

A Dreaded Holiday

by GinnyW

My take on the WIKTT Valentine's Day Carni Challenge. Dumbledore hires a carnival for the students and staff for Valentine's Day. One-shot. **Round 4 Joint winner in the Multifaceted Awards in the Rapture category.**

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Many thanks to my most wonderful Beta, Meredith!

Albus Dumbledore hadn't been this giddy about anything in a very long time. He was unsuccessfully attempting to hide his excitement at this, the most wonderful idea he'd had in quite sometime. And that was saying something. As he looked out over the school grounds, he could just see the workers at the Quidditch pitch setting everything up. The snow was beautiful, as it always was this time of year, blanketing the ground and shimmering on the trees.

Christmas had not been a very festive holiday this year, with the final battle taking its toll on Hogwarts students, alumni, and staff. After two months of mourning, he wanted to do something to try to bring some joy and happiness back to the school, back into the children's lives. And maybe even a little hope.

Yes, this was one of the best ideas he'd had in a very long time.

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It was Valentine's Day morning. Hermione hadn't liked the holiday when she was in grade school, and didn't like it now. In her opinion, it was a muggle holiday created by the card, candy, and jewelry industry to make money. She remembered the tradition of filling out Valentine's cards and exchanging them with her classmates. As children do, her fellow students would tease her if a boy gave her sappy little thing, or if she inadvertently gave too sappy a card to some boy. She hadn't had too many friends in grade school anyway, and this annual event only further isolated her from her peers. Hermione let out a small shudder at this memory. As she walked to the Great Hall for breakfast, her book bag slung over her shoulder, she sighed in relief that Hogwarts did not make a fuss over such an idiotic holiday. She swung open the doors to the room . . . and her jaw dropped.

In her seven years at Hogwarts, the only time that Valentine's Day had ever been mentioned or even remotely celebrated was in her second year when Professor Lockhart was teaching. What she saw in the Great Hall now was a very bad memory returned. There were pink and red banners, covered with white hearts, draped along the walls and hanging down from the ceiling of the Great Hall. No fewer than fifty Cherubs were flying over the tables, leaving trails of what appeared to be pink snow which melted and instantly when it landed. The boys were smirking at each other as they winked and flirted. She could hear the high-pitched giggling of young girls, and even that of some older ones. Her astonishment was complete when she saw Hagrid gave Professor Sprout a rather bedraggled bloom of some sort, winking at her to boot.

When Hermione finally regained her composure, she immediately decided to go back upstairs and spend the rest of her day in peace and solitude. Unfortunately, Ron and Harry had seen her and were waving for her to join them. With a groan, she walked over to them and sat down for breakfast, hooking her book bag over the back of her seat.

"Hello, Hermione," said Harry.

"Morning," said Ron, barely pausing between forkfuls of egg.

Hermione didn't even bother with niceties. "What is going on in here?"

"Who knows?" grinned Harry, looking up from his buttered toast. "It is a bit over the top, though."

"That's an understatement," answered Hermione, grabbing a plate.

Just as she finished dishing up her breakfast, she heard Professor Dumbledore clear his throat. He had stood to speak, and the room quickly quieted.

"Good morning, students, Professors." Dumbledore had the widest smile that Hermione had ever seen on the man. His eyes were twinkling wildly, as if he had received a dozen pairs of socks and a never-ending bowl of lemon sherbets for Christmas.

"Happy Valentine's Day, everyone!" He proclaimed. "I thought that it was time we all sat back and had some fun. So, for today, classes are cancelled."

There was a roar of cheering from the students. The teachers almost looked relieved. Hermione, on the other hand, was quite appalled. Why did Valentine's Day merit a day off from classes?! ARGH!

"Settle down, settle down," continued Dumbledore. The quiet resumed quickly, but the excitement and anticipation was rippled throughout the room. His smile seemed to broaden further, and after a dramatic pause, he said, "I have hired Fortescue's Fantastic Festivals to host a carnival of rides and events down at the Quidditch pitch."

Another raucous cheer and wild applause came from the students. Hermione was now so thoroughly disgusted that she didn't think she'd be able to eat her breakfast. She put her head in her hands and decided that she would, indeed, spend the day in her room studying. She could hear Ron and Harry talking next to her, obviously not sharing her concerns.

"A day that I don't have to take a skiving snack box to Potions with me!" said Harry with obvious delight at this turn of events. "So, Hermione, what do you say we finish breakfast and head on down to the Quidditch pitch?"

"No thanks, Harry," Hermione replied somberly, lifting her head from her hands. She reached out for her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Oh, come on Hermione!" exclaimed Ron. "Just because you don't have a boyfriend doesn't mean that you can't come along and have fun with us."

Oh, that was it! Hermione slammed the pumpkin juice down on the table, stood up and yelled, "This has nothing to do with me not having a boyfriend, Ron! I hate the ruddy holiday and I am NOT going to go to any stupid carnival."

Now fuming, she grabbed her book bag and stormed out of the Great Hall, oblivious to the stares she was receiving. She was in such a huff she didn't notice Professor McGonagall until she nearly ran into her.

"Oh, sorry, Professor," she said, coming to an abrupt stop.

"Miss Granger, I was just coming to look for you."

Hermione couldn't believe that the woman had the audacity to be so bloody cheerful on such a morning.

"What can I do for you, Professor?"

"Well, Miss Granger, I wanted to make sure that you would be attending today's festivities," she said, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"But, Professor, I thought I would use the time to get caught up on my studies," Hermione replied, ticking off her mental list. "I need to complete a report for Potions, a research assignment for Defense Against the Dark Arts, and your essay on conjuring animals."

Professor McGonagall merely shook her head.

"No, Miss Granger, if classes weren't cancelled you wouldn't be able to work on those things until this evening anyway. As Head Girl, I need you to help the Prefects and staff in keeping the students from getting too out of line at the Carnival. But that doesn't mean you can't have some fun down there too. We just need you to be around to help prevent too much mischief." She finished with a smile and a wink.

Hermione sighed. "Yes Professor."

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"I'm glad you decided to come down, Hermione."

"It's not like I had much of a choice, Ron." She couldn't help but smile at her friend. He was obviously anxious to go to the carnival, and there was no sense dampening his good spirits with her annoyed ones.

They walked through the crowd of students milling around rides and games. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. They had just decided to get a sugar spin when Harry came panting up beside them.

"Hey, you two! You have got to see this ride!" he said, trying to catch his breath.

"What ride, Harry?" asked Ron.

"It's the Tunnel of Love!" exclaimed Harry, grinning.

Ron and Hermione both broke into laughter. It was only when they stopped that they noticed Harry was not alone. Luna was clinging to his side with a beaming bright smile and dreamy eyes ogling up at him. Hermione smirked.

"Hi Luna, I didn't see you there." She cast a quizzical glance at Harry. He and Luna weren't an item, Harry still fancied Ginny, didn't he?

Harry's face reddened immediately and he glanced from Hermione to Ron.

"Well, uh, you see...Luna asked me to go on the ride with her and it was... very nice," he smiled, looking down at Luna. Luna held his gaze as she nodded readily in agreement.

Hermione started looking around...there were an awful lot of new 'couples' walking around. She had initially thought it was because of the holiday's affect on teenage

hormones, but she began to notice that most of the girls had dreamy eyes and looking at their beaux with adoration that surpassed even Valentine's Day romanticism. She felt certain that magic had something to do with it. Her curiosity was piqued, and she wondered exactly what was going on.

Ron smiled at her. "Come on Hermione, let's go check it out."

"Okay," she said, nodding her agreement. They left Harry and Luna to themselves and walked towards the crowd gathered around the ride.

Hermione was horrified at the look of it. The ride personified why she hated Valentine's Day. It was the ugliest thing she had ever seen. The cars were bright red and heart-shaped. They sat two people and apparently kept the unsuspecting couples rather close together. The tunnel itself was decorated with two large animated cupids on either side, giggling and waving wands over the couple as they entered the tunnel.

Hermione did have to admit that everyone looked very happy when they left the ride. Well, mostly happy. Some of the boys looked rather frightened, to tell the truth, but they weren't shying away from their partners either. She furrowed her brows in thought. What was going on?

Ron and Hermione took their place in the queue, patiently waiting their turn when Susan Bones ran up.

"Ron, would you ride this with me, please?" Susan said, a shy smile on her face.

"Ummm...well...Hermione..." Ron managed to stammer out.

Hermione took her cue and answered for him. "Ron was kind enough to offer to go with me so I wasn't alone, but seeing as you're here, I'm sure he'd rather ride with you, Susan."

Susan beamed at this response. Ron turned to look at Hermione and she smiled reassuringly. Ron had been fond of Susan Bones since sixth year. This could be good for him.

"Don't worry Ron, it's alright. It won't kill me to go on this thing alone."

Ron replied with a wink, and soon he and Susan boarded their car. The next car pulled up a few moments later and Hermione stepped in.

"Oi, Miss!" came the squeaky voice of the short witch running the ride.

"What?"

"Where's your partner, Miss?" asked the witch.

"I don't have a partner, I'm going to ride alone." Hermione answered as she turned to face straight ahead.

"Nope, nope, nope!" sang the witch in a sickening cheerful tone. "Nope, you can't ride alone. Nope, nope, nope!"

Hermione shook her head disgusted. She really hated this bloody holiday!

She was getting ready to just get out of the blasted thing when the witch called out, "Lone rider here! We have a lone rider! Would anyone like to join this lovely young woman in The Tunnel of Love?"

At this Hermione's brown eyes flashed with fury, she was more disgusted by this than anything else that she'd heard or seen that day. Now, however, she was determined to sit there all day until either someone showed up to ride with her or the ride-witch got a clue that some people can be single and happy and still ride stupid rides alone! She had just finished ranting to herself when she felt someone get in and sit next to her. She turned and was stunned to find that it was none other than her greasy Potions professor.

Stammering she managed to fumble out, "Oh, uh, he-he-hello, Professor Snape." Oh great, how articulate was that? She groaned inwardly as Professor Snape quirked a supercilious eyebrow at her and their car lurched forward into the tunnel.

"Good day to you too, Miss Granger. I couldn't have you holding up the ride all day. There were some sixth years threatening to dive-bomb you with well, anyway, I thought I would save you the embarrassment and myself the need to oversee their impending detention." His mouth sneered at her, and he resumed staring straight ahead.

After a few moments, Hermione noticed something odd. The seat of the car seemed to be getting smaller. When Snape had first sat down next to her you could have fit another person in between them. Now, barely a twig would fit in the space.

Hermione began to get nervous. Yes, that was the feeling. Her heart was pounding, her stomach was in knots. Sitting next to Professor Snape in a rapidly shrinking ride car was **not** what she had anticipated on when she had first seated herself.

After only a few more moments, they were squashed so tightly together that Professor Snape had to put his arm around her to give them more room. She heard him grunt some form of an apology when he did this as if he thought someone may be watching. Hermione tried to slow her breathing, and looked up in time to see the pair of disgusting cupids at the entrance sprinkling dust over them.

"What was that?" she asked. Snape only shrugged, seemingly unconcerned.

The small car continued into the tunnel. Hermione realized that it was dark. Very dark. It suddenly struck her that these rides were dark intentionally to allow lovers time for a private snog. Well, that would **definitely** not be occurring here, she smirked, hazarding a glance at Professor Snape.

With a sudden left turn, the car was surrounded in a heavy pink haze, then broke free into a room full of clouds. No, it wasn't a room, it was really clouds! Hermione peered out of the car and looked below to see nothing below them. She noticed something peculiar about the enormous clouds on either side of them. They were like Muggle television screens. Each cloud was showing something different, but the people were the same, and looked familiar to her.

"What is this?" she asked the professor, in near wonder.

In a bored tone, he replied, "I have no idea, Miss Granger."

"Wait!" She pointed at the screen closest to her, where there was a little girl with brown bushy hair wailing like a banshee. "That's me!" she exclaimed in awe.

"What? That is a small child, that is obviously not you," jeered the Professor.

"No, not me now, that's when I was four. I was trying to learn how to ride my bike and I kept falling," she explained, her voice full of wonder.

She began looking at the other clouds. They were all full of images of her and her parents at different stages in her life. When she was born, her fifth birthday, her first day of school, tauntings on the playground because of her frizzy hair and big teeth. This was all her. Other clouds showed her sitting on the stool to be sorted, leading Umbridge to the Forbidden Forest, walking out of Divination class, glaring at Professor Snape in Potions as he mocked and degraded her, swiping boomslang from his private stores. Seeing that one, she quickly looked over to Professor Snape, who was smirking at her, an amused look on his face.

They passed through the remainder of the clouds and entered more thick pink haze. A few moments later they emerged into another room of clouds, only this time the

pictures and images on the clouds weren't of Hermione. They were of a dark, lank haired little boy. He was cowering in a corner, hiding from a screaming man, playing outside, riding a toy broomstick, reading books of hexes, being sorted into Slytherin. Hermione felt Professor Snape's grip tighten around her shoulders, as he pulled her closer to him. She didn't try to shrug him off.

"Professor Snape, is...is that you?" Hermione whispered, turning to look at him.

"Yes," he replied simply. His eyes caught hers, daring her to laugh as he was certain she would. But not a sound came from Hermione as she turned again and continued to look at the images. When she next caught his gaze, he was struck by the emotion in her brown eyes. She looked sad and unsettled.

They passed by more images. Snape talking to Lucius Malfoy, being brought before Voldemort, having the Dark Mark seared onto his skin, talking to Dumbledore. Other clouds showed him stalking the halls of Hogwarts, in the Shrieking Shack with Sirius Black, in the graveyard as Lord Voldemort was reborn and Harry was dueling for his life, and being tortured by an unmasked Death Eater during the final battle.

Hermione was speechless as they again entered the pink fog. She had never truly realized the horrors of Professor Snape's life. She looked up at his grim face and felt a nearly overwhelming desire to hug him. UGH! What was she thinking? It was still Professor Snape, after all. They entered another room of clouds. Hermione was surprised. What more could there be to see?

Hermione realized it was a wedding. As the faces of the couple came into focus, she saw that it was their wedding; hers and Professor Snape's. Another cloud showed him holding a baby with curly brown hair, cradling it in his arms. In another she was comforting a crying little girl with long, straight black hair, while Snape healed a scrape on her knee with his wand. She felt her skin go warm when she saw one showing herself and Snape kissing passionately while he slid her blouse off her shoulders. In another she was crying, and he came up behind her, putting his arm around her in comfort.

What the hell was going on? Her lungs felt constricted. She looked over at him and saw an indiscernible look on his face.

They passed through the hazy fog again and were back in the black tunnel.

"What that was, Professor?" she finally asked, a catch in her voice.

"I don't know, Miss Granger," he replied. He appeared puzzled, but not overly disconcerted by the images they had seen.

They turned another corner and she saw the end of the tunnel. As if in answer to her question, she saw a small sign that read:

Thank you for riding The Tunnel of Love.

You have had the privilege of seeing your true love's past and a small glimpse of your future together. As with each ride from Fortescue's Fantastic Festivals we cannot be responsible for any exposed secrets, insanity, convulsions, mad flights over cliffs, or hexed body parts caused as a result of your participation in this event. Have a nice day!

P.S. We offer discounts to Tunnel of Love alumni who book their wedding reception entertainment with us. Please see Madam Fairingame Fortescue's for further details.

Hermione's eyes widened in amazement. She glanced at Professor Snape again to see if he had seen the sign. He obviously had. She couldn't tell if he was happy with it or not. Why did that man always have such a stern mask on?

She was thankful when they reached the end of the ride so she could get out. All she could think was that she desperately needed air. Professor Snape rose first. He reached out his hand to her.

"Miss Granger, are you coming?" he asked, in an unexpectedly soft voice.

"Yes, Professor, thank you," was all she gasp as he helped her out of the car, gently settling her on the landing platform. She looked up as she steadied herself, and caught his eyes. The warm coal black of them seemed to warm every inch of her skin. His hand tightened on hers for a moment. She could see turmoil in the depths of those eyes, and knew he likely saw the same in hers.

"Have a pleasant day, Miss Granger," he said. With that he drew his fingers away from hers and abruptly walked away, leaving her speechless.

She remained there a few moments, and then slowly walked away from the ride. Soon Professor Dumbledore was approaching her.

"Did you have a pleasant time in The Tunnel of Love, Miss Granger? Who was your partner?" He asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Ummm, yes, I suppose." She stammered. "Headmaster? Is that...is that what really will happen or just some trick?"

Dumbledore smiled and answered, "It is what will be, Miss Granger, if you stay in a relationship with your partner."

"But what if I haven't been in a relationship with my partner? Or even considered being in one?" she asked, still confused.

"The tunnel is enchanted to know our true needs and desires, whether we have acknowledged them or not," he answered. "It is also enchanted to only allow couples to enter who are truly destined for each other."

Hermione's breathing began to quicken, as the implications of this sunk in.

"Miss Granger, you still seem puzzled. Who was your partner?" Dumbledore politely repeated.

"Professor Snape," she answered. "I have another question, if I may."

"By all means, please do," Dumbledore smiled at her indulgently.

"Does Professor Snape know this?" she asked.

Dumbledore broke into a wide grin, his blue eyes twinkling even more brightly than ever.

"Yes, he does. He knew before he got on the ride with you," he answered. "I shall not divulge all of Severus' secrets, but let's just say perhaps he was testing the ride."

"Do you mean, he wanted to test it with me? To see if we were compatible?" she whispered.

"Severus has perhaps already acknowledged certain feelings to himself." Dumbledore replied. "But as insecure as he is, I knew he would need confirmation."

Hermione looked up, an expression of understanding on her face as the implication hit her.

"What do I do now?"

Dumbledore broke into laughter and placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Well, my dear, that is up to you," he said. "But whatever it is you decide on, I ask only one thing from you."

"What is that?" she asked, her brain still trying to absorb the information she had been given.

"Wait until you've graduated," he replied, giving her a small wink. With that, he turned and walked away, leaving her to her thoughts.

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was certainly a surprise. Oddly enough, she acknowledged that the idea didn't turn her stomach as she might have thought it should. She felt warm, comforted as though she were being held. A feeling of peace had settled over her. Professor Snape, she thought to herself. Severus. She should start thinking of him as Severus. There were only four more months until she was done with school, then . . . the possibilities were endless. She took a deep breath and smiled and then set off to find her friends.

A/N: This is my take on the WIKTT Valentine's Carni Challenge and was my first fanfic. Thanks so much for reading!

The 2005 Valentine's Day Challenge as issued by MsJessicaAllen on WIKTT:

~To celebrate the defeat of Voldemort in Hermione's 7th year, Dumbledore decides to hold a Muggle carnival (coincides with Valentine's Day).

~All the seventh years are raving about the love tunnel ride & Hermione decides to see what is so special about it. It's a ride through a dark tunnel of sickening sweet hearts and angels.

~No one rides with her, so the ride operator yells out "Lone rider." Hermione doesn't show obvious embarrassment.

~Snape stalking the carnival grounds is suddenly curious about the ride and takes the empty seat beside Hermione. It is not apparent that he cares whether Hermione is embarrassed in any way.

~What will occur? What spells does the tricky Dumbledore have in store for the lovers? Did Dumbledore make them both curious on purpose? Will the ride spark something between the two? You decide.