

The Sun is Often Out

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 9

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Hermione had always wondered how long it would be before she ended up back at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She hadn't thought it would take only a year, yet here she stood inside the gates, appreciating the impressive castle. She couldn't help but recall the last time she had been within the castle walls, when lives had been lost and Voldemort finally dispatched. The months following had been rather a blur for her, not least for the warring periods of grief and elation that the whole wizarding world had been going through, but also because Hermione, personally, had found she was unsure of where her life was headed. Such uncertainty hadn't appealed one bit, and she had thrown herself into a year-long work placement with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, within the Ministry of Magic.

At first, the stability of a regular job had contented Hermione; it was a welcome relief after the stressful time she'd spent hopping around the British Isles with Harry and Ron. As time wore on, however, she began to feel stifled and bored. She began longing for the times when she could spend hours in the library, researching, reading, and relaxing, even. She'd told Ron of her desire to get back to academia, but as she had expected, he hadn't really understood it. The letter from Hogwarts had only put further strain on their relationship.

Hermione strode quickly towards the doors of the castle as her thoughts turned towards Ron. She hadn't been able to disguise her pleasure at seeing the wax seal of the Hogwarts coat of arms on the envelope. She'd been more than surprised when she read the contents of said letter. Her old Head of House, Minerva McGonagall, had written informing her of a difficulty they were having in filling one of the teaching posts and, if she was interested, would Hermione mind meeting to discuss such an opportunity? Hermione could not deny that her heart sank a little when she saw which post was in question, and Ron had been bewildered when he realised she was actually going to give it some thought.

'Muggle Studies?' he'd scoffed loudly. 'Hermione, you can't seriously be thinking about accepting it!'

She'd told him flat out that there was no harm in meeting Professor McGonagall, and regardless of Ron's protests, that is precisely what she did. The thought of the meeting still brought a smile to her face...she'd missed her old teacher.

Six weeks earlier

'Professor McGonagall! How lovely to see you again!' Hermione grinned as she spotted the older woman at a table in the Leaky Cauldron.

'My dear girl,' she cooed, with her soft Scottish lilt, 'please call me Minerva. Thank you for agreeing to see me.'

'It's my pleasure,' assured Hermione as her Butterbeer was brought over. She was pleased at McGonagall's request to address her informally, but for the moment Hermione felt unable to capitulate...it would take a bit of getting used to.

'I'm sure you have been wondering why you've been offered the Muggle Studies position.' Minerva took a sip of her Gillywater and expectantly peered over the top of her glasses at Hermione.

'Indeed, I was surprised. I mean, besides my obvious Muggle heritage, I never studied the subject at advanced level; in fact, I dropped it after my third year...'

Minerva waved her hand dismissively and smiled. 'Ah, my dear, we both know that despite a lack of formal qualifications, you would have no trouble teaching it. I'm sure you could become familiar with the particulars in no time at all. What I am concerned about is that you would not feel it challenging enough or even enjoy it; but I confess I hoped you might be open to the idea.'

Hermione dropped her gaze to her Butterbeer, a little flattered at the professor's obvious desire to win her over. 'I have no doubt teaching *any* subject is challenging,' began Hermione.

Minerva gave a short chuckle of laughter and nodded her head.

'As you say, Muggle Studies was not a passion of mine, though I can't deny I was intrigued in studying Muggles from a magical perspective. Still, I am not certain I could do it justice.'

Minerva did not look put off. 'I thought you might say something like that. I'll tell you, Hermione, we have had enormous trouble finding a replacement since poor Charity Burbage was... killed.' McGonagall lowered her gaze for a moment and Hermione remembered the former professor, whom she had liked during the short time she had been taught by her.

'Then, of course, there was the abominable Alecko Carrow. Indeed, we were without a teacher last year, and classes had to be divided amongst other members of staff. The point is that the end of the war signifies an important change in the wizarding world. For those to whom it is left, it is imperative that another megalomaniac must never arise.'

Hermione could not have agreed more.

'As it is, Severus has...'

'Severus?' blurted out Hermione before she could stop herself.

Severus Snape...now there was a name she hadn't heard in a while. He'd stunned everyone with his miraculous recovery from the snakebite. It was still rather shrouded in mystery, and Hermione had no idea how he had managed it.

'Good Lord, I had completely forgotten he was still headmaster!' Hermione was surprised at her own obtuseness. The fact that it had been McGonagall writing to her and meeting with her had led Hermione to make automatic assumptions.

Minerva appeared to take her tone at another meaning, however, and she eyed Hermione sharply. 'That wouldn't be a problem, would it?'

Hermione's eyes widened. 'Oh! No, no, of course not,' she replied firmly. 'I was merely surprised. I assumed you... '

'Ah, yes, well, Severus felt I would be better placed to discuss this with you; he's not one for wooing potential employees.'

They both smiled.

'As I was saying, Severus...all of us at Hogwarts...feel that it is important to try and eradicate the prejudice that lingers towards Muggles by some members of our society. I don't need to explain this to you, Hermione; you've witnessed it firsthand.'

Hermione nodded, completely intrigued.

'You must also realise the stigma that surrounds Muggle Studies as a subject at Hogwarts. Some consider it irrelevant, *asoft* subject...it doesn't attract many students. Indeed, half the time it is taken up by students who already have extensive Muggle experience, but wish to keep in touch with that side of their lives. Severus is hoping to encourage the Board of Governors to let him make Muggle Studies compulsory for students until the third year, when it becomes an option. Even if it is only one lesson a week, we think it can only benefit students.'

Minerva took a sip from her glass.

'Now, my dear, before this can happen we are looking to overhaul the Muggle Studies syllabus, which has admittedly become a bit outdated. Only then can a case be presented to the Board before the end of the next academic year. I think you would have the enthusiasm, imagination and commitment for such a task, not to mention the considerable intellect. Severus has agreed to offer you a temporary contract spanning one year. Therefore, if teaching is really not your thing, we will continue to look for another candidate who will hopefully be able to implement any changes you may make.'

Hermione rather thought that with the responsibility of such a project, she'd want to see it out herself, not someone else, but she was glad she wouldn't have to commit herself for too long, just in case she did hate teaching. There was no denying that Minerva's proposition appealed to her. As she would later explain to Ron, she was interested in Wizarding reform, and if she could be a small part of it at Hogwarts, where the next generation of minds was moulded, then it would be a privilege. It would be a great opportunity. It would be a refreshing change after a year at the Ministry, and at the end of the day, she needed a job.

In a fit of Gryffindor rashness, Hermione accepted on the spot, surprising both herself and Minerva.

Later, Ron had just looked at her blankly when she'd tried to explain. She told him of the responsibility she would have, how she would love to make a difference to magical education, however small it might be. She'd also be able to pursue her own projects, with the use of the Hogwarts' library and the extensive experience of the staff at her disposal. It was a unique opportunity for her to continue her studies in her spare time.

Ron had rolled his eyes, commenting that she'd never got over not gaining her proper N.E.W.T. qualifications. Hermione had bristled, but deep down she knew she'd always felt that it was rather unfinished business for her, despite the fact that she technically didn't need them. Once things had settled down following Voldemort's death, the students who hadn't had chance to sit their N.E.W.T. exams were offered certificates based on predicted grades, if they needed them. However, most employers were ready to waive such requirements and simply accept teacher references in recognition of extenuating circumstances. Hermione hadn't requested her predicted grades, and she was probably the only student who was disappointed she could not have sat the exams.

Hermione decided to let Ron have his sulk. She knew he was upset because it would mean they wouldn't be able to see each other as often, and Hermione felt guilty that Ron hadn't figured an important factor in making up her mind. Was she being selfish? Or was it selfish of her to stay when her heart just wasn't in it? She'd lain awake many a night wondering if she'd made the right choice, but she consoled herself by looking at a year's teaching as an experience for her to learn from, whether she enjoyed it or not.

And here she was. She'd left things a bit up in the air with Ron. He hadn't wanted to break it off completely, but Hermione knew it would only be a matter of time. A shout across the lawns of Hogwarts jostled her from her musings.

"Ermione!"

'Hagrid!' cried Hermione in delight at seeing the half-giant lumber towards her.

'Great to have yer back!'

As he squeezed a big arm around her, Hermione couldn't help but agree.

Professor McGonagall was waiting in the Entrance Hall when Hermione, plus Hagrid, entered through the main doors.

'Hermione, I'm so happy you came,' trilled McGonagall.

'Thank you... Minerva.' Hermione still felt self-conscious addressing her former teacher by her first name, and no doubt it would get worse when she met the rest of the teachers. Minerva seemed to pick up on her nervousness, for she smiled encouragingly and offered a few words of reassurance before leading her to her living quarters.

Hermione was delighted with what she saw; the rooms were spacious and included several bookshelves just begging to be filled. A large window faced over the expanse of the Forbidden Forest, and the smoke from Hagrid's house was just visible. She was already envisaging where all her things would go when McGonagall's voice broke into her thoughts.

'Severus sends his apologies for not being here to greet you, but he has been detained at the Ministry and will be back later this evening. He would like you to go and see him in his office at six o'clock; the password is Lacewing Flies.'

Hermione nodded, her nerves fluttering for a moment once more. She'd wondered where he was. Minerva soon left her to get settled, after ensuring that Hermione would come and meet the rest of her soon-to-be colleagues in the staff room, once her meeting with the headmaster was complete. Hermione flopped down softly on her bed and sighed contentedly for a moment before tugging her wand from her sleeve and getting right into unpacking.

About an hour before her meeting with Snape, Hermione ventured outside for a stroll around the grounds to enjoy the warm August evening, with the added purpose of clearing her head. The memories of her time as a student had been floating around her mind all day. The last thing she wanted was to be distracted. Sitting down on a stone bench, Hermione simply gazed around for bit. She'd never really known Hogwarts as quiet as this, with no students running about, no hubbub of sound permeating the air. It was very tranquil.

A rather shrill creak punctured Hermione's peace, and she swiveled round to view the gates, the most probable source of the sound. A dark figure was closing them before making its way up towards the castle. Hermione didn't need to look twice; she'd recognise him anywhere. It looked like she'd be meeting her boss before their allotted time. Her boss. It was funny, really; she hadn't given it much thought, but yes, in a manner of speaking, Snape would be her boss.

Hermione hadn't set eyes on the man since the end of the war. With the Order officially disbanded, he hadn't ever turned up for one of their informal gatherings, organised by Harry at Grimmauld Place. She'd not really asked Harry why he never showed, and for that Hermione felt a bit ashamed, considering the importance Snape had played in the war. She couldn't help but be impressed by him and all he'd done, very much in spite of the discord she had felt with him as a student.

He was getting closer, and Hermione noted with a wry smile that he looked the same as ever. She took a deep breath and stood up to greet him. His expression appeared to be inscrutable, and Hermione couldn't help but think back to the other welcomes she had received so far. She nearly laughed aloud at the vision of Snape bounding over to hug her as Hagrid had. He appeared to sense her humour, for he raised his eyebrow as he reached her, offering his hand for her to shake. Hermione took it with a small smile.

'Miss Granger,' he murmured politely.

The sound of his silky voice and the feel of the dark gaze transported her almost immediately back into the Potions classroom. She blinked. 'Professor Snape.'

A swish of his cloak was all Hermione was left with as he abruptly turned and made his way up the steps. Hermione duly followed and mumbled a noise of thanks as he held open the door for her. Truth be told, she felt strangely uncomfortable in his presence, and she wasn't sure why. It was probably the novelty of the situation, and Snape was hardly the type to make it easier for her. Indeed, she felt like an errant student as he led her silently to what she assumed was his office. Her supposition proved correct when he stopped at the stone gargoyles, and Hermione suddenly brightened with the realisation that she would soon see Dumbledore, or rather, his portrait.

Snape stepped off the revolving staircase and opened the door to the impressive headmaster's office. Hermione had only ever been in this room a handful of times, and it always fascinated her. What she wouldn't give to have a thorough exploration of it one day. A glance at the dark man hanging up his cloak reminded her that her curiosity would not be satisfied any time soon, if indeed ever.

'Well, well, hello, my dear Miss Granger,' came a voice Hermione hadn't heard in a long while.

'Professor Dumbledore!' Hermione's attention was drawn to the newest portrait in the room, hanging on the wall to the left of Snape's desk.

The old wizard smiled down at her. 'I was glad to hear you'd taken the job. I'm sure you are just what this castle needs.'

Hermione rather blushed at this, but wasn't quite sure whether it was from Dumbledore's comment or Snape's quiet huff that indicated his apparent disagreement.

'You must forgive me, my dear, but I will have to leave you and Severus to it; I have an appointment with the Fat Lady to keep.' With that, he hopped through several frames before he disappeared completely.

Hermione turned towards the other occupant in the room, who motioned with a flick of his hand for her to sit. Seating himself behind the desk, Snape rummaged around the papers laid out upon it, obviously looking for something. Hermione noted that his attire was somewhat different from what she remembered. He no longer wore the long, black teaching robe favoured by several of the staff; instead, his outer robe was of a heavier material, more befitting perhaps of a headmaster, Hermione decided. It was black, of course, with darker lining around the cuffs and edges. The only other colour visible on his person was the briefest hint of a white collar around his neck, tightly bound, as ever, by a knotted black cravat.

Her eyes were drawn unwittingly to the spot where she knew he had been bitten by that snake. She hoped there would come a time in the future when she could venture to ask how he had managed to survive that night in the Shrieking Shack. At the time she had thought he was dead, and she was no Mediwitch, after all, yet still a part of her wished she had done something herself.

Oh dear, he was looking at her now. Hermione returned his gaze steadily, all the while wondering to herself how a simple stare could make her feel so uncomfortably aware of her own inexperience; perhaps Snape would now remark that he'd changed his mind and decided she was too inadequate for the job. He didn't. Instead he unfurled a long roll of parchment with a flick of his wand.

'Your contract, Miss Granger; I trust Minerva has gone through the finer details that the contract will require of you...teaching hours, holidays, salary and so on?'

Hermione nodded. 'She has.'

'Well then, perhaps you have some questions you would like to put to me before we make this official?'

Hermione's mind went blank for probably the first time in her life. 'Uh, no, thank you, not at this juncture.'

'Indeed,' replied Snape smoothly, with just a partial rise of his eyebrows. Hermione thought he was a little surprised she hadn't launched a barrage of questions at him.

He dipped his quill in the inkpot on his desk before scratching out his signature on the parchment. 'Sign your name in the space next to mine.'

Hermione did as bidden and felt a quiver of nerves when, immediately after signing her name, the parchment rolled itself up with a snap and a piece of red ribbon materialised around it. She watched as it zoomed off to file itself within one of the many cabinets within the office. No backing out now, then...she really was going to be a teacher.

'Tomorrow you will be shown your classroom, as well as your office. Minerva and I will also take you through how to organise lesson plans in accordance with an agreed syllabus. We still follow that which was set out by Professor Burbage, but as you are aware, we would like you to formulate any changes that you deem appropriate and, by extension, / deem appropriate. Therefore, as the year progresses, make note of what works, what doesn't, what is missing, what is outdated, and so on. This is something I'll revisit with you at a later date, once you have had a chance to become accustomed to your teaching duties.'

'Of course.' Hermione was rather looking forward to getting stuck into it all.

'You have a few weeks before the start of term, and I'm sure that is ample time for you to get acquainted with everything...' Snape trailed off for a moment as if weighing his next words. 'Minerva assures me that you will do an excellent job and I have not, as yet, any reason to contradict her.'

On balance, it was probably the nicest thing Snape had ever uttered to her. 'I shall try very hard not to give you a reason, sir.'

'Very well, you may leave and join the rest of the staff. I know Filius is dying to see you.'

He could not have said it more derisively, but Hermione smiled nonetheless. 'Thank you, Professor Snape,' she said as she stood to leave.

He merely nodded in response and Hermione made her way to the door. As she was closing it, she found herself glancing back towards him. He was standing, looking out through the large window, and Hermione noticed his right hand come up to rub at his neck. She was oddly fascinated by the sight for a moment, before quickly realising he could turn around at any second. Hermione closed the door as gently as she could and breathed deeply. She was an actual teacher... 'Professor Granger'. She hadn't felt this excited about anything in a long time.

The remaining weeks of August soon dissolved into September, and before Hermione knew it, she had completed her first week of teaching. Friday evening after dinner found her slumped in a chair in Minerva's office.

'Well, my dear, how do you feel now that the first week is out of the way? I know you were a bag of nerves beforehand,' stated the older woman with a smile.

Hermione sat up a bit straighter. 'I actually really enjoyed it. Well, once I got over the sight of all those expectant faces staring at me! Still, I managed to keep all of my lessons from descending into mayhem. You really do need eyes in the back of your head, don't you? I don't know how you manage; at least there's no magic involved in my classes!'

Minerva laughed. 'There is no big secret, it's just years of experience. I have taught for longer than I care to remember, and as such, I've seen pretty much all there is that can go wrong...I know what to expect. Mind, there's often one or two students who keep you on your toes.'

'It's really strange, though. It doesn't seem all that long ago that I was a student myself.'

'Believe me, Hermione, come Christmas you will feel like you have been teaching here for years. It just remains to be seen whether that will be a good thing or not.' Minerva eyed Hermione speculatively over her glasses.

Hermione thought for a moment. 'It's early days, of course, but I hope it will be a good thing.' Hermione chuckled loudly. 'Unless the Headmaster sacks me, of course.'

Minerva raised her eyebrows and there was disbelief evident in her voice. 'Why on earth would Severus want to sack you?'

Hermione tucked some of her wayward hair behind her ear and shrugged. 'Oh, just something he said a few weeks ago, along the lines of me not giving him a reason to contradict the faith you put in me by recommending me for the job.'

Hermione smiled in bemusement as the other woman snorted and shook her head.

'It was Severus' idea to offer you the job!'

'What?' exclaimed Hermione, genuinely surprised.

'Yes,' laughed Minerva. 'Oh, he was Slytherin enough to make it appear as though I'd suggested you, but *distinctly* recall him nonchalantly dropping into conversation one day the fact that you'd finished your placement at the Ministry. I might have called him out on his bluff, were it not for the fact that I was eager to have you back here, so I humoured him.'

'Oh, I see.' Hermione was surprised to feel a peculiar spread of warmth fill her at the thought that Severus Snape himself had wanted her for the job. How had he even known she was finishing her Ministry placement and not planning on returning? Minerva excused herself for a short moment before both women would make their way to the staff room, where most of the teachers usually gathered to relax and enjoy themselves after a hard week.

In the meantime, Hermione's thoughts remained on the mysterious headmaster, for he was definitely mysterious, she decided. He'd been perfectly civil to her during the few times they had actually spoken, and Hermione was certainly not going to complain about that. She'd suffered her own share of his insults in the past and she didn't want to have to put up with them still.

She'd probably only seen him a handful of times this week, the majority of which were at meal times. And, as she was at the bottom of the staff pecking order, she always ended up several chairs away from him; chances, therefore, of striking up a conversation were rather low. The only significant exchange she'd had with him had been prior to the Welcoming Feast, and it still brought a small smile to her face.

She'd been standing in the small anteroom off the Great Hall with the rest of the teachers as they waited for the older students to be seated. Minerva had been out in the Entrance Hall, waiting for the first-years, and Hermione had found herself standing on her own, desperately trying to calm her nerves by adjusting and readjusting her robe. Out of nowhere, Snape's deep voice arrested her attention, and she'd spun round to find him standing nearby.

'Professor Granger.'

She hadn't been able to stop her eyes from widening slightly at the sight of him. It had to be the only time she had ever seen any other colour apart from black or white on him. His outer robe was a very deep purple, really not worth mentioning except for the fact that it was so incongruous on Snape.

As ever, he'd known where her thoughts were headed. 'This is nothing, Professor. Just wait until you see my pink robes.'

His face had betrayed nothing, and for a split second Hermione had wondered if he was being serious, until she realised the ridiculousness of such a thing, and she'd chuckled lightly at the vision conjured in her mind. It was only later, in hindsight, that she wished she'd come up with something rather wittier in response.

He'd proceeded to bid her good luck before moving to enter the Great Hall, and Hermione had been left feeling a little bit more confident. Still, that was several days ago, and she thought he might have at least inquired as to how she was getting on.

Minerva's return put an end to any more musings, and Hermione followed the elder woman eagerly out of the office, looking forward to a relaxing evening. She'd had her eyes opened recently in regards to some of her fellow teaching staff when it came to letting one's hair down. Never would Hermione have imagined Pomona Sprout knocking back the sherries with such abandon as she had exhibited a couple of weeks ago, during Filius Flitwick's birthday celebrations. What an experience that had been, escorting the inebriated Hufflepuff back to her rooms. She'd chattered on about the most random of things and had amused Hermione greatly. Clearly, she was still guilty of the childish perspective that teachers had no life beyond the classroom, but it was a transition to which Hermione was quickly becoming accustomed.

They soon arrived in the staff room and were quickly furnished with drinks. Hermione took a seat next to Minerva and Pomona, shortly joined by the school matron, Poppy Pomfrey, who was taking advantage of an empty infirmary. Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch were engaged in a rather tense chess game, with Horace Slughorn observing closely.

Hermione sipped her wine, and for the next hour the witches chatted, swapping beginning-of-term anecdotes, detailing the mayhem and mishaps that had befallen some of the first-years. Though not particularly quiet by nature, Hermione was often content to sit back and just listen to their conversation, especially when it concerned Hogwarts; she was quickly realising she had a lot to learn.

The room had filled with a few more occupants and Hermione was a little bit relieved to find that Sybill Trelawney was not among the number. She'd managed to avoid her quite comprehensively so far. Pomona, who had left to retrieve another drink, returned with a steaming cup of tea.

'Yes, Hermione,' chuckled the Hufflepuff knowingly, 'there'll be no need to escort me tonight. I don't get into that state during term-time. What kind of example would I be setting my impressionable firsties, hmm?'

They all giggled at the image.

Suddenly the fireplace in the centre of the room glowed green, and a tall figure unfurled itself from the grate. It was Snape. He nodded in greeting at their little enclave, mumbled something towards the others, and, pouring himself a hefty measure of Firewhisky, he slumped elegantly into a nearby armchair.

From the moment he'd stepped out of the fireplace, Hermione had been oddly transfixed. She'd never seen her Professor looking so... un-Snapelike. He had shed his heavy outer-robe, and Hermione couldn't help but examine what that revealed underneath. Most strikingly, she noted he'd loosened his black cravat slightly, allowing the collar of his shirt to droop, which in turn caused his throat to be partially uncovered.

Hermione managed to finally wrest her eyes away, lest anyone comment on her preoccupation. She swallowed uncomfortably as a slow blush flooded her cheeks. What the hell was wrong with her? She didn't know where to look! She felt like some ridiculously repressed Victorian gentleman, swooning over the sight of an exposed feminine ankle. Why was he here? He never appeared as one for socialising, and why did he have to come in looking like that? Perhaps she was drunk? Merlin, she hoped so.

'Poor Severus,' clucked Madam Pomfrey. 'The start of term is always the hardest.'

Minerva hummed in response, but Hermione could only manage a weak, 'Oh?'

'Indeed, my dear, we often get homesick children writing home saying they are unhappy, and that in turn brings a lot of letters from concerned parents, especially Muggle parents who are probably only just coming to terms with the existence of magic, let alone anything else.'

Hermione was suddenly reminded of her own first few weeks there. She'd also been unhappy, but the thought of learning magic had been so thrilling it had outweighed the fact that she was having difficulty making friends.

'There are angry parents, too,' muttered Minerva darkly. Hermione watched the other women shake their heads in disgust. Minerva elaborated in an undertone at her expectant look. 'They get a bit personal with him, questioning his right to be headmaster after being a Death Eater, thinking it will get him to oblige their ridiculous demands. Dumbledore was not exempt from such tactics, either; he had his share of difficult parents over the years. I think Severus finds it harder to rise above it, though he'd never admit to it,' finished Minerva with a small smile.

Hermione was shocked. 'Seriously? After everything he did during the war!'

Hermione chanced a glance in the direction of the topic of their conversation. When she saw him, she was relieved to find her faculties had not deserted her a second time. Clearly, she had been suffering from a "funny five minutes," as her mother would say. Indeed, as she watched him stare unblinkingly into the fire with his tumbler balanced in his hand, Hermione felt rather uncharitable for her earlier affront that he hadn't spoken to her about her lessons this week. Instead, she would just take it as a sign that he had faith in her abilities.

'Severus!' cried Flitwick in his high-pitched voice. 'I've just dispatched Horace here. How'd you fancy your chances?'

Snape blinked and turned to the diminutive professor, who was sorting out the chess pieces. He drained the remains of his whisky, and Hermione observed him making his way over to the table.

'I think you'll find the question, "How do you fancy yours?" more pertinent. I trust you remember the pitiable state I left you in the last time?' said Snape haughtily.

'I was rather dire, wasn't I?' lamented Flitwick sombrely.

'Completely,' agreed Snape.

Hermione thought she might have even witnessed a small smile from him. He appeared to have a good rapport with his staff, particularly with the older members, and Hermione found she would like to have that with him, too. Perhaps be friends of sorts, or if that was too much to ask, then at least have informality; he seemed to call everyone else by their first names, after all.

Minerva and Pomona were soon taking their leave to check that their respective Houses were adhering to 'Lights Out' and then to check the corridors before retiring themselves. Hermione made to leave shortly thereafter, the thought of her comfy four-poster proving too tempting. Plus, she had a big day tomorrow; she was going to meet Ron in Hogsmeade, and it was a meeting she was both anticipating and dreading.

'I guess I thought a few weeks apart might make you realise that you missed me, or something.' Ron smoothed a hand through his red hair rather self-consciously.

Hermione sighed heavily, hating herself for what she had to say. 'Of course I've missed you, Ron... but not, I'm afraid, in the way you might have hoped for.'

His eyes dropped to the table for several moments before he spoke once more. 'I think I knew that, deep down. I can't believe it's over, but even I can't deny that you look happy here. I am truly glad for you, Hermione, and I'm sorry if it's taken me a while to show it.'

'Don't be silly, Ron, you have nothing to be sorry for,' said Hermione with a slight quaver in her voice.

They both sat in silence for a few minutes, and Hermione wondered if things could have been different between them. Was she doing the right thing, holing herself up in a draughty castle away from her friends, away from Ron? She wasn't sure; only time would tell in that respect. But there was one thing she did know, and it was regardless of where she lived and worked: her relationship with Ron had run its course. She owed it to him to be honest and could now only be grateful for the fact that it had ended amicably.

They hugged each other goodbye with the promise that they would get together soon, along with Harry and Ginny. Still, Hermione could not help feeling down as she

returned to the castle for dinner. It was a feeling that persisted well into the evening, and Hermione longed for something to turn her mind to. It was Saturday night, and she had no marking, her lesson plans were perfectly organised, she'd already spent an hour or two jotting down ideas for her classes, her bookshelves were concisely alphabetised, she had no duties to perform, and in essence, she was at a complete loss.

In the end, she stalked out of her rooms and walked at random through the many corridors. They were mostly free of students this late into the evening. An object lying on a windowsill caught Hermione's attention, and as she got closer she saw that it was an abandoned book. Picking it up, she was disappointed to find it was a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*, but an inspection of the inside cover for a clue as to whom the owner was revealed it to be a library book. Who would dare to leave a... Oh, the library! Hermione could have hexed herself. It was her favourite place on earth; how could she have overlooked it?

Hermione smiled; she would return the book to Madam Pince and then lose herself in the stacks. She quickly headed down to the fourth floor.

Madam Pince muttered angrily when Hermione explained where she had found the book. Hermione knew that when she traced it, a certain student would be getting a severe talking-to. Hermione left her to it and explored the shelves. The library was officially closed to students at this time, but staff could access the books whenever they liked, although they could not remove them without the librarian's permission.

Hermione was already feeling more relaxed as she moved into the Arithmancy aisle. Her eyes were drawn to the Advanced Arithmancy textbooks that seventh-year N.E.W.T. students used. She hadn't studied the subject since her sixth year, and two years had since passed. Her mind recalled the moment when Ron had intimated that she'd been bitter about never completing her N.E.W.T.s, and she didn't mind admitting, in her mind at least, that he was right. She'd missed a whole year of advanced study, for Merlin's sake, to say nothing of what she'd missed in all her other subjects.

She grabbed the book. It was simple; she would teach herself. It might never be official, but it would be enough for her to know that she had done the studying and filled the gaps in her knowledge. It could be her little project. She was sure she could rely on Minerva and some of the others to give her some guidance, or at the very least a seventh-year syllabus from which she could follow.

Hermione, decision firmly made, flitted around the shelves, picking up texts on Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology and Potions. That was enough for her to be getting on with for the moment. If she found she had enough time on top of her teaching workload, she might go for Ancient Runes and Astronomy as well. She didn't feel she had to bother with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Upon reaching the desk Hermione was disappointed to find Madam Pince had retired for the evening.

'Bugger,' she said softly to herself.

Unfazed, Hermione settled herself in a small nook, lit several candles, and looked at her watch. It was nearly nine o'clock; she could easily get in a good two hours before going to bed. She Summoned some of the spare parchment that was kept for students at the library desk and rummaged within her robe for a quill. Satisfied, she pulled the Arithmancy text towards her and began flicking through, noting down all the matter she was already familiar with and all which was foreign to her.

Hermione worked contentedly through Herbology and Transfiguration, diligently making lists for each subject. She leaned over the table, her finger pointing alternately at the last two remaining books. 'Charms or Potions, hmm, Char...'

'I should hope you know better than to pass over potion-making for foolish wand-waving, Professor.'

Hermione was sure she nearly died of fright. 'Bloody hell!' she exclaimed loudly, spinning around in her chair at the noise.

Severus Snape was standing close by, watching her speculatively.

'Professor Snape! I'm sorry; I didn't hear you come in,' breathed Hermione rather deeply.

Snape smirked. 'My apologies; I did not mean to frighten you. I saw the light and had to check.'

'It is all right, well... it will be, once my heart starts beating again.' Hermione smiled weakly, turning back to her table. She wasn't entirely pleased to see him; he'd probably want to know what she was up to. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione could see him moving closer to the table. He lifted up her small pile of books and inspected the front covers. *Help yourself*, thought Hermione wryly.

'Do you mind...?' He was gesturing to the chair next to her.

Hermione hoped the surprise she felt wasn't also written all over her face. 'Of course not, go ahead.'

His close proximity suddenly made Hermione feel very self-aware, and she fought not to fidget. What a novel situation this was, sitting in the library with Severus Snape at...she glanced at her watch...quarter to twelve! Where had the time gone? He was clad in all black today, and Hermione was nearly overcome by an inexplicable urge to enquire as to where his pink robes were. However Gryffindor she might be, she was nowhere near comfortable enough in his presence to initiate witty banter. She wasn't sure it would be welcome.

'May I ask why it is that you are surrounded by N.E.W.T. level texts?'

'Oh, well, I thought I might take advantage of being back here at Hogwarts and catch up on all that I missed from my seventh year'. Hermione eyed him resolutely in case he reverted to type and decreed her an insufferable know-it-all once more. However, he was staring at the table as if deep in thought, while the fingers of his right hand tapped delicately along her pile of books. Had he even heard her? She was about to break the silence when he looked at her.

'Professor, what would you say if I said I could try and arrange it so you are able to sit the N.E.W.T. examinations properly, at the end of the school year?'

Hermione could only stare for a few moments, once again thrown off-balance by the man beside her. She smiled slowly. 'I would say that I'd be extremely grateful.'

Her gaze dropped to her hands resting in her lap, feeling very happy that she would finally accomplish one of the goals she had always had in her mind since being an eager first-year. 'Oh, but, Professor, I don't want to cause you any trouble. I'm sure you have more important things to concern yourself with. I don't mind really if officially I never...'

His raised hand cut her off. 'I assure you, Professor Granger, it will not be a problem. Indeed, I expect the Ministry will be more than happy to oblige, especially when they know it is for you.'

'Hmm, I wouldn't be so sure, sir. I don't think they were very happy with me after I snubbed their job offer.'

He gave a low chuckle, which only served to make Hermione feel inordinately pleased.

'They will not hold a grudge. Come, it is late; I will walk you back to your quarters.'

Hermione could have skipped back to her rooms, but it was hardly something Snape would appreciate, so she managed to refrain.

'I believe I have been remiss in not discussing with you how your first week of lessons has gone. However, I believe you to be in good hands with Minerva and assumed that you would rather discuss any problems with her, anyway,' said Snape as they neared her landing.

Oh. Hermione moved her head to look up at him, but he was as unreadable as ever as walked beside her. 'I understand,' she offered. 'Besides, there's not much to tell, as things went rather smoothly.'

'I am glad to hear it.' He stopped outside her door. 'I shall bid you good night, Professor.'

'Thank you again, sir; good night.'

He nodded before sweeping off down the corridor.

Hermione, once inside, threw herself upon her bed as the day finally caught up with her. Her thoughts, on the other hand, remained with the man who was no doubt still stalking the corridors. He seemed so different to what she remembered as a student. Had the end of the war changed him? Or had he always been like this and only now was she able to witness it? Why was it that he made her feel so self-conscious? Last night in the staff room she'd... No, she'd been tipsy from the wine that was all. She was just unused to seeing him as anything other than an irascible Potions master... *that* was all.

She thought about Ron and wondered if he was all right. A pang of regret assailed her. She would write to Harry in the morning and ask him to keep an eye on Ron for her. Hermione soon fell into a deep sleep, and all thoughts were blessedly curtailed.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for beta-reading this :)

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

Characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

The following morning, Hermione awoke to a tapping on her window. Rubbing her bleary eyes, she glanced at her bedside clock and was surprised to see it was ten minutes to nine. Well, she'd missed breakfast, that was for sure. Tossing the covers aside, Hermione moved to let in the owl perching on her windowsill...it was Harry and Ginny's owl. Hermione sighed; no doubt it was a missive lamenting the end of her and Ron's relationship.

Before opening it, Hermione decided she would get dressed and head to the kitchens for a cup of tea to blow away the early morning cobwebs. Possibly she would get a piece of toast, too. Noticing the promising weather outside, Hermione mused that it might be nice to spend her Sunday morning outdoors. She would take a quill and parchment, find somewhere pleasant to sit, and then compose a response to their letter.

Half an hour later, after losing the battle with the bane of her life...her hair (in the end she'd simply snapped a bobble around it)...Hermione made her way to the kitchens, chatting briefly with the house-elves, and then headed for the quiet quadrangle opposite the Transfiguration classroom. It had been one of her favourite places to sit and study as a student.

Several students greeted her as they passed in the corridor and Hermione reciprocated with pleasure. She had no idea who any of them were and wondered how on earth she would remember the association between so many names and so many different faces.

The quadrangle was empty, apart from a pair of young girls who seemed to be exploring by the way they were peering closely at everything. Hermione sat down on a bench and pulled out the letter from Harry...it was relatively short. She knew Harry would be disappointed, and indeed, Ginny as well, but the letter didn't indicate any surprise on their part. She smiled at the thought of her two friends. Hermione hoped one day she would be as happy with someone.

She began writing out a reply, expressing her gratitude for their concern. It occurred to her that she should also write to her parents, so she extracted another piece of parchment and started what turned out to be a rather lengthy letter.

She was addressing the envelopes when she heard her name being called.

'Ah, good morning, Minerva,' called Hermione pleasantly. 'I'm just writing a couple of letters.'

Minerva noticed the addresses. 'How are your parents, my dear?'

'Very well, thank you; they came rather close to remaining in Australia, even after I returned their memories. I'm happy to say, though, that in the end they missed home too much.'

'And Mr Potter and Miss Weasley?'

'Never better. Uh, Ron and I have ended things you see...' began Hermione, a fraction awkwardly.

'Oh no! I had no idea! Oh dear; was it because you took the job here?' Minerva sat beside Hermione and patted her hand gently.

Hermione smiled gratefully at the older woman's concern. 'Partly, but mostly we had been beginning to grow apart for a long time. We want different things from life... I'm sad about it, of course, but it was for the best, I'm sure. We are still on good terms, and that is the most important thing.'

'No doubt, Hermione. Well, you have a busy week ahead of you to monopolise your attentions away from your sadness. You know where I am if you need a chat.' Minerva smiled kindly. 'I'm afraid I must be off. I've a meeting to attend about Quidditch scheduling...it's riveting stuff, I assure you, but I must negotiate the best terms for Gryffindor if we are to win this year! Hufflepuff actually won the cup last year, can you believe it?'

Hermione laughed.

After the older woman had left, Hermione sat quietly for a few moments before beginning the walk to the Owlery, not for the first time wondering if she should finally get an owl of her own. Maybe, when she got her pay at the end of the month, she would travel to Diagon Alley and have a look in Eyelops' Owl Emporium.

Her correspondence was soon winging its way south, and Hermione spent a few moments at the top of the Owlery tower appreciating the vista before her.

Examining the grounds, she was surprised to see a small flash of orange. Moving around the tower to get a better view, she could see several intermittent orange flashes.

Were they flames? What appeared to be small, black creatures were scuttling around the lawns, and she witnessed Hagrid appear from the side of his hut, brandishing his pink umbrella. Oh, God...Hermione sincerely hoped he hadn't been illegally breeding Blast-Ended Skrewts again!

'Don't fall, don't fall, please don't fall,' repeated Hermione to herself as she ran quickly down the winding Owlery steps and then down the hill to Hagrid.

As Hermione got closer, she could see they were not Skrewts, but Fire Crabs. Nearby was a large crate that had been opened. Mindful of the small jets of flame that would periodically expel from the creatures, Hermione finally reached Hagrid.

'What happened?'

Hagrid was trying to usher the crabs back into their crate, and Hermione squealed loudly when Hagrid's beard caught fire.

'Aguamenti!' she cried, pointing her wand at him.

'Thanks, 'Ermione; look, could yer give me a hand? Some bloody students spelled open me casement of Fire Crabs.'

Students? Hermione looked around quickly, worried that someone could get hurt. She could see no students, but she could see Snape striding briskly over the grounds.

'Hang on, Hagrid, let me jinx them onto their backs, and then you can lift them quickly into the crate.'

There were six altogether, and there was only one left to deal with when Snape reached them, his hair whipping slightly in the autumn breeze. Hermione was suddenly aware of the strands of her own hair tickling her face and realised it probably looked a fright after her rapid descent from the Owlery.

'What, may I ask, is going on here?'

'Ah, I'm sorry, 'Eadmaster, it were some students interferin' with me casement of Fire Crabs from the Ministry.' Hagrid patted his beard free of broken and burnt hair.

'Students?' repeated Snape quietly. 'Where...?'

Hagrid indicated with his eyes the nearby copse of trees that made up the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Snape nodded fractionally.

The remaining Fire Crab suddenly sent a jet of flame towards one of Hagrid's pumpkins, causing the half-giant to sigh heavily with dismay. Hermione silently extinguished the flames, but froze when she heard a very muffled giggle. She wasn't the only one to hear it. Snape's wand was out and aimed at the trees. A large, white light sped with a crack into the woods and Hermione watched it break up. A few seconds later, three young boys appeared, being dragged by their collars as if by an invisible hand. Their struggles were futile, and Hermione had to suppress a small smile at how effectively they'd been caught.

'We'll see how funny you find it when you are cleaning out the Owlery... without magic,' snarled Snape. There were groans but no protests...they knew they'd been caught fair and square.

'Apologise immediately to Professor Hagrid with the assurance that no, you won't mind mucking out the Thestrals either,' purred Snape delicately.

This time indignation caused all three to gasp and glare. None, however, had the courage to challenge the punishment. They apologised rather sullenly to Hagrid, whereupon Snape flicked his wand in the direction of the castle. The invisible hands began dragging them uphill.

'You will wait for me by the hourglasses in the Entrance Hall, where we will witness together just how many points are going to be deducted,' Snape called after them. Then he turned to Hagrid with a frown. 'Try to keep a closer eye on your creatures, Hagrid...this is a school, not a zoo.'

Hermione was going to speak out on behalf of Hagrid, before realising it was not her place. Snape glanced at her as if challenging her to protest, but Hermione merely watched him evenly. Besides, he had a point.

Hagrid nodded. 'You're righ' o'course, Professor; it won' 'appen again!'

'Good day to you both.' With those parting words Snape left them to join his misbehaving students.

Hermione watched his robes billow for a moment before turning to Hagrid cheerfully. 'How about some tea, Hagrid?'

Hagrid was inspecting the damage to his pumpkin...it was black.

'Sounds good teh me. Oh! I made some of me rock cakes; I know yer like 'em!'

Hermione smiled weakly as she entered Hagrid's hut.

Late afternoon found Hermione seated at the large, round table in the staff room. She had with her all her third year materials; tomorrow was her first lesson with them and she wanted to make a good impression. After all, they had just signed on to three years of her subject, and she did not want half of them to have dropped it for another subject by the end of the week!

The room was reasonably quiet. Snape had entered a short while ago to converse with Horace and hadn't so much as glanced in Hermione's direction. Now, he appeared to be dealing with a house-elf, and as Hermione got up to make some tea, she realised he was reading several menus. Hmm, so Snape had final say on what ended up on the tables at dinner.

Upon reaching the sideboard, Hermione began filling the kettle with her wand and hummed rather absently under her breath.

'One sugar and just a drop of milk will do nicely, Professor.'

Hermione blinked and gave a sidelong glance at the back of the chair in which Snape sat. He wasn't looking at her; he was still dealing with the house-elf. She shrugged; it was probably rude of her not to offer in the first place. As the kettle boiled, Hermione reached for the crockery. Was Snape the cup and saucer type? Probably not, she reasoned, and picked up a white mug.

On her way back to her spot, Hermione placed the mug down gently on the small coffee table near his feet. He didn't say anything; he merely flicked his eyes briefly towards her. Well, he'd been good to her last night, so Hermione decided she'd let him have this bout of aloofness.

Settling back down, she surreptitiously observed him take a sip from the mug. Yes, her vanity *did* extend to wanting to know if he liked her tea or not, and Hermione wasn't ashamed to admit it. Was that...? Ah, yes, that was a definite wince. Hermione immediately dropped her gaze to her parchments.

Shortly, the entrance of Minerva and Pomona broke the quiet. Hermione waved them over to her. 'I'm preparing for my third-years tomorrow.'

Minerva nodded, took a seat and pulled the register of names towards her. 'Watch out for Mr. Huckleby as he can be rather disruptive when he feels like it. He doesn't have an aptitude for much, and I wouldn't be surprised if he chose Muggle Studies expecting an easy ride. He's a Slytherin, and Horace has had no end of trouble with him.'

Pomona huffed in agreement.

'Hmm, I see; thank you for letting me know.' Hermione would make sure to suss him out as soon as possible. There would be no easy ride for him, or anyone for that matter.

Out of her peripheral vision, Hermione could see Snape stand up. The thought that he might be getting up to toss his tea down the sink crossed her mind, and Hermione defiantly took a long sip of her own. Worse though, he approached the table.

'My dear, you do have a rather large third-year class,' commented Pomona, who was now inspecting the list of names.

'I was going to mention that,' replied Hermione with interest. 'Is this a lot more than usual?'

'But of course, Professor Granger, it is not every day Muggle Studies is taught by a celebrity.'

It was Snape who had spoken, and Hermione winced inwardly at his deeply disdainful tone. It disappointed her to think that students had chosen her class because they were impressed by her notoriety or, more likely, her friendship with Harry.

Her disappointment must have shown, for Minerva patted her gently on the arm. 'Well, it doesn't matter what attracted them there in the first place as long as they are learning! Besides, you should have seen how many sixth-year girls signed up for Advanced Muggle Studies last year when they found out our illustrious Headmaster, here, would be teaching it!'

Snape scowled severely at his deputy, while Minerva merely gave a small wink in Hermione's direction.

Hermione, emboldened by Minerva's presence, plastered a look of dawning comprehension on her face. 'Ah! I wondered why there was a crowd of girls glaring daggers at me all lesson on Thursday! Bless them, they must be so disappointed.'

Hermione bit her lip to keep herself from laughing aloud. She was wary of Snape's reaction and didn't dare look at him. The other two ladies felt no such compunction and chuckled freely.

'Indeed, it is all very funny,' purred Snape, his tone suggesting very much to the contrary, 'and once I am sufficiently recovered from the effects of enduring such hilarity, I would like to speak with you, Pomona, regarding ingredients for the Infirmary potions stock.' With a dismissive glare he stalked off, leaving the three witches still smiling.

'I didn't realise Professor Snape taught Muggle Studies last year,' said Hermione thoughtfully.

'Oh, indeed, he was the person with the most Muggle experience on staff last year and so he took on the advanced classes. I rather think he enjoyed teaching again, though I doubt Severus would ever admit to such a thing,' remarked Minerva. 'I have picked up enough to get by on over the years so I taught the third-years, and Rolanda Hooch had the fourth and fifth-years...'

They were suddenly interrupted by a well-known voice. 'Well then, what are we talking about, ladies?'

They all looked up to a large painting of a Scottish landscape on the wall.

'Albus! Are you eavesdropping again?' Pomona laughed.

'Certainly, dear; my two-dimensional life is very dull without it.' The old face smiled benignly down at them.

'You always were a gossip at heart, Albus,' commented Minerva with a shake of her head.

'Speaking of gossip, Severus tells me he is going to arrange for our Miss Granger to sit her N.E.W.T. examinations.'

Hermione suddenly found herself on the end of the twinkling, blue gaze, and centre of attention. 'Well, he said he would look into it for me. He, ah, caught me in the library buried in N.E.W.T. texts,' stated Hermione self-consciously.

Minerva laughed knowingly. 'I think it is wonderful, Hermione. I can only imagine how disappointed you were not to take them the first time around.'

'Yes, it is very good of Professor Snape to arrange it for me,' said Hermione.

'Indeed,' agreed the former Headmaster.

Hermione was vaguely uncomfortable when she detected a double meaning in his tone. Was she imagining it, or was Dumbledore implying an ulterior motive in Snape's generosity? It would be something to bear in mind, she decided.

Lunchtime, the following day, found Hermione slumped in her office with her head on the desk. She had reckoned it would happen sooner or later, but still, it hadn't meant she was entirely prepared. She had just had a nightmare of a lesson...a complete and utter nightmare. Well, that might be exaggerating a tad, but it could certainly be considered as such in the context of her fledgling teaching career. From the off, nothing had gone according to her careful preparations.

Firstly, she'd made the monumental mistake of arriving a few minutes after the bell had rung for the lesson to begin. Bloody Trelawney had cornered her after breakfast, parroting some nonsense about seeing the Grim in her cornflakes. Therefore, when she got to her classroom, her third-years were already feeling restless as they lined up in the corridor. Once settled, she'd given an introductory speech, and then set them a short task of jotting down anything that they knew about Muggles and the Muggle world. The lesson had gone downhill from there.

During the class discussion that had followed the exercise, Hermione handed out her first detention and deducted thirty points from, she was ashamed to say it, Gryffindor. The detention had been for a Slytherin boy who hexed a Gryffindor student completely green, and the points were for ignorant anti-Muggle jokes made by a pair of Gryffindor boys who clearly thought themselves hilarious.

Hermione was astounded by how oblivious some students were to the ways of Muggles. Despite the demarcation of two separate worlds, one for magical people and another for Muggles, both were intertwined. Hogsmeade was the only completely magical village in the British Isles; therefore it was inconceivable that the majority of children did not come into fairly regular contact with Muggles. Not to mention the fact that pure-blood numbers were steadily declining, and had been for years.

Hermione sighed. She'd become so annoyed during the lesson that she ended up setting the homework she'd been saving for their second class. Why on earth couldn't she have a class full of Arthur Weasleys? Her life would be much easier for it.

It was time for lunch in the Great Hall, but Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to explain the loss of thirty points from Gryffindor to Minerva just yet. She had the rest of the afternoon off, and a stroll to Hogsmeade sounded like the best course of action after her hectic morning.

As her second week of teaching wore on, Hermione began to feel more and more comfortable in the classroom. Her third-years had been better behaved the second time around, and the class discussion that had arisen from the homework she'd set had shown much more promise. However, Hermione was not one to become complacent, and she kept a watchful eye over the potential troublemakers. Her Advanced classes were what she enjoyed the most. The seventh-years had debated the future of

Muggle and magical integration and co-operation, and Hermione was pleased to hear so many different perspectives and insights. So much so, she feared she might have become rather long-winded about it in her letter to her parents. Still, she knew they wouldn't mind.

Dinner, on Friday evening, was a rather noisy affair. The students were in high spirits at the thought of the weekend, and also, the first Quidditch match of the season...Ravenclaw versus Slytherin...to be played on Sunday. Hermione ignored the bustle and quite contentedly made inroads into her chicken pie and mashed potatoes. After a missed lunch, her appetite had been taunting her throughout the day, and it was only on wanting to retain her dignity in front of hundreds of people that she didn't start shovelling her food down, like Ron and Harry were sometimes wont to do.

After her main course, Hermione pulled a dish of fruit salad towards her. The chocolate profiteroles looked extremely inviting, stacked in front of her just so, but she was getting a little too comfortable with the Hogwarts desserts. She was aware of Snape taking his leave further up the High Table. He never did linger at the table after meals.

Hermione pushed her fork into a piece of pineapple. It was deliciously juicy and tart, and she fished around the apple and melon for another. She was chewing on it, when she noticed Snape come to a stop behind her.

'Professor, I would like to see you in my office after dinner.'

Hermione nodded dumbly in acknowledgment, and he carried on out of the Great Hall. Immediately, she swiped a hand across her face, expecting to find a hideous trail of juice on her chin, but thankfully, luck was on her side. What did he want to see her about? Perhaps it was about her N.E.W.T.s? Hermione had wondered if he'd forgotten about them, as he'd made no mention of them for a week. Eager to hear what Snape had to say, Hermione abandoned her fruit and began the walk to his office.

She reached the stone gargoyles...'Armadillo Bile'. It appeared that Snape had forsaken Dumbledore's tradition of basing his passwords on sweets and had opted for potion ingredients instead.

Hermione knocked on the oak door at the top of the revolving staircase and quickly straightened her robes. She waited for a few moments, but there was no answer. She tried the handle, and when it twisted easily, Hermione opened the door. She surmised Snape was the type of person who, if he hadn't wanted her to go inside and wait, would have damn well made sure she couldn't.

The office was indeed empty, and Hermione took the seat opposite the large desk. Looking in the direction of Dumbledore's portrait, she was disappointed to see it was also empty. Catching Phineas Black's eye, Hermione nodded in acknowledgment before scanning the rest of the room. The gallery above caught Hermione's interest. How she would love to go up and see what kind of titles were stored in the bookshelves. The Sorting Hat was sitting upon a high shelf and appeared to be snoring lightly. Her attention shifted to the desk in front of her, and Hermione was surprised to note that it was slightly untidy. There were a lot of parchments and books strewn haphazardly about. She was admiring an intricate sand timer when the door opened.

'My apologies, Professor Granger, for keeping you.'

'It's not a problem.' Hermione quirked her lips awkwardly as Snape moved around his desk and sank into the large chair. She looked on in amusement as he shuffled around the many scrolls on his desk before locating the one he obviously needed. He tapped the scroll open with his finger before looking up at Hermione.

'I have spoken with the Ministry and, as expected, they are more than happy to oblige in regard to your N.E.W.T.s.'

Hermione couldn't suppress the small flush of pleasure at his words. 'Thank you, Professor; I am extremely grateful to you. I didn't want you to go to any trouble.'

'I assure you, it was no trouble. I confess that I sympathise with your situation, somewhat, and indeed, you were one of the few students who actually seemed to care about their studies. It seemed the obvious course of action now you are back at Hogwarts,' stated Snape smoothly.

Hermione nodded silently, feeling perhaps that Snape was not one for effusive thanks. Still, his words warmed her and she thought back to the conversation with Dumbledore in the staff room last Sunday. She must have been wrong; besides, what ulterior motive could Snape possibly have in letting her complete her N.E.W.T.s? She was being ridiculous.

'All that remains, Professor, is to tell me what subjects you intend to sit, so that you may be listed officially on the register.' Snape picked up a large quill, dipped it into an inkpot, and looked at her expectantly.

Oh, he needed to know right now. 'Oh, well, I think, Arithmancy, Transfiguration, Charms, and Herbology,' said Hermione thinking quickly. This was her only chance. Should she bite the bullet and take on Ancient Runes as well? No, she would have enough to do as it was.

Snape was scratching his quill along the parchment, his black hair obscuring his face slightly. Hermione watched him closely, and she noticed him pause for a moment. He raised his eyes towards her once more, and they were narrowed into a frown.

'Why have you since decided not to sit the Potions exam?' His tone was almost accusatory.

Hermione had thought this might come up. 'I thought it would be difficult to do the practical side of Potions. I have nowhere to brew and, even if I did, I'd need supervision...I'm sure Horace has better things to do with his time.' Hermione had thought long and hard about this and decided it was for the best.

Snape merely sighed, and an unspoken admonishment of '*Gryffindors*' hung in the air.

Hermione clasped her hands self-consciously.

'Professor, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. Firstly, the Potions classroom is generally free on weekends, not to mention the numerous other empty dungeons that could be of use. Secondly, while the potions on the seventh-year syllabus are undoubtedly difficult, not all of them are potentially dangerous. Therefore, you would be perfectly able to brew them unaided...your Gryffindor nature, such that it is, precludes you from cheating. And lastly, I brew the majority of the potions for the Infirmary, so you may use those opportunities to tackle the more dangerous potions...I can supervise without infringing on my own spare time.'

Well, that certainly told me, thought Hermione dryly.

Snape's eyes glittered for a moment and he spoke once more, rather flippantly. 'Besides, if nowhere suitable is available for a makeshift Potions laboratory, I'm sure we can find you an abandoned bathroom somewhere.'

Oh Merlin's pants! Hermione stared at him in surprise.

'Relax, Professor, it's a joke. I'm not going to give you detention over something that happened years ago.'

Hermione smiled weakly, she was never sure, with his dry humour, if he was joking or not.

'Well, then...?' Snape indicated with his quill to the unfinished parchment.

'Yes, yes, of course,' said Hermione eagerly. It would have been a shame not to get a Potions N.E.W.T.

Snape was still writing when an owl, carrying a letter, flew in through the open window and landed on the perch beside the desk. Hermione could only stare at the owl in interest. Snape signed the parchment with a flourish and followed Hermione's gaze.

'Yes,' he began with a trace of resignation in his tone, 'that's Potter's owl.'

Hermione was intrigued. Clearly, Snape didn't seem surprised to see the owl so this wasn't a one-off. Did Harry have some kind of correspondence going with Snape? Why had Harry never mentioned it? She would have to ask him about it the next time she saw him. One thing was for sure...she could not ask the man in front of her, not if the glare was anything to go by. Hermione feigned disinterest.

'What happens now, Professor Snape?'

'What you do in terms of your other subjects is your own business, but with regard to Potions, I want you to make a list of the potions that will need supervision, and then I will inform you as to when you shall attempt them. The others you may brew in the Potions classroom on the weekends...just let Horace know of your plans. I'm sure he will be willing to verify your finished products as well.'

'Excellent! Thank you once again. Have a good evening, Professor,' replied Hermione as she got up to leave.

Snape nodded, but Hermione could see his attention was now turning towards the owl and the missive it held in its beak. She wondered as she left if he would appear in the staff room that evening, and she felt a small pang of disappointment later when he didn't.

Sunday morning dawned bright for the opening Quidditch match of the season. Despite not feeling any affiliation to either Slytherin or Ravenclaw House, Hermione would be going to watch in the stands nonetheless. She knew Minerva would be there, eagerly assessing the chances for Gryffindor this year.

Breakfast in the Great Hall that morning was singularly full in anticipation of the upcoming match. Truth be told, Hermione was more looking forward to after the match. Yesterday she had spoken to Horace Slughorn, who had been more than happy to lend her the use of his classroom. She'd then gone into Hogsmeade to replenish her Potions kit, and this afternoon she would brew something basic to get back into the swing of things...it had been a while, after all.

From her vantage point at the High Table, Hermione saw Snape enter the Great Hall through the main doors, closely followed by Minerva, and they were clearly discussing something. Hermione wondered if Snape's choice of a dark, forest-green robe was coincidental or a subtle show of support for Slytherin House, despite the need for impartiality in a Headmaster. She'd finished her list of potions for him and had a house-elf deliver it to his office. Now all she had to do was wait.

The Quidditch match was a long and hard-fought one, but in the end Ravenclaw managed to edge out Slytherin by a mere ten-point margin. Hermione quickly retreated from the Quidditch stands, and the Ravenclaw celebrations, to her quarters from where she retrieved her Potions kit and then walked down to the dungeons. The quiet was a relief after the noise outside. She soon found herself in her old Potions classroom and Hermione smiled...it hadn't changed.

She pulled her textbook towards her and opened it to the recipe for a Wit-Sharpening Potion. There were many different ingredients involved, along with several different modes of preparation. Hermione thought this was a good place to start to get used to handling ingredients once more. She chopped, diced, skinned, crushed, and plucked for over an hour, and she was relieved to find her skills hadn't completely disappeared in the two years she'd been away from a cauldron.

Her potion, once finished, was the correct colour and consistency, and she bottled it, thinking it would be possible to start her seventh-year potions next weekend without making an arse of herself. She tidied her bench and then left for the staff room to organise her notes and make a timetable to fit her studies around her teaching duties.

The night found Hermione unaccountably restless. She had been trying to drop off to sleep for ages with no success...it was her own fault for working so late. All evening, Hermione had been in discussion with Minerva about Transfiguration and what she should expect to encounter in terms of N.E.W.T. level work.

Back in her rooms, Hermione had become engrossed in her Transfiguration textbook and now her mind refused to switch itself off. She looked at her clock...it was half past midnight. What could she do? She thought about reading over her notes for her class tomorrow, but when she looked through her pile of files, she realised they weren't there.

Where the hell had she put them? She couldn't teach without them! Hermione closed her eyes and thought about the last place she remembered having them. Ah, yes, she'd put them on the floor by her chair in the staff room and, it appeared, had left them there. She didn't feel right knowing they weren't in safekeeping.

Hermione picked up her wand and shrugged on her dressing gown. It was only a short way to the staff room; she'd be back in five minutes.

The corridors were deadly quiet, and Hermione tried to ignore how eerie Hogwarts became in the night. The sconces and braziers were either extinguished, or dimly lit, and Hermione cast a Lumos spell to aid her way.

It was with relief that she quickly reached the staff corridor, but Hermione slowed when she saw the soft, orange glow emanating from the door that had been left ajar. Was someone still in there? The house-elves extinguished all fireplaces during the night if the room wasn't in use.

There was no sound coming from within, but Hermione was afraid to just barge in. Careful as to not make a sound, Hermione moved her head slowly into the narrow space afforded by the partially open door and peered in. The fire was at the opposite end of the room and, with no other source of light, her end was shrouded in darkness. A fact for which she was grateful when she realised it was Snape in the room.

He was sitting at an angle to the fireplace, giving Hermione a profile view of his features. He appeared to be deep in thought as he stared, almost wide-eyed, into the flames, one hand clutched around a tumbler of Firewhisky. Hermione's first thought was that she should sneak up on him for a change, but as she watched him, it occurred to her that she would regret it. He looked, for lack of a better word, unhappy.

Suddenly, he swigged down the contents of the glass and then, with all his might, threw it into the fireplace. Hermione jumped rather violently at the sound of the glass disintegrating, and she wrenched herself away from the door, afraid that he might have heard her. The last thing she saw was his hand coming up to press at his neck.

Hermione walked as quickly as she could, without outright running, back to her rooms. She was breathing deeply and was slightly out of breath when she threw herself onto her bed. Truthfully, she was rather concerned by what she had seen. Why was Snape sitting there, brooding in the dark? Clearly, he was upset about something, and it most certainly was *not* because Slytherin had lost a Quidditch match.

Hermione felt troubled by the incident and wasn't sure why. She turned off her lamp, hoping once more that sleep would come, but Snape's bleak expression lingered in her mind for a long time after.

A/N: Many thanks, as always, to astopperindeath for her editing this!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

Characters belong to J.K. Rowling

Chapter 3

Autumn was in full swing at Hogwarts, and the trees in the extensive grounds were a riot of colour. The Scottish air didn't yet have its chilly bite, but Hermione still hugged her cloak tighter around herself as she trekked to Hogsmeade one Saturday morning. She was meeting Harry and Ginny in the Three Broomsticks, and she would be seeing them for the first time in two months. Hermione had missed them greatly.

'Hermione!' greeted Ginny excitedly, with a hug.

'Hey, Hermione,' smiled Harry.

Hermione gave him a quick squeeze before they all sat around a table replete with three Butterbeers.

'You look wonderful, Hermione; those house-elves have really been looking after you.'

Hermione immediately blanched. Was Harry trying to say she'd gained weight?

Ginny laughed. 'What Harry is trying to say, Hermione, is that you look well, but as he's a bloke he doesn't seem to realise it doesn't always come down to food!'

'What?' exclaimed Harry. 'Food at Hogwarts always made *me* feel good!'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'I am rather enjoying myself, I admit... plus I'm, ah, going to do my N.E.W.T.s at the end of the year.'

'I should have known the thought of exams would put that smile on your face!' Harry laughed.

'Ha, ha,' said Hermione sarcastically, but she smiled nonetheless. 'How's life in the Auror training programme treating you both?'

'It's all right,' commented Ginny, 'but I can't wait till we become fully-fledged Aurors next year.'

Harry nodded in agreement.

'And Ron?' prompted Hermione.

'He's OK...doing well in training, but... Look, Hermione, I know Christmas is some weeks away yet, but we were wondering if you'd be able to drop by Grimmauld Place for a bit? Everyone will be there, and I think it would do Ron good to see you in a relaxed setting, so to speak. I think he's unsure where he stands with you, you know, friendship-wise.' Ginny looked at Hermione with a hopeful expression.

'Of course I can,' agreed Hermione. 'I'd love to! It shouldn't be a problem for me to leave the castle...I have no responsibility as a Head of House or anything. I miss Ron, too; it will be good to see him.'

She received two very pleased smiles in return.

'Oh!' said Ginny suddenly. 'I just saw Professor Snape walk past the window. I nearly forgot to ask, what's he like as a boss, Hermione?'

'He's fine...keeps himself to himself, for the most part; he was the one who suggested I sit my N.E.W.T.s. Funny thing, though, I was talking to him in his office, a week or two back, and guess whose owl turned up?' Hermione looked squarely at Harry. 'I had no idea you were in contact with him.'

Harry looked a bit sheepish. 'I didn't want anyone to know, because you know how funny Snape can be about privacy, although, Ginny knows, of course. You see, I bumped into him at the Ministry a while back; we talked for a bit, or rather, *I* talked, and I plucked up the courage to ask him about my mother. I told him how I regretted never talking to Sirius or Remus about her...for some reason I was always more interested in my dad. He got arsey with me and, in a manner of speaking, told me to get lost. A few weeks later, though, he wrote to me saying he'd consider answering any questions I might have about her, when she was a child.'

'Oh,' said Hermione quietly. 'That was good of him.'

'Yep,' nodded Harry. 'He doesn't get very personal or anything; believe me, his letters could not be more detached, but I don't expect him to...just knowing her likes and dislikes, anything, really, is good enough for me. I've never mentioned it to you, or anyone else, in case he found out and threw a wobbly about it.'

'I understand completely, Harry....' Suddenly Hermione was reminded of something. 'Say, you've never mentioned anything about *me* in your letters, have you? Like, I was looking for a job, perhaps?'

Harry looked confused. 'Well, I might've dropped it in somewhere, as I occasionally write a few lines about stuff that's going on, but I always assumed he ignored those bits.'

'Why do you ask, Hermione?' enquired Ginny.

'Apparently, it was *his* idea to hire me when he found out I was unemployed, but I don't know how he found that out.'

'So, I indirectly got you your dream job?' asked Harry, with a laugh.

'Looks like it!' Hermione raised her glass to Harry with a wide smile. 'I guess I owe you one.'

Marking work had, oddly enough, been an aspect of teaching Hermione had looked forward to, and indeed, at the beginning she had enjoyed reading essays...offering constructive criticism, or words of encouragement and praise. As the work began to pile up, however, the novelty soon wore off, and the words repetitive and monotonous sprang to mind.

There was the odd student or two, in each class, whose work was always a pleasure to read, but often she felt frustration when it became clear that some pupils were not heeding her advice. She was also becoming rather concerned at the essay-writing skills of some students, and for the first time she wondered why Hogwarts didn't offer any English lessons; surely it was important that pupils could express themselves properly?

Her musings were cut short by a knock on her door. Minerva appeared around it, looking harassed. 'Not interrupting anything, am I?'

'No, just marking; why, is anything the matter?'

Hermione put down her quill and shoved her papers to one side.

Minerva entered the room fully and paced in front of the desk, clearly agitated. 'That bloody infuriating man! Oh, he knows how to press my buttons!'

Hermione smiled in bemusement. 'No idea what you're talking about, Minerva.'

The older woman flopped down into the chair opposite Hermione's desk. 'Severus! He's in one of his moods *again*. All I asked was a simple question, and he bit my head off! Then, of course, it escalated when I told him not to speak to me like one of his students. In the end, he actually pulled rank on me! Well, he can have this round, but next time he can watch out!'

'I don't wish to pry, Minerva, but what do you mean by "one of his moods"? 'Hermione was thinking back to a few weeks ago, when she had accidentally stumbled upon him in the staff room, late at night. 'It's just... well; I have been wondering how, at times, he seems awfully despondent. I was walking through the cloisters, the other day, and he was there looking out into the courtyard. Yet, I don't think he heard me approach at all; indeed, I had greeted him *twice* before he noticed me. To use a Muggle expression, it was like the lights were on, but nobody was home.' Hermione decided not to mention the other incident.

Minerva gave a long sigh, and Hermione noticed the anger seemed to evaporate with it. She took off her glasses and began cleaning the lenses with a handkerchief.

'Ah, my dear, I'm afraid a complicated man like Severus has much to be unhappy about. I know he's troubled, still, by... *events* in the past, and sometimes it results in periods of melancholy or black moods, whatever you want to call it. I've tried drawing him out, but it's like talking to a brick wall...he prefers to suffer in silence. What can I do? It doesn't affect the way he runs the school.' Minerva replaced her spectacles and looked at Hermione contemplatively. 'I think I should warn you, Hermione; do not try and approach Severus about this...he will not appreciate the interference one bit.'

'Yes... yes, of course,' demurred Hermione, but truth be told, she felt slightly uncomfortable. Was it right to just ignore the situation and leave him to it? It discomfited Hermione, but then, Minerva did have a point. They could hardly force Snape to talk about what was troubling him.

'I wouldn't worry about it too much, Hermione,' said the older witch kindly, standing up to leave. 'Severus likes to deal with things in his own way...it's just the way he is. Anyway, I'm afraid I have to go as I have detentions to supervise. I will see you later, I expect.'

As the door closed, Hermione pulled another essay towards her, her mind only half on the job. If ever she saw Snape like that again, she wasn't sure she would be able to leave him alone. Maybe she could just keep an eye on him, surreptitiously.

However, making good on her resolution proved more difficult in practice. Sometimes, several days would pass during which Hermione would only catch a glimpse of Snape, usually in the Great Hall, and she could hardly crane her neck down the table to look at him all the time...it would be bound to raise suspicions.

About two weeks after her conversation with Minerva, Hermione got her chance for a more comprehensive observation of the Headmaster. She received a note from him one morning, informing her that he would be brewing potions all evening and that she would be welcome to use the opportunity to work on her own potions. Hermione had both anticipated this note and, in some small way, dreaded it, too. The last thing she wanted was to make a fool of herself in front of him.

Luckily, her weekends in the Potions classroom were going well, and Horace had yet to find fault with any of her mixtures.

Still, throughout the day Hermione found it hard not to fret. Was she supposed to bring her own ingredients? Should she go down to the store cupboard in the dungeons and get them? Where were they even going to brew?

It was a relief to finally get it over with and find herself standing outside Snape's office at six o'clock, complete with her Potions kit and textbook.

'Come in.'

Hermione did as bidden and entered the office. 'Good evening, sir.'

'Professor,' acknowledged the dark man behind the desk. He got up and moved around to where she stood expectantly.

Hermione felt an odd little jolt in her stomach at the sight of him, and it discomfited her.

'Follow me,' he commanded, and Hermione's curiosity flared up when Snape began climbing the winding stairs to the gallery above. She quickly followed and came to an area lined with several bookcases and three closed doors. Snape had his wand out and was murmuring unintelligibly outside the nearest door. Hermione took the opportunity to glance at as many books as possible, which wasn't many as Snape soon had the door opened and was indicating for her to enter.

Hermione was disappointed...she was sure she had just seen an extremely old looking copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

She was now in a room that reminded her very much of the Potions classroom, except it was round and a lot brighter. Numerous shelves were filled with ingredients, empty vials, and Snape's staple...jars of pickled creatures.

'You may use that bench there.' Snape pointed to a bench at the back of the room. 'I need these three for myself.'

Hermione duly placed her cauldron and the rest of her equipment on the table.

'Take the ingredients you need off the shelves,' stated Snape distractedly, as he rummaged through some papers that covered a small desk in the corner.

Ah, well, that solved her dilemma.

'Thank you, Professor; by the way, I really don't mind reimbursing you for the ingredients. I mean, I'm not a student here anymore.' Hermione had thought about bringing this up before; she'd felt a bit guilty using the student supplies.

'Indeed,' answered Snape smoothly, 'which is why I've deducted a select amount from your wages.'

Hermione blinked. *Thanks for telling me*, she thought sarcastically. She was about to say as much, when it struck her that this might be him joking again. How embarrassing would it be if he weren't, though?

In the end he must have noticed her indecision, for he spoke once more. 'Never fear, Professor; I'm sure the school budget can stretch to a few extra potion ingredients.'

Hermione gave a weak smile in agreement before turning with frustration to the shelves behind her. Merlin, he must think her a simpleton at times!

Gathering all the required ingredients, she set them down to begin preparation.

'I expect you to ask if you find yourself unsure of anything, Professor Granger. I do not want to have my own potions compromised in the event that ~~you~~ you have an accident. Is that clear?'

'Of course,' replied Hermione, and she flicked her gaze towards him as she crushed her beetles to a fine powder. He was shrugging off his robe and pulling on a black coat that was clearly less cumbersome than the heavy robe. He hefted a large cauldron onto each table, and Hermione found she was easily distracted by the way he moved efficiently among the three of them.

At times, she couldn't help but feel that there was something... indefinable about him. It was only when he made to turn in her direction that she hurriedly focused herself on her chopping board, and her powder, which to describe as fine would have been an understatement. Hermione suddenly felt a wave of unease. There was no way she was messing this up in front of him.

Keeping her eyes fixed on her cauldron, Hermione worked steadily at adding the ingredients and stirring her potion. The room was silent, apart from the sound of cauldrons bubbling and the occasional noise of knives and pestles.

Soon, her potion was halfway to completion and needed ten minutes to simmer before beginning the next stage. Determined to keep her mind on the job, Hermione began to scan the next part of the recipe, making sure there was no room for error. She was not going to look at the other occupant in the room, despite the irrepresible urge to.

Five minutes passed agonisingly slowly for Hermione. She'd re-read the whole recipe, twice, plus her accompanying notes. Well, maybe she could just have a peek, purely out of professional interest, of course. There was no harm in that, surely? Why should she feel a bit funny when she looked at him anyway? It was only Professor Snape, for Merlin's sake! Hermione looked up towards the front of the room.

Oh dear Merlin, he was making his way over to her.

'How is it coming along?' he asked as he peered into her cauldron with narrowed eyes.

Hermione suddenly found her mouth to be inexplicably dry.

'Ah... all right, I think,' she finally managed, blushing at how uncomfortable she sounded. Her eyes were attracted to his hand resting on the tabletop for a moment.

'Good,' he murmured quietly before gliding back to his own cauldrons.

Hermione collapsed heavily on her stool and stared helplessly at his back. The heat from her cauldron sustained her blush, and she felt hot and clammy. She swiped a hand savagely across her forehead, wondering if she looked as frazzled as she felt. Hermione would bet her last galleon that her hair did.

It was all rather unnerving; she had felt this oddly around him before, but this time there was no way she could be drunk. Neither could she blame it on cauldron fumes...the potion wasn't noxious. So... clearly, she could not ignore it any longer. The time had come to entertain the notion that, maybe she was a *little* bit attracted to her professor, her older professor, and her... boss.

Hermione stood, somewhat dazedly, and blindly reached for her chopped daisy roots...there was that feeling of unease again.

The rest of the evening passed in a hazy blur. Once her potion was complete, Snape decreed it to be "generally adequate" and Hermione could not summon any disappointment at his lacklustre praise, for she was too eager to get out of the room.

Once free, she immediately found the nearest exit to the grounds and stood outside in the cold night air for several moments. Finally, rational thought was descending upon her mind once more.

So, she felt a *tiny* bit of an attraction to Professor Snape. Yes, it was unexpected, and indeed, on paper it appeared rather bad...he was her boss after all...but it wasn't that big a deal. Really, there was nothing wrong with a bit of admiration, and it wasn't as if she was in love with him...she hardly knew him! Clearly, she just... *liked* to look at him.

In some way it was inevitable, anyway, as he was the only man in the castle who wasn't a student, dead, the wrong side of 70 or... Hagrid.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath of cold air with relief and nodded to herself. Yes, it was nothing to worry about...it would soon pass.

Indeed, over the following weeks, Hermione really was convinced it was nothing to concern herself about. In fact, at times, she wondered if maybe she was mistaking a need to impress him for attraction. Except, there would be moments where he passed her in the corridor, and Hermione would then find herself checking her reflection in a nearby window...to check her hair wasn't messy or that her robes were straight.

It was certainly a novel situation to find herself in. It was those instances when she had to wonder what the hell she was playing at...her appearance had never been more than a trifle to her before.

Still, there was some good to come of her predicament. She was now prepared for the odd feeling that would overcome her when he was in her vicinity and, therefore, was more equipped to deal with it. So much so that, at times, she felt she could ignore it completely and for the most part, be entirely relaxed in his presence.

In realising her little crush, and by admitting it to herself, Hermione felt confident that soon enough it would dissipate...completely.

Hermione knocked twice more on the oak door to Horace Slughorn's office. Where on earth had he gone? She had a steaming beaker full of Skele-gro that she'd just brewed and needed him to pass judgment on it. Personally, Hermione didn't think he would find fault with it, but still, she'd rather hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak.

She sighed, returning to the classroom, where she bottled her potion into two flasks. Tidying away her things, she reasoned that Horace must have had an incident to deal with in Slytherin House. She thought she might give the staff room a quick once-over, though, just in case he was in there.

Placing one of the flasks on Horace's desk, along with a quick note for him, Hermione made her way out of the dungeons with the other flask in hand.

The staff room was completely empty. Hermione shrugged to herself; he could check the vial of potion on his desk and let her know later on. She would take the other bottle back to her rooms, where she kept a little collection of the potions she had made, under the maxim of 'they might come in handy one day.'

Hermione opened the door to her office and immediately jumped in surprise at the figure sitting in the chair opposite her desk. The flask in her hand dropped to the floor and smashed into tiny pieces while the potion splattered across the tiles. Hermione stared dumbly at it and fervently wished that, at that precise moment, she would also smash into smithereens.

Snape was also looking at the mess at her feet, and when his gaze met hers, she could see he was biting his lip slightly. He wanted to laugh, did he? It was his fault; must

he always startle her?

Hermione Banished the mess with her wand...thank Merlin she'd had the foresight to bottle it twice!

She sat down behind her desk. 'Professor Snape, I thought we weren't meeting till seven? It's only...' Hermione looked at her watch; it was a quarter to...oh wait, it had been a quarter to seven the last time she looked...about ten minutes ago.

'Ten past, Professor,' finished Snape for her, rather languidly.

Ah, well within his rights to invade her office then. 'I apologise, sir; my watch has, ah, stopped, it seems.'

Hermione couldn't believe she'd kept him waiting, and over something so important as well! They were meeting to discuss her thoughts on the changes needed for the Muggle Studies syllabus. She'd been preparing for this discussion for ages, and it had already got off to a bad start.

Snape waved his hand in an impatient gesture. 'Let us begin.'

Hermione swallowed her nerves; if she wanted to impress him, then this was her moment.

'Well, in my opinion, there are several key areas of study that need to be updated...some more significantly than others. Muggle technology, for example: the current syllabus places large emphasis on the Wireless, well, for one thing, it is rare that you find Muggles that call it that anymore, and besides, advances in information and communications technology has meant that even the way Muggles listen to the radio has changed. Another example is the telephone...take a look at these.'

Hermione, well into her stride, yanked open one of her desk drawers and pulled out a rather large phone. 'This is one of the Muggle mobile phones kept in the store cupboard for students to look at. Not to put a too fine a point on it, it's a brick.'

Snape took the phone out of her hand to examine it.

'This,' continued Hermione, 'is a mobile phone I purchased last month, in Muggle London.'

She proffered a rather smaller-looking object at him, and he took it. 'You have to flip the screen open.'

Hermione watched as Snape prised open the phone delicately, and she fought not to smile; it looked rather out of place in his hand.

'I see what you mean,' he murmured, placing both phones back onto the desk. 'It should not be a problem to allocate more money to update the items needed.'

Hermione nodded. 'This is all material stuff, of course, and it's the more theoretical aspects that are, perhaps, more important. Generally, Muggle history is dealt with well, particularly important world events, but there is a glaring lack of time spent on Muggle current affairs, at least until Advanced Level. Even if it is only contained to what is going on in Britain, I think that there should be an element of it introduced to the younger years.'

'Indeed, there has always been a tendency within the wizarding world towards parochialism, but there are many who have no inclination to see that changed, including the bureaucrats at the Ministry,' said Snape softly.

Hermione frowned. 'But surely it helps to see both sides of a coin? I mean, when it comes down to it, the wizarding world has always had the advantage because Muggles don't even know it exists! Not to mention the edge that magic itself gives to witches and wizards over Muggles. Surely, then, it is our responsibility to make the effort to understand and co-operate with Muggles, insofar as it is possible? Why can't the Ministry see that?'

Snape raised his eyebrows at her vehemence. 'Sound logic, Professor, but maybe you are underestimating Muggles. They have their own advantages that we magical folk are not entirely unaware of, and it causes some disquiet. Take Muggle medicine for instance. Granted, spells and potions can cure most things within hours, but Muggles have created their own solutions with the tools at their disposal. Look at the drugs Muggles have created with their knowledge of Chemistry and Biology...some of which are just as dangerous as any poison we can concoct in a cauldron. Wizards fly on brooms, Muggles use their knowledge of Physics, and Merlin knows what else, to build aeroplanes. I'm sure you can see where I am going with this...there is a lack of creativity within our world that hinders progress, which becomes glaringly obvious when we seek to become more knowledgeable about Muggles.'

Hermione was deeply interested. 'So, you're saying magic has made us lazy; why then has no one ever brought this problem up before? We can't be the only ones to have noticed?'

Snape rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and laced his fingers together thoughtfully. 'We would rather ignore the implications of such introspection, or indeed, forsake it altogether. Perhaps it is some hidden inferiority complex that causes most magical people to shy away from admitting we have anything to learn from Muggles, or even anything to fear. However, there are also those who simply don't want to understand or learn about Muggles...they *do* fear greatly the influence of Muggle culture and prefer to keep it at arm's length as far as possible. Then, of course, you have egomaniacs like the Dark Lord, who would go as far as to subjugate Muggles and Muggle-borns to ensure magical superiority. Witches and wizards often don't want to understand Muggles because they are afraid of what it might reveal about themselves, and indeed the wizarding world as a whole.'

Hermione smiled gently. 'I had no idea you were so revolutionary, Professor Snape.'

Snape arched an eyebrow and frowned. 'Don't misunderstand me, Professor; there is much I find distasteful about Muggles and their ways, but I am not as blind to deny they haven't got some things right, particularly in terms of education. Have you not noticed how illiterate some of your younger students are?'

'Of course,' agreed Hermione. 'Some students have significant trouble expressing themselves fluently in their essays, not to mention the atrocious spelling.'

'Precisely, whether they have been educated in a Muggle Primary school or by their parents, one cannot presuppose that an eleven-year-old knows all there is to know about the English language. Yet, how are they supposed to learn about such skills once they get to Hogwarts, if they have not the natural aptitude or the predisposition towards book learning?'

'But, is there anything we can...' began Hermione, but Argus Filch distracted her attention at her door.

'Excuse me, Professors, but Headmaster, you are wanted in your office...you have a Floo-call from the Ministry.'

Hermione could have cheerfully strangled Filch and whoever the arse was from the Ministry. It gratified her to note that Snape looked a bit put out too.

'All right, Argus; I will be with them shortly.'

Filch nodded and closed the door behind him.

'My apologies, but we shall have to continue this conversation at a later date.' Snape unfolded himself from his chair and stared down at Hermione.

'I would like you to write down your ideas, perhaps in the form of a report, including a draft syllabus for potential first- and second-year Muggle Studies classes. You can have till January, when we will then work on a final proposal that I will give to the governors in March. Is this acceptable to you?'

'Perfectly,' Hermione assented, trying to mask her disappointment at having such an intriguing conversation cut short.

Snape made for the door. 'Good evening then, Professor.'

Hermione, she silently added.

After a time, Hermione got up and rubbed her face tiredly. Ugh, if he kept initiating exceedingly fascinating, intelligent discussions, with his maddeningly cool and sophisticated manner, then there would be no way her crush would be going anywhere.

She suddenly caught sight of her reflection in her small, framed mirror on the wall, and grimaced.

She had a small, but very noticeable, ink smudge just above her jaw.

Oh. Lovely.

Christmas soon arrived, and Hermione had secured permission from Snape to leave the castle for a week or two. She would go to Grimmauld Place for three days, then to her parents for Christmas itself, and finally back to Hogwarts for New Year.

The majority of students had left already, and Hermione herself would leave later in the day. First, she had to make a last trip through the snow into Hogsmeade as she was a bit behind with her Christmas shopping. The end of term had been a busy one, and Hermione was not one for shopping at the best of times.

At first, she had been unsure what the etiquette was at Hogwarts in terms of Christmas gifts. Obviously, she would get something for Minerva and her other friends there, but was she supposed to get Snape something? Or did the staff pool together to get him a gift? In the end, she had just asked Minerva, and the answer had been yes, if she wanted to. So now it was just the problem of what to get.

After an hour of unproductive meanderings around several shops, Hermione spotted something in Scrivenshafts that she felt would do. She remembered the untidiness of his desk and reasoned that the ornate quill holder might be welcome. Well, she hoped so, anyway.

Hermione trudged back to Hogwarts and deposited her gifts with the house-elves, ready to be delivered on Christmas morning. Then she checked she had everything she needed in her trunk...her other gifts, some marking, N.E.W.T. revision, and importantly, her work on the Muggle Studies curriculum, which she would put the finishing touches on over the Christmas break. She was hoping to pick her parents' brains about her little project. Satisfied, she shrunk the trunk into her pocket and began the walk to the Apparition point, feeling the excitement bubble at seeing her friends again.

Hermione first put her head around Minerva's door to wish her a merry Christmas, before she was out in the snow once more, heading for the main gates. As she approached them, Hermione realised she could see Snape making his way from Hogsmeade, and Hermione was suddenly filled, perhaps unnecessarily, with delight; she had hoped to happen upon him before she left.

He slowed down to a stop when he reached her. 'Ah, off on your travels, are you, Professor?' Hermione found his look to be rather appraising.

'Indeed, sir; I hope you have a happy Christmas,' offered Hermione, with a smile.

She observed his face close off for a moment and the black gaze flick up to the brooding castle. Hermione was slightly troubled by his expression, but couldn't quite pinpoint what his look signified.

'Indeed,' he said eventually, before seeming to remember himself and he glanced back at Hermione. 'The same to you, as well.' He inclined his head towards her before he carried on walking towards the castle.

Hermione stood unmoving for several moments, and she suddenly had the bewildering urge to return to the castle and remain there. She shook herself mentally and scoffed at her ridiculousness; really, it knew no bounds at times.

With one last look at the castle, Hermione Apparated.

AN: Cheers to astopperindeath for beta-ing this chapter :)

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Hermione knocked on the door to number twelve, Grimmauld Place with just a flicker of butterflies in her stomach. She knew Ron would be in there, and it would be the first time she had seen him since things had ended between them, nearly three months ago. In the intervening time, they had written sporadically, but Ron had never been one for writing letters so they had been a rather uncomfortable and stilted affair.

Harry opened the door. 'Hermione! There is no need to knock, come straight in.'

Hermione smiled and gratefully entered the warm house, shaking off her snow-covered cloak as she went. She could hear the sound of the Weasley clan coming from the living room, and she made for the door. *Best to get it over with as soon as possible*, she thought.

As soon as she appeared in the doorway, they descended en masse, apart from Ron, she noticed, who lingered slightly by the sofa. Hermione greeted them warmly, particularly relieved to find that Molly was not being distant with her. She had wondered if Molly would be unhappy with her for ending her relationship with Ron.

The group dispersed around the room and Hermione moved to sit by Ron on the sofa. He smiled at her rather awkwardly.

'It's great to see you again, Ron,' said Hermione, breaking the ice.

'Yeah,' he replied. 'You too, Hermione.'

Ron had never been one with words, but Hermione knew him well enough to know he was being sincere. There was silence for a moment, and Hermione looked helplessly at her hands for guidance.

'I, ah, hear things are going well at Hogwarts for you.'

Hermione turned towards him. 'Oh! Yes, yes, very well thanks; I'm learning so much, and well, you know me...I can't learn enough!'

Stop babbling!

Ron smoothed a hand over his red hair, and Hermione saw a good-natured look form on his face more reminiscent of the times before they had broken up.

'I also heard about your N.E.W.T.s.'

'Oh, yes.' Hermione found herself feeling a little sheepish. She caught his eye and they both chuckled quietly. 'Typical me, hmm?'

'Just a bit,' he laughed.

'Would you believe me if I said that it wasn't my idea to actually do them officially?'

Ron grinned. 'In other words, it was your idea to do them unofficially?'

'Yes,' admitted Hermione, without a hint of embarrassment. 'I was going to teach myself the work for fun.'

'Fun!' Ron scoffed, not unkindly. 'Well, you know me, Hermione...I'd rather curse myself with a particularly nasty hex than go through all that again!'

Hermione rolled her eyes with mock-impatience. She was immensely relieved to feel that the awkwardness was clearing between them. Maybe one day, in time, it could be like the old days again, and as Harry flopped down beside her, she could almost pretend that it was.

The four days Hermione spent at Grimmauld Place passed far too quickly for her liking, but the thought of seeing her parents kept her spirits from dampening too much. She had enjoyed being amongst the Weasleys again.

They'd all shown an interest in how she was getting on at Hogwarts, and, in turn, she'd regaled them with some of her most cringe-worthy moments as a teacher...stumbling into a pyjama-clad Argus Filch while on a midnight flit to the kitchens had been one of them.

Hermione had also had chance to discuss her work on the Muggle Studies syllabus, although that had been mostly with Ginny and Arthur. Harry and Ron had tried to look interested, but Hermione, after months of teaching, could now spot the vacant expression of a daydreamer a mile off, and Arthur, rather unsurprisingly, had shown enough enthusiasm for the both of them.

When she'd asked him what aspect he'd enjoyed the most about Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, he'd replied, 'Oh, I couldn't possibly say, my dear! I just found it all so completely fascinating. I could talk about them all day; I mean, what are these things they wear in their ears sometimes? Often, white or black strings that disappear into their clothing...'

What followed had been a lengthy discussion during which Hermione had tried to explain the concept of earphones and portable music players.

It occurred to her that Arthur Weasley was one of the few exceptions to Snape's hypothesis about wizarding interest in the Muggle world. Arthur ~~was~~ utterly fascinated with them...there could be no bones about it.

Neither was it out of pity, or indeed, a need to feel superior...it was genuine interest. Hermione wondered if Arthur would ever consider coming to Hogwarts to talk to some of her classes about Muggles, or even his work at the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. Perhaps it would be good for the first-years, if, of course, first-year classes got the go-ahead. It would be something to consider.

Hermione, having put her Christmas presents under the tree in the library, was jolted from her musings when she heard the door creak behind her.

'Hermione?'

'Ron, I'm just putting the presents under the tree, and, don't worry, I haven't got you a book this year!'

He smiled gratefully. 'Listen,' he began, 'I, ah, hoped to speak with you before you left. We haven't had much chance to speak privately.'

Hermione was suddenly on the alert. 'Oh, yes, of course. What is it you want to talk about?'

He sat down on the sofa and motioned for her to join him. 'It's a bit awkward, well, it's not... it shouldn't be anyway. I just wanted to ask you...' Ron broke off for a moment and Hermione felt her stomach sink through the floorboards. Was he going to talk about getting back together?

'Look, I'll just come out and say it. There's this girl at the Ministry and I'm thinking about going out with her, but I wanted to tell you in case you weren't all right with it or something. I mean, I don't know why you wouldn't be, I just, I felt I ought to tell you...' He stopped, becoming aware that he was rambling.

'Oh, Ron! Of course I am OK with it! I am happy for you.' Hermione gave him a wide smile, touched at his consideration. 'Thank you for telling me, though. I appreciate it.'

She hugged him tightly, not for the first time wondering if she had been a fool to finish with him as she had.

On Christmas Day, Hermione awoke mid-morning. She'd arrived back at her old home yesterday afternoon, overjoyed to see her parents. They'd had so much to talk about that it had been rather late before they retired to bed.

From the sound of it, her parents were already up. Hermione rolled out of bed and shrugged on her dressing gown before making her way downstairs.

'Morning, love; Happy Christmas,' her mother greeted warmly.

'Thanks, Mum! Happy Christmas to you, too. Where's Dad? In the kitchen?'

Her mother rolled her eyes. 'Yes. He's supposedly learnt some fancy new trick off the telly about cooking a turkey, so he wants to be in charge of it this year.'

Hermione smiled. 'Dad!' she yelled. 'We're opening presents!'

A moment later, her father appeared. 'Righto; you had a few arrive yesterday by owl, by the way...from Hogwarts, I take it?'

'Oh, most probably,' answered Hermione as they sat down and began unwrapping.

She had to smile; she might not have got Ron a book this year, but he certainly had got her one, as had Harry. *They can be so predictable*, she thought affectionately.

Her parents had got her a gift voucher for Madam Malkin's in Diagon Alley.

'Mrs. Weasley helped us get it,' explained her mother, at Hermione's questioning look.

'Thank you! I could do with some more teaching robes, and indeed some new dress robes, too.'

Hermione turned her attention to the small pile of gifts she had left, revealing themselves to be a bottle of wine from Pomona, and a box of Honeydukes' finest from Poppy. Minerva had sent her a beautifully crafted burgundy scarf, and then there was one small, rectangular package left.

Hermione lifted the gift tag and saw, with a jolt of anticipation, that it was from Snape. His name wasn't written on the tag anywhere, but Hermione could not fail to recognise the hand that had spikily scrawled 'Happy Christmas.' She ripped off the paper to reveal a box, sincerely hoping her parents would not comment on her haste.

Inside the box was a long, silver-coloured bookmark, the type that curled over the spine of a book. On the end of it was an intricate Celtic emblem, and Hermione turned it over in her hands for several moments. It was very pretty. She hadn't thought about Snape much at all since leaving Hogwarts five days ago, and quite frankly, it was a relief.

Now, however, his image swam unbidden to the front of her mind as she considered his gift. Hermione sighed to herself silently and placed the bookmark back into its box. She was being far too sentimental...he'd probably bought a job-lot of them and given one to each of the staff.

Over the next few days, Hermione found her thoughts turning towards the Headmaster more often than she would have liked.

Perhaps it was the quiet of being with her parents, after the bustle of Grimmauld Place, that allowed her more time to just sit and think. As much as she had loved being with Harry and the Weasleys, and her parents for that matter, Hermione could not deny that she was missing Hogwarts.

Indeed, it rather came as a surprise to her, but she did miss the life she had created for herself there. She knew it was silly...she had been gone for less than a fortnight! However, she was seriously beginning to feel cut out for teaching, after all, and was considering the possibility that she might spend a few years as one, at least.

The thought of Snape still niggled at her uncomfortably, though. Hermione had very little experience of crushes. Granted, there had been Lockhart, but that didn't really count...she had been thirteen, and that time with Viktor didn't really stand for comparison either. Then there was Ron, but that hadn't been spontaneous attraction. He'd been her good friend, and she had fallen in love with him.

There wasn't anyone she could really talk to about it, either. Well, her mother maybe, but Hermione wasn't sure what exactly she would say to her, anyway.

She would just have to trust herself, she decided. Whatever it was that she felt around Snape would surely burn out eventually. It wasn't as if she entertained flights of fancies about the two of them. There were scores of reasons why it would never work and, anyway, everyone knew about him and Lily Potter so there was no point really.

No point at all.

On New Year's Eve, Hermione left her parents with a promise not to leave it so long until her next visit. She Apparated to Hogsmeade and all but rushed up the path to the gates...there was something very pleasant about the sight of the old castle. She was looking forward to seeing Minerva and the others, wanting to thank them properly for their gifts. There was someone else she was eager to see, too, in spite of her reasoning that she should probably keep her distance, and Hermione thought herself extremely foolish for just wanting to have a glimpse of him.

The castle was quiet when she entered. The majority of students were not due back for a few days, and only a handful had remained behind. She headed straight for Minerva's office. The office was empty, so she headed to the older woman's quarters.

Minerva invited her inside with a warm smile. 'How was your Christmas, dear?'

Hermione sat gratefully in the armchair by the roaring fire and accepted the offer of tea and crumpets. 'Quiet for the most part...just my parents and me...but that is how we like it. And yours?'

'Good, thank you; I visited my sister for a day or two in Aberdeen. I couldn't stay for too long, as I have four students who stayed behind in Gryffindor.'

Hermione nodded.

'Oh, before I forget, Hermione.' Minerva's eyes twinkled for a moment. 'We are having a little get-together in the staff room tonight for the New Year. I hope you will join us?'

'Of course!' laughed Hermione.

Hermione was secretly pleased at this piece of news. Surely Snape would be there? Maybe she would be able to strike up a conversation with him? Hermione suddenly cringed to herself at her pathetic little hopes. Had she no self-respect? Where had it gone? When had she become some childish girl mooning over a man twice her age? She knew it was a slippery slope, and yet, she couldn't stop her foolish thoughts.

That evening, Hermione stood looking in her wardrobe at all the robes she owned. She wanted a set that weren't too dressy, or too casual. Nothing she owned seemed to fit the bill; she really should start paying more attention to clothes, she decided. In the end, she pulled on some dark blue robes, and then turned to tackle her hair, thinking she would wear it down (only after giving it a good spray to calm down some of the frizz, that is).

She studied herself in the full-length mirror for a moment and sighed in frustration, not quite satisfied. Well, it would have to do. Tugging at an errant curl, she shut the wardrobe door and exited her rooms.

Come eleven o'clock that night, Hermione was rather disappointingly sober in comparison to the incessant frivolity of others around her. In fact, it annoyed her to realise that it was precisely because of disappointment that she was not enjoying herself...Snape was nowhere to be seen.

In fact, she had seen neither sight nor sound of him all day. She huffed to herself and stuffed a nibble off the nearby platter into her mouth. Should she be concerned, though? Surely, he would have joined his staff for a drink on New Year's Eve... And yet, no one else seemed bothered by it.

Eventually, she couldn't stand the not-knowing, and hoping that it wouldn't be that much of an unusual observation, Hermione turned to Minerva with a carefully schooled expression.

'Is there any reason why the Headmaster hasn't joined us tonight?' Hermione glanced around the room nonchalantly. 'He's missing out,' she added for good measure.

Minerva waved her hand dismissively and adjusted her crooked spectacles with laboured movements...she had been pretty handy with the Scotch all evening.

'Hermione, my dear, I despair of that man! He has been like a blackcloud hanging around the castle these past two weeks! *I tried*,' Minerva slurred slightly, 'I tried talking to him again, but he won't listen to me. He's probably about, brooding somewhere.'

Hermione frowned to herself at the implication of Minerva's words and began to feel rather unsettled. The stuffiness, and the noise of the staff room, were rather cloying and Hermione felt the need to get some fresh air in order to think. She said as much to the woman beside her and slipped quietly out into the corridor. She already knew where she would go...the Astronomy Tower. It was a beautifully clear night, and a bit of stargazing might clear her head.

Truth be told, she was worried. She recalled the conversation she had had with Minerva several weeks ago, when Minerva had said she should not approach Snape about his moods. Hermione wasn't sure she could just stand by anymore, while he was so obviously troubled. Not that she had such a high opinion of herself to think that she could triumph where Minerva had failed. Indeed, she was probably the last person Snape would take notice of, but, she could still try.

All of her silly fancies about admiring the fall of his hair, the intensity of his black gaze, or the timbre of his voice vanished from her mind when she thought of him now. They seemed irrelevant, and indeed, self-indulgent when he was clearly unhappy in himself. What could she do, though? Should she go looking for him? Could she pluck up enough courage to go to his office? Probably, she realised, if her need to see if he was all right was anything to go by.

Hermione opened the door onto the Astronomy Tower and immediately felt an icy blast of air. She really wasn't appropriately dressed for standing atop a windswept tower, but a Warming charm would suffice for a few moments of reflection.

Hermione moved into the open and towards the battlements, where she could gaze out over the night sky. The stars were exceptionally bright above her, and the twinkling lights of Hogsmeade were also visible in the distance.

The occasional gust of wind felt very refreshing to Hermione, and it blew her thick, curly hair away from her face...now she couldn't care less if it ended up looking like a bird's nest. She leant on the parapet tiredly, taking extreme care not to look down...it wasn't the highest tower at Hogwarts for nothing...and could soon feel the cold seep into her bones. Hermione thought it was unwise to linger, despite her desire to remain, but it wouldn't do for her to become ill.

Suddenly, she could hear heavy footsteps climbing the stairs. Hermione turned to face the door, and stepped further into the shadows, unable to help but feel slightly apprehensive. She exhaled deeply when she saw who it was; well at least she wouldn't have to go looking for him now.

Frowning, she realised he was in his shirtsleeves when she herself was freezing with a full set of robes on. He didn't see her as he moved across the tower, and Hermione said nothing, unsure of what to do. His movements were heavier than usual, and Hermione wondered if he had been drinking.

She was galvanised into action a few moments later, when he reached the parapet and swayed slightly between the battlements.

'Professor Snape!' she cried, rushing towards him and grabbing his arm. 'What... what are you'

He looked surprised to see her, but it soon passed and he wrenched his arm from her grasp. 'Relax,' he spat. 'I'm not going to throw myself off.'

Up close to him, it was clear he had been drinking...she could smell it. There was a strong hint of stubble on his face, and in the moonlight he looked extremely tired. Hermione felt at a loss.

'Leave me,' demanded Snape imperiously. 'I wish to think.'

Hermione's eyes widened as he sat on the edge of the parapet. Her stomach lurched at the thought of the drop below. 'Look, I'm not leaving you sitting there'

'I told you I wouldn't throw myself off, didn't I?' he snarled.

She wished he wouldn't keep putting that image in her mind. 'Yes, you did, but you could lose your balance by accident in your... in your' Hermione stammered slightly.

Snape flew to his feet and towered over her. 'In my *what*?' he hissed. 'In my state...in my pathetically inebriated *state*. Is that what you wanted to say, Granger?' He glared fiercely down at her, and Hermione felt stunned at the anger radiating off him.

'No... no, I...' she began quietly, but he'd already whipped around and stalked away from her. Hermione was about to speak again when he turned back towards her, and the words died on her lips.

'What the hell is it to you what I do, anyway? Well?' he demanded.

Hermione tried to placate him. 'Nothing; but, sir, please, I'

He cut her off once again, and Hermione began to feel frustrated that he wouldn't let her finish a sentence.

'Exactly! *Nothing!* So why can't you get it into your *inexplicably* bushy head that I want you to leave?'

Hermione could not say she enjoyed being spoken to in such a manner, but something was keeping her there. Maybe she had a hitherto unseen masochistic side, but Hermione was determined to get him to calm down. She tried a different tack.

'Please, Severus' Hermione broke off rather startled when the words seemed to ignite him further.

""Please, Severus!" Oh, yes, that is sure to get me to bend to your will. Take a look at where we are, Professor,' Snape gestured wide with his arms, encompassing the whole tower, 'and oh, look! I'm standing just about where Dumbledore was... *when I killed him*. That's what he whispered to me, "*Please, Severus.*" Urging me, and I obliged.'

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably at the sudden venture into un-chartered territory. He laughed bitterly and began advancing on her, his voice becoming increasingly raised.

'The most, the *most* ironic thing is that it hardly matters anymore that I killed him. No one seems to care that I was able to cast the Killing Curse on him! Does it matter to you that I am a murderer?'

'No,' Hermione managed, completely taken aback.

'No! Of course not! All is forgiven and forgotten, but I remember...how could I possibly forget? How could I forget how I sat there while Charity Burbage begged me for mercy until the Dark Lord snuffed out her light with a flick of his wand? There are those two words again, Professor, "Severus, please...help me, Severus!" Do you know what Voldemort did with her dead body, Miss Granger? He fed her to his cursed snake!'

He loomed over her again and Hermione fought the urge to look away, or indeed, to run away.

'This is what you wanted to hear, isn't it?' he whispered at her venomously. 'This is the show you wanted to stick around for?'

Hermione had remained still, hardly daring even to breathe, or even comprehend what she was hearing. Tears rose to her eyes unbidden as she finally absorbed what the man in front of her had just... unleashed. She'd had no idea that he'd been present when Charity Burbage was killed.

She felt shame that no one had noticed his despair until now, but then, they *had* noticed it, and she thought of Minerva who'd written it all down to moodiness. She, herself, had fallen into the same trap, agreeing with Minerva; but they were both wrong...it was so much more. In that moment, Hermione was made painfully aware of her own age and inexperience. She was not naïve; she had played her own part in the war, but it certainly wasn't the same as the man who stood before her. In many ways, they had fought different wars.

What on earth could she say that didn't sound trite and inadequate? How could she deal with this? It was extremely important that she did.

Eventually, she shook her head in response to his question. 'No,' she whispered quietly, a tear escaping down her cheek. Hermione swiped at it, trying to pull herself together.

Snape, she noticed, was breathing heavily and still staring at her. His rather stricken expression told Hermione that he was beginning to remember himself. He ran a hand through his long hair and turned away from her.

'I'm... I apologise; I didn't mean to frighten you... I, ah, I don't know what came over me.'

Hermione could tell that his anger had passed, for his voice was back to its low timbre. He appeared rather shaken. She watched as he ran his hand over his face and then to his neck.

How often had she seen him do this? Hermione doubted it was some kind of nervous habit he'd developed. Without really thinking about it, Hermione approached him, sensing that it was time for her to take control of the situation.

Hardly believing her own audacity, Hermione grasped his arm and tugged his fingers away from where they pressed at his neck. Snape turned to her in surprise.

'It still hurts you doesn't it, sir?'

There was no answer. Making a split second decision, Hermione gathered all the courage afforded to her by that last glass of wine she'd had and reached up to grasp the knot of his cravat, pulling slightly to loosen it.

Immediately, a pair of hands came up to clasp her wrists, and Hermione nearly gasped aloud at how cold they were.

'What... what on earth are you doing?' he murmured.

Hermione was relieved to hear there was no bite, only surprise, in his tone and this spurred her on. She ignored the grip on her wrists and carried on loosening the knot until she could tug the white collar of his shirt away from his neck. She risked a quick glance up at his face to find him watching her intently.

'The bite on your neck, sir, I can tell it pains you...I have seen you often grasp at it. I want to see it.'

'Oh, you do, do you?' His voice was soft and calculating, and he relinquished his grip. Hermione swallowed involuntarily.

Holding the corner of his collar with one hand, Hermione used her free hand to lightly move his hair out of the way. She moved her head back to allow her to see better. In the moonlight, two puncture marks were visible, with the surrounding skin partially raised and bumpy. In the sunlight, Hermione assumed it would be more obviously discoloured than it was in the dark. Hermione had an urge to touch it, but she was afraid such an action would be pushing her luck.

Eventually, she let his hair drop back around his face and released his collar. Snape raised an eyebrow at her.

'Why don't you take something for the pain?'

He sighed heavily and moved back towards the parapet, except, this time he lowered himself to sit with his back to the wall, his legs outstretched before him.

'Many reasons; mainly because it doesn't hurt often enough, and when it does, it does me good to be reminded. And that's the last of your questions I am answering.'

Hermione ignored him. 'You must be freezing; it's too cold to sit out here.'

The glare she received might have withered her under normal circumstances, but these were not normal. Hermione pulled out her wand and cast a Warming charm on the stones around him before settling herself down next to him. He gave a low, annoyed groan.

'Quiet. Your hands are like ice, you know.' So saying, Hermione boldly reached for his hand nearest her, and pulled it into her lap, enclosing it in both of hers to warm it. She felt, rather than saw, his head whip in her direction.

'What the devil... You are taking unprecedented liberties with my person tonight!' he growled.

Hermione's lips twitched as she resisted his attempts to remove his hand, and soon he huffed quietly and ceased. When Hermione was sure there would be no apprehension in her voice, she spoke into the silence that had fallen between them.

'You've never spoken those thoughts aloud before, have you?'

Snape didn't answer straight away, but eventually he did with resignation. 'No, I have not. How could you tell?'

Hermione ignored his sarcasm. 'It would do you good to talk about it.' She had a feeling that this outburst she had witnessed was only the tip of the iceberg.

He scoffed loudly. 'Even if I were predisposed to talking about my *feelings*, there is no one to listen.'

Hermione knew that to be untrue; she herself would be more than willing to help him, but she wasn't sure how to tell him that. She was reminded of his periodic correspondence with Harry.

'Perhaps you could write them down, and, even if you burn it straight away, the process might help.'

He was silent once more, and Hermione dropped her gaze to his hand, unexpectedly realising that she was stroking the back of his hand very lightly with her thumb. She blushed in the cold air, but couldn't bring herself to cease her movements, not while he seemed to be allowing them. Venturing a peek at him out of the corner of her eye, she could see he was staring directly ahead, unmoving.

Hermione looked ahead too. 'Look, sir, I am not going to pretend to understand what you must feel, or indeed, tell you what to feel, but I just hope that there will come a time when you can look at your part in the war differently. People don't hate you for what happened with Dumbledore, simply because we now understand *why* it had to happen. Often, that is all it takes for people to accept and move on. As for Professor Burbage, she did not die in vain; she died for the future of the wizarding world and, well, you cannot blame yourself for everything.'

'Recognising such logic does not lessen my regrets... sometimes they are all I can think about.'

Hermione felt the desolation in his tone settle somewhere between her ribs, and it pained her.

'But, perhaps you are right,' he said quietly. 'There may come a time when I can learn to live with them properly.'

Hermione nodded to herself thoughtfully. For his sake, she sincerely hoped so. 'Will you tell me, sir, how you survived that night in the Shack?'

Snape looked at her then. 'Been wondering about that, have you?' He paused for a moment. 'No, I will not tell you tonight. Rest assured, there is no story of divine intervention or magical miracle that you are missing out on... just one of misguided loyalty and sacrifice. It doesn't end well, and I am sure I have depressed you enough for one night.'

Hermione wanted to protest as her curiosity was irresistibly piqued. How could it not end well? He was alive, wasn't he?

'I don't think I could stand the irony of *you* flinging yourself off the tower... after all this.'

Hermione glared severely at him.

'Not a fan of gallows humour, then?' There was a twitch of his lip.

'Indeed not.'

Hermione saw this as an opportunity to lighten the mood somewhat. 'Oh, and by the way, that comment about my "inexplicably bushy head"? It was a low blow indeed...I'll have you know it is very windy tonight.'

He gave a low chuckle. 'My most sincere apologies, then.'

They both lapsed into a comfortable silence, and Hermione could feel the chill seeping into her bones again, not to mention the complete lack of comfort provided by the hard stone. Yet, for all that, she was very reluctant to move. In the distance she could hear the tolling of the clock in Hogsmeade, and she realised the New Year was upon them.

They could not sit there all night, but Hermione promised herself a few moments longer, before he would finally remember himself, take back his hand and retreat to his own tower, and she would be left feeling more confused than ever.

AN: My thanks to astopperindeath for editing this chapter!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 5

Hermione, after a rather disjointed sleep, awoke early on New Year's Day. Her mind had refused to switch itself off after the events of the night before. Events that, in the cold light of day, Hermione could hardly believe had happened, and she fully expected that Snape would be cursing himself for letting them happen.

Neither had spoken on the journey down from the Astronomy Tower; Snape had walked with her to her rooms, and with a quick "Goodnight," he had soon disappeared into the dark corridors.

As Hermione stood to view the leaden sky of the morning, she sighed heavily with concern. Would he be embarrassed by what happened? Would he act like it hadn't happened? Hermione sincerely hoped that he felt better for it...regardless of any supposed injured pride or dignity.

Looking at her clock, Hermione saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. Perhaps she could get a quick breakfast down her before she worried about facing him. The Great Hall would likely be quiet at this time, as it was unlikely that many of the teachers would be rising early after last night.

A short while later, after washing and dressing, Hermione made her way down to the Great Hall. The castle was indeed quiet, and Hermione met no one in the corridors. Reaching the staff door, Hermione entered the hall and immediately noticed the completely barren High Table. Then, she saw the single, large table situated where the House tables usually were, and remembered that this was the custom when the majority of students were absent.

Walking around the dais, Hermione had to stop herself from freezing in her tracks when she saw who was already at the table. Argus Filch sat at one end, mumbling and fawning over his cat, two young boys sat at the opposite end, and Severus Snape sat in the middle, in his usual Headmaster's chair.

Clearly, he'd had the same idea as her.

Hermione was of two minds. On the one hand, she wasn't sure she wanted to deal with him this early in the morning, and yet on the other hand, she could hardly turn around and breeze back out of the hall.

Resigned, she approached the table, unsure of where she should sit, eventually deciding that opposite him would be the best.

At her approach, Snape looked up and threw her off completely, when, with a movement of his head, indicated that she should sit down in the chair next to him.

'Good morning, sir,' said Hermione evenly.

'Is it?' was the low grumble in response.

Hermione said nothing, but looked askance at him. Her eyes were unwittingly drawn to the cravat tied around his neck, and she felt herself flush as she recalled how brazenly she'd accosted him last night.

Averting her gaze to the table, she noticed he had a full English in front of him, and Hermione fought not to grimace...she didn't have the appetite for that sort of thing today. Instead, she placed a couple of slices of toast on her plate and set about pouring some tea...anything to keep her hands busy and her mind off the uncomfortable silence that was permeating the air between them.

Several minutes passed and Hermione was growing increasingly tense. She'd imagined that he had had something to say to her when he'd offered the seat next to him, but nothing was forthcoming. Should she break the ice herself? Or maybe she could simply beat a hasty retreat? How long did she have to remain before she could leave without seeming rude?

Peripherally, Hermione was aware of him lowering his cutlery to his plate, and she thought, with anticipation, that maybe he was now going to venture into conversation. Alas, no...he was just reaching to put more sauce on his sausages.

Hermione took a hefty swig of her tea in annoyance.

The boys down the far end of the table were taking their leave, and Hermione decided she could not last any longer without speaking. 'Professor Snape'

He raised his fork in protest, cutting her off immediately. 'A few more moments of peace if you don't mind, Professor.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows and turned her attention back to her plate. Peace? Oh, he found her annoying, did he? She had half a mind to get up and leave him to his peace, but again, something else was keeping her there.

At length, she felt his eyes on her and she looked at him defiantly. He pushed his plate away with a sigh. 'In the space of a few words I've, somehow, managed to offend you, have I not?'

Hermione was a little surprised. 'How do you work that one out?'

'Well, by the way you were trying to bore holes through the table with your eyes, not to mention your rather accusatory expression on your face when you looked at me...I can't imagine why.'

Hermione couldn't help but soften at his tone, not quite as infused with disinterest as he often affected. 'Just wondering if I should leave you to *you* peace, Professor,' answered Hermione, with a flippant quirk of her lips.

'I see,' replied Snape. 'Well, I actually... Ah, it doesn't matter now; we both know there is something else we should be discussing.'

Hermione nodded, suddenly unable to look at him.

'I hope that you have not, or indeed, intend not to tell anyone about what... happened?'

Hermione turned to him, completely astonished that he would think she would blab to all and sundry. Now, that really did offend her. Snape, she saw, was tracing his finger around the rim of his mug, avoiding her gaze.

'Oh dear! I'd better recall that owl I sent to the *Daily Prophet* then, hadn't I?'

His eyes flashed at her, but Hermione stared back resolutely.

'Of course I haven't bloody told anyone! What on earth do you take me for?' she hissed at him.

Snape scowled at her deeply. 'There are many who would love to get their hands on a scoop like that, Professor!'

'Well, thank you for your charming assessment of my character, Professor Snape!' stated Hermione, with an incredulous laugh. She immediately pushed her chair back with a satisfying screech and made to leave. A hand on her arm arrested her movements, and she remained seated. Snape removed his hand and stared into his mug.

'I apologise,' he began stiffly, 'I just...'

Hermione could sense how uncomfortable he was, and her bluster deflated quite suddenly. 'Look, you don't have to worry about it, sir; no one will ever find out anything from me.'

He nodded silently, and Hermione exhaled slowly in relief.

'I *will* hold you to that, Professor.'

No doubt, she thought.

'You know, after everything, it seems silly for you not to address me by my name... everyone else does.'

Hermione couldn't help the wide smile that spread across her face, nor, indeed, the small blush.

'I would be happy to... Severus.' It would take some getting used to, but Hermione loved saying it already.

'I may presume to...?'

'Oh yes, of course!'

Their attentions were momentarily distracted as Minerva entered the hall, and headed directly towards them.

'Indeed; Hermione it is, then,' murmured Snape, turning his eyes back onto her.

'Severus! What a surprise to see you at breakfast; well, bless me, to see you at all! I thought I was going to have to drag you out of that tower today. Good morning, Hermione!' finished Minerva as she seated herself the other side of Snape.

'Yes, well, as you can plainly see there will be no need for you get violent, Minerva,' goaded Snape.

""Violent", Severus? I'll have you know..."

Hermione tuned out their bickering with ease; Snape's use of her first name was still ringing pleasantly in her ears.

On reflection, Hermione decided that that night on the Astronomy Tower, and their shared exchange the following morning, represented a change in the relationship between herself and the Headmaster.

Well, relationship was perhaps overstating the matter, but Hermione now felt that there was an understanding between them that marked their interactions differently.

For her own part, Hermione felt that Snape was finally beginning to see her on par with the rest of his staff, and not merely as an ex-student or Harry Potter's friend. In turn, she felt less edgy and self-conscious around him, less like she had as a student, and more as a colleague on equal footing; well, as equal as it could be with him still being her superior.

That night on the tower, he had become so utterly human to her, so removed from his often sneeringly aloof demeanour that Hermione could not deny to herself that she wanted to see more. However unwillingly, and however reluctantly, Snape had shared a part of himself with her, and Hermione could not help but fancy that it might be the tie from which a tentative friendship could form.

Maybe she was being silly and fanciful, but it warmed her to think of it, and Hermione was determined to build upon their shared experience.

'Good afternoon, Professor Snape,' breezed Hermione as she entered his potions workroom.

The man in question glanced up from the array of cauldrons he had on the go. 'Hermione,' he greeted briefly, before turning his attention back to his work.

Hermione made for the back of the room and her usual table to set up her equipment, unfazed by the apparent lack of enthusiasm from her companion...he hardly ever spoke much during these sessions, his attentions required elsewhere.

From what Hermione could see, he appeared rather busier than usual, with several cauldrons bubbling away with Pepper-up Potion. The students would be returning to the castle tomorrow, no doubt bringing with them all manner of colds and coughs.

Hermione opened her textbook to the page of instructions for a Wiggensweld Potion and set about preparing the ingredients, with a bit of trepidation. It was a very difficult potion to make, and Hermione was not sure she would get it right on her first attempt. How she wished this was one she could brew on her own, but the mixture had the potential to become volatile if not brewed properly, and she was aware of Snape's gaze flicking to her every now and again.

Not ten minutes into the brewing process, her cauldron began to smoke and splutter. Before she could even register it, Snape had Banished the concoction from across the room.

'Your Ragwort was chopped too finely...a classic mistake when first brewing this potion.'

His tone was matter of fact, and Hermione tried to ignore the stab of wounded pride she felt at succumbing to such a pitfall. She collected more ingredients with a sigh, annoyed that the instructions were not more specific; when exactly did 'finely' become 'too finely'?

Hermione began anew, and to her infinite relief, progressed past the Ragwort stage without major incident. She'd even successfully negotiated the particularly tense stage where she'd had to sieve in powdered horn of Bicorn, and pour in Armadillo bile simultaneously. Now, all she had to do was stir the potion to a thick consistency, to ensure a deep shade of red, and then it would be complete.

Hermione stirred, and stirred, but the mixture refused to thicken.

'Oh for the love of...!' muttered Hermione in frustration as she peered over her cauldron. The heat was beginning to fluster her, and she took a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves. There was no way she was failing after getting so close to the finishing line, despite the persistent ache in her stirring arm.

To make things worse, she could sense Snape was watching her. Gritting her teeth, she looked to see him arranging his conical flasks in front of him, ready to decant his potions.

Was he going to make her ask?

Giving her potion another few furious stirs, Hermione admitted defeat. 'I... can't get it to thicken,' she ground out eventually.

'Oh?' Was the offhand response.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him as he slowly crossed the room, his hands clasped behind his back. She didn't know what she would do if he made her start again. He inspected her cauldron impassively, and Hermione held her breath.

'Seeing as you have caught me in a particularly magnanimous mood...'

He quirked an eyebrow in her direction and then reached to alter the flame on the heat under her cauldron. Taking the stirring rod from her, he began stirring more slowly and in an alternating clockwise and anti-clockwise fashion.

Hermione watched the potion thicken before her eyes.

'Yay for magnanimity, I suppose,' said Hermione in a disgruntled voice of resignation. She flopped heavily onto her stool, brushing strands of her hair out of her face. 'Severus, why on earth don't you write your own Potions textbook? Libatius bloody Borage gets on my nerves sometimes!'

Snape gave a short chuckle. 'There is nothing wrong with Borage's method; however, clearly one of any number of variables in your potion was not quite right, not so much as to ruin the potion irrevocably, but enough to cause you some difficulty. What Borage doesn't tell you is how to rectify your mistakes, and indeed, when they are rectifiable; neither should he, otherwise where would the challenge be?'

Hermione could not dispute such reason. 'Still, I don't suppose you annotated your seventh-year text and have it lying around somewhere?'

'I think not,' replied Snape dryly.

Hermione laughed.

'Come, clear your stuff away and make yourself useful by helping me take these potions to the Infirmary.'

'By the way, Severus,' began Hermione as she started clearing away her mess. 'I've finished my report for the Muggle Studies curriculum.'

'Do you have it with you?'

'Yes.'

'All right, you may leave it on my desk,' he said as he put stoppers in each flask of potion. 'I will look over it in due course, and then we shall discuss it further before I meet with the Governors.'

Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out the sheaf of parchment that she'd spent an inordinate amount of time on. She thought she'd done a good job, even if she

said so herself, but there was still a nagging doubt in her mind that she'd fall short of Snape's notoriously high standards.

Hermione moved towards the desk and placed the report down resolutely; she'd done her best, and that would have to be enough.

'No, Mr. Cripps,' sighed Hermione long-sufferingly, 'Muggles in Britain are no longer beheaded for crimes; neither are they hung, drawn or quartered.'

She was beginning to regret giving her third years reading on traditional Muggle events in the calendar. They'd been particularly taken with the story behind Bonfire Night and relished the gory details of the demise of Guy Fawkes and his gang.

'Perhaps we can move onto the other readings I set for you. Who can tell me about patron saint days? Who is the patron saint of Scotland, for instance?'

Hermione looked expectantly at the display of faces before her. A hand rose up slowly. 'Yes, Mr. Powell?'

'Did they really stick Guy Fawkes' head on a pike outside Parliament as a warning, Professor?'

Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly. 'Enough! Not one more word about Guy Fawkes or points will be lost!'

A short while later, Hermione entered the staff room, relieved to have the afternoon off. Minerva was sitting by the fire marking some essays.

'How are you, my dear?' she enquired as Hermione took the chair opposite her.

'Fine, thank you; I just, unwittingly, got my third years fascinated with historical Muggle barbarity. Things only got worse when some bright spark piped up about the French use of the Guillotine.'

'Lovely,' said Minerva dryly, 'but that's children for you.'

Hermione nodded in agreement. 'One boy even went so far as to ask if I could bring in some Muggle stocks for the next lesson, so we could have a practical example!'

Minerva gave a hearty laugh at this. 'Now, there are times when I could cheerfully put some pupils in the stocks, I can tell you!'

'No doubt,' replied Hermione, with a knowing smile.

The door opened then and Hermione watched as Snape entered the room and poured himself a cup of tea. He was wearing a thick cloak, and a long scarf hung loose about his shoulders.

Seeing that Minerva's attention was back on her marking, Hermione took the opportunity to join Snape at the other end of the room.

'Off anywhere nice, Severus?' she asked, trying to keep the curiosity in her tone to a minimum.

'I need to collect some ingredients...plant cuttings mostly; Pomona needs fresh ones to replenish the greenhouses.'

Oh. Hermione had thought he might be off to the Ministry or something, but now, she was intrigued.

She fiddled with the sugar bowl absent-mindedly.

'Sounds interesting; where do you go...the Forbidden Forest?'

He swallowed some of his tea before answering, somewhat evasively, as if he knew her interest had been irretrievably piqued by the academic venture.

'Sometimes...but not today.'

'I see,' replied Hermione, not pressing the matter. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much she would love to join him...it would be practical fieldwork for her Herbology N.E.W.T. if nothing else!

'Well, I have some marking to see to, so I'll see you later, perhaps?'

'Indeed.'

Hermione felt disappointed that he hadn't asked her to join him, but then, why on earth should he? She turned to leave, half debating whether to just simply ask him herself, when she became aware of a few low chuckles.

'What are you laughing at?' asked Hermione in surprise.

Snape set down his mug in the sink and began wrapping his scarf closely around his neck. 'You,' he said simply.

Hermione immediately bristled. 'Why?'

'You never miss an opportunity to learn, do you?'

'Is this your roundabout way of calling me a know-it-all again?' demanded Hermione with a frown.

Minerva, who had risen to leave the room, had heard part of their exchange and stopped briefly. 'Hermione, it takes one to know one. Severus, here, is the biggest know-it-all I've ever met.'

Hermione was amused to see Snape close his eyes with a pained sigh. 'Thank you for your input, Minerva; wherever would we be without your witty observations?'

Minerva merely gave an ironic pat to his arm and left the room.

'If you wish to join me, then you may.'

His voice was flat, as if he couldn't care less either way, and Hermione was tempted to spite him by declining, but then, she wondered if perhaps he really did want her to come...otherwise why would he ask?

Besides, Hermione could not, in good conscience, stick two fingers up at such an opportunity.

'I shall, thank you; feeling magnanimous again, are we?'

'Well, I am known for it.'

Hermione scoffed loudly.

'Your scepticism wounds me.'

He said it so seriously that Hermione wondered for a quick moment if she really had. However, he brushed past her and picked up a large, leather bag from a nearby chair.

'Actually, I could do with someone to hold the bag,' he said with a languid smirk.

That is more like it, thought Hermione.

'How ever shall I cope with such responsibility?'

Snape merely pulled out his pocket watch. 'Go and get your cloak and some appropriate footwear, then meet me in the Entrance Hall. You have ten minutes...otherwise I'm off.'

With only two minutes to spare, Hermione was in the Entrance Hall clad in her thickest cloak and sturdiest boots.

'Ready, Professor?' said a deep voice behind her.

Hermione nodded and they made their way out into the cold January air to the Apparition point.

'Where are we off to, then?'

'First stop is south Wales, a place called Kenfig Burrows.'

'Sand dunes?' asked Hermione, looking up at the man beside her.

'Indeed, have you ever been there?'

'No, I have not.'

'I will Apparate us, then.'

With that, he offered his arm for Hermione to take. A split second later, she found herself behind a grey, stone building. She followed Snape around it to confront an impressive expanse of sand dunes and vegetation.

'Some of them are massive!'

Snape looked down at her with a smirk. 'I'm afraid we have to negotiate them to get to the beginning of the dunes; we cannot risk Apparating in case there are Muggles about.'

He pulled out a tiny object from deep inside his cloak and enlarged it to reveal the leather bag. He held it out to her expectantly. 'There, you may do the honours.'

'Thanks,' deadpanned Hermione as she slung it over shoulder.

'My pleasure, I assure you. Let us get going, then.'

Hermione made a face at his back as she followed him onto one of the many paths that crisscrossed the dunes towards the sea. She was exceedingly grateful as they made their way through the undergrowth that she'd heeded Snape's advice about footwear...sand in one's shoe was not a pleasant experience.

A band of dunes loomed large ahead, and Hermione was already having trouble keeping up with Snape's pace. Trudging through the sand, up and over the large dunes whilst the wind gusted around them proved no easy business, for Hermione at least, who was beginning to feel slightly puffed. Snape, however, was striding along with perfect ease.

Eventually, as they neared the sea, the dunes began to get smaller and Hermione caught up with the man in front.

'So, what is so special about this place? There must be loads of other sand dunes nearer home than this?'

'Indeed, there are,' replied Snape, 'but this is one of the largest and most active dune systems in Europe. It is also a place that, historically, has important magical significance. See the remnants of that castle in the distance? Buried underneath is the remains of a medieval village; of course, the Muggles have no idea it was a magical community.'

'I see,' commented Hermione, with interest.

'I can get a good many plant species here, and significantly, Kenfig has a high proportion of the rare Fen orchid, a very versatile and potent ingredient in potions, as no doubt you are aware.'

They'd reached the edge of the dunes, and Hermione stood looking at the churning waves for a moment, before turning her attention back to the matter at hand.

The wind was fiercer here, and she grimaced at the sand and spray being whipped up about her.

'Right; there should be some Sea Holly and Saltwort around here...put a Stasis charm on each beaker as you hand it to me, and then place them carefully in the bag.'

Snape knelt down, and Hermione watched as he began gently taking cuttings.

'There may no longer be a magical settlement here, but the Muggles, in their own way, have recognised the importance of this area and protect it quite adequately. They have designated it what they call an 'S.S.S.I.''

Hermione's eyes widened and she stared down at her companion in surprise. 'Severus! You mean this is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and we're nicking the plants! What if someone notices us emasculating their bloody Fen orchids?'

Snape rose slowly and placed the beaker inside the bag, while fixing Hermione with an impatient glare. 'Relax, will you? It's not as if I'm waltzing through here ripping up whatever plants I see fit! I've been taking cuttings from here for years and the Muggles are none the wiser. Besides, take a look around you, the place is deserted at this time of the year.'

'Except for that woman walking her dog, over there.'

Snape turned to view the woman who was approaching in their direction. He looked at Hermione, unfazed.

'We are just two walkers enjoying the view.'

'In admittedly odd clothing,' added Hermione silently.

'Come on, let's go over there; I see some Saltwort.'

Hermione complied and followed behind him. The woman up ahead was on the same path and they would have to pass.

'Good afternoon,' offered the woman politely as she stepped to one side, allowing them to pass.

Hermione flinched as she witnessed the rather alluring look the unknown woman flashed at the man beside her. 'Afternoon,' she choked out, trying to recover herself.

Snape was silent and indeed, hadn't seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary. Hermione risked a glance behind and glowered at the receding figure of the woman, her hair flowing out sleekly behind her.

She looked once more at Snape, and tried to imagine what it was that had attracted the woman. There was no denying that he cut an impressive figure, tall and forbidding; or maybe it was the dark, almost raggedly, long hair?

Hermione wasn't sure why she was so bothered; hadn't she herself admitted an attraction as well? Surely, it was good to know she wasn't the only one who saw anything in his rather singular looks?

Moreover, they would never see that woman again, and well, if she did turn up again today, Hermione always had her wand handy. She shook herself mentally; jealousy had never been a good look on her and this was completely and utterly irrational at best.

After collecting Saltwort, Ragwort and Sand Sedge cuttings, Snape led Hermione into one of the dune slacks and instructed her to look closely for the orchid, as the plant was not in flower and therefore more difficult to spot.

Eventually, they located it, and Snape collected *several* cuttings, much to Hermione's consternation, and they began the climb back over the dunes once more.

Hermione stumbled once or twice in the sand, and when the third time she had to reach out for Snape's arm to steady herself, she huffed in annoyance.

'Can't we just Apparate from here? There's no one about.'

Snape deliberated for a moment before nodding tersely. 'Hold on, then.'

Hermione opened her eyes and saw she was standing on a grassy mountaintop, literally in the middle of nowhere.

'Where are we now?' she ventured, taking in the complete emptiness of the place.

'Northern England,' Snape answered, 'in the Peak District, lots of Alpine Pennycress and Spring Sandwort around here. There's the sandwort on that rocky outcrop.'

Hermione moved in the direction he was pointing and came to a ridge...there was a significant drop between them and the sandwort.

'How on earth do we get over there? We didn't bring any brooms.'

'Don't worry; you are staying here and I will be going to get it. Prepare a beaker for me.'

'How are you...oh my God!' shrieked Hermione and covered her eyes with her hands, unable to breathe.

Had he really just jumped off the edge?

Hermione parted her fingers and, breathing shallowly, looked across the small valley. She lowered her hands in relief when she saw he was balanced on the ledge with the plant, and not lying broken on the ground below.

She couldn't help but look away when he, well, *flew* back over to her...it made her nervous.

'What the hell was that, Severus? I nearly had a heart attack!'

Snape looked at her with casually raised eyebrows as he took the beaker off her. 'Oh, didn't you know I could fly?'

Hermione was amazed he could be so flippant about such a skill. 'No, I did not!'

'I thought Potter might have mentioned it.'

'Funnily enough, your aviation skills have never featured in our conversations.'

'Well, now you know,' shrugged Snape unconcerned.

Hermione still couldn't believe that he'd just jumped straight off... She shivered violently.

'You don't like flying?'

'No,' sighed Hermione. 'I'm no good on a broom, and the thought of flying with nothing even to hold on to... Let's just say I prefer to keep my feet firmly on the ground.'

After collecting a few other plant specimens, without incident, they Apparated back to Hogwarts just as the last lessons of the day would be finishing. Hermione felt a bit tired and extremely windswept. Her hair was sticking out everywhere, probably riddled with sand, and her cheeks would no doubt be red for several days if she didn't thaw out soon. Snape, Hermione noticed, seemed annoyingly unruffled.

'Thank you for taking me along, Severus,' said Hermione as she handed him the leather bag.

'You were not entirely bothersome.'

Hermione smiled. 'That is good to know. See you at dinner, then.'

He inclined his head and walked off in the direction of the greenhouses.

As soon as she reached her rooms Hermione began running a bath, looking forward to a long relaxing soak. She sat down on her bed and thought back over the day she'd had. She still marvelled over the fact that Snape could fly. It occurred to Hermione, then that it was probably Voldemort who had taught him how to do it it was an extremely uncommon skill after all and while it was not exactly Dark magic, it was powerful magic, and indeed, that was dangerous enough in itself. What other magic did Snape know? What else was he capable of?

For the first time, Hermione wondered if she should be put off by the fact that Snape, Voldemort's formerly most trusted ally, had the potential to be a very dangerous man. These thoughts were superfluous though, she wasn't put off, in fact, if anything, he appealed to her more because she knew that despite whatever potential he possessed, he was a good man and, well, she liked him...it was as simple and as complicated as that.

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath for her efficient beta-ing:)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

Characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 6

The day after Valentine's Day, Hermione received a rather cryptic owl from Harry, which, in a hasty scrawl, said: 'Can you meet Ginny and me in Hogsmeade, on Saturday morning at eleven o'clock?' Hermione had sent an affirmative reply and spent the intervening days in a perpetual state of curiosity...clearly Harry had news of some sort.

Saturday morning eventually dawned, and instead of getting out her N.E.W.T. work, as was her usual practice on weekends, Hermione left the castle immediately after breakfast for Hogsmeade. She had well over an hour before meeting Harry and Ginny in the Three Broomsticks, and she would do some shopping to pass the time. She was in dire need of stationery supplies and, indeed, a relaxing browse through the bookshop.

Harry and Ginny were already seated in the pub when Hermione entered at eleven. They were grinning from ear-to-ear and looked vaguely ridiculous to Hermione's mind. She smiled at them bemusedly as she sat down.

'Well?' Hermione burst out finally, when they continued to just sit there staring inanely at her. 'What is all this about?'

Ginny looked at Harry, who nodded briefly.

'We're getting married!' squealed Ginny, thrusting out her left hand with a girlish giggle that Hermione could only dream of producing.

'Oh my God!' gasped Hermione. 'This is fantastic! Look at that rock on your finger!'

Hermione looked at Harry with wide eyes.

'Isn't it gorgeous?' Ginny gushed.

'It cost enough,' muttered Harry in good humour.

'He proposed on Valentine's Day, Hermione; it was wonderful!'

Hermione couldn't help but laugh at Harry's discomfort as his blatant romanticism was revealed.

'I'm so pleased for you both; truly you deserve to be happy. You certainly kept this quiet, Harry; I had no idea you were planning on proposing!' She grinned.

Harry laughed. 'I wanted it to be a complete surprise.'

'When is the big day? Have you decided yet?'

'Actually, Hermione, that is something we wanted to discuss with you. You see, we don't want a long engagement, so we were thinking about this August. Harry was hoping...'

Ginny trailed off and looked at her fiancé.

Harry rubbed the back of his head. 'I was wondering what you thought the chances were of Snape letting us get married at Hogwarts?'

Hermione blinked. 'Oh, well, I couldn't say, Harry, I mean'

'You must have an idea, Hermione; you have worked with him for months now.'

Harry looked at her earnestly, and Hermione could see how much hope he'd set on marrying at Hogwarts. It wasn't a surprise, really; Hogwarts had been Harry's first proper home, and he had an attachment to the place that went deeper than most.

'Look, Harry, I think it's a lovely idea having the wedding at Hogwarts, and as for Professor Snape, well, I won't dismiss any chance of him agreeing, but I will say, don't get your hopes up too much, just in case.'

Harry nodded in understanding.

'How were you planning on broaching the subject with him?'

'We thought about going to see him, but I think writing to him first might be better.'

Hermione agreed. 'Yes, do it tonight. I have a meeting with him tomorrow...maybe I can feel his reaction out a bit and perhaps talk to him about the idea. I don't know, but I will have a try.'

Both Harry and Ginny lit up like light bulbs.

'I knew we could count on you, Hermione!' Harry grinned gratefully at her.

'Oh, and keep yourself free for the sixteenth of March; we're having an engagement party at Grimmauld Place.'

After parting from Ginny and Harry, Hermione strolled leisurely back to Hogwarts. She was delighted for her two friends, yet at the same time, she couldn't help but see how it threw her own situation into sharp relief, and it dampened her spirits somewhat. It wasn't that she wanted to get married, far from it, but she had no one and was unlikely to meet anyone at Hogwarts.

Yes, she had her silly fancies about Snape, but really, she could not envisage anything coming from it. She might, deep down, wish it, but when it came to Snape feeling anything in return, Hermione just could not see it. She was young yet, though, and had plenty of time to worry about the direction her life was headed. For the present, losing herself in the library for an hour...or five...seemed the best course of action.

'Good morning, Severus,' said Hermione as she entered his office the following morning.

He was seated behind his desk and returned her greeting in a detached manner. Hermione sent a nervous smile towards Dumbledore, who was unabashedly watching from his portrait. As she sat, Hermione could see her Muggle Studies work sitting atop the desk, and her stomach fluttered uncomfortably.

'I have read through your report and draft syllabi multiple times' He broke off suddenly and steepled his fingers. 'Actually, perhaps you had better bring that stool over here and sit this side of the desk so you can see my annotations.'

Hermione got up, and visions of the sarcastic red comments that had desecrated her old Potions essays swam before her eyes. She steeled herself and sat next to him.

'So, this is what it feels like to be Headmaster of Hogwarts, hmm?' said Hermione, trying to mask her nerves. She looked around the office from her new vantage point. 'I confess it is not as I imagined.'

'What did you expect?' commented Snape silkily. 'One can hardly create the same effect sitting on *a stool*. You need a huge, over-compensating armchair.'

Hermione laughed aloud, a little surprised by his good humour.

'We need some blank parchment...there's some about here somewhere.'

Hermione watched as he shuffled his papers about, fruitlessly, for the parchment. 'Severus,' she ventured, 'your desk, frankly, is a mess.'

He turned to her with a deep frown. 'This is organised chaos, Professor.'

'Oh, I see,' Hermione conceded wryly. 'May I?'

Snape raised his hands in beleaguered acceptance.

Hermione stood up and began collecting the discarded quills about the desk. She saw the quill pot she had bought him for Christmas sitting empty. 'There; if you try and keep all your quills together and align your inkwells in their proper holders, it looks better already.'

Hermione smiled when she noticed his grimace at her patronising tone.

'As for your papers, well, I'll let you deal with them.'

'Most kind,' he grumbled quietly. 'You find the parchment; I must retrieve a copy of the current syllabus from the filing cabinet.'

He got up and moved to the many cupboards and cabinets situated in the alcove behind the desk.

Hermione began sifting through the 'organised chaos', careful not to dislodge anything, when his voice rang out that she might try his top drawer. Hermione moved to his chair to access the drawer, and indeed, found a pile of blank parchment.

'You know, Severus, I do sort of feel drunk with power in your chair.'

'Told you.'

Suddenly, there was a brisk knock at the door, startling Hermione, and Minerva McGonagall appeared around it brandishing an envelope.

'Severus' She stopped short. '*Hermione?*'

'Hello, Minerva,' Hermione managed, flushing with embarrassment at what Minerva must be thinking, catching her sitting behind the Headmaster's desk with her hand in the drawer.

'I was, ah, looking for Severus,' commented the older woman.

To Hermione's relief, Snape quickly reappeared and slapped a thick file down onto the desk. She gingerly scooted back onto her stool and plucked at the sleeve of her robe.

'Can I help you, Minerva?'

'Yes, Severus, I just wondered if you'd heard about Potter and Miss Weasley's engagement, and Albus, too?'

Snape lowered himself into his chair with a sigh. 'Yes, I am aware of this scintillating piece of news.'

So, *Harry has indeed sent the letter then*, Hermione mused.

A disgruntled voice sounded to the right. 'You never mentioned it, Severus!'

'I only found out last night, Albus; look, Professor Granger and I are in the middle of something...can't you go and cluck over this inane gossip elsewhere?'

Hermione bit her lip.

Minerva frowned, but merely turned to Dumbledore and told him to meet her in the staff room. After they both left, Hermione debated with the idea of broaching the subject of the wedding further. It was now or never, she decided.

'I, ah, notice you didn't mention Harry's request to them.'

He looked at her swiftly and calculatingly. Pulling out two pieces of parchment from inside his robe, he smoothed them out onto the desk. One was an invitation, and the other was a letter. 'I should have known you would have been in on this. Roped you in to butter me up, has he?'

Hermione gave a small smile. 'I would never presume to be able to "butter you up," as you so elegantly put it, Professor Snape.'

'Be that as it may, no doubt Potter thought you could ease the way for him. What if I told you that I've already owed him back, telling him exactly where he can stick his wedding?'

Hermione sized him up for a few moments. 'You have not.'

'Haven't I?'

Hermione began to feel unsure. 'Really?'

'No,' he let out eventually before muttering fiercely, 'Am I never to be free of that blasted boy?'

Hermione was quiet for several moments. 'Severus, it would mean a lot to Harry, for reasons I think you yourself might understand.' She looked at him seriously and prepared herself for an outburst at her presumptuousness.

Snape scowled deeply. 'However did you make that deduction?' he demanded icily.

'Well,' Hermione began, unsure if she were doing the right thing. 'What you said to me... that night on the tower'

He interrupted her by pushing back his chair and stalking over to the window. 'Don't bring that up now!' he hissed angrily.

Hermione swivelled round on her stool to face him, or at least the back of him. 'Severus, there is no point in denying it ever happened. However much you may not like it, you told me things I cannot forget, and yes, I think about them. I have wondered why it is you came back to Hogwarts, a place that in many ways embodies your regrets, when you could have gone anywhere and done anything, and I don't think it was only to surround yourself with reminders. I think Hogwarts has been your home, just as it always was Harry's.'

Hermione thought she might have finally gone too far with him, and part of her wished she hadn't said anything. After a lengthy silence, he sighed resignedly and spoke once more, albeit in a tightly controlled voice.

'You're right; Hogwarts is all I've ever really known. It holds some of my deepest regrets, and indeed, some of my happiest memories.'

Hermione wondered how many of those happy memories involved Lily Potter. She had to avert her gaze, even though he couldn't see her, when she felt an unexpected pang of resentment inside her.

Soon enough, Snape turned and moved back behind his desk. 'I'll think about it, no more, no less.'

Hermione only nodded with a small smile.

'I'm not going to that bloody party, mind,' he scoffed and blasted the offending invitation off his desk with his wand.

'Pity,' was all Hermione said as she casually began opening and arranging their work on the desk. He said nothing, but Hermione could feel his eyes on her, and she hid an amused smile.

'How did your meeting with Severus go?' asked Minerva later that afternoon.

Hermione glanced over the top of her book as the older woman joined her by the fire in the staff room.

'All right, thank you; he was as reserved as ever so I've no idea, really, if he was impressed with my work or not. We've agreed on a first and second year syllabus, approved changes needed to update the subject, and, well, it's entirely up to the Governors now.'

Minerva nodded. 'They're not a bad bunch. No Lucius Malfoys of course, but there may be one or two who will dig their heels in. I'd hate to think we'd put you to all this trouble, Hermione, for nothing.'

'Yes, it would be disappointing, I must admit.'

Minerva began to look at her speculatively. 'You've been here several months now, my dear. Do you think you'll stay on another year, or more?'

Hermione put down her book in contemplation. 'You know what, Minerva? I think I probably will, especially if the Governors give the go ahead on the new classes...I'd want to see them implemented into practice myself.'

'As well you should! I am glad to hear it. You are a good teacher, no doubt about it.'

Hermione blushed.

It would appear she'd made up her mind then; she would stay on at Hogwarts for some time longer. It seemed to Hermione the right thing to do. She had friends here, and most importantly, she really enjoyed teaching...*a revelation in itself*, she thought wryly.

Several days later, Hermione was strolling through the grounds, enjoying the late winter sunshine. She'd been to visit Hagrid, who'd gushed with pride as he'd waved his invitation to Harry and Ginny's engagement party. He hadn't seen Harry in a long time, and Hermione knew the half-giant missed him being around. She had no idea how Hagrid would fit inside Grimmauld Place, but as long as he kept to the kitchen or the living room, he would be fine, she supposed.

She sat down on a bench overlooking the lake and reached inside her robe for her Charms textbook.

'Hermione!'

Hermione stood up in surprise and turned. Minerva was walking briskly in her direction.

'Hermione, there you are! I've been looking for you.'

'Oh,' answered Hermione, 'is anything'

'What on earth have you done to Severus?'

'I beg your pardon?' spluttered Hermione, somewhat alarmed. Was he OK? She hadn't been near him for several days. Suddenly, Hermione was aware of the twinkle in Minerva's eyes and the small smile about her lips.

Minerva tugged Hermione back onto the stone bench. 'Severus has just informed me, quite out of the blue, I assure you, that he's given Harry Potter permission to hold his wedding here!'

Hermione grinned in delight, but was still rather confused by Minerva's accusation.

'I am sure it is your influence, my dear.'

'*My influence?*' said Hermione incredulously.

'Well, I'm sure he wouldn't normally agree to such a thing.'

'Minerva, I don't think...' began Hermione, a bit flustered.

'I am sure of it, Hermione; I can see the difference in him! I've noticed his moods have been a lot better lately, and well, you seem to get on quite well together.'

Hermione didn't know what to say. Did she really have any influence over Snape? Really? Was the idea as ridiculous as it sounded? Hermione wasn't entirely sure.

'It does him well, Hermione, to have a friend of sorts, who isn't looking to use him in any way. As you know, I have tried drawing him out, but I am so much older, and well, I think I remind him too much of Albus, at times.'

Hermione smiled and patted Minerva's hand at her rather sombre expression. As she stared out over the expanse of water, Hermione could only think of that word... 'friend.'

She could recall clearly those many months ago, when she'd first started teaching, how she'd envisaged forming a friendship with the melancholy Headmaster. Then, she'd developed an attraction...mere whimsy, a bit of fun, as she'd thought at the time. It would pass, and in some ways it had, except, Hermione now realised, not in the way she had hoped.

She was now afraid it had deepened into something more. Minerva thought they could be friends, and all of a sudden, Hermione wanted to blurt out and ask her if that ~~all~~ she thought they could be.

She didn't, though.

Hermione walked back to the castle with Minerva, in silence, until she stopped at the main doors to speak with one of her students, while the older woman went inside.

'Miss Armitage, will you come to my office after dinner? I need to discuss something with you.'

The poor girl looked terrified, but Hermione only wanted to ask if she could submit some of her work for the Governors to look at.

Hermione opened the main doors and immediately picked out the tall form of the Headmaster as he conversed with a group of students. Hermione felt her heart thud painfully in her chest. She wanted to thank him for what he'd done for Harry, but she also wanted to escape unnoticed, up the staircase, and disappear into her rooms. That talk with Minerva had left her feeling a bit off-balance.

She was halfway up the marble staircase when he spotted her and called her.

'Professor Granger, might I speak with you a moment?'

Hermione closed her eyes briefly and, with a deep breath, turned to descend back down the stairs.

'Certainly, Headmaster.'

He led her back outside, out of the earshot of any students.

'I thought you might like to know that I've'

'Agreed to have the wedding here, I know; Minerva is practically incandescent about it,' Hermione interrupted, managing a small chuckle. 'Thank you, Severus.'

He looked uncomfortable. 'Well, it's not any'

'You will accept these thanks gracefully, for once, Severus.'

He shut his mouth with an impatient huff. 'You look awfully pale, Hermione. Are you all right?'

Hermione tried to brighten her expression. 'I'm fine, a bit tired perhaps. Say,' she began, trying to change the subject, 'will you really not be coming to the engagement party?'

Time to see if she really did have any influence over him.

Snape shook his head. 'No, indeed not. Besides, I cannot leave the castle unattended.'

Hermione shrugged dismissively. 'Of course you can; there are more than enough teachers capable of looking after the school for a few hours. If there is a problem, you will only be an Apparition away.'

'It will hardly matter if I am not there,' he retorted.

'Well, Harry wants you there; otherwise why would he invite you?'

'He could hardly ask me for the use of Hogwarts, and then *not* invite me to the party.'

Hermione sighed and decided to go the whole hog. 'All right then, well, I would like to see you there. But look, I am not going to say one more word about it, except that Minerva and I will be meeting in the Entrance Hall at six, three weeks Saturday, to go to Grimmauld Place. I'll leave it to you to decide if you want to join us or not.'

He looked at her impassively, but his eyes were narrowed.

Hermione gave him an expectant look before entering the castle once more, feeling a little embarrassed at her own audacity.

The day of the engagement party soon rolled around, and Saturday evening found Hermione surveying herself critically in the mirror. She'd never been really unhappy with her appearance, but there were times when she wished she had more obvious beauty, like perhaps Ginny's long and sleek, red hair. However, her own hair was behaving itself adequately tonight. She'd French plaited it the night before, and when she'd undone them earlier on, her hair had hung in relatively frizz-free curls. Some hairspray would hopefully preserve the look, but Hermione wasn't holding her breath.

She was wearing a new set of dress robes, purchased from Madam Malkin's, courtesy of the Christmas gift from her parents. They were a deep burgundy colour, and for once, Hermione was pleased with the fit. A few touches of makeup, a few sprays of perfume, and she was pretty much ready to go.

She wondered, briefly, if all this primping would be for naught if *he* didn't show up. Well, she would want to look nice regardless, but Hermione could not pretend that she didn't want to impress him, if indeed that were at all possible. She thought once again of Minerva's words down by the lake and considered that, perhaps, it wasn't so *impossible*, and maybe, Hermione decided, she should believe in herself a bit more.

As the clock approached six o'clock, Hermione arrived in the Entrance Hall. Minerva stood waiting by the hourglasses, but otherwise, the hall was empty. Her stomach dropped in disappointment...she should have known he would not come.

'Good evening, Minerva.'

'Hermione! Don't you look lovely, dear.'

'Thank you; ah, I take it Severus is not coming?'

'I don't think so; in any case, even if he had wanted to, he received an urgent owl from the Ministry today and, as far as I know, is still in London.'

Hermione nodded and silently followed Minerva out of the doors and towards the gates. Oh, well, that was that, then. She wouldn't let it dampen her evening too much...it would be rather selfish of her.

Mrs. Weasley opened the door at Grimmauld Place, and she ushered them through to the living room, predominantly filled with other Weasleys and Hagrid.

Ginny immediately came over and greeted them warmly.

'Harry's not even here!' moaned Ginny, pulling Hermione aside.

'What?'

'He's been at the bloody Ministry all day!'

'On a Saturday?' Hermione questioned.

'Yes,' replied Ginny, in an undertone, 'some ex-Death Eater has turned up or something.'

No doubt that's what Snape's doing at the Ministry then

'He'll be back soon, Gin, he has plenty of time; not everyone has arrived yet.'

'Yes, you're right; help yourself to a drink, Hermione. I need to check on Mum in the kitchen.'

Hermione moved over to the table laden with drinks and poured a glass of wine, giving a wave at Hagrid as she did so. He was crammed onto the settee with a large tankard of ale in his hand.

More people had arrived, and Hermione only vaguely knew some of them by sight...Harry and Ginny's Auror friends from the Ministry. There was someone she did know well, though.

'Ron!'

'All right, Hermione?' He smiled when he saw her.

'Great, thanks; so tell me, will I get to meet Lisa tonight?'

Ron had mentioned his new girlfriend several times in his letters, and Hermione was interested in meeting her, especially after Ginny had given Hermione the impression that she didn't like her.

'She's working late, so she'll be around later.'

'Good!' said Hermione brightly as Ginny reappeared.

'Catch you later, girls, I'm going to talk to Hagrid.'

As soon as Ron was out of earshot, Ginny leaned towards her.

'Told you about his new girlfriend, has he? She's like a clone of Lavender Brown, only with a worse high-pitched giggle!'

'Ginny!' Hermione admonished. 'This is your brother's girlfriend you're talking about.'

'You just wait until she arrives! Mark my words, Hermione!'

Hermione shrugged...if Ron liked her, then that was all that really mattered.

'Oh, watch out, here comes Phlegm.'

Hermione laughed into her wine glass. Bill's wife looked as effortlessly beautiful as ever, and Hermione had to elbow Ginny, who was glaring at her with an envious frown.

Ginny sniggered. 'I'm only joking; I've got to know her quite well, and she's not that bad.'

Hermione was suddenly aware of the loud tones of Molly Weasley, and the Scottish brogue of Minerva McGonagall, drifting through the open door from the hallway. An unmistakable, deep voice joined in and Hermione froze, her glass halfway to her lips.

'You are not seeing things, Minerva...'

'Are you all right, Hermione?' asked Ginny, causing Hermione to snap back to attention.

'What? Oh, yes, uh, I think...'

Ginny was already turning to the doorway, though.

'Harry! Thank Merlin, you're finally back!'

'Sorry about that, Gin; it's all sorted now, though.'

'Was that Professor Snape I heard you come in with?' Hermione asked, unable to help herself.

'Snape is here? How on earth did you manage that?' exclaimed Ginny in a whisper.

'Yeah,' laughed Harry, 'he's in the kitchen with McGonagall. He didn't take much convincing to come along really; probably fancied a good drink after the day we had at the Ministry.'

Hermione found her hand, of its own volition, surreptitiously move to smooth her hair down. She was in two minds whether to go in the kitchen and speak to him or to leave it for a bit.

'I need a drink; I'm gasping,' muttered Harry, and he began crossing the room to the drinks, a task that took twice as long by the amount of times various people accosted him.

Hermione followed for lack of any idea as to what to do with herself. Eventually, they came to a stop by Hagrid, who began an enthusiastic monologue about his latest illegal breeding venture.

'I fancy Professor Snape has changed a bit since we were in school, don't you think? Physically, I mean,' commented Ginny quietly while Harry was still trapped in conversation with Hagrid.

Hermione's eyebrows shot up her forehead and moved to see where Ginny was looking. Snape had entered the room, drawing many a furtive glance; Minerva and Arthur followed him.

'Do you think so?' replied Hermione neutrally. 'He's certainly different, but I don't know about, ah, physically.'

'He looks... healthier, I suppose,' finished Ginny. 'Why don't you go over and say hello, Hermione? He looks a bit pained, sitting there, listening to my mother and McGonagall chattering on.'

Hermione glared at the side of Ginny's head. 'I suppose it would be... rude of me not to,' she ground out.

He appeared to be without a drink, so Hermione refilled her wine glass and poured a Firewhiskey for him.

'I see you decided to come then, Professor,' stated Hermione as she approached the armchair in which he sat.

Snape looked up at her and frowned. 'Evidently. Well, you have often accused me of masochistic tendencies, and what could be more masochistic than putting myself at the mercy of a veritable roomful of Gryffindors?'

'Not a lot,' she agreed. 'Firewhisky?'

'Thank you.' He relieved her of the tumbler, and Hermione took the liberty of perching on the arm of his chair.

'How has your day been?' asked Hermione, competing with the hubbub of noise in the room.

'Tedious,' he replied shortly, communicating clearly that he did not wish to speak of it, or indeed, anything. Hermione could tell that he was not in the best of moods. He seemed content to merely sit and observe, and that was what they both did for a time, until he spoke up once more.

'Who's the harpy Ronald Weasley is with?'

Hermione picked out Ron in the crowd and saw there was an unknown brunette standing next to him. She looked down at the man beside her with a smile.

""Harpy""?

Snape nodded with a grimace. 'Didn't you hear her laugh?'

'No,' chuckled Hermione. 'You'll have to excuse me; I must go and say hello. I'll speak to you later, Severus.'

'All right,' he replied grimly, and Hermione made her way over to Ron.

'Hermione! This is Lisa.'

'Lovely to meet you at last, Lisa,' offered Hermione with a smile.

Immediately, Hermione was uncomfortably aware that she was being sized up. The eyes of the other woman surreptitiously traveled over her form and then came to rest level with Hermione's own gaze.

'I have heard so much about you, Hermione,' Lisa simpered sweetly. 'Teach Muggle Studies, I hear!' She gave a little giggle that was so shrill and fake, Hermione could only stare blankly. 'We didn't study that at Beauxbatons.'

'She's part French, see,' put in Ron, with a grin.

'Oh.' Hermione nodded.

Suddenly, Ron was being pushed towards the chocolate fountain as his girlfriend squealed unintelligibly about strawberries. Hermione was left standing there in bemusement. She began looking about for Ginny, but Hermione was unable to see her anywhere and decided to check the kitchen. She was in there alone, putting sandwiches and other snacks onto large platters.

'I just met *Lisa*.'

Ginny turned around and they both burst into apologetic laughter.

'Poor Ron,' Hermione lamented. 'We shouldn't laugh.'

Ginny merely raised an eyebrow before turning to take sausage rolls out of the oven. 'Enjoying yourself, Hermione? I know parties are not really your scene.'

'Well, I wouldn't say that exactly,' said Hermione defensively.

'You looked to be enjoying yourself in the company of a certain former Potions master earlier.'

Hermione frowned. 'We barely spoke.'

'Precisely!' returned Ginny triumphantly. 'Yet, you were still clearly enjoying yourself.'

Hermione rolled her eyes and frowned. 'If you have something to say, Gin, just say it. I could tell you were fishing for something earlier on.'

Hermione cast a discreet Muffliato spell.

'All right,' Ginny began in a brisk tone, wiping her hands on a tea towel, 'you and Snape...spill.'

'There is nothing to *spill*.'

'Come on, Hermione! I saw how you practically jumped out of your skin when you heard his voice in the hall and how you smiled at him.'

'That's hardly much evidence to base your assumptions on, Gin.'

'Isn't it? You never looked at Ron in quite the same way.'

Hermione looked at her hands in defeat, realising it was pointless to prevaricate.

'All right, all right, I like him, end of story. It's not that obvious, is it?'

Ginny smiled reassuringly. 'No, of course not. Only to someone who knows you well and is female.'

Hermione laughed weakly.

'So is there really nothing to spill?'

Hermione shook her head. 'Of course not, and it is unlikely there ever will.'

'You never know.' Ginny shrugged. 'Who's he to turn his nose up at you?'

'It's not as simple as that.'

'How'd it happen anyway?'

Hermione waved her hand tiredly. 'Oh, I don't know; I'm sick of going over it in my head, really. He just... fascinates me, I suppose.'

Ginny smiled gently. 'Well, Hermione, you know what you can always do...tell him.'

Hermione blanched, and Ginny winked as she left the kitchen, followed by several levitating platters. Tell him? There was no way in hell, Hermione reasoned; no way was she going down that road.

Giving herself a mental shake, Hermione got up to rejoin the party. As she stood in the hallway, though, she wondered if a quiet five minutes by herself might do her good. The combination of noise and wine was beginning to give her a headache.

She walked down the passage and opened the door to the library. The fire was lit in the grate and bathed the room in a bright orange glow. The back of a dark head was visible on the sofa, and Hermione smiled ruefully at her luck.

'I should have known you might be in here, Severus.'

She walked around to where he was sitting, staring into the fire with his Firewhisky on the table in front of him. It was a familiar scene, only this time she didn't have to run away. 'Mind if I join you? It's got a bit too much for me in there, too.'

He shrugged. 'Do as you please, but I warn you, I am not much company.'

Hermione sat down next to him, at an appropriate distance, and set her feet upon the coffee table. 'Why not?' she ventured.

He hadn't looked this glum in a long while.

'It was a mistake coming here, to this house, and I've drunk too much...it's got me in a pathetically maudlin mood.'

'Do you... do you want to talk about it?'

He stood up suddenly and drained his glass. 'No! No, certainly not! I am in no mood for one of your little counseling sessions! I don't know why you became a teacher when you are eminently more suited to being a bloody therapist!'

Hermione was rather stunned at the sudden venom in his tone. She hadn't had that directed at her in a long time. Making a decision, she got up to leave and was nearly at the door when his low voice stilled her.

'Look, I didn't mean to shout at you in such a manner.'

Hermione hesitated.

'Severus, I am not trying to pry or anything like that; I only ever want to help.'

He looked into the fire. 'I am not used to talking about things, as you well know.'

Hermione returned quietly to her space on the sofa.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said suddenly.

'What do you mean?' asked Hermione in confusion.

He rubbed a hand wearily over his eyes. 'Like I could tell you anything and you wouldn't...*pity* me, or even judge me.'

Hermione didn't know what to say.

'Don't you just love irony, Hermione? Is it not one of the most damnable concepts?'

Hermione raised her eyebrows, indicating that she wasn't quite following him.

'As soon as I entered this house tonight, I realised something. The people who should be here tonight...the people who should be at Potter's wedding, his parents, his godfather, Lupin, even Dumbledore, are all gone, and yet here I am. After everything that has gone on, I should be the one left. Is that not ironic?'

'If you choose to look at it that way...'

'It is the only way, Hermione.' He looked at her straight on, and Hermione willed herself not to look away.

'You once asked me how I survived Nagini... Well, I will tell you.' He gave a bitter laugh. 'You would never guess in a million years who came to my aid.'

Hermione hardly dared to breathe, lest she disturb the abstraction he seemed to be in.

'It was a house-elf...can you believe it? A house-elf saved my life.'

Hermione's eyes widened. A house-elf?

Snape began pacing up and down.

'Violet was her name. She worked at Hogwarts, of course, and for some reason became rather attached to me when I began teaching there. Although no single house-elf is ever assigned to one person, she would take it upon herself to answer my calls and clean my rooms. She liked to help out when I was brewing potions for the Infirmary. She even came home with me some summers...Dumbledore would send her to 'look after me,' like he thought I would waste away if left alone.

'When I... when Dumbledore died, things changed. The house-elves had to obey me, of course, but they thought I was a traitor and Violet never came near me. So, you can imagine how surprised I was to wake up at my house, only a day or so after lying at the brink of death in the Shrieking Shack, to find her beside me. She'd Apparated me out of the shack and, somehow using her own magic, healed the wound on my neck and fed me the phoenix tears I had stored away. I still don't know to this day how she knew what had happened to me, and where. I never got to ask her...she was old, and the magic she'd spent Apparating and healing me were too much for her, in the end.'

His voice had remained flat, as if he were merely relating the weather, but Hermione could see the way his eyes glittered with anguish in the firelight. She wiped the tears out of her eyes, inexplicably touched by the loyalty and sacrifice of the house-elf. She thought of Dobby, who had also given his life for their cause.

Now she knew why he'd been so reticent about it before...no doubt he felt it another death on his conscience.

'Severus,' breathed Hermione sadly, standing up and moving towards him. 'You don't regret her sacrifice, do you?'

He looked at her and shook his head, causing some of his hair to fall into his eyes. 'No, not deep down...I would be doing her a disservice otherwise. That is another reason why I went back to Hogwarts. At times, all I wanted to do was lie away hidden in Spinner's End, but I owed it, not just to her, to do something useful with my life.'

'I'm glad,' said Hermione with a smile. She tentatively reached out to touch his arm for a moment. If he seemed surprised by the action, he didn't show it.

'I didn't know house-elves had any sort of healing magic,' Hermione mused, after a few moments.

'Neither did I,' replied Snape quietly. 'Which is why I've never spoken about it and have resorted to a tale of forward thinking and handy potions stored in my robe for the Ministry. I'm not sure it is in the best interest of the house-elves for such a thing to become common knowledge.'

'I think you're right. Come,' smiled Hermione, a little brighter, 'let's sit down and cheer ourselves up. It's a party after all, and we will be raining on everyone's parade.'

'Are you trying to say I've rained on yours?'

'Of course not!' She shook her head good-naturedly and motioned for him to sit down.

Hermione flopped down beside him, only this time her thigh was brushing his. Propping her feet up once more, Hermione realised she was decidedly comfy, apart from the sudden flush rising in her cheeks caused by any number of reasons...his proximity, the wine, the fire, Hermione wasn't sure.

For a while, the only sound in the room was the crackling fire until her gaze landed on the hand resting on his leg.

'I've never seen you wear jewellery before,' observed Hermione.

'That's because I don't wear *jewellery* normally,' he scoffed. 'However, this ring,' he brandished his little finger, 'is linked to my office so if I am needed I can be contacted through this.'

'Ah, I see. I thought, perhaps, it was a new look you were going for.'

He gave a quiet rumble of laughter. 'Should I be going for a new look?'

Hermione stilled...she'd walked blindly into that one.

'Oh, no, I don't...' she began, slightly flustered, but trailed off when the door behind them opened with a clatter. They both turned to see who it was, and Hermione looked back impassively when she saw that it was Ron and his girlfriend.

Ron, however, was staring at her in confusion while his companion clapped her hand over mouth and said, rather unapologetically, 'Oops, sorry!' She shoved Ron out of the door with another grating titter of a laugh.

'Told you she was a harpy,' muttered Snape under his breath. 'Tell me, Hermione; why is it that you are in here with me and not out there having fun with your friends?'

Hermione was rather surprised at this line of questioning, and she could tell that while his voice appeared indifferent, his left hand was plucking at the folds of his robe, belying his interest. Deciding to be brave, Hermione gently curled her hand around his forearm.

'Are we not friends, Severus?' Hermione lifted her chin to look at him and held her breath when he remained silent. Visions of him flinging her off and calling her a stupid, naïve girl passed, ridiculously, through her mind.

Finally, he nodded and looked at her. 'We are,' he said quietly and actually smiled; it was a small one, but the most genuine Hermione had ever seen off him.

'Good,' was all she could manage in reply as she tore her gaze away, afraid that she was perilously close to making a fool of herself.

Time was unfortunately getting on, and Hermione realised that people would be wondering where they were. Giving Snape's arm a regretful squeeze, Hermione stood up.

'I think it's about time we got back to the party.'

Snape also stood up. 'You're right...but I am going to go back to Hogwarts.'

'Oh, all right.' Hermione was disappointed, but she knew there wasn't much point persuading him otherwise; no doubt he wanted to be alone for a bit. 'I will see you tomorrow.'

'Until tomorrow, then,' he murmured, and Hermione was intrigued to note that he seemed unsure about something. She was about to speak when he quickly reached out to grasp her hand. Hermione's heart began to beat wildly when he lifted it and pressed a brief kiss to it.

He fixed her with one last look before he disappeared from the room completely.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she stood there clutching her hand, utterly transfixed, before throwing herself back onto the sofa with a pitiful groan.

He was going to be the death of her.

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath for beta-ing!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 7

As the month of March drew to a close, the Easter break approached, and Hermione was sincerely looking forward to two weeks of lesson-free days. The castle didn't empty as much as it did during the Christmas holidays, but it would still be relatively quiet...perfect for Hermione to work on her exam preparation, both in terms of her own exams, and those of her students as well. It was all well and good deciding to stay on and teach at Hogwarts, but if all her students did badly in their end-of-year exams, then surely that would raise some issues!

Presently, Hermione was enjoying her last lesson of the term with her third-years. The day was a bright one, and Hermione had decided that, as a treat, they would have a fun, practical lesson and take it outside. The students seemed to be enjoying themselves, if their enthusiasm was anything to go by, and unless her eyes were deceiving her, things were about to get a bit more enjoyable for herself, too.

'Good afternoon, Headmaster; have you come to join in?'

Snape came to a stop beside her, the ends of his hair fluttering slightly in the breeze. He'd emerged from the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid and was holding a vial of some unknown substance in his hand.

'I think not, Professor,' he answered, watching the spectacle in front of him with narrowed eyes. 'It's hardly my cup of tea. What are they playing...is it rounders?'

'Yes, it is rounders.'

'May I ask why it is they are playing such an inane game?'

Hermione laughed. 'You don't approve of such frivolity, I take it?'

'I can be described as many things, Professor, and frivolous is not one of them.'

Hermione nodded in agreement. 'Well, we have been studying Muggle sports, and seeing as they are all up-to-date with their work, I decided they might enjoy having a go at something themselves. I thought it better to pick rounders, rather than having them all running about with hockey sticks or pummelling each other in a game of rugby.'

'As if you could have taught them how to play rugby,' Snape observed derisively.

Hermione was affronted on principle. 'I might have played women's rugby in the past, for all you know!'

'Women play rugby?' He looked rather horrified.

'Of course they do, and it's *just* as brutal.'

Snape merely raised his eyebrows.

'I suppose you've made sure there's no cheating?' he asked after a moment, nodding in the direction of the rounders game.

'Of course,' assured Hermione.

Snape gave her a look.

'Well, all right, only after Hodge charmed the bat and whacked the ball all the way into Hogsmeade.'

'Ah.'

They watched silently as one student sent the ball soaring into the air and began tearing around the bases.

'I made a run, Professor!'

Hermione nodded. 'Well done, Miss Bradshaw.'

Hermione then proceeded to alter the little scoreboard beside her.

'Slytherpuff and Gryffinclaw?' snorted Snape.

Hermione smiled. 'Yes, I had to combine them into teams...the winning team gets ten points for each house.'

'I see. By the way, I need the samples of work you selected for the Governors by Sunday at the latest.'

'Oh, yes, of course; you know, I wish I could come to the meeting with you. The suspense will surely kill me.'

'You shall just have to control yourself until I am back, I am afraid, which should be around one o'clock. Normally, the meetings are held at Hogwarts, but changes to the curriculum have to go through the Ministry so it will be held there.'

'Do you think there's much chance they'll vote against it?' Hermione queried.

Snape shrugged. 'I really couldn't say. People are less outspoken, in general, about their views of Muggles since the end of the war, but that doesn't mean they are afraid to air them if they feel they need to.'

'We will just have to wait and see, then.'

'Indeed, Hermione. Indeed.'

Monday dawned to find Hermione a ball of nervous energy. She arose early and got through her usual morning routine in half the time. Therefore, she was extremely grateful when, after breakfast, she was needed to help usher students into the awaiting carriages to be conveyed to the station in Hogsmeade. It gave her something to occupy herself with for half an hour, at least.

Then, as it neared eleven o'clock, she observed Snape leave for the Ministry, and she groaned. She had two hours of tense waiting still to get through until she would know whether she had succeeded with her proposals or not.

Hermione shut herself in her office and pulled her Transfiguration work towards her, hoping that some spell-work would distract her. It didn't and she shoved it away in frustration. She couldn't help but think it would be a blow if they were rejected completely...to Hogwarts, and indeed, to her own pride. It would be *her* personal failure...an irrational way of looking at it, perhaps, but it would be personal for her. Would Snape, and indeed, Minerva, wish they'd got someone else to do it?

Hermione stood up suddenly, aiming to rid herself of her thoughts. It would do no good to worry over it; well, at least until later on, anyway. She looked at her watch and was disgusted to see that she'd only wasted half an hour since Snape left...it seemed to her that time was moving inexorably slowly.

Marking work was definitely off the agenda as it would be a constant reminder; so, what could she do to pass the time? Even the library didn't have its usual appeal. She couldn't pester Minerva for a chat, either, as the older woman had gone to Diagon Alley.

Standing at the window and looking out across the grounds, it was a lovely spring day, she decided. Maybe she should try her luck outside? Perhaps a visit to Hagrid would be a good idea.

Mind made up, Hermione descended through several floors before exiting the castle in the direction of Hagrid's hut. She stood on the step and knocked briskly on the door for a short moment. Nothing...there was no reply, and indeed, as she listened, there was no sound to be heard at all inside.

Hermione frowned in frustration and began walking aimlessly around the grounds, steering clear of the Whomping Willow and the lake, where many of the remaining students were amusing themselves. It really was a lovely day; the sun shone pleasantly, adding warmth that was rare for spring weather in Scotland.

As she came round to the front of the castle, Hermione decided that it might be nice to get a book and sit on the grass for a bit. There was no one around to bother her so she could settle down quite comfortably.

Not a textbook...she'd already tried and failed in that respect, but, maybe a novel would prove more absorbing. Removing her robe, Hermione draped it on the grass and whipped out her wand to Summon a book from her rooms. It wasn't a coincidence that, from her vantage point on the gently sloping grass, Hermione had a clear view of the gates. She would know immediately when Snape returned and would be able to, in a manner of speaking, pounce on him straightaway.

Soon, her book whizzed into her lap and Hermione opened it. It was a book her mother had given to her on her last visit home...a Muggle thriller novel...the kind which her mother devoured on a regular basis.

A swift reader, Hermione was soon sucked into the plot, only stopping now and again to recast a Cushioning charm on the ground beneath her. When Hermione finally did hear the gates swing open and clang shut, it came as a bit of a surprise. A glance at her wrist informed her that Snape was back earlier than he'd said he would be. Was that a good sign or not?

The calm that had descended on her as she'd sat and read evaporated as quickly as it had come. She peered discreetly from under her eyelashes in Snape's direction and saw by the way he had veered off the path that he had noticed her.

He seemed to be taking an age to reach her, though, and in her nervousness, Hermione wondered if she could stop herself from running towards him and demanding to know what had occurred at the meeting. However, she managed to close her book and make a show of casually putting it to one side...a perfect study in nonchalance; well, she hoped so, anyway.

He finally came to a stop beside her, and Hermione could no longer contain herself. 'Well?' she asked hesitantly.

'Well, what?' he answered, with a blank expression.

Hermione huffed and stood up, not wanting to have to keep craning her neck. 'Don't play silly-beggars with me; you know perfectly well what I am on about.'

Snape allowed himself a smirk. 'Very well; all members agreed that improvements should be made to update the current syllabus and had no issues with the ideas you put forward. As for the extra classes...'

Hermione thought she might expire from the anticipation; did he have to be so languid about it?

'Some governors were very particular about dragging their heels over the idea. Indeed, they were rather vociferous about it, but eventually a majority decision was reached to *allow* the classes to go ahead.'

Her mouth dropped open. 'Really?'

Snape nodded, looking faintly amused.

Hermione was suddenly overcome with a swell of happiness, and she wanted to throw her arms around the man next to her, but something held her in check.

However, her excitement needed to have an outlet somewhere, so she grabbed onto his forearm, shook it repeatedly, and exclaimed, 'I am so pleased! I can't believe it!'

'Evidently,' remarked Snape, looking at his arm in disdain.

Hermione laughed aloud; even in the face of such achievement, he was still as characteristically reserved as ever, and it only made Hermione want to embrace him all the more. It was a sobering thought, and she breathed deeply.

'Why don't you join me and tell me all about it?' she offered, a large part of her expecting him to decline.

He looked down at the grass calculatingly before raising his eyes to their surroundings. Hermione had an idea of what was giving him pause.

'There are no students about,' commented Hermione airily as she settled herself back down. 'Most of them are paddling down in the lake.'

Finally, he sat down next her appearing extremely put upon, and Hermione hid a smile.

'What are you doing out here, anyway?' he asked as he shrugged his arms out his robe, letting it spread out on the grass. His legs were stretched out before him, and to Hermione, he seemed a vivid contrast of black and white colours.

'Just felt like enjoying a beautiful day,' Hermione replied, omitting the fact that she'd been driven outside by her anxiety. 'So, was it a really close call, the final decision?'

'No, I don't think so. There were a couple who were affronted, simply on the principle that they saw no point whatsoever in the subject to begin with. They said I was turning into another "Muggle-loving Dumbledore," but generally they were all impressed with your work.'

Hermione flushed deeply. 'I couldn't have done it without your help,' she protested.

'I hardly did anything,' Snape dismissed.

'No, you *only* had to present the idea'

Snape cut her off with a swift glance. 'We could volley this back and forth all day.'

'Probably,' agreed Hermione, and she moved to lie down, feeling unaccountably relieved at their success. 'This means I get to go on a spending spree to replenish the Muggle Studies stock room, doesn't it?'

Snape snorted. "'Spending spree'? I'll want every Sickle accounted for, and if I find a payment to Madam Malkin or Twilfitt and Tattings on the Hogwarts account, there'll be trouble.'

'As if I would do that!' said Hermione, giving his calf an admonishing nudge with her foot. 'You know, it's a real shame Muggle technology doesn't work at Hogwarts. Isn't there any way around it?' She raised herself up on her elbows and looked at him enquiringly.

'Well, the only way without an electricity source is to modify the object with magic.' He turned to her slightly. 'As you know, that type of thing is tightly controlled by the Ministry, so you would have to go through them.'

Hermione sighed. 'It kind of defeats the object by getting them to run on magic, doesn't it? Although, really, I don't think even magic is enough. Take a mobile phone, we might be able to get it to switch on, but there's no way we'd get a signal up here, and the same goes for radios and televisions.' Hermione relaxed back onto the ground again, her thoughts focused on deciding whether it would be worth modifying some Muggle objects.

The sound of the gates opening, and of an accompanying groan beside her, attracted her attention, and Hermione sat up to see who had been the cause of it.

'Did you know Potter was planning on paying a visit?' asked Snape, in a disgruntled voice.

Hermione shook her head. 'No...not at all.'

Harry had spotted them and was making his way briskly across the grass. She could tell that he was a bit thrown to see them sitting there from the way his eyes shifted between herself and Snape.

'Any particular reason for your trespassing, Potter?' questioned Snape calmly.

'Harry, what a pleasant surprise!' put in Hermione with a wide smile.

'Hello, Hermione,' returned Harry. 'I have something I wanted to talk to you about, Snape; I heard you were at the Ministry today, and I hoped to catch you then, but you'd already left.'

'What is it, now?'

'Rita Skeeter's been sniffing around, again.'

Snape cursed under his breath. 'What does that old hag want now?'

Hermione listened to the conversation in confusion.

'Same as before...I told her where to go, but I don't know how much longer she'll accept the brush off. I'm afraid she might start preying on someone else, who might be more easily swayed by a few Galleons.'

Snape sighed. 'Well, there's not a lot I can do until she does actually publish something.'

'She wants to write about you?' asked Hermione.

Harry nodded in disgust. 'She wants to give him the Dumbledore treatment...she even has a title..."Severus Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?".'

Hermione looked at Snape in surprise; he scowled in acknowledgement.

'It's, ah, partly my fault in the first place...' added Harry sheepishly.

'Indeed,' growled Snape.

Hermione knew they were referring to what Harry had revealed to everyone as he'd battled Voldemort for the last time, in the Great Hall.

'She's registered as an Animagus now, isn't she?' The question was rhetorical; Hermione knew for sure that she was.

Harry nodded grimly before changing the subject. 'How did it go at the Ministry then, Hermione?'

Hermione grinned. 'Perfectly! Can you believe it?'

'Of course I can!' laughed Harry. 'Since when do you fail at anything you set your mind to?'

'Well, she has yet to make a sufficient Girding potion,' offered Snape helpfully.

'Severus!' exclaimed Hermione aghast. 'You promised you wouldn't ever mention that!' She felt her cheeks blush slightly at the memory of that disastrous day.

'Oops.'

Hermione huffed, trying to appear more put out than she actually felt.

Harry cleared his throat. 'I'm glad I caught you actually, Hermione. There's something I've, ah, been meaning to speak to you about. I can't now as my lunch break will be over soon, and I need to be back at the Ministry. Can you pop by Grimmauld Place later?'

'Sure,' agreed Hermione, a little surprised at the request.

'See you later, then; Snape,' Harry acknowledged before turning to walk back down to the Apparition point.

A comfortable silence descended between the two of them after Harry departed, and Hermione let her attentions wander to her companion, oddly fascinated by silly little things, like the way the ends of his necktie fluttered in the gentle breeze, or the way his hand sometimes picked absent-mindedly at the grass.

Hermione turned her gaze in the opposite direction, feeling not a little foolish...she was easily fascinated these days, it seemed.

'What's wrong with Carrington?' asked Hermione, referring to the young boy she could see scuttling shiftily towards the main doors of the castle behind them.

The boy was clearly sopping wet.

Snape turned to look, first behind, and then in the direction of the lake from where Carrington had appeared. 'Here comes trouble...Dobbs is a bully; I bet he bloody pushed the poor sod into the lake.'

Hermione grimaced as she noticed a small gang of boys approach. 'You're probably right.'

'I'm going to go and speak to them,' he said as he gathered up his robe. 'I'll see you later.'

He was soon striding off into the castle, and Hermione was left staring into the space he had vacated, wondering how she could go from feeling so happy to all of a sudden being decidedly deflated. She collapsed back onto the grass completely and closed her eyes.

Evidently, she'd lost her mind somewhere down the road.

At six o'clock that evening, Hermione arrived on the doorstep of Grimmauld Place.

'All right, Harry?' asked Hermione brightly, when he opened the door.

'Hello, Hermione; sorry about making you come all the way here,' said Harry as he ushered her in and led her to the kitchen.

'Where's Ginny?'

'Out with a friend,' Harry responded.

Hermione detected a rather shifty note in Harry's tone, and looked at him speculatively as they sat at the table. 'What's this about, Harry?'

Harry avoided her gaze. 'Tea?'

Hermione nodded slowly and wrapped her hands around the warm mug that was shortly handed to her. 'So?' prompted Hermione, somewhat impatiently.

Harry sighed deeply from the opposite side of the table. 'Look, Hermione, *really* hope I'm doing the right thing here, but you are one of my best friends so I can't keep quiet.'

'What, Harry? You're worrying me now.'

Harry appeared to be preparing himself for what he was about to say. Eventually, he opened his mouth. 'It's, well, it's about you and Snape.'

Hermione stared dumbly at Harry for several moments. Of all the things that she'd expected him to say, *that* had featured absolutely nowhere.

Harry looked back evenly at her.

'What,' began Hermione, trying to keep her voice level, 'what exactly is it about Severus and me that you wish to discuss?'

Harry fiddled with adjusting his glasses as he spoke. 'Well, there's nothing going on between you, is there?'

Hermione's mouth dropped open in amazement. 'What is it with everyone asking me this? I don't even know where you are getting this idea! Tell me, do I unconsciously salivate at the mouth when he's near? Or, perhaps you've seen us in some suggestive clinches that, strangely, I am as yet unaware of!'

Harry raised his hands in a gesture of calm. 'Hermione, I didn't mean... I just, I couldn't help noticing today'

'Oh for Merlin's sake, Harry...we are friends; we were just talking!'

'It's not just that,' stated Harry defensively. 'The morning after the party, Ron's girlfriend came down to breakfast, and while we were talking about what a good night it'd been, she casually announced that "Hermione's a dark horse, isn't she? Cosying up to a man twice her age".'

Hermione flushed with fury. 'What a cow! Who is she to cast aspersions?'

'I know, Hermione, believe me, and normally I wouldn't have taken a blind bit of notice, except that I caught the expression on Ginny's face...and it was decidedly pleased. In the end, she told me what you'd talked about.'

Hermione rubbed a hand over her face dejectedly. She should have known Ginny wouldn't be able to keep from blabbing to Harry. 'So, what do you want to tell me, Harry? Are you disgusted? Shocked? Or what?'

Harry was silent for a moment. 'No, you know how I feel about Snape, now. I won't deny that I find it rather unorthodox, but it worries me for a different reason, Hermione.'

'Why?' asked Hermione quietly.

'Has he given you any idea that he... feels the same way?'

Hermione couldn't believe she was having this conversation with Harry, of all people. 'No,' she replied defensively, 'but it's not as if we've ever spoken about it.'

Harry looked at her earnestly. 'I don't want you to get hurt, Hermione. You... you know about Snape and my mother, of course.'

'Of course...who doesn't?' said Hermione tightly.

'Hermione, I never really told you about everything I saw in Snape's memories that night, not the details, anyway. Have you considered that he might *still* be in love with her?'

Hermione felt the blood freeze in her veins. 'I'm not... I don't really' She took a deep breath. 'Do *you* think he still is?'

'He told Dumbledore he'd always love her,' began Harry gently, his voiced tinged with regret. 'Hermione, I saw a completely different man in that Pensieve; everything he ever did for the last twenty years was for her...not for me, Dumbledore, or even himself, but *her*. He consistently fooled Voldemort motivated by her memory, and I don't need to remind you of what his last words were in the Shrieking Shack that night. I just... I don't think it can be ignored.'

Hermione sat, completely frozen at Harry's words.

'After what Ginny told me, I had to say something before it was too late. I care about you, and I don't want to see you unhappy. I know you wouldn't want to be a, well, a replacement for her.'

Hermione aroused herself from her daze and blinked back the tears that pricked at the corners of her eyes. A replacement...did Harry really think that would happen? Was that *all* she was good for?

'It's fine, Harry; I'm glad you told me, like you said, before it was too late. Thank you, I ah, I should be going, though,' choked out Hermione as she pushed back from the kitchen table, and walked as quickly as possible towards the door.

'Hermione, are you all right?'

'Yes, fine. I just need to get back to Hogwarts now.' Her breath hitched as she spoke, and she nearly broke out into a run down the hallway to the front door.

'Hermione, wait'

'Please, Harry, just leave me be.'

Hermione closed the door behind her and rather recklessly Apparated back to Hogwarts. She landed unsteadily and grabbed onto the gates for support, feeling physically sick...and she knew it wasn't from the Apparition.

She let her forehead rest against the cool iron of the gate and closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. What had she got herself into? How could she have let this happen? She'd *known* that Lily Evans had been the love of his life...how could she have let herself believe that she actually had a chance? Harry clearly thought that, in Snape's eyes, she would never compare to his childhood friend.

'Stupid, *stupid* girl,' Hermione repeated to herself.

As soon as she'd realised she was starting to have feelings for him, Hermione knew she should have tried to distance herself, yet she'd actively sought him out and let herself get completely sucked in.

Harry had asked if she had any reason to believe Snape felt the same way. Well, did she? That night at the party, when he'd kissed her hand, had played repeatedly in her mind since, and before this moment she might have interpreted it as a sign. Now, however, Hermione couldn't believe how pathetic she was. So, he'd kissed her hand...as far as romantic overtures went it was hardly a declaration. He'd probably just been grateful for the fact that she'd listened to him talk... for being his *friend*.

Hermione felt the tears prick at her eyes once more, and she stubbornly swiped at them. As she wrenched open the gates, she suddenly felt a bubble of resentment rise up within her. Why did Harry have to bring this up now? She had been so happy this morning, and now, she just felt... defeated.

Breathing a long, shuddering breath, she began walking towards the castle. Harry really did have her best interests at heart, but despite what Harry thought, Hermione knew that it was *too* late. The damage had already been done.

What should she do now? There was no way she could face Snape yet, or anyone else for that matter. Then, a thought struck her; if Harry and Ginny had noticed something between herself and Snape during the brief time they had seen them together, did that mean that half the castle had noticed it, as well? Perhaps, Minerva, or Dumbledore's portrait, were biding their time to have a pitying conversation about how she was wasting her time on a man who would never love anyone else.

Oh well, Harry had arrived there first.

The castle appeared to be deserted, and Hermione was grateful that she met no one as she walked quickly to her rooms. All she wanted was to dive under her bedclothes and stay there.

Once inside, she sat unmoving on her bed for several moments, marvelling at the mess she'd got herself into. What on earth should she do? She'd never been in this position before.

Something caught her eye on her bedside table, and Hermione reached for it...it was a letter from her mother. *Heparents*. Maybe, that was the answer...to put some distance between herself, the castle, and its *occupants*. Without thinking twice, Hermione pulled her trunk across the floor and began tossing clothes, books, and parchments inside it. A stay with her parents would surely do her good. She hadn't formally requested the leave, but it wasn't as if she had any special responsibilities to uphold while the students were away.

Hermione spelled her trunk to shrink, and she shoved it inside her pocket before giving her rooms the once-over to ensure she hadn't forgotten anything. Satisfied, she stepped out into the corridor and made sure her door was completely locked. She would have to stop by her office to retrieve some books, and then, well, she would have to inform someone she was leaving. Hermione knew that technically it should be Snape, but the thought of seeing him made her feel queasy. It would have to be Minerva, then; it was, perhaps, cowardly of her to avoid Snape, and indeed, rather unfair as he hadn't done anything wrong, but Hermione didn't have the energy to wrestle with her conscience.

After a detour to her office, Hermione stopped outside Minerva's rooms, praying to anyone who was listening that the older woman was inside. Hermione did not want to have to look in staff room. Luck was on her side, and the bespectacled woman smiled warmly to see her, readily inviting her in.

'Congratulations, Hermione, on your recent success! I knew you could do it!'

Hermione smiled wanly.

'We will have to have a little celebration after, don't you think?' trilled Minerva, with a wink. She indicated for Hermione to sit, but Hermione remained standing.

'Minerva,' began Hermione, trying to sound as normal as possible, 'I've decided to go to my parents for, ah, for a few days. I'm sorry for the late notice; I hope it's not going to be a problem?'

Minerva shook her head slowly. 'No, that's all right. Are you going now...tonight? Is there something wrong, Hermione? You look very pale.'

Hermione plastered a casual expression on her face. 'I am going now, yes, and everything is fine, I assure you.'

'My dear, are you sure? You don't need to leavenow, do you; it's very sudden. What about our celebration?'

Hermione thought she might break down if Minerva carried on looking at her in that concerned way. 'Really, Minerva, I'm sorry, but I must be off now. I will owl you soon.'

She began backing out of the room, but all of a sudden the fireplace glowed green, and she stared at it in morbid fascination. She knew who was going to step out of it...she should have known it wouldn't be this easy.

'Here's the book you wanted, Minerva.'

'Thank you; now, Severus, maybe you can persuade Hermione, here, to hang on before leaving for her parents.'

Hermione felt herself become hot and cold all at once as the man in question turned to look at her appraisingly.

'I had not realised she was leaving us,' he answered quietly.

Hermione was alarmed to find herself begin to tremble slightly, and she quickly clasped her hands together to mask it.

'I'm sorry, I must go.' To her own ears her voice sounded unsteady, and she opened the door, fighting all her urges to run. Would he follow her? When his voice rang out down the hall a moment later, she had her answer. He called her name and she froze, but did not turn around. She could sense that he was standing only a few paces behind.

'Hermione, you never said you were going. Is anything wrong?'

She couldn't bring herself to speak. What was there to say?

'Did Potter have bad news for you?'

Before she knew what she was doing, Hermione had turned around to face him.

'Professor Snape, it's really none of your business.'

He stared down at her expressionlessly, but Hermione saw his eyes flicker and she immediately wished she could take her words back. He said nothing and whirled around to stalk off back down the corridor, leaving Hermione watching helplessly after him.

Now, she really did feel like being sick. What an utter cow she was to say such a thing to him...she'd probably just selfishly spoiled whatever measure of friendship they'd formed over the past few months.

Her heart heavy, Hermione exited the castle, uncaring that this time a tear did manage to spill down her cheek.

Well done, my girl, she thought ironically, you've actually managed to make yourself feel ten times worse

AN: According to J.K. Rowling, Rita Skeeter did write the book 'Severus Snape: Scoundrel or Saint' after he died.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 8

A week had passed since Hermione had hastily left Hogwarts for her parents' house. As much as she'd thrown herself into marking essays, preparing practice exam papers, and reading for her own exams, her mind was still pretty much occupied with the implications of what Harry had told her. What did it mean for her future at Hogwarts? What if her feelings didn't go away?

Could she spend another year just putting up with it, or indeed, allowing the small hope that lingered inside her still to keep burning? In the interest of self-preservation, should she, perhaps, take more definitive action? It was difficult to know what to do.

Hermione was considering telling all to her mother. As far as her parents knew, there was nothing wrong. She'd explained away her sudden departure from Hogwarts with a tale about needing a change of scene. It had made her feel guilty, hiding things from them, but at the time, she just hadn't wanted to talk about it. Now... well, now she desperately could do with some advice.

Minerva had owled a couple of times, but she hadn't heard from anyone else at Hogwarts, not that she'd expected Snape to owl her after the way she'd left things that night. She still cringed when she thought of what she'd said to him. No matter how embarrassed and mortified she'd felt, there was no excuse.

Several times Hermione had thought about writing and apologising, but she felt it would be better coming from her in person. Hopefully, by the time she returned in three days, she would have her wits about her to not make a complete hash of it.

Harry had also owled, but Hermione had only sent a terse note in reply. She still wasn't sure if she should be grateful to Harry or not. Ginny certainly seemed to think he should have kept his nose out, and Hermione was gratified to hear she'd been angry that he'd gone behind her back like that. At the same time, Hermione couldn't deny that Harry had a point.

A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts, and Hermione sat up from where she had been lying on her bed. The door opened ajar, and her mother's head appeared.

'Love, you've been cooped up in this house all week; your father is working and so I was wondering if you might like to join me for some retail therapy in London?'

Her mother looked at her expectantly, and Hermione didn't have the heart to say no. While shopping wasn't a major passion for Hermione, as it was for some, the thought of spending an afternoon out with her mother was more than agreeable. She was getting rather sick of looking at the same four walls for days on end.

'Sounds good to me, Mum; give me a few minutes to get ready, all right?'

Her mother smiled widely. 'Excellent. See you downstairs in a bit, then.'

The door was pulled shut, and Hermione sat in front of her dressing table. Her hair was looking a bit unruly today, not an unusual occurrence by any standards, but Hermione was not in the mood for tackling it. Instead, she smoothed it back from her face into a simple ponytail...uninspiring maybe, but presentable. Next, she swiped a bit of blusher over her cheeks to give herself a bit of colour. Then, she changed her shirt, grabbed a jacket, and, ensuring she had her wand stowed away, left her bedroom to meet her mother.

Soon enough, they were travelling the relatively quick journey into the centre of London, her mother having driven them to the railway station where they were now ensconced upon the train. It was a change, Hermione realised, to do everything the Muggle way. She could have Apparated both her mother and herself to London, but Hermione was now glad that she hadn't.

Oxford Street was as busy as ever, but the hustle and bustle helped to keep her mind off certain things. As the day wore on, Hermione could honestly say that she was actually enjoying herself. Her mother was looking for a new evening dress to wear to some work event she would be attending along with her husband, and Hermione laughed aloud often as they both purposefully pointed out dresses that would look ridiculous.

Eventually, they found a dress that they both fell in love with, and once bought, Hermione turned to her mother.

'Where now then, Mum?'

'Do you know what? I'd love it if you could take me into Diagon Alley. I haven't been there for ages, and I love looking round there. I expect you have things you need to buy?'

Hermione did need parchment and ink, but the thought of going to Diagon Alley didn't appeal very much. However, Hermione knew her mother enjoyed the place immensely, and she couldn't deny her. She was lucky to have parents who were so understanding of, and indeed, interested in her world.

Hermione gave her a genuine smile. 'Come on, then, Mum...I know how much you love the food in the Leaky Cauldron, too!'

Mrs. Granger laughed. 'Very true, my dear.'

Diagon Alley was as busy as Muggle London, only this time, Hermione could recognise several familiar faces in the crowd.

'Hello, Professor Granger!' rang out as yet another of her students walked past. Hermione greeted them warmly, and she could see her mother was chuffed to bits to get a minute glimpse into her daughter's life as a teacher.

Hermione took her mother into several shops, including the Weasleys' shop to see George; the Apothecary, where Hermione replenished her Potions kit; and then to her favourite, Flourish and Blotts. Her mother, also an avid reader, gravitated towards the wizarding fiction section, while Hermione worked her way around several different aisles of books.

After nearly a quarter of an hour had passed without sign of her mother, Hermione felt she'd better track her down. She didn't like the idea of her wandering around alone when she was clearly a Muggle.

Reaching the fiction section, Hermione was concerned to see her mother wasn't there, so she began inspecting every inch of the shop.

As Hermione rounded the Arithmancy bookshelf and into the Potions aisle, she spotted her mother casually perusing the titles. She was about to call out to her, when she saw the figure at the opposite end, only a small distance from her mother.

Hermione stood unmoving, unable to quite believe the ironic sight of her mother browsing the Potions collection along with Severus Snape. She bit her lip at the sight of him, longing to go and speak to him, but she just couldn't bring herself to. It was easier to pretend she hadn't noticed him. She was turning to go and wait for her mother elsewhere, when the woman herself gave the game away and called out to her.

'There you are, Hermione; come and look at this.'

Hermione fervently wished she had a less unusual name, like Jane or Rebecca or something...Snape surely wouldn't have batted an eyelid at that. As it was, he now was looking right at her. Hermione walked stiffly towards her mother and saw that Snape was putting his book back onto the shelf. It crossed her mind that maybe *he* was simply going to pretend he hadn't seen her.

Her mother seemed to have realised that Hermione was looking at something behind, and she turned.

'Good afternoon,' said Snape quietly.

Hermione managed a smile, hoping it would hide how uncomfortable she felt. 'Mum, this is Professor Snape, the Headmaster of Hogwarts. This is my mother, Liz Granger, Severus.' Her voice faltered slightly over his name, but Hermione hoped it went unnoticed.

'Oh, how lovely to meet you, Professor Snape,' offered Hermione's mother brightly.

Hermione looked at Snape, but was disappointed to see that he was barely acknowledging her.

'Likewise, Mrs Granger; I do hope you will excuse me, but I have important business to attend to.' With a fleeting nod he'd disappeared away from them, and Hermione suddenly felt all of her wretched thoughts from a week ago return.

'Well, I daresay he's a bit brusque, isn't he?' exclaimed her mother, turning to Hermione with raised eyebrows.

Hermione groaned aloud and put her head in her hands.

'What's wrong, love?'

Hermione peered through her fingers at her mother, before sighing and dropping them completely. 'Mum, I'm, ah, thinking of handing in my notice at Hogwarts.'

'You're what?'

Hermione nodded apprehensively.

Her mother stared at her in confusion. 'Why ever for?'

Hermione placed her hand in the crook of her mother's elbow. 'Come, let's go and sit somewhere so we can talk.'

They made for a table in a quiet part of the Leaky Cauldron pub, after ordering a couple of drinks.

'Now, tell me what it is that has been bothering you, Hermione. Does it have something to do with why you decided to come home for Easter? I mean, I thought you loved it at Hogwarts?'

'I do!' Hermione breathed.

'Then, what...is it about this Professor Snape? Has he upset you in some way? I remember you...'

'No, Mum, he's not like that anymore. I've just been so silly and stupid. I wish he was still like how he was when I was a student.'

Hermione avoided her mother's gaze.

'Oh, dear,' her mother gasped, 'you've fallen for him, haven't you? Got a little crush on him? That's nothing to worry about, my love; I think you told me he's a bit dark? Well, we all of us go through a phase where we fall for a bit of rough, when we are young...it will pass!'

Hermione let out a burst of pained laughter. 'He's not my "bit of rough", Mum! It's not some childish obsession I have with him. I think... I think,' Hermione took a deep shuddering breath, 'I *love* him.'

There was an incredulous look upon her mother's face.

'It's so stupid, Mum! So bloody stupid!'

'He does seem a lot older than you.'

'Twenty years,' said Hermione quietly.

'That's a big age difference,' commented Mrs Granger carefully.

'Oh Mum, that's just the tip of the iceberg! Yes, he's twenty years older than me, but he's also my boss, he's my ex-teacher, and to top it all off, he's been in love with the same woman, probably since he was a child, and she's been dead for twenty years!'

Her mother's eyes became wide with shock. 'Good Lord! Yes, I remember now; you told me about it when the War ended.'

'I knew all this at the outset, and *still* I let myself get drawn in. Do you know what the worst of it is, Mum? I really don't think I felt this way about Ron; what is the matter with me?'

'Love, it's not your fault; these things just happen. We can't control it. Is *he* really still in love with this woman? Harry's mother, wasn't it?'

'Harry seems to think so, and I can't see any reason to contradict him. Severus has spoken to me about the War, told me a lot of things that I'd never have expected him to, yet, never once has he made a reference to her, or even said her name aloud. Well, his silence speaks volumes.'

'Wait a minute; wasn't he the one who...' Her mother lowered her voice. 'He *killed* your Headmaster Dumbledore?'

Hermione nodded, a bit awkwardly.

'Hermione, I must say...are you sure you should be getting involved with a man like this?'

'Mum, please, you know he was on our side. What happened between him and Dumbledore is not an issue for me, however much it might be for him.'

'So, this is why you want to resign at Hogwarts, then?'

'Yes, I'm seriously thinking about it. I don't think I can take it being around him, Mum, and how can I expect my feelings to go away if I have to see him every day? I can't do that to myself, can I?'

'No, you cannot; you would only get more and more unhappy. Is there really no chance of him feeling the same way? Harry could be wrong, you know.'

Hermione rubbed her chin tiredly. 'I think about it all the time, Mum; *what if* Harry is wrong? But then I think, *twenty years*...it's a hell of a long time. If nothing changed in Severus' feelings in all that time, why should they now?'

'Can't you ask the man himself? Tell him how you feel?'

'I don't know if I can take that risk, Mum. Not while I have two months left at Hogwarts. It would be unbearable having to face him, and it would make him uncomfortable, too, having to let me down gently. He may even laugh in my face, for all I know.'

Hermione immediately felt uncharitable towards Snape, and she rectified her words. 'No, I don't think he'd really do that. I just, *don't* quite get rid of the small hope inside me, Mum, pathetic as it may be. So, perhaps at the end of term, when I have nothing to lose, I will find the courage to confront him. I'm still going to resign though, soon, as I need to give a few weeks' notice. If there is any chance between us, then I'm sure it will happen regardless of whether I am at Hogwarts, or not.'

Her mother took hold of Hermione's hand and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

'I'll be proud of you whatever you do, love, and so will your father. This Severus would be a fool not to snap you up!'

'Thanks, Mum; I'm glad we talked about it...I'm only sorry I didn't tell you sooner.'

Hermione really was. Talking aloud about it had gone some way to clearing her thoughts and clarifying her priorities and responsibilities. She had two months of teaching left at Hogwarts that included many exams. She would not fail her students, and she would not waste the chance she had been given to do her N.E.W.T.s.

It would hurt to hand in her notice at Hogwarts, and she would face some awkward questions, but it would be final and give her the resolve she needed to keep her mind on the job for the remaining weeks. No more self-pitying thoughts, and no more mooning over someone she couldn't have. It was time to grow up and act accordingly. Maybe then, at the end of the school year, she would talk to Snape and tell him how she felt, and if it were not what he wanted to hear, well then, she would just have to move on.

It would be difficult, but Hermione was nothing if not determined.

At the end of the week, Hermione was back at Hogwarts. The students would be returning later in the afternoon, and the castle still seemed quiet. As she walked to her rooms, she mentally steeled herself for what lay ahead. Patting her pocket, Hermione felt the envelope and stubbornly ignored the butterflies in her stomach. She *would* do it today; there was no putting it off.

Once in her quarters, Hermione took out her trunk and began unpacking her clothes and books. After that task was complete, Hermione told herself to stop prevaricating. She resolutely left her rooms, heading in the direction of the stone gargoyle. When she got there, she realised she didn't know the password.

'Damn,' she muttered to herself. Then again, she wondered if maybe he hadn't bothered to change it while the students were away.

'Flobberworms?'

The gargoyle moved and Hermione, somewhat gratefully, stepped onto the revolving staircase. Now she was getting nervous, but she kept telling herself that it would all be fine. It really would.

She faced the large, oak door, put her game face on, and knocked sharply.

'Come in.'

Hermione entered the office, perhaps spending more time than was strictly necessary to close the door, and stepped up to the desk. Many of the portraits were watching her, and Hermione wished they would go away...it was like sitting in a goldfish bowl sometimes.

Hermione was relieved to see that Dumbledore wasn't there; she didn't want him sticking in his two Sickles. Snape was scratching out something with a quill, and she remained silent until he looked up at her.

'Professor Granger, you've decided to grace us with your presence. What can I do for you?'

She'd expected him to be formal after the way things had been left, but still, it didn't stop her from feeling deeply disappointed. The sarcasm left much to be desired, as well.

'Severus, I, well, firstly I wanted to apologise for the way I spoke to you last time, when I left Hogwarts...'

'There is nothing to apologise for.' He brushed her off with a shrug of his shoulders, as if he could not care less.

'Well, I disagree; I was upset and I didn't mean it.'

He said nothing for a moment, and his expression betrayed nothing, either.

'Is that all?' he said finally.

Hermione blinked at his detachment; maybe this wasn't going to be as difficult as she thought.

'No, I, ah, have something I need to give to you.'

Hermione pulled out the envelope from her robe pocket and handed it to him. It had taken her an age to get right, and, in the end, she had enlisted the help of her mother with the final draft.

He took the missive from her and unceremoniously pulled out the sheet of parchment from within. Hermione watched, on tenterhooks, as his eyes scanned the letter. There was silence for several moments, until he raised his eyes to her once more.

She was alarmed to see the look of anger he was exhibiting.

'What the hell is this?' he asked, in a deadly calm voice.

Hermione swallowed. 'Well, it is my...'

'I know what it is! Why are you giving it to me?'

Hermione could not hold his fierce gaze for long. 'It's all explained in the letter.'

'So, you are saying that you feel your current position is not right for you? That is the reason you are opting for?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes.'

She took an involuntary step back when he suddenly stood up and thrust out the parchment towards her. 'This,' he hissed, 'is complete and utter bollocks!'

Hermione's eyes widened as the parchment began to magically disintegrate before her eyes. 'I can just write another one,' she said, unsure what to make of his obvious anger.

'Oh, will that one be full of rubbish, too? You led Minerva to believe you would be continuing here!'

Hermione suppressed a flinch at the accusation in his tone. She should have known those words would come back to haunt her.

'I'm sorry, but I never committed myself to anything, and I am well within my rights to change my mind.'

'You won't tell me what made you change your mind?'

For the first time, Hermione detected something other than indifference or anger in his tone, and it nearly made her want to tell him everything, but she just couldn't bring herself to.

'There's nothing to tell,' she forced out, as convincingly as possible.

'Very well,' he answered shortly, and sat behind his desk once more.

Hermione couldn't stand to leave things stand as they were.

'Severus, please can we...'

He interrupted her swiftly. 'I have things to do, *Professor*, you know where the door is.'

Hermione started at the venom he infused into that one word, all at once implying that she was not worthy of the title, and indeed, that he was no longer willing to address her informally. Hermione turned on her heel, believing it better to leave the matter for now. Maybe, in time, things would improve, but she wouldn't be holding her breath.

After leaving the tower, she walked slowly through the hallways feeling decidedly down in the dumps.

'Hermione! May I speak with you?'

Hermione turned in surprise to see Dumbledore staring out of a portrait to her immediate left. 'Professor, of course, how can I help?'

'I'm glad I caught up with you, my dear. You see, I happened to catch the majority of your conversation with Severus, just then.'

Hermione nodded in resignation.

'Now, I'm not going to pry...I know you must have your reasons for leaving, and so I'll leave that up to you. What I will say though, is, just be patient with Severus, and he will come round eventually. He's disappointed that you are going; I can tell.'

So am I, thought Hermione, but she was unsure of Dumbledore's words. 'Do you think so? I think I've hurt him, sir, and he won't want to be friends with me now.' Was it presumptuous of her to think she had the ability to hurt him?

'Just don't give up, Hermione, that is all I can say.'

Hermione smiled gently in thanks, and carried on sombrely to her quarters.

Later on, there were a series of knocks at her door, and Hermione had a feeling she knew who it was going to be. Minerva had probably just found out about her quitting.

When she opened the door, Hermione could see that she had been right.

'Hermione, Dumbledore just told me you've handed in your notice!' The older woman looked extremely dismayed.

She motioned for her to come in and sit down. 'I'm sorry, Minerva. I know it must come as a surprise, but it is for the best,' placated Hermione.

'Why?' Minerva spluttered.

'Things have changed recently...I just can't stay.' At Minerva's look of protest, Hermione carried on. 'I promise I will tell you everything, Minerva, in time, though, not tonight; I've had a hellish day. Severus is very angry with me.'

'Hermione, we'll never find someone as committed as you to teach Muggle Studies.'

Hermione suddenly felt extremely guilty. 'Of course you will.'

Minerva remained unconvinced. 'Well, there is nothing I can do to help change your mind?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Hermione could see Minerva was rather upset that she would be going, and she felt awful. She would explain everything to her soon; Minerva deserved that much of her.

'Minerva, I hope you don't think I am ungrateful for the chance you and Severus gave me here.'

Minerva shook her head and gave a small smile. 'You know you can always talk to me about anything, my dear?'

Hermione nodded humbly. 'I know, and I will, I just need some time.'

During the next few weeks, Hermione became extremely busy with exam preparation. Her load of marking increased dramatically as she set practice exam questions and essays for all her classes. She aimed to get them marked and corrected as quickly as possible, so the students could revise from them.

She was particularly stressed out with her fifth and seventh-year classes, as she worried whether she had prepared them thoroughly enough for their external exams. She hoped that they would all get good O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, but only time would tell.

Trying to keep up with her own work had become more and more difficult, especially for Potions, but that was not only due to lack of time. Snape had not asked her to join him in his lab since the beginning of the summer term, and Hermione had not asked him. Luckily, Horace Slughorn had offered to supervise some of her attempts as he was finding himself more and more confined to his classroom with marking.

Relations between herself and Snape, though, had pretty much evaporated. He never spoke to her unless it was an absolute must, and sometimes he appeared to even look right through her, as if she didn't even exist. She was sure the rest of the staff had noticed, well, certainly Minerva had.

As much as it pained her, there wasn't much she could do. He ignored or brushed off impatiently any attempt she made at building a bridge between them. However, she couldn't let it worry her too much; she had a job to do and she was going to do it well.

When the exam period did finally roll around, Hermione found she was more nervous about her students' exams than her own. How on earth would she be able to wait until August when the results were published?

Her first N.E.W.T exam, on a Friday afternoon, was her Potions practical, and it was probably the one she dreaded most. Thankfully, Ginny had owed telling her to meet her in the Three Broomsticks once it had finished, and Hermione had eagerly accepted...it was something she could finally look forward to.

Ginny had already bought her a glass of wine by the time Hermione made it into the pub on Friday afternoon.

'I know it's early, but I thought you might need it,' explained Ginny.

Hermione sipped it gratefully...she did need it.

'How did the exam go?'

'All right...well, sort of,' responded Hermione. 'To be honest, it started off as a bit of a nightmare.'

Ginny looked concernedly at her from across the table. 'How so?'

Hermione wondered if she should bring it up, but Ginny wouldn't laugh at her. 'Well, we had to make a Girding potion, and it just reminded me of the time I tried to brew it with *him*...it was a complete disaster then, but it amused him greatly. It just hit me again, right at that moment, what a mess I'd made of things, and what I'd lost. Pathetic, aren't I?'

'Of course not,' said Ginny earnestly. 'Still not talking to you, is he?'

'No,' replied Hermione grimly.

Ginny contemplated her drink for several moments, before looking at Hermione with a meaningful expression.

'Do you ever wonder, Hermione, why it is that he is so pissed off about your leaving Hogwarts? This is what it boils down to, isn't it? He's acting like an arse because you handed in your notice...well, clearly he doesn't *want* you to leave.'

'Yes, but how do I know whether that is because he can't be bothered to look for a replacement, or because he actually enjoys my company, friendship, or whatever? Maybe he just feels that I've thrown the opportunity he gave me back in his face, and that I don't deserve his consideration anymore. You know how aloof and difficult to please he can be. Maybe the bottom line is that, actually, he believes I have thrown his friendship back in his face. He knows there's more to my resignation than me saying I'm not suited to an extended teaching stint.'

Ginny sipped at her pumpkin juice. 'Well, there's only one thing for it, Hermione; you must tell him. I know you thought I was crazy when I mentioned it weeks ago at the party, but things have progressed a lot since then. Otherwise, you'll always wonder about what might-have-been.'

'You're right; I've been thinking the same myself. Once the exams are over, I'm going to do it. I don't want to; I know I'll make an arse of myself, but I have to try.'

'Rather you than me,' said Ginny, biting her lip.

'Oh, thanks, Gin!' They both laughed heartily for several moments.

'By the way, I *won't* be telling Harry about any of this! You don't need him sticking his oar in again!'

Hermione smiled charitably. 'He meant well, Gin, and besides, it's better that I know now and not further down the line.'

'If you say so.'

'I do. So, how are the wedding plans coming along, then? Only three months till the big day.'

'My mother is driving me batty!' Ginny happily launched into a lengthy exposition on the trials and tribulations of wedding planning, and Hermione listened, greatly amused.

They parted when it became time for Hermione to return to Hogwarts for dinner, and as she walked from Hogsmeade, Hermione was pleased to realise that her spirits felt lighter than they had in a while.

It wasn't to last, however. When she entered the Entrance Hall, Snape was standing there with an unfamiliar woman.

'Thank you, Headmaster; I will look forward to your owl.'

The woman breezed past Hermione and out of the doors without making eye contact, but Hermione could see that she looked a good few years older than herself. Snape was watching her, and before Hermione could stop herself, she had blurted out, 'Who was that?'

The calculating expression on his face caused Hermione to wonder if he was going to tell her to mind her own business.

'I was interviewing her as a potential replacement...*for you*.' He swiftly turned on his heel and began up the marble staircase.

Hermione swallowed down the hurt she felt at the disregard in his tone. 'Severus, please, why can't we just be friends?'

He froze halfway up the stairs, before turning and coming back down to stand in front of her.

'Friends?' he whispered coldly. 'It's funny that out of the two of us, it should be *you* that doesn't know the meaning of the word.'

Hermione felt her face crumple and she quickly turned around to leave by the main doors. She didn't have to listen to his spiteful comments, and she would be damned before she let him see that he'd upset her. She'd had enough of him treating her like dirt just because she had the temerity to do something he didn't like.

She passed through the doors, furiously wishing they were smaller so she could slam one of them in his face.

Now that was a satisfying thought.

A/N: Thanks to astopperindeath for beta-ing this :)

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 9

Hermione, eager to return to all things academic, accepts a teaching post at Hogwarts. Her love of learning opens her eyes to many things, including what it means to truly love someone.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

AN: This chapter begins where the last left off.

Chapter 9

Hermione flew down the steps and moved blindly around the perimeter of the castle, uncaring of where she was going, just as long as it was away from him. How dare he speak to her like that? Was this how her year at Hogwarts was going to end...epitomised by bad feelings and discord?

Cringing when she heard footsteps behind her, she furiously wiped her eyes, but refused to turn around.

Bugger off, she pleaded silently.

'You are determined not to tell me why you are leaving?' She heard his voice from some distance behind her.

'Just... Please leave me alone.' How could she ever tell him when he wouldn't even speak to her with civility?

'I... Look, I have been going mad wondering about it.'

'There's nothing to tell,' she croaked out.

'Do you think I was born yesterday? After everything I've shared with you, you won't tell me this simple thing?'

Hermione was filled suddenly with indecision.

'Very well, then, there is nothing left to say.'

Hermione heard him step away, but then he stopped.

'Actually, no, I will not leave this. I demand to know why you feel you can just swan off without so much as a by-your-leave! You will tell me!'

Hermione turned slightly in anger. 'You can't just *demand* to know. Or were you planning on forcing it out of me with Legilimency?'

'Oh, it's good to know how well you know me,' he spat back bitterly. 'Perhaps you just don't want to admit what I've known all along...that you think yourself above teaching; well, you've completed the initial challenge, and now can you move on!'

Hermione was flabbergasted. 'Well, it's good to know how well you know *me*.' It made her unbelievably sad that he would think so little of her. 'It's *all your* fault, anyway!' She winced.

'My fault?'

'No, I... ' As Hermione desperately tried to pull herself together, she failed to hear him approach. It was only when he heaved a defeated sigh that she realised he was directly behind her.

'I've made you cry...that *is* my fault.' His voice was soft and regretful, but Hermione, still feeling the sting of his earlier words, became stubborn.

'I'm not crying.' It wasn't particularly convincing.

'I don't like to see you cry, Hermione, especially when you are wasting your tears over me.'

This time, something in his words resonated with Hermione, and she stilled. Finding the courage to finally face him fully, she turned, uncaring that her face was probably marred with tear tracks. He stood watching her, but his expression was softer and his eyes less cold.

'You haven't called me Hermione in a long while.'

He shook his head briefly. 'No, indeed, I have not.'

More tears began to fall, and Hermione looked away as she inelegantly wiped at them with her sleeve. She felt ridiculous. 'I'm sorry, Severus.'

He handed her a handkerchief and she accepted it gratefully. 'Sorry...what for?' he asked calmly.

Hermione shrugged. 'For everything,' she said in a small voice. 'For blubbing like a fool right now; for spoiling things; for making you think I didn't appreciate your friendship; for acting like a stupid, immature girl...the very type you probably detest!'

Why the hell couldn't she stop crying? Hermione was getting furious with herself. What a red, blotchy state her face must be in!

'My behaviour has hardly been exemplary, has it?'

Hermione gave him a watery smile in response. The warmth that she had become accustomed to seeing in his features showed signs of returning, and it eased the pain inside her somewhat to see it. She reached out to touch his arm, but ended up shyly plucking at his sleeve.

'I've missed you, Severus, this past month or so.' Her voice still retained its edge of sadness, but Hermione was pleased it remained steady.

'You have?' he asked in quiet surprise.

'Of course,' she answered, unreservedly.

'Will you stop those tears?' he questioned roughly, but not unkindly, and Hermione could sense he was a little embarrassed at her admission. She didn't mind.

'I can't seem to,' shrugged Hermione helplessly.

'Maybe,' he began, a trifle awkward, 'maybe, I can help.'

He moved closer still and completely surprised Hermione by reaching out an arm to encompass her shoulders. She hardly dared to breathe as he guided her head to rest on his chest. Her arms automatically came up around his back, and she felt her body relax perceptibly.

'This is the appropriate action in such situations, is it not?' he murmured into her hair.

Hermione felt on fire at the sensations she felt at being in his arms...hearing his heart beat, feeling his voice rumble from within his chest, the occasional tickle of the ends of his hair on her forehead...it was strangely intoxicating, and Hermione could have quite happily stood there all night.

'Why do you think you have spoiled things, Hermione? It is my fault; I should have just accepted your reason for leaving...you owe me nothing, and I should respect your decision. I apologise for my words earlier; I can only say that I thought we, that is...well, it doesn't matter what I thought.'

Hermione opened her eyes and knew instinctively that this was it. Regardless of whether she was ready, she could not go back, after all this, and deny it was anything. Her heart began to pound painfully with anticipation, and she stepped back from his embrace. His arms fell away and he watched her keenly.

'We both know there is more to it, Severus, and I can see why you would feel disappointed that I have not shown you the same confidence as you have shown me when it comes to our friendship. Maybe I've been a bit silly, and a bit rash, but I think, though, you will understand my reticence, shortly.'

She opened her mouth a couple of times and nothing came out.

'Hermione, please, I understand'

Just do it, Hermione, she told herself.

'It's because of you, Severus,' she blurted out suddenly.

'I'm sorry?' he exclaimed in confusion. 'So *it is* my fault? What have I done?'

Hermione began to tremble at what she was about to reveal. 'Nothing, Severus, you did nothing... except make it virtually impossible for me to be around you, with the knowledge that I,' she faltered and breathed deeply, 'that I could never be... in there.' Hermione qualified her words by reaching out and placing her hand over his heart.

She kept her gaze trained on her hand, unwilling to see what his reaction was. Hermione felt herself flush when he did nothing; was he trying to work out his best escape route? How to let her down gently? Maybe, even, how to quell his laughter?

Now rather embarrassed, Hermione thought it best to make things easier and just go. However, when she moved her hand away, his own came up to clasp hers tightly, and she looked at him in surprise. He looked vaguely bewildered.

'Who says you aren't already?' His voice was gruff and sincere, but Hermione found her doubts didn't go away. She removed her hand and looked away over the grounds.

'Don't tease me, Severus, why would you care about me? I'm young, not especially pretty'

'Ah, excuse me,' he interrupted briskly, 'I think it is I who should have the monopoly on self-doubt and low self-esteem. You are young, but I am old~~you~~ are beautiful; I certainly am not. You are pleasant and kind, whereas I am moody, *unpleasant*, and most importantly, I have a hideous past. Perhaps then, it is *you* that dares to tease me?'

Hermione smiled gently. 'Of course not...you don't give yourself enough credit. I care about you~~because~~ of those things...not even in spite of them.'

His gaze dropped to the ground for a moment before he smirked at her. 'I'm not sure what that says about you.'

Hermione chuckled wanly. 'Me neither.'

Unconsciously, her expression fell as she remembered the crux of the matter.

'What is it?'

She plucked at her robe and cleared her throat. 'Harry said, well, I've wondered too, about Lily...' She trailed off at the shadow that passed over his face. Hermione looked at her hands fearfully. Would he now admit, even after all the things he'd just said, that she could only hope to be second best?

'This is what you have been fretting about?' Hermione shivered as he stepped forward and lifted a hand to her hair. 'Don't compare yourself to her, Hermione, because I don't. Look at me...I'm not sure what has become of me, recently. You know, I'm sure you bewitched me that day, many months ago, when you first arrived in my office.'

Hermione blushed. 'Don't be silly.'

'It's true.' He let out a long breath and his face took on a rather bleak turn as he shook his head, 'I'm no good at this, Hermione; I have little enough experience of such situations. I'm afraid that I won't be able to be what you want me to be...you deserve someone less... *damaged*. For your own good, I should send you away, but I'm finding it exceedingly difficult not to be selfish. Why do you think I hated the fact that you wanted to leave? I suppose, what I am getting at, in my own, *woefully* inadequate way, is that, well, that you....' He closed his eyes briefly in frustration. 'My heart is entirely yours, if you will have it.'

His hand moved down her hair to the back of her head, and he leant forward to gently press his lips against hers. It lasted for only a few seconds before he pulled back.

Hermione had to force herself to breathe. She opened her eyes to find him surveying her apprehensively. 'I wouldn't call that inadequate.' A whispered reply was all she could manage.

The corners of his eyes crinkled slightly, and suddenly Hermione felt like a fire had been lit underneath her...she stepped close to him and lifted a hand to play with the buttons on his waistcoat.

'Severus, don't make it any more complicated than it has to be. I only want you to be yourself, because the simple fact is, well, that I love you, so there.'

She sent him a defiant look as she raised her hands to his shoulders and pressed a patient kiss to his cheek.

'Poor, deluded girl,' he said softly, after a time. 'You actually mean it.'

He gently manoeuvred her body flush against his and immediately sought out her lips, teasing her with several enticingly short kisses. Hermione was embarrassed to hear herself let out a pitiful whimper of delight. Finally, he allowed his lips to linger, and Hermione took the opportunity to deepen their embrace. The feel of his mouth responding to hers sent exhilaration coursing through Hermione's body that she wasn't sure she'd ever felt before. She became utterly oblivious to anything else...the whole school could have been watching them, and she wouldn't care.

When it became increasingly imperative for Hermione to breathe, she regretfully parted from him. Lowering herself from her tiptoes, Hermione sagged against his body burying her head in his chest in a mixture of elation and infinite relief. He tightened his arms about her waist.

'Does this mean you will stay at Hogwarts, after all, with me?' Even now, he still had an edge of uncertainty.

Hermione nodded vigorously. 'I would like nothing more, especially if I can have my job back.'

Snape chuckled. 'I think we can come to some arrangement.'

Hermione gave him a grateful squeeze before stepping back from him with a dazed smile. 'You know, I think I could do with a sit down. I can't quite believe this is happening, can you?'

'No,' he snorted in disbelief, 'and if anyone has witnessed this nauseating display, my dear, there will be trouble.'

'Promise?' she replied cheekily.

'Ah! I can see I'll have my work cut out with you.'

Hermione smiled contemplatively. 'You know, not two hours ago I was pouring out my woes to Ginny Weasley, in the pub, and now...' She broke off. 'Well, I couldn't have hoped for anything better...'

He put a hand on her back. 'Come, I know of somewhere we can sit. I can tell you have more questions.'

He guided her a short distance around the castle, until they came to a low wall bordering one of the courtyards. Hermione sat down and linked her arm through that of the man's next to her. They said nothing for a minute or two, and Hermione was happy to sit in silence and simply absorb what was happening between them. It was Snape who broke the silence.

'You mentioned something just now about Potter. What did he have to do with anything?'

'Ah,' sighed Hermione, 'you're not going to like this, but it was Harry who told me you might be still in love with his mother. He found out I had feelings for you, you see, and he felt he ought to warn me.'

'That's why you bloody took off at Easter, wasn't it...because of Potter?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'What, pray tell, makes you think Potter would know how I feel? You should have just asked me.'

'It was hardly an unreasonable assumption for him to make, was it? I didn't have the courage to just ask you straight out...I didn't know how you would react. You've never mentioned her to me, Severus.'

Hermione noticed him frowning deeply.

'I suppose you are right.' He didn't say anything for a few moments, and Hermione thought it was all he was going to say on the subject, but he surprised her with his next

quiet words. 'I did love her, of course I did, but after that night in the Shrieking Shack, the thought of spending another twenty years pining after something I can now see was never really there in the first place, well, it wasn't attractive. It helped that I no longer felt obliged to protect Potter...it was all over, finished, and I had to let it go. Easier said than done, of course, well, until you came along, that is. Then, I wondered if I was falling into the same trap, again.'

'Why?' Hermione immediately asked, suddenly afraid.

'I could hardly believe you would ever feel the same way, and so I thought, with infinite irony, that I'd be destined to another twenty years of misery over someone else.'

'I'm not a... replacement, then?' she questioned tentatively.

He glared at her suddenly. 'Just what the bloody hell was Potter telling you? And what do you take me for?' He made an effort to relax and patted her hand. 'Under the circumstances I will make an allowance for your appalling lack of judgement. The only similarities you share are intelligence and Muggle heritage...observations I could make about numerous other witches. Wait until I see Potter; I'll have a few choice words for him!'

Hermione, relieved, placed her free hand on the arm she had already trapped within hers. She let it travel down the material of his robe until it reached his hand, and began playing with his fingers...even that sent a thrill through her.

'You will *thank* Harry, when you next see him,' she stated, and at his disbelieving look, elaborated. 'Well, his intentions were honourable, though poorly executed. However, you said yourself you couldn't believe I would feel the same way about you, and surprise, I couldn't believe you would feel the same either. How long would we have dithered around each other before one of us plucked up enough courage to talk about it? At least Harry forced us into action.'

'I suppose I can't argue with that logic.'

'Though, I think I might have handled the situation a bit better,' Hermione mused.

'Isn't that the whole point of these kinds of developments...that they are not handled well, until the end?'

Hermione smiled gratefully and nodded; a thought struck her. 'It won't be an issue will it, us being together at Hogwarts?'

'No, as long as we don't do anything that can be construed as unprofessional. People will probably talk, and not only because we are colleagues. I can just imagine some of the tosh the *Daily Prophet* is going to come out with.'

'Perhaps we should try and keep it under wraps until the end of term; otherwise we won't get any peace.'

'A wise idea,' he agreed. Hermione smiled to herself; she liked the idea of keeping a secret.

'People will be wondering why we are not at dinner,' she commented sometime later.

'Minerva, especially, will be beside herself with curiosity,' acknowledged Snape. 'Do you care?'

'No,' she laughed. 'No, I don't.'

'Nor me.'

'Good!' said Hermione brightly as she jumped to her feet to face him.

'What are you doing now?'

'Move your legs,' she demanded imperiously, feeling bold. 'I want to kiss you.' Aiming to capitalise on the height advantage she was afforded by the fact he was sitting down, Hermione insinuated herself between his knees.

'I haven't given you permission,' he said sternly.

'Don't be insufferable...I don't need permission.' She curled one arm about his neck and mimicked his gesture from earlier by brushing the hair away from his face with her other hand. For a moment she simply studied his face, fondly. How long had she wanted to do this? How long had she been afraid that she never would? He looked directly at her for a time, and it heartened Hermione to see the warmth in his eyes.

Soon, however, he blinked and lowered his gaze, as if discomforted by her appraisal.

'A man could go mad from the anticipation here,' he complained, drawing her from her contemplation.

'Sorry,' she offered with a wide smile, and obligingly fulfilled her original mission. The kiss began languidly, and the feel of his thumb gently stroking her cheek resonated in an almost weakening of her knees. Snape seemed to realise the effect he was having on her and gave a throaty chuckle.

She suddenly wished he wasn't sitting down...she wanted to press herself to him and infuse how much he meant to her in one kiss. She wasn't sure quite how it happened, maybe she shouldn't have tried getting on his lap, but in her enthusiasm she almost toppled them both backwards off the wall. This kiss broke as he struggled to regain his balance, still supporting her weight.

He eyed her warily. 'Is all this going to turn out to be a very elaborate attempt to kill me? I had a suspicion you'd been coveting my job.'

Hermione laughed. 'Sorry...I got a bit carried away.'

'Indeed,' he replied dryly. 'I can just see you explaining to Poppy how I managed to fall off a two-foot high wall and crack my head open.'

Hermione got up from where she was half-sitting, half-leaning against him. 'Well, it would have been your own fault, you know.'

He stood and, wrapping his arms around her waist in a strong grip, pulled her up with him. Hermione gave a startled noise as her feet left the ground a few inches. He kissed her swiftly on the mouth before dumping her unceremoniously back on her feet.

'That's enough of that for now; otherwise things really will get *unprofessional*.' Hermione swallowed involuntarily at the intensity of his expression. She was quite sure no one had ever looked at her like that before.

She managed a dumb nod.

'We'd better go inside before the hall starts to empty and whatever remains of my forbidding reputation is shot to pieces.'

They walked back in the direction of the main doors, and Hermione sought to get her breathing under control. As they rounded one of the castle walls, Hermione immediately saw Minerva McGonagall standing on the steps, scanning the grounds.

'There you are!' she cried when she noticed them.

Hermione plastered a neutral expression on her face, but was sure it was very pathetic.

'What can we do for you, Minerva?' asked Snape calmly.

'Where the devil were you at dinner, Severus? You never said you weren't going to be there.'

Hermione's mind went blank, and she looked to the man beside her, in the hope that he had retained his wits.

'Minerva, Professor Granger and I simply lost track of time. You see, I have managed, by using my hitherto untapped powers of persuasion, to convince our Hermione here to revoke her notice and stay at Hogwarts.'

Minerva looked blankly at them.

'I can see you are surprised, Minerva,' continued Snape, and Hermione could tell he was enjoying himself. 'Well, we discussed the possibility of her receiving, shall we say, some ah, *extra* benefits in her job, and so between the two of us, I'd say we managed to bring the matter to a mutually satisfying conclusion, in fact, very satisfying indeed.'

Hermione felt the heat in her cheeks immediately flare up at his brazen insinuations. She prayed that Minerva would not notice her embarrassment.

'What are you on about, Severus...extra benefits? Do you mean a pay rise?'

'If you say so; after all, she will have a bigger workload next year.'

Minerva just gave him another odd glance before turning to Hermione. 'I'm so happy to hear you are staying, my dear.'

Hermione smiled. 'Thank you, I'm glad to be staying.'

As soon as the older woman had returned back up the steps and into the Entrance Hall, Hermione turned to Snape.

'I can't believe you did that!'

'What?' he said innocently. 'She had no idea what I was talking about.'

Hermione looked at him slyly as they ascended the steps. 'Are these "extra benefits" going in my contract?'

He smirked. 'I'm sure I can put an addendum in there somewhere. The Ministry will understand the need for such measures.'

'Undoubtedly. So, when do I get to sample your "powers of persuasion" again?' She pointedly looked at his lips.

'All in good time, my dear. All in good time.'

Hermione gave him an affectionate smile as they entered the Entrance Hall. There were several students milling about, and he moved slightly to create an appropriate distance between them. Hermione didn't mind; she would hunt him down later and have him all to herself.

More pressingly, however, she had to work out how to refrain from running about the castle screaming in jubilation.

In the end, it was the prospect of a one-way ticket to St. Mungo's that held her in check.

Three Months Later

Hermione stepped out of her bathroom in her nightdress and dressing gown, towel-drying her hair after intensively washing it with copious amounts of Sleekeazy's. A snap of a newspaper drew her attention, and she turned to the other occupant in the room.

'Still here, Severus?'

'Yes,' he said flatly.

Hermione could tell he had a bee in his bonnet about something, and she stilled in her task to perch on the arm of his chair.

'What's wrong?'

He lowered his newspaper. 'Remind me again why I agreed to this stupid wedding being held here? The thought of all those Weasleys, Lavender bloody Brown, Neville Longbottom...I could go on...all in the same room gives me a headache just thinking about it.'

Hermione wasn't fazed by his grumpiness. 'You agreed because I asked you.'

He looked at her appraisingly then. 'Because *you* asked me?'

'You deny it?'

'I do!'

'So, you're saying that, at the time, you *didn't* want to secretly oblige my every whim?' she teased.

'Precisely.'

'Liar.'

He laughed. 'Fine! I can't deny I saw an opportunity and took it.'

'Well, I thank your opportunistic nature.'

He yanked her down into his lap. 'I can think of a better way you can thank me.'

'Certainly not!' Hermione slapped her towel at him and got up before he could react. 'Ginny will be here any moment, and unless you have a particular wish for Molly Weasley to see you starkers, I suggest you leave.'

He stood up in resignation. 'All right, I'll go, then.'

Hermione leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. 'I'll see you after the service. Oh, and make sure you wear your dark purple robe...it'll complement my dress,' she added, tongue firmly in cheek. Really, she just liked the way he looked in it. He left, grumbling all the while about the indignity of being ordered about.

Hermione smiled to herself and resumed the task of drying her hair. Their relationship was going well; he was still difficult and moody at times, but she detected a change in him, at least in their own interactions, that warmed her.

He'd taken to spending most nights in her rooms, and she was grateful not to have to contend with the prying, twinkling eyes of the portraits in his office that she was made to suffer when leaving his. Hermione was unsure what would happen once term began. The Headmaster of Hogwarts could hardly be seen to be shacking up with one of the teachers. Not that their relationship wasn't common knowledge, but still, certain propriety had to be maintained if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Minerva had been the first to find out about them. While they were not as careless to start snogging in the corridors, where anyone might see them, they were a bit more reckless where there were no students. It had been immediately noticeable in the staff room when they had started sitting and talking together once more, following that period of discord.

Minerva had seemed suspicious then, but in the end, it had been Hermione's poor dissembling skills that let the cat out of the bag. She had been in her rooms, conversing with Minerva, when the older woman had casually pointed to a piece of black material, peeking out from behind a cushion on the settee.

'Oh, dear me, look...it's Severus' cravat,' she'd said, with a deceptive flippancy to her tone.

Hermione had only been glad it was nothing more risqué. But the occurrence had still thrown her, and Minerva had seen the truth written all over her face before she could devise a tall tale about why she should have his cravat. She probably could have even denied it was his, but Hermione decided to tell her exactly what was going on. Minerva had been pleasantly surprised to have her suspicions actually confirmed, and was happy for the both of them.

It wasn't long after that they decided they might as well start telling people...school was nearly over after all. Dumbledore had twinkled in pleasure; her mother had been ecstatic for her, although her father had some reservations, well, more than some, in fact. Ginny had also been extremely pleased, and telling her had involved a lot of girly squealing; Harry was apologetic for being entirely wrong in his assumptions, and Ron, well, he thought her completely mental. He seemed rather put-out by the fact that she couldn't be happy with him, yet she could with "that git." She knew Severus took inordinate pleasure from it.

It hadn't ended there, though. As they'd predicted, they'd warranted several mentions in the gossip columns of the *Daily Prophet*, much to both their consternation. Generally, most of it had been favourable, except for the odd dubious insinuation from some. Hermione had easily ignored it, but she'd had to persuade Snape not to get riled up.

The N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. results had been published at the end of July, and Hermione had been overjoyed to see that the majority of her students had achieved an E or above. There had been a particular cluster of O's for her N.E.W.T. students, and it heartened her to see concrete proof that she was doing something right as a teacher.

Her own N.E.W.T. results had been excellent, although seeing the list of O's didn't fill her with over-whelming joy as it once would have done, but she felt a sense of finally having completed what she'd begun working for, nearly ten years ago. She did allow herself to feel a little pride at her Potions mark. In fact, she'd thrust it under Snape's nose as soon as she'd seen him.

'Do you know,' she'd said, 'this O is because of you.'

He'd looked at her with his usual deadpan expression. 'I'm honoured, but my exemplary teaching skills can't take all the credit.'

Hermione had laughed genially. 'They can take some, but no...do you remember those few weeks, when you were a complete bastard to me?'

He'd huffed at her as if he hadn't wanted to be reminded. 'I wasn't a bastard...' he muttered grimly.

'I had to brew an endurance potion...the Girding potion...for the practical, and you recall the spectacular mess I made of my first attempt? When the cauldron exploded and contaminated your jar of flobberworms, so that they began slithering around the room at ten times their normal speed? Well, I started to panic, but then I thought of you, and decided I bloody well wanted to prove to you I could do it...I was determined to succeed. I don't think I could have brewed it any better, so thank you!' She'd given him a kiss on the cheek for good measure.

'It's the first time I've ever been thanked for being a bastard.'

Hermione had laughed easily.

A knock on the door attracted her attention away from her thoughts, and in came Ginny, armed with bags and two covered dresses floating behind her.

'Just saw Severus in the corridor; he doesn't look very pleased,' observed Ginny.

'I just had to send him away.'

'Oh,' laughed Ginny. 'Hey, guess what, Hermione?'

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

'I'm getting married today!'

The service took place in the Great Hall...Harry had been attracted to the symmetry of marrying in the place where Voldemort had fallen. Hermione thought Ginny looked wonderful in her wedding dress, and in her own bridesmaid dress, Hermione felt a different confidence in her looks. Of course, there was only one person's opinion she cared about, and she hadn't had chance to speak with him yet.

When the service itself was over, they went outside for photographs while the hall was prepared for the reception. It wasn't until after the dancing had begun that Hermione was free of her duties and able to seek out her elusive other half. She found him downing a measure of Firewhisky at the makeshift bar, and looking decidedly furious, Hermione was dismayed to see.

'Severus, what on earth is the matter?' She touched his arm lightly.

'That bloody friend of yours, yes, the ginger one, thought I should know that in Muggle weddings it's tradition for the bridesmaid to get off with the best man!'

Hermione was, frankly, shocked that Ron had said such a thing.

'Severus, for one thing, this isn't a Muggle wedding, and another, Ron is talking through his arse. He's just feeling inadequate and jealous because he doesn't have anyone since he split up with his girlfriend. Anyway, don't you trust me?'

He put down his glass with a sigh, 'Of course I do; I suppose I've just never thought about your past with Weasley. You were worried about someone who died twenty years ago, yet, I never stopped to consider Weasley, someone you were still going out with only last year. You must have felt *something* for him, although, for the life of me, I can't imagine why.'

Hermione bit her lip to forestall her amusement. 'Forget about Ron, will you? He's my friend, nothing more. I don't like to inflate your ego too much, but sometimes it needs puffing up a bit. I've never felt about Ron the same way as I do you, so stop feeling sorry for yourself. Now, are you going to dance with me, or do I have to find someone else?'

She half wondered if he would tell her to find someone else, shying away from such a public spectacle seemed the type of thing for him to do. However, he grudgingly took hold of her hand and led her over to where innumerable couples were dancing together.

Perhaps she should be grateful for Ron's words; maybe they were what were spurring him on. He put a hand on her waist, she put one on his shoulder, and they clasped their free hands together. The music was slow, and they moved gently around their spot on the dance floor.

'You look radiant, my dear.'

'Thank you, so do you,' she added, with a quirk of her lips. Snape rolled his eyes long-sufferingly.

Secretly, Hermione was pleased that he'd noticed. Sometimes, he seemed so unflappable and indifferent that she had to wonder how she'd ever managed to impress him enough to fall in love with her. Invariably, he was reserved when they were in public together, including around people they knew well. Hermione wasn't bothered by it...it was just his way, and frankly, it was rather endearing to her. He was not unromantic; in his own quiet way he had his moments, and it suited Hermione just fine that they were for her and her alone.

'I see you wore the purple.'

'Who am I to deny a request from a lady?' he replied smoothly.

Hermione smiled and they lapsed into a pleasant silence. She was happy to just enjoy the moment. All of a sudden, though, he had wrapped his arm tighter around her middle, drawing her in closer so she could lay her head on his chest, if she so wished. Hermione leaned her neck back to look up at him in surprise.

'What's all this about?'

'You don't think I just want to hold you?'

'Severus, you dislike me holding your hand when we are out; you prefer I take your arm in a proper, dignified manner. I might develop a complex if I didn't know you better.' She smiled sincerely at him.

'All right; Weasley and Longbottom are staring at us with barely disguised horror, so I thought I'd give them something to be scared about.'

Hermione surreptitiously scanned the room and could, indeed, see Ron and Neville standing together, glancing in their direction every so often.

'So, you're using me to prove a point?'

'Do you mind?' he asked, with an annoyingly assured expression. 'I thought you'd want to make the most of it before I return to my emotionally-challenged self.'

Hermione laughed. 'Do you have to be so self-deprecating all the time?'

She took their clasped hands and guided his to her hip, before reaching hers up to join with her other around his neck, so there was only a small distance between them.

'See how they like that,' she said impishly, her head resting neatly under his chin.

'Weasley's turned green!' he returned a moment later, distinctly triumphant.

Hermione laughed and felt an accompanying rumble of laughter through his chest.

Soon, she closed her eyes to forget about their spectators. Ron would come round eventually; she had an inkling that, in the past, he might have harboured a cosy fancy that they would have all got married and had children as one, huge, extended family, all related...the Potters and the Weasleys. This wedding was now a reminder of what would never be. Hermione regretted that he was disappointed, but she could not summon any regret over her own decisions...she loved Ron better as a friend.

Unconsciously, she tightened her grip on the man who was dancing with her, and she rubbed her cheek gently against the material of his robe.

Her eyes flew open quite suddenly, and she pulled back to look up at him in concern. 'Merlin, Severus! Your heart is pounding something terrible. Are you all right?'

He glanced down at her uneasily. 'I wondered how long it would take you to notice. I'm fine, I just...' He rolled his eyes heavenwards in annoyance.

Hermione was completely confused as he pulled her into a hug, and breathed deeply for several moments.

'Marry me?' he whispered into her hair, after a time.

She froze in shock, her eyes wide. He stepped back to look at her in nervous bewilderment.

'I don't know what has come over me. I shouldn't be doing this here...I should have a ring, and maybe I should be down on bended knee, and if it is a grand gesture that you require, then I will gladly oblige. I know it has only been three months, but it's no good, I can't be without you...I must take this opportunity while you are not yet sick of me. Will you marry me, Hermione?'

Hermione felt the waterworks coming on as soon as he'd started speaking, but this time he wiped away her tears, an action which helped to dispel her daze. 'Of course I will,' she managed, in a quiet voice, 'and I won't ever become sick of you, you idiot.'

'I will hold you to those words.'

Hermione smiled at the relief in his expression. 'I have one condition.'

'Oh?' A tinge of concern coloured his features.

'You must kiss me to seal the deal.'

'Gladly,' he murmured as he gathered her to him.

Hermione was peripherally aware that the music had stopped, and that the band was now striking up some cheesy, Muggle disco song. She couldn't help but laugh at his pained expression.

'This racket is hardly conducive to the tender kiss I wish to bestow.'

'Pity, and after you made such a romantic little speech too,' she commented, only half-teasing.

'Do you dare to mock me, my dear?'

'I wouldn't dream of it, Professor Snape; now look, I'm not marrying you unless you kiss me, so I say, bugger the ambience and just do it.'

He did.

Several feet away, Ron Weasley had to fight to keep his vol-au-vents from coming up for an encore.

What on earth had happened to his friend?

Shamelessly snogging that git like *they* were the newlyweds! There were no two ways about it...Hermione was*completely* mental!

END

AN: Finally, many thanks once more to astopperindeath, who has been a huge help betaing this story; as well as to the admins here :)