spell cast on your body."

The flight back was just as exciting. Hermione's heart hammered; she loved being so close to Severus. However, it ended much too soon, and reluctantly she had to let go of him.

"Thank you," she said with a bright smile. "I shall see you tomorrow in your Potions lab, then."

"If you like, you can assist me with the preparations for a pre-stage of the Wolfsbane Potion."

"Wolfsbane?" Hermione was dumbfounded. She had never really cared about what had become of the remaining werewolves in Britain after the war. After Remus' death and the relief that little Teddy hadn't inherited his father's condition, werewolves had only been important to her in their abstract role as magical beings. She had worked for their freedom, acceptance and self-determination for almost twenty years at the Magical Beings Division of the Ministry of Magic. However, she had rarely been directly involved with any of the magical beings she was fighting for individually and hadn't really thought about Wolfsbane and how it could help keep the number of werewolves small by reducing the numbers of new infections, in addition to lightening the suffering during transformation.

"You know, Dumbledore left me a lot of his money. It's rather laughable, really. It could never have been his intention for me to have the money, since he set me up to die at Voldemort's hands with that strange wand ownership thing. I've never quite understood it. It must have been one of those alibi actions that made Dumbledore appear

benevolent when in reality..."

"I know," Hermione said.

"If I hadn't inherited it, the money would have been distributed among several charitable organisations. But for some reason, I survived, and thus received the money when I came back to England." He looked at her sideways. Hermione had blushed slightly; he must never know that it was she who had saved him. She didn't want to be an obligation, want him to feel that he owed her a debt.

"Anyway," he continued. "Since you know about my past, I'm sure you can easily imagine that I wouldn't touch Dumbledore's money with a stick. But to let it go to some anonymous charity? I decided to maintain some control over it and set up a Werewolf Research Foundation in association with St. Mungo's. And that's why we're preparing it. We provide the Wolfsbane Potion, and every werewolf can get it for free, every month. In return, they agree to share their medical data with the Foundation. We don't really know all that much about lycanthropy; maybe more knowledge will help us develop better potions, if not a cure.

Hermione was very quiet. She stared at him then suddenly blurted out, "You're L. Brown! The one who wrote the new, revolutionary Potions textbooks, aren't you? I've read about this in the *Daily Prophet*. The Remus Lupin Werewolf Research Foundation will be located in the L. Brown Wing, won't it?"

He looked at her insecurely. "Yes, that's my alias. I would have told you eventually. That's how I've earned my money during these past twenty years. The royalties for my books were rather generous, and I was involved with some rather interesting discoveries. I didn't ask St. Mungo's to name a wing after my alter ego, though."

"But that's wonderful! Ernie has been going on and on about those books and how they make teaching Potions so much easier." Ernie McMillan was the current Potions teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione continued, "It shouldn't be called the L. Brown Wing, it should be called the Severus Snape Wing! How did you come up with the idea to help the werewolves, of all causes?"

"I never really had an issue with Lupin, although I was always mortally afraid of werewolves, as you would know."

Hermione nodded, her heart going out to him. To be almost killed by a werewolf at fifteen wasn't a joke, and he wasn't likely to ever forget this.

"I, ah, didn't treat Lupin fairly. He always kept out of the pranks and fights if he could, and when we were in the Order together, in the second war, he did make an effort to make peace, only I..."

"Don't blame yourself. He was no angel, and you were under so much stress," Hermione threw in passionately.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But still... and then he was killed in the war, and now I can never tell him that I did appreciate his efforts at making peace." He paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. "And thus the Foundation. I can't do anything for him anymore, but I can help his fellow sufferers. Providing them with Wolfsbane will also prevent them from infecting more people, and if we treat them decently, they won't turn to the next Dark Lord, who's bound to show up sooner or later"

"Merlin, don't tempt fate," Hermione gasped and knocked on wood. "But I still think it should be the Severus Snape Wing."

"L. Brown is just fine, and you'll find out more about that when we go to the opening ceremony. Now, let's get on with the brewing..." And with that they started to work silently, side-by-side.

It took Hermione three more flying sessions before she was able to make her first short, independent flight. Still tied to Severus, though now by much longer ropes, she took off, flapped her arms wildly and managed some control over her movements to send her soaring in the air at thirty feet. Thinking about where she wanted to go, she managed to control her movements sufficiently to actually fly in a small circle and land proudly at Severus' side.

"That was not bad, Hermione. If you continue like this, you'll have your first free flight session in two weeks."

Hermione beamed at him. While she was sad not to be able to fly piggyback with him any longer, the experience of flying on her own was something liberating. She was looking forward to it. Flying tandem with Severus wasn't good for her peace of mind. She would be relieved when she could pretend to be indifferent again and wouldn't have his warmth, the way he felt under her hands and his beguiling scent dangling in front of her nose like a carrot.

"How much of the potion is needed?" Hermione had helped Severus with the brewing for three weeks now, and they had five cauldrons containing a preliminary stage of the potion waiting for completion.

"Only two more cauldrons," Severus said. "We'll take the preliminary stage to St. Mungo's, and the Healers can do the final step on their own. Under stasis, the pre-potion will last for a while, and they can activate the amount they need each month. This here should last them six months, at least. That will give me enough time to train their best Healers to make the potion themselves."

"All right then. Let's fill these last two cauldrons."

Hermione had never felt as free as when she was soaring in the wind and the air. She'd had six sessions of free flight already, and today was her final flying lesson and her first night flight. Severus had promised her a surprise, and now they were flying under the stars and a crescent moon, enjoying the sight of the mysteriously glittering lakes, dark forests and rugged, barren hillsides under them.

Hermione hadn't felt this peaceful in a long time. She was both happy and sad. Happy for having achieved what she had set out to do, happy for having formed a kind of friendship with Severus. Sad because the close interactions of the flying lessons would come to an end now. There were still a few days of brewing left, and then they would be going to the opening ceremony for the Research Foundation on Saturday, but after that, it would be over.

However, having become friends of sorts, perhaps they could spend some time together, independent from being forced to do so by the charm? Hermione resolved to give it a try.

Her thoughts were interrupted when he led her to the cave that had become their place for a rest and some tea before each lesson ended. Today, a picnic had been set out with cold meat, sandwiches, salads and an apple tart. Severus opened a bottle of wine and poured them a glass each.

"Congratulations, Hermione," he said, smiling slightly. "You are now one of only two human beings in the world who can fly on their own. It takes a very skilled and powerful witch or wizard to master that spell, and you can be very proud. You are one powerful, remarkable witch." He stared at her with glittering eyes, and Hermione's breath caught.

"Thank you," she whispered. "But without you as my teacher..."

He shook his head. "Without your talent and determination, the best teaching wouldn't help. This is your achievement; don't downplay it. And we'll celebrate it tonight; this evening is for you. Look." He motioned towards the cave's opening, and Hermione looked outside and gasped. Within a few minutes, many shooting stars and fireballs shot past.

"A meteor shower," she said in delight. "What wonderful fireworks you have organised for me."

He didn't say anything but raised his glass to her. They watched in silence while they ate.

When it got late, Hermione said tentatively, "I've really enjoyed this time together, Severus. I wonder if, uhm, perhaps it would be possible to spend some time, as friends, after the charm..."

"Shh," he said, taking her hand and kissing it gently. "We are in a forced companionship here, Hermione neither of us had a choice in the matter. I've enjoyed the time we've spent together, too, but please, wait until the obligation is fulfilled and the charm ends. Then, if you still want to ask me your question, I shall give you my answer."

"I agree," she said, understanding perfectly where he was coming from. "But remember, Severus, this was one of my heart's desires. That can't be forced. The charm insists on honesty there."

He nodded. "Shall we fly back? It's getting late."

"All right," Hermione said as she got up and stretched. She winced; her arms were sore. Severus saw her pained expression and offered, "Would you like to fly back in tandem? Your muscles will need a lot more training before they're up to lengthy flights without aching."

Hermione accepted thankfully, and rather selfishly, and savoured their close contact once again.

"You look very elegant," Severus commented when he saw Hermione in her new ruby-red dress robes, ready to go to the opening ceremony with him.

"You're not so bad yourself." She laughed, inspecting him in return. He looked rather striking in his graphite coloured dress robes, a colour that softened his complexion and went perfectly with his grey hair.

"Let's get going then." They walked to the gates of Hogwarts, and then he took her arm and Disapparated.

At the Ministry, he showed her to their seats in the front row and explained to her that he'd be called to the podium towards the end of the ceremony. Then he took both her hands in his.

"Hermione, you have helped me prepare for this event and accompanied me here. Your obligation to me is fulfilled; this was one of my heart's desires. And I taught you how to fly, and that was fulfilled as well. That was your heart's desire. If you agree that we have both fulfilled our obligation to the Harmonious Matrimony Charm, then it will end."

"It has been fulfilled," Hermione agreed, and a magical tingle went through both of them.

"That was it." Severus smiled at her. "And now, if you wish, you can go home. It would make me very glad if you decided to stay, though, and accompanied me to the banquet after the ceremony."

"I'd love to," Hermione smiled at him. "You are good company, Severus."

He still held her hands, his eyes shining. Reluctantly, he let them go when Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was still Minister of Magic, went up to the podium to speak.

Hermione was strongly aware of the wizard at her side during all the speeches. The ending of the charm hadn't changed a thing; she still wanted to be with him as strongly as before and was hoping that she could maintain a close friendship with him since anything more seemed out of the question. She had stopped listening after the third speech but was suddenly all attention when the Chief Healer of St. Mungo's said, "And now, I ask you to welcome the founder and benefactor of the Remus Lupin Werewolf Research Foundation, none other than Leontes Brown, a wizard who is known for his ground-breaking contributions to the field of healing potions and for his new standard textbooks for Potions, a wizard to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude for fighting tirelessly on our side in both Voldemort wars, a wizard also known to us as Severus Snape." Hermione's eyes went wide while the audience was gasping in surprise and then clapping frantically. Severus had stepped up to the podium where he'd started to speak. She didn't hear a word he said; she was dumbfounded.

Leontes. His alias: the name he had used for travelling the world, the name he had published books with, was Leontes Brown, but usually only seen abbreviated as 'L. Brown'. Leontes, King of Sicily, husband of Hermione, both characters in Shakespeare's play 'A Winter's Tale'. Her heart hammered so fast that she couldn't hear anything apart from the wild staccato in her ears. The blood had rushed to her head and seemed to diminish her vision as well. She only saw his face, his lips moving while he was giving his speech. Leontes. Anger slowly rose in her. To spring this on her in public, in a situation where she couldn't even give him a piece of her mind. Devious bastard. She had to admire him, though, and that made her smile. Leontes. Suddenly, the hope blooming in her heart made her dizzy. Husband of Hermione. He'd have to grovel before she'd forgive him for that. And then...

She didn't get an opportunity to talk to him for a while. Looking apologetically in her direction, he was led away by the Chief Healer and the Minister. Hermione smiled and turned to Minerva McGonagall and Ernie Macmillan, who had both come to the ceremony independently.

"I can't believe L. Brown is Snape," Ernie exclaimed. "His research is outstanding, and the new textbooks are so fantastic... so much better than that old-fashioned, dusty nonsense we were forced to study with. It makes teaching so much easier. I can't wait to discuss the books with him." He beamed.

Minerva McGonagall gave Hermione an odd look. "Leontes, hm? I wonder why he chose that name."

"That's something I'd like to know as well," Hermione muttered.

When Severus came back to escort her to the banquet, she greeted him with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. "You have some explaining to do, uh, Leontes."

His eyes narrowed, and he frowned. "Later." He relaxed, however, when Hermione squeezed his arm reassuringly.

They both chatted with their neighbours during the meal, but Hermione was constantly aware of his presence. Her heart was still hammering wildly, and she had trouble focusing on what her neighbour, an elderly wizard who worked at St. Mungo's, was telling her. She couldn't wait for the meal to end. She wanted to be alone with Severus. She wanted an explanation.

When the endless-seeming meal finally came to an end and the music started to play, couples moved onto the dance floor, and before anyone else could approach Hermione, Severus asked her to dance.

This was just what she needed, she thought while they danced, as if she wasn't confused enough already. His arm around her felt so good, she only hoped that he wouldn't notice how fast her heart was beating. She sighed, and he drew her closer. Giving up all pretence, she leaned into his embrace. They finished the dance as close as decency permitted.

They then had to dance with other people, but again Hermione was aware of Severus wherever he was. Whenever she looked in his direction, he looked back at her with a half-smile and glittering eyes.

When they finally danced with each other again, Hermione whispered, "If I don't get that explanation soon, I am going to explode."

Severus chuckled and drew her closer again. "Soon," he promised, but it took another hour until they could finally leave.

Once outside on the street, Severus whispered, "Let's go to the cave."

Hermione nodded, suddenly tongue-tied. Her heart had started to hammer madly again, and her mouth was dry. She took Severus' arm, and he Apparated them to the mountains, as close to the cave as possible. They nodded at each other, broke into a run and took off, heading straight up the steep slope until they arrived at the cave.

Inside, Hermione started a fire and sat down. "Explain."

Severus sighed, sat down opposite her and took her hands. "I was afraid that you would be angry with me..."

She shook her head, frowning. "I don't understand... Why Leontes...?"

"Can't you guess?"

She swallowed, breathless. "Not really."

He closed his eyes and sighed again. "I'll understand if you don't want to see me any longer. But I had hoped that perhaps..." He leaned forward and looked into her eyes, searching for something. "I thought that perhaps... you know. Ever since you kissed me back to life, it's only been you."

"What?" Hermione's eyes widened. "You know? You've known all the time? But my Memory Charm..."

"Confused me for a while, but not for long. It wasn't very strong not strong enough for someone who is proficient at Occlumency, at any rate."

"I see," she whispered. "But why..."

"Why did I leave? I had to sort a few things out, about me, about my life. I had messed up my first chance at life horribly; I didn't want to risk that second chance you'd given me. As you said back then, I was free for the first time in my life. And you were about to marry Weasley, or so I thought."

"But why Leontes?"

"Because of that kiss... You were in my heart, and I couldn't get you out again. I knew that you were alive, thought you were happy, and that was a way to be connected to you. The only way, I thought."

Hermione swallowed. "And Brown?"

"Your brown eyes were the first thing I saw in my new life."

"Merlin," she said. "And Lily? I thought it was her, always. I thought..." She closed her eyes and grimaced. "I thought I didn't have a chance with you," she whispered insecurely. "And I won't be second best. I couldn't live with that."

"Never, never second best," he exclaimed. "It's been you for so long. Only you." He shook his head, giving her a wistful smile. "You gave me my memories back, and I looked at them in a Pensieve. And from that moment, my obsession with Lily was gone. She will always have a special place in my heart; she was my best friend, and the only friend I had." He squeezed her hands reassuringly while she stared at him wide-eyed. "But she never loved me; she didn't really care for me very much. I see that now. I never understood that as a youth, and later, after her death, the memory of her was the only thing that kept me going, the only light in my life that made me strong enough to survive all that without going mad. Can you understand that?"

Hermione nodded. "And now?"

"And now I hope that you will allow me to court you. I know that I can't give you much. I know what I am..." Now ~~he~~ she looked insecure. "But you must believe me that there is no one else, nor ever will be."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, she looked straight into his black, glittering eyes, lifted one hand and cupped his cheek. "That makes me very happy," she said simply and kissed him.

They didn't need any more explanations, or many words that night. Hermione had found what she had been searching for for so long, and Severus was all she could ever wish for. He was considerate, passionate, skilled and intense. When they made love, he whispered, moaned and screamed her name, and she was never again in any doubt that it was she he loved, and no one else. She didn't give him any reason to doubt her feelings for him, either.

Hermione had the impression that the rest of the school year went by like a dream. There were two more Quidditch games: Slytherin against Hufflepuff and Gryffindor against Ravenclaw. Severus and Hermione, however, cared little. They had given up prowling the corridors and only patrolled when they were on duty. The rest of the time was spent in each other's company, much to the relief of the older students, who could now pursue their own romances with more freedom again.

Slytherin finally won the Quidditch cup by a hair's breadth because Albus Severus Potter managed to catch the Snitch after a game that lasted five hours. Slytherin had scored enough points to make it next to impossible for Gryffindor to beat it. In the last game of the season, Gryffindor against Ravenclaw, the Ravenclaw Seeker was determined not to let Gryffindor get away with drawing out the game long enough to score enough points, and thus the Gryffindor Seeker barely managed to catch the Snitch and secure second place for Gryffindor.

Despite losing the Quidditch Cup, Gryffindor won the House Cup for the fourth time in a row, and Hermione applauded as enthusiastically as the rest of the school.

Severus proposed when school ended, and they got married in July.

Epilogue

Hermione and Severus Granger-Snape had two children: Perdita Snape married Albus Severus Potter, and much to her father's amusement and his father's annoyance, Albus took her surname and called himself Severus Snape the Younger from then on. Hermione and Severus' son Mamillus Granger married Andrea, the youngest daughter of George Weasley and his wife Angelina. Gregory Greengrass married Rose Weasley, and James Potter married Lobelia Longbottom. Scorpius Malfoy married Lily Potter, and Mark Bradley married Pansy Bulstrode. Kevin Hopkins married Margaret Thomas and...

All was well.

A/N: This story has been recc'ed on the Golden Seeker.