

Between the Sand and Stone

by sshg316

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 7

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So lately, been wondering

Who will be there to take my place

When I'm gone, you'll need love to light the shadows on your face

If a greater wave shall fall and fall upon us all

Then between the sand and stone, could you make it on your own?

~ Wherever You Will Go, The Calling

Prologue

September, 2003

The room was quiet, save for the high-pitched beeping of the Heart Monitoring Charm and the raspy breathing of the man in the hospital bed. He hated St Mungo's. He would rather be dying in the comfort of his flat than this sterile, bleak, wretched hospital. He struggled to breathe, to fill his Cursed lungs, but his efforts were not rewarded. A shuddering cough pierced the silence, racking his body with excruciating pain.

Cool, slender fingers brushed aside the lock of pale blond hair that had fallen across his brow. He felt her touch as she gently moved along his face, as though memorising his features: the bridge of his nose, the fullness of his lips, his slightly pointy chin, and strong jaw line. He struggled to keep his eyes open so he could continue to look at her...his wife. He had never deserved her, had been the cause of so much pain for her, and now, after everything they had been through, here they were.

Fate was a fickle bitch.

He coughed again, unable to even utter a curse as the pressure in his chest built and released, built and released, leaving him even more weakened than he had previously

thought possible. Damn his crazy aunt and her demented loyalty to that bloodthirsty maniac. And while he was at it, damn his idiotic parents, too...this was entirely their fault.

Because of them, he would have to leave her...his wife, his love, his fucking *everything* ... his Hermione.

A cool cloth wiped his face and neck, and soothing words were spoken. "Don't look so cross, Malfoy. Your face will stick like that, and then where will you be, hmm?"

He attempted to smirk at her before answering weakly, "Don't worry ... Granger. If it does ... you won't have ... to look at it ... for long."

Instantly her eyes...those brown pools he so adored to stare into...filled with tears; he cursed himself soundly. "Don't. S'all right," he slurred, frowning his brow in frustration at how weak he was becoming. He was close to the end now. Damn it all to hell. He wasn't ready; she needed him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she moved her hand to his, entwining their fingers, her thumb sliding across the top of his hand in a light caress.

He barely managed to roll his eyes. "What are ... you sorry ... for? I'm the ... fuck-up who ... made you cry."

"Language," she scolded softly, a gentle smile curving her lips.

How many times had she said that very same thing? Would that be the last time? He wasn't *ready*. Greedy bastard that he was, he wanted more ... oh Merlin, did he want more ... more of everything with her.

Pull yourself together, he thought. There were important things he needed to tell her. She might not be able to make it on her own. It had been a constant struggle, even with the both of them, and he had to be sure she would be taken care of after he was gone. Harry bloody Potter was Merlin-knew-where, and those damn Weasleys had turned their backs on her when she had dared to marry the Malfoy heir. He and Hermione had just been starting to get things together financially when his health had begun to deteriorate. And now he was going to die. He wasn't certain she could finish what they'd started on her own...and he knew without a doubt that she would try, even if it were to her own disadvantage. He needed to know she wouldn't be left destitute or without a place to live ... or alone. He had to tell her

Another torturous cough ripped the air from his lungs. Shite, it fucking *hurt*.

"It's all right. Just relax and let it come. You have plenty of air. Don't fight it, love. Work with it ..."

Her calm, loving voice talked him through the pain, even as he internally snorted at her words. *Plenty of air, my arse*. He couldn't say that, though. She was fragile enough as it was; he didn't want to upset her more with his usual sarcasm.

"Go ahead and say it. 'Plenty of air, my arse,'" she mimicked, her eyes shining with tears or mirth, he couldn't tell which.

One corner of his mouth lifted in a brief facsimile of a smile. "Smarty-pants." Damn, it was so hard to breathe.

"That's me."

He heard her laugh softly...Merlin, he loved that sound.

"Hermione. Have to ... tell you. Promise me..."

His words were interrupted by another cough, his body so weak he could only shudder and choke his way through it. It would be over soon. He had to tell her...she had to know ...

"Shh. I'm here. Let me go get the Healer. She can give you some more pain-relieving potion, all right? I'll be right ba..."

"NO!" he roared, violently expelling the air from his lungs. His eyes rolled back in his head as he tried to relax against the wave of pain his outburst had caused. Hermione slipped her hand into his, and he grasped it tightly as he struggled for breath. As soon as he could take in enough air, he tried again. "You ... have to ... promise me ... if you ... need help ... go to ..."

Dear Merlin, this was hell. There just wasn't enough air. Why hadn't he told her sooner? *Because you're a self-absorbed moron who thought he was invincible. Now, get on with it!*

"If you ... need help ... promise me ... go to ... Snape. Promise ... me." Pain and frustration filled his eyes as he struggled to get out the words.

"Draco," she began, her tone placating but firm, "Professor Snape would be the last person willing to help me. Besides, it won't come to that. I can take care of myself. You don't need to worry."

"No ... been ... writing him. He writes back. Meetings ... every week. Letters ... in a box at the top of ... the cupboard. Severus ... likes me. He will ... help." He felt his breathing become more and more shallow. Was this it then? This slow asphyxiation was how he was going to die? How ignominious.

"I don't think..."

"Promise me!" He stared at her, willing her to understand what he wanted, his eyes wide and probably appearing half-crazed by his efforts. "Promise me ... now." He cringed at how pathetic he sounded; the deep timbre of his voice was long gone, and in its place was a thin, reedy whinge.

"If I need help, I'm sure Harry will..."

"No!" Good gods, why was the woman fighting him now? Wasn't she supposed to honour a dying man's last request? What the hell was with all the bloody questions? "Not Potter ... Snape ... Snape! ... Promise, if you ... need help ... go to Snape ... promise." He was so tired. He wished she would just agree so he could sleep.

"All right," she whispered.

"Say it."

She gave him a sad smile and reached out one hand to touch his face. "I promise, if I need help, I will go to Professor Snape. All right? I promise."

"Good." Yes, that was good. Finally. He could rest now. His breathing became more relaxed, though it still remained shallow. "Love you ... so much ... so sorry, love. Don't want ... to leave ... Love you ..."

Tears coursed down her cheeks ... and his, if he would ever admit to such a thing.

"I love you, too. So very much." She pressed her forehead against his arm as she trembled.

The door to the room opened, and the Healer briskly entered, carrying a tray of various phials. "Good evening, Mr Malfoy, Mrs Malfoy," she said, her tone sympathetic yet professional. "Are you comfortable? We could give you a more powerful pain-relieving potion, if you'd like. It might make you a bit drowsy."

That meant he might drift away while he slept. That was somehow both appealing and disconcerting. He looked to Hermione.

"It might be easier, darling," she said, wiping away her tears only for them to be replaced with fresh ones. "Why don't you take the potion, and I'll climb in and lie with you a while."

Yes. That sounded like a great way to go.

He nodded his approval, and the potion was administered. The Healer left quietly, and Hermione used her wand to widen the bed a bit. She crawled in and snuggled up next to him, her head on his shoulder. They lay there side by side, their hands clasped tightly, their fingers intertwined. After a few minutes, the pain began to dull, although his breathing remained laborious. His eyelids began to droop, and he knew he would fall asleep soon. He needed to hear it one more time; he needed to tell her once more.

"Love you."

"I love you. Always."

He turned his head, which took more effort than he had anticipated. "Kiss me."

She tilted her face toward him, and somehow he garnered the strength to lower his head and capture her mouth with his. It was tender and sweet and passionate. Damn it. It was probably the last one. He broke the kiss, his head falling back against the pillow. He wished he could make love to her one more time; he smiled at the memories of their early newlywed days when they couldn't seem to get enough of each other. What he wouldn't give to feel her underneath him just once more ... to be inside her one final time. Still, it was enough. It had to be enough.

"Reminiscing?" Hermione asked, breaking him of his reverie.

"Yes."

"Good memories, I hope." She snuggled closer to him, her nose nuzzling against his shoulder.

He managed to smirk. "Only ... the best."

They lay in silence for a few moments, each lost in memories of the short time they'd had together...each wishing they'd been given more time ... always more.

He began to drift asleep. Needing her to remain close by, he whispered, "Stay with ... me."

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Good ... need you ... love you."

~o0o~

A few hours later, wrapped in the arms of the woman he loved, Draco Abraxas Malfoy slipped beyond the veil.

Hermione had never felt so alone.

A/N: A huge thank you, as always, to my beta readers, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and my Brit picker, LettyBird. They are awesome!

I also have to thank GinnyW for not killing me. She knows why. ;)

A few things to say about this fic. It is not complete at this time. There are currently four more completed chapters. I warn you now, after the first five chapters are posted, new chapters will post as real life allows.

This story pretty much ignores Deathly Hallows, but I may use certain aspects if they work for the story.

The next chapter will post in a week!

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

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December, 2003

The bookstore was crowded, and not just with people busily shopping for those lucky enough to be on someone's Christmas list, but with trees and ribbons and bells and snowmen and large boxes wrapped as presents and a number of other oversized baubles. In the midst of the obscene display of holiday revelry stood Hermione Granger Malfoy, reluctant cashier. And currently, it was taking every bit of restraint she possessed to keep herself from hexing the finicky customer in front of her.

With a simple wand wave and a gift wrapping charm, the book was packaged in cheerful holiday paper and all tied up with a fancy ribbon. "Thank you for shopping at Flourish and Blotts. Happy Christmas!" Hermione said, plastering a smile on her face as she handed the package to the pernickety old witch.

"Hmph," the woman responded as she inspected the package. "The ribbon is crooked."

Hermione's jaw tightened as she ground her teeth, her plastic smile never faltering. "I'm so sorry," she said with all the false sincerity she could muster. "Please, allow me to fix it." She reached for the package, but the crotchety woman waved a dismissive hand.

"You obviously don't know what you're doing. I shall fix it myself at home." She left the bookstore, muttering under her breath about stores finding proper help.

Hermione huffed in frustration and counted to ten before turning and offering a saccharine smile to the next customer. "Good evening. Did you find everything you needed?"

It had been a very long day, and she was more than ready to go home. Her head throbbed from an evening's worth of the combined din of Christmas music and chattering customers. If she had to endure Celistina Warbeck singing her holiday version of "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love" one more time, she would not be responsible for her actions. She realised that "The Witches and Wizards of the WWN's Winter Wonderland" album was a huge hit, but if she never heard the Weird Sisters sing "The Twelve Wizarding Days of Christmas" again, it would be far too soon. Thankfully, her shift was almost over.

She rang up the last few customers by rote and then waved her wand to lock up the store. Standing behind the counter, she placed her hands on her aching lower back and stretched, attempting to loosen the tight knot of muscles she had acquired during the long hours of standing. She shouldn't have agreed to help close the shop that evening...not after an already hectic day at her full-time job at the Ministry...but she needed the money; every little bit helped.

After re-shelving a few books and helping to straighten up the store, Hermione walked to the backroom and grabbed her cloak. She took a peek out of the back window; it was snowing. "Wonderful," she muttered sarcastically, eyeing her winter cloak that had long since seen better days. Sighing, she reminded herself that she did not need to waste money on a new cloak; she could buy one next winter. She threw the worn fabric over her shoulders and fastened the clasp before returning to the front of the store. Waving good-bye to her fellow employees, she left the building.

The bitterly cold wind hit her full force as she stepped outside, and she hastily cast a warming charm before beginning the short walk to the Apparition point near the Leaky Cauldron. As she trudged up the cobblestone street, she took note of how truly magical Diagon Alley seemed just then, the dim light of the gas lamps casting a warm glow and reflecting off the falling snowflakes, causing them to sparkle like golden diamonds floating in the air.

Hermione smiled faintly as she remembered the last holiday season, when she and Draco had come to Diagon Alley to purchase a Christmas tree. It had been snowing just like it was now. They had bickered and teased as they each picked out their favourite trees, until finally they had settled on a large evergreen, only to return home to find that it was too big to fit through their front door. The smile faded as she remembered that this year there would be no tree, no walks in the snow ... no Draco.

It was hard to believe it had only been ten weeks since his death. She blinked back tears. It felt like an eternity.

Finally, she arrived at the Apparition point and, after pulling her cloak a bit tighter, spun on her heel and Disapparated to a small alley a few streets from her flat in Wimbledon. Walking briskly toward home, she shivered and recast her warming charm; the temperature seemed a bit chillier here than in Diagon Alley.

She always enjoyed this part of her day; walking home gave her time to unwind, to relax before facing yet another night without her husband. After all, why should she hurry home to an empty flat ... especially one that held constant reminders of all that she had lost?

Arriving at her building, Hermione wearily climbed the stairs to their ...her second floor flat. Warding the door behind her, she tossed her cloak onto a chair and walked through the small, white-walled sitting room and into the kitchen. She yawned as she peered inside one of the upper cabinets to pick out something for a quick supper. It didn't take long; the cabinets were nearly bare. She didn't need to keep much on hand when it was only herself.

"Hm," she pondered aloud. "What will it be tonight? Chicken-flavoured Super Noodles, or mild curry-flavoured Super Noodles? Decisions, decisions." With a shrug, she pulled out the mild curry package, then found a small pan and followed the directions, adding in some fresh, chopped vegetables left over from the salad for the previous night's supper. While the noodles cooked, she toasted a slice of bread and grabbed a glass of water. She nibbled on the toast as she waited for the noodles to finish cooking. Once she was settled at the kitchen table with her small but filling supper, memories resurfaced, reminding her of times when she had sat at the very same table, with the very same meal, only she had been sharing it with her husband.

Hermione hated supper. It was the one time of day that she remembered just how alone she really was. Not only was her husband gone, but so were her parents, and now Harry was off on some long-term, hush-hush assignment for the Ministry. And Ron ... well, Ron was a prat who had shunned her when she had chosen to marry Draco. The remaining Weasleys had sided with their son and brother, either out of agreement with his feelings or some sense of family loyalty. Her other close friends were all either dead, casualties of the war, or had left England, unable to live with the memories. The only child of only children, she had no family in the Muggle world, either. As for Draco's friends ... well, there was no point in even thinking of them; they had no interest in befriending her now that Draco was gone.

Hermione shook her head and closed her eyes for moment, as if blocking out the unwanted thoughts, before she picked up her fork and began to eat, her mind returning to the current state of her so-called life.

In a vain attempt to stave off the lingering memories and depression, she was now working seven days a week, both days and evenings. Besides her full-time job at the Ministry in the Department of International Cooperation, she also worked three evenings a week at the stationery store in Diagon Alley. When she had seen the advertisement for seasonal help at Flourish and Blotts, it had seemed like a good idea. Not only could she use the extra money, but she had thought perhaps staying so ridiculously busy would keep her from noticing the crushing loneliness. It worked like a charm, but she was mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. Most days, it was all she could do to go home, fix a light supper, and fall into bed. On the positive side, if things continued on as they were, she would have the last of the Malfoys' debt paid off by February and could begin to put some money aside ... and not a moment too soon. She could hopefully use those next few months to build up her savings a bit.

Even as she cringed at thinking ill of Draco's parents, Hermione cursed her in-laws' stupidity for the thousandth time. If they hadn't given most of their fortune to a power-crazed lunatic and then thrown themselves headlong into a mountain of debt in order to keep up appearances ... well, her life might have been a lot different. But she would work to pay it off all over again...a million times over...if only she could have Draco with her.

With a groan, she rose to her swollen, aching feet and took the dishes to the sink. She didn't even have the energy to spell them clean; they could wait until morning.

Just as she was heading to fling herself into bed for a good night's sleep, she heard a knock at the door. She glanced at the clock; it was after ten. Who would be visiting at this time of night? Picking up her wand, she approached the door.

"Who is it?" she called, her wand trained on the door; one could never be too cautious. She had learned Mad-eye Moody's lesson well...constant vigilance.

A gruff voice answered, "Your landlord."

Fabulous. What a perfect ending to a perfect day. Her landlord was one of her least favourite people. He was oily and sneaky; had he gone to Hogwarts, he would have been a Slytherin. Mentally whispering an apology to Draco for maligning his House with such thoughts, Hermione opened the door to the rather round, balding wizard.

As always, the man was dressed in expensive robes that were far too small for his large frame, the material clinging to him almost indecently in places. His hair...if one could call it that...was combed over to the side in an attempt to cover his balding head. He was as short as he was round, Hermione's average height making her feel quite tall in contrast. The thing she hated about having to deal with him, however, was the way he would sometimes look at her that made her skin crawl. She hadn't had to deal with the man directly since before Draco's illness, and she wasn't looking forward to it.

"Good evening, Mr McNaughton. What can I do for you at this *late* hour?" she asked pointedly, looking directly into his dark, beady eyes.

"It's the first of the month, and I haven't seen hide nor hair of your rent, missy."

Hermione barely managed to hold her tongue at his sanctimonious tone. "I'm so sorry. I had to work early today and must have forgotten to drop it off to you this morning. Let me get that for you." Mumbling under her breath, she found the envelope with the rent money on the small table next to the sofa and returned to the front door. She thrust the envelope toward the man. "Here you are. Good night."

She was about to close the door when a beefy hand halted the motion.

"Not so fast. I want to be sure it's all here."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you accusing me of something?" She gripped her wand a bit more tightly.

"Do you have something to feel guilty about? I just want to be sure I get all the money that's due me." With a condescending smile, he ripped open the envelope and counted the money. "Where's the rest?"

Stunned, Hermione stared at the rotund little man. Swallowing down the feeling of panic, she asked, "What do you mean? It's all there. Two hundred Galleons, just like every month."

"Didn't you get the notice?" he asked far too innocently. "Rent's gone up ... effective today."

There had been no notice...awful, horrible, little man, raising the rent just before the holidays. Hermione was livid but somehow managed to rein in her formidable temper.

"By how much?"

"Thirty Galleons."

"Thirty Galleons!" It was an outrageous amount, and she was certain he was up to something. Quickly, Hermione added up what she had left after paying the month's bills. There wasn't nearly enough. She only had around ten Galleons to last her until the middle of the month, when Flourish and Blotts would pay her. There had been a few bills she could have held onto for a while had she known about the increase in rent, but she had sent everything off by owl post that morning. Damn it. She would have to play nice and hope the bastard would wait until her next pay check.

"I don't have thirty extra Galleons right now," she began through gritted teeth. Her parents would have killed her for all the damage she'd been doing to her teeth over the last few months. "I will have it by the fifteenth, however."

"The rent is due today, Mrs Malfoy, not the fifteenth." His lips curled into a smug smile.

"I realise that, but I don't have thirty Galleons. I did not receive a notice, so I was not anticipating the extra expense."

He did not appear sympathetic. Bastard. He knew enough about her circumstances to know that her budget was tight. Hermione was more convinced than ever that the slimy wizard was up to something...and it wasn't anything good.

Gripping her wand, she straightened her spine and glared at the man. "What is it you want?"

His eyebrows shot up in surprise briefly before his features resettled into a scowl. Clearly, he hadn't been expecting such forthrightness from her.

"I want my money," McNaughton stated, enunciating each syllable as though he were speaking to a child.

"I don't have it," Hermione responded in kind. "But I will on the fifteenth. I will, of course, pay the late fee as stipulated in our...*my* lease."

"I'm not waiting until the fifteenth. Your lease is null and void anyway, Mrs Malfoy. Your husband is dead, and he signed the lease, not you. You have absolutely no rights here, missy. I can raise your rent however much I want, whenever I want. I can evict you tonight if I feel like it." He paused a moment, his demeanour shifting from aggrieved landlord to something else entirely. His beady eyes raked over her, lingering on her chest and legs until she wanted to race to the shower and scrub herself clean. "On the other hand, perhaps we can work something out between the two of us, *Hermione*."

Her temper flared. Oh, he was right about the lease; she had simply hoped he would not remember that bit of information. But to proposition her! Did he honestly believe she was that desperate?

"Mr McNaughton, I am normally hesitant to remind people of my ... let's use the word *status*, shall we? However, it seems I must remind you that I am one-third of the golden trio, the vanquishers of Voldemort. I am a very formidable witch with friends in high places." Surely it was all right to stretch the truth a tiny bit. "I will pay the late fee, but I will not, under *any* circumstances, 'work something out' with you!"

By the end of her tirade her voice was raised and her face flushed with outrage. To her dismay, Mr McNaughton did not appear to be swayed in the slightest by her impassioned speech.

"Ah, but I think you will, Hermione," he said with a sneer. "You see, I have been paying attention. Your husband is dead. Your parents are dead. Your so-called friend, Harry Potter, hasn't visited in months. In fact, no one has visited in months. You, my dear, are on your own. There is no one to save you, no one to come to your aid ... except for me." His eyes hardened as he leered at her once more. "Play nicely, and I'll let you stay here. Refuse, and I'll toss you out on your arse before you can say 'golden trio.'"

Hermione saw red. "Are you threatening me?"

He smiled puckishly. "Threaten is such an ugly word, my dear. I much prefer 'encourage,' don't you?" he asked as he raised his hand and ran a podgy finger down her arm.

She snapped. "*Protego!*" Hermione cried, and the wizard fell backwards into the hallway, his head hitting the opposite wall with a crack. Hermione flew at him, placing her wand under his double-chin and pressing. McNaughton's beady eyes widened in fear, his body trembling from head to toe, and for a moment, Hermione thought he might lose his bodily functions.

"How dare you proposition me, you foul, pathetic excuse for a wizard," she hissed. "You are lucky that I won't hex an unarmed man. Otherwise you might have found yourself visiting the Spell Damage ward at St Mungo's this evening. You will leave me be, do you understand? I will pay you five Galleons now and the remainder by the fifteenth." It meant she might have to ration her food for a few days, but she had to have a place to live. "Attempt to *encourage* me again, and I will hex your little McNaughton..." She eyed his crotch. "...to kingdom come. Do I make myself clear?"

Unfortunately for Hermione, she had underestimated the slimy wizard. He made a strange motion with his hand, and in an instant, his own wand was pressing into her neck.

"You want to duel me?" she asked, her tone incredulous.

"No!" he shouted. His ashen face indicated that perhaps he was terrified of her after all. "I ... I want you out of this building. Tonight."

Hermione blanched. Damn. She had pushed him too far. She could always *Oblivate* him, she supposed ...

"And don't even think about trying to *Oblivate* me." Even in his current position, he managed to smirk at her. "Old landlord's trick: anti-Oblivate spell on the building so tenants can't claim they paid their rent when they didn't."

She sighed. Clearly, she had miscalculated. Where was her vaunted intelligence now, for Merlin's sake? However, she wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing. She pushed her wand a bit harder into the man's neck and glared at him.

"You will give me seven days to find a new home and leave the premises, or I will hex you where you stand."

"Three days, or I will tell the Aurors you attacked me just now."

She snorted. "Who do you think they will believe ... you or me?"

"Oh, I don't know," McNaughton said in that tone she was quickly beginning to hate. "How about the Muggle security camera up there in the corner? Caught everything on tape. Too bad it doesn't have any sound. All they'll see is you attacking and then threatening me. I'm simply defending myself."

Hermione eyed the camera quickly and then let loose with a string of curse words that would have made Draco proud. "Fine. Three days, but I want that security tape before I go, or I will ensure your dangly bits never see the light of day again." His look of surprise caused her own smirk to appear. "I see you had forgotten I am a Muggle-born."

A thought came to her, and her eyes narrowed. "I don't think I trust you, McNaughton. I want a wand oath that you will not only give me the tape but that you will make no copies of it, nor will you spread rumours about either me or my husband."

McNaughton appeared apoplectic. "My word is good enough, madam."

She shrugged. "Apparently, it is not. I want that oath, now ... or you can say toodle-oo to Mr Winky."

"Fine!" He pulled his wand away from her neck, wincing as she did the same. "Bitch," he muttered under his breath.

Once the oath was made, Hermione quickly backed into her apartment.

"Good-bye, Mr McNaughton. Oh, and one more thing."

She stopped and raised her wand, causing the wizard to throw his hands in front of his crotch. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"*Accio* rent money."

The envelope flew from the pocket in his robes to her hand. She quickly calculated the pro-rated amount of rent and then took out all but twenty-five Galleons before handing him back the envelope.

He sputtered indignantly. "You can't do that!"

She mimicked his patronising smile. "Of course I can. You didn't honestly think I would be paying for an entire month when I'll only be staying here for three days, did you?" And then she slammed the door in his face, placing the strongest wards she could think of to prevent his uninvited return.

No longer in imminent danger, the adrenaline running through her system abruptly vanished, and Hermione found herself sliding to her knees, her wand clattering to the floor as her breath came in harsh gasps.

What was she going to do now?

She heard her neighbour's wireless turn on, and the cheerful sound of the Weird Sisters' "The Twelve Wizarding Days of Christmas" drifted through the parchment-thin walls.

Hermione didn't know if she should laugh or cry...so, she did both.

A/N: My Brit picker informs me that unlike the US, shop assistants are not expected to act cheerful during the holidays. In fact, she says, "I think being made to act cheerful would infringe our human rights or something!" After much consideration, I decided to keep that small scene. I felt it says something about Hermione's current emotional state, that she feels the need to force herself to be cheerful, even to a pernickety old witch. And for the American readers, pernickety is the Brit equivalent of persnickety.

Healthcare appears to be free in canon, as it is in Britain, which is why Hermione did not mention any medical bills from Draco's illness...there are none.

According to JKR (whose math we all know to be a bit sketchy), thirty Galleons is roughly the equivalent of £150, or around \$300 USD.

Also, the concept of a wand oath is not canon, although I thought it was. After an extensive search, I realized that it must be a fandom thing. I have no idea whom to credit, but I assure you, I am not the first to think of the concept.

My unending gratitude, as always, to DeeMichelle, Subversa, and LettyBird. You ladies are the best!

Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

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Three days later ...

Standing in the middle of her living room, Hermione blew an errant curl out of her face and looked around the flat. She had waited until the last possible moment to pack up her belongings, not that there was all that much *to* pack up. It certainly would not take very long, and so she had easily been able to justify her procrastination. With a sigh, she tucked the stubborn strand of hair behind her ear and plopped onto the sofa, resting her head against the back.

In most circumstances, Hermione was extremely task-driven, but in this case, her reticence was two-fold. First and foremost, she did not want to leave the flat she had shared with her husband. Her eyes closed, and she breathed in deeply; she could still smell his scent if she concentrated hard enough. How could she leave that behind? Almost worse than that, however, was the idea of grovelling before Severus Snape, something she did not wish to think about until it was absolutely necessary.

Yet the time had come to face the facts. She would have to honour her promise to Draco and ask their former professor for help, no matter how much it pained her. *It's just until I have enough money scraped together to rent another flat*, she assured herself. Her resolve now strengthened, she hoisted herself off the sofa; she had some packing to do.

Hermione dragged out her old Hogwarts trunk and decided to start in the living room. A few framed photographs and her collection of books were all shrunk before being carefully placed in the trunk. The furniture had come with the flat, so she simply cast a quick spell to clear the dust before heading to the kitchen and then the bathroom, where the process was repeated. She was moving quickly in an effort to contain the ever increasing feeling of sorrow as she systematically removed all traces of her life with Draco. She needed to get out of the flat and deal with the professor ... then she could sit down and have a nice long cry...again.

A feeling of dread settled in her stomach as she headed toward the bedroom. Hermione had known this would be a difficult room for her to clear. She meticulously folded and packed her clothing the Muggle way, telling herself she enjoyed the methodical movement of folding clothes, all the while knowing she was really just avoiding the inevitable task of sorting Draco's things.

When there was nothing of hers left, Hermione sighed and returned to the cupboard. Deciding it would be best to get it over with, she threw herself into the task. She determined that most of his clothing, as well as his shoes, could be donated to charity. She Summoned several boxes from the sitting room and sorted through the items with a discerning eye; then with a soft sigh, she found his favourite Puddlemere United t-shirt.

Her body shuddered as she buried her face in the soft blue cotton and inhaled deeply, rubbing the wash-worn material against her cheek. Several minutes later, she wiped away her seemingly ever-present tears and then packed the shirt with her other things.

Soon, only one article of clothing remained in the closet...Draco's dress robes. Reverently, she pulled out the impressive, dark grey robes her husband had worn on their wedding day. Blinking back even more tears, she carefully placed them in the trunk...they would remain with her.

Not yet ready to leave the bedroom, Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes immediately drawn to the nightstand, which held a framed wizarding photo of their wedding. She picked it up and smiled briefly as she watched picture-Draco smear a bit of frosting on picture-Hermione's nose as he smirked at the camera.

Hermione smiled as she remembered the scene. She had been furious at his indecorous behaviour until he had explained that he had got the idea from an American Muggle movie Harry had taken him to see; he had assumed it was a Muggle wedding tradition. Warmed by his misguided attempt at incorporating something Muggle into their wizarding wedding, she had laughed at his concerned expression, just before she smashed an entire piece of cake into his face. With Harry cheering him on, Draco had chased her throughout the room until he'd caught her, kissing her soundly as he "shared" the cake with her.

They had been so young, so carefree, so much in love; they had believed nothing could touch them. If only they had known how little time they would have together. Hugging the photo close to her heart, Hermione sniffed, then stood and glanced about the room, looking for any items she might have missed.

Just as she was about to leave the small room, she remembered the letters. She certainly could not leave without them. Hermione pointed her wand at the cupboard and Summoned the box before setting it on the bed and staring at it as she once again remembered her promise to Draco.

"If you ... need help ... promise me ... go to ... Snape. Promise ... me."

"I promise, if I need help, I will go to Professor Snape. Okay? I promise."

Until then, she had not wanted to read the letters. Perhaps she was simply dawdling, but at that moment, she really wanted to know what was in them. Slowly, Hermione removed the lid from the box and pulled out a small stack of letters. She turned the packet over, assuming that the first one Draco had received was now on top, and hesitantly opened the envelope and began to read.

Mr Malfoy,

Thank you for the invitation to your wedding ceremony. I regret that I will be unable to attend as I will be out of the country on business. Please accept this monetary gift in my absence. I know you will use it wisely.

I wish you all the luck in the world upon your marriage to Miss Granger. You will most certainly need it.

Severus Snape

She felt her lips twitch in vague amusement at the familiar, derisive tone. Reading through the letter again, Hermione remembered that it had been Professor Snape's generous wedding gift that Draco had used to place the deposit on the very flat she was now leaving. Shaking her head at the irony, she opened the next letter, skimming through the contents.

I am sorry to hear you are feeling poorly. Perhaps if you were to cease this incessant, Gryffindor-like behaviour, you would not be...how did you put it?...ah, yes, sicker than a wing-clipped Hippogriff. It is vulgar to the point of indecency, this insistence upon paying your parents' creditors with such undue haste.

Hermione was surprised by her unexpected bark of laughter. Glancing at the date on the letter, she remembered that week. Draco had somehow managed to catch the Muggle flu and certainly had been sicker than a wing-clipped Hippogriff.

Surprisingly, Hermione found that she was enjoying reading the letters the professor had sent to her husband, so much so that she scooted up the bed so that she could sit back comfortably against the headboard as she read. He was witty and sarcastic, intelligent and humorous, and she found herself wishing she also had Draco's letters so that she could read the conversations in their entirety.

One by one, she read them, in order of their receipt, her reticence giving way to curiosity as the friendship between the two men revealed itself. Not only had she not known of the ongoing correspondence between her husband and their former teacher, but she certainly had not been aware of such obvious affection between the two wizards.

Even if I do have to look past the Slytherin-speak to see it she thought with a small, amused smile. Each new letter provided further insight to the taciturn professor she had once believed she knew; now, she understood she did not truly know the man at all, and she wondered if Draco had realised how privileged he had been to call Severus Snape his friend.

Before she knew it, she was staring at the last letter. Hermione was painfully aware of what this one might contain. The writing on all of the previous letters had been scrawled but precise; in this letter, the script was sloppy and rushed, as if his hand and quill had been unable to keep up with his thoughts. Her fingers shook slightly as she clutched the parchment and began to read.

My friend,

I am distressed indeed at the seriousness of your illness. Your aunt always was a vindictive witch, but the depth of her viciousness, while not wholly unexpected, is surprising.

I have consulted my texts, even venturing into those which some might consider unseemly, but I am afraid my efforts were fruitless. In addition, I made a few discreet

inquiries to some trusted colleagues, also to no avail. I regret to tell you that it appears the Healers are correct...there is no known cure for this altered version of the Eximo Spiritus. The time-delay Bellatrix added to the curse is doubly confounding, and there is simply not enough time to do the necessary research to develop a counter-spell. I find I cannot fully express my despair. Draco, I have failed you.

Fresh tears streaked down Hermione's cheeks as she read the words of desperation and anguish penned by a man she had previously considered cold and unfeeling. His emotions mirrored her own. She bit down on her lower lip to still its trembling and continued reading.

As to your request, I sincerely doubt that your wife would ever have need of my assistance. However, should such a need arise, I swear upon my life that I will not turn her away. I do hope that my word is satisfactory ... or would you prefer it in blood? Said blood is only half pure, however, so perhaps it would be only half satisfactory. I suppose you shall have to make do with my word.

I shall come to see you on Thursday at the regular time.

Severus

But Thursday had never come for Draco.

Hermione pondered a moment over the professor's words. To some, joking about his blood status...joking of any kind during such a situation...would be shocking and offensive. After reading the letters, however, Hermione could recognise the heartbreak in Severus' teasing words. She had no doubt that if Draco had required his blood, sweat, or tears, Severus Snape would have provided.

She carefully folded the parchment before putting it in her pocket for safekeeping. Wiping the wetness from her cheeks with the palms of her hands, she considered what she had just read. A few days before Draco's death, he had seemed calmer, happier even. She had believed he was just putting on a brave front for her sake, but the professor's promise must have eased his concerns, allowing him some modicum of peace in those final days.

The letters certainly explained Severus Snape's presence at Draco's funeral. Her already fragile emotional state had been further compromised by that fact that Hermione had been forced to face the day completely on her own. Harry had been away on an undercover mission, the same mission that he was on currently, and although she had contacted the Weasleys, there had been no reply. Despite that fact that she had no family or friends to support her, she had stood beside the silver coffin, her chin held high.

Most of Draco's friends had been either cold or downright nasty to her. Blaise Zabini had even had the audacity to suggest that she consider becoming his mistress...at her husband's funeral. Pansy Parkinson had been neither kind nor cruel but instead had simply stared at the silver coffin that held the body of one of her oldest and dearest friends. Pansy had not agreed with Draco's decision to marry "the Mudblood," but she had possessed enough sense to keep her opinion on that subject to herself. She and Hermione were civil to each other, but that had been solely for Draco's sake. Without him as a buffer ... well, Hermione doubted there would ever be an invitation to tea by either party.

Of Draco's friends, only Gregory Goyle had surprised her. He had approached her after the service, haltingly offered his condolences, and hesitantly asked if there were anything he could do for her. She had politely thanked him for his concern, and as she had dazedly watched him lumber away, a dark-cloaked figure standing near the edge of the cemetery had caught her eye.

She had immediately known it was him...Professor Snape...even though he had covered his head with the hood of his cloak in what might have been an attempt to conceal his identity. As if sensing her gaze upon him, he had turned, his dark, glittering eyes meeting hers. His expression had been completely devoid of emotion. He had nodded an acknowledgement before bowing slightly at the waist and then Disapparating. She had neither seen nor heard from him since.

At the time, Hermione had believed that he had simply come to pay his respects to a former student with whom he had maintained a correspondence. After reading the letters, she realised that he had come to mourn the child he had sworn to protect and the man who had become his friend. Perhaps his apparent stoicism had been masking his grief.

As she looked at the box containing his final, sorrow-filled letter, she murmured, "Perhaps he is not so different from me after all."

Glancing at her watch, Hermione started as she noticed the time; she had to be out of the flat within the hour. She gently placed her wedding photo and the box of letters into the trunk and then closed the lid. Next, she shrunk the boxes that would go to charity and put them in her bag; she could drop them off in Diagon Alley before going to...

I'm not thinking about that yet, she scolded herself firmly.

Hermione used magic to move the now heavy trunk into the living room, her steps quick and efficient as she swept through the flat one last time, looking for any forgotten items. After finding none, she returned to the living room, locked her Hogwarts trunk, and then placed the key to the flat on the small kitchen table, along with a note reminding McNaughton of his oath. She pulled on her cloak, and then waved her wand and said "*Locomotor trunk!*"

And with the meticulously packed trunk floating behind her, she gave the flat one last mournful look before leaving the home she had shared with her husband.

~oOo~

Hermione was convinced she was going to freeze before she arrived, even with the warming charm she'd cast. The bitter wind tore through her old winter cloak as if it were not there at all.

Walking as quickly as she could, given the snow and ice, she made her way up the narrow, cobbled street, her eyes taking in the maze of rundown, brick row houses. As she continued on, her now Disillusioned trunk floating along behind her, she felt her heart sink at the bleak desolation of the area. She saw not a single soul, and the houses were dilapidated. A few were obviously abandoned, with boards covering broken-out windows in some cases, whilst in others, the frigid winter air whistled through the empty panes. The odour from the rubbish-lined river, combined with the smell of what must be a nearby fish-and-chip shop, was absolutely nauseating, and she found herself holding her breath, inhaling only when necessary.

At last, she found the street named Spinner's End. With an uneasy feeling, Hermione stared at the giant mill chimney, its massive shadow further darkening the already dreary street. As she reached the end, she found it...the very last house, a very small, very old two-up, two-down which appeared very uncared-for.

Merlin. *This* was where Professor Snape lived? How was he supposed to help her when it was perfectly obvious that he could barely afford to make ends meet for himself? Admonishing herself for not having sent an owl before showing up on the man's doorstep, she pushed down her panic and cautiously walked to the front door, avoiding the slippery patches of ice on the pavement. Before she could think to change her mind, she hastily knocked on the door, the sound echoing loudly down the deserted street.

She waited with bated breath for what seemed like an eternity before she heard footsteps near the door, and then it slowly opened, revealing the pale, sallow face of her former teacher. He seemed different...more approachable, perhaps...without his teaching robes; the simple white shirt and black trousers were certainly not as intimidating.

"Mrs Malfoy," Professor Snape murmured, opening the door wider, allowing her to see into the small, dingy sitting room behind him. He did not appear to be surprised to see her at his door, although she could sense his reluctance in speaking with her. Of course, that might have something to do with the fact that he had yet to invite her in, despite the bitter wind and snow, and instead was staring at her rather impassively as he stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Two could play at that game. Suppressing a shiver, she met his unwavering gaze with one of her own.

"Professor Snape."

His thin lips curled into a sneer. "Now that we have reacquainted ourselves," he mocked lightly, "perhaps you will deign to inform me just what it is you want."

Hermione felt her temper flare at his condescension but remained outwardly calm. Her hand reached inside her cloak, into the pocket of her trousers, where she removed the letter containing his promise to Draco. She watched as his eyes widened in recognition, and he seemed to move backward even as she stepped forward to hand him the piece of parchment.

"You told my husband that if I needed help, I could come to you. In fact, Draco made me promise to come to you...and only you...if I should find myself in need. I..." She swallowed her pride before continuing. "I am afraid I am in need of a place to stay for a few weeks until I can locate suitable housing. I was hoping that perhaps ..." She trailed off as she saw the flash of alarm cross his features as his arms fell to his sides, his fingers gripping the parchment. His sallow face blanched, and she knew.

"Mrs Malfoy..." he began.

She swiftly interrupted him. "I can see that you never expected to have to fulfil your promise to my husband. Don't worry, Professor. I won't hold you to it. I'll find someone else to assist me. I apologise for taking up your time. Good day, sir."

Hermione reached forward, snatched the parchment from his hand, and then turned, determined to get away from Spinner's End as quickly as possible, before she lost her last shred of dignity by completely breaking down in front of the insufferable man.

Unfortunately, she had forgotten about her Disillusioned trunk.

Without a second thought, she ran directly into it, tripping over it in her haste to escape. Stretching out her arms, she prepared herself for her inevitable fall. Before she hit the ground, however, she felt warm hands grip her upper arms, halting her descent.

"Are you all right?"

Hermione could not remember a time when she had heard Severus Snape's voice laced with concern, but there it was. Interesting. She gathered her tattered pride about her just as she had her tattered cloak and turned to thank him.

The gods were against her, she decided, as her foot slipped on a small patch of ice. Luckily, the professor's hands were still grasping her arms, and as he pulled her toward him to steady her, the front of her body pressed firmly up against his. His dark eyes screwed shut, and he grimaced as if he were in pain.

"Come with me."

He gave her no opportunity to decline his terse invitation, as he all but dragged her inside the small house, slamming the door behind him before yanking it back open again to allow her still Disillusioned trunk to float inside.

Hermione barely had time to take note that the sitting room appeared much nicer and larger now that she was inside the house before he had seated her on a small sofa and began pacing in front of her. She looked at him questioningly, and he muttered, "The rooms appear less hospitable to unwelcome guests...it encourages them to leave."

Not surprised by that revelation, she nodded her understanding and looked about the room, finding it was comfortable and unexpectedly inviting...apparently she was no longer unwelcome. Remembering her trunk still floating by the door, Hermione pointed her wand in its general direction and softly said, "*Finite Incantatem*," causing the heavy trunk to crash to the floor with a loud *bang* and earning her a glare from the irate wizard in front of her before he resumed his pacing.

After a few long moments, he glanced at her and noticed her obvious shivering. He called out a loud, "*Accio blanket!*" and the next thing she knew, she had a face full of warm wool. Hermione frowned her disapproval as she primly unfolded the blanket and wrapped it around her trembling form, her chin held high.

Unfortunately, the object of her irritation did not notice her censure one bit, as he was busy muttering under his breath, one hand pinching the bridge of his nose as he continued walking to and fro. Finally, he stopped and turned to face her, his hands braced on his narrow hips. Drawing himself up to full height, he looked like a man about to go to battle...one who knew he would not survive the night.

"Just how pregnant are you, Mrs Malfoy?"

A/N: My ending gratitude, as always, to my beta readers, DeeMichelle and Subversa, and my Brit picker, LettyBird. They are the best!

The next chapter will post in a week.

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

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Severus Snape had known it was not going to be a good day the moment he'd heard the knock at his door. After all, it was rare for someone to visit him at Spinner's End, and of those who had, all but one were now dead...and he knew better than to show up uninvited. When he had opened the door to find Hermione Granger Malfoy, her expression a mixture of defiance and vulnerability, the hairs on the back of his neck had raised, as if his body had recognised the danger of her presence even before his mind.

His most pressing concern, however, was not her mere presence. Oh, no. She had shown up at his door *pregnant*...of some months, as well, if the bump he had felt pressed against him when he had halted her fall were any indication. Damn and blast. If she were anyone but Draco's wife But Draco had been more than just a former student; he had been a friend, and Severus knew he would honour his promise and help his friend's widow in whatever way he could.

Severus turned to face the witch, straightened his spine, placed his hands on his hips, and asked, "Just how pregnant are you, Mrs Malfoy?"

He immediately wanted to kick himself for asking the question in such an inane manner, but it wasn't every day a woman showed up at his door ~~conceinte~~ and seeking refuge.

"I assure you, Professor," Hermione replied dryly, "I am adequately pregnant."

Severus tilted his head in warning at her flippant remark, but he was grudgingly impressed with her temerity, given the situation.

After some moments had passed, she sighed and said, "The baby is due in three and a half months."

Severus nodded, relieved that the child's arrival was not imminent, and sat down in the armchair across from the sofa. "Why, exactly, are you here?" She opened her mouth to reply, and he raised a hand to halt what he fully expected was to be an angry tirade, judging by her red face and irate expression. "I mean to ask what circumstances have led you to seek out my assistance."

She seemed to deflate a bit, her shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. She stared at him a moment before answering, "I was evicted from my flat. My landlord expected certain ... privileges. As I was unwilling to consider such an arrangement, he felt it best that I leave and gave me three days to pack my belongings and find a new place to live."

"I see," Severus replied, carefully maintaining his blank expression. He was outraged by her revelation. Only the most contemptible sort of person would use such tactics against a pregnant widow. "I promised Draco that should the need arise, I would be willing to help you...and I am willing...but I am surprised that there is not another more ... suitable person whom you could approach for assistance."

He watched her jaw clench as she responded flatly, "There is no one."

His eyes narrowed; perhaps there was more to this story than he was aware. Whatever had happened, it was none of his business, and regardless, it would not negate his responsibility. His sense of honour and duty might have been a tad rusty, but they were still there...he would keep his word. He would help her.

He nodded abruptly before rising to stand in front of the hearth, his hands clasped behind his back. "Very well. You may stay here ... *temporarily*. There are conditions, however. There will be no visitors, no *friends*," he said with a sneer, "coming to call and traipsing through my home. I value my privacy, and you will do well to remember that. You will leave me alone, and I will leave you alone. I see no reason for us to interact beyond what is absolutely necessary. I have never been much on pleasantries, Mrs Malfoy, and I do not expect that to change in the foreseeable future. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir. I would like to pay you for my room and board. What would you consider to be fair?"

Severus was aghast. "I am offended that you would even dare to ask. I am honouring a promise to a friend. To accept money would taint that honour. I refuse. Any further questions?"

She shook her head, although her pinched expression suggested that she was not pleased. Severus knew, however, that she would comply. She had no choice, after all; she could not force him to accept her money.

"Good. Collect your trunk and come with me."

He led her through a doorway and into the kitchen to the narrow staircase. Once they reached the top, he stopped on the small landing.

"This," he said, indicating the door directly opposite the stairs, "is my room. You are not to enter." He turned, opening the door on his right. "You will sleep here."

She brushed past him, entering the small but bright bedroom. Severus watched as she directed her trunk to the foot of the bed. She removed her cloak, clasping the material to her as she looked about the room. He was certain she had not anticipated that such a space would be found in his home; the walls were a cheery yellow, and the furniture was a bleached white, as was the quilt covering the bed.

"It is small," he said gruffly, "but it should be satisfactory for your needs."

She smiled briefly as she ran her fingers across the quilt. "It's lovely. Thank you."

For a moment, he felt the absurd desire to smile back at her.

"Supper will be ready in one hour. Do not be late," he snapped. He exited the room, forcefully shutting the door behind him.

~oOo~

Severus was placing two bowls of steaming hot stew onto the table when she appeared in the kitchen, looking wary and out of place.

Rolling his eyes, he motioned for her to sit before placing a loaf of hot, crusty bread on the table and then taking his own seat. From the corner of one eye, he noticed that she ate ravenously of the stew and bread.

Supper was eaten in silence, and although that was exactly what he had wished, he found it disconcerting. The woman across the table had always been somewhat of a chatterbox...it was odd for her to be so quiet. Satisfied that he had discovered the source of his discomfort, he continued eating.

When they had both finished, Severus rose to his feet and began to wash up. As he stood at the sink, he informed his guest that he would be retiring to the sitting room to read for the remainder of the evening. "You may do as you wish." There was no response, and he turned to find the young witch asleep, her arms folded one on top of the other on the tabletop, her cheek resting against one hand.

Severus heaved a sigh and pulled out his wand, preparing to utter a quick *Mobilicorpus* in order to move her up the stairs to the guest room. He faltered when he remembered the pregnancy. He was unsure if the spell was safe for pregnant women. His eyes closed, and he groaned audibly as he realised he was going to have to carry the witch upstairs.

As he gathered her into his arms, her head lolled to one side, coming to rest against his shoulder. He shifted her to a more comfortable position and was startled by her slightness. *Surely a pregnant woman of her height should weigh more than this* he thought before reminding himself that it was none of his concern. He was providing her temporary shelter...that was all.

Gritting his teeth, Severus carried her up the stairs to the guest room. He placed her gently on the bed, covering her with the quilt. "Just how much trouble are you going to be, Hermione Malfoy?" he whispered, his gaze focussed on her sleeping form.

Quietly, he closed the door behind him and muttered, "Already a nuisance."

~oOo~

Severus retired to the sitting room and poured himself a glass of brandy before sitting down in the chair by the fireplace to read. He could not seem to concentrate on the book, however, and soon abandoned his attempts at reading to stare out of the small front window, losing himself in his thoughts.

Draco. As much as the little bugger had annoyed him at times, they had been friends ... and Severus missed him. He had been proud of his former student; Draco had grown immensely since the end of the war. Severus' mouth curved into a small smile as he recalled the regal manner in which the young wizard had held himself at his

father's sentencing and the restrained grief he had exhibited at his mother's funeral, just weeks after Lucius had received the Dementors' Kiss. His comportment had been a far cry from that of the spoiled, self-centered boy Severus had once known.

While he had been unable to attend Draco's marriage ceremony, Severus had noted how responsibility and married life had suited his former charge, giving him more to consider than his own scrawny neck. Severus had never been as pleased as he had been the day Draco had sold Malfoy Manor...a home rich in history and the pride of every Malfoy for generations...in order to pay the majority of the enormous debt incurred by his parents ... debt that had been passed on from father to son upon Lucius' incarceration. Draco had been determined to make the Malfoy name something to be proud of...not only for his own sake but for that of his wife ... and now, it appeared, for his child, as well. It was a travesty that the life of a young man had been snuffed out just as he had succeeded in turning that life around.

Severus remembered well the day he had received the desperate letter from Draco explaining the nature of his sudden illness. Bellatrix had been livid when Draco had not followed through with the murder of Albus Dumbledore; she had considered it a personal affront to the family name. In a fit of pique, she had cursed the boy...at the time he had been a mere child of sixteen...but when no immediate effect had been detected, Draco and his parents had assumed the crazy witch had either cast the spell incorrectly or missed him entirely. There had been no way of knowing that Bellatrix had altered the spell so that its effects would not be seen for years. It had not been until the incessant coughing had begun that Draco had suspected that something might be terribly wrong ... and by then, it had been too late. There simply had not been enough time to find a counter-spell.

Draco's entreaty that Severus be of aid to his soon-to-be widow had been in that very same letter. Severus had been shocked at the request, even though he was well aware of the rift between the young Mrs Malfoy and the Weasleys, as well as Harry Potter's continued absence. Her parents had died soon after their return from Australia in, of all things, a Muggle car crash. The witch was bright and resourceful, however, and Severus had felt certain that she would never require his help ... and if she ever did, there would most certainly have been someone else to whom she would rather go for aid.

When she had shown up at his door that afternoon, Severus had instantly suspected her purpose, and this had quickly been confirmed when he'd seen the familiar piece of parchment clutched in her hand. Stunned by the implication the presence of the letter presented, he had taken a step back as he had realised that his carefully constructed, self-imposed exile was about to be temporarily suspended. The momentary lapse in control had been misconstrued as reluctance, however, and the young widow had raised her stubborn chin and set off to places unknown ... until she had run into that damned trunk.

Severus cringed at his show of insensitivity. The witch was grieving, and he regretted that his perceived hesitation at fulfilling his promise to her late husband might have added to her pain in even the smallest amount.

And then there was his own pain to consider. Draco had been his friend...one of the few people he had ever called such...and now he would be reminded of his absence day in and day out, almost certainly until after the holiday. He did not want to be reminded, he did not want to have company, he did not want to be her friend. He wanted to be left alone. In Severus' experience, friendship with him always ended in someone's death.

"Enough," he whispered harshly.

There was no need to reflect further upon such maudlin thoughts. It was bad enough to be forced to relive such moments in his dreams.

~o0o~

Severus woke early, as he did every morning, and was about to go down the stairs in his nightshirt to grab a cup of coffee and the *Daily Prophet* when he remembered a certain Gryffindor witch was currently residing in his guest room. Irritated that now he would have to dress before having his morning coffee, he turned to the cupboard. He was pulling out a pair of trousers when there was a knock at his door.

"What is it?" he snapped. Good gods, it wasn't even seven o'clock, and she was already proving irksome.

"Pardon me, Professor, but I was wondering if you could tell me where the bathroom is?"

Severus rolled his eyes as he noted the hint of desperation in her voice; she hadn't used the loo the previous night before she had fallen asleep. He momentarily considered telling her that the only bathroom was the communal one outside, but then he sighed and said, "Tap your wand three times on the wall across from your door ... slowly. Then say *Alohomora*, and the door will appear."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, the words muffled by the closed door.

He stood very still and listened. *Tap ... tap ... tap. "Alohomora!"* Then came the sound of the door quickly opening and closing. He swore he could almost hear her relieved sigh. Severus felt his lips twitch in amusement.

After he finished dressing, he checked the bathroom and found it empty. He quickly performed his morning ablutions and had just finished shaving when he smelt it ... coffee. And bacon and eggs. Perhaps even some toast.

She was making breakfast.

First, he had been forced to carry her to bed, then she had ruined his morning routine, and now she was cooking breakfast in *his* kitchen with no consideration for his needs whatsoever. A muscle in his jaw clenched, and then he was pounding down the stairs.

"Mrs Malfoy..." he said sharply as he entered the kitchen. He came to an abrupt stop as he took in the sight before him. At his seat at the table was a plate, piled high with eggs and bacon ... and toast. He loved toast. Severus shifted his gaze to the oddly beaming woman standing next to the stove, a cup of freshly brewed coffee in her hands.

"Good morning, Professor!" she said cheerfully...too cheerfully.

Severus scowled. It was indecent to be that happy first thing in the morning.

"I hope you don't mind, but I cooked breakfast this morning, since you made supper last night." She glanced down at the cup in her hands. "Oh! Here is your coffee, sir."

He watched her suspiciously, grunting his thanks as he took the cup and sat down in his chair, staring the plate of food before him. Picking up his fork, he took a bite of eggs and then the bacon. It was ... good. Very good, in fact. He sipped the coffee. Dear Merlin in his crystal cave. It was the best coffee he'd ever had...it was rich and dark and bitter, just the way he liked it. He glared at the cup and then at the witch who brewed it.

"What did you do to my coffee?"

Her smile faltered. "Does it taste bad? I've never made coffee before. I'm not a coffee drinker, and neither was ..."

Draco's name was left unsaid, and Severus caught the flash of profound grief that crossed her features before she delicately shrugged one shoulder and smiled again.

"It is an acquired taste, or so I am told," Severus murmured softly.

She nodded, that ridiculous smile plastered on her face, filled her own plate with a spoonful of eggs and a slice of toast, and sat down to eat.

Breakfast was as silent as supper had been the previous night, but it was a comfortable silence; perhaps he was already acclimating to the troublesome creature's presence. Or maybe...and more likely...he was thinking with his stomach. The meal was very good.

When they had both finished, Severus noticed that the young woman was about to return upstairs, reminding him of something he needed to discuss with her.

"Mrs Malfoy..."

"Hermione, please, Professor. Mrs Malfoy is Draco's mother, and I'm afraid I have rather ... unpleasant memories of her."

His eyebrows raised; he hadn't realised that Narcissa had ever met Draco's Muggle-born wife. Given Narcissa's warped views on Muggles and Muggle-borns, Severus could certainly understand not wanting to recall such an association.

"*Hermione*," he emphasised, "I have reset the wards to recognise your magical signature. You may feel free to Apparate directly to and from the guest room."

"Thank you, sir," Hermione said. Then her cheeks flushed, and she continued, "And thank you ... for putting me to bed last night. I hadn't realised I was so tired."

Severus nodded stiffly. "Indeed. See that it does not happen again."

He picked up his edition of the *Prophet* and began to read, pausing a moment when she stood to leave the room.

"Oh, and Hermione? Don't pretend to be cheerful for my benefit. Your morning disposition makes no difference to me."

Her angry stomps up the stairs were not wholly unexpected, and Severus finished reading the *Prophet* in the peace and solitude to which he was accustomed.

~o0o~

The next few days followed the same routine, the exception being that rather than the smiling young witch he had come downstairs to the first morning, he now found an irritable young witch who very much resembled something the Kneazle dragged in. A morning person she most certainly was not.

Each day, Hermione cooked breakfast, and Severus prepared supper. She was surprisingly quiet...they rarely spoke more than a handful of words to each other during the course of a day, and most of those were courtesy exchanges such as, "Please, pass the jam." After supper, Severus excused himself to the sitting room to read, and Hermione would spend the remainder of the evening in her room. He assumed she was either reading or retiring early; perhaps the pregnancy was draining. Whatever the reason, it was fine with him, as her intrusion into his life thus far did not seem to have had as much of an impact as he had anticipated.

Things might just work out after all.

~o0o~

Severus was going over a file in his cellar office when he heard the sound of a Floo call in the sitting room. As he headed up the stairs, he caught the urgency in the voice and hastened his steps.

"Professor Snape? Professor Snape, are you there? This is of vital importance!"

Severus strode into the room and then stood before the green flames. He recognised the bone-and-wand insignia on the witch's robes. What would a Healer want with him?

"I am here, madam."

The woman appeared relieved. "Thank Merlin! We weren't sure who to contact, but as you were listed as the emergency contact on the late Mr Malfoy's records, we assumed it would be safe to..."

"It is never safe to assume anything," Severus snapped. "Now would you please get to the point?"

"Oh! Yes, of course," she said, apparently flustered. "Hermione Malfoy collapsed at the Ministry this morning, and we need you to..."

"I will be there shortly," he interrupted before ending the Floo connection.

Damn it! He should have known something like this would happen. Things had been going much too smoothly, and that should have been the first indication that trouble was brewing.

Severus stepped into the fireplace, threw down a handful of Floo powder, and shouted, "St Mungo's!"

My thanks, as always, to DeeMichelle, Subversa, and LettyBird! You ladies are the best!

Another evil cliffhanger. Sorry! But never fear, the next chapter will post in a week.

Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

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Severus hurriedly strode down the hospital corridor, looking for Hermione's room, scowl fixed firmly in place to hide his growing concern. The welcomewitch had refused to tell him anything more than the location of her room. Dear Merlin, he hoped the child was all right; how much tragedy could one young woman endure? He lengthened his strides.

As he rounded the corner, he found a Healer standing outside one of the rooms, ostensibly looking over some patient charts, her lime green robes a stark contrast against the bright white walls of the corridor.

"Pardon me, Healer. I am looking for..."

The woman turned her head to face him, her expression filled with surprise. "Professor Snape!"

Ah, yes. He had heard she had become a Healer; he had been quite proud of his former student when had learned that bit of information.

"Good afternoon, Healer," he said with a smile so small it would have been unnoticeable to those who had not been in Slytherin during his tenure as Head of House.

"It's good to see you, sir. Can I help you with something?" she asked. Her usually cold tone held a hint of warmth for her former teacher.

"Yes. I am searching for Hermione Malfoy's room. The welcomewitch said it was down this corridor."

Her eyes widened, and she began looking through the charts for Hermione's name. "What happened?"

Severus paused to consider how much he should divulge and then replied, "She has been staying with me for a few days. I received a Floo call from one of the other Healers saying she collapsed at work and was brought here."

If she were surprised by that bit of potentially salacious information, her expression did not show it. "I see," she said distractedly. "Ah, here she is. She's ... she's pregnant?" Quickly, the young Healer scanned the chart. When she was done, she raised her head. Severus was surprised to see not concern, but anger in the witch's eyes.

She smiled at him tightly. "Pardon me, Professor. I believe I need to have a chat with my patient. Wait here. I will fetch you when you can see her."

And with that, she turned on her heel, stalking into a room a few doors down from where they had been standing.

Severus breathed a relieved sigh. If he were to be allowed to see her, it couldn't be all that serious. Leaning against the wall outside Hermione's room, he refused to ruminate on why he had felt such concern for his houseguest's well-being and instead attempted to focus solely on how the irritating witch had interrupted his day.

~oOo~

Why are hospital rooms always so bloody cold? Hermione wondered as she fidgeted with the blanket that was draped across her legs. She wasn't fond of St Mungo's, having spent so much time there over the past few years, and yet here she was ... again. Only this time, she was the one in the bed.

And it was no one's fault but her own.

Sighing, she turned her head to look out of the window; guilt gnawed at her as she considered the harm she could have done to her child ... ~~to~~ Draco's child. She was utterly exhausted, spent mentally, physically, and emotionally. But in her heart, she knew there was no excuse for what she had done. She had been so wrapped up in herself, in her grief, that nothing else had mattered. Oh, she'd put on a good front, but underneath the strong façade, she felt broken beyond repair. And so very much alone. Her hand drifted to her swollen belly. She had forgotten that now she was never truly alone. Her child should have been her main concern, and she'd failed utterly. Her eyes closed, but she did not cry. She did not deserve the feeling of release the tears would bring.

"I am a selfish, unthinking cow, that's what I am," she whispered.

"I completely agree, Granger," came a familiar voice from the doorway.

Opening her eyes, Hermione turned her head as the Healer entered her room.

"It's Malfoy, as you well know, Parkinson."

The dark-haired witch smiled, although it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Yes, I suppose I do. Now then, *Mrs Malfoy*," she said with a sneer, her smile fading and her voice hardening with each subsequent word, "why don't you tell me why it is that you have decided to jeopardise the health of Draco's child?"

Hermione simply looked away, as if it would shield her from Pansy's impending accusations. She would not break...especially not in front of this woman.

"Undernourished, underweight, dehydrated, high blood pressure, exhaustion," Pansy rattled off coldly. "What the hell is wrong is with you? Don't you want this baby?"

The silence was deafening.

"Well?" Pansy screeched, the high-pitched sound echoing in the small room.

Hermione swallowed the guilt that had risen in her throat like bile and managed to choke out a whispered, "Yes."

"What's that, Granger? I didn't quite hear that pathetic excuse of an answer. Did you say yes? Because I see no proof of that given your actions. For Merlin's sake, Hermione!"

Hermione's eyes snapped to Pansy's face in surprise at the use of her given name. There was anger etched into her features, yes, but there was something else, as well ... something akin to concern.

"You are almost six months pregnant, and this is the first time you've seen a Healer! What in Merlin's name were you thinking?"

Filled with remorse for her careless actions, Hermione looked away, but she couldn't bring herself to admit her shortcomings to Pansy Parkinson. "I saw a Muggle doctor."

Pansy snorted. "That would be fine except for one thing...this is not a Muggle baby! You are a witch, a magical being, and so is this child. You of all people should understand the difference! There are diseases and defects that only occur in magical babies, things that can only be detected by a Healer, and yet you chose to ignore all that to see a Muggle doctor. Why?"

Hermione rolled to her side, putting her back to Pansy, struggling to maintain the wall she'd built around her heart as a shield from her grief. "I ... I don't ..."

Swiftly walking to the other side of the bed, Pansy moved to face her uncooperative patient. "You don't what? You don't know why? You're going to have to do better than that, because if you don't, there is no way in hell that I am releasing you from hospital. I will bind you to this bloody bed for the rest of your pregnancy if I have to. Now, what's it going to be?"

It was too much for Hermione to handle, and the wall came tumbling down in an instant. All the emotional turmoil of the past few months bubbled to the surface, and her face crumpled as she began to sob uncontrollably, her pride in tatters, overcome by her grief, remorse, and pain. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to be neglectful. I just didn't want any more Healers. I didn't want to come here where ... where Draco ..." She dropped her gaze to her hands, tears sliding unabated down her cheeks, unable to finish.

"Oh."

Her head shot up, and Hermione was surprised to see the dawning comprehension in the other woman's eyes. "I did try, you know," she continued earnestly, sniffing as she wiped the tears from her cheeks with her fingers, only for more to take their place. "I researched all the possible complications, and I performed all the right tests at all the right times. And I really did go see a Muggle doctor. I just ... I just couldn't bring myself to come *here*."

To Hermione's surprise, Pansy seated herself on the bed next to her and sighed. "You could have contacted me. I could have come to you to do the proper tests. You aren't trained..." She held up a manicured hand to halt Hermione's impending protests. "You aren't trained, and regardless of how well you think you know Healing spells and charms, you are not a Healer."

Pansy Summoned a box of tissues and passed it to Hermione. "I would have, you know. I would have come if you had asked ... for Draco's sake. Although," she added grudgingly, "I can understand why you didn't."

Hermione stared at the other witch in shock; for a Slytherin, Pansy's words were all but an outright apology, and that was certainly unexpected.

Pansy stood and smoothed the front of her lime green Healer's robes as she schooled her features into a more professional demeanour. "You're depressed, as well. That much is obvious. Hopefully this incident has scared you into you taking better care of yourself, because if you don't, you *will* lose this baby. Understand?"

Feeling duly chastised, Hermione nodded as she wiped away her tears with a tissue.

"Good. Professor Snape is waiting to take you home. Yes, yes, I know all about that," Pansy said dismissively at Hermione's surprised gasp. "If you will give me permission, I will fill him in on what has happened."

After Hermione indicated her agreement, Pansy continued. "The baby is fine. All tests have come back normal."

Hermione eyes fluttered shut as relief washed over her from head to toe. "Thank Merlin."

Pansy ignored the remark, continuing with her instructions. "As for you, go home and take a few days off from work. Rest. Eat healthy meals. Drink plenty of fluids. Keep your stress levels down. Come back to see a Healer in two weeks ... or contact me and I'll come to you," she added, almost as if it were an afterthought. "And for Merlin's sake, *talk* to someone. You've had a great deal of loss over the past few years. It isn't healthy to hold it all inside. If your lousy Gryffindor friends won't help, try Professor Snape...he's a good listener."

Hermione didn't know about that, but the rest was sound advice. As Pansy turned to leave the room, Hermione stopped her.

"Pansy?"

The witch halted but did not turn around.

"Thank you."

Straightening her shoulders, Pansy said, "Just don't let this happen again," and swept from the room, presumably to speak with Professor Snape.

Oh, no. Professor Snape. What would he say?

With a groan, Hermione's head dropped to the pillow with a soft plop. She knew without a doubt that her day was about to get even worse.

As the professor entered the room, Hermione noticed his absent robes, indicating that he had rushed to St Mungo's upon receiving word that she had been admitted. His expression was blank, emotionless ... except for his eyes, which were as cold as ice.

"Healer Parkinson has apprised me of your condition and explained your care. I have sworn to ensure your health. Gather your things...I am taking you home where we will discuss your recent behaviour."

Morosely, Hermione complied. Yes, things had just become much worse indeed.

~o0o~

The scene was eerily reminiscent of they day the young witch had come to stay at the house at Spinner's End. She was seated on the sofa in the sitting room as Severus paced in front of her, muttering under his breath. Merlin help him, he had to control his temper, or he would say something he would later regret. If she weren't pregnant, he would have no trouble allowing her to feel the full brunt of his wrath, but she was, and so he couldn't do that. He wasn't exactly certain why he was so angry; he supposed it had to do with the threat to Draco's child, but he was in no mood to examine his feelings too closely. Perhaps later, after he dealt with the current situation.

With a deep breath, he turned to face her, his arms folded across his chest and his dark eyes boring into hers. "Healer Parkinson informed me of your medical condition. How did this happen?"

The print on her skirt apparently became very interesting, as she began to trace the linear pattern with the tip a finger. "It's my fault. I ... I've been working three jobs."

"*Three* jobs?" His brow furrowed in thought and then cleared as he realised the implication of her words; his eyes narrowed. "You've been Apparating out of your room after supper."

She nodded miserably and explained, "I wanted to finish paying off the Malfoys' debts and have some money set aside for after the baby is born."

"I see," he said tightly. "I suspect that was not the only reason."

Struggling to remain impassive, he watched as she valiantly held back the tears that had welled in her eyes.

"No."

He nodded and waited a few moments before arching one eyebrow and asking impatiently, "Well? What was the other reason?"

Her grief and sense of loss was almost palpable. "It was ... easier, being busy every waking moment. I could just work and sleep and not think about ..."

Hermione raised her tear-filled eyes to his, and Severus felt his own gaze soften slightly at her words. He was familiar with loss and was well aware of the loneliness, the despair, of losing loved ones in close succession. In one way or another, she had lost everyone important to her, everyone she loved, and now she was alone. Yes, he knew exactly how that felt.

"You have kept all this inside and have dealt with your grief alone." He winced inwardly at his matter-of-fact tone, but he was walking a fine line. He did not want to befriend her, did not want to be her confidant, but then again, if not him ... well, who would? He couldn't let her continue on this way; she might do herself or the child irreparable damage. The guilt would eat him alive.

He glanced at Hermione from the corner of one eye and inwardly sighed. Despite the strong façade, the witch was emotionally fragile. Her skin was paler than his, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes. She was far too thin, something he had been curious about since he'd carried her to bed that first night and that had been confirmed by Miss Parkinson. Something had to be done. It was obvious that she could no longer continue as she had been. Seeing that he had no other choice but to get involved, Severus decided it was quite obvious that someone needed to take charge of her care, and apparently that someone was him. *Fabulous*. It was time, he supposed, to shake some sense into her...figuratively speaking, of course...and then see if he couldn't find the bossy, take-charge, insufferable know-it-all he'd once known.

Drawing himself to full height, he resumed pacing, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes trained on her face. "Since you have been so abysmal at caring for yourself," he began with a sneer, "there will be new rules for as long as you remain in my home. You will have one job, not three." He stopped pacing and glared at her,

daring her to contradict him, before continuing. "You are saving a good deal of money by staying with me, therefore you will remain here until after the child is born. The money you would have used for rent can be used to pay off the remaining debt and bolster your savings.

"After you return from work, you will rest until dinner. You will eat healthy, nutritious meals and snacks, and you will retire before ten o'clock. You will immediately inform me if you should feel poorly or out of sorts.

"Is that clear?"

Rather than the outraged outburst he had hoped for, Hermione simply nodded dejectedly, her gaze focused on the floor in front of her.

Damn it. Perhaps she merely needed a bigger shove.

"Good. It is now three o'clock. You will go to your room and rest until dinner." *That should garner some sort of reaction.*

Hermione rose from the sofa and quietly walked to the kitchen until he heard her soft tread upon the stairs.

Severus frowned, his forehead wrinkling in concern. He collapsed into the armchair by the fireplace and ran his hands through his lank hair. What the hell had he got himself into?

A/N: This seemed like the natural place to end this chapter. It is short, but important. Don't worry. I won't allow Hermione to wallow for very long, but she has to allow herself to truly grieve before she can move forward. Then we can move the story along.

Thank you to DeeMichelle and Subversa for beta reading, and to LettyBird for Brit picking, as always.

This is the last of the completed chapters. I have begun chapter five, and hopefully it will be up in a few weeks. I make no promises, but as the Shuglets are heading back to school next week, I'm feeling optimistic. Thank you all so very much, and please review!

Chapter Five

Chapter 6 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

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A/N: As it's been so long since I've updated, just a reminder that this story is not DH-compliant. The previous chapter left off with a depressed and guilt-laden Hermione, and our dear professor was wondering what the hell he'd got himself into. In this chapter, he'll find out.

Severus frowned as he stared unseeingly at the evening *Prophet*, unsure as to what to do next. Although he'd needed to awaken Hermione for supper, she'd immediately retired after, saying that she was rather done in after the day's events. He couldn't blame her; he was exhausted and he hadn't been the one who had spent the afternoon in hospital. Now, some hours later, he gave up his attempt at reading. It wasn't as if he had actually been able to process the words; his mind was far too preoccupied for that. He tossed the *Prophet* onto the small table beside his chair and then extinguished the fire.

The house was dark as he trudged up the stairs to the first floor. He knew sleep would be long in coming, despite his tiredness. Hermione's grief and depression, not to mention her pregnancy, weighed heavily on his mind. Severus suspected that, during Draco's illness, Hermione had set aside her fear, anger, and sadness in order to appear strong for her husband's sake. After his death, she had kept herself numb by working herself to the point of utter exhaustion, thereby denying herself any opportunity to deal with the turbulent emotions lingering beneath the surface. He worried what would happen, now that he'd taken away the only tools at her disposal, and how she would react when those carefully constructed walls began to crumble. Now there was the additional guilt over what could have happened to the child. Severus suspected *that* would be the harder obstacle for Hermione to overcome.

Standing in the narrow hallway between the doors to the two bedrooms, he rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. His gaze drifted to her closed door. She had eaten more at supper than he'd seen her consume since her arrival. That had to be a good sign. He scowled. The witch had been his guest for less than a week, and already she had invaded not only his home but now his thoughts. He disliked that his mind continued to return to her time and time again, but there was little he could do to change that. Her temporary stay was now indefinite, and he'd best get used to the idea sooner rather than later because she was his problem now. There remained one aspect of the entire bloody situation that he could control, however: he might have been honour-bound to accept her into his home and to take charge of her care, but that did not mean he must accept her into his life.

He preferred to remain unscathed when their association came to its inevitable end.

With a sigh, he turned toward his room. A troublesome thought came to him, however, and his hand lingered on the doorknob. Straightening, he pulled his wand from his sleeve. A few waves of his wand, accompanied by a murmured incantation, and his mind found some semblance of peace. Satisfied, Severus glanced once more at the guestroom before heading off to bed, wishing for nothing more than the mindless oblivion of sleep and hoping Hermione would not follow him into his dreams.

~oOo~

Five days 'til Christmas ...

Hermione lay atop the white quilt in the guest bedroom, propped up against a mound of pillows. A book was loosely held in her left hand, but she wasn't reading. Her head was turned to one side as she stared blindly out the small bedroom window, her thoughts elsewhere. The fingers of her right hand ghosted over the roundness of her abdomen, grateful for the tiny flurry of activity.

It had been a week and a half since her fainting spell at the Ministry, and while she was eating better and attempting to get more sleep, she was still plagued by guilt as she considered the damage she could have caused her child. She'd been lucky that her thoughtless actions had not caused any irreparable harm, and she would not take such

chances again. She would do whatever was necessary in order to bring her and Draco's child into the world safely. To that end, she had asked Professor Snape to send for Healer Parkinson. Pansy would be arriving shortly to perform a routine examination, and Hermione was anxious for reassurance that the baby remained in good health. With a shuddered breath, she hoped that all would be well.

As she turned her head to one side, her eyes fell upon the small calendar she kept on her bedside table, next to her wedding portrait. A tear slid from the corner of one eye, and with trembling fingers, she dashed the moisture away.

Christmas was in five days.

And she missed Draco.

Numbing herself to the pain, she returned her unseeing gaze to the window.

~oOo~

Severus paced back and forth in the sitting room, glancing every so often at the clock upon the mantle. The last ten days had found him floundering for how to help his new charge, and he was anxious to speak with someone who might be able to shed some light on the subject. Since the Healer was coming anyway, he'd asked if he could speak with her before she checked on Hermione.

Finally, at precisely one o'clock, he heard the anticipated knock.

"Healer Parkinson," Severus said in greeting as he flung open the door.

"Please, call me Pansy. How is she?" she asked, briskly entering the house, her eyes immediately searching for her patient.

Severus took her cloak and placed it on the coat rack. "She is waiting in her room, and she is ... better." He turned and ushered her into the sitting room.

Pansy eyed him shrewdly. "But you're worried about her," she said as she sat down, perching on the edge of the sofa.

He straightened his spine in indignation. "Mrs Malfoy and her child have been entrusted into my care...I take that responsibility seriously."

"Of course you do."

His ruffled feathers were soothed by the audible sincerity in her tone, despite her impassive expression.

"Now then," she continued, "what is it you wish to speak with me about?"

With a sigh, Severus all but collapsed into the armchair, weariness evident in his posture. "I am concerned. Physically, she has shown marked improvement. She has followed your recommendations to the letter...she left her part-time positions and is on holiday from the Ministry until after the New Year. I've not given her much choice but to eat in a healthier manner, and she seems to have gained a bit of weight."

Pansy appeared satisfied with that answer. "And her sleeping patterns?"

Severus frowned, his eyes troubled; he ignored Pansy's speculative look. "She cries at night, until she falls asleep. I can hear her from my room," he explained, despite the knowledge that such an admission would pique Pansy's curiosity. After all, he could have cast a Silencing Charm if he had so desired. Shifting slightly in his seat, he barrelled onward. "Even so, she is sleeping a full eight hours, as well as taking a brief nap in the afternoons."

"Excellent." Pansy tilted her head to one side. "What about her emotional state? Has she talked with you?"

"No," he said, knowing that his agitation at the situation could be heard in his voice. He left his seat to stand by the window.

Pansy raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

"That is my primary concern," he admitted after a long pause. "She is subdued during the day, often saying merely a handful of words. Whilst she eats and sleeps, that is all she does. She often carries a book about, but doesn't ever read...which in and of itself may be a sign of the Apocalypse...nor does she busy herself in any other manner. She lounges on the sofa"...he waved an arm toward where Pansy was sitting..."or in her bed and stares out the window. I've attempted to goad her into a reaction, but she has not responded. I am ... at a loss."

Pansy frowned. "You dealt with grieving students in the past."

He nodded, turning to face his former student. "Yes, of course. However, they were not solely dependent upon me. They had friends and family to offer support. I merely provided information and a listening ear when needed. It's not something I was particularly good at," he added begrudgingly. "Hermione has no one...no family and apparently no remaining friends, save Potter, who is away on assignment...and given the tenor of our previous association, I don't believe she has the inclination to share her grief with me."

"Then you must forge a new relationship," Pansy said, as if the answer were obvious.

Severus snorted, and Pansy's lips twitched, one corner of her mouth curving upward.

"Yes, easier said than done, perhaps. Still, it must be done, Professor, if you truly wish to help her. She will be staying here until after the baby arrives?"

He nodded.

"Until that time, then, *you* are the central figure in her life."

Severus' gaze snapped to Pansy's, his expression horrified. His eyes narrowed as Pansy laughed at his instinctive reaction.

"It's true, like it or not," she said. "You must be a friend to her, be her support system, and help her know she's not alone. If you think it necessary at some point, I suppose I could attempt to get to know her, as well." Her nose wrinkled slightly. "Oh, and Professor," she added softly as she rose to her feet, "you were a very good listener...you certainly helped me."

Severus couldn't hide his surprise, although he was quick to school his features into his usual impassive façade as he also rose to his feet.

Pansy smirked and walked to the sitting room door. "If there is nothing else you'd care to discuss, I would like to examine her now. I must return to St Mungo's within the hour."

Her previous words still echoing between his ears, Severus simply nodded and directed her to the guestroom.

Once Pansy had knocked on the door and been admitted by its occupant, he escaped to his office and attempted to lose himself in his work. It was a futile effort. His conversation with Pansy replayed in his mind in an endless loop, and finally he gave up, throwing his quill onto the desk in disgust. Groaning, he dropped his head into his hands. He had been avoiding the logical conclusion to his plight for days now, but Pansy had been correct. There truly was no other choice. He would have to do the one thing he had never wanted, the very thing he had sworn he never would: he had to befriend Hermione Granger Malfoy.

Happy Christmas, indeed.

~o0o~

The ticking of the clock echoed in the sitting room, its rhythmic beat lulling Hermione ever closer to sleep. She knew better than to retire to her room for the evening, however. It was there, alone in the unfamiliar bed, that she felt Draco's absence most keenly; it was there that she would no longer be able to keep the pain at bay. Grief and guilt were her nightly companions now. Sleep, when it would finally cease to elude her, was a welcome, if temporary, escape.

Instead, she had chosen to join the professor in the sitting room after dinner. The latest edition of *Potions Weekly* was held in her hands, but the words swam across the page, unfocussed, her thoughts elsewhere.

Healer Parkinson's visit had soothed her worried mind. Had she been in better spirits, she might have laughed outright at that thought. Never would she have expected to find comfort in anything having to do with Pansy Parkinson. In this instance, however, Pansy had been able to tell her that that her child was healthy and strong; her stupidity had not caused any lasting damage. Relief had been instantaneous, although it had not assuaged her guilt. Even so, she was profoundly grateful for Pansy's assessment, no matter how stoic her delivery might have been.

"You seem to be inordinately interested in Mr Leatherby's hypothesis regarding the use of dragon's spleen. What are your thoughts on Howsham's rejoinder?"

Hermione's head shot up in surprise, and her brow furrowed as her gaze met Professor Snape's. "Erm, sorry. I've not yet read that far."

"Hm. Pity," he said blandly, returning to his own reading.

Hermione noted with some fascination that the sneer that typically accompanied such a remark was conspicuously absent. Had he truly meant to discuss the article with her? She worried her lower lip between her teeth. It had been so long since she'd had any sort of intellectual discussion, and Professor Snape, she knew, would definitely be a worthy adversary...particularly in the subject of potions. An all but forgotten feeling washed over her. Once as familiar to her as breathing, she could not recall when she'd last felt its compulsive spark.

Curiosity...the absolute *need* to learn, to know, to understand.

Her gaze returned to the article, the words now crisp and clear against the pale parchment. The spark could not be ignored.

She began to read.

~o0o~

Severus surreptitiously cast a glance across the room and smugly noted that it appeared his guest was actually reading, rather than merely pretending. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth and a small v had formed between her eyebrows as she concentrated on Leatherby's article in *Potions Weekly*.

As the evening wore on, she asked no questions, but Severus knew it was only a matter of time. Her inquisitive nature would see to that. He merely had to be patient.

It wasn't a particularly auspicious beginning, but it would do.

~o0o~

Four days 'til Christmas ...

"Do you think he's right?" Hermione asked the following evening after dinner, her curiosity overwhelming all other thoughts. She had devoured the article, rereading and pondering over it throughout the day. The opportunity to discuss its contents with her former professor had been too tempting to pass up.

Professor Snape, who was reading the *Prophet* in his armchair, flicked a glance in her direction. "Do I think who is right about what?"

"Leatherby's idea for a filtering process for dragon's spleen. What are your thoughts? Is he right?"

"Ah." He returned his attention to the *Prophet*. "An extended potion trial would be necessary to determine if his theory is correct."

Hermione frowned. "Yes, of course, but do you think a trial would prove him right?"

"That is the purpose of a trial, is it not?"

She had the feeling he was being purposefully obtuse. Perhaps he was no longer interested in discussing the article with her. Sighing, her shoulders slumped, and she nodded, the spark of curiosity dimming. "I suppose."

~o0o~

Damn. He'd been pleased that she had taken the initiative, causing him to push a little too far in testing her mettle. It was too soon for that. She'd retreat again if he weren't careful. But it had been decades since he had purposely sought the friendship of another...he was bound to be a bit rusty. Attempting to provoke the grieving witch, however, was not a step in the right direction.

Methodically, Severus folded his paper and laid it on the small table beside his armchair before angling his body toward hers. "It is a fascinating theory. Most brewers don't have the opportunity to work with dragon's spleen all that often. However, as it is a component of the Wolfsbane Potion ..." He shrugged.

Her gaze swung back to his, and he noted the faint gleam had returned to her eyes. "You've used it many times." She hesitated, then pressed forward. "Surely you have an opinion on his theory."

Severus leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, his steepled fingers resting against his mouth for dramatic effect. After a long moment, he replied, "I do. What are your thoughts?"

Her eyes blinked rapidly, and she frowned as if nonplussed. "Mine? Oh, I ... Well, I haven't ever used dragon's spleen, so my opinion is solely based on the known properties of the ingredient itself."

Severus leaned back in his chair and nodded impatiently. "And...?"

"Well, I understand the basic principles behind Leatherby's theory, and it does seem sound. The filtering process he proposes would reduce the spleen to a concentrated liquid form, thereby allowing smaller amounts to be used. It would much less dangerous in such small amounts, giving even the average brewer a better chance at brewing Wolfsbane, since the potion would be more stable."

"I agree," Severus said, his tone matter-of-fact. "However, he is also claiming this filtering process could be of use for several garden-variety ingredients, making them slightly more effective."

"It seems to me that the necessary filtering process would be cost prohibitive for use in the average potion. It would simply be too expensive."

"Precisely my thoughts. Why, then, do you suppose Leatherby is making such claims?"

She pondered his question. "Perhaps he's searching for investors for his trial. By claiming there could be potential uses other than for the Wolfsbane Potion, which is subsidised by the Ministry, he may garner more attention from investors."

"That is my opinion."

She frowned. "Of course, it's rather obvious, don't you think? No one who knows a thing about potions would fall for such a transparent ruse."

Severus laughed, startling his guest. He raised a sardonic brow. "You would be surprised."

Hermione's answering smile was small but gratifying.

~oOo~

Three days 'til Christmas ...

Hermione fidgeted as she watched the kettle, waiting for the telltale whistle. Her stomach rumbled loudly, and her nose wrinkled at the reminder. Usually the professor was in charge of afternoon tea, but he had obviously been caught up in his work, as it was now half past four with no sign of the taciturn wizard. When she'd realised the time, she'd instantly closed the book she'd been absorbed with for the better of the part of the day and set about the business of preparing afternoon tea herself.

Her stomach growled again, and her eyes drifted to the upper cabinet to the right of the stove. Inside, she knew from previous kitchen forays, was a small tin of shortbread biscuits. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and glanced at the closed door that led to his office. Knowing that the professor could make an appearance at any moment, she quickly nicked a biscuit from the tin. He wouldn't approve, but just one wouldn't hurt anything.

Greedily chewing her pilfered treat, she prepared a tray with two teacups and a small plate of cucumber sandwiches. Placing three tea bags inside the ceramic pot, she rested her hip against the counter and returned to her vigil over the kettle.

The past twenty-four hours had been enlightening. The previous evening's discussion on Leatherby's hypothesis had led to a debate regarding Horsham's rejoinder, which had ended with Professor Snape lending her several rare texts in order to assuage her budding curiosity. Despite the whirling of her mind, sleep had come quite easily, and Hermione had awakened feeling rejuvenated. Breakfast remained her responsibility, and she'd cooked with the professor's copy of *Medieval Potions and Their Modern Uses* charmed to hover at eye level. Once her host had descended into his office, Hermione had spent the better part of the day in the sitting room, eagerly soaking up the material like a sponge.

It had been ages since she'd felt so much like ... well, so much like *herself*. It was as if a switch had been flipped on in her mind...at least intellectually. Emotionally, however, she still felt tightly strung, as if she might snap at any moment.

But that didn't matter, because this was better. Better than before she'd come to stay with her erstwhile professor.

The high-pitched whistle of the kettle interrupted her reverie, and she quickly moved to pour the steaming hot water into the teapot to allow the tea to steep. Professor Snape would surely be hungry by now, and she really wished to discuss what she'd learned in her reading.

~oOo~

Severus read through the parchment one final time, ensuring that the wording was to his satisfaction, and then scrawled his signature across the bottom. The nib of the quill had hardly lifted from the parchment when it rolled itself up into a tight scroll and disappeared with a *pop*.

His work for the day now complete, he arched his back, stretching the tense muscles in his back and wincing at the audible crack in his spine. His head ached slightly, and he was about to fetch a headache-relieving potion when the door to the basement creaked open.

"Professor? May I come down?"

Hermione.

He glanced at the small clock on his desk and groaned. He'd been so caught up in his work, he'd forgotten about tea.

Severus cleared his throat and called out, "I'm coming up."

He paused at the top of the stairs, his eyebrows rising as he noticed the tray of sandwiches and pot of tea already sitting on the table.

"I could have brought it downstairs," Hermione murmured as he fully entered the kitchen.

"Nonsense," he stated firmly. He pulled out a chair and motioned to her. "Sit down."

She appeared confused by the gesture but sat in the proffered chair. Severus took the opposite seat and watched with barely contained surprise as she poured him a cup of a tea and then prepared him a plate of sandwiches. He was so caught up in the idea of her actually *doing* something rather than imitating a bump on a log that it was only when she said his name that he realised she had been talking to him.

"...do you think, Professor?"

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, hoping that his inattentiveness would go unnoticed.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so chatty," Hermione said, then pursed her lips and gently blew a stream of air across the surface of her tea.

He shifted in his chair slightly. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm afraid my mind is still on my work, and I didn't hear your question."

The small smile that had graced her face the previous day returned, and he relaxed, knowing that he had not offended her...and that he had avoided telling her where his thoughts had truly been. He turned his attention to the small repast, hoping that she would make the effort to continue the conversation.

She glanced at him over the top of her teacup, her brow furrowing. "What sort of work do you do, Professor?"

Pleased by her initiative, he leaned back in his chair and tilted his head to one side. "I am currently employed by the Ministry of Magic."

Her eyes widened in apparent surprise. "Really? But you work from here."

"I am contracted as needed by various wizarding governments, profiling Dark wizards and the like."

"Sort of a ... hired wand? That sort of thing?"

A bark of laughter escaped his lips, and her smile widened minutely. "Something like that. More the equivalent of working for MI5, I would think."

"Fascinating. I had assumed you still worked with potions."

He arched an eyebrow as he took a sip of tea. "Actually, I haven't been interested in the field of potions for quite some time. I had my fill at Hogwarts."

She frowned. "You were an exceptionally brilliant Potions master. Do you no longer enjoy brewing?"

He nodded deferentially. "Thank you. I do brew occasionally, but only for my own supplies. The brewing process remains a way to alleviate stress, but I have no desire for it to be anything more than that. I do, however, enjoy keeping up to date on the current theories and such, which has at times proven helpful in my current line of work. I've also remained an adjunct professor at Hogwarts, giving the occasional lecture on the subject."

She hummed a response and picked up a sandwich. "So that's why you're still 'Professor Snape.' I had wondered."

They were silent for a few moments until Severus realised perhaps he ought to show some interest in her work. "And how do you enjoy the Department of International Cooperation?"

Her gaze snapped to his, as if surprised that he was aware of her place of employment, and then returned to her tea. "Oh ... it's ... it's fine, I suppose." She sighed and then rolled her eyes. "It's boring as hell. I have no idea what I was thinking when I accepted the position."

As she sipped her tea, Severus' mouth curved into a slow smile; she was acting more and more like herself. "Potter said that you'd been thinking of leaving the Ministry before..."

Hermione coughed, choking on the tea she'd just swallowed.

Damn. He hadn't meant to go there. She didn't seem to notice his blunder, however; her attention had been caught by something else he'd said.

She stared at him incredulously. "Did you just say *Harry* told you?"

The tension eased, and Severus smirked. "Potter and I have worked on several cases together, he in the field, of course, while I usually prefer to do my work from here."

"Well," she said, appearing slightly dazed. "I certainly never expected to hear that you and Harry were working *together*."

His lips twitched. "Neither had I. However, Potter has matured a great deal since his school days. Actually, we work quite well together, and he is one of the few people, other than yourself, of course, who has been invited into my home."

To her credit, she did not appear visibly shocked by that revelation. "Harry has been a guest here?"

"Only because he was too pissed to Apparate home."

That got her; her eyes were wide and her jaw dropped before she snapped it closed. "You're friends, then?"

He looked at her shrewdly. "Not at all. He visits twice a year...once on Halloween and again in May. We drink ourselves into a stupor, and in the morning, I give him a potion to relieve the hangover. Then he leaves. Other than that, our interactions are solely work-related."

A sad smile appeared as she grasped the significance of the dates. "I see."

Yes, he was sure she did. Uncomfortable now that the focus had switched to him, Severus rose to his feet. "I have an errand to which I must attend. I shall return shortly."

Before she could utter a word, he was in the sitting room and stepping into the Floo, eager to put some distance between them. He tossed down the Floo powder and left the house in a burst of green flame.

~o0o~

Two days 'til Christmas ...

Hermione cocked her head to one side and stared at the bare tree stuffed into the corner of the professor's sitting room. She wondered when it had arrived; it hadn't been there that morning, she was certain, and she hadn't seen Professor Snape since the very awkward evening they'd shared the night before.

After his hasty departure from afternoon tea, he had reappeared to prepare supper. He'd been in a strange mood, and Hermione had determined it was best to leave the man to his thoughts. She'd hoped to see him at breakfast but had only found a note on the kitchen table, along with a plate of eggs and toast, stating he had gone out for the day. It was now almost time for supper, and she hadn't been aware of his return.

Given the presence of the tree, however, it appeared he had returned after all.

She turned on her heel and was preparing to go and search for him when a large box floated into the room, followed by the wizard himself.

"I apologise for my absence," he said, lowering the box to the floor beside the tree. He sheathed his wand inside his sleeve and turned his attention to her. "I thought perhaps you might enjoy having a tree."

"Oh."

Actually, she didn't know if she would enjoy one or not. It was something she hadn't considered. She had lovely memories of Christmas, the last several of which had been spent with Draco, who had adored the holiday. She was uncertain if she could enjoy the day without him...she didn't know that she wanted to.

"These were my mother's," he said, indicating the box. "I'm afraid the selection is rather eclectic."

Glancing at the professor, she caught a slight tightening around his eyes. He was trying to do something nice for her. The least she could do was show some appreciation. She knelt beside the box and opened it cautiously; if there were wizarding decorations involved, who knew what might be inside.

She gasped in delight as the contents became visible. Inside the box were gobs of tinsel and garland, fairy lights and ribbons, and countless bows and baubles. It was enough to cover the entire tree from top to bottom. It would be garish and tasteless ... and absolutely wonderful.

A slow smile spread across her face, and she looked up at him. "Can we use it all, do you think?"

His posture visibly relaxed, and Hermione felt her own heart lighten minutely.

After a quick supper, they found themselves knee deep in decorations and creating the most fabulously gaudy Christmas tree she'd ever seen.

~o0o~

Severus glanced at Hermione as she stretched to place yet another bauble in one of the upper branches. The tree was quite a sight...she was determined to use every last decoration, and the result was horrifying. He shrugged it off, however; she seemed happy.

A frown tugged at his lips. Perhaps happy was too strong a word. She was beginning to come out of her self-imposed shell...cracks were beginning to form...but she was still a far cry from the stubborn, bossy, determined know-it-all he'd once known.

Regardless, she was enjoying herself for the moment, and that eased some of the guilt that had been sitting on his chest for the past twenty-four hours.

It wasn't that her reaction to his drunken bouts with Potter had bothered him. No, it was the realisation that he'd forgotten something very important about friendship: it was reciprocal in nature. If he were her friend, she would expect to be his, too. It was something that somehow hadn't occurred to him prior to that conversation, that he would have to share part of himself with this woman if he wanted her to share herself with him. The revelation had sent him reeling; he didn't want that. He had accepted that he needed to be her friend...for her health and that of her and Draco's child...but he had no interest in her being his. Now he had realised he had no choice, and that knowledge had sent him running.

Coward.

"Is there a star or something ... you know, to put on top?"

Thankful to have been shaken from his melancholic thoughts, he shifted his attention to his houseguest. "No. It broke when I was a child. My mother never replaced it."

"A repairing charm didn't work?" she asked innocently as she peered at him from between the laden branches.

His temper flared, as it always did when he was forced to remember his dismal childhood, but he held himself in check. She didn't know of his background, had no idea what dangerous ground she was treading. Perhaps if he told her something, she'd be more willing to share with him.

"My father didn't allow magic," he said tersely.

Her eyes widened. "But your mum..."

He shrugged and attached a bow to one of the branches.

They worked in silence for a while, but he swore he could almost hear her thinking.

"What happened to them? Your parents, I mean."

He flicked a glance in her direction. "They're dead."

Part of him was hoping to hear an impatient huff at his brief response. He was to be disappointed.

Hermione nodded. "Mine, too."

His hand stilled its movement, the glittering bauble dangling from his fingers. "Yes."

"Do you have many friends?" she said suddenly.

"No."

"Do you have *any* friends?"

His jaw clenched at her impertinence. "Not anymore."

She nodded sadly, her eyes on the bit of glittering tinsel she was draping on the tree's branches. "You're alone, then."

Severus felt the words like a blow, and his spine stiffened with indignation. How dare she...

"Like me."

His anger disappeared in an instant, and he looked at her. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. Then she turned away from him, wrapping her arms about her torso, the tinsel held in her hands twisting with her. She looked so damned lost, so fragile.

So alone.

Like me.

"We still need something to put on top," Hermione said, false cheerfulness infusing her voice. "I...I think I have the perfect thing. I'll just be a moment."

The tension in his chest left with her departure, and he raked his hands through his hair. She was slowly opening up, which was a good thing, he reminded himself. But damn it! He'd meant to maintain his distance from her, to protect himself. It was clear now that it would not be possible.

Reciprocal.

Severus sneered as the word came to mind, but grudgingly accepted it as truth. Lowering himself into his favourite chair, he acknowledged that of all people he should be forced to admit into his life ... well, he could have done worse. Hermione Granger Malfoy was loyal to a fault, intelligent, and courageous. Yes, she was stubborn and impertinent and brash. Even those traits, however, were in her favour...he wouldn't want a friend who couldn't stand her ground against him. It could be nice to have someone in his corner for once. It could be nice not to have to be alone.

Maybe this time, if he were lucky, things wouldn't end badly.

He groaned, his head flopping on to the back of the chair.

When had luck ever been on his side?

"Would this be all right?"

Opening his eyes, he turned his head to look at Hermione. She lingered just inside the room. In her hands was a silver peacock, its long tail feathers twining about her arms. He arched an eyebrow.

"For the top of the tree," she explained as she shifted from one foot to the other. "It was Draco's favourite. I thought maybe it would be nice to ... you know." She shrugged and looked up to the top of the tree.

Severus slowly rose to his feet and crossed the room to where she was standing. "An excellent idea," he murmured. "May I?"

Hermione nodded and allowed him to carefully take the fragile bird. When he finished placing the peacock atop the tree, it became obvious that it was a magical decoration. The plumage lengthened, wrapping itself around the tree like a ribbon.

Severus moved to stand beside Hermione as they took in the fruits of their labour.

"It is ..." He couldn't complete the utterance; there were no words.

"Gloriously tacky," Hermione offered.

He looked down at her and nodded sagely. "The peacock is perhaps a tad much."

While a tinge of sadness still lingered, the small smile that appeared on her lips bespoke her amusement.

He felt his own lips curve upward in reply.

"Thank you," she said, her gaze still fixed upon the tree.

"You're welcome." Without thinking, he added, "And thank you."

Before she could say anything more, he gave a terse "Good night" and then swept from the room.

~o0o~

One day 'til Christmas ...

Hermione woke up the next morning, her stomach rumbling with hunger and the baby sitting on her bladder. Heaving her pregnant body from the bed, she hastened to the loo. She performed her morning ablutions and then went back to her room to dress for the day.

As she dressed, she smiled as she recalled the previous evening's activities. Decorating the tree with Professor Snape, whilst occasionally discomfiting, had been enjoyable. In fact, she had enjoyed the past few days especially, as they had moved from discussing intellectual pursuits to more personal matters. Whilst he was still taciturn and often moody, she couldn't help but be pleased whenever she caught a glimpse of the man she'd seen in his letters to Draco. Now she wondered if they could move beyond their shared history. Perhaps they could even be friends.

Perhaps neither of them had to be alone any longer.

Yes, it was clear that Professor Snape needed a friend as much as she did. Actually, they were quite alike in many ways: both were intelligent and thrived on learning; both had difficulty making friends but were fiercely loyal once the bond was made; both had been betrayed by those they believed to be friends.

Both had known loss. Both had lost Draco

A sudden thought came to mind, and her jaw dropped in surprise as she put the pieces together.

Maybe *this* was why Draco had insisted she go to Professor Snape. It was his way of trying to take care of them, to ensure they would be all right after he was gone.

So that they wouldn't be alone.

Tears filled her eyes, and she smiled tremulously. Draco had loved them both, his wife and his friend. It wasn't at all farfetched to believe that he would have wanted them to become friends, even if it was after his death.

Once, she wouldn't have thought such a thing possible, but now ... Yes, she believed they could be friends.

She didn't realise she was smiling until she looked into the mirror as she began to tackle her wild mane of hair, but there it was. As she looked, the smile widened, and a rough laugh escaped her lips as she noticed a small sparkle return to her eyes.

Feeling lighter than she had in ages, Hermione quickly finished dressing, then left her bedroom, smile still firmly in place. She missed her husband...she always would...but she was still here. Her fingers drifted to her pregnant belly, and she paused on the stairs to listen to sounds of Professor Snape moving about the kitchen.

She was still here, and she wasn't alone.

She all but skipped down the rest of the stairs to the kitchen.

Professor Snape's wary expression told her that her rare good mood...particularly in the morning...had not gone unnoticed, but she merely continued to smile as she prepared breakfast.

After they'd finished eating, the professor went down to his office, telling her that he would be busy until lunch, and left Hermione to her own devices. She did the washing up, and then found herself at a loss as to what to do next. She supposed she could continue to research medieval potions, but for some reason that wasn't appealing. It was Christmas Eve, after all; surely there was something ...

Christmas Eve!

Hermione's face fell. Professor Snape had been so patient with her, had been so unbelievably kind to her, and she hadn't even thought of getting him a gift for Christmas. She looked at the closed door to his basement office, catching her lower lip with her teeth as she sat at the kitchen table and contemplated the idea that was forming in her head.

She really wanted to get him a gift. She already knew the perfect thing...a lovely raven-feathered quill she'd seen when she'd been working at the stationery store in Diagon Alley. Yes, she had promised not to Apparate from her room, but she'd been feeling much better now that she was sleeping and eating regularly. Her mood had improved greatly over the last few days. She felt much more herself, and the baby's near constant squirming was proof of his or her good health. Pansy had also assured her that the baby was doing well and had even agreed that she could return to her job after the holidays, so long as she continued taking care of herself.

Surely it would be all right to pop out for a bit; she'd only be gone fifteen minutes at the most. The professor wouldn't even notice she was gone, and it would be a wonderful surprise, a way to thank him for all he was doing for her.

Decision made, she went to her room to collect her cloak, as well as a quill and a piece of parchment. Perched on the edge of her bed, she scribbled out a note, so that he wouldn't worry should he come upstairs before her return, assuring him that she had popped out for a quick errand and would return shortly. A wave of her wand folded the note into an airplane and sent it sailing to the kitchen table.

That done, she pulled her cloak about her shoulders and then grabbed her bag. Excited about the task at hand, she turned on her heel to Disapparate.

Nothing happened.

Frowning, she tried again.

Again, nothing. She remained in the professor's guestroom.

"What in the world?" she wondered aloud. She'd never had any trouble Apparating before. Why now? Her magic seemed to be fine, so if it wasn't that ...

Her eyes narrowed. Furious, she barrelled down the stairs as quickly as her pregnant body would safely allow.

~oOo~

The stomping footsteps overhead alerted Severus that he was about to have a visitor even before the angry rapping at his office door. He leant back in his chair to await her arrival, curious as to what had brought this on given her good mood at breakfast. Not that it mattered; he was pleased by the show of true emotion on her part, be it humour, contentment, or anger.

The door was yanked open, and she called down, "Professor Snape!" as she stormed down the stairs.

Smirking, he settled into his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. This was bound to be amusing.

"Professor Snape," she repeated she entered his office and stood before his desk, hands on her hips and eyes blazing, "did you place an Anti-Disapparition Jinx on my room?"

"No," he answered truthfully, pausing a moment for effect. "I placed an Anti-Disapparition Jinx on the entire first floor."

Her mouth thinned into an angry line. "I appreciate what I am certain were good intentions. However, I am not a child to be coddled or told what to do. Now, am I or am I not a prisoner in this house?"

"You are not," he replied deferentially. "However, given your history of gallivanting off, even to your own detriment, I considered the jinx to be a prudent safety measure."

"Be that as it may," she snapped, "I have every right to leave this house as I wish. Now, I have an errand that I wish to run...although why I should currently escapes me. Remove the jinx."

His lips twitched with amusement. "Do you speak to all your friends in such a manner?"

That brought her up short. She sputtered a moment, then folded her arms across her chest. "Yes."

He couldn't hide his satisfaction at her response. "I see." He merely watched her, waiting until she shifted before speaking again. "I will remove the jinx after lunch and accompany you on your errand."

"I don't need you to accompany me," she said through clenched teeth. "I don't *want* you to accompany me. It's a surprise, damn it, and I am perfectly capable of going on a fifteen-minute errand by myself!"

Her face had turned a fascinating shade of magenta, and with an angry growl, she turned on her heel, undoubtedly to storm off to her room.

"Hermione," Severus called.

She paused with one foot on the bottom step, her posture rigid and her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"Now that we're friends, you may call me Severus."

After holding up two fingers in his general direction, she resumed her angry ascent up the stairs to the kitchen.

Severus let out a bark of laughter at her audacity, and then, grinning smugly, returned to his work. Glancing up at the door she'd just exited, he shook his head and chuckled. It was good to see her acting her old self again. "Welcome back, Hermione."

A/N: I apologize profusely for my long absence. Between real life events, running the SS/HG Awards, and a horrible bout of writer's block, things just didn't come together as quickly as I would have liked. This chapter is a turning point for the story, with much ground to cover, and I wanted it to be just right.

There are more notes on this chapter here, if you're interested: <http://sshg316.livejournal.com/208565.html>

Thank you to richardgloucester for allowing me to use her family's Christmas tree topper for this chapter. It was too perfect!

My unending gratitude, as always, to my beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and my Brit picker LettyBIRD. I'd also like to thank Annie Talbot, machshefa, and Lady Rhian for pre-reading for me when I was so nervous about posting.

I'd also like to say thank you to those who voted for this story in the SS/HG Awards! *Between the Sand and Stone* was nominated for Best WIP and was voted runner-up for Best Angst! Thank you so much!

Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 7

When tragedy strikes and circumstances go awry, Hermione is forced to seek the help of a reclusive Severus Snape. Brought together by a promise neither expected to fulfill, they will find that sometimes love deserves a second chance.

Chapter Six

Christmas Eve

An hour later, Hermione was marching out of the Leaky Cauldron and into a snow-blanketed Diagon Alley with a visibly smug Severus Snape blithely gliding along beside her. Casting him a baleful glance, she gave a disgruntled huff. He wasn't at all put out by her display of temper. Indeed, he seemed rather amused by the entire affair.

"Irritating git," she muttered. With a huff, she cast him a scathing glance. "Do you have to follow me? I am perfectly capable of running an errand on my own."

He merely shrugged and continued walking, a single stride matching every two of hers as they navigated down the busy cobblestone street.

Hermione grumbled under her breath, her annoyance with the wizard growing with each passing moment. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she acknowledged that perhaps she was being a tad unfair. The professor's actions had been in direct response to her carelessness, after all, and she had to admit it felt nice to have someone consider her well-being ... even though it was getting on her wick.

Despite the charitable thoughts fighting to the forefront of her mind, she stopped abruptly in the middle of the pavement and turned to glare at the professor. She had a Christmas present to buy, damn it.

"Professor..."

He frowned at her, and she rolled her eyes.

"Severus..."

His black eyes warmed, and a rare, if brief, grin appeared, distracting her momentarily. His entire being seemed to transform when he smiled. *That will take some getting used to*, she thought.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Hermione began again. "Honestly, this isn't necessary. I'm going to the stationery store across the way. See? It's right there, not far at all. I'll only be a few minutes."

His only response was an arched eyebrow, and she groaned. "Why do you have to be so ... gah!" She threw her hands in the air in frustration. "I'm going to buy a Christmas gift. I will be perfectly fine."

"Of course, Hermione. You're a grown witch and perfectly able to care for yourself, after all."

Her jaw dropped at the complete insouciance with which he'd spoken. She snapped her mouth shut, and her eyes narrowed as she glared at him with every bit of vitriol she could muster.

She turned to walk away only to see Pansy Parkinson approaching. Just what she needed...yet another Slytherin who wanted to tell her what to do.

"Good afternoon, Professor Snape," Pansy said as she stopped in front of them. She turned her attention to Hermione, her expression one of disapproval. "Traipsing around Diagon Alley isn't what I had in mind when I said you needed rest."

Already irritated, Hermione's temper spiked, but she maintained control...somewhat. "I'm not *traipsing*, Parkinson. I'm shopping...or I would be if *someone* would take a hint and go home!"

Pansy looked at Severus, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Professor, what say you? Has my patient been complying with my orders, or is she still gallivanting all over wizarding Britain for no good reason?"

"I'm standing right here...and I had a perfectly good reason!" Just not a rational one, and she was very sorry about the whole thing, but that was irrelevant at the moment.

Severus ignored her and instead addressed Pansy. "Indeed. She is following your orders to the letter and has shown marked improvement over the last few days. She promised her errand would take but a few minutes, so I did not see the harm. I assure you, I would not risk her health for something as trivial as shopping."

The tension around Pansy's eyes eased slightly. "That's very good to hear. Well, don't let her dawdle too long, Professor. She needs to rest. Happy Christmas." She gave them each a short nod and continued on her way, seemingly headed to Flourish and Blotts.

"For Merlin's sake," Hermione said, throwing up her hands in exasperation as she turned to Snape. "I am not a child. I can take care of myself." She realized immediately that her words might have had more of an effect had they not been accompanied by the stomping of a foot. "Oh, never mind. I'm going to the stationery store...alone."

"I have an order to pick up at the apothecary," he replied, his lips twitching in what she could only assume was amusement at her expense. "I shall meet you at Flourish and Blotts when you have completed your shopping. Agreed?"

"Agreed." She took off down the street before he could change his mind, moving as quickly as she was able, leaving him laughing her in wake. Her anger and indignation drained away at the unexpected sound, and she fought a smile of her own. The man was infuriating in more ways than one, but she couldn't help but like him.

Shaking her head, she allowed the smile to form and headed in the direction of the stationery store.

~oOo~

Within fifteen minutes, Hermione had made her purchase and left the store, a small brightly wrapped package safely hidden inside her robes. She was confident the professor would appreciate the sentiment behind the gift, if nothing else. While it was a bit impersonal, she didn't know the man well enough to have done otherwise, and even if she had, there wasn't enough time for a more extensive search. In a pinch, the quill would have to do.

And a fine quill it was. The raven's wing feather was a black so dark it seemed to have a blue sheen. She had admittedly splurged a bit on a quality nib, carefully inspecting each option before choosing one of the finest the store carried, knowing the professor would be pleased with the way it would glide across the parchment.

Satisfied with the gift she had selected, she stopped in front of Flourish and Blotts to admire the display in the window.

"Hermione?"

Her eyes closed briefly, and her contented smile slipped from her lips. She considered ignoring the inherent request in the pleading tone or pretending that she hadn't heard, but playing the passive-aggressive had never been her game. Gryffindor to the core, she squared her shoulders and turned around to face her self-proclaimed nemesis.

"Ginny." Her gaze shifted to the rigid form of Molly Weasley, who stood a short distance behind her daughter. "Mrs Weasley."

Neither woman had changed much since Hermione had least them. A little older, obviously, and Hermione wondered if they were a little wiser, as well. *One can only hope*, she thought.

She wasn't certain she was prepared for what was bound to be an uncomfortable conversation, but she also felt compelled to stay and listen to what Ginny had to say. Despite their abandonment of her, Hermione hadn't yet been able to completely sever her heart's ties with the Weasley family. A small part of her still hoped for reconciliation, no matter how unlikely.

They stepped to the side a bit, allowing some fellow last-minute shoppers to pass, and then stood in awkward silence, Ginny looking everywhere but at Hermione and Molly staring icily at a point just over her right shoulder. Were they really going to just stand there on the pavement all day?

"Was there something you wanted? Or were you simply acknowledging my existence?" Hermione said, suddenly feeling tired and cross and hormonal and wanting nothing more than to find Severus and return to Spinner's End for a spot of tea. And maybe one of those delicious biscuits from that tin hidden in the cupboard.

Molly scoffed and rolled her eyes. With a hard look at her daughter, she turned on her heel and stormed off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

"Or perhaps not even that," Hermione muttered as she watched the woman she'd once considered a second mother walk away. The hurt wasn't as acute as it had once been, but she still felt it. Unwilling to offer any insincere platitudes, such as *it was good to see you or we must do this again sometime* she clamped her mouth shut and decided it was her turn to leave.

"Wait!" Ginny said, rushing forward to touch Hermione's arm as she began to turn away. "Don't go, please. It's been so long since I've seen you..."

"And whose fault is that?" Hermione took a step back, allowing her former friend's hand to fall.

A shadow briefly crossed Ginny's expression before her face became infused with sincerity. "Mine, absolutely. I...I've wanted to contact you, for a long time actually, but ..." She trailed off and shrugged.

"You act as if I've been living on another continent. If you had truly wished to contact me, you could have done quite easily."

"Of course," Ginny quickly replied. "Only, I wasn't certain my apology would be accepted."

"Ah. I've always believed in seeking forgiveness when you know you've done something wrong regardless of whether or not you think you will be forgiven, but because it's the right thing to do."

It didn't escape Hermione's notice that Ginny didn't immediately fall all over herself apologising, nor did she utter even a single word. She merely nodded and looked away, and they returned to the uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Ginny spoke again, her mouth curving into a small, cautious smile. "So ... how are you? Anything new in your life?"

"You must be joking."

The small smile faltered, and Ginny's brow furrowed. "Sorry?"

"Anything new?" Hermione repeated, her incredulity at the inane question suffusing her tone. "You mean other than burying my husband, having a baby, and being wrongfully evicted from my flat? Other than those tiny little insignificant things, no. Nothing new at all."

Ginny's mouth tightened in annoyance for a brief moment before she caught herself and smoothed her features. Hermione tamped down the pang of hurt...it was obvious Ginny had no interest in her well-being. It wasn't anything new. She was used to disappointment when it came to the Weasleys. The only real question was Ginny's true motivation for approaching her.

"You haven't seen Harry, then?" Ginny asked as she turned to look at the window display, a blatant attempt at nonchalance.

Should have seen that one coming Hermione thought with dark amusement.

"No one has seen or heard from Harry in several months. He's away on assignment," she said. "But even if I had, I wouldn't discuss him with you."

Ginny's friendly façade disappeared in an instant, and anger flared in the witch's eyes. "Of course you wouldn't. You want to keep him all to yourself," she said, her expression darkening with bitter antipathy.

There was the truth of it, then. Hermione waved a dismissive hand. "Rubbish. Harry is a person, not an object, and can determine for himself with whom he does or does not associate."

"Oh please. You play on his emotions..."

"Harry makes his own choices, with no input from me."

"Right," Ginny said, derision dripping from the word. "We both know you convinced Harry to go along with you when you chose a filthy little ferret over my brother."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "First, that 'filthy little ferret' is my husband, and I love him...if you had any regard for my feelings, you would respect that, no matter how you feel about him. Second, let's not rewrite history. *You* are the one who played on Harry's emotions and then pushed him to choose, either me or you. That choice was his and his alone. And as for Ronald, he had every opportunity to make known any such feelings he harboured. He had *years*. It's not my fault he chose not to."

"He *did* tell you..."

"Only after I began seeing Draco. Even then, he made no true declarations, only vague inferences. He expected me to wait for him until he was done dipping his wand in every willing cauldron." Hermione gave a disbelieving laugh. "It was ridiculous."

Ginny shook her head stubbornly. "He loved you."

"Doubtful. If he'd had his way, I would be waiting even now."

Ginny, of course, waved away her reference to Ron's continued carousing. "He loved you, and you threw it back in his face. In all our faces!"

"Pardon me for not being willing to sacrifice my own wants and desires on the altar of all things Weasley!"

Ginny ignored her and continued her rant. "Well, what goes around comes around, doesn't it? I warned you. I told you getting involved with Draco would be a big mistake, and look at you now," she said with a sneer. "You're all alone. No family, no friends, with a dead husband and a bastard ba..."

Hermione was already drawing her wand when a dark voice from behind her said, "I would not finish that sentence if I were you."

She glanced up to see an eerily familiar sight...a livid Severus Snape. Her heart warmed at his fury on her behalf.

Severus gently grasped Hermione's elbow in a show of support and then looked down his hooked nose at the now nonplussed witch before them. "You have previously demonstrated some modicum of intelligence, Miss Weasley, so I am certain you are aware that particular word is not applicable in this instance."

Ginny's expression was rather mulish, but she somehow managed to curb her tongue.

"Have you completed your shopping?" he asked Hermione, his gaze unwavering, locked on Hermione's angry erstwhile friend.

"Yes, I have. But if you could wait a moment, I would like to settle a few things with Ginny."

His eyebrows rose at her determined tone, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Of course." He gave her elbow a squeeze and then stepped back, only to reveal Pansy Parkinson at his side, her wand in hand as she surreptitiously cast a few privacy charms over the immediate vicinity.

"Looks like this could get rather ugly," Pansy murmured as she and Severus stationed themselves behind Hermione.

Both former Slytherins stood at the ready, the fingers on Severus' right hand outstretched, ready to retrieve his wand if needed.

Surprised by the display of loyalty...something she had done little to earn...Hermione blinked back unbidden tears. Then she smiled. Her revelation earlier that morning that she was no longer alone was holding true...she now had people standing at her back. And it felt glorious.

"As you can see," Hermione said, returning her attention to Ginny, "I have friends."

It was a rather bald statement, and perhaps she was stretching the truth slightly, but the words felt right.

"Oh, yeah." Ginny laughed, the sound ringing of sarcasm. "Such good friends you've found!"

"Let's talk about good friends, Ginny. Real friends. Severus"...Ginny's eyes widened in surprise at Hermione's use of their former professor's given name..."is not only a highly respected war hero, but he is the most honourable wizard I've ever known. Look at all he has done in the name of friendship, even when to his own detriment. He is intelligent, loyal, dependable, and trustworthy, and I am proud to call him my friend.

"As for Pansy," Hermione said, "how do you suppose Draco's wealthy pureblood friends reacted when his parents died and their debts were called in? What did they do when he sold the manor and chose to live as an ordinary wizard in an ordinary flat with an ordinary life?"

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything," Hermione replied. "Draco's friends never abandoned him. Not ever. Not even when he married someone they considered beneath him. Did they become my best friends and come over for a chat and a cuppa? No. But they never let their dislike for me affect their relationship with him...because they loved him and his friendship was invaluable to them. That, Ginny, is what true friendship is all about...as opposed to threats and ultimatums." She glanced back at Severus, then Pansy, and a small smile touched her lips. "I think I've found some rather good friends, actually. Better than the so-called ones I had."

The anger in Ginny's eyes had faded as Hermione spoke, and now she stood shifting from foot to foot, her cheeks flushed with what could have been embarrassment and her eyes downcast. She cleared her throat and then said, "With Draco dead, I'd hoped you'd regained your senses, but obviously that isn't the case."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "You mean you were hoping I would forgive you so you could have another shot at Harry. You couldn't care less about me. Not really."

A single tear slid down the young witch's cheek, but she said nothing.

Hermione let out a breath. "I have no need for friendship with strings. My relationship with your family is over. Harry will, of course, make his own decision. I won't influence him either way, just as before."

Ginny nodded and, without another word, spun on her heel and walked away.

Hermione remained still, her eyes riveted to the retreating back of her one-time friend. It was done. And though part of her would always miss them, severing ties with the Weasleys once and for all had been far easier than she would have expected.

Once Ginny had disappeared into the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione turned to Severus and Pansy. "I'd like to return to Spinner's End. I believe I need a bit of a lie down."

Severus immediately stepped forward. "Of course."

"Thank you. Oh, and Pansy?"

Pansy arched an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Do you have plans for Christmas dinner?"

The Healer responded with an inelegant snort.

Hermione caught Severus' gaze, her request written on her face.

He sighed and nodded before turning to Pansy. "Please join us for Christmas dinner, Healer Parkinson."

A slow smile appeared. "I suppose I can cancel my previous arrangements ... and again, please call me Pansy, sir."

A/N: Just a reminder, after all this time, that this story is NOT DH-compliant. :)

Thank you to everyone who looked over this chapter over the years. (Gah.) All mistakes are mine. I make no promises as to when the next chapter will be, but I am hopeful it will be sooner than later. Up next: a Christmas surprise.