

Facing Her Future

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Sequel to Facing Her Facts. Independent story, but it makes more sense if you read Facing Her Facts first.

One-shot Story

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: With many thanks to sshg316 for making this story readable!

Hermione wasn't very hungry that morning. She had gone to bed quite late and was still tired, and she had a rather persistent headache after having attended the New Year's party. She had been eating and drinking more and later in the evening than she was used to, which probably accounted for the bad dream she'd had. More like a nightmare, in fact, she told herself. She did not want to admit that she had enjoyed the previous night's dream, in which her generally annoyed and annoying professor had suddenly taken it into his stubborn head to make love to her, his previous student and present apprentice, in a most satisfying way. No, she did not want to admit how much she had enjoyed it. Especially not with Snape now sitting right next to her, the third why reason she couldn't eat much and just sat there playing with her toast, gulping down strong coffee, and hoping that she would soon be her level-headed, practical, not-at-all-infatuated-with-Snape self again.

'That was some party,' said Professor McGonagall, wiping her forehead with her napkin. She looked somewhat pale. She hadn't eaten too much either, Hermione noticed. Had the punch been that strong? Even Hagrid, strong as a thestral and generally able to take a lot more than other wizards, looked as though he had not had the best of nights.

Next to Hermione, Snape huffed. 'Almost like the old days, Minerva,' he said grumpily. 'Christmas pudding, Christmas crackers, and that infernal punch. I should have stayed away, as I had originally intended. Remind me never to let you talk me into attending again.'

'Now, now, Professor,' said Hagrid, putting down his coffee cup with so much force that he nearly broke the saucer. 'You know we all like to keep up the tradition.'

'Right,' Snape said wryly. 'But next time I'll make the punch. I'm not quite sure what went into it, but it had an odd taste. I suppose that's where this absolutely horrible headache is coming from.' He stopped talking because of the noise at the other end of the table, where Professor Trelawney seemed to have dropped her glass of pumpkin juice, cutting herself in the process.

Professor McGonagall lifted both hands to her temples. 'Please, Sybill,' she said. 'Don't tell me that you didn't see ~~that~~ coming.'

Professor Trelawney, apparently even more oversensitive than usual, took offense and rose from her chair, holding her bleeding finger up in the air. 'It ~~was~~ ~~one~~ of the possibilities,' she said, trying to make it sound dignified but failing miserably due to the sob she couldn't suppress. 'We Seers cannot always take all possible scenarios into account.'

'What, not even an anticipating piece of plaster in your handbag?' Professor McGonagall called after her as Professor Trelawney hastily left, probably in search of some medical supplies.

Hermione had watched the scene, still playing with her toast. Apart from the look he had given her when entering the hall, Snape had practically ignored her. She was

surprised and disappointed, and she was furious with herself for being so. What had she expected? The fact that she'd had a ridiculous dream about him did not mean that his thoughts were going in the same direction. She wasn't interested in him anyway, was she?

She finished her coffee and pushed back her plate. Her attention had been caught by the fact that last night's punch had been mentioned by Minerva, as well as Snape, and that everyone looked like they had not slept well. What if there *had* been something strange about that punch?

'Leaving already, Miss Granger?' Snape asked as she rose to her feet.

'Yes, Professor,' she answered. 'I have some research to do.' She looked at his face, which was somewhat paler than usual, like everyone else's. But his unguarded expression from earlier that morning had vanished altogether; his usual snark was in place again. She had probably just imagined it.

In the library it was still dark. No visitors were expected on New Year's Day. Hermione lit some lamps and went to the Restricted Section. That was one good thing about not being a student any more: she could check all the books in the castle without needing anyone's permission. What was she looking for? Potions and dreams. Erotic dreams, to be more exact. Still a rather wide subject. A general book first, she thought, which hopefully would yield some more specific hints. With a pile of books in her arms, she went to a table. Soon, she was immersed in her reading.

After half an hour or so, she was roused by the rustling of robes behind her. She did not look up. The rustle went past her, into the Restricted Section. It was Snape.

Even with a headache, it did not take a smart girl like Hermione very long to infer that Snape might also be looking for the effects of certain potions in punch. Had he had unusual dreams, too? Wouldn't she like to know what sort of dreams!

She was still considering possibilities when Snape returned. He glanced at the books in front of her.

'Well, well, Miss Granger,' he said. 'Thank you for preselecting the references I need. Great minds think alike, it seems.' His tone was ironic but not unfriendly.

Hermione chuckled. 'Thank you, Professor,' she said. And then, with an audacity which must have been due to the strange mood she had been in ever since she had woken up that morning: 'Do great minds dream alike, too?'

There was silence. Hermione held her breath and looked down. Damn, she thought. Stupid thing to say. How embarrassing.

She heard Snape clearing his throat. 'My dreams are none of your concern, Miss Granger,' he said. *My* present concern is last night's punch. My guess is that someone tampered with it. It had an odd taste, and it seems we all felt rather out of sorts this morning. I was under the perhaps mistaken impression that you had come to the same conclusion, and that you could assist me in finding out more about it, as part of your education as a Potions mistress.'

'Yes, Professor,' Hermione replied hastily. 'Of course.' She pushed some books towards him. 'I haven't checked these yet; the other ones contain nothing useful, as far as I can tell.'

'Do you know what exactly we are looking for?' asked Snape.

Hermione hesitated.

'Well, a few people complained of a headache, but not all of us. Maybe we should take stock of the exact symptoms of everyone who drank the punch.'

'Brilliant, Miss Granger,' Snape replied sarcastically. 'And what do you think I have been doing during that half hour after you ran off to do research with no plausible hypothesis and an inconvenient lack of data?'

Hermione blushed. 'Asking people if they experienced anything unusual after drinking the punch, sir,' she said.

'Brilliant again, Miss Granger. There seems to be no consensus among the people I have interrogated thus far. Hagrid says that he was feeling slightly nauseous and had some difficulty waking up, even when that thing he calls a dog jumped on him; but we must take into account that whatever it was, may have affected him differently because he is half giant. Professor Trelawney was not available for any comments. Filch told me that he slept well and had a nice dream about the old days, when he was allowed to punish rule-breaking students according to his own preferences. Minerva reports that she had a most disturbing dream about Dumbledore being alive again, but she volunteered no details. And what is your story, Miss Granger?'

Hermione swallowed.

'Why do you think that Professor McGonagall did not give you any details, sir?' she asked, postponing the dreaded moment.

Snape frowned.

'I don't know. Perhaps she thought it was none of my business; perhaps she did not want to discuss it, given that I was the cause of Dumbledore's death.'

'No, sir,' Hermione said.

'What do you mean?'

'You weren't the cause of his death, sir. He was the cause of his own death, or rather the maker of that Horcrux was the cause of his death, if you will. Professor Dumbledore was careless with that Horcrux. I suppose that maybe Professor McGonagall did not want to remind you of your painful task.'

Snape cleared his throat again.

'A charitable explanation, Miss Granger. Thank you. But back to our investigation.'

'Has it occurred to you that Professor McGonagall's dream may have contained some very personal elements, sir?' she asked. 'And perhaps my dream, too? And yours? That certainly would explain why we all seem reluctant to speak about it.'

Snape looked her straight in the eyes. 'Very astute, Miss Granger,' he said. 'But these... sensibilities... are not going to help us. So could you please provide me with more information? You can trust that I will be discreet.'

Hermione felt another blush creeping up.

'And if I do, will you tell me something about your dream, sir?' she asked. 'I can hardly assist your search if you will not let me in on the little data that we have.'

Snape seemed to ponder.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I'll give you the information which I deem relevant.'

He sat down at the other end of the table and folded his arms. 'Well?' he said. It was obvious that he expected her to go first.

Hermione swallowed. 'It was a very private dream, sir,' she said. 'It was about someone I have known for a long time, but in my dream, I had feelings for that person which I have never had in reality.' She paused. 'Or if I did, at least I have never realised it,' she added very softly.

Snape was watching her with a strange, concentrated look on his face. 'Yes, go on,' he said when she kept silent.

Hermione looked down. She could not bear the look of those sharp eyes while she was thinking about that embarrassing dream. What if he was using Legilimency, like dream-Snape had done?

'Well,' she said hesitantly, 'that is pretty much all there is to tell. In the dream I liked this person, and he liked me, quite contrary to real life. There the dream ended. But it was a dream from the past, sir. It cannot have been a prediction; it cannot really happen in the future. I hardly think you need to know anything more, sir.' She was still blushing profusely and didn't look up. Therefore she missed the flash of confusion on Snape's face.

'Well, Miss Granger,' he said, 'your story coincides with that of Professor McGonagall that is, the part which you both have told me. She also dreamed of a nonexistent affection.' And after a short silence, he added: 'And I, too, dreamed of something that is now impossible.'

Hermione looked up again, but he avoided her eyes.

'All three of us?' she asked.

He nodded.

'So it wasn't just Professor Dumbledore being alive again, but... the two of them...'

He nodded again.

Hermione tried not to think too much about it, but she had to ask. 'Were Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore ... involved when he was still alive, sir?'

'Not that I know of,' said Snape. He shrugged. 'But if they were, it is unlikely that either of them would have told me. I cannot say for certain.'

Hermione was silent. Questions were on the tip of her tongue, but she did not dare to ask them. Snape seemed lost in thought. Suddenly, he grabbed a book from the pile in front of him. He began to turn the leaves, read a few passages here and there, then closed it and rose from his chair. He walked over to the bookcases, checking titles and picking out another book that looked very heavy and old, even more so than most of the books in the Restricted Section. He opened it where he stood and after a few minutes he exclaimed: 'Hah!'

'What is it, sir?' Hermione said, pushing her chair back from the table and walking towards him. 'Did you find something?'

'I most certainly did,' Snape said grimly. He carried the book to the table, still open, and put it down. Hermione stood next to him, and together, they looked at the page.

Hermione was a little distracted by his closeness, but her scholarly as well as personal interest in the case soon took over. On the left page, she saw a drawing of a cauldron with a number of herbs and other potion ingredients next to it. On the right, there was a body of text in very old print. She began to decipher the characters on the right page. It was in Latin. She read slowly and with some difficulty. She looked at her Potions master.

'A visionary potion?' she said.

'That old hag...' Snape hissed between his teeth.

'But what went wrong?' Hermione wondered.

'Leave that to me,' Snape said. He gathered an armful of books and began putting them back onto the shelves. Hermione followed his example. When the table was clear, they left the library together.

'Good morning, Miss Granger,' Snape said. 'Enjoy what's left of this New Year's Day. Rest assured that something will be done.'

Hermione ventured a smile at him, and she was rewarded by a hint of a smile in response. She felt an excited tingle in her chest, and she couldn't resist. 'Let me help you, sir, please?'

To her surprise, Snape nodded without raising any objection. 'I'll let you know,' he said and swept around the corner.

Hermione spent the rest of that day in her room, watching the swirling snowflakes outside and turning a few pages of the book on her lap without remembering a word of what she'd read. Her thoughts were completely occupied with two things: Snape and the potion that had been added to the punch with rather unexpected results.

She wasn't quite sure, but from the ingredients it would seem that someone had tried to add a fortune-telling concoction to the punch. Snape obviously thought that it must have been Professor Trelawney, and she had to admit that he had a point. Who else would want to try and turn people into Seers for a while? Perhaps she had wanted to inspire more respect for her profession in her colleagues. Or perhaps she had wanted to gain some sympathy from them for her daily experiences. Or perhaps it had just been her idea of a nice surprise. But whoever had done it, and for whatever reason, it had not worked out as planned. Hermione and Professor McGonagall had dreamed about the past, about situations that had never been true and could not become true in the future. Professor Dumbledore was dead. Hermione could never be a seventh year virgin any more. And she was very curious to know about Snape's dream. Had he dreamed about a romance that had never happened, too? With Harry's mother, perhaps? And what about Trelawney herself? Had she dreamed about being a famous Seer, believed by everyone?

Putting speculation aside, Hermione wondered what Snape was doing now. He had suggested that she was to help him. So why hadn't he asked her to come to his laboratory? She tried to analyse her feelings about him. She had simply never thought of him as a man, as a lover. He had been the strictest and, at times, least fair teacher she had ever had. He was not unfair to her these days, but he never paid compliments; even as his apprentice, she had to rely on his abstaining from any criticism to find out that she had done something correctly. But she didn't care; she had already learned so much from him. Just watching him prepare ingredients was utterly instructive.

She realised now that she had been thinking about him quite a lot over the past two years. She enjoyed watching him, she enjoyed being with him, even if he did not say a word to her for hours. The silence between them never bothered her. But she knew so little of him. Too little to know if these emotions could grow into something more.

Snape spent the rest of that day in his laboratory, undisturbed by anyone, just as he liked it. McGonagall had asked him what he thought of the punch, and he had told her that he would conduct some research. He was almost certain that his guess was correct: Sybill Trelawney had attempted to prepare a mixture that would give people a flash of their preferred future. But the silly cow didn't know the first thing about potions. She wouldn't have been able to brew it the right way, and she had given no thought to possible side-effects resulting from the combination with other ingredients, such as those contained in the punch. He had gone to the kitchen to ask for a sample of the punch in order to analyse it, but the house-elves had already cleared away every remnant of last night, of course. Efficient little blighters. He would have to make do with theory for the moment.

He knew he had given his apprentice permission to assist in his research, but he regretted that now. Therefore, he had not asked her to come down to the dungeons. He had expected to have completely forgotten about his dream by now. But he had not. He still could not think of his apprentice without seeing the image of her walking slowly to the altar, barefoot in the fresh green grass, dressed in a beautiful, clinging gown with her hair hanging down on her back in a luxury of shining brown curls instead of pulled back into the usual practical bun, smiling in the bright sunlight, with a loving look for her husband-to-be: himself, waiting for her, escorted by Dumbledore and Lupin. That was no vision of the future; it couldn't be, for those two men were both dead.

What worried him most was not the image of himself marrying Hermione. No, it was the emotion that had coursed through him while she approached, the lightness and the warmth he had felt as she had finally reached him and given him her sweetest smile while she laid her hand in his. He had felt happy for the first time he could remember. And she had been the cause.

The idea of her actually wanting to be with him, choosing him above all others, had made him feel like he had never felt before. And the more he thought of it, the more it hurt him, until he felt that he could not bear even the thought of being in the real Hermione's presence. It would serve only as a reminder of what could never be.

He was not even convinced that he had any feelings for Hermione; he hardly knew her well enough; they had never had a personal conversation. All he knew was that he enjoyed working with her, that she was never in his way, that he liked their silences, that he liked how she did not seem to mind his moods and how he never felt the need to adapt his habits for her, and that she was one of the very few people to whom he did not need to explain everything twice.

After he had woken up, he had allowed himself a short fantasy about what would have followed their wedding ceremony, and, much to his dismay, he had found himself quite aroused by it. On entering the hall, he had caught himself watching her in a decidedly un-professorial manner. Fortunately, she was looking down at her plate or she might have noticed. He had needed three cups of very strong tea before he trusted his voice enough to risk speaking to her.

He remembered her blush when she had told him of her dream. Had she dreamed about some impossible love, too, like he and Minerva seemed to have done? Jealousy welled up inside him. With a sudden sense of possessiveness, he realised that he wanted to be the one she had dreamed about. But why should she? He had been, and still was, her teacher, and he had never spoken a personal word to her. He was twice her age and had no looks and no agreeable personality to recommend him. His social skills were sorely lacking, and he had never been very kind to her, never even given her a genuine compliment about her excellent work.

He snapped shut the book that was lying in front of him. Tonight, he would take some Dreamless Sleep, and tomorrow he would be back to normal, ready to snarl at his apprentice again instead of enjoying her sharp intellect and comforting presence, admiring her beautiful dark eyes and her naturally graceful movements, and lusting after her womanly, perfectly shaped body.

During that day and the next, Hermione saw hardly anything of Snape. Because of the holiday, she was having time off. She did some studying in the library, but she wasn't due at Snape's lab and didn't dare to go there without being asked. He seemed to have forgotten about his promise that she was to assist him in solving the punch problem; she didn't even know if he was working on it. Maybe he had decided it wasn't worthwhile, after all. She saw him at meals, but he came in late and left early. He never sat next to her or talked to her now. He seemed like his ordinary self, except that he appeared even more brooding than usual.

Hermione was glad that he paid her no attention. Now that she had more time to spend on other things than work, she had done some serious thinking, and she had come to understand that her dream had indeed brought some unacknowledged sentiments to the surface. She had always told herself that it was pure love of potions that had made her apply for this apprenticeship and that she would cope with Snape's unpleasant personality if that was what it took to become a Potions mistress. Not that she could not have obtained an apprenticeship somewhere else if she had wanted to, but Snape was the best in his profession, and she would have been a fool to throw such an opportunity away. But now she had recognised that she wasn't just coping, but actually enjoyed having him teach her, show her, criticise her, and ignore her, all in turn. She loved watching him in his stern, dark teaching robes, with his stern, dark expression; she loved watching his deft hands and concentrated face, and she loved hearing his dark voice, even if it was snapping at her.

But she wasn't happy with her discovery. She knew that she had been ignoring her feelings, not because she was generally prone to do so, but because she could not flatter herself with any hope that Snape would ever return them. That dream had blown away the veil she had unconsciously thrown over her deepest wishes, and the look he had given her on the morning after had increased her confusion even further. But nothing had followed, and she had been forced to come to the conclusion that she had probably just imagined it.

Now, she was impatient for the holidays to be over. If everything went back to normal, maybe she would, too.

Hermione was tired of thinking. The snowstorms of the last few days had subsided, and the view from her window was beautiful, reminding her of a Christmas card. The sun was setting above the forested hills, and the evening sky was turning red, mirrored in the frozen surface of the lake. Time for some exercise to chase all those worries away. She put on her coat, boots, and scarf and went for a walk.

During the remainder of that day and the next, Snape was unusually restless. He told himself that it was just the after-effects of the dream or the punch. But the image of Hermione in her wedding gown continued to nag him morning, day and night.

He spent his days and evenings in his lab, preparing his lessons for next term, trying to read the most difficult and complicated books that his own and Hogwarts' library afforded. He tried everything to put Hermione out of his mind. He remembered very well what he had promised her, but he could not bear her presence while he was in such confusion. And there was no longer any need: he knew exactly what had happened and had already informed Minerva.

The book that he had found on the morning after the party, of which he had shown a page to Hermione, contained an entire chapter on the particular potion with which Sybill had attempted to provide her colleagues with a wonderful experience. By process of elimination, it had become clear to him that it was that and nothing else: a potion that was intended to give people insight into what they really wanted, so they could begin pursuing it. It was supposed to help people find happiness; so far her intentions had been good. However, not being well versed in potions, she had not considered its interaction with the spices in the punch. It was not a known side-effect, and the book said nothing about it, but from comparison with other potions, Snape had inferred that the specific combination of spices had laced the potion with an extra touch: a sense of lost opportunities, resulting in a distortion of the image, changing it into a desperate wish that could not come true.

In Minerva's case, her vision probably had been mixed with feelings of regret that she had not acted on her desires while she still had the chance, or possibly with regret that she and Dumbledore had not had the relationship that she, and maybe he, would have wished to have. In his own case, it was obviously his sense of guilt about the deaths of Dumbledore and Lupin, about his latent feelings for a student, and about supplanting his first love, whom he had wanted to consider the love of his life. Filch seemed to be unsusceptible to any regrets; but one could hope that Sybill would have had her share of it, too. Merlin only knew what Hermione had experienced.

When he had told Minerva, she had looked very stern and unforgiving. She had summoned Sybill and confronted her with her actions. Sybill had broken down immediately, still suffering from the effects of the potion herself (what bad feelings was she struggling against?), and confessed what she had done before patiently listening to Minerva's speech about the psychological damage that could ensue when people were subjected to visions or worse, to warped visions without proper warning or preparation. Then Snape had added his bit about unlicensed brewing. Sybill had been reduced to a sobbing wreck and escorted to her room by a house-elf. She would not try concocting anything else anytime soon; so far, so good. Now all that was left to be done was for the partakers of the punch to deal with whatever had happened to them.

Snape rose from his chair and began pacing. Damn that witch, he thought. He wasn't sure which one he meant: the witch that had caused the dream, or the witch that had played such a prominent role in it that he could not get her out of his head. Soon, his apprentice would be working next to him all day again, and he had to rid himself of these thoughts about her. He would die of shame if she ever found out.

He felt too restless for any useful occupation and decided to go for a walk. Maybe the cold, fresh air would clear his head a little.

Hermione was standing on the shore of the lake. She felt how the crisp, cold air was doing her good, as if the confused thoughts and emotions of the past few days were crystallizing into clear, distinct ideas. She was apprentice to a man whom she now knew she had fallen in love with some time ago. She would have to find out if she could live with that, seeing him every day, feeling knowing that he was indifferent to her. The worst part of it would be the small remnant of uncertainty. But she could not tell him this, for if he did not return her feelings which he probably didn't she would have ruined her chance of finishing her apprenticeship with him. She had no choice but to continue ignoring her feelings as best she could and go on with her work. Only one year left. Surely she would be able to endure it for one more year.

She pushed her hair away and found that it was a little wet. A few snowflakes were falling again; before her, the sky was still streaked with the bright colours of sunset, but another snow storm was coming up from behind. She turned around. And there he was.

Snape had been standing there, looking at her, keeping a safe distance. When she turned around, he felt caught and began to walk in her direction. When he reached her, he noticed that she was blushing deep red. It made him forget the neutral, indifferent remark he had wanted to make. All he could do was stand there and look at her; she did not look away. They had never looked at each other like this; it was more significant than any confession of love could have been.

Another snowflake blew into her face, and she lifted her hand to wipe it from her skin. But he had reached out at the same moment, to wipe it away for her, and their hands met. Hermione stood very still, her hand not moving; Snape let his fingers encircle hers, then pulled her hand against his chest. They stood there, looking at each other, for a few long minutes.

'I don't know what to say,' Snape said at last. 'I'm not quite sure what is happening.'

Hermione gave him a rather uncertain smile. 'Do we need to know?'

'Of course we do,' he said.

'But maybe not right now,' she answered. 'We have enough time.'

'Do we, Hermione?'

'Yes,' she said with growing confidence now that he had called her by her first name for the first time. 'We do. All the time we need. And more.'

She stepped towards him.

'I am very curious about your dream,' she said. 'But I don't need to know now. And I do not want to tell you mine yet.'

His mouth relaxed slightly, and in his eyes, she saw the beginning of a smile.

'What do you want, then?' he said in a soft voice.

'I want you to kiss me,' she whispered, taking another step towards him, her eyes wide and shining.

He held his breath.

Then he pulled her into his arms slowly and tenderly; he bowed his head and kissed her.

She was right; there was no need for explanations now, no need for the recounting of dreams. For this first beautiful moment, a kiss was enough. No, not only enough. It was much more than he had ever hoped to receive. In the cold of the beginning snow storm, he felt the warmth of his dream return to him, but this time it was real; it was Hermione's warmth, chasing away the cold of all those long years, while she was returning his kisses with an eagerness that astonished and delighted him.

Hermione let her hands slide underneath his cloak, along his sides and his back. He enfolded her inside the woolen fabric to shield her from the cold wind, and she pressed herself closely against him. I love him, she thought. I love him, but I will not tell him yet... It's too soon...

He broke the kiss and pulled her head against his shoulder.

'No, it's not too soon, Hermione,' he whispered into her ear. 'Please say it... tell me...'

'Severus...' she said, the sound muffled in his cloak. 'Severus, I love you... I dreamed about you... about being with you... Severus, I want to be with you now... Please, don't say no...'

He had no answer to that; he could only hold her, his arms tightening around her as he closed his eyes. She had dreamed about *him* like he had dreamed about *her* dreams that could not come true, he knew but maybe some part of those dreams could come true after all. The most important part.

'Severus...' Hermione whispered. Without saying anything, he took her hand in his and began to walk back with her, to the castle. He had no words for his feelings. But he would leave her no doubt about them this night.

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