

Hilltop Cottage

by neelix

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

The Wizarding War ended more positively than Hermione had thought it would. She was still alive, for one thing, and Harry had defeated a wizard so evil that he made Adolf Hitler seem like a good guy.

Some people had decided to grab life by the balls and throw themselves into the pure pleasure of simply living. There had been more weddings and subsequent births than there had been for many years before, sales of Butterbeer and Firewhisky had gone through the roof, and there was never a need for an excuse to have a party. The end of the war and its successful outcome was reason enough, even a year on.

But Hermione couldn't feel that joy, no matter how hard she tried or how drunk she became. Her parents had been victims, along with many other Muggles. She felt their loss in a strange, detached way because she had changed so much over the years. The easy-going relationship they had shared when she was a child had become something strained, and the differences between their lives so fundamental, that they had little in common and little to discuss. Hermione had kept so much from them that in the end, they had felt like mere acquaintances. The Weasleys became her real family, brothers and a sister she had never had but learned to rely on. She had felt Fred's loss acutely, and it had highlighted that she was not, in fact, a Weasley, and they had grieved privately for him, leaving Hermione hurting alone. She didn't even have Harry, who had reunited forcefully with Ginny and was included in the Weasley wake.

It was a parting of the ways, and Hermione moved from the Burrow into a small flat close to the Ministry and took the first position she was offered, working in the Charms research department. She spent some time with Harry, but this lessened as his relationship with Ginny grew. More often than not, she spent her evenings alone, sometimes poring over work documents for the want of something to fill her time.

Ron had taken a post as a trainer for the Holyhead Harpies and had slowly made his way around most of the team, keen as they all were to sleep with Harry Potter's best friend. It didn't bother Hermione that much. They were never going anywhere, not really. But she missed him and his ridiculous sense of humour, even though there was nothing much she wanted to laugh about.

Her day started out much like any other. A shower and a coffee in the flat, and then she walked the fifteen minutes it took her to get to the visitors' entrance at the Ministry. Another ten minutes getting her wand checked in and her daily security badge charmed to her robes, and she entered the lift, getting out at the fourth basement level.

She walked into her office and said a perfunctory good morning to Alice Smyth, her assistant. It was then that the day started to get worse.

Firstly, someone had tossed the pile of research papers that she had sorted the previous day onto the floor. Secondly, she had been called to a meeting that was due to start in almost five minutes, to be chaired by Miranda Mitchell, a witch Hermione had taken an instant dislike to because she was almost as sickly sweet as Dolores Umbridge. With a deep sigh, Hermione walked back out of the office and down the stark corridor to the boardroom.

She passed Harry's office on the way and was surprised to hear a round of applause and three cheers shouted out loud, followed by a rousing chorus of 'For He's a Jolly

Good Fellow'. Intrigued, she dipped her head around the door and observed Harry in the centre of a crowd of colleagues, sycophants, or both, being clapped on the shoulder in some sort of congratulations. She felt a touch of gratification when he caught her eye and waved her in. He hadn't forgotten her totally.

'What's going on?' She smiled at him wryly.

'I was going to come and find you,' he said, slightly breathlessly. 'Ginny and me, well... We're getting married!' His face split into a hugely happy grin.

Hermione felt slightly nauseous and forced a smile onto her face. 'That's great, Harry.'

Why she didn't feel ecstatic for them, she didn't know. She could feel the walls closing in around her, and the cacophony of noise in the room and pockets of raucous laughter were making her feel dizzy.

'Hermione, are you okay?' Harry asked, concerned.

'Sure. A bit tired. I think I might just need a holiday or something,' she said softly. 'I have to go, Harry, meeting with Mitchell.' She slipped quickly out of the room and leant against the cool wall of the narrow hallway, closing her eyes to steady herself.

She turned slowly, away from Harry and in the opposite direction of her meeting with Miranda Mitchell, walked into her office and pulled out a bit of parchment. She wrote quickly and sealed it, leaving it in a prominent position for Alice to forward, and then she lifted some personal items from the drawer.

She left without a word to anyone.

A/N: Just a quick thanks to Kizzy for beta'ing and being so encouraging, and to Lily, who read it first and made me keep going!

One

Chapter 2 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: A few things to say.

1. New Mills is a real town in Derbyshire, England, and according to the *HP Lexicon*, it is supposed to be the town JK Rowling considered as Snape's home place. And it does have a road called Spinnerbottom!
2. Most of the detail in this story in regard to New Mills is true. The only bit I made up is Hilltop Cottage and my original characters. If you're interested, you can GoogleMap New Mills for the lie of the land.
3. This is the longest story I have ever written, therefore the relationship will be slow to build. I hope you enjoy it, all the same!

Hilltop Cottage, in the old industrial town of New Mills in Derbyshire, sat behind a row of more auspicious houses on Whittle Bank Road. Almost like an afterthought, it nestled apologetically behind a tall, overgrown privet hedge. The only clue to its existence was a battered wooden gate that sat in the middle of the shrubbery. White paint that had once shone proudly, its glossy surface almost blinding in the sunlight, was now chipped and dulled by the inclement weather that this area of the countryside was renowned for. Its hinges were caked with orange rust, and the wrought iron handles creaked in protest should anyone dare to venture beyond its boundary.

When Hermione stepped off the train at Newtown station, her first thought was of Hilltop Cottage. Formerly owned by one Bertram Mellor, it had been passed down to his only surviving relative at the time of his death five years previously. Hermione had only met her great grandfather twice. Once was at her christening; the second time had been on a family visit as he lay dying in the local hospital. Hermione kept a faded photograph of Bertram on the mantelpiece in the cottage to remind her that he had once been a robust and well-loved local gentleman, bearing no resemblance to the pale, wizened old man who had finally passed away in the early hours of the morning with no family by his side.

Bertram Mellor had never known that his great granddaughter was a witch. In fact, save for a few photographs that he had perused now and again, he had rarely given Hermione any thought at all. It is true to say that Bertram Mellor hadn't always recognised the smiling girl with bushy hair looking up from the Kodak print, particularly towards the end of his life. But he had known she must be family, and that had been good enough for him. Bertram Mellor had never known that Hermione would be eternally grateful to him, or that he had saved her sanity on more than one occasion by providing her with a bolt-hole that no one else knew existed.

Hermione clutched her travel bag in one hand and threw her large rucksack over her shoulder. With a spring in her step, she set off for the exit and hoped there would be a taxi waiting beyond the small brick building that housed the ticket office. Her train had been delayed leaving Manchester, and she had arrived later than she had wanted to. It had been six months since her last visit, there was no food in the house, and if she weren't quick, the late opening supermarket would be closed before she could even get a pint of milk. With a sigh of relief, Hermione let the double-glazed station door close behind her with a bang, and she set off purposely to the only waiting taxi, its yellow sign glaring "Grab-A-Cab" in the growing gloom.

'Hi,' Hermione said cheerfully, 'I need to call by Price's shop, then on to Whittle Bank Road, please.'

She smiled winningly at the driver, who drew in his paunch slightly and winked at her, giving her a toothy smile of his own.

'No problem, love. Throw your bags in the boot there and hop in,' he said. There was a hint of flirtatiousness in his voice that made Hermione wince inwardly, but she had no choice but to go with him. Apparition was not an option, not in New Mills.

Half an hour later, Hermione was standing at the doorway of Hilltop Cottage, attempting to get the key into the Yale lock, whilst being acutely aware that Mike the lecherous taxi driver was standing close behind her, holding her bags of shopping. She mentally berated herself for packing her wand in her holdall and then forgave herself just as quickly. She hadn't known she would need it, and she hoped she still wouldn't. With a bit of luck, he would take the hint and go without any awkwardness. With a small sigh of relief, Hermione felt the key slide home, and with a quick twist, she pushed the white slatted door open and dumped her travel bags on the bottom stair before turning to take the carrier bags from Mike.

'I never knew anyone used this old place since Bert pegged it,' he said amiably.

Hermione smiled sweetly. 'Bert was my great grandfather, actually. Did you know him?'

She leaned forward and prised the plastic handles from Mike as he relaxed his grip.

'Goodness me, yes. Everyone knew Bert. Never knew he had family, though,' Mike said, leaning against the doorjamb.

Hermione's heart sank. She hadn't wanted to get into a conversation, and so she proceeded to walk awkwardly backwards whilst negotiating the shopping bags and hooking her foot behind the door to close it. Realising that Hermione was in no mood to talk, Mike coughed a little and shucked himself upright before nodding in her direction.

'Right, then. G'night, Miss Mellor,' he said, flashing her another smile.

Hermione stifled a giggle at her assumed name. It wouldn't do any harm to maintain anonymity, so she didn't enlighten him.

'Goodnight, Mike. Thank you,' Hermione called down the path. Only when the gate clicked shut and she heard the roar of the car engine did she close the door and laugh lightly to herself.

Later, when Hermione had packed away the shopping and treated herself to cheese on toast and a disgustingly large glass of red wine in front of the fire, she took the time to think. She had been putting it off for almost two years, but with the alcohol coursing through her veins and the sanctuary provided by the cottage, it was time.

Two

Chapter 3 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

The following day, Hermione had to practically drag herself out of bed. She always used the smaller bedroom, set in the eaves of the house, because she loved the view from the small window. She curled up under her duvet at the foot of the old metal-framed bed, her arms resting on the rounded finial, and looked out. The sun was already high in the sky, and she could see for miles across the rolling landscape, green fields stretching into the distance. Her eyes were drawn to the narrow strip of garden belonging to the cottage, and she curled her lip ruefully when she noticed how overgrown it was. She would need to do something about that before the month was out.

Feeling a bit fuggy-headed from the wine, not to mention the tears she had shed the night before, Hermione slouched down to the kitchen, her feet catching slightly on the hems of her fleece pyjama bottoms, and put the kettle on. A cup of tea and a brisk walk was just what she needed, and she smiled as she looked up at the blue sky through the kitchen window. It was always nicer walking through the town when the sun was shining, and she knew exactly where she wanted to go.

An hour later, Hermione was at the Heritage Centre at the end of Rock Mill Lane. Her hair was tied in a tight ponytail high on her head, and she had her rucksack with her, which currently held a fresh sandwich and a bottle of Buxton water along with her thin raincoat. She didn't need it now, though. The sun was beating down on the top of her head, and she walked gratefully towards the start of the millennium walkway and the cool shade of the trees above. The walkway spanned the wide gorge beneath New Mills, went along the bank opposite Torr Vale cotton mill, and crossed the rivers Goyt and Sett as they met in churning torrents beneath Hermione's feet. She walked slowly, enjoying the fresh air and looking up at the treetops as bright patches of blue sky filtered through the translucent green leaves. When she had reached the halfway point, in the shadow of the imposing old Mill building, Hermione leant against the metal railing and watched the rumbling water below. The noise was almost deafening, crashing and booming against the rocks, and the white spray flew upwards and landed in small flecks on Hermione's face. She closed her eyes, absorbing the sound of the water, and her mind thrust forward the other echoes that she had wanted to forget about.

The final battle had raged until the early hours of the morning, although most people had lost track of the time. Hogwarts had taken a battering, and the roar of the falling brickwork assaulted Hermione's memory. Hexes were flying everywhere, and no one had known where they would land or what damage would be done until they hit or missed their target. There was a smell of burning flesh and burning wood, and a pall of smoke lingered, making visibility nigh on impossible. Then, people were screaming, others were sobbing – great heaving sobs that made them want to vomit. Grief was everywhere, and despite Harry's success in defeating Voldemort, it was the sounds and images of that grief that had stayed with Hermione for the past two years.

With a shuddering breath, she opened her eyes and rubbed away the tears that had tripped down her cheeks. She tried to focus on the building before her, her eyes scanning the glass in the windows, watching the reflection of the dappled sunlight on their shiny surfaces. Taking out her water, she took a long drink and then reached for her sandwich. Food was always grounding at times like this, and she took a grateful bite. She had been waiting for this to happen, but she hadn't expected it to be quite so exhausting. It was time for Hermione to experience her pain and to let it out and let it go. She had to move on, and this was the only way. With a long sigh, she silently thanked Bert Mellor yet again for bequeathing her his house. It was the only place she could escape the hawkish public and media scrutiny. Hermione smiled to herself. She was well aware that Muggle celebrities had their own problems with paparazzi hounding them and spreading their personal news over the pages of the glossies. How ironic that this Muggle-born celebrity witch could find her own bit of privacy in this small mill town. No one here knew her, and she had learned a long time ago to keep her safe place a secret, even from Ron and Harry. They didn't know she was here, and that was just the way she wanted it.

Hermione took another bite of her sandwich and let the rest fall into the river. She watched as it met the creamy foam and smiled as she thought of providing a treat to the local swans that swam further down the river where the current wasn't as strong. As she raised her gaze, however, she caught sight of someone else on the walkway, a glimpse of black in her peripheral vision. Her head snapped up, and she gasped as she watched the tall, dark haired figure walking briskly away from her.

There was no mistaking Severus Snape, even in his Muggle clothing. His gait, despite a slight limp, gave him away immediately. But what the hell was he doing in Hermione's private haven? Hermione followed him, her slow pace turning into a jog as she tried to keep sight of him as he strode away. She didn't want him to see her, so she maintained a bit of distance until they reached the town. Snape walked quickly down a narrow side street, and Hermione cursed under her breath and increased her pace again. As she rounded the bend of the street, she caught sight of his boot-shod foot as he took another right turn. Hermione knew she was heading down a cul-de-sac without her wand, on the trail of an ex-Death Eater she hadn't seen since the night in the Shrieking Shack. But the curiosity was killing her, despite the foolishness of her actions.

At the end of the narrow street, she paused and put her head around the corner. A short row of Victorian villas sat facing an unused and sparse bit of scrub ground, and Snape disappeared into one of them, the door slamming closed with a resounding bang that made Hermione almost leap out of her skin.

Hermione's heart was pounding against her chest, and she closed her eyes and leant against the brickwork as she tried to catch her breath. When she opened her eyes again, she looked up at the street sign in the alley that read, 'Spinnerbottom'. Trembling with shocked realisation, Hermione walked slowly into the narrow street and looked at the sign above the row of houses.

The sign saying Spinner's End was faded and weather-beaten, just like her own front gate. The letters, once black, were now charcoal grey, and some cheeky youth had

crossed out the word 'Spinner's' with red marker and scrawled 'Cock' in its place. Hermione might have laughed if it wasn't all so sad. The houses were narrow and grim, most of them boarded up. The houses that looked lived in had faded nets at the windows, yellowing and dusty. If Hermione hadn't known better, she would have assumed the houses were empty.

A feeling of despondency washed over Hermione, and suddenly she wasn't in such a hurry to be reunited with her former professor. With a shiver not dissimilar to being doused with cold water, she knew without a doubt that he was watching her. Hermione took a breath and turned, walking with slumped shoulders back down the narrow street and into the main town. She had come here to escape the war and deal with her overwhelming memories. And now, here she was, faced with the worst of it all.

For when Hermione had her most vivid dreams at night, Severus Snape was always a part of them.

Three

Chapter 4 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Severus Snape was breathing deeply as he pressed his back firmly against his front door. His eyes were tightly closed, trying to block out the many images of Hermione Granger that had flashed through his mind since he saw her leaning over the weir.

'Shit,' he muttered. He had expected she would be in New Mills at some point, but he had always hoped their paths would never cross.

It was standard Hogwarts practice to keep the family trees of each pupil on file for reference, particularly in the case of Muggle-borns. Family traits and patterns were logged, including the Houses into which each family member had been Sorted. In the case of Muggle-born witches and wizards, the further back the family tree could be traced, the better. There may have been ancestors within the family with magical ability, unknown to more recent generations, and genetics was an area of research the Ministry was particularly interested in.

He had known Bertram Mellor and hadn't liked him. A grandson of the original mill owner, he had inherited certain properties across New Mills, including the houses in Spinner's End. For a time, Bert Mellor had been his mother Eileen's landlord, until Severus had been able to purchase the property himself.

It had been a shock to Severus to realise that a relative of Bertram Mellor had been accepted into Hogwarts, but after her first year, he had realised that Hermione had very little to do with her great grandfather. He had been relieved. New Mills was his escape, a place he could hide his true identity. The house meant nothing, but the privacy it afforded him meant everything.

And now, she was here, and he was sure she had followed him and knew where he lived. He should have stopped and spoken to her before coming back to the house, but his first instinct had been to flee. He knew of Granger's penchant for 'projects,' but more importantly, he liked his life just as it was.

Since the end of the war, routine was a balm for Severus; the humdrum was like music to his soul. Ordinary life was extraordinary for Severus Snape, and he wasn't willing to give it up. He kept the wizarding world at arm's length, maintained a steady income through freelance potions projects and consultancy fees, and he even went on the occasional weekend break. Basically, he wanted peace and quiet. The thought that Hermione Granger could upset his very settled apple cart was giving him a headache.

Giving in to temptation, Severus opened his net curtain very slightly and peered out. He was just in time to see her turn and walk back down Spinnerbottom. Letting out a sigh of relief, he let the curtain fall and walked through his small lounge into the narrow kitchen at the back of the house. Years of having to live like a Muggle while at home had Severus set in his ways, and he quickly struck a Swan Vesta to light the gas hob, filled an old, battered silver whistling kettle with water, and set about brewing a pot of tea.

Like the street on which it sat, the house was run down and uncared for on the inside. The décor left much to be desired, the furniture old and worn. However, it was significantly cleaner than it had been for quite a while. Severus had more time now to attend to chores, and he found it quite therapeutic in an odd way. Beating the dust from the threadbare rugs was always particularly satisfying. The only thing he really pined for on occasion was a garden in which to grow things.

The two-up, two-down house had a small back yard enclosed on two sides by the house itself, the other two boundaries edged by a window-height brick wall. Any space that could have been set aside for planting had been swallowed up by the bathroom, which had been added onto the house at the same time as running water had been installed years ago. Nevertheless, Severus made the most of it by planting herbs in terracotta pots hanging from wires hammered into the pointing. But with more space, he could be more self-sufficient, and his potions would be more potent and subsequently more valuable, due to the freshness of the ingredients.

The kettle whistled loudly, and in minutes, Severus was walking into the lounge with his tea tray. Setting the tray on a small table, he folded himself into the green, moth-eaten armchair beside the fireplace, stretching his left leg out as he sat. It ached, especially so on damp days, but it was of no matter. He should be dead, so a war wound and a dodgy leg were the least of his concerns.

After pouring himself a cup of strong tea and adding a dash of milk, Severus turned back to the early edition of the *Daily Prophet*. He read the headline, which he had previously given only a cursory glance, and smirked to himself. According to the *Prophet*, the War Hero Hermione Granger had suddenly left her well-paid and respected post at the Ministry for Magic to travel the world, without even telling Harry Potter where she was headed.

Severus was sure it was driving the lackeys at the news desk totally mad not knowing where their meal ticket had vanished. Knowing that he had the information they so desperately wanted made him chuckle. He also felt a twinge of pride in his ex-student, for she had managed to evade them thus far. He was just about to take a slurp of tea when he paused.

If Granger had chosen New Mills as a place of refuge, then all well and good. He understood the need for an escape better than most. The *Prophet* probably had no knowledge of her family link to the town, so it was highly unlikely they would trace her here. However, Severus had no such anonymity, and his address was well known, having been publicised constantly during his trial. Even now, he knew that his house was watched when news was slow, and column inches would be devoted to 'The Secret life of an ex-Death Eater.' It was never very exciting and usually consisted of an account of his recent trip to the shops (Snape uses Muggle provisions supplier!) and speculation of how he spent his days within the walls of his small Muggle-built home. Severus rarely read it.

Snape knew that undoubtedly, Granger would not be able to leave well alone. Should she come calling on a slow news day, her cover would be blown and any hopes she had of taking a break from the realities of her life would be dashed.

'Bugger it,' he whispered.

Forgetting about his tea, he threw the paper down in exasperation, and without stopping to think about what he was about to do, he grabbed his black, Muggle jacket from

the hook by the door. Wandlessly, he Summoned the paper to him and folded it neatly, placing it carefully into his inside pocket. With his mouth set in grim determination, Severus stepped out into the street for the second time in the space of an hour.

Four

Chapter 5 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione's walk back to Hilltop Cottage had been uneventful as far as she was aware, but her thoughts had not been on her surroundings or on getting from A to B. In fact, she felt glad that she had been able to subconsciously place one foot in front of the other and find her way back without having to concentrate on her route. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess after seeing Severus Snape.

The man had been a greater influence on her than she had ever admitted to anyone else. Despite his dual role, his much-maligned mistreatment of his students, and his ability to make Hermione feel smaller than she already felt, he had been the one constant, unmoveable point during her school years. When everything around her had been chaos and uncertainty, when her parents had died, Snape had always been Snape.

Where Harry had Dumbledore to lean on and look up to, Hermione had Snape. For some reason, no matter how sarcastic or cutting his words might have been, he had been like the centre of the storm for Hermione. Whenever they were in the same room, she had felt calm and safe. Even when the war had ended, the smell of the Potions lab had often been enough to bring Hermione a similar sense of peace. It wasn't the same, though. The Potions lab didn't throb with awareness of his presence, nor did it envelop her with a deep feeling of security. Suddenly seeing him today, Hermione was faced with the stark reality that she was now floating adrift in her storm, and she had missed his steadying influence more than she had realised.

Hermione blindly opened the gate, the creaking of the handle perforating her awareness only slightly as she walked up the path towards the front door. Like an automaton, she put the key into the lock and went inside, throwing her rucksack on the bottom stair and then aiming for the sofa. She sat gingerly, wringing her hands together as she stared into the ashes of last night's fire. The smell of blood was in her nostrils, and she began to weep as the now all too vivid memory of the Shrieking Shack assailed her. Unaware, she slid down onto the rug in front of the fire and began to sob uncontrollably. It didn't matter that Snape had survived by some small miracle. She had thought that she had seen him die. It had felt like the world had disappeared under her feet and for months months and months Hermione had grieved for him alone, beyond explanation or rational thought.

It had taken Severus several attempts to locate the correct dwelling, and he had almost missed Hilltop Cottage as he walked purposefully down the lane. It was the swinging of the gate that first caught his attention, its hinges protesting against the light breeze. As his eyes followed the path, he noticed the small wooden sign above a front door that appeared to have been left open, the key still in the lock. Severus closed his eyes and stretched out his awareness slowly, pulling back just as carefully. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the gate open and stepped through, catching his forehead on the overgrown Privet and swearing silently as he felt blood seep from the scratch. Licking his finger a little, he rubbed the blood away and glared at the offending branch before continuing down the path to knock at the door with a gentle tap, tap.

Severus waited for a few seconds and then pushed the door open impatiently. It was bad enough that he was here in the first place, never mind that Granger had no thought for security or concern for who might walk in off the street. As he stepped inside, he heard what sounded like sobbing and rolled his eyes. The part of him that wanted to just step away from the emotional woman was screaming at him to flee for his life. However, the little-known but often stronger, compassionate side was intrigued. And against his better judgement, he was genuinely concerned.

Severus walked into the middle of the room and stared down at the top of Hermione's head as it shook. Her crazy hair was still just that, and to his initial glance, she hadn't changed at all in the two and some years since he had last set eyes on her.

'Miss Granger,' he said softly.

Hermione thought she was hearing things when she heard him speak her name.

'I really am losing the plot,' she thought to herself. But then he spoke again, a little sterner this time, and she rubbed her already puffy eyes and looked up at him.

He was standing in her front room with his arms folded and a frown on his face, wearing black Muggle jeans, his old Hogwarts boots, and what looked like a donkey jacket that had seen better days. She was so overwhelmed, she didn't know whether to laugh or just keep crying.

'I really did think you were dead,' she whispered. 'You fooled everyone, including me.'

Much to both of their dismay, Hermione started to cry again.

Severus coughed uncomfortably and then fumbled around in his pocket. It was not unknown for him to catch the odd cold, so he had invested in handy packs of pre-packaged tissues and always kept one in his jacket in case of emergencies. Grabbing the packet, he handed it to the still weeping witch and then walked to the kitchen. If ever there was a time for tea, it was this.

The kitchen was small and narrow, not unlike his own. However, the equipment was a little more up to date. The worktops were made of gleaming granite, and Severus ran his fingers across the sparkling surface appreciatively as he waited for the kettle to boil. His eye was drawn to the view from the kitchen window, where a rickety wooden bird table sat in the middle of a patch of unkempt grass. There were crumbs on the table, and a couple of hedge sparrows were pecking away at them. Severus felt a twinge of envy as he craned his neck to see more of the garden. It seemed to stretch for quite some distance around the rear of the cottage, and he would have loved to go out and explore it. The kettle clicked off and interrupted his musing, and he sighed as he went back to the task in hand. The cynical side of him laughed loudly as he realised he still had to calm down the witch in the other room. He had a feeling it would be a conversation he would regret, either now or at some point in the future.

Hermione had stopped crying and felt her face redden as she heard the professor making tea in her kitchen, feeling there was something wrong with it. She should be playing host, entertaining him as a guest in her home. She had often thought that they might be friends, given different circumstances. Hearing his footsteps on the wooden floor as he walked back into the room, Hermione raised her red-rimmed eyes to his.

'I am very sorry, Professor. I don't know what you must think of me.' She stood awkwardly, a couple of screwed-up tissues falling from her lap, and she reached for the mug of tea he offered to her.

Severus watched her as she took a tentative sip. Her face was streaked with the tracks of her tears, but as the tea warmed her, colour started to return to her cheeks. With

a satisfied nod, Severus walked over to the chair beside the fireplace and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

'I never know what that comment means. Do you wish to know what I actually think of you, or would you prefer I remain silent ?' he asked conversationally. He lifted his mug and took a noisy slurp.

Hermione let slip a nervous giggle, which earned her a raised eyebrow and a small smile.

'Sit down, Granger. You look like a guest in your own home.' Severus held Hermione's gaze for a moment until she did as he said, sitting down uncomfortably in the middle of the sofa.

'I'm not sure I do want to know, now you mention it,' Hermione said, keeping her eyes on her tea.

Severus let out a bark of laughter, and Hermione jumped and sloshed her tea onto the wool rug.

'Shit,' she muttered. But before she could head for the kitchen and grab a J-cloth, Severus 'Evanescod' the spilt tea with his wand.

'Thanks,' Hermione said. 'I don't use magic here, to be honest. I never have.'

Severus nodded in understanding. 'It is all the more necessary not to at the moment, I would imagine.'

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked, surprised.

Severus looked at her for a short moment, then reached inside his jacket and pulled out the folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*. He didn't say anything, but he leant forward slightly and handed it to her before stretching out his leg slowly. The ache was back, and he rubbed at his thigh through habit, unaware that the movement caught Hermione's attention.

'Are you in pain, sir?' Hermione asked him quietly.

'No more than usual. Read, Granger. It's what you are good at, if I remember rightly.' Severus set his face in a grim stare.

Hermione blushed and immediately drew her eyes from him as she opened the paper. Her face adorned the front page, and she frowned as she saw the headline and went on to read the article.

'Bloody hell,' she hissed. 'Of all the... How dare they? This is beyond a joke. You would think they might have more news-worthy things to write about, wouldn't you?'

Severus watched with amusement as the indignation washed over Hermione's face. At least she seemed to be over her tears, whatever that was all about.

'Why did you bring me this, Professor?' Hermione asked. Her voice was tight with anger.

'I felt it prudent. After our almost encounter this morning, I knew that you would be like the proverbial dog, and I the bone. It wouldn't have taken long for you to come calling, but I think you should know it would not have been safe. The *Prophet* is still interested in my now boring and ordinary life, and if you had visited, as you would most definitely have done, your whereabouts would make the front page. Of that, I have no doubt.'

Severus sat back in his chair and finished his mug of tea, then nursed the empty vessel between his hands as he looked at Hermione.

Hermione stared at Snape for a moment. He looked settled in the armchair, relaxed almost. Both legs were outstretched in front of him now, and his fingers were interlocked around his mug. Without really being aware of it, she had felt calmer in the last ten minutes than she had in months. His presence soothed her, and she didn't really want him to leave just yet. Even the reality that she probably wouldn't be able to stay undetected in New Mills for very much longer didn't affect her as much as it probably should have, and Snape was definitely staring at her as if he was waiting for the fall-out.

Hermione stood and held her hand out for his mug.

'Shall we have more tea?' she asked him with a slow, almost shy smile.

Severus's gaze softened slightly, and his eyes crinkled at the corners as he handed her his mug and nodded.

Five

Chapter 6 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Just a quick thanks to Kizzy. She totally rocks.

When Hermione went into the kitchen to make more tea, Severus stood to stretch his leg. As his eyes scanned the mantelpiece, he noticed the photograph of Bertram Mellor, and he lifted it with interest.

Hermione watched him from the door of the kitchen, and she smiled to herself. For some reason she hadn't yet managed to work out, she felt very happy to have Severus in her house. He could be as nose-y as he wanted, and she would still welcome him.

'That's my great-grandfather, Bertram Mellor,' Hermione said, offering Severus his tea.

'I am aware of your family connection to New Mills, Miss Granger. I wonder, however, how closely you have looked at this photograph?' Severus stared down at her, his face a mask of indifference.

Hermione faltered slightly. Something in Snape's manner had changed, and she had no idea what she had done, but he was definitely not one bit pleased.

'I hardly look at it. It just sits there. This was his house before he died.' Hermione was perplexed. 'Why do you ask?'

Severus took his tea and put the photograph in Hermione's free hand.

'Examine it and tell me what you see,' Severus said softly.

He was watching her face carefully, and as her brow furrowed, he relaxed slightly. She obviously hadn't studied the picture in any great detail, and his musings that she had been duplicitous were soon replaced with a sense of relief. She was truly Gryffindor to her frizzy roots. Severus suspected she would have a hard job being untruthful to anyone, even if her life depended on it.

Hermione stared at the photograph. Snape had obviously spotted something she hadn't, but the picture seemed innocent enough. Her great-grandfather had always been a smart man. He was dressed in a dark coloured suit, complete with tie and waistcoat, and a trilby hat was set at an angle on his head. Tufts of grey hair poked out around his ears, and he was smiling slightly at the camera as if posing under duress. Hermione shook her head apologetically and looked up at Snape.

'What am I meant to be seeing?' she asked.

Snape rolled his eyes in such a familiar and yet exasperatingly superior manner that Hermione felt irritated. Holding the picture out of his reach, she took a step backwards and hardened her gaze as she looked at him.

'I'll look again, shall I? I get the feeling if I don't see whatever it is, you'll give me a bloody detention. Don't forget, sir, that I am almost twenty years old. Not only am I no longer a child, I have never actually appreciated you treating me like an idiot.'

Almost immediately, Hermione regretted her outburst and gasped, putting her hand over her mouth in shock. 'Where the fuck did that come from?' she thought, trying to keep up as several things happened at once. The photograph dropped from her hand and fell to the floor, the glass in the frame cracking distinctly. At the same time, Snape put his mug onto the mantle in the place where the photo usually sat, then turned on his heel and walked from the house without a backward glance, leaving the door wide open.

Hermione stared after him for a moment before her feet started to move. She ran down the path to the wooden gate and looked down the lane. Snape was marching away from the house, and Hermione fumbled with the latch on the gate in her haste to catch him.

'Professor!' she shouted down the lane. He either didn't hear her or chose to ignore her, and she kicked out at the gate in frustration, stubbing her toe and bringing tears to her eyes.

When she looked again, Snape was nowhere to be seen, and she screwed her eyes tightly to stop the wail that threatened to break free.

'Please come back,' she whispered sadly.

Snape slammed the door of his house with such force that the ashes of his fire were disturbed by the sudden gust of air, swirling like grey dust onto the rug next to the hearth.

It had been against his better judgement to go to Granger in the first place, and now he knew why his gut feeling had told him to avoid her at all costs. The bloody girl really knew how to push his buttons, and despite her protesting, she really was still a girl to him. She had always managed to get under his skin one way or another, and she had managed it yet again after only an hour in her company. Snape gathered himself and took a deep breath. It was of no consequence. He had done what he felt he should, and there was no reason for them to have to tolerate one another again. For tolerate him she most certainly had.

Of course she must bear a grudge, because he really had been despicable to her at Hogwarts. During the first year, it was because he was wary she would already know of him through her great grandfather. There had been no love lost between Mellor and Eileen Snape, and she had christened him the 'Vulture' after a particularly steep rent increase.

In subsequent years, Granger's friendship with Potter was reason enough to dislike her, but the thing that had frustrated him the most was that he had to teach her then, a time when he couldn't hone her skills, allow her intelligent insights, or compliment her abilities. They might have achieved great things together had he been able to teach her properly, but the opportunity had been denied them both. All because of the fucking war. His own extra curricular activities had driven him to breaking point, and there were times during classes that he had simply gone through the motions, unaware of what or whom he was teaching. Their chance had gone, and he had failed her and made her hate him in the process. It could have been so very different, but he didn't allow himself the luxury of what might have been. Loving Lily had taught him that such thoughts were just a waste of time.

Severus ran his fingers through his hair and walked despondently to his armchair. Her words were still ringing in his ears, and a part of him felt foolish for walking out as he had. But the overwhelming shame at her outburst had been too much to bear. She hadn't invited his presence into her house, and he was sure she wouldn't have wished it. Worse yet, she had obviously been emotional for some reason, and she must be mortified at him observing her tears. Thank God she hadn't felt the need to explain herself. He had no desire to listen to the tale of her broken heart, for surely that had triggered her outburst. What other reason could she have for needing to hide from the rest of the world?

Severus stretched his legs and felt his eyes closing. He had a headache, and it wasn't eased by the memory of Granger's usually wide, brown eyes narrowed in anger as she spat her vitriol in his direction.

Hermione decided to fill the void left after Snape by having a bath and trying to forget about it. The bathroom was small and set in the eaves of the cottage, with the bath nestled under the sloping ceiling. There was a small frosted window, edged with the frilliest pink chintz curtains Hermione had even seen. It was at floor height, and its situation had puzzled her until she realised that the floor had been raised to give ceiling height to the room below.

The taps were on full, and steam started to rise and fill the room as Hermione unstopped a bottle of scented oil. Lavender was her favourite, and right now, she needed its relaxing properties as well as its wonderful aroma. She added a generous splash to the water and turned the taps off tightly to stop them dripping. Sorting out the dodgy plumbing was one job that would have to wait. Hermione slipped off her white, towelling bathrobe and fixed her hair into a messy bun atop her head. She dipped her toes into the water gingerly, swirling the bath oil and inhaling deeply. Slowly, she eased herself into the hot water, allowing it to wash over buttocks and thighs until she was lying with her head supported by the curved end of the bath.

Closing her eyes, Hermione immediately thought of Snape and bit her lip. It was only an hour since he had stormed away from her, and yet it already felt like it was just some sort of surreal dream. And still, her skin tingled as she remembered his tall frame and sombre countenance, standing in front of her fire and staring down at her. He still managed to intimidate her, so how had she found the courage the ridiculously rash courage--to lash out at him in such a rude and un-Hermione-like way? Not that what she said wasn't true, but she had never spoken in such a way to someone she respected. Her cheeks blushed at the memory of it, and she shook her head and opened her eyes, forcing her mind to concentrate on things other than Snape. But even as she grabbed her bath scrub and squeezed the foaming bath wash into the nylon fibres, the image of his face hung like a spectre in the back of her mind. With a resigned sigh, Hermione knew she wouldn't settle unless she apologised to him. She hit the bath water with the flat of her palm in frustration.

'He is going to just love that, damn it!' she said out loud, imagining the smug look on his face.

Half an hour later, Hermione was sitting at her small dining table with a block of writing paper and a Parker pen in her hand. She had poured herself a large glass of wine to fortify herself, but so far, she had two attempted apologies and had screwed them both up into small crumpled balls, which she had then thrown in the direction of the fireplace. She took a breath and tried again.

'Dear Professor Snape,

If you are reading this and haven't incinerated my letter already, then thank you for giving me the time to explain myself.

I am truly sorry for my unnecessary outburst earlier today. As you are aware, my emotions are a little frayed at present. Nevertheless, this does not excuse my rudeness.

After all, you only wanted me to look at the photograph more closely...'

'Shit,' Hermione muttered to herself. She had completely forgotten the photograph. Her eyes scanned the room until she spotted the picture on the floor in front of the fireplace, surrounded by shards of broken glass. She walked quickly to it, lifting it by the corner and shaking the glass from the faded print. She brought it back to the table and turned her reading lamp onto it. Taking a sip of wine, she perused the photograph carefully from the top to the bottom, examining each section to find what she had previously missed.

With a gasp, Hermione's eyes widened in shock. She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it before, and yet now she couldn't tear her eyes from the image. Bertram Mellor was standing in front of a row of very familiar Victorian houses. The image was a little shaky, but there was no mistaking what she was seeing. Staring out between the net curtains of one of the houses was a young, pale, and terribly thin face, framed with black hair.

'Oh, no,' she whispered.

Six

Chapter 7 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thank you so much for the lovely reviews.

Three days later, Severus Snape stood in his front room dressed as if he was heading to teach a Potions class. His boots were polished to within an inch of their lives, his trousers pressed to a fine, sharp crease, and his hair was clean and shiny. As part of his routine, he ventured into the wizarding community three times each month to withdraw funds from his bank at Gringotts and exchange it to Sterling. He would ensure that any outstanding invoices were settled at Slug & Jiggers and also obtain further ingredients as he needed them. Not that he brewed very often, except for particular clients who were more than willing to pay his extortionate fees, or occasionally for himself. He wouldn't purchase potions from anyone when he was more than capable of brewing them himself. Not to mention that it was always a safer option.

There was a clatter from Snape's front door, and he frowned slightly at the mail that had landed on his mat. Snape's post always arrived the Muggle way. It was not a common known fact that Squibs made up the majority of staff at the Post Office in Britain. A system of intercepting owl post had been introduced during the war, so as not to bring attention to the renegade wizard-in-hiding, and Snape had found that his neighbours didn't ask as many questions when there were no owls travelling back and forth. He didn't have time to open his letters now, so he lifted the three envelopes without paying them any heed and placed them on the table beside his armchair. He would deal with them later.

He turned and grabbed a handful of Floo powder, stepped into the fireplace, and emerged a few moments later at the back of the Leaky Cauldron. A few patrons stopped their supping as his tall, black frame walked passed them, and some of them murmured his name to each other quietly. He always attracted attention and had learned to ignore it, mostly by going about his business as if no one else existed. Even the *Daily Prophet* had become bored with 'Snape Spotting' once they realised it wasn't such a rare occurrence after all.

Stepping out into Diagon Alley, Snape made a sharp right turn and walked purposefully in the direction of the bank. There was quite a crowd milling about, and Snape sneered slightly as he caught sight of Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley outside Fortescue's, sharing what was probably the most disgusting ice cream confection he had ever seen. Potter looked up a little and caught his eye, nodded once in acknowledgment, and turned his attentions back to the Weasley girl, linking her fingers in his tightly. Snape looked away. What was it with Potters and their penchant for girls with red hair? Whatever it was, he had no wish to dwell upon it.

With a rueful grimace, Snape found his thoughts drifting to the rest of the Golden Trio. He realised instantly that it must be the boy Weasley that Granger was running away from, and he didn't blame her one bit. He had always been too sloppy and slap-dash for Snape's liking, and he imagined that it was Granger who had coached the boy through most of his schooling. He didn't have such a poor showing in his O.W.L.s, but it was doubtful he would have done so well without help. Scowling, Snape found himself still thinking of Granger as he walked up the steps of Gringotts, and he forcefully pushed away the image of her crying face as he approached the Goblin clerk and began his transaction.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her shirt tightly, tied her hair into a ponytail on the top of her head, and then lifted the thick gardening gloves. She had put off starting the mammoth task of clearing the garden for a couple of days, but she refused to say that she had been wallowing.

Yes, she had spent her mornings lolling around in bed, staring at the view from the window. And it was true to say she had consumed an inordinately large amount of wine and chocolate each evening while trying to concentrate on reading her book. The fact that she been replaying her conversation with the professor was neither here nor there. She also ignored the fact that she had bitten her nails to the quick, wondering what his reaction would be to her letter.

She had finally churned out what she felt was an acceptable missive after four more scribbled, tear-stained attempts and another glass of wine. She had shoved it hastily into the envelope, addressed it and stuck on a Muggle stamp before she could change her mind. She must have looked quite a sight, walking down the dark lane in her PJs, scarf, and Wellington boots to the post box. By the time she had finished writing, it had been three a.m., and the only other living thing that had shared the lane with her was an aged and half-sighted badger out for a stroll, and he'd not been one bit bothered that her outfit did not match.

Finally, Hermione had given herself a mental kick up the arse and resolved to start on the garden.

The weather was mild, the sun trying to creep out from behind the light clouds above, and Hermione had pulled on her old black jogging bottoms that she tucked into her socks before putting her wellies on. She had no idea what might be lurking in the undergrowth and had visions of standing in something disgusting necessitated the boots. She had bought the gloves from the local shop on her first trip into the town since 'Snape day,' as she had started to think of it. Even though she had only visited the garden centre, she had found herself scanning faces and looking around in the hope that she might see him again. She had returned disappointed and angry with herself for being disappointed.

She began by lifting out the more noticeable rubbish. Old plastic carrier bags, empty drinks cans and even an old bicycle wheel had embedded themselves in the overgrown grass, but how they had found their way there, Hermione couldn't guess. She had filled two large black bin liners within the space of twenty minutes, and she stopped to look at her progress. It would be so much easier with magic, but she hadn't even unpacked her wand yet. She would have to do something about that soon. Hermione had realised during a previous stay that not using her magic would start to make her feel woozy, and later she had looked up her symptoms in Hogwarts' library. It was a common enough problem, the magic building up and causing flu-like symptoms, easily resolved when the magic was dispelled. Now, whenever she was spending time in New Mills, she would sneak into Diagon Alley, Disillusion herself, and find a dark corner in which to perform some quiet and unremarkable spells. She always returned feeling energised and clearheaded.

With determination, Hermione grabbed the strimmer and smiled grimly as she turned it on, feeling the vibrations buzz through her. Taking a deep breath, she headed towards the grass.

Snape returned to Spinner's End with a bag of potion ingredients, a copy of the day's paper, and three bottles of elf-made wine. His trip to Gringotts had been very gratifying, and he had been informed of a large return on his investments. He was so pleased that he had decided to treat himself.

He walked into the kitchen, stored the wine horizontally in the wine rack above the end cabinet, and then headed back into the sitting room. He placed his paper beside the morning's post, and then went up the narrow stairs and into the smaller of the two double bedrooms. This was the room he had converted into a potions laboratory. It wasn't anything near what he had access to at Hogwarts, but it served its purpose, and he could still lose himself for hours over a bubbling cauldron when the mood struck. Carefully removing the phials of ingredients, he placed them meticulously on the long shelving system that ran the length of the back wall, turning the labels outward so they could be identified at speed if necessary. Crumpling the paper bag, Snape threw it into the charmed waste bin where it burst into flames and fell as ash into the base. He was still smiling smugly at his amazing aim when he went from the lab and into his own room to change into different clothes for the evening. Wearing his wizarding robes was all well and good, but they could be damned uncomfortable when he needed to relax.

Snape's bedroom would have come as a surprise to many people. Apart from his lab, it was the one room in the house that he had paid any attention to. He had purchased the bed frame from an antiques dealer one weekend when he was visiting St Austell in Cornwall. It was sleigh style, with a curved, glossy headboard and large bun feet carved from walnut wood. A tallboy stood in one corner of the room, and by the window, Snape had sat his mother's old writing desk, from where he dealt with any correspondence. On the opposite side of the bed, tucked into the corner of the room, was a floor to ceiling wardrobe with mirrored doors. Snape walked over to it and pulled out a coat hanger with one hand while unbuttoning his jacket with the other. He hung the jacket up carefully, then unfastened his trouser buttons and toed off his boots. He slipped his trousers off and stood in just his underpants while he sifted through the hangers for his soft karate trousers and a t-shirt. He wasn't quite as fit as he used to be, and it showed in the slim roll of fat that overhung his briefs a little. He wasn't overweight in the clinical sense, but he could definitely use some toning. And although his chest still showed signs of a six-pack beneath the smooth and unmarked skin, the criss-cross of myriad scars that adorned his back were his badge of honour. Not that anyone had ever seen them. Snape had never had much time for women after Lily, and a quick blowjob and an unexpected fuck with Bellatrix Lestrange (during which only his cock had been exposed) did not count as far as he was concerned. He had been Imperius'd at the time, a gift from the Dark Lord to his favourite whore, and Snape had vomited for days afterwards.

Snape finished dressing and wandered back downstairs. He was pondering grabbing a glass of that wine, even though it wasn't a special occasion. He laughed shortly to himself as that very thought crossed his mind. When would Snape ever have a special occasion for which to save the wine? He went to the kitchen and poured himself a generous measure, and then, taking the glass with him, he settled down in his armchair. Glancing at the *Prophet*, Snape pushed it aside with his hand and lifted his mail. He took a sip of wine, placed the glass beside the paper, and scanned the letters briefly. The first was a statement of his Muggle bank account. He already knew the balance, as he was meticulous with his personal accounting, but it was useful to ensure that all of his direct debits were going out as planned. He had learned that lesson the hard way when British Gas had charged him twice in the same month.

The second letter made Snape frown slightly. He recognised the handwriting immediately, and he sighed. She wouldn't just let it lie, of course. It was probably a grovelling apology, complete with contrite promises that she would naturally leave him alone from now on. She couldn't, Snape knew. It wasn't in her nature. Gryffindors loved to fix things, even when they weren't broken.

Snape ignored the letter and put it next to his wine glass, then turned to the last envelope. He smiled softly as he examined the neat, angular writing. Punctual as usual, he could almost picture Minerva as she sat at her desk writing. He opened it and took another sip of wine as he read. There was the usual news about the school and the expected offer of work should he ever wish to return. *'We do miss you, Severus,'* she said this time, and with chagrin, Snape felt a lump in his throat. He missed Minerva very much, but he doubted that anyone but she and Pomona, perhaps, would give him a second thought. It was the last paragraph that gave Snape pause, and he read it over again.

'I am particularly concerned about Hermione Granger, Severus. You remember her, naturally. She and I have also been corresponding until recently. I find her leaving the Ministry and departing so quickly very disconcerting. She hadn't even mentioned going away, and her letters had been much less cheerful of late. The war leaves traces, I think. Some of which we are never free.'

Yours in friendship,

Minerva'

Surely Granger would have told someone of her plans? What with leaving her job and making up some tale about travelling the world, not to mention her emotional state and subsequent outburst, it would seem that she was behaving totally out of character.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Snape lifted the letter from Hermione and opened it carefully. He had expected an essay, but inside the envelope was one folded sheet of writing paper, crammed with her rounded script. Snape shuffled to the edge of his chair and bent over her note as he read.

'Dear Professor Snape,

I cannot take back the words that I said to you, nor do I think I will. You really were horrible to me at school, and for a time I did hate you for it.

However, I do think that there is a time and a place for honesty, and I have never been very good at picking my moments. You were very kind to me. You didn't pry, and I repaid you with rudeness. For that, I really am very sorry, and I hope you can forgive me.

I did take a closer look at the photograph, and I now see what you were trying to show me.

You looked like a very sad child, Professor. I sincerely hope you are happier now.

Yours respectfully,

Hermione Granger

P.S. Should you ever find yourself walking past Hilltop Cottage, please feel welcome to call for tea.

Snape let the letter fall to the floor and knocked back the remainder of his wine in one go. She was looking for forgiveness when she had spoken nothing but truth. And she would welcome him back. He shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment. He could never fathom the workings of a woman's mind, and female Gryffindors were even worse.

Seven

Chapter 8 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thanks to Kizzy for making this readable. And a special message to a certain reviewer. No Chinese food in this chapter. Hunger is good sauce, though, right?

Hermione rubbed at her shoulders slightly and cricked her neck. She had worked for hours, strimming back the overgrown jungle behind the house, but it had been well worth it. Now all she needed to do was to mow the grass and get rid of the rubbish, but that was tomorrow's job. Right now, she had an appointment with her sloppy clothes and her television.

Not many people were aware of Hermione's weakness for watching TV. It was something she had to fight hard against, and oh, how easy it would be to spend the whole day curled up on the sofa, watching with mind-numbing habit. But she was strong-willed. She limited her viewing, and only her favourite programmes were allowed to catch her attention, and only then when she felt she had earned it. Tonight was one of those nights, and Hermione smiled to herself as she pushed the round, black button on the front of her TV set, grabbed her Sky remote and flicked to the right channel automatically.

She was just about to flop down onto the pale green sofa cushion when there was a knock at the door, and she froze. The only people who knew that she was here were Mike the creepy taxi driver. And Snape. She cast her gaze downwards as she walked slowly to the door. Her grey jogging bottoms had seen better days and had a large chocolate stain on one leg. Her slippers were the pink, fluffy ones her grandmother had bought for her ('It's so draughty in that old house, Hermione.'). But worst of all, she was wearing a thin, strappy vest top and no bra. Her breasts were ample and swung freely beneath the fabric, and she quite enjoyed the way the vest brushed her nipples on occasion. Nipples that were, right at that moment, annoyingly pert and visible. There was no denying that whoever was behind the door, she didn't want them seeing her in all of her glory, and whoever it was, they were impatient, because now they were knocking again.

'Alright!' Hermione shouted. Honestly, it was bad enough that she was only half-dressed, but her programme was just starting, and she would probably end up missing it.

She walked to the door and opened it a fraction. Her stomach dropped as she saw Snape standing there, clutching a bottle of wine and looking like he would rather be elsewhere.

'Hello,' she said quietly, 'sir.' *'Nice one, Hermione, very articulate,'* her inner voice grumbled at her.

Snape found his voice after a brief pause. 'Miss Granger,' he nodded. 'May I come in?'

'Em, well... Yes, of course.' Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door just wide enough for him to step through while hiding herself behind it carefully.

Snape ducked inside and turned to look at her. 'If this is a bad time, please say. I will leave,' he said, his voice slightly stilted. He looked uncomfortable, and Hermione realised that he would have received her letter by now and that the wine was probably a peace offering of sorts. She didn't want to blow it now, so she smiled brightly at him.

'No, it's fine. I just feel a little underdressed, to be honest. Make yourself comfortable, sir. I'll be down shortly.' Hermione waved her hand airily towards the sofa, then turned and hopped up the stairs two at a time before he had the chance to catch sight of her properly.

She took a stupidly long time deciding what to wear. It wasn't like it was a date or anything, and yet everything she chose made her feel too young, too frumpy or too slutty. Eventually, she pulled on her green zip-up fleece and black joggers and replaced her slippers for a pair of woollen socks. By the time she returned, Snape had opened the wine, found her glasses, and had set them on a small table in front of the sofa. He didn't look at her when she sat tentatively beside him, however. The glowing box in the corner of the room took his attention; his eyes were wide and his mouth was open slightly.

'Who on God's earth is that?' he asked her, sarcasm dripping from him.

Hermione laughed out loud. 'That,' she said happily, 'is Ty Pennington. He's an American.'

'So I gathered.' Snape curled his upper lip slightly. 'He is incredibly loud, isn't he?'

Hermione nodded and grinned. 'I love his enthusiasm. I get the impression he doesn't really care what people think of him, as long as the job is done. I envy that.'

'Indeed.' Snape turned his head slightly and glanced at Hermione. 'Would you care for wine?'

'That would be very nice. Thank you,' Hermione said sincerely.

Snape poured the wine deftly and handed the first glass to Hermione, who kept her eyes fixed to the screen and only nodded her thanks to him. They sat in silence as the home of some needy family was destroyed by Muggle machinery on the television, and as the wine warmed them, they both relaxed back against the sofa. By the time the programme had finished, Snape's bottle was empty and Hermione had opened one of her own, which was now only half-full. Hermione was rubbing her damp eyes with one of his tissues yet again, and she laughed out loud.

'You must think I spend my life crying,' she slurred. 'I don't, actually. You just happened to be here, that's all.'

She emphasised her words by pointing at him and almost poking him in the chest, and Snape realised the wine had affected her a great deal more than it had him, probably due to her age and lack of drinking experience. He was about to take his leave and allow her to sleep it off, but she hadn't finished talking, apparently.

'I find it very emotional,' she said, pointing at the television with the remote control and turning the screen black. 'The way they make peoples lives better, the amazing things they do. It restores my faith in people.'

Snape assumed she was talking about the programme they had watched.

'Indeed,' he replied. He had no idea where the conversation was headed, and he hoped he could slip away sometime soon. Sleep was creeping up on him, and he stifled a yawn as Hermione twisted to face him.

'Did you get my letter, Professor?' she asked him, her gaze staring earnestly at him as she leant forward slightly. She was swaying, and Snape fought the urge to laugh.

Her hair had started to free itself from the ponytail she had caught it in, and her cheeks were flushed pink

'I did get your letter. That was the reason for my visit, Miss Granger.' He looked at her in amusement. She really was quite entertaining.

'Oh, just call me Hermione, will you?' She grinned lopsidedly at him and laughed loudly before covering her mouth. 'Although I can't see myself calling you Severus any time soon....'

At this, she collapsed into a fit of giggles and fell face forwards, her head landing halfway between his chest and crotch. She hit him with such force that he recoiled forwards with an 'oomph,' making her laugh even harder, her curls shaking madly. Under her breath she was mumbling half formed sentences, and he grabbed her shoulders, pushing her upright as she continued to laugh.

'Make me some tea, Severus,' she sputtered through her laughter. 'Severus...' she said again, her voice raising an octave as her giggles overcame her totally this time, and she slid haphazardly from the sofa and onto the floor, kicking the table leg and tossing the half-full wine bottle.

'I think that's enough,' Snape muttered. With the grace that his leg did not usually allow, he bent to lift the bottle before all of the contents spilled onto the rug, set it upright on the table, and then stood quickly. He glanced down at Hermione, and his lip curled a little. She had fallen asleep with her head against the side of the sofa, and her hair covering her face like a long, curly curtain. She had even started to snore slightly. He was tempted to leave her like that, but thought better of it, deciding to find an eiderdown or blanket to cover her.

Snape made his way up the stairs and ducked his head into the first room. There was a metal-framed single bed against one wall, complete with an old mattress but no bedding. The next room was more promising, and he realised this must be Hermione's room when he saw a pair of trainers under the bedside locker and a pile of books on top of the chest of drawers. He lifted the patchwork quilt from the bed and turned to leave when a pile of old copies of the *Daily Prophet*, sticking out from under the bed, caught his eye.

Flicking on the lamp by the bed, he lifted the pile and saw that they were all marked in various places with small Muggle stickers in bright yellow. The first article, published almost two months after Voldemort's demise, was the news that he, Severus Snape, had survived the war. The paper had been well thumbed, it seemed. The next newspaper was marked in three places, and on each marked page, a large, red circle had been drawn around the articles that Hermione had paid particular interest in. They all centred on him. What Snape would do now, if he couldn't return to Hogwarts? And more laughably, the last passage stated he had been paying clandestine visits to the wife of Lucius Malfoy behind her husband's back. Not true. He was in fact bringing necessary potions for the man himself, but then the *Prophet* nearly always got it wrong.

Snape couldn't fathom why Granger would keep articles about him, or why she would have them with her now, when she had wanted to break away from the magical world for a while. He realised with a pang that he was glad that someone had noticed his survival and had wanted to be reminded of him, whatever reason she might have. With a start, he remembered that he had left her sitting on the floor downstairs, and she was probably freezing by now. The cottage really wasn't very warm at all. He put the old newspapers back where he had found them and hurried back downstairs with the quilt in his arms.

Hermione had slipped fully onto the floor, her mouth open like a hungry fish and her legs akimbo. Snape snorted, wishing he had a camera, and then placed the quilt on the sofa before bending to lift her carefully. Hermione roused slightly and wrapped her arms around his neck as he placed her on the sofa. Extracting himself slowly, he frowned as he realised she was actually inhaling the front of his shirt with a small smile on her lips. He shook his head. She really was a strange girl. Covering her with the quilt, Snape checked the back door was locked and then left quietly through the front.

When Hermione awoke the next day, her head was pounding, and she felt decidedly strange. Her bed felt lumpy, and for some reason, she was still wearing her clothes. Protecting her eyes with her hand, she squinted an eyelid open gingerly and peered through a gap in her fingers. It took a few seconds for Hermione to realise she was lying on the sofa, but as the reality hit, so did the events of the previous night. Initially horrified, she closed her eyes and moaned into the top of her duvet. Her shock turned into a snort of laughter as she remembered watching "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" with her former professor. It was all the more surreal because at the time, it had felt completely normal. Her thoughts continued to follow the course of the evening, and she blushed furiously as she remembered her fit of giggles and falling on top of him.

'Oh, gods,' she mumbled, shifting herself until she was sitting upright, the duvet wrapped around her waist. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was already ten o'clock. Her mouth felt very dry, and she was seriously in need of tea. Shoving the duvet off, Hermione slowly stood and padded to the kitchen, flicking on the kettle and trying not to wince as sunlight flooded through the gaps in the Venetian blind at the window.

As usual, her thoughts went back to Snape. They hadn't really spoken much, and it occurred to her that she hadn't even asked him why he had called around. They had just slipped into a night of wine drinking and TV watching as if they were, well, friends. It seemed so commonplace that Hermione wasn't one bit surprised to find him on her doorstep yet again ten minutes later.

'I brought you this; I thought you might appreciate it,' Snape said, his mouth twitching slightly. He handed her a hangover potion, which she took from him eagerly while poking out her tongue playfully.

Hermione's hair was all over the place and full of tangles that would take an age to sort out. Her face was pale, her clothes crumpled, and yet for some reason, Snape felt very glad he had decided to come back this morning.

If he was a moth, then Hermione Granger was, for some strange and unknown reason, his flame.

A/N no. 2: Apologies for the delay in replying to the reviews in Chapter 6 -- I was away for my best friend's wedding! Back now, and eagerly anticipating everyone's reactions to this chapter!

Eight

Chapter 9 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thank you for the wonderful reviews, everyone. They made me smile. A lot. Oh, yes. Chinese Food in this chapter for those who were waiting.

Over the next two months, they drifted into a routine without really noticing it, and every two or three days, Severus would arrive at Hermione's house. At first, there was always some flimsy pretext for his visits. More hangover potion should she need it, the loan of a book or a copy of *Ars Alchemica* for her to read, and on one occasion, some herb seedlings he had ostensibly found no room for in his terracotta pots. But Severus wasn't fooled. He was just being a fool.

He had forced himself to stay at home today. It had been warm and sunny, ideal weather for assisting Hermione in her garden, but he had busied himself in his lab instead, brewing potions that he didn't really need. His thoughts had been far from his cauldron, much to his annoyance. Hermione Granger had penetrated his hard built defences, and he found that she had filled a void in his life that he hadn't known was even there. For the first time in his life, he had a genuine friend. Lily, he had decided, did not count.

Theirs had been a friendship based on similar need. They were two children, coping with their newly discovered magic, drawn to each other by the wonder of discovery and the joy of not being the only one. How quickly that had diminished, however, when push had come to shove. Lily Evans did not bestow the security of an unconditional bond, in which mistakes were made and then forgiven, on Snape. Where he had thought himself safe and accepted, he had been judged and found wanting, eventually subject to her scathing rejection.

It wasn't the rejection of his love that had hurt the most. Severus was not so stupid that he didn't realise teenage love could be fickle and transient. What had pained him the most was Lily's rejection of him and their friendship and all that they had shared before Hogwarts. He had invested himself so deeply, but it had counted for nothing, and subsequently, he hadn't felt a like whole person for years. His hurt had been burning a hole in him more fiercely than his Dark Mark, a pain to which he had become so accustomed it almost ceased to exist, until Granger and her honest, open and accepting friendship had fulfilled him, almost healed him.

He couldn't understand it. He was over twice her age, and yet the past that they shared seemed to bind them and invisibly draw them to each other. Strangely though, during all of his visits, they hadn't talked about the war or of Hogwarts or of her friends or his past. They focussed only on the 'now,' as if by some unspoken rule. Having tea, weeding the garden, and watching Hermione's ridiculous television programmes seemed enough. On occasion, they even sat and read in the same room quietly, the silence cossetting them like a cosy fleece.

Severus had recently come to acknowledge that he didn't want Hermione to leave Hilltop Cottage any time soon, and yet he had no idea of her plans for the future. She could up and leave within the week for all he knew.

He tried to pretend that he was indifferent, but deep down, the thought scared the shit out of him.

Hermione had spent the morning in her garden, preparing a surprise for Severus. She wasn't expecting him today. He had told her he had business to attend to, and she didn't pry. Although part of her was curious as to how he spent his days, she never asked and he never divulged. It wasn't important. The one thing he'd told her--and the thing she had noticed most--was his envy of her garden.

Occasionally, Hermione would catch him staring at the long, narrow plot with his brow furrowed and his lips moving as if he was talking to himself. One day, he had paced along the plot, counting to himself, and Hermione had realised he was planning what he would do with the garden if it were his.

She had been very careful not to ask too many questions because she knew it irked him. He would purse his lips and his gaze would grow distant, so she quickly stopped, resorting to quiet conversation in the hope it would draw him out of himself. Sometimes they wouldn't speak at all, and Hermione found she really liked those times. Being with Severus was bringing her the peace she had thought would elude her despite her seclusion.

But on the day he had paced her garden, she had forgotten her own rule and asked him about it, and his mouth had quirked ruefully as if he knew it was but a pipe dream. But he had told her anyway.

In one section, he would grow herbs and edible flowers, planted in rotation so he could sow, harvest and replenish the soil with nutrients in such a way as to always have a fresh crop. In the next section, he would grow shrubs that he could use in his potions but would lose efficacy when dried. This was an idea in the development stages, in line with research he had refused to discuss further. When describing the last section of the garden, Snape had been dismissive of his plans to grow vegetables in a bid to be more self-sufficient, but Hermione had been enthralled by the idea. Snape had smiled slightly at her enthusiasm and patted her shoulder as if humouring her. Hermione had blushed at the gesture, and Snape had pulled back in embarrassment, as if he had forgotten himself. But Hermione had secretly been thrilled. It had shown his contentment with her company, that he actually liked being with her. It was usually so very hard to tell.

Hermione was starving, and much to her frustration, she realised she needed to go food shopping. One onion, half a loaf of bread and a banana would not go very far, and with a sigh, she realised the shop would already be closed. She hadn't even realised how late it was. With a small smile, she pulled out the local takeaway menu and grabbed the phone. It would only take her ten minutes to run down there, and she had worked very hard today. A treat was in order.

After making her call and placing her order, she pulled on her green fleece over her thin white t-shirt, pushed her feet inside her greying trainers, and searched for her rucksack and the front door key. Once she had everything, she set off, closing the front door with a satisfying bang and then almost trotting up the path. For some reason, she noticed her gate had stopped creaking, and when she glanced down, there was a telltale smear of oil on the hinges and the handle. Hermione rolled her eyes. There was only one person who would have done that. She smiled knowingly. She wasn't sure if he had done it for her benefit or because the noisy gate annoyed the hell out of him. She suspected it was the latter.

The sun was just setting as she walked down the lane, a rosy ball glowing as it dipped behind the hills, casting streaks of pink and purple light across the sky. There were faint puffs of greying cloud, and Hermione was reminded of the old wives' saying, 'Red Sky at Night, Shepherds' Delight.' It would probably be a nice day tomorrow, and she hoped that Snape would call so she could show him his surprise. She could hardly wait to see the look on his face.

Before long, Hermione saw the red and yellow sign hanging on the wall outside the Chinese takeaway and felt her mouth water a little. The Chung Ying House had opened a little over two years ago, a much needed addition to the town. They also did the best Crispy Chilli Chicken Hermione had ever tasted. As she got to the door, she noticed there were two other customers waiting. She paused momentarily to gather herself. Both customers were male. One man was bald and had dark blue tattoos on his large neck and his forearms. His eyebrow was pierced with a long, black, pointed fang, and he looked every inch like a Muggle she would choose to avoid, even though she knew this was a stereotypical response. The man was probably perfectly nice, despite appearances.

The other customer was hidden from view by a large menu board in the window, but his feet were visible, and Hermione laughed lowly to herself. There was no mistaking those boots or the slim, dark legs that were stretching above them. With a grin, she pushed the door open. Both men turned at the sound of the tinkling bell, and Hermione nodded to the tattooed Muggle, who grunted and nodded back, then put his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans and stood slightly taller. She turned then and grinned lopsidedly at Severus, who seemed to be trying not to smile back at her. He crossed his arms and leant back against the beige Formica countertop, his lips twitching as Hermione walked towards him.

'Not cooking tonight?' he murmured.

'Nope. I was busy, ran out of time to get anything in. What's your excuse?' Hermione giggled a little as he grimaced slightly. She had an idea that cooking wasn't something Severus did very often.

'I do not need an excuse,' Severus said quietly, leaning forward slightly so as to keep the conversation between them. 'I just love the Crispy Chilli Chicken.'

His face was deadpan, but Hermione saw a glimmer of amusement in his eye and started to laugh just as a slim Chinese lady walked from behind a two-way mirror carrying two paper bags.

'Crispy Chilli Chicken?' she asked, looking at all three customers with her eyebrows raised.

'Yes,' said Hermione and Severus together. Hermione gave Severus a sideways glance and felt very slightly smug as his mouth opened in surprise, then closed quickly into a smirk. With an old-fashioned gesture, Severus swept his arm in front her, allowing her to take her food first. Hermione grinned and handed her money to the woman behind the counter, who looked at both of them with a bemused look on her face and shook her head a little. Severus followed suit, and before long, they were standing on the pavement outside the shop, holding identical bags of food and looking a little awkward.

'Well. Better eat before it gets cold,' Hermione stated, waving her bag slightly.

'Yes,' Severus said, nodding.

Neither of them moved, and Hermione laughed a little with embarrassment.

'Will I see you tomorrow?' she asked quietly. For some reason, the question sounded loaded with innuendo, and she blushed, hoping the dim light would hide her glowing cheeks.

Severus was staring intently at Hermione, as if trying to read some hidden meaning in her words. He was feeling tense suddenly, and he wondered if she had asked because she wanted to see him, or because she thought he would call up anyway.

'Perhaps.' Severus nodded and turned to walk away, but her words made him pause and turn slightly.

'Severus?' Hermione moved her feet a step towards him, then stopped suddenly.

'Yes?' He raised his eyebrow in a question.

'Would you like to come for lunch? I have something to show you, and we could eat at the same time.' She smiled shyly.

'Very well. Tomorrow, then,' he said quickly, turning to walk up the street.

Hermione stared after him, and with a sinking feeling, she realised she had just invited Severus Snape on what had sounded like a date. Her stomach flipped when she realised she wasn't averse to the idea at all.

Nine

Chapter 10 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thanks for the reviews, everyone. I'm truly grateful.

Snape scraped the remainder of his egg fried rice and congealed chilli sauce, which was a shocking shade of pink, from his plate and into the empty take away container. As usual, his meal had been delicious, in spite of the calorific content. He wasn't quite sure just how much of it he had been aware of eating, however.

The stilted conversation that had taken place between himself and Granger was playing on his mind, and his usually measured and detached approach to the curve balls that life threw at him was teetering on the edge. As if he hadn't already been confused by their strange connection--he had spent the day pondering it, for goodness sake--now she had thrown another log onto the fire.

He was fairly certain that her lunch invitation had been just a friendly gesture. While at Hogwarts, Minerva would occasionally make the same offer at weekends, to have lunch in Hogsmeade, or on one occasion, Diagon Alley. It had been pleasant to spend time away from the school, to talk about things other than work or the doom and gloom of the war, although inevitably the conversation would touch on that, the closer the threat had become.

And yet, there was something about the way Granger had asked him, an awkwardness that ordinarily he would have attributed to her youth had they had not already shared each other's company comfortably over the past few weeks. Her invitation had been heartfelt. But had he heard something in her tone of voice that suggested it was more than just lunch?

Snape stared down at his hands and found that he was gripping onto the edge of his sink so tightly that his knuckles were shining white through his pale skin. His stomach was starting to roil slightly at the notion Granger may desire more than just friendship from him. It was a ridiculously pathetic notion, and he would tell her that if he had to.

Regardless of the age difference, which wasn't something Snape had thought about until this moment, she was most likely on the rebound from Weasley and needed someone to fill the gap. He knew she admired him for some strange reason. Looked up to him, almost. But he had convinced himself that he was a sad excuse for the father figure so obviously missing in her life, not a potential paramour. One thing he was certain of was that he would end up hurting her, one way or another, and he was beginning to wish she had never turned up in New Mills.

Solitude had been so much easier.

Hermione was having a nightmare. Her legs were jumping beneath her duvet, as if she was running where she lay, and small, indistinguishable murmurs were escaping her pursed lips. Beads of perspiration sat on her top lip, and her hair was clinging to her face as she tossed and turned.

It was dark, and she was somewhere in the Forbidden Forest. The sound of hexes and curses being screamed and yelled were coming from all directions, and yet Hermione knew she was safe where she was. There was a smell of burning, and as she looked upwards, she could see the tops of trees set alight by spells gone awry. She turned at the sound of twigs breaking, and her heart jumped into her throat as she shrank back against the trunk of a nearby tree.

Whoever it was, they had stopped close to where Hermione had been standing moments before, and she could hear panting, wheezy breaths as they paused. Steeling herself, Hermione ducked a quick look around the tree trunk and sighed with relief. It was only Severus.

'Oh, thank goodness it's only you,' said Hermione.

Dream Snape stood upright and sneered down his nose at her with contempt.

'Granger,' he growled.

'Severus?' Hermione stepped towards him with her arms outstretched, wanting to hold him to her and offer comfort.

'I have no need for you,' he said, folding his arms across his chest and almost staring through her.

Hermione walked closer to him, ignoring his words and his offhand manner. She went to wrap her arms around him, only to find them slipping through him as if he was but a ghost or an apparition.

When Hermione looked around her, Snape was suddenly nowhere to be seen, and the sound of laughter pierced through the darkness as Bellatrix Lestrange entered the clearing, her hair crackling with magic and her wand arm outstretched.

'Silly little girl,' Bella sang, 'wants to touch what isn't hers.'

Hermione thrust out her wand and felt herself trembling as she stepped towards the Dark witch.

'He's not yours either,' she said warily.

Bella cackled and licked her lips. 'He will want a real witch, you stupid, little Mudblood!'

She screamed at Hermione and then lunged forward with her eyes wide and her lips stretched in a grin-like grimace.

'Avada Kedavra!'

Hermione screamed as a flash of green light sped towards her.

Her scream was real, and she awoke in terror, her duvet wrapped around her and almost strangling her as she tried in vain to scramble from the bed. In blind panic, Hermione began to sob as she stumbled and tripped over the pile of *Daily Prophets* that stuck out from under her bed. Fumbling to the floor, she grabbed a paper from the top of the pile and stared at the front page in the half-light.

The moon was shining through a small gap in the curtains, and it fell on the moving image of Severus as he scowled and sneered in turn. His hair was lank and looked unhealthy, his face pale and wan. A makeshift dressing was half hanging from his still-open neck wound, the photograph having been snatched when he had least expected it. It had been his first venture beyond his front door since the final battle, and all he had wanted was a little fresh air and a pint of milk.

Hermione's hands shook as she stared into his blank gaze. It was reminiscent of the Severus of her dream, uncaring, unfeeling and distant. This wasn't the Severus she knew. Her Severus had warmth and humour, and he cared about the living. He cared about her. Didn't he?

Bellatrix's words were ringing in Hermione's ears, and even though she knew it was a dream, they cut her to the quick. The thought of Severus sharing himself in any capacity, with another witch made her want to throw up. As unreal as the dream was, the pain that Hermione had felt when Severus disappeared had stayed with her, leaving her feeling empty and bereft. With sudden anger, Hermione clawed at the paper and started to tear it into small pieces, grabbing and ripping until it lay like black and white confetti around her. Her tears fell, unchecked this time by handy packet tissues. Severus wasn't here to calm her now, and the thought that she might have to live her life without him in it sent a shiver of terror through her. In a remote and very small rational part of her brain, Hermione asked herself what it all meant.

There was no answer.

When Hermione awoke again, the sun was shining through the gap in the curtain and lay in rays across her face. Small dust motes flew like floating glitter as she shifted herself upright and rested her head back against the mattress. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to clear her head of the previous night's events. Glancing over at her alarm clock, she groaned and then gasped. It was almost noon. And Severus was coming for lunch.

Pushing herself up, Hermione walked quickly to the front bedroom and peered out of the window and down the lane that lead to the house. Severus was walking slowly up the road, his leg dragging slightly and his black hair bobbing a little as he limped along.

'Fuck,' Hermione muttered. Why was he so damn punctual?

Dashing back to her bedroom, she threw on her underwear and yesterday's jeans, fastened her bra with fumbling fingers, and grabbed the first t-shirt from the pile in her top drawer. She lifted her deodorant spray and spritzed herself liberally just as she heard Severus knocking on her door.

With a deep breath, Hermione walked barefooted down the stairs and opened the door breathlessly, forcing a false smile onto her face.

'Hi' she said.

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but his words choked and became a startled laugh as he stared at Hermione.

'What on earth happened to you?' He was almost grinning, like he couldn't help himself.

Hermione had never seen him smile fully before, and she was mesmerised by the change in his features. His eyes were almost twinkling, his face looked fuller and a little pinker around the cheeks, and his lips stretched wide and full to show his uneven but fairly white teeth. With a start, she realised he was now in full flow and laughing so much he had to lean on the door jamb for support.

'What are you laughing at?' Hermione said, grinning in spite of herself.

'This,' he said. With a swift movement, he propelled Hermione by her shoulders into the living room and stood her in front of the mirror above the mantelpiece. She gasped and started to giggle as she saw her hair for the first time that day, stuck out at all angles like a bushy halo. Her skin was blotchy and still showed her tearstains, and as she rubbed at her cheeks, the memory of her nightmare came flooding back, and her face fell.

Severus was standing behind her as she looked at herself in the mirror. She looked ridiculously wonderful with her mad hair, and as he stared at it, he noticed bits of paper stuck here and there. Tentatively, he lifted a scrap from one of her curls and stared at it. It looked like newsprint, and he caught Hermione's gaze in the mirror with a questioning glance.

Hermione's lip trembled as she looked into Severus's reflection. This was her Severus. His eyes were warm, and the trace of his recent laughter lingered around his twitching lips. Slowly, Hermione turned until she was staring up into his face. A look of fear flashed in his eyes, then softened.

'You've been crying again,' he stated quietly.

'I had a nightmare,' she whispered. They were standing so close; Hermione could feel his warm breath on her cheek and caught the hint of peppermint.

'Tell me about it.' Severus stood as still as a statue, his arms by his sides, and stared down at Hermione's pale face.

With a small sob, Hermione flung her arms around him. She hugged him to her so tightly that he almost lost his balance. She was weeping against his shirt, and he didn't know what to do. He couldn't remember the last time he had been in close contact with a female in such a way. His experiences with Bellatrix had certainly not been caring or affectionate, and it was with shock that Severus realised the last female to hug him like this was his mother. Lily did not count. Nothing she had ever done counted any more.

With gentle, slow hands, Severus pushed Hermione away from him, keeping a firm hold of her upper arms as she wiped away her tears.

'Tell me about your dream,' he said again. He knew how destructive nightmares could be, and if he could help her work through it, all the better.

'You left me,' Hermione sighed. She stepped towards him and laid her head on his chest, inhaling him and wrapping her arms more gently around him. 'You left me, and I couldn't bear it.'

Severus felt his stomach tighten, and his breath hitched at her words. He closed his eyes, and against his better judgement, wrapped his arms around the now calm witch, pulled her closer and rested his chin on top of her curly head.

To his dismay, it felt good. Amazing, in fact.

Ten

Chapter 11 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Later, Severus couldn't remember how long he had stood with Hermione in his arms. It seemed like forever, and yet not quite long enough, when she finally relaxed her hold and moved away from him with a shy smile and an apologetic look in her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don't know what came over me.'

Severus felt wrong footed for a brief moment. Her nearness, the feel of her warmth and her slender frame against his clouded his thoughts momentarily, and he had no idea how to respond. His mouth was dry, and he swallowed slowly, following her movements avidly as she moved towards the kitchen.

He heard the kettle click and the familiar sounds of tea making. Letting out a long breath, he closed his eyes for a brief moment before steeling himself to just behave normally. It was only a hug, for goodness sake. She hugged her friends all of the time; he had seen this with his own eyes. She was a spontaneous and emotional person, and he was conveniently placed to be the recipient of her affections. It meant nothing more. And yet, surely her words meant something?

'You left me, and I couldn't bear it.'

It was as if she had expressed more than just the dream, and the irony of it wasn't lost on him. He knew he wouldn't be able to bear her absence either, not now.

He felt her walk back into the room, and he turned towards her, schooling his features to relax as he caught her eyes briefly and took the proffered mug. They stood awkwardly for a moment until Hermione could no longer stand the silence. She sat down on the edge of the sofa, nursing her steaming tea and staring at his shiny boots.

'Do you have more than one pair of boots, or is that the same pair you used to wear at Hogwarts?' She smiled up at him cheekily, and he smiled slowly back before folding himself into his usual chair beside the fire.

'I have two pairs. But these are the Hogwarts boots.' He stretched his legs out and waved his feet slightly. They both stared at them for a short moment until Hermione changed the subject again.

'I missed you, you know. After you "died."' Hermione made quotation marks with her free hand and looked into his face. 'I had no idea you meant so much to me, until I thought you were gone forever.'

She was looking at him with expectation. Severus shrugged.

'I don't know what you want me to say, Hermione,' he sighed. 'Whatever you see in me is misguided. I have nothing to offer.'

'How can you say that? You have already given me so much!' Hermione declared hotly.

Severus narrowed his eyes slightly and scowled. 'You talk such rubbish. I don't know what sort of pedestal you have me on, but I assure you, there is nothing special about me.'

Hermione stood abruptly and placed her cup on the mantel. She ruffled her hair in exasperation and started to pace around the room.

'You have been part of my life for so long, Severus, don't you see? I never doubted your loyalty; I always knew you fought for what was right. You made me feel safe, even when everything was falling apart. I always knew I could rely on you, despite your moods and that you didn't even like me. That wasn't important, really.'

She stopped pacing and stared at him. 'I haven't been able to make sense of anything since the war ended. Everyone else seemed to be able to grieve and then move on. That didn't happen for me. Ginny and Harry announced their engagement, and I just knew I had to get away from it all. How can they pretend that everything is okay, when it's not? It's not okay at all.'

Hermione was trembling a little as she looked at him. Her face was white, and she wrapped her arms around herself for warmth.

'I need you, Severus,' she whispered.

Why he moved from his chair was a question he would ask himself later. Hermione's plaintive words made him act in ways he would never have imagined, and before he knew what was happening, he was by her side, one arm around her shoulder, guiding her back to the sofa. He handed Hermione her tea and sat beside her, his arm

draped around her as she leant against him.

'You are not in touch with your friends,' he stated. He knew this from Minerva's missives. She never failed to mention her concern for Hermione's wellbeing, but Severus hadn't divulged anything. She obviously had her reasons for not keeping in touch.

'They didn't understand,' she replied.

'Not even Weasley?' he asked.

Hermione snorted a little. 'Ron? Apart from losing his brother, you'd think the war was just something that got in the way for a few years. He has all the depth of a puddle.'

Severus chuckled softly. 'Quite,' he replied. 'Then you and he are not an item?'

'God, no. Never were, never will be. Actually,' Hermione sighed, taking a slurp of her tea, 'I have never been an item with anyone.'

Severus stiffened slightly and coughed.

'Nor have I,' he whispered.

There was a silence then that seemed to stretch with an un-nameable tension, but it was rudely interrupted by Hermione's stomach growling. She giggled slightly.

'You should eat,' Severus said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

'I should, but I have no food in the house. I meant to go this morning; I didn't mean to sleep so late,' she replied.

'Then we should remedy that. You bathe; I will shop and return with supplies.' Severus extracted himself carefully from around her and stood slowly, stretching his leg a little. He started when he felt Hermione's hand in his, squeezing tightly, and he looked down at her in surprise.

'Thank you, Severus,' she said, her eyes large and shining.

He nodded, not quite knowing what she was thanking him for.

Hermione took her time to brush through her tangled curls before stepping into the bath. Her hair was knotted in parts, and she wished she had some Sleakeazy with which to tame it. She planned to take her trip to Diagon Alley the next day, and as she tugged and winced, she resolved to buy up the shelves of the hair-calmer so that she would never be in this predicament again.

Stepping into the warm water, Hermione sighed softly and grabbed her foaming bath oil. In moments, she was covered in soft, scented suds, letting her puff caress her body as she washed herself. She felt highly sensitised, as if someone had flicked a switch somewhere inside her, and her body was tingling as she ran her hands across her skin and rinsed herself with the warm water. Her nipples, pink and pert, stuck out from the surface of the water, and she shivered slightly as she ran her palms over them.

Hermione wasn't one to masturbate regularly. She first tried it on the night of the Yule Ball, when Viktor had all but snogged her senseless. He left her feeling tense, and her knickers were more than a little damp. He had offered more, but she had felt she didn't know him well enough. There was always a little dark in Viktor that had made her feel uncomfortable, so she had declined and explored her more intimate crevices behind the drapes of her warded and Silenced bed in the girls' dorm. She had almost screamed when she had her orgasm, pleased she had accomplished it at her first attempt. She would have been cross with herself if she hadn't, because she had read enough about it to know where she should be rubbing.

But while she enjoyed making herself come now and again, she had found it quite exhausting, not to mention distracting, to masturbate too often at school. It made her sleepy afterwards and had interfered with her study, so after a week of solid fingering over the Christmas break, she limited herself to the weekend, and it had become something of a habit.

Now though, she felt turned on, and she clenched her vagina slightly as small tremors flooded her while she pinched at her nipples.

It was Severus that had her like this; she couldn't deny it any longer. She could almost feel his arms around her, remembered the warmth of his chest under his shirt, and the scent of him lingered still. It was hard to describe what it was; a combination of washing powder, soap and that indescribable maleness that seemed to exude from him whenever she stood close. When she had hugged him, she had wanted to feel his skin against hers, to crawl over him and absorb him by some sort of strange, human osmosis. Why she hadn't noticed the attraction she felt to him before, she had no idea. She wondered if he felt it, too?

Hermione's hands trailed lower, slipped beneath the water, and parted her moist folds slowly. She hissed as her fingertip circled her clit, and then she jumped, making the water splash over the side of the bath, as she heard the front door close below. Severus had returned, and there was no way she was going to wank when he might overhear her moans.

Thrumming and more than a little frustrated, she let the water run from the bath and stepped out, towelling herself quickly and trying to ignore the throbbing between her legs.

Each step Severus took that lead him away from Hilltop Cottage was causing him pain. He wanted to be with her, and despite his inner voice telling him all of the very real and valid reasons why this was a most ridiculous notion, his heart and his body were betraying him. Even now, his hand prickled where she had held it, and he could almost feel her curls pushed beneath his chin. Just being close to her would be enough, to listen while she rambled on, jumping from one thought to the next and sharing her inner feelings with him, most of which he couldn't rationalise if he tried.

She needed him.

Severus shopped quickly, grabbing Italian part-baked bread and carton soup from the fridge, a tub of his favourite ice cream, and a punnet of strawberries. He decided to get a bottle of white wine and glanced out of the window at the cloudy sky. He couldn't say for certain, but he guessed that the sun was over the yardarm by now.

He paid in haste, telling the counter assistant...a pale, freckled teenager called Carl, who was on his first day in the job and nervous with it...to put the change into the charity box. He had no time to waste standing around waiting for his money, and he didn't need it anyway. All that he needed was to get back to Hermione as quickly as he could.

By the time Severus returned to the house, his leg was giving him more gip than it had in years. He knocked the door, but when Hermione didn't answer, he guessed she was still in the bath, so he took the liberty of letting himself in and taking the shopping bags straight into the kitchen. He heard sloshing from upstairs and the gurgling sound of water being drained. She would be down shortly, so he had time to have everything ready. He had no clue why he felt a frisson of excitement at the thought of making lunch for her, but it was there all the same, refusing to be cowed. He put the wine in the icebox to cool quickly, then found a shiny, silver saucepan and poured the Italian Tomato and Basil soup into it. He eventually figured out how to control her oven and popped the Ciabbata into it as he stirred the warming soup.

Hearing footsteps, he turned to greet Hermione and almost groaned out loud. She had twisted her damp hair into a tight chignon at her nape, and she was wearing a pale green silk dress that dipped low at the front, showing a glimpse of cleavage and the hint of a lace bra. Her eyes were bright, her lips full and plump, and if he didn't know

better, he'd have thought the witch was aroused. The girl he had always seen her as in his mind's eye had been chased away to do her homework, and in her place was a young and beautiful woman who bore him no malice and welcomed his company. She had told him that she had missed him and grieved for him, and with sudden clarity, he knew that he had missed her, too.

Severus smiled, a long, slow stretch of his lips that brightened his face and lit up his eyes.

'You look much improved,' he said lightly.

Hermione smiled back with a quirk to her lips and leant self-consciously against the open kitchen door.

'Couldn't have been much worse, though. Is that what you mean?' She grinned, softening her words.

Severus held her gaze meaningfully and saw her breath hitch. 'I meant that you look lovely, Hermione.'

She blushed and cast her gaze around the kitchen, not very subtly looking for a way to change the subject.

'Soup?' she asked.

'Obviously,' he said, deadpan. 'Not homemade, sadly, but passable, I think.'

'I love making soup. Chopping vegetables, adding seasoning. Making it taste wonderful.' She smiled at him, her eyes bright as she shared yet more of herself.

'Not dissimilar to potion making,' he said quietly as he stirred the slowing bubbling liquid.

'Oh! I forgot about your surprise!' Hermione clapped her hands together in excitement.

'Turn the oven off, Severus. I really want you to see this,' she said.

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her, but did as he was told, taking out the golden bread and turning the heat out from under the soup. A happy Hermione was preferable to a weeping one, and he was glad she was feeling more cheerful.

Hermione opened the back door and grabbed Severus by the hand, dragging him with her past the bird table, which was now repainted and upright thanks to his attentions last week. Giggling to herself, Hermione pulled Severus around to the back of the house, and then stepped aside so that he could see her handiwork.

'Ta da!' she said, making a gesture with her hands towards three identical patches of garden that had been dug, weeded, and hoed to within an inch of their lives.

Severus smiled slowly, not daring to believe what he thought she was offering, but hoping he was right.

'Is this?' he whispered.

'For you? Yes,' Hermione said quietly. Her enthusiasm had given way to embarrassment at such a grand gesture. He could be in no doubt now as to the depth of feeling she had for him, for why else would she have spent the day doing such back-breaking work?

Severus turned to her and took her hand in his, pulling her gently towards him. Staring into her eyes, he stroked her face with his fingers tenderly. Hermione leant into the warmth of his palm, smiling softly as she looked at him through half-closed lids.

'Thank you,' he said.

A/N: I want to say thank you, too. People have been saying lovely things about my story, and it's made me very happy indeed.

Eleven

Chapter 12 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Apologies in advance for the more-than-evil cliffie. It's necessary, but I'm still sorry! *puts on Flak-jacket and waits for missiles*

They ate in a charged silence that was broken intermittently by the clinking of metal spoons on china bowls. They had often sat opposite each other like this, eating and talking about this and that, but they both seemed aware that this time was different.

Severus had opened the wine, but Hermione sipped only lightly at hers. Her brain was already a little addled by the events of the past few hours, not to mention that he was still here, sitting so close that she could reach out and touch him if she wanted to. And she did want to.

It felt magnetic, the way she was being pulled towards him. She played with her soup, her head bowed as she thought about him. It was strange how his age, their past as student and professor, and even the war seemed to pale into insignificance. None of it mattered to her at this moment. He was just the man she was suddenly yearning for.

'Penny for your thoughts,' Severus said quietly, leaning back in his chair and draining his wine glass delicately. His movements could be graceful at times, when he was relaxed and not thinking about it. He was watching her intently, and his eyes were dark and smouldering pools of emotion that had never been set free.

Hermione shuddered slightly as she stared into his eyes. Her next words could unleash something that she might not be able to control, but perhaps that was what she wanted? She had been in control for far too long. Throwing down the gauntlet suddenly seemed like the best idea she'd had in ages.

'I was thinking... about you,' she said softly, not breaking her gaze.

Severus paled slightly. He hadn't expected her to be quite so open, but then what else would she be? Whatever thoughts she had been mulling over, she obviously wasn't going to keep them hidden forever. It wasn't in her nature. He hadn't even begun to work on his response before she started to talk again.

'I don't think we can ignore what's happening, Severus. Do you?' She smiled shyly at him, a light blush grazing her cheeks. She took a sip of wine, and her tongue licked a stray drop from the lip of the glass as Severus watched, enthralled.

'Indeed. It would be... foolish... to pretend,' he replied. His eyes were on her lips, and as she smiled widely at him, he lifted his eyes to hers.

'It would be a leap of faith, though,' Hermione mused, twirling the stem of her glass between her finger and thumb. 'I would hate to lose your friendship.'

'It is a risk,' he replied quietly, pouring more wine into her glass and refilling his own.

'Is it worth taking, do you think?' Hermione looked at him a little warily.

Severus pondered her question carefully. He valued Hermione's friendship more than anything he had in his life. Possessions, money, and property none of them were important when compared with what she had given him. Her acceptance of him was everything. She didn't expect him to apologise for his past or justify his life in any way. He was just Severus, she was just Hermione, and it was what it was.

He took a breath before speaking because she was staring up at him with such a beseeching gaze. Would he disappoint her with his answer?

'I cannot be anything but what I am, Hermione. You must know that,' he said softly. He reached across the table and took her hand, holding it lightly by the fingertips and letting them rest on his palm. He ran his thumb along them gently and noticed the remnants of soil beneath her fingertips. 'Our friendship has been a great surprise to me. A welcome one, but a surprise all the same. To change the nature of that friendship would indeed be a leap of faith. I haven't entertained the idea of a relationship for many, many years.' He caught her gaze solemnly.

'So you think we should stay as we are, then?' Hermione looked a little crestfallen, and she pulled her hand away from his quickly.

Severus frowned slightly at her abrupt reaction. Was this what he would have to expect? Emotional, changeable and all moods in between, aimed in his direction? He was aware of her volatile nature. Would he be on the receiving end if he put a foot wrong? He had been through enough conflict in his life.

'We are so very different, Hermione,' he sighed. 'And while I find the idea tempting, I fear you would regret it, sooner or later.'

Hermione grabbed his hand in hers and squeezed firmly, forcing Severus to look at her. Her eyes were bright, sparkling slightly from the combination of wine and the reflection of light from the small candles dotted about the room. She ran her tongue over her lip slightly and sat forward in her chair, causing the front of her dress to slip down further. While he was sure it wasn't done on purpose, Severus couldn't help but stare down her cleavage at her softly rounded breasts, cupped in white lace. He felt his mouth go dry as Hermione linked her fingers through his, and as he raised his gaze slowly upwards again, he felt simultaneously perverted and encouraged by the quirk on her lips.

'I won't know if it's something I'll regret, unless we try,' she said softly.

Her eyes were serious and held a depth of meaning that Severus recognised in an instant. With a growing certainty, he realised he was on a speeding train, Hermione was driving, and she wouldn't let him get off until they reached their destination.

She smiled at him and whispered a breathy 'Please,' and Severus felt his willpower collapse around him.

Clumsily, because Hermione was still holding his hand in a vise-like grip, he stood and walked around to her side of the table, pulling her to her feet slowly. There was a pause as he stared down at her. He was looking at her lips and wondering how the hell he was meant to kiss her. Hermione laughed slightly and stepped closer, and he could feel her body heat. He bent his face to hers awkwardly, and as she moved her face up to him, his mouth met the side of hers, missing her lips roughly. He banged his nose against her cheek, and Hermione caught hold of the front of his shirt as she wobbled slightly, balanced between him and the chair behind her. She laughed again, and in embarrassment, Severus took a step back, pulling away from her.

Hermione said quietly, 'I'm not very good at this, Severus. You have to give me a chance.'

Her face had taken on a look of despair, and Severus relaxed when he realised she hadn't noticed his own lack of prowess, but was more concerned about her own. He smiled at her gently.

'Come here,' he said, taking her hands in his and pulling her to him. They were on firmer footing, and he smiled again as Hermione slid her hands tentatively to his waist. There was no hesitation this time, and in unison they moved without pause, their lips meeting warmly, pressing into each other. Severus put his hands on Hermione's lower back, and she gasped slightly, snaking her tongue out and making him groan as she touched his lips with its moist tip.

Suddenly, and it was some small miracle as far as Severus was concerned, they were snogging like a pair of teenagers at the Yule Ball.

Hermione awoke the next morning and stretched like a cat that had found a sunny spot. She had slept better than she had in ages, and as she glanced over at her alarm clock, she was heartened to see that it was still early. Pushing back the duvet, she stumbled from the room and into the bathroom. After using the loo, she stood at the sink to wash her hands and glanced at her face in the mirror. Her lips were red and full, almost as if she had taken a punch. She grinned to herself, running her fingertips across her mouth. Her lips still tingled, and she flushed slightly as she recalled the details of the previous evening.

They had eventually made it to the sofa, where Hermione had curled up around Severus cosily, and they had kissed some more. So much more that they'd been so worked up, they had to eventually agree to call it a night. Despite Hermione's growing desire for him, she wasn't a girl who would have had sex on the first date. With shame, however, Hermione knew she would have leapt at the chance and at him, if he had offered. But ever the gentleman, Severus had taken his leave, promising to return the next evening for their usual night in front of the television.

With a spring in her step, Hermione washed and dressed for the day. She scrabbled around in her drawer and found her wand and then fished out her witch's robes, stuffing them unceremoniously into her rucksack. Today, she was going back to the life she had left behind, if only for a few hours. It felt strange and a little exciting, but she was eager to get it over with so she could come home to Severus.

Hopping down the stairs quickly, Hermione grabbed the phone and called Grab-a-Cab to get her to the station in time for the nine o'clock train. If she was quick, she could be home by teatime and still have plenty of time to get ready for Severus later.

By the time the cab arrived, Hermione was waiting by the gate with her rucksack over her shoulder and impatiently pursed lips. To add insult to injury, the driver was Mike the Creep. She plastered a false smile onto her face and climbed into the back seat.

'Hi, Mike,' she said politely.

'Morning, Miss. On your travels again?' He caught her eye in the rear view mirror, and Hermione nodded.

'Yes. London, actually.' She averted her gaze and watched as the hedgerows down the side of the lane sped by.

'Very nice too. Me and the Missus, we like a good show, you know,' he said cheerfully, grinning at her.

Hermione smiled at him briefly and then closed her eyes to signal the end of the short chat. She wasn't going to tell Mike her business. She just wanted to get to the station.

Hermione peered through half-closed eyelids as they entered Market Street and then turned left into Station Road, and with relief and a buzz of anticipation, she stepped from the car, paid Mike his money, and went into the station, buying a return ticket to London King's Cross.

Mike the Creep (whose name was really Cathcart) was having a nightmare of a day. He couldn't remember such a busy Thursday, and it irritated him no end. Thursday was chippy day, and the girls at The Crispy Cod were always ready with a bit of banter and some extra scraps of batter for his lunch.

But lunch would probably turn to supper the way things were going. He tried to avoid the hiss and crackle of his radio, and Gladys, the perm-haired harridan on the call desk, was starting to shriek painfully. He had already taken eight calls since the nice Miss Mellor called him out to Hilltop Cottage, and he found himself wending his way up Whittle Bank Road yet again to pick up Mr Horridge, who lived at the bottom end of the lane. As he passed the Mellor house, he saw a tall, dark haired man opening the gate, carrying the largest bunch of chrysanthemums he had ever seen. He shrugged and carried on to the end of the road where old man Horridge was waiting. After seeing him safely strapped in, because the old bloke was so wobbly he had been known to tip sideways around sharp bends, Mike turned the car around and drove slowly back down the street.

As he reached Miss Mellor's cottage, he stopped and wound his window down. The dark haired chap was knocking loudly on the door and calling some weird name through the letterbox. 'Poor sod. Better put him out of his misery,' he thought.

'She's not there, mate,' he yelled loudly.

The tall man turned and stared down his nose in Mike's direction.

'I beg your pardon?' he replied.

'The young woman. She's not there, mate.' Mike pointed a stubby, nicotine-stained finger at the house.

The man walked back down the path, carrying the flowers limply. As he came closer, Mike was shocked at his dark, steely glare and felt tempted to wind his window up and drive quickly away. The man frowned down at him imperiously.

'Explain,' he said, his voice low and smooth.

'I picked her up this morning. She said she was going to London, so I guess you've missed her,' he said carefully.

Puzzled, Mike stared as the man withdrew a long, dark stick from his sleeve and heard him whisper an odd, foreign sounding word like 'legumes' or something. Then, he was watching images inside his head, like a film, of him collecting young Miss Mellor and then their little chat in the car. The last thing he saw was the woman walking purposefully into the railway station with her rucksack on her back.

Then the dark haired man was pale and trembling in front of him, and the flowers in his hand were shaking so much that their petals were falling like confetti onto the tarmac. He was still holding the bit of stick, and he pointed it at old man Horridge shakily, whispering, 'Obliviate.'

He turned to Mike and pointed the stick at him.

But he didn't remember any of it.

Twelve

Chapter 13 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: I hope you're all still with me? Sorry for the delay. Have a great Christmas, everyone.

Hermione sat beside the window and watched as the scenery beyond it changed by the mile. The rolling Derbyshire hills and dry-stone walls gave way to a more industrial landscape, images of the revolution that shaped the history of the area and forever changed the face of the world. As the train entered Manchester and pulled up at the crowded platform, Hermione could feel herself tense slightly. It had been a few months since so many people had surrounded her.

Hermione closed her eyes for the rest of the journey, not really sleeping but pretending to. Over the years, Hermione had realised that she had one of those faces that endeared her to strangers and gave them the impression that she was up for a conversation. At first, because she was a nice person and hated to be rude, she would be civil, and tedious conversations would ensue. Unfortunately, she found she had little to share with the common Muggle, and explaining that she was a witch was never a good idea, even if she wanted to. Inevitably, Hermione would then spend most of her time listening to the Muggles as they talked incessantly about themselves. Today, she chose to avoid this.

The train arrived at Kings Cross just before one o'clock, and Hermione walked quickly down the platform and towards the humming noise of the city.

The house at Spinner's End looked like it had been burgled. The furniture in the front room had been decimated to such an extent that even clever magic wouldn't be able to entirely repair it. Shards of broken wood, smashed glass and the stuffing from the armchair completely covered the carpet, and the room was filled with dust and the aroma that hangs in the air after Bonfire night, sulphurous and cloying.

At the edge of the melee, slumped against the wall, Severus sat with his wand in his shaky hand. Streams of sweat ran down his face, mingling with his frustrated tears as he gulped in huge breaths of air, trying to calm himself and failing miserably.

His stomach hurt as if someone had thrust a red-hot poker into his gut, and somewhere under his ribcage, his heart was beating wildly as if protesting from such wanton mistreatment. His body had thrust its sense memory forwards with force as soon as he had made it back to the house, for he had been here before with Lily. He knew rejection, and he knew the pain it brought. But this was worse than the last time. Although he couldn't or wouldn't name it, Severus had fallen in love, and this was what it felt like when his heart was broken.

He couldn't stop seeing her face. He couldn't stop the tears.

Hermione stood in front of the mirror in the toilets of the Leaky Cauldron, feeling and looking like a different woman. She hadn't lost her touch, and the Glamour she had applied was flawless. Putting on her robes, she inspected her look critically. Her hair was a mousy brown, tied back in a ponytail. Her eyes were now blue-grey, her face rounder than normal, and her mouth smaller and thinner. In fact, she was so nondescript that she wouldn't earn a second glance, which was exactly what she had been aiming for.

She pointed her wand at her rucksack and Transfigured it into a tapestry carpetbag with a leather strap. She already had Galleons from her last shopping trip, and when she was sure she was all set, she ventured out into Diagon Alley feeling refreshed and alive after letting her magic loose again.

Her first stop was to Madam Primpernelle's Beautifying Potions, where she bought as many bottles of Sleekeazy as she thought she would be able to store in her tiny bathroom. She also purchased a bottle of 'All Over Wonder Cream,' which claimed to smooth and hide any bodily imperfections for that 'special night.' Hermione laughed softly to herself. She hoped she would have the opportunity to try that out very soon.

Her thoughts now firmly with Severus, she took the liberty of purchasing a newly published, up to date Herbology book from Flourish and Blotts. The book had a special section on growing specialist plants for potion making. It was a personal gift, but not too intimate. Their relationship hadn't gone that far yet, but as Hermione waited for the shopkeeper to parcel up her books, she felt a little frisson of excitement about the forthcoming evening. Grabbing her books quickly, she all but ran from the shop and back down the alley in her sudden haste to return to New Mills.

She didn't even notice Harry and Ginny as they strolled along hand in hand.

Severus made a perfunctory effort at cleaning up his house, but his heart wasn't in it. He felt like a wrung-out dishcloth, weak and good for nothing. He would have to buy a new armchair, and from the way his small table kept wobbling over to one side, he guessed he would need to replace that too. With a deep sigh, he trudged into the kitchen and filled his kettle. He thought of Hermione as the water started to pop and crack over the heat of the gas ring.

Had the wine addled her brain so much that she had seen more in their friendship than there could ever be? Her emotions had been unsettled for weeks; her rambling musings when she was weepy had held the promise of so much. And yet, after acting on her whims, she must have come to her senses finally, and who would blame her? Severus was in no doubt that a life lived with him, in peaceful solitude, would be nought but a half-life. The commonplace Muggle town of New Mills was no place for a witch with her talents and potential, no matter how hard it was for him to cope with his own personal loss.

And yet, wasn't it her who had insisted it was worth a shot? Wasn't it her, with her seductive persuasion and breathy pleading, who had cajoled him into this mess in the first place?

'Give me a chance, Severus,' he repeated her words harshly, his anger bubbling up again. She had hoodwinked him, pulled him into her little experiment like a spider beneath a microscope.

'Bitch,' Severus hissed. He stormed back into the living room and pointed his wand at the wobbly table.

'Bitch!' he yelled.

The table exploded in a shower of red sparks.

Hermione was getting impatient. Already it was gone nine o'clock in the evening, and their programme had just finished. He hadn't missed it in over six weeks, so where the hell was he?

She stood and walked into the kitchen, opening the bottle of wine that had been chilling for hours in anticipation of his arrival. She poured herself a glass, throwing the metal wrapper from the neck of the bottle into the bin along with the remains of an oddly beheaded bunch of flowers she had found, dropped just outside her front gate.

She lifted the glass and took a sip before going to the front door and looking out onto the lane. There was still no sign of Severus, and Hermione frowned. What if he was ill? Or something had happened to him? Or, what if... With a sharp intake of breath, Hermione gasped.

He had cold feet! Why hadn't she thought of that? He had been a reluctant participant in this new relationship, and she had all but beguiled him into it. No matter how enthusiastic he had been once they had perfected the kissing, in the cold light of day, he must be having second thoughts. Perhaps he had decided she really was too young for him? Or maybe she wasn't his type?

Hermione felt her stomach clutch in dread. She had made such an effort tonight. Her hair was smooth and silky, and she had smothered herself from head to little toe in Wonder Cream. Other than plastic surgery or constantly wearing a Glamour, there was nothing else she could do to improve on her looks. She hoped Severus wasn't that shallow, but what did she know of his tastes and desires where women were concerned? Apart from his well-documented and unrequited crush on Lily Evans -- which Hermione had always dismissed, because teenagers fall in lust at the drop of a hat anyway -- she knew absolutely nothing.

Although, hadn't he told her he had never had a girlfriend? She was sure that's what he had said.

Hermione's eyes narrowed, and with Gryffindor impulsiveness roaring inside her, fighting and winning against her more cautious side, she grabbed her wand from the side of her rucksack that she had left by the bottom stair, threw on her thin grey cardigan, and slammed the front door behind her.

Thirteen

Chapter 14 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione's confident determination left her as soon as she walked down Spinnerbottom. She started to shiver and pulled her cardigan around her tightly as she walked slowly around the corner and into Spinner's End. She stared at the row of houses and panicked as she realised she didn't know which house was his. She closed her eyes tightly and brought to mind the photograph of Bertram Mellor, the sad face of Severus peering out of the grimy window behind him. She stared at the front of the houses, bathed in the shimmering orange glow of the streetlights, until she saw it. Her heart lurched a little. She felt that she was impinging on his territory a little bit, but she needed to know what was happening. When all was said and done, relationship or no, Hermione still wanted Severus in her life.

She walked slowly to the door and felt the crackle of magic as she stepped within the boundary of his wards. It was powerful, but she supposed it had to be during the war. Old habits must die hard. She paused before knocking because she was certain he would already be aware of her presence on his doorstep. The type of wards he used would give him both prior warning, and the chance for escape. She knocked lightly on the faded paintwork.

Hermione was wondering if he had already used his Floo to run away from her when she heard the door latch click. Severus opened the door so quickly; she barely had time to catch her breath before he grabbed her by her arm and dragged her into the house forcefully. He slammed the door so loudly that he made the house reverberate with the noise of it.

'What the hell is wrong with you?' Hermione turned on him, rubbing her arm where he had grabbed her.

'Why are you here?' Severus folded his arms across his chest and peered down at her coldly.

Hermione took a step back, biting her lip to stop herself from crying in front of him yet again.

'You didn't come tonight. I was worried,' she said quietly, staring warily at him.

Severus snorted and paced across the room, leaning against the mantle and looking down into the embers of his fire. He was confused by her presence, not just in his house but because he had thought that she had gone for good, and now, suddenly, she was here, accusing him and claiming concern.

His anger found an outlet, and he turned to her, his face contorted in an ugly snarl.

'Worried you would be found out, I should think,' he bit out.

'Found out?' Hermione asked him, puzzled. 'What on earth are you talking about, Severus?'

'Do not say my name,' he murmured slowly, his eyes narrowed. He approached her slowly, pinning her with his gaze, and wave upon wave of anger, mixed with his magic, was overwhelming her.

Hermione's feet felt as if they had taken root in his threadbare carpet, and as she looked up into his face, she was forcefully reminded of the Severus of her dream, cold and unfeeling, telling her that he didn't need her. Her face paled.

'Please, tell me what's wrong, Severus,' she whispered.

His eyes hardened as he stared down at her, and he dipped his head to her ear.

'I know that you left, witch,' he whispered.

Hermione shivered at the malice in his voice, but she felt relief wash over her. The decapitated flowers and his absence tonight, it all made sense, and she felt a huge rush of affection for him.

She hadn't told him she was going to Diagon Alley, and how like him it would be to make assumptions. How bereft he must have felt, after all of her begging and pleading, to think she had abandoned him.

'Who told you?' she asked him lightly, treading carefully. He was still a coiled spring, and she had no idea how to unravel the mess they had found themselves in.

'That is not important. The fact is, I know. I accept it. You can leave now,' he stated flatly, taking a step towards the door.

'What about being friends?' she said softly.

Severus paused, glancing over his shoulder at her. 'Friends do not leave without explaining their absence. Only cowards walk away from what they cannot face,' he whispered.

Sensing that the fight was out of him, Hermione laughed lightly and placed her hand on his shoulder.

'I only went shopping, Severus. I wasn't leaving you.' Hermione rested her head against him and felt a shudder beneath her.

Tentatively, she put her arms around him and turned him to her. His face was pale, his body limp, and he looked down at her with a mix of relief and pain. His eyes explored hers for some sign of dishonesty and found none. And yet, Hermione knew that trust was hard earned where Severus was concerned.

'You can see, if you want to,' she whispered.

Severus didn't hesitate. Staring deeply into her eyes, he whispered '*Legilimens*' just as he felt her arms snake about his waist softly. He pushed the feeling away. He would not be distracted from his task. He wanted to believe her, but words were not enough. He needed to know.

Hermione gripped the back of Severus's shirt as she felt him invade her mind. He wasn't being careful in his urgent quest for the truth, and amongst her memories of her transforming herself in the Leaky Cauldron and her thoughts of him when she bought him the book -- *bang goes that surprise*, she thought ruefully -- he was also privy to the thoughts and dreams she'd had recently, the majority of which involved him.

Desperately, Hermione tried to hide the secret part of her, the part she hadn't even dared to admit consciously to herself, but she couldn't. He was peeling away the layers of her very self as if peeling an onion, and there at the core was the truth of it.

She loved him, and she had done for many years. And now not only was Hermione forced to face it, but Severus knew it too, and she hadn't even said the words out loud.

He withdrew from her mind much more slowly than he had entered it, delicately pulling his thoughts away from hers until they were standing before each other. Hermione felt naked in front of him. Tears filled her eyes, and she averted her gaze, loosening her grip and moving away from him.

'Forgive me, Hermione,' he whispered hoarsely, grabbing hold of her hand and pulling her back to him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her firmly, hugging her close and nuzzling his nose in her hair. It felt smooth, and he opened his eyes to look at it.

'Your hair is different,' his whispered softly.

'Yes,' she answered, still unsure as to where this was going.

Severus tipped her chin upwards and looked down at her, his eyes on her lips. Hermione smiled slightly, relaxing in his arms, and as their lips met briefly, a small groan escaped her. Wrapping her arms around him again, she initiated another kiss, urgent this time, her mouth parting to allow her tongue to probe at his lips purposefully. Severus gasped and opened his mouth, searching for her tongue with his own and growling lightly as they jostled. His hands slid to her hair and slipped through her

smooth tresses, and he held her head firmly in place as he started yet another assault on her delicious mouth.

Hermione gasped as she felt him pushing her backwards. Her shoulder blades pressed firmly against the wall, and his left leg shifted until his thigh was pushing against her pubic mound. Hermione's hands explored his chest, rippling, wiry tautness beneath his shirt, and she brushed her palm across his nipples as he planted firm, need driven kisses onto her throbbing pink lips. Finding his buttons, Hermione kissed Severus firmly while her fingers nimbly pushed each tiny circle of plastic through its designated hole. As her hands found his skin, Severus pulled away abruptly and stared down at them as if realising he was half undressed for the first time. He lifted his gaze, and Hermione stared deeply into his eyes, willing him to see the offer she was making him and begging him to just take it, take her, anywhere, everywhere, but please...

'Take me, Severus,' she whispered.

Severus gaped at her for a moment, knowing what she saying and not quite believing his ears. God knew he wanted to make love to her, but she was still a virgin and he was woefully inexperienced. It could all go so disastrously wrong, and they had only just got over one precipice. He didn't feel ready to tip into another.

'Hermione, I...' he stuttered huskily, interrupted by her pale finger on his mouth.

'Let's find a bed,' she said softly, taking his hand in hers and leading him towards the narrow staircase. She paused briefly and nodded at him to go first with a sweet, warm smile, and he shot her a sideways glance, smiling wryly back at her.

The damn witch always got her own bloody way.

Fourteen

Chapter 15 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Sorry for the delay, everyone. Real life had to take priority for a while.

Thanks to kizzy for the great beta, as usual.

Severus led Hermione into his bedroom with a touch of embarrassment that even his growing need didn't chase away. He didn't look at her as he closed the grey curtains and lit the one candle by the bed. Candlelight at night was a habit he had brought back with him from Hogwarts, and because he rarely felt the need to read while in bed, he found it soothing and restful. In this case, he assumed it was also romantic, although how anyone could be seduced in such a shabby house remained to be seen. He heard Hermione sit on his bed when the rusty springs in the old mattress creaked loudly. He hadn't thought to purchase a new one when he bought the bed frame, because it didn't creak on his side. She giggled softly.

'You are a wizard, aren't you? Why haven't you fixed the bed?' she asked quietly.

Severus could hear the smile in her voice, and he grinned in spite of himself. He turned and shrugged, feeling out of place suddenly.

'It never bothered me before,' he said.

Hermione smiled up at him and patted the mattress beside her. Severus stepped towards her a little and then smirked, pulling out his wand. Pointing it at the bed, he frowned in concentration, and Hermione squealed with laughter as the mattress shifted beneath her and transformed itself into something more comfortable, complete with a warm patchwork quilt that was surprisingly similar to the one on her own bed. Hermione ran her hand over it gently, cocking her head towards Severus in invitation.

He sat slowly beside her, and she turned towards him, kissing him on the lips as she slid her arms around his neck. He deepened the kiss, caressing her shoulders lightly as she leaned further towards him, pressing her cotton covered breasts into his bare chest. Her hands ran through his hair, and her kisses became firmer. Before he knew it, she had manoeuvred herself onto his lap and was currently shrugging her arms out of her cardigan and getting frustrated in the process. Her mouth was pursed in a small moue, and her once smooth hair was starting to curl again, much to Severus's delight, and he forced himself not to laugh as she fought with her long grey sleeves.

'Want some help?' he said, smiling at her.

Hermione flopped her arms by her sides and looked up at him with a pout. 'Yes, please,' she said quietly.

Severus ran his hands inside the thin wool and pushed it down her arms carefully, caressing her soft skin with his palms as he did so. Hermione closed her eyes and revelled at his touch, and as the garment fell from her body, Severus pulled her to him and kissed her lips gently.

'You are lovely,' he whispered.

Hermione smiled widely at him and threw her arms around him, squeezing him tightly. Her lips found his throat, and she began to plant small kisses along his skin, trailing them down to his chest as she pushed his shirt from him and ran her tongue around his nipple.

Severus groaned at the feel of her tongue on his flesh, and he tipped his head back as she repeated the act on his other nipple just as delicately. His cock went rock hard, and Hermione squirmed slightly as she felt him, erect beneath her, through her thin linen trousers.

'Hermione,' Severus moaned softly and ran his hand through her hair, stopping her movements. Her eyes caught his, full of smoky desire and desperate want, and at some unspoken signal, she slipped from his knee and stood before him. Slowly, she started to undress, stripping down to her lace bra and knickers, and Severus couldn't move for staring at her round, full breasts as she knelt down and unfastened his trousers carefully.

'I thought you hadn't done this before,' he murmured, his breath hitching as she pulled him to his feet and pushed his trousers down around his ankles, rubbing her bra and breasts across his straining underwear as she bent down.

'Am I doing okay?' she asked, looking at him hopefully.

'You are incredible,' he said, gazing at her breasts as he sat down on the bed again.

Hermione smiled at him. 'Touch me,' she whispered.

Severus just stared at her. He had no idea what he should touch, or how. Hermione lifted his hands and placed them palm down over her breasts, and Severus sighed at the feel of them, so warm and soft. Slowly, he moved his hands over her, caressing her tight, erect nipples through the fabric of her bra. Overcome with desire, Severus bent his head and kissed and licked at the flesh of her cleavage, then trailed kisses over her bra, gently licking her nipples with his tongue through the lace. Hermione trembled at his touch and reached behind her back to unclip her bra carefully. Slipping the straps from her arms, she let them fall, and as Severus pulled his mouth away from her breast for a moment, she let the fabric fall to the floor, leaving Severus with a face full of her bare breasts. He cupped them with his hands, licked the soft, creamy flesh and took her nipples into his mouth wetly, sucking ever so gently until small, mewling sounds were coming from her and she could hardly bear it any longer. She ran her fingers through his hair and moaned softly at him to stop.

He raised his gaze, his lips still wet and slippery from his ministrations, and Hermione took his hand and held it gently against the front of her knickers. He felt wetness, and as he rubbed his finger along the length of her, her sweet, musky smell hit him. He slid his finger under the elastic, and his fingers probed softly at her wet folds as he watched her face for signs of enjoyment. Hermione's eyes were heavy with desire, and now and again she gasped as his fingers brushed a sensitive spot. He was taken with a need for more space to feel what he was doing, rather than just prodding and poking about at her like a schoolboy, and she sighed sadly as he withdrew his fingers from her and slipped the scrap of lace over her round hips.

'Get into bed,' he said quietly.

Hermione shuddered at the almost commanding tone that imbued his voice and complied willingly, climbing under the quilt and then turning to face him, her hair splaying over the firm pillows. Severus had stood and removed his trousers, and his black underpants showed the outline of his cock, straining for release in more ways than one. He turned his back to her and quickly took them off before slipping into the bed beside her and gathering her to him eagerly. Their lips met, and Severus immediately slipped his hand between Hermione's thighs and parted the lips of her vagina with delicate fingers. Hermione moaned against his mouth, and he pulled away for a moment.

'Show me how,' he said.

Hermione smiled at him and covered his hand with her own, guiding his fingers to her clitoris. His fingers slipped around the hard nub until he found a rhythm, and Hermione kissed him with fervour, then cried softly into his mouth as he brought her to a shaking climax, her thighs clamping around his hand, now slick with her juices.

Hermione closed her eyes and leant her forehead against his as she caught her breath, little tremors of pleasure still pulsing through her as Severus removed his hand carefully. He looked down at her and started to worry at her lack of response.

'Hermione?' he whispered.

'Mmm?' Hermione was feeling languid and more than a little dazed. She had never experienced an orgasm by someone else's hand, and the feelings were so intense and incredibly arousing that she felt transported for a moment. Opening her eyes, she saw concern on Severus's face and smiled at him slowly. 'I'm fine, Severus. That was just so wonderful.'

She was grinning at him now, and she felt him relax. A smug smile crossed his features briefly, and she laughed at him and pushed his chest playfully. 'Oh, you! Yes, you are a Sex God, okay?'

Hermione couldn't stop giggling as Severus raised an eyebrow at her and pushed her onto her back, rolling himself over on top of her and insinuating himself between her damp thighs. He bent his head to hers and kissed her until she stopped laughing, and their eyes met.

'I want you, Hermione. So much,' he said softly, stroking her hair from her face.

'I know. I want you, too.' Hermione slid her hand down between them slowly, never taking her eyes from his as she took hold of his heavy cock. Not having had a cock in her hand before, Hermione went by instinct, tentatively wrapping her fingers around his shaft and squeezing before moving the loose skin up and down slowly. Severus's eyes widened, and his cock twitched in her hand as she rubbed the head through her wet nether lips. Pushing down slowly, Hermione sat him at the entrance to her vagina and then pulled her hand away.

Severus couldn't breathe. The feel of her hand had made him want to shoot his load, and now he was at her opening, with wet, warm juices covering him and making the head of his cock so sensitive he thought he might not make it very far at all.

'Hermione, I don't think this will take very long,' he said apologetically.

'That's okay. We have all night,' she replied.

She smiled at him and lifted her head to kiss him. Her breasts rubbed across his nipples, and he groaned as nature took over. He just couldn't wait any longer.

He kissed Hermione deeply, thrusting his tongue inside her mouth as he pushed his cock inside her. He was so determined that the momentum of his thrust broke her hymen, but neither of them noticed. Hermione sighed as he filled her, gasping at his girth and the feeling of being stretched. Severus swore and closed his eyes, pushing himself up on his arms and revelling in the feeling of being sheathed to the hilt inside Hermione Granger. The sensation was exquisite, but it couldn't last. His cock was throbbing to the point of being painful, and he had to come. Withdrawing slowly, he immediately thrust into her again, once, twice... On the third thrust, Severus let out a low moan and came forcefully, a gush of semen that Hermione actually felt inside her.

'Oh, gods,' Severus whispered, his body taut, his buttocks clenched as he pushed himself deeper into her. 'Oh, Hermione...'

Hermione watched him with fascination. She had never seen anyone experience an orgasm before, and the knowledge that she had reduced Severus to a quivering, thrusting mass of desire made her feel incredibly special. She smiled, and then laughed as she caught Severus's gaze.

'I guess this makes you a Sex Goddess,' he teased. He lowered himself gently onto her, kissing her lips tenderly as Hermione ran her fingers through his hair, kissing him back in turns.

'I love you,' Hermione whispered softly, looking into his eyes as tears started to fill her own.

Severus smiled at her. 'I know,' he said.

Fifteen

Chapter 16 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione awoke at three in the morning to find herself alone. Half asleep, she stretched her slim arm across the mattress and found only a cold expanse of cotton sheet. She felt bereft for a short moment until rational thought kicked in. She had no idea of Severus's sleeping habits, apart from that he usually slept alone. Having another person in the bed, no matter how welcome they were, was bound to take some getting used to. Aware of the need to use the loo, Hermione slipped across the bed and swung her legs over the side, feeling around in the dark for something to wear. Her hands grasped something – Severus's shirt – and she smiled to herself as she pulled it on and fastened a few buttons for decency's sake. She stepped her way carefully across the room and went in search of the bathroom.

Severus heard the creak of floorboards above his head and paused his reading for a moment. He had set the fire, and it crackled away cheerily, providing warmth and bit more light than just his reading lamp. But despite the fire, he felt unsettled.

It was strange having Hermione in his home, and even stranger to have her in his bed. During the night, she had snuggled up behind him and curled her frame around his, making him feel warm and cared for at first. But after a while, he had felt claustrophobic, and he had slipped from the bed quietly so as not to wake her. He had pondered transfiguring the workbench in his lab into a bed, but had the foresight to consider how this might look to Hermione and thought against it. He wouldn't want to get off on the wrong foot this early in the proceedings, and he had almost buggered it all up already. He closed his eyes slowly and slipped his reading glasses from the end of his nose, folding them onto his lap, pondering on her arrival at his door the previous evening.

His first thoughts on seeing her had been to take her in his arms and kiss her to within an inch of her life; he'd been so relieved to see her. She had looked so vulnerable. The cold air had made her nose turn pink and her face pale, and her wide eyes had been beseeching for a few brief moments, until he had allowed the red mist to cloud his judgement. He really was a prize fool, immediately jumping to conclusions, seeing what he had expected to see and not what he had really seen. He should have trusted her. And she had forgiven him, yet again, for his ridiculous temper and his childishness. Despite being older than Hermione in years, Severus had no doubt which one of them had the greatest level of emotional maturity. She had a lot to teach him. He just hoped he was up to the task, because if there was one thing he was sure of, it was that he wanted more of her.

Severus smiled to himself as he recalled making love to her for the first time. It had been incredible, beyond his most vivid imaginings. But the most amazing thing was that she told him she loved him without guile or pretence. He knew it, of course. He'd seen it when viewing her memories. But to hear her speak the words from her own lips, to see the feeling reflected in her eyes. No one had ever told him that they loved him before, not even his mother. She had shown it in small ways, but never had anyone felt the need to make their feelings as perfectly plain as Hermione had. It made him feel like he could take on Voldemort all over again, without the help of anyone else.

Severus smirked as he heard the crack of the bottom stair, yet another repair that he had ignored.

'I thought you were asleep,' he said quietly, not opening his eyes.

'I was missing you,' she said, her voice coming nearer as she padded barefoot to where he had pulled the sofa closer to the fire. He felt her sit beside him, and he cocked open one eye.

She was gazing into the fire, her hair a tumble of soft curls again. She was unconsciously twisting a length of hair around her finger, and Severus smiled to himself as he realised she was wearing his shirt. The buttons were fastened wrongly, leaving the fabric gaping open just enough for him to catch a lovely view of her left breast. Feeling a rush of protectiveness towards her, he stretched his arm out and wrapped it around her waist, pulling her closer to him. Hermione swung her legs up onto the sofa and hugged Severus gently as he planted a soft kiss on top of her head.

'I borrowed your shirt. Do you mind?' she asked him.

'Of course not,' he replied.

Hermione lifted her face and looked at Severus. His eyes were closed again, his head resting against the back of the sofa. His skin was a little stubbly, and she traced the line of his cheek and jaw with her fingertips. Shifting her position, she planted a slow kiss on his upturned lips, and Severus smiled.

'Want something?' he said in a low voice. Hermione laughed lightly and squeezed his hand in hers.

'Only you. Come back to bed?' she said.

Severus looked at Hermione then and caught the hopeful glint in her eyes. He lifted his hand and caressed her breast through his shirt, making her gasp. Her eyelids fluttered and she opened her mouth in a pretty 'O,' her tongue protruding just slightly.

'Lead the way,' he whispered meaningfully.

Two days later, all hell broke loose in New Mills. The early edition of the *Daily Prophet* heralded the start of it, with a photograph of Hermione standing on Severus's doorstep and leaning in to give him a quick kiss goodbye. As he stood staring in disbelief at the front page, a Howler arrived at Hilltop Cottage

By the time Snape arrived at Hermione's house, it had been warded to the 'nth degree. She had even added anti-jinx and anti-hex wards that he didn't even know existed. With some trepidation, Severus scanned his immediate surroundings before disillusioning himself and casting his Patronus. No longer a doe but a badger, the creature gambolled to the house and through the front door to pass on its message, and within moments, Severus felt the wards drop. He walked quickly to the door and let himself in, dropped his disillusionment spell and searched around the room for Hermione.

'In here,' she called from the kitchen.

Severus walked towards her slowly, expecting to find her weeping and distraught. To his surprise, however, she was standing by the kettle in her pyjamas, making tea for them both.

'Are you alright?' he said quietly.

'I got a Howler from Harry! Of all the bloody cheek!' Hermione turned to Severus with her hands on her hips, her hair shaking with her fury.

Severus's mouth twitched slightly. How like the boy to attack first and ask questions later.

'What did he say?' he asked with an amused tone.

'Oh, I'm sure you can guess. "I thought you were on holiday abroad, and now I find you're shackled up with Snape! I'm answering a lot of questions on your behalf, Hermione! You could have at least told me!"... Blah, blah, blah... There was more, but I incinerated it before it finished.' Hermione's eyes flashed at him. 'I guess we made the *Prophet*?' She returned to making the tea, clattering the spoon around each cup as she fished out the tea bags.

'Front page.' Severus walked up to Hermione and stilled her hand with his. She paused and took a deep breath, letting her anger ebb.

'I'm not sorry. I don't care who knows about us, Severus, but it's no one's business but ours. Not even the Chosen One has exclusive rights to my personal life,' she said

quietly.

Severus heard the hurt in her voice as she spoke about Harry Potter, and he leant down and kissed her cheek softly.

'Come on. Time for tea and sympathy. And you can look at our front page news.' He handed Hermione the newspaper from under his arm and grabbed the tea, chivvying her ahead of him into the sitting room.

Hermione curled her feet beneath her as she sat on the sofa and opened the paper. Under the headline *'Secret Lovers Mystery Uncovered'* was a detailed account of Hermione arriving at Severus's house that first night, some not very subtle innuendo when she *'didn't emerge until the following day, looking dishevelled,'* and some seedy comments about the *'former student and her professor teaching her new lessons.'*

'Good grief. Did you read it?' She turned to Severus demandingly.

'I did. I apologise, Hermione. If I had visited you as we had arranged, this would never have happened.' Severus sat brooding into his tea.

'Oh, Severus, I don't blame you! I'm glad I came to see you that night. It was wonderful.' Hermione turned to him and put her arm around his slumped shoulders, squeezing him tightly. 'And on the plus side, now that everyone knows where I am, I can use my wand again,' she said lightly, kissing him noisily on his cheek.

Severus grinned sheepishly, and then his face fell.

'Oh, shit,' he said. 'Minerva is going to kill me.'

Sixteen

Chapter 17 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thanks to Kizzy for helping to make this readable, and to all who review -- you make me smile!

Severus awoke with a start and felt around urgently for his wand, only to find the soft flesh of a warm witch instead of his trusty stick of wood. With a sigh, he laid his head back on the pillow and gazed at the ceiling above him, trying to calm his pounding heart. It had been a while since he'd had a bad dream, but when they came, he was always left feeling like he had been flattened by a tonne of bricks.

It had taken some time for Severus to come to terms with himself after the war. Bumbling about the house on his own had given him space to think and rage at the bloody injustice of the whole sorry mess. For a large part of January, to coincide with his birthday, he had thrown himself a wonderful pity party. A crate of Firewhisky had been the only guest invited, and Severus had wallowed for a week, until the whisky had run out and he'd sobered up enough to smell himself and do something about it. It had taken strong self will to get into some sort of routine, but once he had started on his potions lab, he had begun to feel a glimmer of hope for the future.

He had never imagined love in that future, and as he turned his head to look at Hermione, who was sleeping like a small dormouse with her patchwork quilt tucked around her, he felt bemused, as if he was living in some sort of alternate reality. It was frightening to think she had become his be all and end all in such a short space of time, but perhaps that was what love was about. It certainly surprised him.

Hermione had initiated their love making up to this point, and each time, it had been sensual and loving. They tended to each other with gentleness, drawing out their passion slowly like a rose opening to the elements. But there was a part of Severus that longed to be unleashed. He could feel it bubbling inside him as he thrust into Hermione's moist flesh, the desire to not just make love to her but to really fuck her with abandon. The thought thrilled him and made him cower at the same time, and he tried to tamp it down. But the more he did, the more he wanted it.

Severus was no stranger to rough sex, even though he hadn't sampled it himself. He had seen plenty of it at Malfoy Manor when the Dark Lord was holding court. Severus would stand ramrod straight at Voldemort's right shoulder, trying not to flinch or show any reaction to the screams that punctured the endless grunts and groans. He had always felt repelled by it, and while he had no wish to hurt Hermione in any way, he felt something at the edges of their lovemaking, tempting him to test it out.

He stretched out his hand and lifted a length of her hair, rubbing it between his fingertips. Rolling onto his side, he wrapped his arm around her waist, pushing his hand under the quilt so his fingers could caress the underside of her breast slowly. Confident now that his advances would be welcomed, he nuzzled her ear and nibbled on her exposed earlobe.

Hermione stretched a little, shuffling her bottom backwards until she met Severus's erection, and made a contented noise in her throat as he tweaked her nipples.

'Morning,' he murmured in her ear. Hermione smiled sleepily and twisted so her lips could meet his.

'You're keen,' she said. She was unable to disguise her pleasure as Severus's hand drifted down between her legs.

'I am. Very.' Severus moved a little and rolled Hermione onto her back, throwing the quilt from her naked form and dropping his face to suckle at her breasts until she moaned at him for more. Trailing a path from her breasts, he teased at her pussy with his tongue slightly, tasting her for the first time. He felt Hermione's breath hitch as he became bolder, licking with small, darting flicks at her clitoris until she started to squirm. But he wasn't ready for her orgasm yet. This time he would coax it from her with his cock, and he moved himself over her, his eyes blazing as he thrust.

Hermione was so aroused, she felt as tight as a coiled spring. For the first time, Severus was in control of what was happening, and she was more than happy to surrender to his overwhelming sex appeal. She arched her back as he thrust into her, and he grabbed her buttocks, holding her in place as he tipped his pelvis upwards. His thrusts were shallow now, the tip of his penis rubbing firmly against her sensitive g-spot, and Hermione groaned as the new sensation took over. Severus grunted and thrust harder, and Hermione cried out with pleasure.

'Oh, god, yes,' she moaned out. 'Do that again.'

Severus felt a rush of power at her words, and the part of himself he was trying to tame yelled out in victory. He started to pound into Hermione, their flesh slapping together as sweat glistened on his chest. Hermione felt possessed by him, unable to do anything but lie there and just take it, and she let herself become totally absorbed by the feeling of his cock inside her and the sense of her impending orgasm. She gripped the sheet in her hands to keep her body from sliding up the bed.

'God, I'm coming. Shit, oh, yes,' she shouted out, her orgasm tearing through her and causing her to become an uncontrollable mass of flesh as she bucked beneath him, moaning, her head tipped back and her vagina clamped so firmly around his cock he could hardly thrust into her. Her inner walls rippled along his length, and the orgasm he had been holding at bay during the last few thrusts wouldn't stay back any longer. Severus tightened his hold on Hermione's arse and almost knelt before her, pulling her towards him with each thrust as he entered her, tight and deep. He could feel every sensitive inch, and he increased his pace quickly until with a roar, he came as fiercely as Hermione had, his whole body jerking and twitching. It felt like his orgasm was lasting forever. At last he slowed his pace, savouring the last amazing sensations of their bodies joined together.

Slowly, Severus relaxed his grip on Hermione and slid out of her with an audible wet slurp, collapsing beside her with a satisfied sigh.

'You can say that again,' Hermione murmured. 'I don't know what you just did to me, but you can damn well do it again sometime.'

Severus chuckled softly. 'No problem,' he replied, slightly breathless.

Pleasures of the flesh were the furthest thing from Hermione's mind as she walked up the short path to Harry's house in Godric's Hollow.

Never one to shy away from confrontation when she knew she was in the right, Hermione had been determined to deal with Harry and his damn nerve as soon as she had recovered the feeling in her legs. It was all Severus could do to make her at least eat a slice of toast before she marched off with all guns blazing.

Steeling herself, Hermione hammered on the bright red front door and waited, tapping her foot impatiently and twisting her wand between her fingers where it lay just inside her jacket sleeve. She was quite prepared to hex Harry if she had to.

The door opened, revealing a sleepy and dishevelled Harry wearing an old grey t-shirt and baggy jogging bottoms. Blinking blindly, he fumbled to push his spectacles onto his face. He had the decency to look momentarily abashed, and his shoulders slumped as he withered under Hermione's gaze. He stepped aside and allowed her to walk into the house without saying a word.

'Want some tea?' he asked her as he followed her down the narrow hallway and into the kitchen.

Hermione stopped walking and turned to him with her face set.

'No, Harry. I do not want tea. I would quite like to know what makes you think you have the right to comment on my private life, though.'

Hermione's voice was low and calm, but there was an undercurrent that Harry recognised. He knew he would have to go carefully if he wanted his dangly bits to stay in one piece after she left. He ran his hands through his hair, making it stick up ridiculously. Normally, it would make Hermione laugh and try and flatten it with the palm of her hand, but right now, she thought he looked like a prat, and her eyes narrowed as she waited for him to start talking.

'You have no idea what sort of a week I've had,' he said, pushing past her into the kitchen and filling his kettle regardless.

'I bet you didn't get a Howler from a good friend,' Hermione snapped.

Harry paused and looked up at Hermione owlishly through his lenses. 'I'm sorry about that. But since you left I have had to field questions left, right, and centre, not least of which from bloody Kingsley. You left everyone in a real hole, Hermione; so much work was left unfinished. No one can get the projects completed because you are the only one who can do that stuff.'

Hermione gritted her teeth. 'It was only research, Harry. It can stay on hold for as long it needs to--we didn't have deadlines or a bloody war to fight. And none of that has anything to do with my love life, so just answer my bloody question!'

'I thought you were sunning yourself on some beach, Hermione. I told everyone you needed a break, had to have a holiday. I made it all up because you didn't think it was necessary to tell me the truth, and then, *this!*' Harry grabbed a crumpled copy of yesterday's *Prophet* and waved it at her.

Hermione looked at Harry's indignant face and fought the urge to laugh at him. She knew exactly what this was about, and it was so pathetic it was beyond belief.

'So tell me,' Hermione said quietly, holding Harry's gaze. 'Is this because I didn't tell you my plans and that you have been made a liar? Or is it because of Severus?'

A nerve in Harry's jaw jumped as he pressed his lips together in a thin line. Truth be told, he had been pissed off with Hermione ever since she had upped and left on a whim, but seeing her with Snape had been the last straw. He respected the man immensely, acknowledged the good he had done. He even understood and felt grateful for the lengths he went to, avenging his mother's death and protecting him. But the man was still Snape, a snake who never changed his skin, and regardless of all he had done, Harry didn't like him. The thought of him and his best friend as a couple made his blood boil. The last thing Hermione needed was to rot away in some godforsaken hole with an older, miserable wizard who was doing nothing and going nowhere. What about her ambitions, her dreams? She could have it all, if she wasn't about to throw it away.

'Is it serious?' he asked her.

'That's none of your business,' she retorted.

'Don't friends share the gossip about their love lives?' he smiled wanly, trying to lighten the mood.

'Knowing the way you feel about Severus, I would rather keep it to myself,' Hermione said. She dropped her gaze, not knowing what else there was to say.

'He's so much older than you, Hermione. What on earth can he offer? Out there, you could meet someone younger and intelligent, who would support your career and be beside you to share all of your success. You might even have a family one day. He won't give you that, Hermione. You've already cut yourself off from all of us. He'll only hold you back even more.' Harry spoke sadly. He truly believed what he was saying, and to his relief, Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip, a sure sign that she was listening to him.

'Severus is the only person who understands how I feel, Harry. You, Ginny, Ron... you've all moved on, made a better life for yourselves. It has never been that easy for me. I'm still not over the war, and Severus understands that. He's helping me to cope, Harry, he really is. He's not the man you think he is.'

Hermione looked up at him with a soft smile as she thought of Severus waiting for her at Hilltop Cottage, and a feeling of warmth spread through her.

'I think you'll find he's not the man you think he is, Hermione,' Harry said, a touch of ire in his voice.

Hermione bristled and glared at him for a moment. Harry's words had cut her to the quick, because part of her feared he was right.

But she was headstrong, and she knew her own heart. And right now, her heart belonged with Severus. Without another word, she turned on her heel and left Harry staring after her.

Seventeen

Chapter 18 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Apologies in advance for the shortness of the chapter, but it was the right place to end it. Don't hate me!

Severus was trying to do the crossword, but every couple of minutes he would glance at the clock on the mantle and wonder just how long Hermione would be. She had already been gone for two hours, and in that time he had made four cups of tea, written an apologetic letter to Minerva for keeping her in the dark, and perused the dug over garden behind the house, planning his first attempt at growing things on a large scale.

He had gone to the shop as soon as Hermione had left, gathering groceries, a couple of bottles of wine, and a Muggle newspaper. He tapped the end of a ballpoint pen on his upper lip as he pondered the next clue, but he was getting nowhere. He was much too preoccupied. He looked up in relief as Hermione walked through the door a few moments later.

'Hi,' she said, walking over to him and planting a gentle kiss on his cheek. He smiled a small smile but said nothing. He would not pry, and she was certain to tell him herself in her own good time.

'I was beginning to worry,' he said quietly.

'I know; I'm sorry I took so long. I wanted to go and check on my parents' old house. The tenant is moving out soon, apparently.' Hermione shrugged off her jacket and left it on the back of the sofa as he went to make tea. Severus folded his paper and followed her, leaning against the door and watching her as she moved around the room.

'Are you quite alright, Hermione?' Severus asked her.

'Of course,' she replied, but she didn't look up at him. 'I think I won't be seeing Harry for a while.'

'Ah.' Severus took his proffered mug of tea from her. 'It didn't go well, I take it?'

'Better than I thought it would, to be honest. I didn't have to draw my wand, anyway.'

Hermione shot him a grin, and he relaxed, smiling warmly back at her.

'He tried to make me see sense. He thinks that you would hold me back, stop me doing the things I may want to do in the future.' Hermione said it as a statement, but Severus could hear the question in her voice.

'Such as?' Severus felt a little chill run down his spine as he anticipated her words. He didn't quite like where this was going.

'Well, going back to work would be the main thing, I suppose. I was in the middle of research — spells, mainly. I used some of them to protect the house. They have a different vibration each time they're set, so they are harder to break down. I just abandoned it all. It's caused a few problems, according to Harry.' Hermione shrugged slightly.

'Just work?' Severus's brow furrowed. Of course he would never get in the way of her work. If anything, he would encourage it. Her intelligence was too powerful to waste.

Hermione paused mid-sip and raised her eyes over the lip of her mug slowly. 'Well, Harry did mention, you know, having a family... that sort of thing.' She turned away and rinsed her now empty mug under the tap, and the silence between them stretched until she was the one to fill it.

'I don't suppose you'd want children anyway. You never liked them when you were teaching, did you? And anyway, they can be a bind, can't they? It's a total lifestyle change, having kids.' Hermione was babbling, and she stared out of the window, watching the birds as they pecked at the remains of her morning toast.

Severus's mouth had gone dry. Children? She wanted children? Of course she would want them. She was young, capable, and bright. Good genes to pass onto a child, he was sure of that. But his children? It was very early days as far as their relationship was concerned. He didn't even know what he was to her. A boyfriend, or a partner? How had they leapt from learning to be lovers to having children? Bloody Potter.

'You want children?' Severus whispered hoarsely.

'One day, perhaps. I hadn't really thought about it, to be honest with you. Not until Harry and I talked earlier.' Hermione turned to him, her face a study in confusion. 'I'm not backing you into a corner, Severus. I was just telling you what we talked about, that's all.'

Severus stared at her for a moment, then walked back into the lounge and lifted the crossword again. He hid behind it for a good twenty minutes, and when he put it down, Hermione was sitting on the sofa, curled up reading a book. He hadn't even noticed her walk back into the room; his mind was such a jumble of thoughts.

'You would want my children?' he asked her softly.

Hermione looked up at him and brushed her curls from her face. 'If the time was right, if we were still together then, and if it was something we both wanted, then of course I would want your children, Severus,' she said, smiling slowly. 'But we've only just started, well, you know...' She blushed as Severus raised an eyebrow at her.

'Yes. Procreation takes practice, I believe,' Severus said lowly. He stood and held his hand out to her, and she giggled as he pulled her to her feet.

'Where are we going?' she laughed as he dragged her towards the stairs.

'To practice,' he said firmly.

Over the next few months, Severus all but moved into Hilltop Cottage, and slowly, subtle changes were made to the décor and furniture that showed it was a shared home. The bedroom had a new, larger bed set in the middle of the back wall and away from the sloped ceiling, giving Severus more headroom. The garden now showed signs of life growing in the previously bland, brown earth, and Severus spent hours with his head buried in his Herbology book, much to Hermione's joy.

After the initial flurry of interest generated by the *Daily Prophet*, the wizarding world became bored with them. They settled into domesticity, and contact with the magical world only happened when it was absolutely necessary. They had everything they needed at home and in the town.

They were seen on occasions in the local pub or the small Italian restaurant in Hayfield, and while people may have looked twice at the couple, because the age difference was obvious even to the untrained eye, eventually they were just Hermione and Severus who lived in Mellor's old house.

Eighteen

Chapter 19 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione had the worst hangover of her life, and as the sun encroached on her suffering with spiky tendrils, she moaned and put the pillow over her head. She knew she shouldn't have touched the chardonnay, but by the time it had been passed around, she'd been too pissed to care what she was drinking. Nausea overcame her, and she tried to run quietly from the room so that she wouldn't wake Severus.

She needn't have worried because he was already awake and suffering a similar fate. The only difference was that he felt able to wander downstairs with his eyes half-open and grab two phials of hangover potion from the kitchen cupboard. When he walked back into the bedroom, Hermione had hidden herself under the covers, and there was a faint but unmistakable smell of vomit drifting from the bathroom. He rolled his eyes.

He had known the birthday party was a bad idea from the outset, but the crowd they had become part of in the local pub would have none of it, insisting that they had to do something. The witch was turning twenty-five, after all.

'Hermione,' he said quietly, the noise of his own voice vibrating painfully inside his head, 'take this.' He pushed the potion into her hand beneath the covers carefully, then unstopped his own, swallowing it gratefully before his head touched the pillow again.

'I'm sorry,' Hermione's muffled voice came from the quilt. 'I should have listened to you.'

'Not your fault. They wouldn't take no for an answer.'

Severus sighed as the potion took effect and his headache lifted. He smiled as Hermione's curly-topped head appeared from under the covers, and she turned and snuggled into him as he wrapped his arm around her tightly.

'Mmm. I love you,' she said softly, planting a small kiss on his exposed chest.

Smiling, Severus manoeuvred her body on top of him and let his erection prod her nether lips playfully as he engaged her mouth in some tender, probing kisses.

'Show me,' he whispered, and Hermione giggled as he caressed her nipples with the flats of his palms. She slid herself onto him with a hiss and rode him until neither of them could bear it any longer, moaning their orgasms with intensity as Hermione collapsed into his arms.

'I really love you,' Hermione said, panting a little.

'So it would seem,' Severus said, laughing lightly.

Hermione snuggled up next to him and stared up at his profile. Slivers of sunlight caught the ridge of his nose and the curve of his upper lip, and his eyelids were fluttering slightly as he breathed out slowly. She had never thought him more gorgeous than he was at that moment, and she smiled. They had been a couple for almost five years, and Hermione had never been more content.

Hermione walked through the Floo at the Ministry of Magic two days later, full of the joys of spring.

She had been back at work for just over year, mainly because her bank balance had demanded it, and after the initial adjustment of finding her feet after so long away from the workplace, she had begun to find her spark again. She was sure that if she had been just any other witch, her job would have either been dissolved or given to someone else who else but a member of the Golden Trio could have got away with such a lengthy sabbatical? But now she was back, and her commitment was evident. The only change to her working habits was that she knocked off at five p.m. on the dot, just like everyone else. No more burning the lone candle for Hermione Granger, for she had a man to go home to. Not that any of her colleagues ever mentioned him. Anyone that tried to engage her in light banter about her 'boyfriend' was soon quelled into silence by a glare to rival Snape's.

Arriving at her office, Hermione flicked her wand lightly, and her jacket flew to hang itself on the row of hooks by the door and a hot, steaming cup of tea appeared beside the mountain of paperwork on her desk. Hermione grinned, ready to get on with her day.

Severus pulled his t-shirt over his head and then resumed his hoeing. The sun was hot against his skin, but he was no longer the pale dungeon lurker of Hogwarts. Instead, he was tanned, with sinewy muscles and a six-pack that others would have envied.

The garden was more overgrown than he had realised, but as he paused and looked at his progress, he was pleased. The weeds were all but gone, and all that remained were regimented rows of herbs and plants at various stages of growth. Later, he planned to harvest some, but his stomach was telling him that he had probably missed lunchtime by at least an hour, and he needed food to boost his energy levels.

Inside the cool kitchen, he made a sandwich and poured a glass of lemonade and then took both back out into the garden. Hermione had bought some cheap, plastic chairs and a table from the local garden centre, and when she had brought them home, she had taken her time and Transfigured them into wrought iron works of art. Sitting in the shade, Severus ate and planned his next lot of tasks.

Hermione had her head down when Harry walked into the office, and he coughed slightly to get her attention.

The progress that the Spells and Charms Department had made since her return had been staggering. He had always known she was the clever one out of all of the old gang, but her research and her lightening-quick thought processes still amazed him. She was, quite simply, a genius.

It saddened him that despite their shared childhood and everything that they had been to each other, their relationship now was purely professional, and he never saw Hermione at any other time but at work. She hadn't attended his wedding, although he knew this was more than likely his own fault. He had made it more than clear how he felt about her being with Severus, and things were now so cool between them that Hermione refused to talk about anything that wasn't work related.

Hermione raised her head and smiled a tight smile that didn't reach her eyes.

'Harry?' she prompted, breaking his reverie.

'Sorry to interrupt, but I have some exciting news.' Harry smiled brightly and slid into the chair on the visitor's side of her desk.

Hermione paused and sat back in her chair, her eyes roaming over Harry properly for the first time in many months. Marriage obviously suited him, as did Ginny's cooking, judging by his filled out frame. His face was still boyish and line-free, but he had an inner confidence that only comes from contentment and knowing that another person loves you unconditionally.

Hermione felt a small twinge of jealousy, but ignored it. She knew Severus loved her, even if he wasn't one for declaring it verbally. He was never overly effusive with expressing his feelings. She had learned to accept that he would never utter those three little words a long time ago, and what did it matter anyway? He showed it in so many other ways, there could be no doubt.

Hermione sat back in her chair and folded her hands together. 'Go on,' she said, smiling with a bit more warmth this time. Harry visibly relaxed as he caught her eye, grinning as he handed her an envelope bearing the Ministry seal.

'Kingsley wanted me to give it to you personally,' he said.

Hermione opened the letter with a puzzled frown and let out a gasp as she read the contents.

'Is this real, Harry? It's not some sick joke, is it?' Hermione looked at Harry with wide, disbelieving eyes.

'No joke. You made the short list. If you win, not only will it mean huge kudos for the Department, you also get a bursary to fund any private research you want. Not to mention being Doctor Granger, with letters after your name and everything.'

Harry grinned at her, knowing just how much the nomination would mean. The Proctor Prewitt Award for Innovative Spell Research was the most prestigious of its kind and was only awarded every fifty years.

Hermione hadn't even known the award was due to be given out again this year, nor did she know she had been nominated. Her heart was pounding with shock and excitement, and her first thought was to rush home and share her news with Severus. Standing up quickly, she rushed around the desk and gave Harry a brief but tight hug, which surprised them both for a short moment. Hermione recovered first and smiled at him ruefully.

'Thank you, Harry. I have to go, though. I really need to...'. She drifted off, but Harry knew what she meant.

'Of course you do,' he said softly. If he had been in any doubt as to how much Hermione was in love with Severus Snape, it dissipated in that moment.

'Go and tell him, Hermione. I'm sure he will be very pleased for you.' He smiled at her.

'Thanks, Harry.' Hermione beamed as she acknowledged his acceptance of her relationship, then turned and almost ran down to the Floo station.

Two hours later, Hermione was walking around her lounge holding a large glass of white wine. Severus was re-reading her letter as he sat at the table, surrounded by the detritus of a Chinese takeaway, and his eyes glanced in Hermione's direction, taking in her flushed face and her palpable excitement. He hadn't seen her this fired up in many a year, and he smiled to himself.

'Of course,' she said expansively, sweeping her arm in a wide arc, 'there is no guarantee the award will be mine. The German candidate got the highest Charms mark ever recorded at Durmstrang, the American is the Charms Mistress at Salem... They're all so incredibly talented.' She paused and stared at Severus with wide, pleading eyes, and he didn't disappoint.

'You have every right to be amongst their number, Hermione. This is the short list, remember? They've already sorted out the wheat from the chaff.' Severus folded the letter and handed it back to Hermione as she smiled at him.

'You're right. I know. I just... Well, it would mean so much! With the bursary, I could explore some of my ideas for Fluidity and Invisibility spells. So much better than just Disillusioning, don't you think? Imagine, walking through a solid wall and not needing to be a ghost first.' Hermione grinned, and Severus chuckled at her as he stood and started to clear the table.

Hermione's personal Spell research was an extension of an idea she'd had when catching the train to Hogwarts. Being able to walk through the platform wall had always intrigued her, and McGonagall had explained that the wall had been charmed to recognise a person's magical signature and would change its structure to allow a person to walk through. Hermione had thought this was all well and good, but what about ordinary walls? And so her theory progressed. She still had a way to go, but the bursary would give her a flying start.

Hermione re-read the letter and followed Severus into the kitchen, staring at his back as he filled the sink with hot water and Fairy Liquid.

'Will you come, Severus?' she asked him.

Severus paused briefly and then grabbed the dirty plates, making a big show of scrubbing them with the washing up brush before answering her. There had been no reason for him to show his face amongst the Ministry glitterati since the end of the war, and he had no real desire to do so now. And yet, he could hear the hope in her voice, and with a sickening feeling in his stomach, he knew she was going to be hurt.

'It will be your finest hour, I'm sure,' he said slowly. Turning, he faced her and instantly felt stricken. He could see that she had anticipated his response by the droop of her shoulders and the pout on her lips, but it didn't make him feel any better.

'I really would like you to be there. I need you,' she sighed. Hazily, Hermione knew her protest was futile, and she battled internally with her deep need for him to be by her side, showing real support, to the other extreme of how excruciating it would be for everyone, having Severus in their midst.

'I won't turn your night into a circus event, Hermione. You know what a fuss it would create. It wouldn't be fair.' Severus was stoic in his resolve, and Hermione knew from experience that not only was there no moving him, he was always bloody right.

Hermione sighed deeply. 'I know you're right. I just wish you would come anyway. I'm not ashamed of being with you, and most people already know we're a couple,' she said, almost too brightly.

Severus walked over to her and planted a soft kiss on the top of her head. 'I can't, Hermione,' he said quietly.

Hermione watched as Severus walked past her and up the stairs.

Nineteen

Chapter 20 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Severus felt ridiculous. He was Disillusioned and standing in a dark corner of the drawing room of Claridge's hotel, watching Hermione from a distance. She wasn't aware of his presence and probably thought he was still at home in front of the TV.

She had left three hours earlier wearing a floor length, midnight blue satin evening gown, and her hair coiled beautifully around her head and studded with small flowers. A simple diamond pendant necklace hung between her breasts, and she looked more stunning than Severus had ever seen her. But he had said nothing, just wished her a good night as she stepped through the Floo, a sad smile on her face as she disappeared. He couldn't bear the thought of her looking so beautiful and not being on his arm, but rather than arrive in style to whisk her off her feet as he would have liked to have done, he had followed her and skulked in furtively, then hid.

It would have been better for both of them if he had just accompanied her in the first place, because he could see that although Hermione gave the impression of having a good time, her smile was a little false, and she glanced often at her wrist watch in the manner of someone wishing the night would end. His own situation was even more depressing, having to stand and watch as she danced with other men, seeing the delight on their faces as they held her in their arms and caressed her curves through her dress. He just wanted the whole evening to get to the damn point.

Hermione was giddy from being swung back and forth by a line of non-descript wizards, most of whom she only recognised from having lunch in the Ministry canteen. The whole evening seemed to be dragging on, and it had been an ordeal from start to finish, not helped by the fact that most people had arrived with their significant others, or at least amongst a group of friends. The only other people that Hermione knew were Harry and Ginny, but the last thing she needed was to be a gooseberry. Although she put her glass of champagne on their table, she had no intention of pretending all was rosy in that garden.

With a sigh, Hermione smiled politely at her last dance partner as the music finally ended, and with relief she made her way back to her table, lifting her champagne and sipping slowly as all eyes were drawn to the spotlighted stage. With a small smile, Hermione watched as Kingsley walked gracefully to the centre of the stage, and then listened intently as he pontificated about advances in the field of Spells and Charms, the need for further research. He expressed his appreciation that everyone had turned out to support the people who were part of such an important area for the future defence of the wider wizarding community. Hermione ruminated on this, feeling slightly unsettled that even now all of her work seemed to be focussed on the past. They would never be allowed to forget Voldemort, no matter how hard they tried.

Hermione felt her stomach lurch as she realised it was time for the award to be announced. Despite being convinced that the other candidates were far more worthy, it didn't stop her hoping that her name would be announced. Her mouth went dry as Kingsley introduced Alwyn Proctor Prewitt, an aging Lecturer whose father had first introduced the award many moons ago. He walked excruciatingly slowly, and people started to shuffle their feet in anticipation as they watched the old man walk to where Kingsley stood. The envelope in his hand shook, and Kingsley took it from him and shook his hand firmly, making the older wizard wobble. Hermione fought the urge to laugh out loud, and suddenly she wished that she had Severus with her to share the moment, whether she won or not. She was sure the absurdity of the situation would have amused him to no end.

There was silence in the room, and Hermione scanned the faces of the other candidates briefly. The American candidate seemed the most confident, flashing a huge, toothy grin when she caught her eye. Hermione bit her lip nervously, and Alwyn Proctor Prewitt started to talk in a deep, rumbling voice that carried around the whole room and belied his frail appearance.

'The recipient of the award has been chosen because of their work ethic and exceptional commitment to the field. Rarely has such an individual had such an outstanding impact at such an early stage in their career. The Proctor Prewitt Foundation believes that the bursary will not only progress the work of this deserving winner, but it will also benefit the whole wizarding community.'

Proctor Prewitt paused for a moment, and a light ripple of applause went through the crowd. Hermione relaxed, certain that the person he was referring to couldn't possibly be her, and she caught Harry's eye and shrugged slightly. Harry arched his eyebrows at her and smirked knowingly, but Hermione had no time to consider what he meant by it, because Alwyn Proctor Prewitt was talking again.

'Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me profound pleasure to present the Proctor Prewitt Award for Innovative Spell Research to... Doctor Hermione Granger.'

The old man stood a little straighter, and his deep blue eyes met Hermione's warmly as he beckoned her towards him. A cheer went up around her, and she walked towards the stage in a state of shock and disbelief.

'Congratulations, Dr. Granger, very well done indeed,' Proctor Prewitt said quietly as Hermione bent down to shake his hand. She had to pause for a moment to process that he was actually referring to her as 'Doctor,' but she smiled at him as she lifted a small, onyx statue of a wand casting a spell and turned to face the crowd that was still applauding her. After a few moments, they went silent again, their upturned faces smiling at her beatifically.

She knew she was expected to say something, but for the life of her she had no idea what, and she looked around the room desperately until a movement in the corner of the room caught her eye. Severus removed his Disillusionment charm and raised his hand to her slightly to let her know he was there, and Hermione beamed at him and nodded discreetly as he replaced the charm and slid back into the shadows. With a surge of confidence, Hermione spoke a few words of thanks, complimented her fellow candidates and assured the Ministry dignitaries that her bursary would be put to very good use.

After another round of applause, Hermione left the stage and was immediately surrounded by well wishers and sycophants alike. She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the corner where Severus was standing, but she was whisked off for photographs and more champagne before she had a chance to say, 'Thanks, but I'm going home now.'

Severus felt full of pride as he watched Hermione being hustled away. He hadn't intended to reveal himself, but he had seen the panic in her face. It had intrigued him to observe her interactions with her colleagues, not least of which Potter, who was obviously still not in her good books. Professional to the 'nth degree, Hermione seemed to have no friends in her workplace, and he wondered if this made her lonely at all. Their private time was always so full of each other, and Severus had never had much time or need for other people, but Hermione had always had friends at school, and he wondered why she seemed to have none now. He waited for a few more moments, but when it became clear that Hermione wouldn't be coming back to the room any time soon, Severus decided to return home and wait for her there.

Hermione was exhausted by the time she returned to Hilltop Cottage. The Cushioning Charm on her shoes had worked its magic, thank goodness, but she was very glad to slip them off as she wandered into the kitchen and flicked the switch of the kettle.

After the photographs, people wanting to discuss future projects or just be within her aura had besieged her, and it had taken her quite a time to extract herself. It hadn't all been a complete waste of time, though. The American candidate, Alicia Maines, had approached her, and much to Hermione's excitement, they shared the same interest in Spell work. In addition, Alicia had access to the Proctor Prewitt library and research facility within her home area and had made her a lucrative and very tempting offer for her to study there for a six-month period.

Hermione waited for the kettle to boil and noticed Severus walking towards her out of the corner of her eye. Smiling widely, she walked into his open arms and inhaled his scent deeply, burying her nose into his shirt.

'Congratulations, Doctor Granger,' he murmured into her hair.

Hermione pulled away slowly and smiled softly at him. 'I can't quite believe it, you know. Thank you for coming in the end.'

Severus shrugged and started to make tea. 'I wanted to see you win,' he said quietly.

'Forget the tea, Severus,' Hermione said meaningfully, holding her hand out to him. 'Just come to bed.'

Severus raised his eyes to hers and saw a familiar glint in her gaze. He took her hand softly and allowed her to lead him upstairs.

Afterward, when Severus had drifted off to sleep, Hermione curled her body around him and slipped her arms tightly around his waist, feeling his body rise and fall with each breath. She closed her eyes and forced herself to remember the feel of him beneath her cheek as wet tears started to drip down her face.

She had no idea why she felt emotional, but something in her world had shifted this night, and it didn't feel one bit comfortable.

A/N: Just wanted to add this apology. There will be a delay in posting the next chapters while I look for a new Beta. Please hang in there!

Twenty

Chapter 21 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Apologies for the delay in posting. Real life has intervened!

Thanks to ARo for the beta of this chapter.

When Hermione had returned to work on the following Monday, a tangible sense of excitement permeated the air. Colleagues beamed wide smiles in her direction, people she didn't even know offered their congratulations, and as she had entered her office, a large vase of flowers sat on her desk with a small sepia label hanging from the stem of a large iris.

They were from Harry; with a note attached telling her the world was now her oyster. She moved the flowers onto a side table and ignored them. Whatever Harry had imagined would happen when she had won the award, she had no idea. Her project would take time and planning, and in the meantime she had other research to complete.

After two months of being Doctor Granger, she was busier than ever and hadn't found the time to even consider using her bursary. She would need to take a work break, and although she had started to work longer hours in a bid to get to the end of projects in process, there seemed no end to it. It was making her harassed and irritable and she knew it, but she had to just keep going. Otherwise the whole thing would be a waste of time and effort.

Hermione was sitting at her desk, working on her folder of current work, when she was interrupted by the arrival of a large and stately eagle owl with an important-looking parchment attached to its left leg. Hermione stroked his beautiful feathers in awe, and earned herself a hoot. Unfastening the parchment, she rolled it out slowly and read the neat script written on it. It was a formal invitation to attend a belated celebratory dinner in her honour, from Alwyn Proctor Prewitt himself. Hermione grinned to herself, and then sighed as she read further. The invitation was for 'Doctor Granger and Guest,' but she had no doubt that yet again, Severus would not want to attend with her. There had been a flurry of invitations in the weeks after her award to dine with this important person, or that Ministry body. Severus had always declined, and although she understood his reluctance to schmooze with people he felt were really not that important, she hated going alone and having to make excuses. She even received a few pitying looks. After all, most people didn't think that Severus Snape was much of a catch. She decided to make things easier this time, and responded to the invitation, stating that she would gladly attend but that she would not be bringing a guest.

Hermione sighed as she fed the owl a treat and sent him on his way, with her reply fastened securely to his leg. She would have felt proud to have Severus accompany her to the dinner, and she was sure that he and Proctor Prewitt would have plenty to discuss. He might have been able to make a few connections of his own and possibly increase his overseas sales, but his feelings about mixing with the wizarding world were very clear. Never the twain shall meet unless absolutely necessary, and a dinner in honour of his bedmate probably didn't count.

Feeling subdued, Hermione grabbed another folder and opened it. She took the top sheet of paper and started to read, and then absently reached for a quill.

Severus was in his lab in Spinner's End, putting to use some of his more recent horticultural endeavours. There was a definite improvement in the efficacy of the potions that was in direct correlation to the freshness of the ingredients, and he made the necessary notes in his journal before returning to his cauldron and stirring the contents.

He found his brewing very soothing, and his thoughts started to dwell on the fact that he was finding the need to brew more often than he would usually. He refused to say that it was an avoidance tactic. It most definitely wasn't that. Space was necessary in all relationships, and Hermione's work was keeping her later than usual, so what better way to fill the time than to brew and keep his stock full?

Thinking of Hermione made Severus tense up. He couldn't remember the last time they had spoken to each other properly, other than the usual everyday communication. He didn't resent her work, but he did miss the way things had been in the beginning, when they had time to spend lazing around the house, reading, or discussing the garden, or sloping off to bed mid-afternoon to make love slowly and really enjoy each other. He found himself living for the weekend, when at least there would be physical intimacy and Hermione didn't worry about getting up for work the next morning. There were times, he knew, that although she was with him physically, her mind was elsewhere, pondering some work issue, and he would double his efforts to get her more focussed on the task in hand. It was usually worth it.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was past eight, and he wondered if she had made it home yet. Casting a stasis charm over his potion, he gathered everything to him and made his way down to the Floo.

Hermione's return to work at the Ministry had proved useful in that she had been able to obtain a Floo connection between the Cottage and Spinners End. Severus had been glad of it, for the older he got, the more he felt the ache in his leg after walking any distance.

Ensuring his wards were still secure, Severus Flooed to the Cottage to find the place in darkness. She obviously wasn't home. Irritated, Severus flicked his wand, and the lights came on as he walked into the kitchen. There was a note by the kettle, and he unfolded the page quickly.

'Severus,

Alwyn Proctor Prewitt invited me to a celebration dinner this evening. I didn't like to disturb your brewing, and I knew you wouldn't want to come, anyway. I hope I won't be too late.

Yours,

Hermione.'

Severus glared at the note for a long time, reading and re-reading it until the words were etched in his brain even when he closed his eyes. He crumpled the note in his fist and let it fall to the floor.

Would he have attended? Perhaps, perhaps not. But it would have been nice to have been included, or at least considered, as Hermione's partner. That's what they were, wasn't it? Partners? She had told him that everyone knew they were a couple, hadn't she? That meant more than just lovers, definitely more than friends. Not married, though. Severus scowled slightly. As if the witch would ever lower herself to the demeaning role of Mrs. Severus Snape. He would never ask that of her, particularly now, when her star was definitely in the ascendancy.

She was going places, he knew that, and he was genuinely happy for her. He just wasn't sure if he would still be there on the journey. Judging by this evening, it would seem that he wasn't needed anyway.

Severus looked around the kitchen slowly and felt out of place without Hermione there. It was her home, after all. Not his. Her absence overwhelmed him and became so oppressive he could hardly stand it. He walked into the sitting room and saw the photograph of Bertram Mellor, still in its place on the mantle. It stood in its replacement frame, turned to face the wall, but it was still there all the same. It served to remind Severus of his place, for this was a Mellor house. He was an interloper, invited in by Hermione to share the space. Was it pity that had forced their friendship? Had she felt so ashamed of her ancestor that she had sought to make amends?

Clarity, Severus thought, was a wonderful gift, and he could see everything clearly now.

He had tried to avoid being the latest project for Hermione Granger, and yet she had sucked him in with the promise of friendship and love. Severus snorted. What would she know of *love*, anyway? How easily the words tripped from her lips, ensnaring him, winding him tighter. New projects were now her priority, it would seem, for she hadn't spoken those precious words for over a week, and the binds that tied him to her were unravelling as he perused a home in which he felt suddenly superfluous.

With sudden resolve and a set jaw, Severus *'Accio'ed* his clothes from the bedroom and Flooed back to Spinner's End.

Hermione was exhausted. The dinner had been interesting to begin with, and Alicia had also been invited, which had given her time to discuss a future visit to take advantage of the library. But it dragged on, as these things tend to do, and Hermione found that she was sat between Alwyn Proctor Prewitt and Jolyon Hamilton. Both of the wizards were elderly and had more in common with each other, and she had sat in the middle of a conversation that flew between the two of them.

She was so relieved to be home, she just walked straight up to bed. She shrugged off her clothes in the dark, not wanting to wake Severus, and she climbed into bed gingerly. Her head hit the pillow, and she was asleep in moments.

It was only when she awoke the next day that she noticed Severus hadn't been beside her.

Assuming he had become engrossed with his brewing, she thought nothing of it and went to work as usual.

Twenty-One

Chapter 22 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Severus didn't sleep a wink. The bed felt uncomfortable, the sheets irritated his skin, and he couldn't stop his brain from thinking of Hermione, no matter how hard he tried. He anticipated that she would try to Floo to Spinner's End to find him, but by four in the morning he realised it was unlikely. Had she returned home and not been bothered by his absence? Or... and this was something he hadn't even considered until now... had she returned at all?

It hadn't occurred to Severus that anything but work would distract Hermione, but perhaps that was naivety on his part. She was a talented and intelligent witch, beautiful and beguiling. Had she met some younger, brighter wizard at one of the interminable functions she'd had to attend? Was he, a faceless, but no doubt virile and handsome Lothario, the reason she had just sloped off to dinner with Proctor Prewitt without mentioning it? How convenient, to assume he wouldn't go with her.

Severus felt his stomach churn with anxiety, and he staggered to the bathroom to throw up. Splashing his face with water, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror and noticed the sagging, dark circles below his eyes and the pale, sickly pallor to his face. With a snort of derision, he stumbled back to bed and climbed back under the covers, convinced that he had lost Hermione to another and not blaming her one bit.

Hermione managed to leave work on time for the first time in a month, and she had a spring in her step when she arrived at the Cottage. She couldn't wait to see Severus after missing him the night before and wondered if he wanted to get a Chinese take away. It had been ages since they'd had Crispy Chilli Chicken, and her mouth watered at the thought of it.

Stepping out of the Floo, she dumped her handbag on the armchair and scanned the living room for him. Obviously not there, she went into the garden, but there was still no sign of him. He must be brewing still.

Back in the house, Hermione put the kettle on and busied herself making tea. As she fished her teabag out of the mug and walked to the bin, she felt something under her foot and bent down to lift it.

With a sense of dread, she realised it was the note that she had left for Severus in her haste to leave last night, and she could tell it had been crushed. She held the hard, spiky ball in her hand and stared at it. He wasn't home last night, and she saw no sign that he had been in the house today. She realised that there was something wrong, and that by the way her note had been demolished, Severus had been very angry.

Hermione abandoned her tea immediately. She grabbed her bag and a handful of Floo powder and shouted 'Spinner's End,' as she stepped into the fireplace. In a flash of green flame, she spun around and found herself exactly where she had started. Panic started to bubble inside her. He had blocked the Floo, she couldn't get in, and she had no idea why.

It would take her twenty minutes to walk the distance to the house, but now that she was using her wand, Apparition would be a better option. She had no doubt his house was warded to the hilt, so she spun on the spot and landed in Spinnerbottom and marched up to his front door without caring if she had been spotted by Muggles. She felt his wards as she approached, and discreetly, she dismantled them until she was able to cast '*Alohamora*' on the lock.

She slipped inside warily, not knowing what to expect. It was past dusk and the evenings were starting to draw in. There were no candles lit on the ground floor of the house, and Hermione shivered in the eerie half-light as it cast a pale grey light over the furniture in the front room. Wrapping her jacket around her a little more, she started to walk up the stairs, avoiding the broken one so it wouldn't creak. She held her wand aloft, and as she reached the top stair, she could see the flicker of light coming from beneath the door of Severus's lab. She could hear movement beyond the door and approached slowly. It surprised her, how uncomfortable she felt, when they had been sharing a life for almost five years. Pausing briefly, she knocked on the door.

'Enter,' Severus mumbled.

Pushing the door open, Hermione gasped at his appearance. He was sitting on the stool behind his workbench, the steam from the cauldron causing his hair to fall in thick, unhealthy lengths around his face. He looked pale and drawn, with dark circles around his eyes and a dead, hollowness to his cheeks. He didn't even look at her as she stepped forward, just continued to stir his cauldron lethargically, his eyes flat and staring at nothing.

All fear and uncertainty fell away as she walked to him and wrapped her arms around him gently. He stiffened under her touch and shrugged her off, but didn't speak.

'What is it, Severus?' she asked him softly, feeling incredibly worried and more than a little hurt. 'Are you ill?'

He raised his gaze and stared at her, narrowing his eyes. 'Would you care if I was?' he said harshly, dropping his stirring rod with a clang against the side of the cauldron and pacing across the room.

'What do you mean?' Hermione frowned. 'Of course I would! That's a stupid thing to say. What is going on, Severus?'

'There's a good question,' he muttered. 'Why don't you tell me?' He turned to face her, and Hermione could sense a change in his demeanour from the other side of the room. She could almost feel his anger as he stared at her, but she had no idea what he expected her to say.

'Why are you angry with me, Severus?' Hermione's voice was incredulous, and her own ire was starting to rise.

'I do not like being made a fool of witch, and especially not in public. You might have had the decency to finish our relationship before commencing a new one.' Severus's voice was low and quiet, but trembled with fury as he spat the words out.

'What?' Hermione shouted at him. She strode over to where he was standing and poked him firmly in the chest. 'Are you accusing me of cheating on you, Severus Snape?'

Severus grabbed her wrists and pushed her to the wall.

'Enough!' He roared at her, his face pulsing and his eyes flashing with anger as he glared into her eyes. Slowly, he stroked his finger down her cheek, as if to remember the feel of her skin, but his face was pale and emotionless, his eyes blank.

'I understand, witch,' he whispered. 'I wouldn't want to stay with me either.'

He pushed himself away from her and walked out of the room, leaving Hermione shaking and tearful against the wall.

Shock rippled through her. She had no idea where this had all come from. Why would he think this of her? She loved him, for God's sake. He was hers, and she was his. That was the way it was.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and followed him.

Twenty-Two

Chapter 23 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Many thanks to ARo for being so kind and beta'ing my story.

Apologies for this chapter. Please don't hate me!

Severus paced around his front room in a state of frenzy. He couldn't believe what was happening to him, or how he had reacted to Hermione. He had known she was there as soon as she'd started to dismantle the wards, but he was feeling like shit so he couldn't even be bothered to stop her. He knew they would have to see each other eventually, but he hadn't been prepared for what the sight of the woman would do to him. His emotions had been conflicted by turns, the pain of seeing her battling with the urge to claim her, caveman like, and throw her onto his bed and take her.

The anger was something he hadn't anticipated, but her barefaced indignation had blindsided him and made him bloody furious. He had thought she would at least have been honest with him, or contrite, perhaps. If she had begged his forgiveness, his might have relented. But the stupid bitch had challenged him, confronted him with her own accusations, and something inside him had snapped. He ran his hands through his hair and tugged at the greasy lengths in frustration, then sat, deflated, on his sofa. He hadn't meant to turn on her. Despite his feelings, he wouldn't ever want to harm Hermione. The memory of the terror on her face hounded him, and he closed his eyes in a vain attempt to block it out.

Hermione walked slowly into the room and stared at the back of Severus's head. It was difficult to judge his mood from her vantage point, so she shifted until she was by the window. She leant lightly against the window ledge, her arms folded across her chest. For some time, neither of them spoke, and as usual, Hermione hated the silence and couldn't bear the atmosphere between them.

'What do we do now?' she said quietly, her voice raw with unshed tears.

Severus looked at her with a sneer and shook his head. 'We don't do anything. You can do what you damn well want,' he said coldly.

Hermione had wanted to resolve things, to talk and find out what the hell was going on inside his head, but his attitude towards her made her seethe.

'What I want, you stupid man, is to know why you would possibly think I was seeing someone else,' she said.

Severus stood and faced her coolly, but didn't move. Hermione felt a tremor of relief, because she wasn't sure she trusted him after what had happened earlier.

'It didn't take a genius to work it out, Hermione. The late hours, the convenient invitations to dinner that you knew I would turn down. How perfect it must have been,' he said, his voice low and smooth.

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. She felt like he had stabbed her, and she held onto the window ledge for support while trying in vain to hide the pain.

'How could you think that of me? I... I love you,' she whispered, her bottom lip trembling as she tried to fight the tears. 'There is no one else, Severus. There has never been anyone but you. You know that!'

'Love?' he hissed. 'How easy that word is for you to say. Do you say it to him, I wonder? And does he believe you, as I did?'

'Severus, you are being ridiculous! I've been working late because I need to complete my work, and if you had just bloody come with me on all of those horrendous events and dinners you would know the truth of it,' Hermione said sadly. 'I wanted you to come with me, every time. But you wouldn't, because of your precious need to stay hidden. They may not have put you in Azkaban, Severus, but you have created your very own prison, right here.'

Severus glared back at her, his jaw set and his eyes glinting. Hermione saw his fist clenching tightly at his side, and she felt for her wand in her sleeve for reassurance.

'I thought we trusted each other,' said Hermione. 'But maybe I was just fooling myself. I assumed that you loved me, but you've never said it, have you, Severus? Not once. I wish you had been with me when I won the award. I needed you that night, so much.'

'I was there,' Severus said, 'I did come.' He had relaxed as he listened to her words, his eyes soft as he looked at her, and it seemed to Hermione that perhaps he was starting to see his error of judgement.

'I know, and I was grateful, really,' Hermione said, smiling at the memory of him waving at her. 'But it wasn't the same as having you by my side. We could have danced together. We've never done that, have we? All of those nights, Severus, I really needed your support.'

'Show me,' he said, stepping closer to her a little awkwardly.

Hermione stared up into his face. It shocked her to realise that she didn't truly know the man before her. He was more complex and insecure than she had ever imagined, and he wouldn't change, not ever. With growing certainty, Hermione knew what she had to do, and so she pushed on before she lost her nerve and crumbled before him. She knew precisely what he wanted to do, but she shook her head sadly.

'No, Severus, not this time. If you can't trust my word, then I don't see much point in going on with this, do you? I need someone who will be there for me, you see. Someone who can put his own discomfort aside now and again to support me. You couldn't do that. I don't blame you, Severus, I really don't. But I need unconditional love, and I don't even know if you do love me,' she said, her eyes filling with tears.

'Silly witch,' he whispered. He reached up and stroked away a tear as it fell, and Hermione took hold of his hand and kissed the palm softly before letting it drop.

'Goodbye, Severus,' she said quietly.

'Hermione, don't... I'm sorry.' Severus gasped, making a futile reach for her arm as she walked to the door.

'I know you are,' she replied sadly, and as the tears started to blur her vision, she stepped outside the house and Apparated away before he could stop her.

Hermione collapsed as soon as she landed in the kitchen at Hilltop Cottage, and her throat was wrenched painfully by the sobs that spewed from her. She had never felt so much anguish, and she cried for hours as she replayed her relationship with Severus over and over again. Exhausted, she eventually fell asleep, her cheek against the cold tiled floor, her body curled in a tight ball.

Severus stood staring at the back of his front door, willing Hermione to walk back through it. After ten minutes, he realised it wasn't going to happen, so he walked in a daze to the kitchen and pulled a bottle of Firewhisky from the cupboard. He didn't bother with a glass.

Slumping onto the sofa, he lifted the bottle to his mouth and took a deep slug, letting the liquid burn his lips, mouth and throat. It was warming, and as the alcohol coursed through his veins, he dissolved in tears as the reality sunk in.

Hermione had walked out of his life, and he knew it was his own stupid fault, which just made it worse. What had he been thinking? He was a spy, after all. He could have just followed her and found out the truth, and they would probably be curled up together in their bed in Hilltop Cottage, loving each other.

He really did love her, with all of his heart. He should have bloody well told her.

Twenty-Three

Chapter 24 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thanks to ARo for the Beta.

Hermione didn't go into work for three days after her row with Severus, for the simple reason that she couldn't stop crying, she couldn't eat and at night, she couldn't sleep. It had taken her all of her effort to Floo a message to work to tell them she was sick with Muggle flu, for which there was no wizarding cure. It seemed plausible and had the added advantage that no one bothered her for fear of catching it.

On the first morning, Hermione had woken up on the kitchen floor, and it took her a moment to remember why she was there. When reality hit her, she was devastated all over again. It felt like she had lost a limb and that nothing would ever be normal again. It didn't help that everywhere she looked, there were memories of Severus, which would set her off crying all over again.

She still received her mail, and the first letter that she got was from Severus. Her hands had trembled as she lifted the envelope and looked at her name, elegantly written in his angular scrawl on the pale parchment. It still sat unopened on her mantle. She felt weak, and she knew that if she read his words she would be at Spinner's End before she got to the end of the letter.

But gods, she missed him. Her body ached for his touch, her lips needed his kisses, and she felt hollow and incomplete without him. And yet, he had hurt her deeply by not trusting her, despite everything they had been for each other. At her lowest, Hermione hated him for making her feel like this, hated him for not loving her as much as she had loved him. The more she hated him, the easier it was to function like a human being, so she nurtured the hate and let it blossom until she felt able to face the world again.

For someone who had just recently been dumped, Severus was feeling oddly chipper.

After Hermione had left, he had finished his Firewhisky. Then he had resolved, in a drunken haze, to woo her back. He knew that she still loved him, so surely all he needed to do was confess his love, beg for forgiveness, and they could start all over again. Damn it, he'd even appear in public again, if that was what she wanted him to do.

He had started by writing her a long and heartfelt letter. He had been a little hung over at the time, but he put off searching for a potion until he had everything on paper. His first attempt had been thrown into the waste paper basket, his tears making the ink run until the words were illegible. His second attempt was better, and he had found it a strangely cathartic process to pour out his innermost feelings onto the parchment.

'My dearest Hermione,

I feel I must apologise for what took place here last night. My behaviour was unforgivable, and yet I am writing in the hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me none the less.

My life before you was nothing. I felt nothing. I had nothing. I thought it was what I wanted. But you changed everything, and I have never been more content than with you in my life.

I know I have been lacking, Hermione. I was never prepared to have a relationship with anyone, as I am sure you know. My expectations were purely selfish; I did not pause to consider your needs. I deeply regret it, my sweet witch. You looked very beautiful when you collected your award, and I was never more proud of you. I should have been with you, and I accept that. It was a mistake I hope you can forgive.

Perhaps you would allow me to accompany you to the next ceremony; for I am in no doubt that you will receive many accolades in the future.

You must know that I do indeed love you, Hermione. I have never spoken those words to anyone, but if you were here with me at this moment, I would hold you in my arms and whisper them to you over and over again.

I love you... I love you, Hermione.

Yours, always,

Severus'

He had posted it immediately, certain that she would respond within the week, either by writing back, or better still, turning up at his door. In anticipation of just such an event, Severus busied himself with sprucing up the house for the first time in years, even buying new net curtains and replacing the threadbare rugs in the front room. He would show Hermione that Spinner's End, while not a palace, was certainly not a prison.

It was while Severus was fixing the creaking stair that he realised it had been over a week since he'd posted the letter, and still there had been no word from Hermione. He felt a sudden stab of concern and berated himself for not checking on her. He had no idea how she was feeling, or how she had reacted to the argument, and she had been upset when she left. He was sure that, knowing Hermione, she would have shed more than a few tears.

Severus lowered his wand slowly and stared at the bare floorboards, now fixed. Perhaps the witch was sick. If she was and it was serious, the news would have made the *Prophet* by now. Maybe she was scared of his response if she just Apparated to his house unannounced, particularly after what had happened the last time.

'Damn it,' Severus said out loud. He couldn't just keep waiting for her. He needed to know that she was all right, and he needed to see her. He missed her, and he wanted her back.

Severus ran up the stairs two at a time and into his room, pulling out a fresh shirt and jacket from the wardrobe. Stepping into the bathroom, he showered, using Hermione's favourite bergamot and sandalwood scented soap and then dressed quickly.

Instead of Apparating straight to the cottage, Severus walked to the local florist and bought a bouquet of red roses, then found a quiet, Muggle-free spot from which to

Apparate. He aimed for the secluded hedgerow just a few doors down from the cottage, so that he could walk up the front path and gather himself. He would never admit to feeling nervous, but his stomach was bubbling with anticipation as he pushed down the handle of the gate.

He was almost at the front door when it opened and a tall, fair-haired young man stepped out of the house and locked it using the Muggle key. He was carrying a briefcase and a clipboard, and he started slightly as he almost walked into Severus, who was glaring darkly at him.

'I'm so sorry, sir,' said the young man. 'Were you expecting to visit with Miss Granger?'

He smiled warily at Severus, who had pulled himself up to his full height and was giving off an air of intimidation that was making him want to run.

'Not that it is any of your business, but yes. Who are you?' Severus said coldly.

'Sam Parker, from Rowcliffe Estate Agents, in Union Road,' he said, holding out his free hand. Severus ignored it.

'Why on earth would Miss Granger need an Estate Agent?' Severus said.

'Well, she's letting out the cottage. Didn't she tell you? She's in America now, won't be back for at least six months, possibly longer.' Sam stepped back slightly as he watched the change of emotions play across Severus's face.

Shock and dismay turned to anger in the space of moments, and he stared at the cottage, narrowing his eyes slightly. So the bitch had really left him, with no word and no reply to his letter, which told him only one thing, the most obvious conclusion he could come to.

He had been right all along, of course, and now, she was in America, most likely with her new lover.

Twenty-Four

Chapter 25 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

As Hermione stared out of the window of the Boeing 747, her thoughts were not of Severus Snape, but of Harry Potter. He had surpassed himself in the past week, and she really didn't know what she would have done without him. Ruefully, she realised there was a reason he was the Ministry's Chief Administrator, the main being his ability to organise people into action at short notice. The fact that he would do anything to put space between her and Severus did cross her mind, but that was what she wanted too, so it was a win-win situation. She had told Harry what she needed to do, and he had done everything. All that was left for Hermione to do was to pack and rent the house out.

Part of the reason she had wanted to travel the Muggle way was because it gave her time to think and consider what she had done. As the clouds floated by, Hermione stretched a little in her seat and closed her eyes for a moment. Leaving New Mills had been wrenching, but then it wasn't the first time she had disappeared quickly. That was how she had ended up at Hilltop Cottage in the first place, after all. She was fortunate that she had options other than returning to the bosom of her friends, because she couldn't stand Harry's 'I told you so,' smug look for very long.

When Alicia Maines first muted the idea of Hermione's visit, it had been for purely academic reasons, but over the past few weeks, during their encounters at dinners and events, the buds of a friendship had started to grow. She was unlike anyone Hermione had ever met. Bubbly, and as intelligent as she was herself, she also had a wicked sense of humour and Hermione had found herself being drawn to her more and more. The excitement she felt about her trip was almost overshadowing the uncomfortable ache of missing Severus, and she hoped that New York would provide her with enough distraction that she would be completely over him before long.

The plane began its descent, and Hermione looked out of the window to watch the city below her as the buildings came closer. She felt a sudden pang as she thought about starting a completely new life without Severus in it. She had hoped to persuade him to come with her, but she knew there would be no moving him, even before the argument. No, it was definitely better this way. Even Harry had said so.

Thinking back over the past week, Hermione couldn't quite believe that she'd poured her heart out to Harry, of all people. There was no one else she could talk to really, not to mention he was the one who had found her in the store cupboard sobbing. It had only taken a couple of words of concern from him, and the events of the past month or so had come tumbling from her. Harry had listened without interrupting, and then proceeded to tell her that he had known all along that Severus would hold her back, and hadn't he said that at the start? It stuck in her throat that he had been right, in the end. Severus wasn't right for her, but she had been too close to him to see it.

The plane landed smoothly, much to Hermione's relief, and before long she was pushing her luggage-laden trolley through to the exit, searching the gathered crowd for Alicia. It didn't take her long to spot her, for the other witch was tall and willowy and towered over most people. Hermione could see her long, blonde hair shimmering as her head bobbed about looking for her, and as their eyes met, Alicia's face broke out into a huge grin of white sparkling teeth.

'Hey!' she shouted, waving wildly and pushing her way through the crowds to get to her.

'Hi,' Hermione said, slightly breathless from pushing the trolley.

They paused as they looked at each other for a brief moment, then Alicia gave Hermione a huge hug, almost lifting her off her feet. They laughed, and Alicia linked her arm through Hermione's as they walked out of the airport. Next to her, Hermione felt a little dowdy, with her bland brown hair and ordinariness, but Alicia was so warm and genuine that it didn't matter. She had arrived, and she had a friend who was obviously pleased to see her.

It was a good start.

Depressed wasn't a word that Severus would have used to describe his mood. Angry, maybe, or seriously pissed off -- those were words he would use. He spent days lolling around in bed being angry. He spent long nights lying awake and being pissed off. He chose not to eat, or to shower. What was the point, after all?

He tried to distract his traitorous mind from thinking about Granger. She was in the past. She had come, they had fucked a bit, and then she'd gone. That was, as they say, that. It was nothing, a mere sideshow in his life. Perhaps one day he would look back and treasure the memory, but at the moment he was too busy being irate with her.

Fortunately, his feelings for Lily were similar to those he felt for Hermione right now, so he found it quite simple to put her in a box of her own and close the lid. Sometimes, though, when he was exhausted from insomnia and his emotions had snuck their way to the surface, he would remember her skin, the scent of her sex, and how it felt to

be inside her.

At those times, Severus would hide under his bedclothes and pretend his tears were a natural part of being pissed off and overly tired. He would tell himself that tomorrow things would be different. He would get up and shower, and brew some potions, and perhaps take a trip to Diagon Alley. He was overdue a trip to the bank, and he needed to visit his suppliers. That's what he would do tomorrow.

Tomorrow came and went because he just didn't know where to start. Another week went by, until he couldn't even stand his own company anymore and dragged himself reluctantly into the bathroom. He washed his hair twice, having watched with disgust as the dirty suds disappeared down the drain. When he'd finished, he took his time to shave off over a month of beard growth and was shocked by the sight of his gaunt face in the mirror. It was this that finally kicked Severus up the arse.

No woman was going to crush him. Not this time, and never again.

Twenty-Six

Chapter 26 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Thanks to ARO for her help with Beta'ing this story.

If anyone had told Severus that he would one day be sitting in front of the desk of the Minister for Magic as a welcomed guest, he would have snorted at them and checked them for Wrackspurts. And yet, so it was. He lifted his cup of strong coffee and sipped it slowly as he regarded Kingsley Shacklebolt suspiciously. The Minister seemed nervous, and was shuffling a stack of papers before him in an obvious 'putting off getting to the point' sort of way.

Severus put his cup onto his saucer with a clink and coughed. Kingsley caught his eye and smiled ruefully.

'My apologies, Severus. If I am truly honest, I didn't expect you to come today,' he said.

Severus nodded his understanding. 'Nevertheless, Minister,' he said smoothly, 'here I am.'

He clasped his hands in front of him and observed Kingsley as a spy might observe his enemy. Trust was hard won with Severus Snape.

'No need for such formality, my friend. We are still friends, aren't we?' Kingsley asked him, a hint of hope in his voice.

Severus relaxed slightly, and a brief smile graced his face. Kingsley had indeed been a good friend during the war, offering him a safe house on occasions, particularly when he needed to recuperate from injury or just needed space to gather his thoughts. Not even Dumbledore was aware of their link beyond that of the Order. It occurred to Severus that he hadn't maintained contact with Kingsley after the war, and he felt a twinge of guilt.

'I would hope so,' he acknowledged, and was rewarded by a hearty laugh.

'Excellent!' Kingsley grinned warmly at him for a moment. 'Now, I'll get to the point.'

'Finally,' Severus said, his mouth twitching slightly. Kingsley's effusiveness was always loud yet brief, and it never took him long to get back to business.

Kingsley looked at Severus seriously, then smiled. 'I had to butter you up first, my friend,' he said softly.

'Oh?' Severus sat forward slightly.

'I have a problem, and I think... I hope, that you can be of assistance.' Kingsley sat back and his eyes narrowed. 'Minerva is ill, Severus.'

Severus maintained his blank façade, but inside, his heart was beating fast. He hadn't heard from Minerva in over a month, but he assumed she was just cross with him for arguing with Hermione. He was sure that the younger witch would have confided in her mentor, and he knew he would be in the doghouse for a while.

'Is it serious?' he said quietly.

'I am told it is, yes. Poppy had been doing her best at the school, but it had proved beyond her skills. Minerva was transferred to St. Mungo's this morning.' Kingsley shook his head sadly.

Severus felt his mouth go dry, and took another slurp of his coffee. His hand shook slightly, spilling the dark liquid into the saucer, and Kingsley eyed him sharply.

'I know this is a shock, Severus. Minerva has always been there, for all of us. But I need your strength, my friend, if we are to do what is necessary.'

Kingsley stood and walked to Severus's side of the desk, putting a hand on his shoulder. Severus didn't even feel it. His thoughts were a jumble of memories and panic, until with a deep breath, he gathered himself.

'What do you want me to do?' he said firmly. There was a glint in his eye, and Kingsley nodded as he acknowledged his willingness to help.

'Well, first of all, you could check in with the Healers at St. Mungo's. They have their own experts, of course, but they're struggling. They have never seen anything like it, apparently.' Kingsley sat back in his chair with a slump.

'Symptoms?' asked Severus, his brow furrowed in concentration.

'Started out with extreme tiredness, then turned into a common cold, or so we thought. Poppy thought a rest and some Pepper Up would do the job, but then Minerva fell unconscious. The Healers say her body is attacking itself. They've put her in stasis, for the moment.' Kingsley rubbed at his face with his hands, and Severus realised just how taxing his job must be.

'Second of all?' Severus said. Kingsley swallowed a little and Severus braced himself. He had obviously saved the worst until last.

'The school, Severus. I hate to ask it of you, I really do. But Flitwick simply cannot command the authority needed. It's not the students, you understand, but the staff. They

need a firm hand, particularly the newer professors,' Kingsley said imploringly.

Severus gritted his teeth and fought the urge to throw something. He might have bloody known. He hadn't set foot in Hogwarts since his spectacular exit and he had no desire to go back. In fact, he had a definite need NOT to return to the place where his nightmares lurked.

'Ask someone else,' he spat out slowly.

Kingsley didn't need to look at Severus to feel his anger, so he kept his gaze averted and hummed for a moment as he scanned a list of names on the parchment in front of him. When moments of silence had passed and he felt it was safe to speak again, he murmured. 'The only other person I could approach is Neville Longbottom.'

Severus gaped at Kingsley in disbelief. 'What about Hooch? Or Pomona Sprout?' he said, his voice wavering at the thought of Hogwarts under the charge of Longbottom.

'You didn't hear? Hooch is in Bulgaria, Coach to the national Quidditch team. Seems she made quite an impression on young Krum, the year of the Triwizard Cup. And Pomona refused point blank. She likes Longbottom, but she doesn't trust him to look after the greenhouses on his own just yet. We need her expertise, anyway. She's providing the ingredients for Minerva's potions.'

Kingsley sighed deeply. It really was a sorry state of affairs. Hogwarts' reputation had definitely suffered during the war, and no one seemed to want to work in the place where Voldemort met his demise.

Severus glowered at the Minister and slumped in his chair like a sulking teenager. He was backed into a corner. Much as he hated the thought of returning to the school, he shuddered to think what might face Minerva if and when she returned to her post. The result could cause a permanent relapse if some dunderhead was left in charge. Resigned to his fate, he resolved that his return to Hogwarts would be brief, because he would do all he could to expedite Minerva's recovery.

'Very well. On one condition,' Severus muttered.

Kingsley caught Severus's cold gaze and shrank back in his chair.

'Anything,' he said.

'We count this as our debt paid in full, old friend,' Severus said quietly.

Kingsley smiled at him warmly. 'There was never any debt to pay, Severus, none at all.'

Severus arrived at St Mungo's armed with official passes signed by Kingsley and his wand hidden up his sleeve. By taking on the task set him, he was no longer allowed to remain anonymous in New Mills, and his presence caused a stir as he walked purposefully up the ward. He reached the nurses' station and glared imperiously down at the small, blonde-haired witch who hadn't looked up at him, despite obviously being aware of his presence. Severus coughed, and she ignored him for a moment longer as she continued to write a patient's notes, then she raised her eyes to his.

'Professor Snape,' she said quietly. 'You're here to see Professor McGonagall.'

'Miss Lovegood?' Severus stared down at her, and had a half-thought that this was some awful joke set up at his expense.

'It's Mediwitch Weasley, actually,' she said. She tipped her head to one side and gave him a lopsided smile. 'It's very good to see you,' she said.

Severus stilled under Luna's stare, even though there was a tinge of warmth there.

'Thank you,' he replied stiffly.

'Follow me. Professor McGonagall is in our isolation ward until we identify exactly what is happening. If you ask me, her immune system has broken down in some way. But the Healers don't ask me, because I'm only a mediwitch,' Luna said softly.

Severus walked beside the witch, eyeing her sideways. He said nothing, but noted her theory. She was strange, but she had performed well in her NEWT's and he would never presume to underestimate her.

They arrived at a side room, and Luna eyed Severus speculatively. 'I need to use some disinfection charms on you, Professor. Is that acceptable?' she smiled at him.

'Perfectly, Mediwitch Weasley,' Severus said, nodding. He stood with his arms stretched in front of himself and his legs apart, and Luna cast a series of charms, some of which made his scalp and skin tingle and left him feeling as if he had been scrubbed with a wire brush.

'You can go in. She won't be able to hear you because of the Stasis Charm, but you can read her chart if you want to.' Luna opened the door, and Severus looked in from where he stood at his friend lying still on the hospital bed. He paused; feeling conflicted, he jumped when he felt a hand on his forearm.

'She's just asleep, really. She's not dead yet, sir,' Luna whispered, squeezing his arm reassuringly.

Severus said nothing but nodded. He felt strangely calmer. Luna turned to walk away but stopped as Severus spoke.

'Which Weasley?' he said, not looking at her.

Luna laughed lightly. 'George,' she said, a smile evident in her voice even though he couldn't see her.

'Thank you,' he murmured, closing the door behind him.

Huge apologies for yet another mistake in the posting - I must have had a brain freeze. Thanks to the kind reader who pointed it out!

Twenty-Five

Chapter 27 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: So sorry- I forgot to post this chapter completely! This means that for some there won't be a new chapter until everything is sorted, and I apologise for that.

Hermione walked into her new apartment with a smile on her face and a bounce to her step. She had fallen in love with the place, because it was so completely different to Hilltop Cottage. Light and modern, the main living area and kitchen was open plan, with a huge picture window giving an amazing view over Central Park. Best of all, the Floo was connected to all of the buildings she needed access to, so she could zip around the city quicker than if she used the subway.

Hermione stood in the kitchen and waited while the microwave nuked a plate of 'Chinese Prawns with Angel Hair Noodles,' grabbed a glass of wine and then carried everything over to the low level couch. A pile of post sat on the arm, and as she ate with one hand, she opened her mail with the other. The first letter was from Harry, telling her the gossip from the Ministry. Hermione smiled but felt so detached that he could have been talking about another planet. The second was from her estate agent, telling her that although he had a tenant for the property and her rent was being paid on a regular basis, there had been no sign of life around the house for a while, as it seemed the tenant was away. Did she want him to call by and check on the house? Hermione made a mental note to write back to him in the morning, because tonight she was going out on the town with Alicia.

Finishing her meal and gulping down the wine quickly, Hermione put her dishes in the sink (another job for tomorrow) and dashed to have a quick shower. The bathroom was en suite to the large bedroom, with such a powerful shower that she felt buffeted by the steaming water jets. Invigorated, she wrapped her fluffy white robe around her and opened the walk-in wardrobe, pulling out a navy dress and silver shoes. Drying herself quickly, she spritzed herself with perfume and used her wand to dry her hair before styling it artfully at the nape of her neck. If there was one thing Hermione had learned to do since moving to New York, it was take care of her appearance, and as she looked at herself in the mirror, adjusting the neckline of the dress slightly, she almost didn't recognise the girl who had left New Mills just over a month before.

As she walked to the Floo, she immediately regretted drinking her wine so quickly. She could feel the effects of the alcohol already, but she shrugged it off. It had been ages since she'd been dancing, and she couldn't wait. Flooing directly to Alicia's brownstone house, she walked through into the large kitchen to find her friend.

She felt at home in Alicia's house, because she had lived here for three weeks while they searched for her own place. They had spent hours in the cosy lounge, sipping wine and talking about their lives and their work, and Hermione had found a better friend in Alicia than she had ever had before. She had even told her all about Severus, and Alicia had been enthralled. She had obviously known of the war, and to hear that two of the heroes had been an item was fascinating to her. She had been a shoulder for Hermione to cry on; she hadn't judged her or said she had wasted her time with him; she had just listened and supported her. Hermione found her acceptance refreshing, and through it, she had felt her feelings of loss start to lessen.

Alicia worked at the local wizarding hospital, a section of Bellevue that was cleverly hidden from the Muggles. Hermione had visited her research department, where Alicia was working on using Charms alongside other therapies. It was fascinating work, and they had ended up having a discussion about the use of Potions in Muggle healthcare, another area that Alicia had been keen to explore at some point.

Feeling a rush of warmth, she watched as Alicia clipped on her earrings at the dining table.

'Hi sweetie, you look gorgeous,' Alicia said lightly as she stood and grabbed her clutch bag.

'Wow, so do you,' Hermione gasped. She stared in awe at Alicia's figure, clad in a cream, silky sheath, her gold coloured stiletto shoes making her taller than she already was. Her blonde hair was pinned in a high ponytail on top of her head, and her makeup was flawless.

'I hope we manage to engage some intelligent men tonight. I can't bear talking to dweebs who forget we have brains!' Alicia said, laughing loudly.

Hermione laughed, but pulled her mouth into a rueful grimace that Alicia noticed immediately.

'I'm sorry. I'm only teasing. I know you're not interested in men, but honey, it's fun,' Alicia giggled, and pulled Hermione to her and hugged her gently.

'I know,' said Hermione softly. 'I wonder if I will ever be able to meet another man and not compare him to Severus.'

'If that's the case, even the dweebs will win,' Alicia said sarcastically.

'Stop that,' Hermione said firmly, but then laughed. 'You didn't even meet Severus. He really was incredible, you know.'

'Sure. But he's also the man who's broken your heart, and I will never let you forget that. Now, let's go find someone cute to flirt with.' Alicia winked playfully at Hermione, who couldn't help being swept away by her friend's good mood and enthusiasm as she followed her to the Floo.

An hour later and Hermione was having the most fun she'd had in ages. The club was full of gyrating bodies, the music was pounding, and she was more than a little bit tipsy. As she danced, a blond haired and very handsome wizard shimmied over to her and bumped against her playfully, and she giggled, meeting his startling blue eyes as he grinned back. They danced for two more songs, until he guided her from the dance floor by her elbow towards the bar.

'I'm Oliver,' he said, holding his hand out formally. Hermione laughed at the contrast and shook his hand firmly.

'Hermione,' she replied, a little loudly.

'I'll get the drinks,' he said, turning to the bar.

He didn't ask her what she wanted, and she felt a little put out for a moment, until he handed her a Manhattan. It was what she had been drinking, and she raised her eyebrow slightly as she eyed him over the rim of her glass.

Oliver chuckled warmly. 'You got me,' he said. 'I was watching you.' He shrugged, a little embarrassed, but relaxed as Hermione laughed.

They stood watching the crowd for a moment, and Hermione waved at Alicia on the dance floor. She waved back, grinning, and then proceeded to bump and grind with the shorter, dark haired man beside her.

'You know Alicia?' Oliver said in her ear.

'Yes. She's why I'm here, actually. We're friends.' Hermione smiled up at him.

'What did you say your name was again?' Oliver frowned slightly.

'Hermione... Granger,' she said.

'Not Dr. Granger?' Oliver said incredulously. 'I assumed you'd be older.'

'Really?' Hermione's eyes danced with amusement at Oliver's embarrassment as he realised what he'd said.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. I work in Alicia's department, you see. The award, well, we all worked hard for it.' Oliver looked away from Hermione and stared out at the crowd, but his thoughts were obviously elsewhere.

Sensing a change in atmosphere, Hermione took her leave and went to the loo. As she walked into the cubicle, she felt suddenly dizzy and closed her eyes. She could feel the cocktails rushing through her, and was shocked to find that she was thoroughly pissed. Her stomach started to roil, and she started to feel flushed. In haste, she turned around and threw up, then rested her head against the wall. Gods, she felt awful. Heaving, she bent over and vomited again, knowing that she couldn't make it through the rest of the night in this state. She left the cubicle and splashed cold water onto her face before finding Alicia and making her apologies.

It was with relief that she collapsed on her bed in the apartment, and she allowed the cool bed linen to soothe her as the room continued to spin. Feeling wretched, she willed herself to sleep.

Hermione spent the next two days recovering from her night out and was thankful she had made no plans for her weekend. She had no hangover potion and resolved to order some as soon as she felt able to move without the need to vomit. She realised that it was most likely food poisoning from the prawns, and decided to avoid them in the future.

When she went to the Proctor Prewitt library on the Monday morning, she felt relieved for the calm atmosphere. The main archives were housed in a light and airy building so far removed from the dark, dusty library at Hogwarts that you would have thought it was a bookshop. She was still aching and exhausted, but at least the queasiness had gone. To be able to sit and just read for the whole day was exactly what she needed.

Pulling a pile of books towards her, she lifted the top one and smiled to herself contentedly.

Twenty-Seven

Chapter 28 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Not a new chapter but a re-post. So sorry everyone :(

Hermione was surprisingly calm as she left Bellevue Hospital and decided to walk home through Central Park to take in some fresh air. Families went past her as she walked, children running about and laughing, some with footballs, some on bicycles. The parents would smile at them indulgently and then at each other, as if they shared some amazing secret. Subconsciously, Hermione put her hand over her abdomen and wondered what would happen in her future now.

Hermione had purposely left her plans open-ended. The opportunities that were open to her now she was Dr Granger seemed endless, and spending time in America, expanding her experience, seemed like a good chance for her. Eventually she would want to move home, and use the knowledge she had gained for the good of her own community, but she was enjoying being in the States, and there was so much more to see. Now, everything was on its head, and she had no idea where she was going.

She had been feeling unwell ever since the disaster with the microwaved prawns, which she had studiously avoided ever since. She was convinced it must have been the prawns, because no one has a hangover that lasts for longer than a week. But the week had turned into two, then three, and after a month of feeling tired, aching and just not herself, Hermione had allowed Alicia to arrange an appointment with her physician.

But the news that she was pregnant had thrown her completely, and she felt ridiculously alone and overwhelmed with a feeling of homesickness.

She sat on a nearby bench and allowed the sun to warm her face. Something deep inside her made her wish that the heat was coming from the fireplace in Spinner's End, and that she was sitting beside Severus, cosy and loved and making excited plans for their new baby. As soon as she had been told the news, she yearned to have Severus by her side and knew without doubt that she was as deeply in love with him as she had ever been, despite everything. Her life was empty without him in it, and it had taken this to make her realise it.

The new pregnancy charms could determine the magical signature of each child. The baby, a boy, would be powerful, the mediwitch had said.

'Like his father,' Hermione whispered aloud.

She couldn't stop the tears once they had begun, and she swiped at them in frustration with the back of her hand. She should tell Severus, she knew that, but a part of her dreaded his reaction. Damn it, she didn't even know how she felt about it herself, but the mediwitch had told her that once the pregnancy was confirmed, she would bond with the baby, because while she was carrying him, their magic would be inextricably linked. She might even discover abilities she hadn't had before. The thought was intriguing, but before Hermione could apply her intellectual capacity to being pregnant and research all that it would entail, she had to deal with her emotions, and at the moment she was all over the place.

Feeling slightly weak, Hermione walked slowly back to her apartment and immediately Floo'ed Alicia. She needed to tell someone, and here, in this foreign place, Alicia was the only one she had.

The blonde witch stepped through the Floo almost immediately, and as she caught sight of a weeping Hermione sitting and wringing her hands on the edge of the long couch, she went to her and wrapped her arms around her, holding her close and stoking her hair soothingly.

'Shh,' she said softly. 'What is it, Hermione?'

Hermione snuffled softly and wiped her eyes with the cuffs of her long sleeved t-shirt, laughing at the gesture ruefully.

'Sorry,' she mumbled.

'It's okay. Gross, but okay.' Alicia smiled encouragingly. 'Tell me the worst of it,' she said.

'I'm having a baby.' Hermione stared as she spoke the words for the first time.

'Oh, my God,' Alicia gasped. 'Oh, Hermione.' She took Hermione's hand in hers and squeezed tightly. 'Are you quite alright?'

'I don't know, Alicia. I don't know how I feel at all, really.' Hermione leant back against back of the couch and sighed deeply.

'Will you tell him? It is his, right?' Alicia winked at Hermione cheekily, and she could help but giggle. She gave Alicia a playful punch on the arm.

'Of course it is!' Hermione laughed. 'I should tell him, I suppose,' she mused. 'I just don't know what he'll say.'

‘There’s only one way to find out. Why don’t you visit? I’ll come with you, if you want?’

Hermione shook her head firmly. ‘No. I couldn’t stand to see him without knowing how he feels first. I’ll write, to him and Minerva. If anyone can encourage him to be sensible about things, she can. But I do know this much, Alicia. I don’t want my son growing up not knowing who his father is.’

Alicia grinned slowly. ‘You’re having a baby!’ she said excitedly.

Hermione stared at her and down at her stomach pointedly, then giggled. ‘I am, aren’t I?’

Writing the letter to Severus reminded Hermione so much of the first letter she had written to him that she almost couldn’t get through it for the tears. Finally getting the right tone, she had scribbled it quickly, leaving tearstains and crossings out all over the parchment, but she didn’t have the energy to start all over again.

‘Dear Severus,

I hope this letter finds you well.

There is no easy way to say this, but you should know that I am having a baby. You are going to be a father, Severus.

Please know that I have no expectations, but I hope that you can find it in your heart to allow your son to know you as he grows up.

I... I think of you often, Severus.

Yours,

Hermione’

The letter to Minerva was easier to write, and she included specific instructions to her to keep Severus from acting rashly, and to look after him, if he would let her. She decided to post this letter first class, which meant using very expensive International Apparition Mail, to allow Minerva fair warning, and once both missives were sent, she headed for bed, hoping she would hear some news soon, one way or another.

Twenty-Eight

Chapter 29 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

One Year and Nine Months later...

Severus looked down at the letter in his hands in disbelief. It had been quite some time since he had heard from Sam Parker, the estate agent from New Mills. He had taken on the tenancy in haste, purely because he couldn’t bear the thought of any other person living in what he always thought of as Hermione’s home. Nevertheless, it had been useful, because it meant he still had access to the garden. He had only entered the house once, just after collecting the keys. It had been difficult, and to add insult to injury, he had found his letter to Hermione propped up on the mantle piece, unopened. He kept it still. And now this.

‘Dear Mr Snape,

In accordance with your tenancy agreement on Hilltop Cottage, I am writing to inform you of your one-month notice to vacate the property.

The owner and her family are due to return and wish to use the house as their permanent home, and it is unlikely we will be marketing this for rental at any time in the future.

However, I do have other properties ready for immediate occupation. Do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Sam Parker

Rowcliffe Estate Agents’

Severus stared into the air in front of him, his mind a complete whirr. There were two things that immediately struck him. Firstly, that he would need to approach Hermione for continued access to her garden. Some of the plants he was cultivating were essential for Minerva’s continued survival. They were no closer to discovering her illness or a cure, but at least his replenishing potions, strengthened and improved by his tireless experimenting with his plants, had increased her physical strength somewhat. Severus visited her daily, more often than not at the end of a long school day. He gave some thanks that he was only running the damned place. He would have broken before now if he’d had to teach classes into the bargain.

The other thing he couldn’t stop mulling over, because he’d had the letter for a week now and was unable to stop thinking about it, was the reference to the owners’ family. The bloody witch must have got herself married and pregnant in America, and now she was back to flaunt it and play happy families, right on his bloody doorstep.

Truth be told, he wasn’t actually living in Spinner’s End. He’d hardly stepped foot in the place since he had taken over for Minerva, and instead he had taken quarters in the guest wing close to the Astronomy tower. He rather liked his new rooms, mainly because he had a window and didn’t have to light his quarters with candlelight during the day, unlike the dungeons. He had even been able to set up a full lab in one of the spare bedrooms. But that wasn’t really the point.

The point was that Hermione still filled most of his waking thoughts, and plenty of his night-time ones. His anger towards her had dissipated over the past year, because he loved her, and he knew that he always would.

So how could he gain access to the garden without bumping into her new man and hexing him into next week?

Hermione paused to breathe deeply before opening the door of the taxi. The cottage looked almost the same, save for the hedgerow, which had overgrown quite a lot since Severus had cut it the last time. She realised that the last tenant probably hadn't had the time to do anything with it. She glanced over at Donovan, asleep in the baby seat beside her, and smiled softly.

'Thanks, Mike,' she said quietly, opening the door and lifting Donovan out slowly so as not to wake him.

Mike smiled and nodded, climbing out of seat to open the boot. He lifted out the three large suitcases and wondered silently how the young woman had managed on the train with the baby and all of her belongings. He also wondered when the baby had arrived and where the poor mite's father was, but he said nothing.

Hermione had forgone the train in favour of Apparating in stages over most of the distance. It had exhausted her magic, but it meant she could shrink her luggage and concentrate on keeping the baby quiet. Landing in a secluded archway at the station had been ideal, and she hadn't been at all surprised to find Mike still working his cab.

Pushing open the gate, Hermione sighed as she heard a familiar creak of rusty hinge. Donovan started to wriggle about in his seat, and she hurried up the path and opened the door, walking inside and placing him on the sofa. After a moment, he settled, his lower lip pushing out in a pout as he breathed in and out. Hermione shook her head. She couldn't believe she had made such a miracle. She turned back to the door as she heard Mike huffing up the path.

'You should have left them, Mike, I'd have done that,' she said, staring as he hefted the third suitcase next to the others.

'That's all right, Miss Mellor. I don't know how you managed them in the first place, what with the little one and that,' he paused, obviously waiting for an explanation.

'I had some help,' Hermione said, averting her gaze and reaching for her purse. 'Here you are.' She smiled as Mike stared down at the money in his hand. She had given him a little extra for his effort, and also to encourage him to leave as soon as possible.

He didn't disappoint her. With a cheery wave, he went back down the path, and Hermione waited until he was well out of sight before withdrawing her wand and sorting out the overgrown hedge.

When she went back in the house, Donovan was fully awake and looking eagerly around the room. His thick black hair was getting a bit too long, and he rubbed his fists in it, in an attempt to get it out of his eyes.

'You're awake, little man,' Hermione cooed. Unclipping him, she lifted him from his seat and sat him comfortably on her hip. 'Welcome home, Donovan,' she said, kissing him on his soft cheek. Donovan giggled and took a handful of her curls gently. Hermione was always amazed that he knew not to pull her hair too hard, and he loved to hold it, almost like a comforter. 'Let's have a look around, shall we? Then we can decide what to do first.'

Hermione walked up the stairs and around the top floor of the house. In the small box room, she told Donovan that when he was bigger, he would sleep here, with a bookshelf for all of his storybooks and a big box for all of his toys. Being only a year old, he only giggled and gurgled a bit, but she told him anyway.

When she reached the door of her own room, she poked her head around it slowly. It was exactly as she had left it, which surprised her no end. The bed hadn't been moved, the books she had left by the bed as a welcome for the new tenant sat untouched, with a thin layer of dust on top of them. She frowned, feeling puzzled, but carried on with the tour and reacquainting herself. After living in her spacious apartment for over a year, the house felt a lot smaller than she had remembered it to be, but in a homely, cosy way. She was starting to feel at home.

Back downstairs, Hermione fumbled to open the back door with the bulky key while juggling Donovan at the same time, but eventually they made it through and into the garden. The bird table was still standing but was sadly free of crumbs.

'We'll have to start to feed the birds, Donovan. You can help me with that, can't you sweetheart?' she said, smiling as he tried to grab at her nose.

They took a stroll around the side of the house, and Hermione took a breath before looking at the three neat plots she had dug out for Severus all those years ago. She expected them to be overgrown and uncared for, and she gasped when she saw quite the opposite.

Each garden plot was weed free, lush with vegetation and tidy to the point of being almost unreal. Hermione tried to understand what she was seeing, but deep down she knew.

Severus was still using the garden at Hilltop Cottage.

Twenty-Nine

Chapter 30 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: I think I have the posting issue under control -- sorry everyone :(

The front room of Hilltop Cottage was virtually unrecognisable. After the first day, when Hermione had taken Donovan in his buggy to the local shops to buy food and other essentials, she had been working tirelessly on making the house more family friendly. It had taken some time, and a bit of research, but now, although the cottage remained exactly the same on the outside, the ground floor had been expanded to twice its square footage.

The living area was double the size, with the fireplace on the same wall as it had previously been. Instead of the sofa being opposite the hearth, however, Hermione had transfigured a wooden crate and the old sofa into a corner-seating unit, which ran along one wall. She had wand-cleaned the floorboards and enlarged the old rug, mending it here and there. She didn't want to get rid of it, because it was part of the character of the house, but the edges had lifted a little. She used a sticking charm to secure it in place. Donovan was only creeping around using the furniture to support himself, but it wouldn't be long before he was toddling about, and she couldn't bear the thought of him tripping over the frayed edges.

To one edge of the room she had created a large play space for Donovan, stealing an idea she had seen in the hospital crèche in New York. The floor was cushioned rubber, firm enough to walk on but soft enough not to hurt when he toppled over, as he was wont to do. The most ingenious part was the invisible wards, which Hermione could control with a silent spell. This would keep Donovan inside the confines of the play space, should Hermione need to go up the stairs or into the garden for five minutes. It gave her peace of mind, and he seemed more than happy to sit quietly and play with his building blocks and other Muggle toys she had bought him.

To make life easier, Hermione had added a laundry room and a proper dining area in the kitchen, and taken down part of the dividing wall into the lounge, so that she could watch Donovan while she cooked. All in all, the place was perfect. She did wonder to herself what Severus would think, but she tried not to think on it too much. Inevitably, their paths would cross at some point, but she was in no hurry for that meeting and would much rather be mentally prepared.

Fussing about the room, Hermione plumped the large, green cushions on the new sofa and arranged the few baby pictures she had of Donovan on the mantle piece. Glancing at the clock anxiously, she lifted Donovan from around her feet and sat him into the play space, putting the wards up and adding an adapted 'Notice-Me-Not' spell for good measure. This meant that Hermione could see her son, but no one else would until she was ready. She wouldn't introduce her son to her expected guest until she was sure he would be properly accepted.

Dashing into the kitchen, Hermione opened a packet of chocolate chip cookies and put them onto a plate. She switched on the kettle just as she heard her Floo activate and glanced anxiously at Donovan when she realised he hadn't seen this Floo working until now. She needn't have worried. The child just watched the green flames curiously and cocked his head at the sight of the dark-haired man who walked into the room. Hermione fought the urge to laugh. Sometimes Donovan's mannerisms were so like Severus it was scary.

'Hi, Harry,' she said, smiling brightly as she walked into the lounge.

'Hermione!' Harry grinned and pulled her into a tight squeeze. 'Welcome back.'

'Come into the kitchen and take a seat; I have the kettle boiled already.'

After the tea was made, they sat at the table in silence for a moment. Hermione didn't know where to start, so she hoped that Harry would do the talking.

Harry took a slurp of tea and eyed Hermione through his glasses. 'You didn't keep in touch,' he stated, a question in his voice.

Hermione felt her cheeks go pink, and she looked at him in shame. 'I had good reason.'

'I'm sure you'll tell me all about it,' he said, his tone telling her she had no choice.

Hermione giggled a little nervously. 'How's Ginny?' she said, changing the subject.

Harry beamed at her. 'We have news, actually. We're having a baby,' he said excitedly.

Hermione felt her stomach flip over, but she was genuinely happy for them both. 'That's wonderful news, Harry. How is Ginny feeling?'

'Well, exhausted, for the most part, generally feeling off-colour. That's how pregnancy is, I think,' he said.

Hermione nodded at the memory of her first few months. 'Did the charm tell you the sex of the baby?' she asked, smiling.

'The sex of the baby? No, why would it do that?' Harry looked at her, puzzled.

'Oh. Well, the pregnancy charms in America must be a bit different, I guess,' she mused.

'Well done for changing the subject, Hermione, but what the hell has been going on? I'm sure you didn't invite me over just for a chat over a cup of tea.'

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, and Hermione was shocked to see a smattering of grey. Harry was still young, but he had lived through more than one lifetime's worth of trauma. Perhaps this was an outward sign.

Hermione sighed deeply. 'I had a baby, Harry. I found out I was pregnant; that's why I couldn't contact you. I couldn't lie, so it was far easier to say nothing,' she said.

Harry choked a little on his tea and looked around himself.

'What baby?' he said, seeing no sign of a child in the house.

Hermione chuckled. 'He's here; I'll introduce you in a moment. But Harry, please be gentle. He's only just turned one.'

She stood and walked to Donovan's play space, where he had obviously started to get a little bored and was throwing his bricks around, watching them bounce off the charmed walls. Luckily, the Cushioning Charm Hermione had put on the blocks stopped them hurting when they hit him, and all he did was watch them and smile.

'He's one? Bloody hell, Hermione, you have a child of one, and you never thought to tell us?' said Harry incredulously.

Hermione looked at Harry sadly. 'It was a difficult time for me, Harry. You'll see,' she said quietly.

With a whisper, the 'Notice-Me-Not' spell dissipated and the charmed walls dissolved.

Harry stared a little disbelievingly as the small, dark haired boy lifted his arms willingly to Hermione and giggled a bit when she nuzzled his face with her nose. She kissed him on the cheek, and he stared back at her with his dark eyes as if he knew everything despite his young age. Hermione walked over to the table and held him for Harry to see plainly.

'Donovan, this is Harry. Harry, this is Donovan Granger,' she said happily, waving his little hand at Harry.

Harry let out a low whistle and reached out, shaking Donovan's hand solemnly and making Hermione laugh out loud.

'Nice to meet you, Donovan. Has anyone told you you're the spitting image of your father?'

Harry looked at Hermione pointedly, and she smiled.

Thirty

Chapter 31 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: I know people are confused about the letters. Please rest assured that I have not forgotten anything in the construction of this story, and all of the loose ends will be tied up.

Hermione walked down the stairs and smiled at Harry, who was ensconced on her new sofa and looked almost half asleep.

'He's sleeping,' she said quietly.

'So was I, almost.' Harry grinned sheepishly and pushed his glasses back on his face. 'I spoke to Ginny. She's not expecting me back for another hour or so.'

'Thanks. It's good to catch up properly. I feel as if I've been away for a lifetime, and having Donovan has turned everything upside down. Let's have some wine?' Hermione suggested.

She felt immensely grateful for Harry's presence in the house, because for the last few days she had only had Donovan for company. Much as she loved him, baby talk wasn't very stimulating.

She grabbed a cold bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the 'fridge and poured two generous glasses. She felt the need for some Dutch courage, because the next part of the conversation wasn't something she had been looking forward to.

She walked back into the lounge, handing a glass to Harry and sitting herself at the opposite end of the couch.

'You want to know if I've seen Snape,' he said calmly, sipping his wine as he watched Hermione blush.

'Am I that transparent?' she asked.

'No, not really, but I'm guessing he doesn't want to know about Donovan, right? It's a shame you won't be able to hide his parentage, Hermione. He's the spit of him.' Harry moved around to face her.

Hermione frowned. Severus had never responded to her letter, but she had sort of expected that. What had hurt her most was that she hadn't heard from Minerva either, and she had felt devastated by what she had seen as her old mentor's total rejection.

'I wrote to him, Harry. I told him that he was going to be a father. He didn't respond, so I think we can assume he's not interested in his son,' Hermione said sadly. 'But Minerva has cut me off too, and that's the worst of it. I wrote to her first, so she could perhaps encourage him to make contact, for Donovan's sake, but she didn't respond and I've heard nothing for over a year. She must be disgusted with me, I imagine. I know how the British wizarding society feels about single parents.'

'But... You mean you don't know?' Harry's face was pale.

'Know what?'

'Minerva's sick, Hermione, she's been in St. Mungo's for over a year. Much as I hate the bloke, Snape has been trying to find a cure. They're keeping her alive in the meantime, with some fancy potion or something.' Harry took a sip of wine.

Hermione's face fell. 'Oh, my God,' she whispered. 'What's wrong with her?'

'That's the thing. They don't know. Something was attacking her immune system, they said, but whatever Snape's giving her, it's stopped it getting worse,' said Harry sadly.

Hermione stood abruptly and walked to the kitchen, tipping her wine down the sink.

'I have to go to St Mungo's,' she said hastily, grabbing her light denim jacket from the banister. 'Please, would you stay, keep an eye on Donovan? I won't be long, half an hour at most. I promise.' She stared at Harry desperately.

'Me? Stay here? What if he wakes up? I don't know what to do with kids, Hermione,' Harry said, panicked.

Hermione grinned at him. 'Think of it as a trial run,' she said, then took his hand in hers. 'Please, Harry. I just have to see her. You understand?'

Harry sighed and his shoulders slumped in defeat. He flinched as Hermione pulled him to her and hugged him hard.

'Thank you,' she said emphatically, then immediately stepped into the Floo. With a determined look on her face, she said 'St Mungo's' and disappeared in a flash of spiky green flames.

The long ward was bathed in half-light, a charm-made glow that was soothing and calming for the patients, but gave enough working light for the nursing staff. Hermione walked tentatively along the corridor to the nurses' station, but there was no one there.

Looking around, she saw a chink of light coming from under a partly open door, and she walked quietly up to it and peered inside. A nurse was tending to the patient in the bed, the wand she was holding casting a yellow light as she passed it over the prone body. Hermione recognised it as a diagnostic spell, having seen Poppy Pomfrey use it on numerous occasions. Pulling back, she walked back to the nurses' station and waited.

Severus tensed as he stepped into the ward. He had caught the faint aroma of something familiar, and he was trying hard to place it when he saw movement at the far end of the corridor, and his heart froze. He would have recognised her down a dark alley, but here, where he had never expected to see her, he felt unprepared and more than a little bit shaken.

Her hair was exactly as he remembered it, a bushy mop of curls that felt soft to touch and could get in the way at times. She seemed different in a way he couldn't quite define, and his eyes scanned her frame. She had filled out, and her breasts were bigger, he was sure. Contentment probably suited her, he thought bitterly.

He paused, and then shrank back into the shadows as she looked into a room, and then turned back to the nurses' station. Today was not the day he had chosen to come face to face with her, even though he knew it would be inevitable. Avoidance was the best policy, and his first thought was to leave immediately. Cursing slightly, he remembered he had brought the next batch of potions for Minerva, and he had no choice but to deliver them before he could go. He just had to work out how to do that without her seeing him.

Hermione turned, as the nurse walked out of the room behind her, and smiled widely as she realised it was Luna.

'Luna,' she said brightly.

'Hi, Hermione. How are you?' Luna walked up to her and they hugged gently.

'Better for seeing you. How's George?' she asked.

'Busy. But then, so am I, so I think it works for us,' she replied, smiling.

'I'm glad,' she said sincerely.

Luna's wedding to George Weasley was the last event she'd attended before leaving the Ministry all of those years previously, and it had been such a happy day. Smiling fondly at Luna, she squeezed her hand lightly.

Luna smiled knowingly, then moved to the nurses' station and lifted a wad of papers.

'You want to see Minerva, I think?' she said, then handed the papers to Hermione, who eyed them suspiciously.

'What is all this?' Hermione said.

'Her notes from the past year. You don't have to read them all now, but I think if you want to help Severus with finding a cure, you'll have to know the background.' Luna ignored the puzzled look on Hermione's face and followed as the witch beckoned her back to the room she had just come from.

'She's in here,' she said quietly. 'She's changed quite a bit from the last time you saw her, I imagine. Don't be too shocked. Just remember she's better than she was.'

'Luna, I'm not sure you understand. I'm not here to help; really, I just wanted to see Minerva. I've been away, I didn't know...' Hermione said quickly.

Luna stared back at her impassively for a moment. 'He really could use your help, Hermione. It's been over a year. What with helping Minerva and running the school, he's doing too much,' she said gently.

'Running the school?' Hermione said, shocked.

'Well, yes. Someone had to look after the place for Minerva. He wouldn't trust anyone else,' she said.

Hermione was thrown. Not only had Severus left Spinner's End to help find a cure for Minerva, he was also back at Hogwarts. After all that time spent in New Mills, avoiding the wizarding world and holing himself up like a hermit, he was back in the public eye in a way she would never have anticipated. She wondered what it all meant.

'I'll think about it,' she murmured.

Luna nodded then ushered Hermione into the room, closing the door behind her.

Walking back to the nurses' station, she paused and looked down the long corridor, then raised her hand in a small wave.

Thirty-One

Chapter 32 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Severus rolled his eyes and walked almost silently to where Staff Nurse Weasley was waiting. He should have known she would see him there, despite the shadows in which he was hiding. He had learned over the past year that she was quite the extraordinary witch, with her observations and strange insights. It was undoubtedly part of her magic, but he had never encountered anyone quite like her before.

Sheepishly, he approached her, and she smiled wryly at him before casting a Silencing Charm at Minerva's room.

'Avoiding someone?' she said.

'I tolerate plenty, Nurse Weasley. Do not try to be flippant with me,' he said quietly, but there was no malice in his voice. He did feel ridiculous at being caught out, but it wasn't Luna's fault.

Luna laughed at him. 'Oh, Severus,' she said warmly.

He tore his gaze from hers. He sometimes felt she could see his very soul with her wide blue eyes, and it was comforting and uncomfortable at the same time.

'I brought Minerva's potions,' he said, placing the phials on the counter.

'Good,' Luna replied. 'Are you going in to see her?'

She avoided looking at him as she walked behind the counter and lifted the potions for storage.

Severus stared at the back of her head, his gaze steely. 'You know very well I have no wish to see... Hermione,' he spat out. He realised he didn't even know if she was still a Granger, and the thought that she was Mrs someone or other made him feel slightly ill.

Luna turned to look at him innocently. 'I was referring to Minerva, Severus,' she said gently, a sad gleam in her eye.

Luna knew exactly how devastated Severus had felt when Hermione had left, even though they had never discussed it. His heart had been broken, his grief all-consuming, and it troubled him, even now. Hermione was just the same, torn and unhealed. They needed each other, of that she was sure, but how they would get to that conclusion themselves remained to be seen. She wasn't one for interfering; she had enough of that from Molly, so she knew how annoying it could be. Still, it pained her to see her friends so unhappy. And there was the other thing, too. Something Severus was obviously unaware of.

'My apologies, Luna,' Severus said, leaning in a dejected slump on the counter. 'I just feel slightly...'

'...Uncertain. I know. But I don't think she would hex you, Severus, if you just went in to say hello.'

Severus shook his head and stood upright, his face blank suddenly. Luna sighed. She knew that look. He felt he had said too much, so he was back behind his walls, keeping her at bay again.

'You could do me a small favour, Nurse Weasley,' he said.

'Of course, Professor,' Luna replied. Her voice was professional, the boundary having been clearly drawn by him.

'I need to leave a note, if you would be so kind to pass it on to... Minerva's visitor,' he said.

Luna stared at him. Idiot man, she thought. 'Of course,' she said instead, handing him a scrap of parchment and a quill.

Severus took them with a flourish and quickly scribed a few short lines, then handed the parchment back to Luna.

'My thanks. I shall return later,' he said stiffly, looking anywhere but at Luna's knowing face. Damn the witch and her bloody insights. He didn't need her manipulating.

He turned on his heel, and Luna watched him as his pace increased and he all but ran out of the ward. If it weren't all so sad, it would be funny.

Hermione was sitting in a chair beside Minerva's bed, flicking through her notes but giving them only a quick perusal. It distracted her from looking at her old friend lying beside her, but only briefly. Hermione's eyes were constantly drawn to Minerva's pale face, her cheeks slightly sunken, and dark shadows around her eyes. The most shocking thing, however, was her hair. It had gone from being thick and lustrous and the colour of the leaves on a beech tree in autumn, to thin and completely white. No longer contained in its usual bun, it lay limply around her shoulders, and it was this that gave Hermione the greatest indication that her friend was seriously ill indeed.

She lifted Minerva's frail hand and rubbed her thumb over the papery skin. It was cool to the touch, her thick veins protruding from beneath the almost translucent layer. She would have no strength to hold a wand, no magic to transform into her Animagus form and no energy to bend her will to transfigure rat to goblet. Hermione let two large tears fall and felt overwhelmingly sad.

She had hoped Minerva could have been like a grandmother for Donovan. She knew that if she had met him, she would have fallen in love with him, and that Donovan would have learned much from Minerva and loved her in return. Who else would fill that role now?

With a sigh, Hermione lifted the papers and left the room without a backward glance.

Hermione was preoccupied with her thoughts and didn't see Luna until she took the sheaf of paper from her.

'How is your baby?' Luna said out of the blue.

Hermione was genuinely shocked and covered her mouth with her hand.

'How on earth...?' she stuttered.

Luna laughed softly and put a calming hand on Hermione's arm. 'Relax, Hermione. I won't tell anyone.'

'I know, Luna, you would never do that. But how did you know?' Hermione was amazed.

'One of the reasons I became a nurse is that I can sense the state of someone's health. How they are physically and mentally and what they've been through. I don't know why I can, really. But I can. I haven't told many people, only George, and now you.'

Luna tipped her head to the side a little, and Hermione was instantly reminded of Loony Luna from Hogwarts. The woman she had become was very different, but every now and then, a flash of the innocent girl would resurface.

'So you can tell I've had a baby? That's incredible,' Hermione sighed.

'Yes. There are changes in women who have had children. What did you call him?' Luna smiled gently.

Hermione laughed. Not only did she know she'd had a child, but also that the child was a boy.

'Donovan,' Hermione said happily.

'Will you tell Severus?' Luna asked pointedly.

Hermione closed her eyes. 'Don't tell me, you can see that, too?'

Luna laughed. 'No. But I can tell how long ago a woman gave birth. It didn't take a genius to work it out.'

'I wrote to him when I first discovered I was pregnant. He didn't respond.'

'Ah,' Luna said in understanding. 'He was here, actually.'

'He was? When?' Hermione looked around, half expecting him to step out from somewhere.

'When you were visiting Minerva. He left you a note.'

Hermione took the folded parchment with a shaky hand and slipped it into her jeans pocket. She didn't think she could cope with reading it just yet. After over a year away, she felt suddenly bombarded by everything. She wanted nothing more than to go home and cuddle her baby.

'I'll visit again, Luna. I'd better get back, I left Harry looking after Donovan,' she said with a small giggle.

'He's missed you, you know,' Luna said.

'He's been okay. He has Ginny,' Hermione said, smiling.

'I meant Severus,' Luna said softly. The two witches stared at each other for a heartbeat, until Hermione couldn't stand Luna's gaze a moment longer.

'I really need to go,' she said hurriedly, and then turned, walking quickly from the ward, her hand unconsciously holding onto the note in her pocket.

Thirty-Two

Chapter 33 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione was sitting up in bed, tucked cosily beneath her bedclothes. A small lamp beside the bed gave the room some light. Across the small landing, Donovan was asleep in his cot, with an alert charm cast around it should he wake and need his mum in the night. It would have seemed to a casual observer that all was right with this contended family scene, but that wasn't the case.

Hermione couldn't sleep, for one thing. She held Severus's note, still unread, in her hand, turning it over and over. Her whole evening had given her food for thought, not least of all Luna's insistence that she should help research a cure for Minerva. How could she not, after seeing her friend so sick? She wished she could just wave her wand and make her better. But it would be even harder than that. It would mean talking to Severus.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't faze her. They had been friends before, and although she wouldn't deny she still had feelings for him, they could be friends again, she hoped. But it was different now, because she had Donovan. She would do nothing that would adversely affect her son, but she wouldn't deny him his father, either. How she was going to fix it, she had no idea.

Her eyes fell on the note. The parchment was just a scrap, so he hadn't written her a lengthy letter. It was probably something meaningless, but still she was finding it difficult just opening it, the thought of seeing his handwriting again making her feel like a lovesick puppy.

'Stop being so silly,' she muttered under her breath. With a slight pause, she opened the parchment, feeling her eyes prick with sudden tears as she stared down at his spiky scrawl.

'As the former tenant of Hilltop Cottage, I visited regularly to tend the garden and harvest some of the medicinal plants.

I would be grateful if we could reach an amicable arrangement that will allow me continued access to the garden. The plants have been conducive to the improvement in the health of our mutual friend.

Please reply at your earliest convenience. I am sure Staff Nurse Weasley can convey your message to me in a similar manner.

S. Snape'

Hermione stared at the note and absently traced her fingers across it. For some reason, knowing he had been the tenant didn't surprise her as much as it should have done. It accounted for the fact that he was rarely here, and that the rooms had been just as she had left them. It was comforting to know that no stranger had slept in the house.

Hermione glanced at the clock. It was almost two in the morning, and sleep was nowhere near coming. With a resigned sigh, she threw the bedclothes from her and padded quietly to the kitchen, grabbing a glass of cold milk and sitting herself at the kitchen table. She was pondering how to respond to Severus's note and realised that if she didn't do it now, it would bug her all night and she would be exhausted tomorrow.

Taking a sheet of plain writing paper and a Muggle ballpoint pen, she wrote quickly.

'Dear Severus,

Of course you can still use the garden. It's yours.

Luna suggested I might be of use in your continued research for a cure for Minerva. I am offering my services.

We may no longer be friends, but I think we could work together amicably, for Minerva's sake.

Hermione.'

Re-reading the note, she was pleased with the result. Any anger she had felt after the split had long been forgotten, replaced only with sadness and regret. The only positive thing that had come out of it was Donovan, who was now crying. She laid the letter aside and walked quickly up the stairs.

Donovan was standing up in his cot, his face screwed up as he cried.

'Shush, sweetie,' Hermione said gently, lifting him carefully and hugging him to her. Normally, she wouldn't have brought him into her bed, but tonight, Donovan wasn't the only one who needed a bit of comfort.

'Come on, Mummy's got you,' she said softly, holding him as she pulled the covers over them both.

Donovan stopped crying and opened his eyes, smiling at her.

'Mama,' he said.

'What did you say?' Hermione grinned at him. It was his first real word. 'Say it again, Donovan,' she encouraged him.

'Dada,' he said, smiling and holding her hair. Hermione felt a pang and wondered just how Severus would feel about Donovan, and if he had thought of him at all. They would probably need to have that conversation before they got any work done, she thought ruefully.

When she looked back at her son, he had fallen asleep. Gently, she took him back to his cot and added a warming charm to the room before returning to her own bed.

Severus rarely received Owl post, which is why he didn't bother to protect his breakfast when the morning mail arrived. He regretted it when a letter dropped and pierced the yolk of his egg, causing it to split and run onto his plate like an oozing yellow river.

He lifted the envelope and cleaned it with his wand, tucking it into the inner pocket of his robes without paying much attention to it. He was more concerned with what was happening at the Slytherin table and cast his eyes along to Professor Slughorn, current Potions master and Head of Slytherin House. Severus tutted audibly, and Filius nudged a distracted Horace with his elbow sharply. Slughorn glanced at Severus, who looked meaningfully in the direction of the Slytherin students. Nodding, Horace stood with a sigh and wandered over to dispense what passed as discipline these days. Severus didn't bother to watch, but stood to return to his lab. He had ingredients to

prepare.

Severus had turned out to be a fair Headmaster this time around, and for the most part, he let everyone get on with his or her jobs without interference. His priority was Minerva's health and getting her back to work as quickly as he could. His first port of call on this morning was Minerva's office, laughingly referred to by some as his office. He didn't see himself as Headmaster. He was merely guarding the post for Minerva. He didn't go in there very often, only for the odd meeting with Kingsley or one of the other professors, but he had left his gardening book in there the last time.

Entering the office quietly, he tried to slip in un-noticed, but to no avail.

'Severus, my dear boy. To what do we owe the pleasure?' Dumbledore twinkled annoyingly from his portrait, and Severus stiffened but ignored him. Walking purposefully to the desk, he lifted the book and went to walk away, but was halted yet again.

'How is Miss Granger? We hear she has finally returned.' Dumbledore was eyeing Severus closely, but he remained blank.

'She has returned, yes. I believe she is in good health,' he said stiffly.

'Well, be sure to give her my regards when you see her, won't you?' Dumbledore smiled, and if Severus had looked in his direction he would have seen a smirk on his face.

Instead, he marched away without acknowledging the comment, until he was on the moving staircase and finally gave vent to the string of expletives he had tried so hard to keep at bay.

He was still cursing under his breath when he reached his lab. He slammed the book down onto the workbench forcefully and gripped it with his fingers whitening as he let out a long breath. Meddling, that's what everyone was doing, and the gods forgive him, he'd had quite enough of it. The sly comments, the knowing looks, the hints, were all forcing his hand. He would see the witch when he was bloody good and ready to deal with it, and not before.

He turned to his storage shelf, pulling down a selection of jars and frowning. His stock was lower than he anticipated, and with a sense of dread, he realised he would need to go to Hilltop Cottage before the week was out. He wondered if the witch had read his note, then suddenly remembered the letter from breakfast and fumbled hastily in his pocket for it.

The sight of his name in her handwriting didn't have the same impact as it might have done if he hadn't been so keen to read her response. What did shake him was her insistence that the garden was his, and he was suddenly assaulted with a memory of three identical yet barren patches of earth and her enthusiastic face when she first showed them to him.

He read the rest of the letter and let out a slow whistle. It certainly hadn't been easy researching Minerva's illness by himself. Often he had wanted to bounce an idea off someone else, but the Healers at St Mungo's, while not being hopeless necessarily, did not have the ability to think outside of their field of knowledge, and Staff Nurse Weasley was only as bright as her intuition. Research was not her forte.

But the witch? She devoured knowledge, soaked up details and information like a sponge. She would be the ideal partner...

His mind found its way to other aspects of his relationship with her, and he started to pace.

She had a 'family', according to the estate agent, which meant another already had her. She was no longer available, no longer free, and no longer his. She hadn't been his for over a year, or perhaps longer. Wasn't that why she had left in the first place, run away to America with her secret lover, the one she had denied, and lied about to his face? Severus growled in frustration.

There was no way of getting around the fact that he was buggered either way. He couldn't avoid contact with her, because he desperately needed access to the garden. He also badly needed her help in finding a cure for Minerva if he ever wanted to be free of the hell he currently resided in. Yet there she would be, playing happy families, sharing what had been their home with another. He didn't know if he could face it, but he had no choice.

As he scanned his jars of ingredients and double-checked the amounts he would need for the potion, he ran his fingers through his hair.

'Damn it,' he hissed.

Taking up a quill and a sheet of parchment, he started to write.

Thirty-Three

Chapter 34 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: The chapter you've been waiting for, I think...

Hermione was nervous; she couldn't deny it. Severus's letter had taken her by surprise, not least because it had come directly by Owl. He had obviously decided to forego the usual mail route in his haste to get to the garden, and Hermione could only hope that no-one had seen the large tawny pecking away at her kitchen window.

He had been polite but to the point, and she had responded in kind. Yes, she was home, yes it was convenient and yes, he could come as soon as he was able.

But with no specified time, it left her few options where Donovan was concerned. The last thing she wanted was the child to meet his father for the first time in this way, with awkwardness or an atmosphere. She knew children were sensitive to that sort of thing. She thought of Harry, but he was working, as she would be herself before long. Ideally she would need a live-in nanny for the boy, someone magical who could work within Hermione's rules. Advertising in the *Prophet* seemed the best idea, much as it stuck in her throat. The only real option right now would be to put him in the play space and hope that Severus couldn't spot the edges of her 'Notice-Me-Not' spell. With some luck, he would go directly to gather his plants, anyway. She didn't like the fact she was hiding his son, but she had no intention of them meeting until Severus brought it up and showed he was favourable.

Tidying up some of Donovan's toys with her wand, she lifted him and put him by his toy box but didn't raise the safety wards just yet. She didn't want him to think he was a prisoner in his own home. Once he was settled, playing with his stacking cups and clapping as he pushed them over, she went to the kitchen and filled the kettle, almost dropping it when she heard a sharp rap on the front door. She didn't need to guess who it was, or what sort of mood he was in. The knock explained it all.

Severus stood tensely outside Hilltop Cottage and waited. He could hear her moving around and the low murmur of her voice. He gritted his teeth at the thought she might be discussing him with her husband, perhaps placating him, and impatiently, he rapped again.

The door opened abruptly, and Hermione stared out at him with large, angry eyes. Her mouth twisted into a grimace.

'Hello, Severus,' she said. 'I did hear you the first time.'

Gods, she was still beautiful. Her hair was lighter than he remembered it, probably due to the sunshine in America, and he had been right, she had filled out in all of the right places. He was suddenly full of regrets, wishing he could turn back the clock, stop her leaving him. His body reacted to her closeness, and he felt a twitch beneath his trousers.

She was glaring at him.

'Miss... ah, what do you call yourself now?' he asked, his smooth voice betraying his fluttering stomach.

Hermione scowled. 'It's still Hermione Granger, Severus, or Dr Granger, if you wish to be formal.'

'Miss Granger, then,' he said quickly, trying to hide the relief in his voice. Whomever she was shackled-up with hadn't had the sense to marry her yet.

'I wanted to thank you, for allowing me to continue to use the garden.'

Hermione looked up at him a little nonplussed, nodding slowly. 'You're more than welcome, Professor,' she said.

Severus winced. He deserved that, and he knew it. She had all but told him to call her Hermione, but he couldn't. Not to her face, anyway. It was too personal, too reminiscent of before. *Too soon*, his inner voice whispered, but he ignored it.

'Would you like tea?' Hermione said, inhaling deeply in an obvious attempt to stay calm.

'That would be acceptable,' he agreed.

Awkwardly, Hermione stood to one side, allowing him to walk through into the living area. He gasped as he stared around the room. It was virtually unrecognisable to the room where they had first kissed, larger and easier to negotiate. He scanned the walls, now decorated with bright blue, striped wallpaper, and then the open-plan layout leading into the expanded kitchen.

'Different,' he said softly, voicing his thoughts.

'I fancied a change,' Hermione said quietly. He turned, not realising she had already made the tea and was handing him a mug. He took it, and their eyes met uncomfortably for a brief moment. How many times had they shared tea in this way? And yet, now something so innocuous seemed loaded with meaning, and they were both aware of it.

Hermione smirked slightly. 'Here we are again,' she said.

Severus acknowledged her need to lighten the mood, and he smiled briefly at her.

'Indeed,' he said. 'May I?' He indicated the couch on the far wall and Hermione nodded. As he sat, she followed suit, and they were silent for a short moment.

'Are you well, Professor? Luna said you have been very busy,' Hermione began.

'Severus,' he said. 'I hope my post as Professor will only be temporary, so I'd prefer not to get used to the title.'

'Of course.' Hermione understood. He was only keeping Minerva's seat warm, after all.

'In answer to your question, I am very busy. I was hoping we could discuss your offer. If it still stands, that is.' Severus sipped his tea. He watched the emotions playing on her face through the rising steam and wanted to shorten the distance between them suddenly. Instead, he sat straight, awaiting her response.

'Of course. Poor Minerva. I read through the hospital notes briefly, but apart from her physical improvements thanks to your potion, there's been no change at all, has there?' she said.

'None,' Severus said, shaking his head. 'Luna is of the opinion it is an immune disorder, but the Healers know little about such things. They rarely affect the wizarding world, you see.'

Hermione nodded. 'A bit like HIV, or AIDS, is it? How on earth could she have contracted that?'

'As I said, we don't know enough about those illnesses to make a proper diagnosis.'

'Perhaps we should arrange a time to go over what you have so far?' Hermione looked at Severus slowly.

Severus nodded. 'Owl me when it would be convenient. I understand you have... family, to consider,' he said blankly.

Hermione bristled. 'I have family?' she snapped.

'According to Sam Parker you do,' Severus said, frowning. He hadn't expected that reaction to his words, and up until that point it had been going quite well, considering.

Hermione stood quickly and wrenched his half-empty mug from his hand. 'You had better gather your ingredients, Professor, before it starts to rain.'

Severus recognised her dismissal, but felt completely confused. Standing, he walked to the back door, followed by a shaking Hermione.

'Hermione,' he said, pausing. 'I apologise if I spoke out of turn. Your family is none of my business, of course,' he said quietly.

Hermione stumbled at his words, and her hands jerked forwards. The mugs fell, smashing loudly on the floor. Her concentration lost, Severus stared at her, and then behind her, as a shimmer of magic appeared by the side of the room.

As if in slow motion, Hermione said 'Oh, my God,' and turned, following Severus's gaze. They both stared as her safety wards dropped, revealing the play space, and a now screaming child.

Hermione's mothering instinct snapped into action almost instantly, and she walked over and gathered Donovan in her arms, cradling him and murmuring softly.

Severus could only stare. She had a child! That was what Sam Parker meant when he said family. She kept her back to him as she soothed the baby, and instantly everything fell into place. She hadn't wanted him to know of her child, which was clear. Too many questions, and answers she wasn't willing to give, most likely. Jealousy seared through him at the thought of her bearing a child with another man, and he suddenly felt closed in by the scene before him.

Without a word, he turned and walked out into the garden, closing the door firmly behind him and taking a huge gulp of air. His stomach lurched, and he turned and vomited into the ditch beside the house. Trembling, he walked to the garden plots, gathered all he needed and Apparated away so quickly that he didn't see the crying witch running towards him, calling him to come back.

Thirty-Four

Chapter 35 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: I apologise for the angst. I promise a happy ending. That's all!

Hermione's hands trembled as she held on to the wine glass, and she cried as Ginny rubbed her back gently. Harry was pacing the living room with Donovan, trying to stop him grizzling. It was emotional chaos, and he looked at Ginny desperately.

'Here, I'll swap you,' she said, almost laughing at the relief on Harry's face as he handed over the snuffling child.

Ginny held Donovan on her hip and started to dance with him, singing a Celestina Warbeck song terribly out of tune. Donovan watched her for a moment and started to giggle, much to Harry's amusement. His wife would be a natural when their child was born, although she didn't even look very pregnant yet.

'How you doing?' he said, gently rubbing Hermione's shoulder.

'Oh, I don't know. I just hoped it would be different, you know. That Severus would love Donovan, and enjoy being a father, and that maybe... maybe...' She started to weep again and pushed the heel of her hand into her eyes to stop the tears. 'I am so stupid.'

'It's not stupid to want the father of your child back, Hermione. Even if it is Snape,' Harry soothed.

'Well, he's made it perfectly clear he doesn't want us, hasn't he?' she sobbed. 'I was going to help him with finding a cure for Minerva, but I don't think I could stand to be in the same room with him now,' she said quietly.

'I think Donovan might be hungry, Hermione,' Ginny said.

'His dinner is in the fridge, I made it earlier when he was sleeping. It just needs a warming charm,' she said.

Ginny left the room with Donovan, and Harry turned to Hermione and took her hand in his.

'Listen, I can't imagine how you're feeling, and you know there's no love lost between Snape and me,' he started.

'Don't you dare tell me 'I told you so,' Harry Potter, or I swear I will hex you into next week,' Hermione threatened him.

'I wouldn't, I promise,' he said gently. 'I was just thinking, though. You could come back to work, take your mind off things, and do your own research into Minerva's illness.'

Hermione nodded and rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. 'Do you think so?'

'Yes, I really do. There will be people around you; you can get your head back into your books. I know you were coming back next month anyway, but there's nothing to stop you coming back earlier,' he said firmly.

'I'll think about it, Harry. Thank you,' she said gratefully. 'Before I do that, I'm going to need a nanny for Donovan.'

Hermione stared into the kitchen, where Ginny was helping Donovan with his mashed potatoes and seemed to be wearing more than Donovan was eating. She laughed suddenly and started to feel a bit brighter. She had good friends, and a wonderful son. What did she need Severus for, anyway?

Severus had been too busy before to wallow in self-pity, but now part of him wished he were still in his dungeons, because the gloom would suit his mood very well indeed.

It was coming close to midnight, a week after he had left Hilltop Cottage, and he had hardly slept a wink since then. His feelings for Hermione, and for her new life that didn't include him, were all consuming. He missed her more than he had when she was away. Now that she was closer, he was acutely reminded of what he had missed out on by behaving like a thug and pushing her from him. He ached with need for her, but he had already lost her, that much was clear. She had moved on, with a new man and a baby for good measure.

He took another slug of Firewhisky, safe in the knowledge that it would numb the pain, but that he still wouldn't sleep, because every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was her face.

The hammering on his door did nothing to brighten his mood, and with a growl, he lurched from his chair and wrenched it open.

'What the fuck... What are you doing here?' he hissed.

The last person he wanted to see right now was the Boy Wonder, no doubt coming to fight the witch's battles for her, and yet here he was, looking much the same as always.

'We need to talk,' Harry said firmly, walking inside Severus's quarters uninvited and with air of a man on a mission. He was holding tightly to his wand, tucked beneath his sleeve, and Severus smirked. Perhaps he wasn't quite so confident, after all.

Severus walked back to his chair and lifted his drink, completely ignoring Harry as he took a sip.

Harry walked over to the fire and stared into it, as if gathering his thoughts.

'You devastated her, you know,' he said quietly.

Severus snorted. 'I have no idea what you're babbling about,' he grumbled, taking another slug.

'Yes you do. I'm talking about Hermione... and Donovan.'

Harry turned and looked at Severus, his eyes beseeching but determined. Severus looked away, unable to bear it.

'Donovan? What sort of bloody name is that?' he sneered.

'It means dark little prince, apparently,' Harry said, raising his eyebrow.

'How touching. Why are you here, Potter?' Severus said coldly.

'You are incredible, do you know that? How can you not care about this? For some reason, Hermione still cares about you. I can't get my head around that either,' he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Severus stared up at him, his brow creasing. 'It's none of my business any more. She's moved on, obviously. I'm sure they're all very happy together,' he muttered, 'and she has no need for me in her life.'

'Now you're the one who's babbling. What are you talking about, Professor?' Harry looked confused.

Severus stood up, albeit a little shakily. 'Look, Potter. I am not here to play guessing games, and I'm not going to crawl back and watch her play happy families with some other man and his spawn,' he hissed. 'Not even for Minerva's sake.'

Harry stared for a moment and then started to laugh slightly hysterically. 'Oh, please don't tell me that you don't actually know?' he sputtered.

He ran his hand through his already spiky hair and started to pace, muttering under his breath. Severus stared at him, wondering what the fuck was going on and still not understanding why he had barged into his rooms at such a late hour.

Harry walked back to him, having obviously come to a decision. 'Professor, I think you should sit down,' he said quietly, a slight tremor in his voice.

'Don't tell me what to do in my own home, Potter,' Severus snapped at him, standing even straighter in defiance.

'Very well,' Harry said, his hands held out, placating. 'Just promise me you'll hear me out, okay?'

Severus stared down at him, his face emotionless. 'Get on with it, Potter,' he said.

'Okay,' Harry said. 'Firstly, Hermione is single. She isn't playing 'happy families' with anyone. Well, except for Donovan,' he said softly.

Severus stood stock still, trying hard not to betray any emotion. He failed miserably, and Harry saw the intake of breath and the spark of hope in his eyes, before the mask was back on.

'The other thing is, she wrote to you from America, and I'm guessing that you didn't get that letter, am I right?' Harry asked.

Severus slumped where he stood. She had written to him? Why? To say what? He shook his head.

'No. I received no letter,' he said.

Harry nodded in understanding. 'What a mess,' he whispered.

Severus's mind was working overtime, and he sat slowly. The witch had written to him, yes. But she had no idea he was back at Hogwarts and wouldn't have thought to send a letter there. He hissed and closed his eyes as the penny dropped. He had been so preoccupied with Minerva and the school, it had been over a year since he had stepped foot in Spinner's End. He hadn't been back to check his mail in all of that time.

He stood quickly, his stomach churning with desperation. 'You know what the letter says, Potter?' It was a rhetorical question. Of course he knew.

Harry nodded sadly. 'It's not my place to say, sir. I'm so sorry,' he said.

'No matter,' Severus sighed. 'I believe it was sent to my home, not Hogwarts. That is why it never reached me. I must go there.'

Harry's eyes brightened. 'Want some company?' he asked hopefully.

Severus stared at him. He didn't despise him as he had before, but he was in no hurry to become bosom buddies with him, at the same time. However... He had brought him news. Hopeful news, that the witch was single, and that she had written to him. And the brat had Hermione's trust. He could well prove to be useful.

'Very well. Come. But touch nothing,' he added as an afterthought. He had already turned to the Floo and didn't see Harry roll his eyes.

'No, sir,' he said ruefully. The man had the ability to make him feel like a first year, even now.

Grabbing a handful of Floo powder, Harry followed Snape to Spinner's End.

Thirty-Five

Chapter 36 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Harry turned his nose up at the smell of dampness that permeated the house. As Snape turned on the lights, it was clear he really hadn't been here for months, by the layer of dust and the chill in the place. He watched with concern as the professor walked straight to his front door and lifted the pile of post that had accumulated. He was obviously more shaken than he had let on, but even his general appearance told Harry volumes about his depth of feeling for Hermione, and it had taken him totally by

surprise. Even during the worst of days during the war, Snape was never dishevelled and unshaven as he was now, and Harry felt some sympathy for him.

'Here, you might as well make yourself useful,' Snape said, thrusting a pile of letters into his hands. He turned and sat on the couch, discarding any letters that didn't bear Hermione's writing swiftly.

Harry followed suit, shocked at how much post could gather in the course of a year.

'Professor, some of this post is over a year old. Some of them are bills... what will I do with them?' he asked.

Snape turned his haggard face to him. 'Ignore them,' he said quietly.

Harry reeled slightly at the pain in Snape's eyes and shivered slightly. Lifting his wand, he lit a fire in the grate and got back to the task in hand. He had sifted through almost the whole pile when a familiar looped 'S' caught his eye. He lifted the lavender coloured envelope and took a sharp intake of breath.

'I have it,' he said. Snape stopped searching and stared at him, then at the envelope.

'You wouldn't have told me about this if it weren't important, would you Potter?' Snape curled his lip slightly.

'Do you really think I want to be sitting in your house at one in the morning for no good reason?' he asked, smirking slightly.

'Why *did* you want to come?' Snape's eyes narrowed.

'Someone has to stop you from doing something stupid when you read this. Let's get it over with,' he said, pushing the letter in Snape's hand.

Severus could feel himself shaking slightly as he slid his finger beneath the envelope. The writing paper rustled slightly as he withdrew it, and he paused before opening in, looking at Potter, who nodded his encouragement. His hands started to tremble as he read the note, taking each line of new information slowly. He started to read the letter again, not quite believing what he was reading, and his eyes blurred with tears he couldn't stop. Half-read lines seared through to his heart, until he closed his eyes, unable to keep reading any longer. But still, the words were imprinted behind his eyelids.

'... You are going to be a father, Severus.

...allow your son to know you as he grows up.

I think of you often, Severus.

Hermione'

'Oh, gods, Hermione,' he whispered.

Harry stared as the professor crumpled before him with tears coursing down his cheeks, and his illusions of the man disappeared, to be replaced with a new and totally unexpected reality. Hermione had been right about him all along. Slowly, he leant forward and patted Severus on the arm.

'Don't worry, sir. It will all work itself out,' he said quietly. 'In the meantime, I need some coffee, and so do you. You can't meet your son for the first time looking like some sort of tramp.'

Harry ambled off to the kitchen and didn't notice Severus as he scowled after him.

An hour later, after three cups of strong black coffee, Harry stifled a yawn and gestured to Severus.

'Ready to go, or are you staying here?' he said.

Severus sighed and rubbed at his eyes. For the first time in a week he felt exhausted enough to sleep, and Severus nodded, pushing his tall frame off the sofa.

'Have you decided what to do?' Harry asked gently. They had been little conversation between them as they drank their coffee, and Harry could do nothing but watch as Severus read and re-read Hermione's letter, his face ranging from despair and hope, and then back to despair again.

'I have no idea, Potter. Truly, I thought she had left me for another and that the child...' he paused, 'that the boy...'

'Your son, sir,' Harry prompted.

'Indeed. I thought he was the result of a new liaison. I would never have guessed...' he said.

'Wait until you meet him. There's no denying he's yours, believe me,' Harry said, laughing lightly.

Severus snorted. 'If she'll ever let me see him, after all that has gone on. I could never understand why she tolerated me then; I have no reason to think it will be any easier now.'

Harry nodded. 'She can be stubborn, all right. She thinks you knew, that you weren't interested in having the baby, or anything to do with him. It broke her heart,' he sighed.

Severus ran his hands over his face. 'I have never considered myself being a father,' he said. 'We talked about it, a long time ago, before... It was always a pipe dream.'

'It's not a dream now, and although she won't admit it, sir, she really needs you, even if it's just for Donovan.' Harry smiled at him.

'Perhaps,' Severus said. 'You won't mention this to Hermione, will you, Potter?'

'Don't leave it too long, will you? I just want her to be happy, and the sooner, the better,' he said.

The two men eyed each other, and some level of understanding passed unspoken between them before they went through the Floo, each to their own destinations.

Hermione quite enjoyed washing dishes the Muggle way. Her hands sank into the sudsy water, and she lifted the brush and scrubbed the remains of her Crispy Chilli Chicken off her plate brusquely.

She had spent some of her day interviewing potential nannies for Donovan and had the list down to two candidates. One was the niece of Marcus Flint, and the other was a young French student from Beauxbatons. Both of the girls were young and on a year's study break, and Hermione had liked them both. It was a hard decision, one she thought she might discuss with Ginny.

Hermione dried her hands on a tea towel and glanced at Donovan. She had sensed his magic growing over the past couple of months and was just waiting for the first

manifestation of it. Presently, he was lying on his belly on the rug, pushing a wooden train back and forth, his dark head moving in time with the train and an 'Shhhh' sound coming from his pursed lips. Hermione grinned. He was copying her from earlier, when she had got down on her haunches and played with him for a while.

There was a gentle knock at the door, and Donovan raised his head and stared.

'Mama, Dada?' he gurgled, a distinct question in his voice.

Hermione chuckled. 'No, I don't know who it is, either, sweetie. Let's look, shall we?'

She scooped the boy up, giving him a noisy kiss on the cheek that made him giggle and squirm away, screwing up his face and showing the two small stubs that passed for his first teeth. Jiggling Donovan on her hip and smiling at him, Hermione opened the door and stared wide-eyed at Severus, standing ashen-faced on the step. He looked dreadful, pale and like he hadn't eaten for a few days. In his hand he was clutching an opened lavender envelope, which she instantly recognised.

'Severus?' she enquired. 'What is it?'

Severus was staring at Donovan, his eyes roaming his features and drinking them in. Tears filled his eyes and he smiled gently as Donovan held out a chubby hand and aimed straight for his nose.

He shifted his gaze to Hermione, and he began to stammer, holding up the envelope for emphasis.

'I didn't know, Hermione... I was living at Hogwarts, didn't collect my post... only opened this yesterday,' he gasped, his words tumbling over each other. 'God, forgive me, but I didn't know.'

Understanding washed over Hermione in a rush, and she felt her legs trembling as she squeezed Donovan tightly.

'Oh... Oh, Severus...' she whispered, and fat tears started to fall down her face.

Severus stepped up to her and wrapped his arm around them both, and slowly, they walked into Hilltop Cottage and closed the door.

Thirty-Six

Chapter 37 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

The sight of his mother crying against the shoulder of the man wearing black was obviously upsetting Donovan Granger quite a bit, because right now, his lower lip was shaking tremulously and his eyes were full of tears.

'Mama...' he wailed, his hands patting her face to get her attention. After a short moment, it worked.

Hermione pulled reluctantly away from Severus's one-armed hug, wiping her eyes and smiling up at him ruefully.

'It's okay, sweetie, don't cry. Mummy's fine,' she said soothingly, rocking him from side to side. 'Severus, would you mind?' She handed Donovan to Severus, who stared at her as if she was mad but took the child clumsily from her and held him at arms length.

'Hermione, I have no idea what to do with him,' he said in a panic.

'Just sit with him for a minute. He's probably thirsty, I'll just get him some water,' she said. Turning, she walked to the kitchen and filled a child's drinking cup with tap water and then brought it back into the room. She looked at Severus and Donovan and then laughed out loud.

Severus had sat on the sofa and placed Donovan beside him in the same seated pose. Donovan was staring up at him warily, not quite knowing what to make of him at all.

'That wasn't what I meant,' Hermione laughed. Lifting Donovan, she placed him firmly onto Severus's lap, took Severus's hands and showed him how to hold him and handed Donovan his water, which he took eagerly.

Severus looked down at the black hair of his son and smirked slightly.

'It would be impossible to hide his paternity,' he said softly, raising his eyes to Hermione.

Hermione smiled and nodded. 'He is definitely his father's son. He even sleeps like you,' she said.

There was silence for a moment, the implication in Hermione's words lying heavily between them. Donovan began to wriggle, and Severus gladly let Hermione lift him. She sat him on her knee, facing him.

'Introductions are needed, I think,' she said lightly.

Severus sighed, glad that she had broken the silence. There was so much he wanted to say, but he didn't know how or where to start. He twisted to face them in his seat, eyeing Donovan calmly and exploring his son's face properly for the first time. He could see they shared their colouring, and his eyes were almost identical in shape and colour already, but he had Hermione's full lips. It was hard to say whose nose he would inherit, but Severus was hopeful that would be Hermione's too.

'Severus,' Hermione said playfully, smiling at Donovan as she held out his hand. 'This is Donovan Severus Granger. Your son.'

Severus swallowed and took Donovan's small hand in his, stroking his chubby fingers gently and staring at them in wonder.

'Donovan, this is Daddy,' Hermione whispered into his ear.

'Mama, Dada. Dada... Dada.' Donovan grabbed hold of Severus's finger and tried to pull it to his mouth to suck on. Severus resisted, and Donovan started to giggle loudly as a tug-of-war took place between them. The joy on his face was infectious, and soon, Severus started to laugh too. Gently, he lifted Donovan to him and held him close, inhaling the scent of his soft skin. He planted a small kiss on his cheek.

'Nice to meet you, son,' he said.

Hermione smiled widely as Donovan snuggled into Severus's chest and started to play with the copious buttons on his jacket.

'You will stay for something to eat, won't you? You look like you could use a good meal,' she asked, resting her hand lightly on his arm.

Severus looked up at her, his eyes warm. 'That would be welcome. Thank you,' he said.

Hermione went to great lengths to emphasise that dinner was not a romantic meal for two, as it might once have been. She made him peel the potatoes for one thing and persuaded him to assist with getting Donovan ready for bed, even though they had yet to decide how his role as a father would look. He stayed with the boy until he fell asleep and then came back down the stairs with a sense of wary anticipation as to what might come next.

They sat at Hermione's new dining table, and he devoured the chicken and mashed potatoes as if it were his final meal. She smiled at him in satisfaction. She knew he hadn't been looking after himself. Hermione purposefully didn't offer wine. She didn't trust herself to be respectable after more than a glass, particularly because as she watched him, her mind drew fantasies of happy family life, Donovan sleeping and Mummy and Daddy making love on the rug in front of the fire. Her face flushed, and he raised his gaze at just that moment, catching her eye.

He put down his cutlery and pushed away his clean plate. 'That was delicious. Thank you,' he said.

'You looked like you needed it. Luna said you've been doing too much.' Hermione cleared the plates and returned to the table with hot coffee.

'It is an uphill struggle. I'm at a dead end, if I'm being truthful. I just don't know what to do next.' Severus sighed, and Hermione saw the dark circles and worry around his eyes.

'I'll help you,' she said finally. 'But first, we need to talk.'

Severus nodded and followed Hermione as she went through to the living room. When they were sat comfortably, Severus turned to her, sensing that this might be his only chance to say his piece.

'I never forgave myself for letting you go,' he said, his eyes on her hands as they cradled her coffee.

'I had no other choice. You couldn't trust me; you couldn't be honest about your feelings. What else could I do, Severus? I had to move on.'

'I know.' Severus nodded sadly. He looked into Hermione's eyes for a moment. 'I wrote to you. You left the letter behind,' he said quietly.

'Yes. I knew that I would be weak, that anything you said would have me rushing back to you and we'd be back in the same place. I thought I was doing the right thing,' Hermione said.

'Was it?' he asked.

'I keep asking myself that. I wonder if I didn't take some bad advice at the time,' she said ruefully.

'Advice, from whom?' Severus scowled. He could guess exactly who that was.

'Harry, and Alicia. They both said I'd be better off in America, that I'd get over you, move on, more opportunities.'

Severus glowered darkly but said nothing.

'For a time, I was able to pretend you didn't exist,' she laughed lightly. 'And then I found out I was pregnant, and I realised I was just fooling myself and everyone else,' Hermione said sadly. She stopped talking then, afraid she would say too much, too soon.

'You didn't have to keep the child,' Severus mused, staring into his mug as the black coffee swirled around.

'Our child,' Hermione said, a little harshly. 'Would you have preferred that, Severus, that I hadn't had him?' Her voice took on a steely edge, and Severus was quick to placate her.

'He's an amazing child, and you are a wonderful mother, Hermione,' he said. 'I would never have wanted you to destroy something so precious.'

Hermione beamed at Severus then and laughed lightly. 'I might be a good mother now, but in the beginning I had no idea what I was doing. I was a mess. Without Alicia, I don't know what I'd have done,' she said.

'Perhaps you could show me what it was like, one day?' Severus looked at her carefully.

'I'd like that,' she said.

Hermione stood and took their mugs to the kitchen, and when she returned to the living room, Severus was stood, obviously ready to leave.

'I need to visit Minerva and return to the school,' he said smoothly, his composure regained as he assumed a more familiar role.

'Of course.' Hermione felt a pang of sadness. Things were very different between them now, she could sense it. Perhaps there was no going back after all, but at least Donovan had a father at last, and for that she was immensely grateful.

Severus coughed lightly. 'I would like to visit again, if that is acceptable?'

Hermione smiled warmly at him. 'Severus, all I ever wanted was for Donovan to know his father. You are always welcome,' she said.

His dark eyes flashed with something she hadn't seen for quite some time, and she felt her cheeks flush and her pulse quicken. He held her gaze for what seemed like forever, and she felt his powerful energy overwhelm her. Suddenly, he looked away and walked to the Floo, and Hermione felt herself trembling.

'Severus,' she said, her voice loud in her ears. He turned and looked at her blankly, and she stepped up to him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she said.

Severus nodded and stepped wordlessly into the Floo. Hermione raised her hand and waved at him as he disappeared.

Severus had Floo'd to his quarters at Hogwarts, and as soon as he arrived he sat, exhausted, in his chair. He had a son. His son, who looked like him, but was a happy child who giggled and said his name already and would be walking soon. He would take him to purchase his first wand, teach him to ride a broom, prepare him so he was advanced of other first years before he even made it through the gates of Hogwarts. He would encourage an interest in Potions, perhaps build him a small lab where they could brew and Donovan could learn the basics. All of these thoughts assailed him as he recalled his son's face vividly, and the feel of him in his arms.

His thoughts of Donovan mixed with those of Hermione. Even dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, the witch beguiled him and surprised him in equal measure. She had

welcomed him, not pushed him away as he had feared. She had gladly borne his child and encouraged him to be his father. Her compassion overwhelmed him, but it was more than that. Hermione was able to love unconditionally. Severus Summoned his Firewhisky and drained the remainder of the bottle into a glass. He sipped, and his brow furrowed in thought.

If he played his cards right, he could have a family before the year was out. He had never wanted anything as much in his life.

Thirty-Seven

Chapter 38 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione had no idea that she had missed Hogwarts quite as much as she had. As soon as she had walked through into the main entrance hall, she felt immediately at home. The smell of old wood and stone, the way that the history of the building seemed to seep through her clothes and into her veins, it was like sucking in a huge gulp of air after being deprived for far too long.

She walked step by step with Severus, who was guiding her to a part of the castle she had never seen, and it made her smirk now and again to see students scatter in his wake. Because he was no longer teaching, he dispensed with his robes for the most part, preferring to be less encumbered for brewing and working with ingredients. Never the less, with his tall frame and black coat and trousers, coupled with his shiny, dragon-hide boots, he cut a striking and intimidating figure as he marched with his head held high.

Hermione glanced sideways at him and smiled. He was taking better care of himself. The five o'clock shadow had gone, and his hair was clean and shone in the light of the wall sconces as they passed them. She tried to play down the frisson of familiar attraction, but she knew it was only a matter of time. The way he had looked at her as she entered the castle told her everything she needed to know-that what she was feeling, he was feeling it too. The only difference was that Severus wasn't quite so obvious, and as soon as his pleasure had lit up his face, it was hidden again.

They alighted a stone staircase, Severus stepping aside to allow Hermione to walk ahead and set the pace. By the time they had reached the top, she was out of puff and laughed as he raised his eyebrow at her.

'I'm not as fit as I used to be,' she panted.

'No stairs to climb in America, I imagine,' he said, a small smile on his lips.

'I don't think anywhere but Hogwarts has a flight of stairs that long, Severus,' she protested.

Severus snorted but said nothing, instead leading her down a narrow but bright corridor. At the end, he opened a sturdy wooden door and stepped inside.

Hermione's eyes widened as she entered his living quarters. It was cosy, with lots of natural light from the large window, which she immediately walked towards and peered out of.

'Oh, the lake looks wonderful from here,' she enthused.

'Indeed,' he said quietly.

Hermione turned and grinned. Severus was standing with his hands clasped in front of him, waiting patiently with a look of amusement in his eyes.

'Sorry. Distracted. I haven't been back in so long. But we have work to do, don't we?' she said.

'It's no problem. I thought I would order some tea. We should discuss my findings before we decide how to proceed.' Severus indicated a comfortable cream armchair opposite his own beside the fireplace. Hermione recognised Severus's teaching voice and complied like a dutiful student, sitting patiently as he poured the tea that had appeared before them.

Handing Hermione a cup, Severus summoned a sheaf of parchment with his wand and indicated the top sheet.

'These are the potions I have used, with the results of their effectiveness. The potion I am making at the moment is an enhanced version of Strengthening Solution combined with Echinacea tincture. It's keeping her strength up, but it's not affecting the disease.'

Hermione took the sheet and cast her eye along the list. 'Apart from the diagnostic spells and your potion, has any other method been attempted? A charm or a spell, for instance?' Hermione frowned as she looked down the list again.

'There is little known about the illness. Experimentation was felt to be risky without the proper research, and we had no one with the expertise to try,' Severus said, 'until now.'

Hermione raised her eyes, and Severus lifted his cup to her in acknowledgement.

'Welcome to the team, Dr Granger.'

Hermione grinned at him, basking in the compliment for a moment. 'Severus, would you mind if I share this with Alicia? Her department is working on the development of Charm Therapy in cases where potions are not effective. It might be just up her street,' she said.

'Of course. If you think she might help, the more the merrier.' Severus sipped his tea.

'Can I see your lab?' she asked.

'Yes. I need to finish the next batch of the Strengthening Solution. Perhaps you could assist me? It would expedite matters, and I may have time to visit Donovan this evening, if that suits you?' Severus stood smoothly, trying and failing to hide the hope in his voice.

'I think he would love to see you,' Hermione said knowingly.

Severus paused as he walked across the room. 'And you?' he murmured, not turning to look at her.

Hermione flushed, but walked to where he stood and slipped her hand into his briefly, giving it a tight squeeze. 'Of course,' she whispered. Her heart fluttered wildly when he squeezed her hand in response, and they said no more, walking into his lab to concentrate on more pressing matters.

When Hermione returned to Hilltop Cottage, Donovan was crying the house down, and Lexie Flint looked close to tears. On the floor, quite some way from the charmed high chair he was sat in, was Donovan's supper, which he was also wearing down the front of his pale blue t-shirt. He was not a happy bunny.

'Oh, god,' Hermione gasped.

'Miss Granger, I'm so sorry. He insisted on feeding himself, and when I tried to take the spoon, the bowl flew in the air and landed there. There was nothing I could do,' Lexie said.

There was a knock at the door, and Hermione flicked her wand at it, letting Severus walk straight into the chaos.

'Miss Flint,' he said, nodding.

'Professor Snape!' Lexie looked like she was going to explode at the sight of her old teacher, particularly dressed in jeans and a casual, navy jumper as he was at that moment.

'I think your son just started to practice his magic, Severus,' Hermione laughed. 'Don't worry about it, Lexie. There's nothing you could have done.'

Hermione walked over to lift Donovan from his chair, when Severus interrupted her.

'I'll sort him out, if you want to clean up the mess?' he said.

Hermione flashed him a smile and then stood back as Donovan lifted his arms and allowed Severus to lift him and carry him up the stairs. She turned and giggled at Lexie as she heard Severus berate their son for scaring the help.

'Are you okay, Lexie?' Hermione asked, her voice concerned.

'I have no idea,' the teenager answered. 'I don't know what shocked me more; the flying food, or finding out that Professor Snape is Donovan's dad. My father won't believe it.'

Hermione observed the girl for a moment. She had a shock of black, spiky hair and her eyebrow had a metal bar pierced through it, which made her wince. Her outward appearance belied her gentle nature, but she still needed guidance.

'Lexie, do me a favour, would you? Don't spread this around like gossip. The last thing I want is to have to let you go, but if a word of this gets to the ~~Prophet~~^{Prophet}, I'll have no choice.' Hermione looked at her seriously, and Lexie bit her lip.

'Sorry, Miss Granger. Of course, I won't tell anyone else. I was just surprised.'

Hermione softened. She wasn't the first young girl to make a mistake. She walked over to Lexie and put a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

'I'll tell you a secret, okay? Yes, Donovan is Severus's son, but me and Severus. Well, it's complicated, but he's not my boyfriend anymore, you see.' Hermione started to whisper. 'The thing is, I really want him back. If people start to gossip, he'll get all huffy. You know how moody he can get, right?'

Lexie giggled nervously. 'Too right I do,' she snorted.

'Exactly. So let's try and keep him in a good mood. You never know what might happen.' Hermione giggled conspiratorially, and Lexie grinned, and then moved away quickly as Severus reappeared with Donovan.

The boy was dressed in clean pyjamas and holding what looked like an old, moth-eaten teddy bear. There were patches where the fabric had been re-stitched, and the poor thing only had one eye, but Donovan was holding on to it for grim death. Hermione eyed Severus suspiciously, but he stared back at her innocently.

'Was there something?' he said, glancing slightly at Lexie.

Hermione took the hint that it was a conversation to be had in private, so she paid Lexie, who kissed Donovan lightly on the cheek and Floo'd away so quickly that they didn't even have chance to say goodbye.

'If you're going to have that effect on all of the hired help, I might have to Polyjuice you while they're here,' Hermione laughed, flicking her wand to clean up the spilled food. She turned and smiled. Donovan was cuddled up against Severus's shoulder and was falling asleep.

'Why don't you put him in his cot for a while? He won't sleep long, but we will have time to eat in peace,' Hermione said sweetly, patting Donovan's back gently, 'and then you can tell me all about that horrid bear.'

Severus snorted, his shoulders shaking lightly, and Hermione could tell he was trying not to laugh as he walked back up to Donovan's room. As he disappeared from sight, Hermione grinned and lifted the Chinese takeaway menu.

Maybe tonight was a good night to take a trip down memory lane?

Thirty-Eight

Chapter 39 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

When Severus finally got Donovan settled, with a scratchy version of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star which he promised himself never to repeat to anyone, he knelt by the side of the cot and watched his son for a while as he slept. His hands were curled up beneath his chin, and his eyelashes were so long, they looked like spiders' legs settled softly on his cheeks. He snored a little, which made Severus smirk. Hermione was right. He did sleep like his father. He reached out a finger and stroked his dark hair gently, feeling the soft fluff and marvelling at how perfect his son was.

He felt Hermione place a light hand on his shoulder and turned to smile up at her.

'He is beautiful,' he sighed.

'Yes, he is.' Hermione smiled down at Donovan, and Severus took her hand in his gently.

'Thank you,' he said quietly, not daring himself to look at her. A wave of emotion was threatening to overwhelm him.

'For what?' She didn't pull her hand away, but threaded her fingers slowly through his.

'For him,' he whispered, his voice breaking.

Hermione stood closer and wrapped her arm around Severus gently. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. 'I should be thanking you, too, in that case,' she whispered.

Severus smiled at her and reached his hand out, cupping her cheek softly. Hermione closed her eyes, enjoying his caress for a brief moment, and then gently pulled away.

'Food's ready,' she said as she left the room.

When Severus entered the kitchen, he sensed the change in Hermione's mood immediately. She was busying herself with plates and cutlery, and an opened bottle of wine and two glasses already sat on the table, which was lit with a couple of tea lights. She put the plates onto the table, then turned back and lifted a very familiar looking paper bag, which she placed ceremonially in front of him. She held his gaze, then took her wand from her jeans pocket and flicked it purposefully, causing the kitchen light to dim and cast a warm glow over them. Taking a step closer, she licked her lips suggestively.

'Guess what's for dinner?' she whispered.

Severus felt his mouth go dry. He had no idea what the witch was playing at. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought it was a seduction, but that was never Hermione's way before. They hadn't even talked about a future between them, although the gentle, affectionate handholding and soft caresses had been more than welcome, certainly. But there were things to discuss. He couldn't bear the thought of her upping and leaving again, for one thing. They needed to put their cards on the table, before Severus did something he might regret. He coughed lightly and took a slight step backwards.

'Surprise me,' he said.

Hermione burst out laughing. 'Oh, your face,' she giggled. 'Relax, Severus. I was only teasing. It's Crispy Chilli Chicken.' She grinned at him.

'You should remember who you're teasing, witch,' he grumbled, but smirked back at her.

They served the food and ate, and without prompting, Severus poured wine into the glasses and handed one to Hermione.

'Just like old times,' Hermione said softly.

'Indeed,' he replied, raising his glass to her.

'I'm so glad you're here, Severus,' Hermione said suddenly.

'As am I,' he said.

'Severus, do you think... well, I think you know how I feel about you,' she said, a nervous tremor in her voice. 'I was wondering, if you thought that... well. Oh, shit, Severus. You know what I'm trying to say!' Hermione sputtered in frustration, her cheeks aflame.

Severus held Hermione's gaze, a smile playing around his lips. He knew what she was trying to say, but she looked very beautiful when she was flustered and it was well worth making her struggle to get her thoughts out, just to see her eyes flashing and the pink blush across her soft flesh.

'What exactly are you asking, Hermione?' he said smoothly.

'Forget it,' Hermione said angrily. 'You know precisely what I was getting at, Severus Snape. Fine. Have it your way. I thought we could just cut through all of the crap and get to the important stuff, you know. I still love you and you bloody well know it, and if I'm not mistaken, you love me. Why bother wasting any more time?'

Severus stared at her open-mouthed, not knowing quite what to say. She was right of course, but he had hoped to court her a little first. But then he thought of their son, sleeping soundly upstairs, and he realised that a courtship would be closing the stable door after the horse had bolted.

Hermione raised her eyes to his, the fight gone. All that was left was pure emotion, and her eyes filled with tears that threatened to fall any moment.

'Don't you dare,' he said quickly. Getting to his feet, he walked to where she sat and knelt besides her, taking her hands in his.

'Hermione,' he said softly, gazing into her watery but oh, so lovely, eyes. 'I think you're absolutely right.'

Hermione stared at him for a brief moment, then slid her arms around his neck and buried her face into his hair, sniffing slightly. 'Oh, Severus,' she mumbled as he wrapped his arms about her waist. 'I've missed you so much.'

Severus closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of her shampoo, and nuzzled his face into her neck.

Hermione felt him smile against her skin, and sat back slightly. 'You are a wicked wizard,' she whispered.

'Am I?' he said huskily, looking pointedly at her lips.

'My wicked wizard, though,' she murmured as she tipped her head slightly and moved closer to his face.

She closed her eyes, and their lips met slowly, tentatively, until she moaned softly and opened her full lips to allow his tongue access. She tasted even sweeter than he remembered, warm and moist and delicious. He could survive on her kisses alone for the rest of his life. Her hands found his hair and pulled him deeper into the kiss, and he splayed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her flush with his chest, the feel of her breast against him making him sigh with remembered bliss. Slowly, painfully, they pulled apart, smiling shyly at each other, and then grinning like lovesick fools. Severus pushed Hermione's hair from her face, caressing her curls as he did so. He bent to kiss her again, when a loud wail from upstairs stopped him, and he smirked, raising an eyebrow at her ruefully.

'Not quite like old times,' he said hoarsely.

Hermione giggled. 'Not quite,' she said.

He helped her to her feet, kissing her briefly before letting her attend to Donovan. At the kitchen door, she paused to look at him as he started to clear the plates.

'Severus?' she asked quietly.

'Yes?' He smiled gently as he eyed her ruffled hair and now pink cheeks.

'Stay tonight,' she said, her eyes hopeful.

He nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. Hermione beamed at him and then went up the stairs.

Thirty-Nine

Chapter 40 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

They had spent a fun couple of hours with Donovan before settling him down for the night. Severus had insisted on charming the wooden train to run in circles, and Donovan's eyes had lit up and he clapped with joy, not at the train but at the flick and swish of his father's wand. Before long, the train was replaced with sparkling lights and bubbles, which he crawled around after and popped, giggling and making his parents laugh in the process.

Hermione gave Donovan a last drink of warm milk and went to settle him in his cot. She was just casting her alert charm when a dark shadow blocked the light from the small landing, and she turned to see Severus leaning against the door, his hands casually thrust into his jeans pockets. His face was in shadow, but she didn't fail to notice the glint in his eye, and the powerful force of his gaze made her tremble slightly.

'Almost done,' she said softly. She raised her wand and finished her charm, leaving a soft, golden light around the room as she stepped away from Donovan towards the doorway. As she turned, Severus stood and held out his hand, and Hermione's heart leapt into her throat as she took it and followed him into the bedroom.

Severus walked behind her and closed the door. The click of the catch made Hermione jump, and suddenly all of her senses were heightened. He walked up behind her and placed his hands gently on her shoulders, then kissed the top of her head softly as he ran his hands down her arms. She shivered slightly, and she heard him chuckle quietly by her ear.

'Are you sure you want me to stay?' he said quietly. 'I am quite prepared to wait for you, if you would rather.'

Hermione took his hands and pulled his arms around her, leaning back against his firm torso. 'No. I want you to stay. I don't want to wake up tomorrow and think I've imagined it all,' she said.

'I had better make sure it's unforgettable then,' he whispered. Dropping his hands, he lifted the bottom of her t-shirt and caressed her stomach lightly.

'My body isn't what it was, Severus,' she warned him.

'Your body was, is, and always will be just a part of you. You are beautiful to me, Hermione,' he said, and then turned her to face him. 'Just tell me that this is what you really want.'

His eyes spoke volumes to her, and she could see hope and insecurity and desire, and possibly love there too. Smiling, she nodded.

'This is what I've always wanted. I never should have left in the first place. That damn award, it changed everything. I was so happy before. We were so happy, weren't we?' she asked.

'We were, indeed,' he said, smiling softly.

Severus cupped Hermione's cheeks and kissed her gently. She slid her arms around him and they stood together for some time, kissing tenderly, in no rush to go any further than just that. After so long apart, and yearning for this moment, sharing each other and savouring the experience seemed to matter to them both.

Hermione broke their kisses first, softly moaning as she pulled away.

'Come with me,' she said quietly, guiding him towards the bed.

She undressed him slowly, until he stood naked before her, his pale skin glowing in the light of the bedside lamp. He was erect, but she didn't look down. Her eyes were focussed on his face as she started to take her own clothes off. When she reached to unfasten her bra, he stopped her with a gentle hand, and his subtle fingers caressed the soft mounds of her breasts that threatened to spill from the lace cups.

Hermione smiled at the look of awe on his face. Her breasts had grown when she was expecting Donovan, and they just stayed that way. Judging by the reverence Severus was paying them, she thought this could be a bonus she could cash in on now and again.

'Incredible,' he breathed, holding her breasts in the palms of his hands.

Hermione laughed softly. 'Thanks,' she whispered. She reached behind and unclipped the fastening, and Severus pulled her bra away slowly, as if taking the wrapping from a precious object.

Hermione watched his face as his eyes widened with undisguised desire. Her nipples were much darker now and stood proudly from her breasts. He stepped closer and wrapped his arms about her, pulling her to him until her breasts caressed his chest, and they both sighed at the remembered feeling of each other's skin. He bent his head and kissed her, deepening the kiss as he unfastened her jeans and pushed them downwards. He didn't wait for her to take them off before his fingers wound their way through her pubic hair to her moist nether lips, and Hermione cried out into his mouth as her passion for him began to overwhelm her. By some unspoken signal, Severus pulled away, and they climbed into bed and immediately reached for each other.

Tenderly and passionately, they made love beneath the covers. Few words were needed as they kissed and caressed each other, and when he thrust into her for the first time, she arched to meet him, the new but familiar feel of him making her keen with pleasure as he brought her to a shuddering climax. He had been holding himself back,

but as her walls trembled around him, he sighed and came deeply within her, kissing her swollen lips time and time again.

Afterwards, they held each other and listened to the other breathing, until Severus spoke.

'I would very much like it if we got married, Hermione,' he said quietly. It wasn't a proposal, but a statement of fact. But it was bloody good enough for Hermione Granger, thank you very much.

'I'd like that, too,' she said, and smiled into his chest.

'Is that a yes?' He laughed softly.

'Was it a question?' she replied.

'It could be,' he said.

'Well if it was, then the answer is yes,' she said.

Neither of them noticed when they fell asleep, but both wore contented smiles.

Hermione awoke the following morning to the aroma of bacon wafting up the stairs. It was early, but for the first time in ages she hadn't been woken by Donovan's squeals, and she sat up with a start, grabbing her bathrobe and wrapping it around her as she hurried from the room. She glanced in Donovan's room to find his cot empty and almost ran down the stairs to check all was well. The sight that met her made her heart sigh.

Severus was standing by the hob in his jeans and an old t-shirt, his feet bare and his hair slightly tousled, prodding bits of bacon around a frying pan. Donovan was sitting in his high chair, waving a slice of toast in his hand. As he saw her, a grin appeared on his face.

'Mama,' Donovan said in greeting, and she walked over to plant a kiss on his cheek, laughing as he pulled her closer with a handful of curls.

'Yes, Donovan, I love you too, now let go of Mummy's hair, there's a good boy,' she said, laughing as she tried to uncurl his tight fist.

Finally free, Hermione turned to Severus and ran her hand across his shoulders gently.

'Morning,' she said quietly.

Severus turned and took hold of Hermione's hand, pulling her closer and holding her to him. His eyes explored her face for a moment, and then unblinkingly, he kissed her gently, raising his hand to caress her breast through her bathrobe.

Hermione closed her eyes and leant into him, sighing with contentment, and he deepened the kiss briefly. Letting her go with obvious reluctance, he smiled at her.

'Morning,' he rumbled, his voice a bit rusty from sleep.

Quietly, Hermione made tea, Severus made bacon sandwiches, and they sat with their son to enjoy their first breakfast as a family.

Forty

Chapter 41 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione was anxiously wringing her hands as she paced Severus's quarters. Every now and again her eyes darted to the Floo, then to the clock on the wall. Severus rustled that day's copy of the *Daily Prophet*, dropping it slightly to watch his fiancée as she wore a hole in the rug.

'Relax,' he soothed. 'Have some tea, or perhaps find something to read.' He indicated the bookshelf along the far wall, and Hermione was tempted, but she knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate.

She desperately wanted this to go well, but she hadn't had the chance to talk to Alicia privately to tell her that things had changed between herself and Severus. She really hoped that her friend would be respectful, at least, but she had a terrible feeling the whole situation may be more than awkward.

'Would you prefer me to leave?' Severus asked as he quirked an eyebrow at her.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say yes, but it was too late. With a roar that made Hermione jump, the Floo sprang to life, and out stepped Alicia, looking more glamorous than Hermione had ever seen her. She was wearing a well-cut dark grey suit with a crisp, cerise shirt, and her blonde hair was long and shimmering down her back. Hermione felt immediately the lesser person in her presence, which she knew to be a ridiculous notion, but the feeling was there nonetheless.

'Alicia,' she said warmly, going immediately to her and hugging her tightly. She had missed her very much.

'Oh, God, it's so good to see you,' Alicia replied. She stood back a little and looked her up and down. 'You look fabulous, honey,' she said sincerely.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Severus stand, laying his newspaper on the chair behind him.

'Alicia, I want to introduce you to Professor Severus Snape,' she said, turning Alicia around to face Severus, who immediately smiled charmingly and held his hand out.

'Miss Maines, it's a pleasure to meet you at last. I have heard much about you from Hermione,' he said smoothly.

Alicia smiled and took Severus's hand and shook it firmly, before turning to look at Hermione, letting out a low whistle.

'And you left him?' she whispered loudly.

Hermione burst out laughing, relief washing over her. She beamed at Alicia, who had obviously been prepared that Hermione would be back with Severus. She wouldn't say anything.

'Thankfully, she came back,' said Severus, a touch of laughter in his own voice.

'And how is Donovan doing? I really missed that little guy,' said Alicia.

'He's doing great. You'll see him later,' Hermione said, smiling, 'and I'll fill you in on all of the drama.'

Severus quirked an eyebrow at Hermione and Alicia as they shared a look, and Alicia laughed.

'Girl talk, Professor. You wouldn't be one bit interested,' she said.

'Why do I have the uncomfortable feeling that I will be a topic of conversation?' he said sternly. Hermione caught the amused look in his eyes that belied his tone, and she poked her tongue out playfully.

'Don't be so smug!' she exclaimed. 'We will have so much more to talk about than the men in our lives,' Hermione protested.

'Oh, do we?' Alicia teased, sounding disappointed. 'What a pity. I wanted all of the gory details.'

'Enough,' Severus chuckled. 'We have some research notes to share, I believe. The gossip can wait until I'm out of the way.'

Hermione grinned, but she didn't notice the appreciative gaze that Alicia gave Severus as they followed him obediently into his lab.

Two hours later, Alicia, Hermione and Severus were standing around Minerva McGonagall's bed. Alicia had her wand out and was murmuring a series of charms that the others had never heard before.

They had spent over an hour poring over the sheaves of parchment that detailed all of Hermione's calculations, Severus's potions and their ingredients and Minerva's symptoms. It was clear that while certain medicinal treatments were having a positive effect on Minerva's immune system, the usual therapies had only worked to a point.

'Do we know what your friend had been doing prior to falling ill?' Alicia asked eventually.

Severus sighed. 'She had been under some pressure I think. The responsibility of building up the school after the war has been a great strain, according to Filius. I feel a certain amount of guilt that I didn't return to assist as she requested,' he said, frowning.

'You had your reasons, and Minerva understood them, Severus. You shouldn't feel guilty. We don't even know if that's what caused this,' Hermione chided him.

'Is there anything specific about Minerva's magic I need to know about? She was a Transfiguration professor, I believe?' Alicia looked up at Hermione with her face set.

'Well, she is incredibly gifted in that area. And of course, she's an Animagus,' Hermione said proudly.

'What animal?' Alicia said suddenly, her eyes bright.

'She is a tabby cat,' Severus murmured, staring down at Minerva's pale, lined face.

'A cat?' Alicia asked in disbelief.

'Yes,' said Hermione. 'Why? Is that significant?'

'Well, it's significant if she contracted her illness when she was in her Animagus form, yes.'

'Good god, I had never even considered that it might not be a human virus,' Severus said, shocked.

'Why would you, Severus? It didn't cross my mind either, but I know that when Minerva is under pressure she enjoys spending time in her Animagus form. She explained it to me once. It gives her the chance to run and stretch in a way she can't as a witch,' Hermione said softly.

'What should we do, Miss Maines?' asked Severus seriously.

'Well, firstly you can call me Alicia. All of my friends do.'

She flashed him a wide smile, but Severus didn't acknowledge it. He was too concerned about Minerva.

'Secondly,' Alicia continued briskly, 'you will need to find a specialist who has experience with Animagus illness. If there is no one here, I could contact my own department. I know that Barnabus Speight would be fascinated with this case.'

'I'll check with Luna,' said Hermione, and she slipped out of the room.

Severus raised his eyes to Alicia. 'I don't know how to thank you. We have been going around in circles with this,' he said sincerely.

Alicia smiled warmly. 'Nonsense. It just needed fresh eyes, that's all.'

She walked around to where Severus was standing and placed her hand over his where it rested on Minerva's bedclothes. She squeezed his hand lightly, and Severus looked at her with a puzzled frown. He was about to speak when the door opened, and Hermione walked in. Alicia immediately removed her hand from Severus's and walked over to Hermione with a small smile.

'Any joy?' she said, a little too brightly.

Hermione looked at Alicia in confusion and didn't quite understand what she had just seen. She turned to look at Severus, whose face was blank and emotionless. He had signs of a telltale flush to his cheeks. She looked back at Alicia, who had schooled her face to its normal, friendly demeanour, and shook her head. Whatever it was, it could wait for now.

'Luna said there is no specialist here at the hospital. They don't have many cases of this type, apparently, which would explain why we hadn't thought of it before,' she said calmly.

'You will call your colleague then, Miss Maines?' Severus spoke firmly, and Hermione noticed the edge to his voice, even if Alicia didn't. She did notice his reverting to her more formal mode of address, however, and she took a slight backward step before nodding.

'Of course. I'll Floo call him as soon as I can,' she said simply.

'Very well. Hermione, I have Hogwarts business to attend to this evening, so I will leave Miss Maines in your capable hands tonight. Say goodnight to Donovan for me.' He went to walk from the room, pausing to kiss Hermione lightly.

'Severus? Do you mean you'll be staying at the school tonight?' Hermione was disappointed and wondered what had happened. They had agreed never to have another night apart, now that they were reunited.

'Only for tonight, Hermione.' Severus's voice softened as he spoke, and he smiled at her briefly. 'I have much to do, and it will give you and Miss Maines plenty of time for that 'girl talk'.' He looked briefly at Alicia and his gaze went steely for a brief moment.

Ah, thought Hermione. Alicia must have said something to upset him when she was out of the room. She would talk to him once Alicia had gone and reassure him. Her feelings for him had never really changed, despite what she may have declared to her friend in the heat of an emotional moment.

Severus closed the door and Hermione grinned at Alicia. 'Now we have the night to ourselves, let's get Donovan to bed early and open a bottle of wine.'

Alicia smiled at her a little tightly. 'Sure, great idea.'

As they walked out into the hospital corridor, Hermione lowered her voice.

'Then perhaps you will explain exactly what was going on when I walked back into the room, and why Severus would rather be anywhere but in your company.'

Forty-One

Chapter 42 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione handed Alicia a large glass of white wine and motioned for her to sit on the sofa. Donovan was asleep, and they had just finished two plates of fish and chips from the takeaway. The conversation up to that point had been superficial and all but meaningless, chat about Donovan, the house – anything that would keep them away from the subject that had caused such tension between them. Hermione wasn't one for avoiding things, however.

'You don't like him, do you?' she stated.

'Donovan? I think he's the cutest thing I've ever seen,' Alicia said, taking a sip of wine.

'I meant Severus, Alicia, as you well know.' Hermione stared at her with hard eyes, and eventually the blonde witch had the good sense to lower her gaze and shrug slightly.

'I hardly know him, so I can't judge,' she said eventually.

'What happened, at the hospital?' Hermione leant forward, making it very clear she would brook no avoidance.

'Nothing, really. Severus was upset about Minerva; I told him I would do all I could to help. That's all,' she said calmly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. 'Why do I want to believe you and yet find it so hard to do so?' she murmured.

Alicia shrugged again. 'It's the truth. Ask Severus,' she said.

Hermione stared into her glass. The sound of Alicia saying Severus's name, the syllables sliding through her teeth like silk, made her feel uncomfortable for some strange reason.

'He really is a good person, Alicia. And you can't deny, he is bloody clever,' she said, smiling proudly.

'He is exceptionally talented, you're right. As for being good, well... that's what girl talk is meant to be about, right? Finding out if they're 'good', or hopeless?' Alicia grinned and then guffawed loudly at her own joke, and Hermione couldn't help but giggle.

'No way. That is one bit of information that stays private.' Hermione laughed.

'Spoil sport!' Alicia laughed again. 'Go on... Just tell me. He's a stallion, right?'

Hermione grinned and blushed madly. 'Stop it, Alicia,' she said, her voice soft. 'I love him. He's asked me to marry him, actually.' She smiled shyly.

'Oh, wow.' Alicia let out a long sigh. 'That's fantastic news.'

She clinked her glass against Hermione's and raised it in a silent toast. Hermione knew it wasn't sincere, because she noticed the dark look that crossed Alicia's face, albeit briefly.

'So, he finally told you he loved you, huh?' Alicia said, raising her eyebrows.

'Well, no. But he didn't have to. I know he loves me, Alicia. He doesn't need to say it,' Hermione said, defending him.

'Well, I think it's very good of him to stand by you and Donovan. He seems like the kind of guy who would do the right thing,' Alicia responded, her tone innocent.

'He didn't ask me to marry him just because of Donovan,' Hermione snapped out.

'I'm glad, truly. You're happy, that's what counts, right?' Alicia took a deep drink of her wine and reached for the bottle. 'Top up?'

Hermione nodded and changed the subject, and they talked about work and advances in Charms until the bottle of wine was empty and they decided to retire. Alicia stayed in the living room, after Transfiguring the couch into a divan bed, and Hermione climbed the stairs heavily, wishing that Severus were there to curl up next to.

She lay awake for an hour, running over the events of the day in her head, and Alicia's comments about Severus. He hadn't actually told her he loved her, and he had changed towards her after he found out about Donovan. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered if Alicia was right, and he was just standing by them because he felt a sense of responsibility. Perhaps he didn't love her at all, and it was just a way to ensure he had a role in Donovan's life.

She tried to stop herself weeping into her pillow and failed miserably.

Severus was waiting impatiently in his quarters. He felt exhausted after a sleepless night. He had missed Hermione and Donovan so much; he had been tempted just to Floo to Hilltop Cottage anyway. It was the presence of Alicia Maines that had made him keep his distance. He had seen enough man-hungry witches to recognise the type, and despite her friendship with Hermione, he didn't trust her. Her actions yesterday had shocked him to no end and he couldn't wait for the witch to go back from whence she came.

Breakfast in the Great Hall had irritated him. The noise level seemed greater than was usual, the scraping of chairs and the chatter of dunderheads had made his brain hurt, and even the wonderfully delicious breakfast hadn't cheered him. He just wanted to get Minerva back to Hogwarts, so that he could get back to New Mills and start his family life proper.

He started to muse about Donovan, what he was having for breakfast and what outfit Lexie would force him to wear today, when the Floo activated, and Alicia Maines stepped into the room. Her long, blonde hair was groomed to perfection, and she was wearing red stilettos and a tight, grey pencil skirt and matching jacket. Although the jacket was buttoned, the top was gaping open to reveal the top of a lacy, red bra. Severus thought she looked like a prostitute, but said nothing as she met his gaze with a challenging look.

'Good morning, Professor,' she said slowly, holding her hand out.

Severus ignored her hand and the greeting. 'Where's Hermione?' he asked crisply.

'Lexie is running late. Hermione told me to come ahead so we can get started as soon as Barnabus arrives. He should be here shortly,' she said.

'Very well,' he said. He stood to his full height and glared at her sharply. 'How is my son?'

Alicia gave him a genuine smile. 'Gorgeous, of course. He's just like his father,' she said bluntly.

Severus felt his face flushing, and turned away from her abruptly. 'I will leave you to meet your friend. Come into the lab when he arrives.'

'Professor,' Alicia said quietly.

Severus stiffened, but turned to look at her. 'Yes?'

'I think that it's just great, what you're doing for Hermione and Donovan,' she said.

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' Severus replied.

'Well, she let slip that you want to marry her and all. That's such a good thing to do. It's very hard raising a child alone these days,' she said with sincerity.

'Get to the point, Miss Maines,' Severus said coolly. He didn't like where this was going.

'Hermione talked about you so much when she was in the States,' Alicia said, 'and about your break up. It's always hard when one person loves the other person more, I think.'

Severus's eyes hardened and narrowed and he frowned. 'She said that she didn't love me as much as I love her?'

'Well, not in so many words, of course. Everything changes when a child comes along, don't you think?' Alicia smiled at him sweetly.

Severus felt his mouth go dry and his throat constrict suddenly. His vision was so clearly clouded by his feelings for Hermione that he hadn't seen what was really going on. Of course the witch wouldn't want to raise the child alone, and what better way to secure her own future than to entice him back with the lure of fatherhood?

'I will see you in the lab, Miss Maines,' he whispered, walking into his sanctuary quickly so that she wouldn't hear the rasping sob that left him or see the tears as they dripped down his cheeks.

Alicia Maines watched him walk away with her head held high and a smirk on her face.

Forty-Two

Chapter 43 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Many, many thanks to all who have been kind enough to leave a review. Mwuah!

Hermione felt ill and looked even worse than that, but she decided to put a brave face on things. She couldn't leave Severus and Alicia to help Minerva alone, but she needed some time to get herself together and sent Alicia on to Hogwarts with a message to Severus that she would be there as soon possible.

She looked at herself in the mirror and scraped her hair from her face, fastening it with an elastic band. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she looked incredibly pale and wan. How ridiculous that her well-being was so intrinsically linked to how she felt about Severus, and how he may or may not feel about her. She stared at herself for a moment longer and wondered what had happened to the old Hermione Granger, who would not have been so cowed by events, but would have gone in for the fight with her wand aloft and her wits about her. It was the war, she knew. It had changed her very psyche on a fundamental level, and she had never been the same.

She shrugged on her grey cardigan and slipped her feet into her well-worn trainers, then trudged downstairs where Lexie was helping Donovan to finish his breakfast.

'I'm going to Hogwarts, Lexie. I'll be home by five at the latest, but if you need me, you have the Galleon, don't you?' She bent and kissed Donovan lightly.

'Sure,' Lexie said. 'Miss Granger? Is everything okay? You don't look too good,' she said kindly.

'I'm fine. Too much wine last night.' Hermione forced a smile.

'See you later, then.' Lexie smiled at her, and Hermione turned and Floo'd to Hogwarts.

Barnabus Speight was a short, portly man with little hair and poor eyesight. On his initial meeting with him, Severus had felt his heart sink. This was the man on whom his hopes were pinned for Minerva's speedy recovery. However, Severus quickly learned that appearances were more than deceiving in this instance. The man was articulate and knew his chosen field inside out.

Moreover, he thought he knew what was wrong with Minerva as soon as Severus described the symptoms.

'There is a problem, however,' he said warningly.

'What is it?' Severus could feel his hope fading yet again.

'In order to treat Minerva, she would need to transform to her Animagus form first. And given that she is currently being sedated, there is no way of knowing if she would have the strength to do that after all this time.' Barnabus looked over his spectacles at Severus gravely.

'Would a Charm work?' Hermione had entered the lab without them noticing and had stood, mouse-like, in the corner, as they discussed Minerva's situation.

Alicia gazed at her coolly. 'Of course it would, if she were conscious,' she said dismissively.

Hermione bristled slightly and walked to the workbench, where they were gathered around the research papers.

'I meant a Charm that would produce Minerva's Animagus without the need for her to be conscious.'

She addressed the comment to Barnabus Speight, ignoring Alicia because of her attitude, and ignoring Severus because she knew she couldn't look at him without breaking down.

Severus looked at her coldly but said nothing.

Barnabus Speight considered her words. 'Is it possible?'

'It's something I have been involved in at the Ministry, an area of research I started but didn't complete, but I can look up the notes and work through them, see if anything comes to light?'

'That sounds like the best plan so far, Miss...?'

'Granger. Dr Hermione Granger,' she said succinctly, holding her hand out and shaking his firmly.

'Well, I'll be.' His face lit up with a huge smile. 'The Dr Granger that caused all the fuss in your department, Alicia?' He looked at the blonde with a questioning gaze.

'There was no fuss, Barnabus. We were all delighted for Hermione,' Alicia said, a little too cheerfully.

'Sure. Shame though, that your funding was withdrawn when you didn't get the award,' he said thoughtfully.

Hermione looked at Alicia in shock. The blonde witch had gone as white as a sheet.

'Why didn't you tell me that?' Hermione asked her quietly.

'It wasn't important,' Alicia whispered.

Barnabus looked from one witch to the other and snorted. 'Sure. Not important. You lost your funding, and the department is closing at the end of the year.'

'God, Alicia. Why didn't you say something?' Hermione implored her friend.

'What damn difference would it have made, Hermione?' Alicia's eyes flashed with held-back anger. 'You won the award fair and square after all.'

'Of course I did.' Hermione was totally thrown by the strength of Alicia's response.

'Not that you're going to do anything with it,' Alicia muttered.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Hermione glared at her.

Alicia snorted. 'I knew as soon as you found out you were pregnant that you'd be weak and come crawling back to Severus, and any research or plans to further your career would be forgotten.'

'But it wasn't like that, Alicia, and you know it. I wanted Donovan to grow up in England, to be schooled at Hogwarts. If Severus was willing to meet with him, then of course I would encourage it, but to say that I came crawling back....' Hermione stared at the witch.

She was stunned by Alicia's response, and her brain was working overtime.

'Isn't that what you did, Hermione?' Severus's cold voice cut through her thoughts suddenly, and she turned to face him, aghast.

'What?' she said faintly. The look he was giving her was hard and emotionless, and she felt her legs start to tremble beneath her.

'Well, it's not easy supporting yourself and a child, I would imagine. How convenient it must have been, to find me on your doorstep that day. I suppose you put Potter up to the ruse, didn't you? He must have planted the letter, helped you to hoodwink me. Clever, actually. You had me fooled, for a time,' he hissed.

'You know that's not true, Severus!' Hermione cried. 'I love you, even if you did only ask me to marry you because of Donovan!'

It was Severus's turn to be shocked, and he momentarily forgot his own pain as he took in Hermione's dishevelled appearance and the haunted look on her face.

'That's not why I asked you to marry me, you stupid chit,' he snapped.

'Well, why, then? You've never even told me that you love me, so what other reason would there be if it's not Donovan? In fact, you can forget the wedding, Severus. I love you, I really do, but you don't need to marry me to be Donovan's father.'

Hermione was shaking, and she stared at Severus, who was also shaking and seemed suddenly struck dumb. She couldn't take it any longer, and with a sob, she ran from the room.

Forty-Three

Chapter 44 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

For a brief moment, the silence in Severus's lab was deafening. Barnabus Speight stared at Severus and blinked furiously behind his spectacles, and Alicia stood stock still but not making eye contact with either of them.

The only person who was actually thinking clearly was Severus.

'I apologise, Barnabus, Miss Maines, but I need to leave immediately,' he said hurriedly.

In a swirl of black, he dashed to the lab and into his quarters. Running to his desk, he opened a drawer and grabbed something, and then rushed to the Floo, where he called out, 'Hilltop Cottage'.

He arrived to see Lexie sitting on the sofa with Hermione, comforting her as she wept on her shoulder. The younger girl gasped as she saw Severus appear.

'Miss Flint. I wonder would you mind taking Donovan out for a walk while I talk with his mother.' He spoke in a calm voice that belied the emotions that were churning inside him. He had been a bloody fool not to realise what was going on, and now he had to make Hermione see it too.

'Of course, Professor,' she stammered. She pulled away from Hermione with a questioning look, and Severus felt a rush of relief when Hermione looked up at him with wet eyes and then nodded to Lexie.

'I'll be fine. Don't hurry back, Lexie,' she said quietly, rubbing at her face with the back of her hand lightly.

Lexie grabbed Donovan and took him upstairs to change into his outdoor clothes, while Severus organised everything she would need and assembled his stroller by the front door. Hermione sat in a daze and watched everything happening around her meekly. Within moments, their son and the hired help were gone, leaving them in silence.

'We always make such a mess of things,' Hermione said sadly.

'I think we might have had some help this time,' Severus said, sitting down slowly beside her.

'What are you talking about?' Hermione pushed her hair from her face and turned to look at him.

'I am talking about your so-called friend Alicia,' he said softly.

'Don't go bringing her into it, Severus. She's been such a good friend to me, it has nothing to do with her,' Hermione stated.

Severus looked at Hermione and his eyes softened. He reached out and took her hand in his, squeezing softly. 'Trusting little Gryffindor,' he said. 'But you put your trust in the wrong person, Hermione. I don't suppose she told you that she made a pass at me, did she?'

'She did what?' Hermione pulled her hand away and stood with her hands on her hips. 'You'd better tell me what happened, Severus Snape, or so help me...' She grabbed her wand from her pocket and twirled it in her fingers.

'Nothing happened. But I know when a witch is making a play. Miss Maines made it very clear that it isn't just friendship she is interested in,' Severus said.

Hermione sat dejectedly beside him, trying to make sense of what he was saying. Alicia wouldn't do that to her. They were friends. That's not what friends do. Her eyes snapped up to him.

'Show me,' she said firmly.

'Of course,' he agreed. What better way for Hermione to see what happened with Alicia?

He manoeuvred himself before her, and their eyes locked as he whispered, '*Legilimens*'.

The memories sped by so quickly that Hermione had difficulty making sense of everything. Severus was so desperate for her to see the truth, but it was coming out in a jumble. He sighed and pulled away, breaking eye contact.

'What was all of that?' Hermione said exasperatedly.

'I'm sorry. I just so want you to see the truth.' He looked at her pleadingly.

'Take a deep breath, okay? Try again, slowly. Otherwise I won't see what I need to see and we'll be no better off, will we?' Hermione took his hand, and he whispered the spell again, this time taking it very slowly.

Hermione was furious when she saw Alicia touching Severus in the hospital. But by far the worst was what she said to Severus in his quarters. She had never said that she loved her more than she loved him, so why lie about that?

Severus pulled away again, and Hermione hung her head. 'I never said that, Severus, about me loving you less.'

'I know you didn't. Tell me,' he asked. 'Did Alicia put the idea in your head that I only wanted to marry you for Donovan?'

'Well, we talked last night, about you, Donovan and... and the wedding.' Hermione's voice broke slightly. 'She said you were just doing the right thing.'

'And you believed her?' Severus said flatly.

'Not really, but then she asked if you loved me, and I said you hadn't actually said it, but that I thought you did,' she said softly. 'I put two and two together and what she said seemed to make sense at the time.'

'And now, Hermione? What do you think now?' he asked.

'I don't know what to think. Do you think I just came back so that you would be forced to be a father for Donovan?' she said. She looked up at him, and he stroked her tear stained face with his gentle fingers.

'No. You are far too honest for that, Hermione. I allowed Alicia's words to affect me far more because I was missing you so much when she said them,' he replied.

'Oh, Severus, you do know that I love you, don't you?' she asked.

'I know you do,' he sighed. He sat back and reached inside his pocket, pulling out an envelope. He paused slightly, but then handed it to her.

'This is the letter I left behind,' Hermione said.

'It is, and I think it's time you read it. My feelings have never changed, Hermione. Every word is still true,' he whispered.

Hermione traced her fingers lightly over his handwriting before opening the letter, and Severus sat in silence as she read the words he had written so long ago. He remembered exactly what he had said in the letter, because it was how he felt in his heart every day since she had left him. Hermione's hands were shaking, and large tears were falling onto the creased parchment.

'I can't read it properly,' she whispered shakily.

He took it from her gently and read out loud from where she pointed with a trembling finger.

'...You must know that I do indeed love you, Hermione. I have never spoken those words to anyone, but if you were here with me at this moment, I would hold you in my arms and whisper them to you over and over again.'

I love you... I love you, Hermione. He put the letter down slowly, and raised his eyes to hers slowly as if afraid of her response.

'Say it again,' she whispered, her voice so faint he hardly heard her.

'I love you, Hermione. I truly love you,' he said softly.

Hermione started to laugh through her tears, and she threw herself at him, her arms around his neck and her lithe body suddenly ensconced in his lap.

'I knew that all along,' she said, giggling softly into his ear.

Severus wrapped his arms around her and held her so close he could feel her heart beating against his chest.

'I love you,' he whispered again.

Hermione tipped her face upwards, and he caught her bottom lip with his mouth, sucking slightly. She moaned a little, and the sound brought an immediate response from Severus's cock, which twitched beneath her squirming bottom.

'How long do we have?' he whispered.

'Long enough,' she murmured, kissing him again and sliding her tongue along his lips seductively as she slid slowly from his lap. She took his hand and pulled him to his feet, leading him slowly up the stairs. Stopping half-way, she turned and wrapped her arms around him, kissing him passionately as he caressed her buttocks teasingly. He dropped his head and licked his way down her throat, and Hermione gasped as his hand brushed gently between her legs.

'Bedroom,' he growled.

Hermione didn't need telling twice, and she leapt up the final steps with Severus hot on her heels. She had her clothes off before Severus, and he stepped up to her from behind, cupping her breasts in his hands and tweaking her nipples. Hermione pushed her firm mounds into the palms of his hands and rubbed her buttocks against the bulge in his trousers.

'Bend over,' he said firmly. Hermione felt a shudder of arousal hit her, and she did as he instructed, leaning her hands on the mattress and giving him a delicious view of her pert arse and a tantalising glimpse of her wet labia. She almost cried out when she felt his mouth on her and his tongue slipping between her folds. She was so transported by sensation, she was unaware he had released his turgid cock from its stifling confines, and he pulled his mouth away and slid himself against her, nudging her opening with the tip.

'I need you,' she begged.

'I know,' he growled, stroking her breasts with his fingertips and pinching at her nipples urgently as he slid his cock around her folds teasingly.

'God, Severus... Please...' she moaned.

With a swift thrust, he was inside her throbbing pussy as deep as he could possibly go, and they both cried out their pleasure as he started to move back and forth slowly.

'Touch yourself, witch,' he said hoarsely.

Hermione mewed quietly and her head hit the mattress as he grasped her hips firmly. She slid a hand between her legs and probed until she found her clitoris, erect and pulsing with want. Her fingers slipped over it and she started to rub herself in a rhythm to match Severus's firm thrusting.

Severus almost came as he watched her pleasuring herself, and the sight of his cock disappearing inside her tightness was so exquisite he didn't want it to end. He felt Hermione start to buck beneath him, and he held her tighter as she moaned incoherently. Her orgasm started, and he finally let loose, pounding his thick, hard length into her as she cried out his name and shattered around him. Severus grunted and bit his lip to prolong the sensations of her clamping muscles, and then shouted out loud as he finally shot his semen deep within her walls, thrusting in and out gently and slowing his pace as his climax ended, leaving him elated and desperate for more of her all at once.

They collapsed onto the bed, both sated and yet needing to keep some contact with the other. Severus gathered her to him and they kissed softly.

'That was amazing,' Hermione said.

'You are amazing,' he replied.

They smiled gently at each other, not wanting the moment to end.

'We should dress, witch. Donovan will return soon, no doubt.'

'I love you,' she sighed, kissing him lightly and then slipping from him. They dressed silently, both dazed from their lovemaking.

'What shall we do now, Severus?' Hermione asked him as they walked down the stairs, holding hands awkwardly in the narrow space.

'Well, I think perhaps you should find your research notes for that Charm, and bring them to the lab at Hogwarts,' he said, frowning in thought.

'And what will you do?' she asked.

Severus turned his serious gaze on her. 'I will consider our next move in regards to Miss Maines, and I want you to promise me that you will pay no heed to any more of her poisonous talk. No one knows what we have, Hermione. No one but us.'

He stroked her cheek softly, and Hermione smiled.

Forty-Four

Chapter 45 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione walked along the corridor to her office with a heavy heart. She had hoped that she had found a kindred spirit in Alicia, and she couldn't fathom what had happened to change things between them. Her thoughts drifted to her time in America, when they had spent hours talking about Charms, how to advance this spell or that spell. Alicia had hung on her every word, encouraged her to think in different ways. They had worked so well together.

Naturally, her pregnancy had changed things, because she spent less time discussing Charms and more time thinking about her new baby and what was to happen in the future. When Severus hadn't responded to her letter, she had sunk into a depression for over a month, and it had taken her longer than that to feel any way normal again.

Donovan's arrival had been a catalyst for many things. Alicia had helped out initially, but they started to spend more time doing different things. Alicia was still a party girl, but Hermione had Donovan to think about, and there was no way she would want to go wizard-hunting with Alicia and leave her son with a stranger. The more time Hermione had spent with Donovan, the more her thoughts had turned to home, and to Severus. It was only a matter of time before she decided to return, and as she started to make plans to move, Alicia all but faded into the background until her farewell party, where she had arrived, glammed up to the nines, and grabbed all of the attention.

Hermione was just about to walk past Harry's office and almost jumped when he called out to her.

Harry was at his desk, surrounded as he usually was by memos, some coming in and some going out. The space below the ceiling was swirling with bits of paper as they waited patiently for their turn to be read.

'Busy as usual?' she asked with a smile.

Harry rolled his eyes. 'You know I didn't call you in to talk about work. Why are you here? You don't start back until next week,' he replied.

'I need some research notes. We've had a breakthrough with Minerva.'

Hermione perched herself on the edge of the desk beside Harry and twirled a length of hair around her finger absently.

'That's fantastic news.' Harry beamed at her. 'Why aren't you more excited?'

'That's a story for another day, but let's just say you don't always know who you can trust.' Hermione frowned as she recalled the sight of Alicia touching Severus.

'Not Severus, I hope? I thought you might work things out between you,' Harry said sincerely.

'You've changed your tune, and Severus did mention your name the other day. What did you say to him, Harry?' Hermione eyed him suspiciously.

Harry raised his hands defensively. 'I thought I was helping. I told him you'd written to him, that's all. He hadn't checked his post for over a year, you know. He had no idea about Donovan,' he said gently. 'It was a disaster, then, I take it?'

Hermione giggled and wrapped her arms around Harry, hugging him tightly. 'No, it was not a disaster, Harry Potter,' she said happily. 'In fact, there's probably going to be a wedding soon,' she said, smiling down at him.

'Wow,' Harry said. 'He didn't waste any time, did he?' He grinned at Hermione, who was quite obviously glowing with inner happiness. 'Congratulations, Hermione.'

'He didn't tell me you had given him a push in the right direction. I think we have a lot to thank you for.' Hermione squeezed his hand.

'Any time.' Harry laughed. 'What about Donovan? Do they like each other?'

'Harry, you wouldn't believe how close they are already. It's really wonderful,' she sighed.

'I'm glad, although even I'm struggling to see Snape as a dad!' Harry said, laughing.

'You just wait and see. He could probably give you tips,' Hermione replied with a giggle.

'I have to go,' she said, walking to the door. 'See you next week?'

Harry nodded. 'Bye, Hermione. Let me know how it goes with Minerva.'

Severus arrived back at Hogwarts in time for lunch. It hadn't escaped his notice that he had spent less time attending to his duties as Headmaster recently. The guilt he felt had less to do with the running of the school, or lack thereof, but more to do with not looking after Minerva's post as he had promised he would. Resolved to check in with his colleagues, he walked purposefully through the entrance hall and into the Great Hall with the air of a man in charge of things. He almost choked when he saw Alicia Maines sitting beside Filius Flitwick, chatting away as if they had been friends for years, but he schooled his features. No point letting the mask slip before the dish was chilled and served.

'Miss Maines, Filius.' Severus nodded by way of greeting and walked on past to his own seat. He saw Filius crane his neck forward, and he turned slowly to catch his eye and raised his eyebrow in question.

'Severus, I found your friend Miss Maines wandering around the castle and I thought it only fair to invite her to join us for lunch,' he said by way of explanation.

'My thanks, Filius. Miss Maines, I apologise for my absence. It was unavoidable, as you know.' He looked at Alicia and allowed his lips to curl in a small smile.

Alicia beamed back at him. 'Did everything work out, Professor?'

'Sadly not. I think, however,' he said softly, and paused, letting his tongue run over his lower lip as he looked at Alicia appraisingly, 'it shall not bother me for long.'

Severus almost laughed out loud as he saw a pink blush rise up Alicia's throat, and she dropped her gaze coquettishly. It was almost too easy.

'I wonder, Miss Maines, if you would care to join me for a walk after lunch? The grounds are quite extensive, and I would be pleased to show them to you.' Severus stared at Alicia pointedly, and her eyes lit up with pleasure.

'I would love to, Professor, thank you.' She smiled at him almost shyly.

'Please,' he said smoothly. 'Call me Severus.'

They ate in comparative silence after their exchange, but Severus was aware of the small glances that were aimed his way, and he smiled smugly.

After lunch, Severus persuaded Alicia to wait for him in the entrance hall. Using the need to collect his outdoor robes as an excuse, he dashed to his quarters and Floo-called Hermione to let her know his plan. She was reluctant to go along with it at first, but Severus was determined. He had a feeling that there was more going on here than they knew, and he needed to get to the bottom of it.

As he left his quarters with his robes over his arm and a further set for Alicia, his face was grim. He felt a surge of anger as he remembered what Alicia had said to Hermione and how deeply it had affected her. The woman had almost cost him the love of his life, something he would not forgive or forget.

Hermione found the file she was searching for at the back of an old filing cabinet. Being the only person with the knowledge and skills to progress the research, the project had been shelved in her absence. She was grateful that the Ministry had a ruling that research files must be retained for at least fifty years before disposal, otherwise all of the work, and the vital information that could restore Minerva, could have been lost.

Hermione sat back in her chair, her fingers tapping the file absently as she thought about Severus. His plan was risky, and she wasn't sure she felt happy about playing along with it. It was clear that Alicia was a loose cannon when it came to trampling over people, and the whole thing could go too far without Severus realising he was out of his depth.

The only way to deal with the unease Hermione felt was to get to Hogwarts as quickly as possible. The least amount of time Alicia spent alone with Severus, the happier she would be.

Forty-Five

Chapter 46 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione lit the fire in Severus's quarters when she got there to take the chill from the room. Severus had told her he was taking Alicia for a walk around the grounds to soften her up a bit, and she was disgruntled to find that they hadn't returned yet.

She went into the lab, leaving the door wide open, and spread the research notes around her. She lifted a sheet of parchment and read through it. She had been right; this was precisely the sort of Charm work they had been looking into. Useful for weeding out unregistered Animagi, it had originally been developed to pass on to the Aurors as a Revealing Spell. Unfortunately, while it was able to transform a witch or wizard to their animal form, it wouldn't work in reverse. This ran the risk of the said person escaping in their Animagus form, particularly if they could fly or run at speed. It also meant that if they didn't return themselves to their natural state, any prosecution that could have been made would be worthless. Only witches and wizards in the human form could be tried under the rules of the Wizengamot.

Hermione pondered the Charm for a while. There was no way of knowing if Minerva would have the strength to transform back after being healed in her feline form, and she wasn't sure if it was a good risk to take. She would have to talk it over with Severus and Luna. She lifted her quill from behind her ear and made a note on the bottom of the parchment and was about to start reading again when she heard the door of Severus's quarters open and the low rumble of his laughter. Her eyes narrowed as she watched Alicia smiling as Severus removed her cloak, and then remembered the plan. She hated it even more now she saw them together, but she trusted Severus. Hopefully she wouldn't have to maintain the charade for long. She cast her eyes downwards as Severus walked towards the lab.

'Granger. I have to say I'm surprised to see you here,' Severus said blandly.

Hermione looked up at him and hardened her gaze. 'I am still interested in helping Minerva, even if you are not, Professor,' she said with a steely tone. 'It looks like you have other areas of interest now, however.' She glared at Alicia with feeling, and the blonde witch averted her gaze and shifted to stand behind Severus slightly.

'We went for a walk. Not that how I spend my time is any of your business anymore,' Severus snapped at her. 'Is that the Charm?'

'Yes. I'll explain it to you. If you come and look at this sheet here...' Hermione shifted to make space for Severus beside her, but he cut her off.

'No matter. In fact, perhaps now would be a good time for you to return to care for our son. I am quite sure Miss Maines will be able to decipher your work. She is very talented in the area of Charms, I believe.' Severus turned to Alicia and held his hand out to her, and she took it with a small smirk of triumph on her face.

Hermione felt her face turn beetroot red, and she slid herself angrily from the stool she sat on and walked up to Severus with her eyes blazing.

'You have no respect for me, Severus Snape. Why I ever thought you might love me is beyond me, quite honestly,' she said harshly. She poked her finger into his chest to emphasise her next point. 'You don't rate my abilities as a witch! All you want me to do is stay home and raise Donovan, while you do whoever it is you want to do. Well, good luck finding what we had with anyone else, Severus.'

Hermione turned to Alicia, seething with fury. 'I thought we were friends, but it seems I was wrong. Good luck with him, Alicia. You'll need it.'

Alicia clutched Severus's hand tightly and stepped back, but her face was calm and her eyes shining with the pure pleasure of Hermione's display.

'Goodbye, Hermione,' she called as Hermione Floo'ed away.

She didn't see the worried look on Severus's face. He hoped he hadn't gone too far. Coughing lightly, he let go of Alicia's hand and walked to the workbench.

'Alicia. Could you cast your eye over this? I am eager to return Minerva to full health as soon as I can, and while Granger has a certain expertise, she hasn't been practising her Charm work recently, unless I am mistaken?' He raised a questioning eyebrow at Alicia, who smirked and laughed out loud.

'You have to be kidding.' Alicia walked to Severus's side. 'I really thought she would be of great use to us in the department. That was why I invited her to stay, you know.'

She grinned at Severus, who twitched his mouth slightly in encouragement.

'The silly witch thought we were friends, but all I needed were her research ideas to keep the department afloat. That award meant everything to me, you see.'

'I see.' Severus let out a laugh, but felt nauseous. 'Are you sure you weren't educated at Hogwarts? You have certain Slytherin traits, I believe.'

'No, definitely not. Salem Institute. But I have always believed that there are ways to get what you want.'

Alicia stepped close to Severus and tipped her face towards his, eyeing his lips closely. Severus bent his head to hers and smiled, closing his hand over hers softly.

'Alicia,' he said smoothly.

'Severus?' Alicia licked her lips.

Severus stepped back quickly and handed the parchments to her. 'I will be in the Headmistress's office should you need me. I shan't be long.'

He turned quickly, his robes billowing as he walked away and closed the door firmly.

Alicia stared after him with her mouth open in surprise and was so nonplussed that she was unaware of security wards being placed on the door, effectively locking her in the lab.

As soon as Severus was sure that his wards were set, he walked to the Floo in two long strides, but it wasn't to the Headmistresses' office that he went but to Hilltop Cottage. As soon as he stepped out of the Floo, he found Hermione standing directly in front of him with a small, uncertain smile playing around her lips.

'You were just acting, weren't you?' she asked him tentatively.

Pulling her to him, he enveloped her in his arms and nuzzled her curls as they caressed her creamy throat and then kissed her fragrant skin lightly.

'Of course I was acting. You know how much I need you, Hermione,' he said, pulling away and taking hold of Hermione's hands. 'Did you do as I asked?'

Hermione nodded. 'I did, but I still don't understand.'

He looked down into her wide, brown eyes and sighed sadly. 'You have been a victim of a nasty, vindictive ruse, I am sorry to say.'

'Whatever do you mean?' Hermione's eyes narrowed and Severus filled her in quickly on his most recent conversation with Alicia.

Hermione walked over to the mantle and ran her finger absently over a framed photograph of Donovan, taken shortly after he was born. She didn't focus on it. Her mind was trying to make sense of what she had just heard. She let out a deep sigh, and Severus took her hand and led her to sit beside him, where he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

'I really thought we were friends. But you were right, Severus. She just wanted what she could get from me, and to make my research into her own success.' Hermione laid her head softly on his shoulder and he gently kissed the top of her head.

'We should return and see if the rest of my plan worked. I believe she has been alone for long enough.' Severus hugged Hermione lightly and let her go, standing and straightening his clothes smartly.

'I don't know that I can face her without wanting to hex her, to be truthful,' Hermione said.

'If I know Miss Maines as I think I do, you won't have to. Come, you'll see.' He pulled Hermione to her feet.

'I will hex her, Severus, I warn you now.' Hermione's eyes flashed angrily, and Severus smirked.

'That's my witch,' he growled, capturing her lips in a sudden, passionate kiss.

Hermione laughed loudly and pushed him away. 'I should threaten other people more often. Come on, let's get it over with.'

Hermione would have found the scene that greeted them more comical if she hadn't been feeling so intensely furious with Alicia. As it was, she viewed the tableau as if through a haze.

As they stepped from the Floo, they immediately saw that the door of the lab was wide open, and lying on the floor in the doorway was Filius Flitwick, obviously Petrified, with a look of pure surprise on his face. Severus stepped over to him with his wand outstretched and helped him to his feet after a murmured, 'Finite Incantatem.'

He checked the lab briefly, a smug smile on his face, and then turned to Filius.

'What happened?' he asked him.

Filius turned to him indignantly, his hands on his hips as he rocked back and forth with irritation.

'You locked the poor girl in your lab, Severus! Of all the ridiculous things to do! She alerted me with her Patronus, and as I unwarded the door, I obviously sprung some sort of trap you had laid. The poor girl was obviously so distressed, she left without realising I was incapacitated!'

Severus chuckled slightly. 'My apologies, Filius. I had no idea you would be summoned to free Miss Maines, and I promise, when Minerva is back to full health I will explain everything. As it stands, however, Hermione and I have some work to complete, if you don't mind.'

Filius looked at Severus as if he had never seen him before as the tall, dark wizard guided him from his quarters with a definite smile on his face. He walked from the room feeling more than a little bewildered, and no more so when he heard deep, booming laughter coming from the acting Headmaster's quarters as soon as the door had closed.

Severus smiled smugly at Hermione.

'It worked. She took the spell with her.' He laughed again.

'Oh, goodness.' Hermione covered her mouth with her hand in a futile attempt to stop herself laughing along with him.

'How long do you think it will be before she attempts the spell?' Severus asked her.

'Knowing Alicia,' Hermione said with a trembling voice, 'she will be testing it as we speak.'

Severus grinned at Hermione as she finally lost control of herself and collapsed in a fit of giggles onto the sofa.

Forty-Six

Chapter 47 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

The soft ticking of the kitchen clock provided a counterpoint to the sharp scratchy sounds from Hermione's quill, but the rest of the house was quietly peaceful. Donovan had fallen asleep in the crook of Severus's arm before they had finished reading through his picture book, and after he had placed him gently in his cot, he had slipped back to Hogwarts to tie up some loose ends before returning to the cottage for the night.

Hermione lifted her glass of wine and sipped it slowly, letting the sweet and sour liquid play over her tongue lightly before swallowing. She pushed her curls from her eyes and tucked them back behind her ears for the umpteenth time and then began to re-read her notes. Tomorrow, they would be using her spell on Minerva, and although all of their tests had so far been successful, she was still nervous about the outcome.

Severus stepped from the Floo and gently shook the soot from his clothes before walking to the kitchen. He paused and watched Hermione for a moment before clearing his throat and alerting her to his presence. She looked up at him and her face lit up in a warm smile, and not for the first time, he counted his blessings that he had her in his life once more.

Hermione's stomach rumbled loudly, and she blushed to her roots, dropping her gaze quickly to her notes.

'Don't tell me you haven't eaten yet?' he berated her gently.

'I will do shortly. I just wanted to make sure I haven't missed anything,' she murmured.

'*Accio* Hermione's notes,' Severus said softly, ignoring the look of consternation on her face. He plucked the parchment from the air deftly and scanned her neat, rounded writing. It was so familiar to him, he felt he had been reading her words for all of his life, and he smiled up at her. 'You haven't missed a thing.'

Hermione sighed with relief. 'Thank goodness,' she said.

Severus folded the parchment and slipped it into his inside pocket, his firm gaze challenging Hermione to protest. He flicked his fingers, and her quill vanished, making it quite clear that her work was done, for this night at least. He walked over to where she sat, slipped his jacket off, and placed his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging out the knots that he knew would sit at the nape of her neck. Her stomach growled again, and Severus sighed.

'Hopeless,' he said in her ear, and Hermione giggled.

He walked over to the telephone, raising his eyebrows at Hermione as she sat with her chin on her hand, smiling softly at him as he placed an order for Crispy Chilli Chicken, times two. Her finger traced the edge of her wine glass slowly, and she dipped her fingertip into the liquid and placed it into her mouth, sucking it slowly and all the while, holding Severus's gaze. She grinned softly as his eyes glazed over at the sight of her finger sliding so suggestively between her full lips, and his mouth dropped open slightly as he replaced the receiver.

'Everything okay, Severus?' she asked him lightly.

'You are a naughty witch,' he said a little huskily, and he walked over to her and pulled her to her feet before bending his lips to hers and tasting the wine for himself. Hermione sighed happily, eagerly opening her mouth and letting him slide his tongue inside sensuously, teasing her own tongue as his hand caressed the side of her breast through her thin, cotton t-shirt.

'I love you,' she whispered, her breath catching as she felt her desire start to rise.

Severus pulled back to look at her. Her eyes were half-closed, and her lips were full and pink. He felt a small lurch in his stomach as he looked at her, knowing that she desired him, that it was he who made her react in this way. He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

'I love you too, Hermione,' he said quietly. 'And I intend to show you just how much,' he said, bending and kissing her firmly before pulling swiftly away again. 'Just as soon as you've eaten.'

'Severus!' Hermione opened her eyes fully and glared at him, reaching out to bat him on the shoulder, but he saw it coming and neatly side-stepped the swipe with a chuckle.

The doorbell sounded and Severus looked at Hermione meaningfully. 'You need to eat, witch. You will need your strength before the night is through.'

Hermione gasped at his words and then flushed at the thought of the pleasures to come. Without another word of protest, she went to collect their food from the delivery driver.

Hermione finished her last mouthful and let her cutlery fall to her plate with a clunk.

'That was great,' she said contently. 'It's been ages since we've done this.'

'Mmm,' Severus agreed. He had finished his meal first and was now lying on the sofa with his feet up and his hands clasped lightly over his slightly round stomach, a symptom of Hogwarts food, Firewhisky and age. 'You know, I am really looking forward to tomorrow,' he said.

'Why is that?' Hermione asked as she lifted their plates and carried them through to the kitchen. When she returned, Severus had rolled onto his side and shuffled back to make room for Hermione beside him, and she snuggled next to him, wrapping her arm snugly around his waist.

'Because when Minerva wakes, I can start planning my departure from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Misery,' he said meaningfully.

Hermione laughed against his chest. 'You're a horrible man,' she said.

'I'm not. I'm just honest. I take no pleasure from the school, and it holds no fond memories for me the way it does for you. I long for the day when I can spend hours in the garden again. I have missed it greatly.' He let his hand rest on Hermione's stomach and his fingertips softly stroked the soft skin above the waistband of her jeans.

'Do you really think Minerva will recover, Severus?' Hermione asked him quietly.

'Of course I do. You're an incredible witch, Hermione. The spell is logical and well planned. I cannot imagine why it hasn't been invented before. It took you to see the potential,' he said warmly.

'You say some lovely things sometimes,' Hermione sighed happily.

'I'm tired of talking,' he said seductively, turning his face to hers and staring into her eyes. His fingers slipped open the button at the top of her fly, and he smirked as she held her breath. Slowly, he slid the zip down and his fingers teased the top of her lace knickers. Hermione squirmed, and Severus moved his hand away abruptly.

'My way, or no way, witch,' he growled.

Hermione giggled. 'Sorry, Severus,' she said meekly, earning her a deep chuckle before his lips met hers in a tender and loving kiss.

'Hold tight,' he whispered. Hermione grasped the front of Severus's shirt, and he twisted slightly, Apparating them directly to the bed upstairs with a bounce. Hermione started to laugh, but she was soon silenced by Severus's deep, hungry kiss and the sensation of his fingers as they probed her moist lips.

It was early morning by the time Hermione was allowed to sleep. Severus had been needy for her in a way that neither of them had ever known before, but when they finally curled up together and settled their heads on the soft pillows, they both knew that a deeper understanding had been reached. No words had been said, no declarations or proposals this time, but they both felt it. They would never be apart again.

Forty-Seven

Chapter 48 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

Hermione felt slightly nauseous as she walked down the narrow corridor of St Mungo's. Severus walked beside her, his face set. They were both nervous and both knew it, although nothing was said. Their hope of a fresh start to their family life hung on the outcome of this morning, not to mention bringing their good friend back to them.

They were met by Luna, who smiled at them with such encouragement, and excitement, that Hermione couldn't help but panic. There was so much riding on this, and Minerva meant a lot to everyone, particularly her ex-pupils.

Beside her stood a tall man with greying hair and a calm, open visage. He wore a white lab coat and carried a holdall similar to a doctor's Gladstone bag.

'Hi, Hermione. Hello, Severus. I have been looking forward to this day.' She smiled brightly. 'This is Frank Brownlee. He's a Wizard Veterinarian. He will diagnose Minerva once she has transformed.'

Frank Brownlee shook their hands with a smile on his face. 'I hope to do more than diagnose your friend. I'll do my best to cure her, too.'

Hermione gave Luna and Frank a tight smile, but said nothing. Severus looked closely at Luna's face.

'Do you know something that we do not, Nurse Weasley?' he asked, knowing Luna's ability to predict things.

'It's Luna, Severus, as I keep telling you. And I prefer to keep my thoughts to myself on this occasion, if that's okay.'

She turned from them and walked briskly to Minerva's room, but not before Severus had caught the edge of a smile on her face. He breathed a deep sigh. Now he knew all would be well.

Severus took Hermione's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. She squeezed back, but didn't catch his eye. She was running the spell through in her head over and over again to make sure she didn't mess it up when she had to say it for real.

As they all entered the room, Luna lifted her wand and ran a series of complex diagnostic spells on Minerva, who was still sleeping peacefully.

'We reduced her stasis charm yesterday. I'll remove it fully before you start the spell. She's at her optimum level of health thanks to your potions, Severus. There's nothing more we can do to prepare her for this. The rest is up to you, Hermione.' Luna smiled warmly at her friend and patted her arm.

'I wish I felt less nervous,' Hermione said quietly.

'You know the spell works. We tested it many times. Just relax,' Severus soothed her calmly.

Hermione withdrew her wand slowly and stepped towards the bed. Luna lifted her wand, and the shimmer of the stasis spell surrounding Minerva slowly disappeared, leaving the sleeping witch at the mercy of her illness. Frank Brownlee stood respectfully at the foot of the bed, but eyed the patient closely as if to glean some sort of clue from her presentation.

Hermione paused before raising her wand and turned to look at Severus. He nodded at her to continue, and she took a deep breath before lifting her hand and starting to speak. She moved her wand in an intricate pattern over Minerva's prone form, and a violet glow emanated from her wand tip and covered the Headmistress like a

translucent blanket.

The change was almost unnoticeable at first, but as Hermione finished speaking and moved her wand in a final flick and swish, the human form of Minerva McGonagall was replaced by that of a mangy-looking, miserable silver tabby cat.

Frank Brownlee let out a long sigh and immediately took charge of the proceedings by walking between Hermione and Severus and running his hands over Minerva's cat form, feeling beneath her fur with gentle fingers.

'Do you know what's wrong with her, Mr Brownlee?' Severus asked in hushed tones.

The sight of Minerva's usually sleek and vital Animagus form reduced to that of a flea-bitten old moggy was more of a shock to him than his friend falling ill in the first place.

Frank sighed again. 'I think I know what this is, Professor Snape. I just need to verify my suspicions.' He pursed his thin lips into a line so tight that they almost disappeared and then began to cast a series of diagnostic spells.

The cat that was Minerva let out a low meow from deep in her throat, and her ears went flat against her head as she eyed Frank Brownlee with suspicion. Hermione held out her hand tentatively.

'Shush,' she crooned, gently stroking the fur at the back of her neck. 'He won't hurt you, Minerva.'

Severus raised a surprised eyebrow at Hermione, who glared back at him.

'Well, she is a cat, Severus. How else should I calm her down? Anyway, it always worked for Crookshanks,' Hermione said defensively. To her delight, Minerva purred softly and rubbed her face against her knuckles, and she shot a smug grin at Severus before resuming her stroking.

Frank slid his wand back into his upper left hand pocket and lifted his bag onto the end of the bed. He opened it to reveal a selection of pills and potions and grabbed a quill and a scrap of parchment.

'Mr Brownlee, we would be more than grateful if you could give us some indication of what you have or have not diagnosed,' Severus said from between gritted teeth.

There was a hint of no nonsense in his voice, and it worked on Frank Brownlee in the same way it worked on the first years of Hogwarts. The man visibly jumped and turned sheepishly to Severus and Hermione while casting a hopeful glance at Luna. He got no support there, but met the same frustrated and stony glance from the mediwitch.

'Forgive me,' he said, his hands splayed in supplication. 'I was so involved in my task.'

Hermione smiled then. She knew that feeling of being so focussed on something that everything else was forgotten.

'It's okay, Frank. We appreciate your help, but you need to remember we have been trying to get Minerva well for quite some time now. It's really important that we know what's wrong with her,' Hermione said, trying to encourage him.

'She has cat 'flu. Quite a serious strain, actually. It's a good job you kept her in stasis, or we would have been too late.' He looked at Severus seriously.

'Is there a cure?' Severus felt a little shaky.

'Well, I will try this extra-strength antibiotic first, and there are some Charms that can complement that should she need a boost. Difficult thing, treating Animagi. I've never had to treat one with cat 'flu before, to be honest.'

He walked over to Minerva, and with help from Hermione, he managed to get her to swallow a phial of antibiotic potion. They all looked at her for a few moments as if expecting there to be an instant cure, but there was no change.

'I think we should let her rest and come back later today,' Frank said.

'Very well,' Severus said, obviously disappointed.

'She looks very content,' Hermione said, stroking the head of the now dozing cat, curled up in a ball in the centre of the bed.

'I think she will be fine,' Luna said, smiling knowingly.

'You're such a tease, Luna.' Hermione laughed lightly and took Severus's hand. 'Take me for lunch. I'm suddenly starving.'

They said their goodbyes after making Luna promise to contact them if there was any change at all.

The coffee shop in Diagon Alley was only recently opened and seemed to be modelled on a similar American chain of shops. Hermione loved it as soon as she walked in and inhaled the rich, sultry aroma of roasted coffee beans. Severus scowled around himself and huffed slightly.

'What on earth is wrong with you?' Hermione muttered at him.

'Nothing. I just don't go for all this.' He waved his hand around himself dismissively.

'I love it. Look, there's a free couch. You go and sit; I'll get the coffee and some food.' She pushed a reluctant Severus over to the couch and watched as he sat tentatively, as if expecting it to jump up and bite him. Shaking her head, she walked to the counter and ordered two large cappuccinos and two paninis.

As she walked back to the couch, she was shocked to see a very different Severus to the grumbling man she had turned her back on. He had lifted a glossy magazine and had his head buried between the pages, ostensibly reading. Hermione wasn't fooled, however. She could see the magazine trembling and the tell-tale shaking of his shoulders, and she knew that Severus was fighting the urge to laugh out loud.

She sat down beside him and lent towards him. 'What on earth is so funny?' she whispered.

'This,' he laughed, handing the magazine to her and lifting his handkerchief to wipe his watery eyes.

Hermione took the 'Witch Life' magazine from him and stared in disbelief at the two-page spread. A large photograph of Alicia Maines shone out from half of the first page under the headline '*New Spell Backfires on Genius Witch*'. On the second page was a photograph of a Chihuahua, and the caption below it read '*Miss Maines, as she is now*'.

Hermione gasped and started to read. She had known that Alicia would want to try the spell immediately, but she had no idea it would make the gossip columns of the American society magazines. The article went into great detail about a press conference that had been held, amid huge publicity, at the hospital where Alicia worked. The witch was there to unveil the new spell she had been working on. Unfortunately, the spell had backfired, and instead of transforming the well-known socialite witch, Maris Wilton, into her Animagus form, the spell had transferred to the caster, Miss Maines. She was then transformed into the dog in the photograph, and no amount of 'Finite Incantatem's' had been able to reverse the spell.

'Oh, my God,' Hermione said, trying hard not to giggle and failing miserably.

'Revenge tastes delicious, doesn't it?' Severus took a long slurp of his coffee and grinned at Hermione.

'But, Severus, you know we can't let her stay that way,' Hermione chided through laughter.

'Well, perhaps we could send the solution to her. In a week or so,' he said, not catching Hermione's gaze.

Hermione put down the magazine and lifted her coffee, then took a contemplative sip.

'I think we may be quite busy this month, Severus,' she said seriously. 'We will have to leave our correspondence until we have more time, don't you think?' She sat back in the couch and licked the foam from her top lip slowly, and looked innocently at Severus. His eyes flashed at her in amusement.

'I think you're absolutely right.'

They sat and ate their lunch in silence, with the occasional giggle from Hermione, who had pocketed the magazine after shrinking it discreetly. They were both surprised when a Patronus in the form of a small fawn landed before them and spoke in Luna's voice.

'You need to return to St. Mungo's. Minerva has transformed back to her human form and is asking to see you both.'

Severus grabbed Hermione by the hand and they ran out of the coffee shop before Luna's Patronus disappeared.

Forty- Eight

Chapter 49 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Only one chapter to go after this. Thanks to everyone who has been reading xx

They had gathered around Minerva's bed like vultures staring at a carcass, and as Severus stood at the rear of the room, with his back to the wall and his arms folded across his chest, his scowl was firmly in place for anyone who wished to look in his direction.

Where had they been when she was at death's door? No bloody where. It had been he who had cared for her, visited her daily. He had read to her, and not all of it academic texts. He had given in and recited Robbie Burns, her favourite, not knowing if she had heard him as he spoke but doing so anyway, his smooth, lilting voice caressing the words, like chocolate sauce over quality vanilla ice cream.

He saw Hermione slip in through the door, carrying two paper cups of steaming and yet disgusting hospital coffee. Ironic that St Mungo's had to model itself precisely on its Muggle counterpart, even in catering. She handed him a cup and placed her hand on his arm gently.

'Don't worry,' she whispered. 'They'll be gone soon.'

Pomona was the first to leave, clutching Minerva's still thin frame to her ample bosoms and hugging her tightly, almost suffocating her in the liberally sprayed 'Lily of the Valley' perfume that she favoured. Minerva gasped until she was released and glugged down the glass of water beside her as if it were badly needed Firewhisky. Severus snorted, and the old witch caught his eye with a steely glare. He answered her with a shrug and continued to sulk as the line of visitors trailed away.

Harry was the last to leave, and Hermione followed him out, ostensibly to make sure he really did go. Severus was gratified she hadn't actually said, 'I'll leave you both alone,' but her gaze told him that was her intention all the same.

He stared at her for a short time, until she patted the bedclothes for him to sit beside her. He did so, awkwardly, not really knowing what to say. 'I'm glad you're not dead,' didn't seem appropriate, somehow. He started when she took his hand in hers. There was never a demonstrative relationship. He could hardly bring himself to meet her gaze, but when he did, she was crying.

'Severus, I don't know how to thank you,' she said hoarsely.

'You sound like you have a hair ball,' he said, looking away in embarrassment.

Minerva coughed and took more water. Finally composed, she patted his hand and let go.

'How is the school?' she asked more surely.

'Still standing,' he murmured. Finally they were on safer ground.

He wouldn't say that he had missed her steady influence in his life. He wouldn't say that he cared for her like family and that the thought of losing her had been the only thing that could have persuaded him out of his self-imposed exile – for that was surely what his life had been. He wouldn't say that he wanted her approval for his relationship with Hermione, and that he hoped she would see Donovan as the grandchild she had never had. He wouldn't say that he needed her, or that he loved her. None of those things would pass his lips.

He met her eyes again, and the warmth he found there told him that she knew it all anyway.

Hermione turned to him in the early hours of the morning, knowing he wasn't sleeping by the even tone of his breathing. She didn't speak, but snuggled her face against his chest. Her hand played with the sparse smattering of hair between his navel and his nether regions, before travelling south and cupping his testicles in a tentative gesture.

'Did you want something?' he said softly, his voice slightly raspy from his earlier Firewhisky. He had taken one too many, and Hermione knew this was from relief, joyous, overwhelming and exhausted relief.

'I have everything I could possibly want already, Severus. I was wondering what you wanted?' she whispered, planting small kisses onto his chest and shifting her position

to flick his nipple with her tongue lightly.

Severus laughed shortly. 'A question I have been asking myself all night. I wanted Minerva to be healed, and she is.'

'So, now what?' Hermione's hand was now around his erection, gentle pressure, up and down, her tongue in his navel as his hand buried itself in her curls.

'Right now, you know what I want. As for the future. I'll decide in the morning.'

He inhaled sharply as Hermione ran her tongue over his glans softly and then took his length into her warm, moist mouth. She always thought he tasted delicious, and she swallowed most of him eagerly, sliding herself between his legs and letting his balls rest between her breasts. His legs twitched, and she knew the signs. She pulled away from him with a slurp and slid herself up his body to his waiting lips. They kissed slowly, tongues languorously playing with each other as his fingers sought her clitoris. She moaned into his mouth, and he started to thrum her with a practiced touch. It wouldn't take long for her to climax; he was so good at knowing her responses now. He manoeuvred her down onto his cock, and they hissed with shared pleasure as he filled her and she clenched him tightly. She sat up and moved gracefully above him. The covers slipped from her body, and the chink of the rising sunlight highlighted her lush skin and her pert breasts, nipples hard and needy.

'You are so beautiful,' he gasped, tracing her breasts with his hands and letting his palms light her desire across her nipples. 'I love you, Hermione.'

Hermione stopped and stared down into his face. He had never told her that he loved her without her saying it to him first. His eyes met hers gently, a smile gracing his lips. She kissed him softly and he flipped her over, caressing her cheek with his hand as he started to move inside her again. Their eyes locked, and they came together, quietly but with such feeling that Hermione felt her heart would burst from her chest.

They lay in each other's arms and watched the sun rise through the open curtains over the rolling Derbyshire hills. Severus brought Donovan to their bed when he awoke.

As the small family discussed their future, Severus decided exactly what he would do next.

Epilogue

Chapter 50 of 56

After the war, Hermione needs a break. A small house provides her with more than just the sanctuary she craves.

A/N: Here we are then, the final chapter. It feels like a lifetime ago that I started on this. Thanks to those who travelled the journey with me, not least my beta, ARo, who helped me out when my last helper stopped helping!

I want to thank everyone for their kind reviews. I've enjoyed reading each of them and you have made me laugh with your predictions and comments.

I also want to thank RobisonRocket here at The Petulant Poetess for her patience.

Severus shrank the battered cardboard box that was perched on his old sofa and handed it to Hermione. He took a brief glance at her as she stepped through the Floo, but when their eyes met he purposely looked away.

He had never imagined that leaving the house in Spinner's End would be so difficult. After all, he had lived at Hogwarts for most of his life, and he had never felt any real sense of belonging in the house. It held more sad and depressing memories than happy ones, and the latter involved Hermione and their first night together in his old bedroom.

He made his way up the stairs and into his lab. Except it wasn't his lab any more. All of the equipment was now neatly boxed and ready for installing in the extension of Hilltop Cottage. It wasn't a wand created extension, but had been built properly at his insistence. Magical expansion was all well and good, but there was always a risk of breakdown at inopportune moments, and Severus didn't trust it. Bricks and mortar had more integrity, and safety had to be priority, particularly if Donovan was going to assist in the lab when he was older.

Severus ran his hand over the dusty workbench. He imagined it would be tossed with the rest of the house when the bulldozers moved in, and he couldn't say he was sorry. He couldn't imagine a family living happily in the house where the taint of his poor and unhappy childhood had followed him like a spectre.

In his bedroom, no furniture remained. Hermione had insisted on donating it all to the local church charity, and all that was left was the threadbare carpet and the musty old curtains. Severus looked out of the window. The scrub ground was now surrounded by metal fencing which bore the signs of a local building firm and estate agent. The area was designated for new building, affordable housing and luxury apartments. The whole of Spinner's End would be gone by the end of the year.

Severus sighed. He wondered how different his life might have been had he been born into pure-blood stock. Lucius had led a charmed life, but it had only gained him wealth and status with other pure-bloods. He wasn't happy. Not in the way that Severus was happy. No. His life had been the right one for him, for without it, he wouldn't be where he was now.

As he walked down the old, broken stairs for the very last time, Severus said a silent thank you to the house in Spinner's End. It had brought Hermione to him, in a strange and roundabout way. For that he would be eternally thankful.

Hermione waited anxiously by the gate of Hilltop Cottage. The taxi was late by approximately four minutes, and Donovan was getting bored.

'Down,' he said firmly.

'No,' Hermione said, distracted as she strained her ears for the sound of the car. Finally, she saw an old blue motor chug its way down the lane, and she half-laughed and half-cursed under her breath.

As the car stopped, Hermione waved at Mike, who sat grinning behind the wheel, then climbed into the back and settled herself and Donovan comfortably.

'How's things with you, Hermione?' Mike asked, looking at her in the rear view mirror.

'Great, thank you, Mike.' Hermione was not going to share her personal information, but they had known each other for so long now, Mike knew not to ask.

'Town Hall, isn't it?' he asked instead, his eyes now focussed on the road.

'That's right.' Hermione straightened Donovan's jacket and tried to flatten the insistent curl that would not lie flat, and the boy pulled his head away in protest.

'No.' He glared at her with such a familiar look she couldn't help but laugh. He really was his father's son.

After ten minutes in the car, Donovan was so restless that Hermione thought she may need to use a Silencing charm on him, but with a sigh of relief, they pulled up outside the Town Hall and Donovan saw Severus waiting for them.

'Daddy,' he said happily, straining to get away from Hermione as soon as the car door opened.

Severus immediately lifted his son from the car while Hermione paid Mike, and he smiled at her warmly as she turned back to them.

'You look lovely,' he said, eyeing her sky blue dress and silver sandals. The sun was shining and catching golden highlights in her hair, and she radiated happiness as she tipped her head to kiss him.

'Let's do this,' she said, taking his hand.

'Everyone is inside,' Severus said as he adjusted Donovan on his hip and they walked up the stone steps.

Hermione stifled a giggle as she saw Minerva, Harry and Ginny standing in their Muggle clothes. Harry looked normal, in a pale grey suit, and Ginny was wearing one of Hermione's old dresses, lengthened to fit. But Minerva looked like she had stepped out of the pages of Country Life, with a tartan skirt, matching hat and a cable-knit sweater. It didn't really matter what any of them were wearing. Hermione was just so happy that they were there.

'Well,' said Minerva, her eyes sparkling as she looked at the family walking towards them. 'You all look very presentable.'

'Verbose as usual,' Severus said, smirking.

'Be quiet, Severus,' the old witch said with a glare. 'I may suddenly start to feel as weak as an ill kitten, and then where would you be?'

Severus paled, and the gathered friends all laughed at him. The thought of returning to Hogwarts after only a month of pure bliss away from the place made his stomach churn uncomfortably.

'Let's do this, shall we?' he said quickly, changing the subject and missing the amused glance that passed between Hermione and Minerva.

He handed Donovan over to Harry and thought briefly of the irony that the only other man he really trusted with his son was the boy wonder himself.

As they walked up the stairs to the Registrar's office, they looked like an ordinary, if eccentric group of individuals who were attending a civil marriage. No one would possibly have guessed that some of the most powerful magic in the whole of wizarding Britain was gathered in the small town of New Mills.

The pub was noisy and full of laughter. Donovan, popular as always with men and women alike, ran between tables, laughing and giggling with the customers and petting the mangy old dog that seemed to reside permanently in the porch way. No one seemed to know who owned him. He was just the pub dog. But Donovan loved him.

Severus eyed him carefully. He had never been allowed a dog at Spinner's End, but he knew that if Donovan ever asked for one, he would have it before the end of that day. He could refuse him nothing.

Hermione took his hand and linked her fingers through his. He glanced down, and the sight of their plain gold bands rubbing together made him jolt with the enormity of it all.

Severus Snape wasn't usually given to expressing his emotions in public, so he surreptitiously rubbed away the stray tear on the shoulder of his jacket. The only person to notice was Harry, who smiled to himself before going to the bar for another round of drinks. If ever someone needed a whisky, it was Severus.

They decided against a honeymoon. A family holiday had seemed like a much better idea, neither of them wanting to leave Donovan at home. It was a revelation to Severus, watching families on the beach. He found himself making sand castles. He thought they were ridiculous, but they made Donovan happy and Hermione happy.

That was the point of everything, really.

The End

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Chapter 51 of 56

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