

Of Fickle Fates and Fateful Fungi

by *windwings*

Hermione's life is about to take a long-awaited turn for the better, but what happens when she discovers that one Severus Snape is standing exactly at the turning point?

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: I, certainly and sadly, own nothing and make no profit. This story is rather canon-compliant than not, EWE, of course, and I have added a few things of my own to the wonderful Potterverse. The rating for this story would be NC-17, due to some explicit content and choice words. This story was beta'd by the wonderful **Melusin Le Fay**, but I might have tinkered with it a bit, so all mistakes are mine. Enjoy and please let me know what you think :)

Her own humming, born of a combination of a delicious sense of anticipation and a seldom-experienced feeling of complete and utter satisfaction with her own self, blended quite nicely with the sounds of a lovely, late August morning. The day promised to become warm, and the last summer haze started to take over the chill of the early morning, the first herald of impending autumn. And as a fat, ripe-golden sunrise, of the kind that can only be seen in the North in the fleeting bouts of the last warm days, lazily ascended from the East and outward, Hermione Jean Granger eagerly climbed a gently sloping hill, one of the many on the Southern outskirts of the Highlands.

The source of Hermione's eagerness, anticipation and motivation was located in a small oak grove, just over the top of the hill. It was what drove her out of her cosy bed at an ungodly hour of a fine Sunday, which happened to be her only day off from a tedious, and rather thankless, job as a junior potioneer for a small wizarding pharmaceutical company.

A large, ready to be picked, untouched and gloriously uninhabited bunch of fairy circles.

Hermione's heart fluttered with elation when she thought of the day she had made this particular discovery. Fairy circles were smallish, slender mushrooms, ash-grey with spots of baby pink and mother-of-pearl white, growing in small uneven rings in the shadowed woodlands. A sight as pretty as it was rare. To stumble upon a circle in a magical area was equivalent to finding a four-leaf clover or a five-leaf lilac bloom in a bunch. However, even if one was on such friendly terms with luck as to find one, chances were, it would be already taken over by pygmy fairies. Then, picking the dainty fungus caps for future use in potions would be considered a crime against protected magical creatures, a species the conservation status of which was listed as critically endangered, according to the Lesser Magical Beings Decree. Offending pygmy fairies could land you a few years in Azkaban and a cancellation of your brewing license, thank you very much. No matter how tempting the fairy circles were, Hermione had never even considered searching for them in the Forbidden Forest or in the few other patches of magical wilderness, scattered here and there across the British Isles.

Oh, fairy circles were very tempting. They were crucial to some of the most intricate and potent healing potions Hermione had come across in her rather short and uneventful, but still very informative, thanks to her dogged tenacity and love of books, potions career. In most cases, fairy circles had to be almost miraculously (or very

much illegally) obtained from existing fairy communities because everyone knew that negotiating with pygmy fairies made as much sense as making a Norwegian Ridgeback one's lapdog. Sometimes, abandoned old circles were available to an avid potions ingredient hunter, but they weren't anywhere close to the fresh mushrooms in quality. The price for a correctly preserved cap was nearly exorbitant.

That was why she was flying up the hill as if her feet had wings of their own. Back in the first dewy days of May, downy with fresh growth, she had found a clearing full of fairy circles in a Muggle area not far from home where it had no chance of being occupied by fairies. Since that time, she had been visiting the tiny fungi frequently, placing careful Muggle-repellent charms, fertilizing and preserving them in any way she could to be picked later in August. Today, after some good four months of waiting, patient nurturing and caring for the circles, was the last day of her dull existence, deprived of all prospect. In a few days, she was going to become filthy rich.

Hermione was no mercantile materialist; if there was anything she still firmly believed in, it was that money won't buy you happiness. But neither was she the epitome of a sunny and bright naiveté, untouched by even a sprinkle of healthy cynicism, like she had been on her last day at Hogwarts, four years before, leaving school with flying colours and great expectations. A war hero, a brilliant scholar in a world waiting to be rejuvenated, reinvented, redeemed after the fall of Voldemort; surely, all venues should be open to her, and any field she chose to apply herself to would welcome her!

The higher you climb, the harder you fall, they say, and hers was a very painful thud. The wizarding world around her appeared far less prone to rejuvenation and reinvention than she'd originally thought it was. Her blood status still often outweighed any social acclaim she might have accumulated, and her stellar NEWT scores seemed to impress no one but her teachers. Many career options she fancied turned out to be quite inaccessible after some unpleasant, but socially educational enquiries, due to her lack of respectable wizarding background and connections.

Hermione Granger wasn't one to let prejudice do her in, but to add insult to injury, Potions, the field she had settled on after a few blunders with social campaigning and Ministry work, upon a closer look happened to be an abode of all the die-hard conservatives and some of the most appallingly retrograde stick-in-the-muds this Earth bore. The young Gryffindor had charged into the quiet, peaceful swamp that was modern Potion-making with all the blunt eagerness of her House spirit and a tremendous desire to create and discover only to find that a vast majority of modern brewing was pillared on recipes that were at least a hundred years old, and that, apparently, the age of a recipe was the key factor to the way it sold.

Of course, research was not exactly unheard of, but doing it on a scale anywhere larger than tinkering with a few potions in a private lab certainly was. After some time, Hermione was even sure of the fact that some of the later 'stunning discoveries of the long-forgotten obscure potions', thanks to 'fascinating ancient lore hidden in the vast book collections confiscated from Death Eater vaults', were successful takes at such tinkering made by some or other enterprising, younger scoundrels.

Never one to fear, Hermione started at the bottom, unwilling to flash her Harry Potter card, twice unwilling since she realized that, in the peculiar and morally opaque society that was the potion brewers of the United Kingdom, it would get her nowhere. But clocks ticked, time slipped away, seasons changed each other in a monotonous succession of days that were crammed with cutting and mincing, pickling and grinding, trying to make ends meet and not go crazy in the process; in one word, anything but moving forward, and she still stayed where she was, at the very bottom of the Potions world: her skills without application, her mind idle, her faith almost lost.

As she hurried up the hill, scuttling along a rocky path, heedless of the astringent smells of an almost gone summer and the plump, sappy beauty of trees adorned with the first gold and crimson, she thought of all the disappointments she'd endured and how she was about to rectify them all in one go. If she had learned anything since that time, when she waltzed out of Hogwarts, ready to conquer the world, it was that while money may not buy happiness, it sure as hell can buy you plenty of time and means to build said happiness.

Finally, finally the fickle Fates had turned their faces towards her. She smiled exuberantly and tucked an errant curl behind her ear as she approached the hilltop, and the precious oak grove became visible. It rested snugly on the northern side of the glen, barely touched by the rare sunshine, an odd dark spot on the background of mysterious outlines of table-like hills.

The last bit of the swiftly shortening distance between Hermione and her dear destination was covered with otherworldly speed, and soon she was catching her breath, resting the palm of her hand on a rough and surprisingly warm bark of a young oak, her weather-whipped hair wild about her face. She loved getting there the Muggle way, loved the exhilaration the workout brought and the delicious distension felt in her limbs. Over the last few months, not only the circles, but this place, the whole repeated ritual had become her own personal resort.

Hermione smiled at the familiar cushionettes of small alpine flowers scattered here and there and couldn't contain a happy laugh while she surveyed the place for one last time before her life would change.

Her laugh died on her lips as soon as she saw a dark figure approaching the grove from the other side of the hill. The man, and there was no mistaking his smooth gait with a faint suggestion of a limp, courtesy of the Cruciatus Curse, glided along the edge of the glen where the hill went abruptly upwards. He was dressed in his immutable black, though its casual variant not generally associated with him, and was walking straight towards Hermione's secret treasure leisurely, if 'leisurely' was even a word to describe one Severus Snape, former Death Eater and most hated Professor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, recently turned hero, and quite the national celebrity.

From her vantage point, Hermione had the advantage of watching him without being seen for a while, but she had no delusions that he wouldn't otherwise sense her presence very soon. The clearing with the fairy circles lay halfway between herself and the Potions master, and if she was going to keep standing there as if hit with a stray Stunner, the situation was going to be changing rapidly and not in her favour.

Her agile mind reeled and whirled with numerous thoughts and half-cocked ideas, which ranged from *Run for it, Hermione, you stupid cow!* to *Maybe it's just my imagination and that's not the Egyptian reed basket he's carrying, but a picnic hamper*, and then looking at a very similar basket in her own hands because Egyptian reed was best for transporting fairy circles. Not relying on logic anymore, she bolted as if struck with a whip...at the same moment when he finally took heed of her presence and also broke into a run.

In any other situation, Hermione would have laughed herself silly at the mere concept of *Snape running*, usually all bloated up dignity and fastidious reserve, but not now when the course of her very life was at stake. Mere seconds after, she was standing at the edge of the clearing, where her further fate would be decided upon, complete with bunches of fully grown, and blissfully unspoilt, fairy circles and Severus Snape standing on the opposite side of it.

At first he made no move and only surveyed her through the slits of his eyes with what appeared to be amused distaste, but Hermione knew that it was barely controlled rage. Oh yes, the way his nostrils flared ever so slightly suggested that he was, in fact, utterly livid. She stared back at him, careful not to move, as if she were a vulnerable prey and he an aiming predator who would strike if she as much as started.

"Hello, Professor. May I ask what you are doing in this gods-forsaken part of Scotland this early in the morning?" she asked when she was unable to continue the staring match.

"Why, Miss Granger, I could ask you the same question, but since asking questions, the answers to which are insidiously obvious, has always been your prerogative, let it be surmised that you yourself aren't here because the weather is glorious and you happen to enjoy traipsing around the *gods-forsaken parts of Scotland* at random," Snape answered in low, rolling tones, which he often used, Hermione knew, to lull the attention of his opponents.

Deciding not to beat about the bush with the consummate Slytherin, as it could well go on for ages, Hermione put forth some Gryffindor bluntness.

"These are mine," she stated with all the resolution she could muster, not taking her eyes off Snape.

He smirked almost indulgently as if dealing with a deranged, but dear, relative.

"And I shoot rainbows out of my arse, Miss Granger."

Hermione found it very hard not to seethe, recognizing the manner in which he had always, and infallibly so, made her feel ridiculous and silly, but didn't budge.

"I found them in May and have checked on them every few days and placed Muggle-repellents and fertilized them and what not. These. Are. Mine."

Very slowly, as if any sudden move would cause her to react unpredictably, her former professor folded his arms across his chest.

"Really, Miss Granger, you don't have to justify and explain yourself to me. You are no longer an errant teenage delinquent." He paused at that, and the 'though I highly doubt it' didn't need to be voiced to let Hermione know it was surely there. "But unfortunately for you, I see no ownership mark on this blessed piece of soil, and neither is there any registry book which would provide proof and grounds for your silly claims."

She noticed how the mask of the falsely-indolent condescension and patience was slowly peeling off his face. He was prepared to fight in earnest. But so was she.

"Well, that's just fine and dandy, Professor, since I just as well do not see that *my* circles bear any signs of *your* ownership," Hermione quipped brightly.

Snape carefully and with excruciating slowness placed his reed basket on the ground at the roots of a knobby oak and started to circle the clearing. Her mind reeled *Oh, Gods, oh Gods, this is not good, not good at all, do something, anything, anything at all*, a frantic, panicking voice in her head chanted as she watched his lithe descent with growing anxiety.

"As it happens, my dear Miss Granger," Snape started in his patented lecturing tone, "I find any attempts of having pretensions to any sort of ownership to... these fungi futile and ridiculous." He was suddenly taking great interest in the state of his nails, and Hermione checked herself when she thought she was staring at his slender hand turning in front of his face with elusive elegance. She knew very well that his other hand, hidden from her view, must be fiddling with his wand. And it was a safe bet to say that Snape was very quick when it came to putting someone at the said wand's business end.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Snape, don't slip on the glaze of your own subtlety," she said scornfully, raising her voice, sick of his games and ready to get it over with. "You haven't come here to have a picnic in the sweet company of this reed basket, have you? Then what are you doing here?"

"Tsk, ts, such an extravagant emotional reaction to my mere presence, Miss Granger?" Snape felt obviously in his element making her fume.

"Just answer the bloody question," Hermione squeezed through gritted teeth.

"What I do here is none of your nosey Gryffindor business." Snape stopped a few metres away from her, one of his hands still hidden in the folds of his frock coat.

"Oh, well, pardon my intrusion then, *sir*. I'll be totally honest and say that it was absolutely not great seeing you, but have a good day. Don't let me deter you for another second, and do leave me to my mushrooms."

She wasn't really hoping that her pathetic attempt at sarcasm would work, of course. But staring at the dead end of his face, Hermione wondered fleetingly if she hadn't taken the situation to a whole new level of horrible. Snape suffered absolutely no mocking of his own intimidation and goal achievement tactics.

"Miss Granger," he purred, his voice so dangerously low, she almost felt it ripple in her ears and trickle down her spine in a scattering of goosebumps. "We both know that I'm significantly faster with a wand than you could ever hope to be... So, let's pretend that you have something crucial at home, or in any other place in the world, that requires your immediate and undivided attention: a kettle left to boil, a Weasley in need of feeding or whatever strikes your fancy. So, now you turn one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, walk fifty steps and Apparate the fuck away. And then I won't Stun you and leave you here 'til it wears off, and since you can be a good judge of how powerful my Stunners are, that could be days."

Snape started circling her again, in measured steps, like a snake getting ready to attack, watching her all the time with a predatory gleam in his eyes while Hermione felt her rage gradually swamp all her senses, including her common sense, which screamed *do not mess with Snape* at her.

"And if you cooperate, Miss Granger, and because I'm feeling particularly gracious today, I'll even let you submit your application when or, rather, if I ever decide to take on an apprentice again." Snape bared his teeth at her in a morbid grin, knowing exactly how to poke her most tender spots with surgical precision.

"I'll count to three, Miss Granger," he sing-songed when she failed to respond, stricken with despair, almost beside herself with the dawning sense of unbelievable irony of the situation. "And when I say three, I want to see your arse on the mission of putting as much distance between me and you as possible in the shortest imaginable span of time."

"One... Two..."

He didn't have time to say three because, since their last unfortunate meeting, he had never cared to update his information on exactly how fast Hermione was with a wand, so he had to dodge her full Body-Bind and retaliate with a series of complex offensive hexes, which made the promised Stunner look like a needle poking at an elephant. Hermione, having thrown back a quick shield, was forced to jump and duck behind an oak when a particularly mean and strong burning spell went through her shield like a knife through melting butter and, threatening to solve her hair problems for a few months to come, left a smouldering hole in the tree.

Then they were slowly moving in circles, assuming duelling stances, wands at the ready like rapiers, prepared to act at any opening.

"O-ho, Miss Granger!" Snape's voice was decidedly full of malevolent glee. "Did I just *incidentally* ruffle some of your feathers?" he asked, his victorious (and quite prematurely so, as Hermione thought) expression showing exactly how incidental he thought the barb had been.

"Fuck you, Snape. I don't give two shits about your apprenticeships!" Hermione spat back. Unfortunately, the way her chest rose and fell and the way her breath came out in dramatic puffs, suggested quite the contrary, and Snape didn't fail to notice it.

He chose the moment to attack again, shooting a few slicing hexes at her in a graceful sequence, which she managed to rebut with practiced ease, but then again, she knew that he was just stretching.

One of the hexes ricocheted and hit a circle of mushrooms, neatly cutting the caps and rendering them useless. Something small, a thinnest shred of sense, tried to scream at her to stop this destructive dance and flee, but her responsibility was completely bound and gagged by overwhelming fury at the man who had been the source of the most painful disappointments of her life.

For a moment, it seemed to Hermione that a flicker of something akin to doubt passed through her former professor's obsidian eyes, but it perished so quickly, she barely registered it and could not tell for sure if it was not a figment of her imagination.

"Such foul language on such... mouth, Miss Granger," Snape drawled, making an expressive pause where another would have inserted a supposedly flattering epithet, like 'pretty' or 'lovely'.

Hermione bit her lip in helpless anger, rather more at herself, at the fact that she was still offended by his low opinion of her exterior, like a vulnerable fourth-year.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, if the prospect of becoming my apprentice makes you so lukewarm, why did you spend your seventh year going out of your skin to secure it? Or maybe it was something else entirely that made you attack me like a banshee, disregarding all the rules of an honourable duel?" Snape went on while Hermione searched frantically for anything, any chance to catch him off guard.

"Did my mentioning a Weasley rub you up the wrong way, perchance?" Snape enquired, and he was immediately hit in his left shoulder with a very deftly thrown cast-iron pot she had conjured.

Falling to the ground, it blasted another precious circle, but Hermione was past caring. Snape faltered, but not long enough to be incapable of discarding her subsequent Petrificus Totalus with a single swish of his wand and sending a cutting jinx her way. Hermione regretted her lack of precision twice as much when it grazed her shoulder with a sudden, stinging pain.

"Oh, my, do I sense some serious moth holes in the matrimonial velvet?" Snape sneered with mock sympathy. "Say something, Miss Granger. You are eerily silent." At that, he fired a very well-executed frost ball, apparently of his own creation, which Hermione narrowly escaped.

This time, he aimed it so it wouldn't harm the mushrooms, and she found herself admiring his spell work and, at the same time, pettily wishing it would have hit a circle, so that when it all came to an end, he'd get fewer. As soon as this thought flickered through her head, she almost pinched herself in self-disgust. Was she giving up already? Had she subconsciously agreed to be on the losing side? Her rage sprung forth with a thousand flames, sparking through her blood, as she deftly shielded his spells and fired her own occasional Stunners and a Binding Hex here and there.

"There was never any *matrimony*, you bitter git!" she yelled, helpless anger stinging slightly at the corners of her eyes, and conjured and then tossed another, and then one more piece of inelegant, cast-iron kitchenware at him. The spell to do it didn't require as much precision and power as your regular offensive spell and had a neat malicious advantage of leaving her opponent with fewer fungi spoils of this 'war'. By now, she was sure that Snape would not back down.

"Oh, there wasn't? How about that?" Snape sounded absolutely unsurprised (and Hermione privately thought it was rather because he was following the papers and perfectly aware of her marital status), then emitted a sound which was supposed to be a laughter, but came out more like a bark. "I suppose I should have gathered that no man could be that scatter-brained, Miss Granger. If your fighting skills resemble those of a common fishwife, I shudder to imagine what your prowess in other areas, which are vital to a happy marriage, would entail. Loath though I am to admit it, I understand Mister Weasley a tinge better, now."

Never, in all their interactions, had he stooped so low as to insult her on such a personal level. And though Hermione had gone through years of merciless teasing about her prudish ways at the hands of her classmates, and even her best friends who had always been a lot more indiscriminate about their amours, though she had thought she'd grown something akin to a rhino hide and remained unfettered by such punctures to her ego, though her love life, as she was a right celebrity, had received some very explicit treatment from the *Daily Prophet*, and she'd learned to disregard it, coming from Snape, this cut particularly deep for some reason.

"You sick bastard!" she seethed, grinding her teeth in insurmountable fury, which was spilling over the brim, and fired a barrage of full-on curses, the likes of which she had last employed in her stand-offs with Death Eaters when she last had been set on, if not killing, then seriously incapacitating someone.

"Your unusually stunted ability to string words together in sentences that exceed four words in length teases my vanity ever so pleasantly, Miss Granger. Shall we see if I can accomplish that feat I failed at for seven years and shut you up?"

The tosser. He wasn't even short of breath, dodging her efforts like they were obnoxious but innocuous mosquitoes, and retaliating with the easy, eerily beautiful grace of some obscure nocturnal animal while she was panting, and stumbling a bit, and rapidly reaching the point where she would have to concede defeat or... or... she wasn't even trying to think past that. If anything, Severus Snape was absolutely unpredictable.

Instead, she thought of what he had come to represent to her over the last few years. He had become to her the embodiment, the rearing banner of her failures. It was like the words 'you fail, Hermione' were written all over him in the stark sans serif she had always used for her study files on the old PC at home: all sharp angles, and rigid lines, and stooping ascetic contours.

Ironically enough, there was a time in her life when he had been the symbol of her hopes, goals and future achievements.

The losses suffered during the long, underground, but influential nevertheless, reign of Voldemort were grievous. Even more grievous in that, when he was finally overthrown, the Ministry launched a full-blown 'Witch Hunt', as it was later referred to, eliminating or exiling any who they deemed to be connected with Dark practices. The campaign's most 'prominent' results were Kingsley Shacklebolt's swift and scandalous resignation and the execrably diminished numbers of highly qualified specialists in such areas as Potions, Mediwizardry, Curse-breaking, Crafting of Magical Artefacts and many others, which slightly touched or openly merged with the Dark Arts in some form. Severus Snape's newly found hero and martyr status was a saving grace for him at that time.

To rectify the situation, the renewed Ministry passed a decree where each remaining holder of the Mastery in several specified areas, Potions included, had to take on an apprentice to replenish the ranks of the few remaining scientists. Hermione's seventh year was spent putting every effort into securing the apprentice position with the most celebrated Potions master. She was, of course, not the only contender, but, and it was unanimously agreed upon, the most gifted, suitable, and thus, most probable one.

Never in her life had she tried so hard to achieve something. She'd been beside herself trying to impress Snape, employed all means her own moral code allowed...she even dropped a few extra credit projects and cut down her NEWT revision to the absolutely necessary amount. Those were indeed her last resorts since they went way after eating, sleeping, and time with her friends on her list of things to sacrifice. She even went as far as threatening Hogwarts' house-elves with socks to learn Snape's life habits.

Ron called her barmy and refused to speak to her for months after she interrupted an especially intense snogging session and left him hard, aching, and literally pantless because she'd remembered that she needed to pick a few rattle roots she'd grown for the next day's Potions class and had a span of an hour to do it. Ginny very soon joined in the teasing and never missed the opportunity to say how ridiculous the whole sucking-up-to-Snape business was. Hermione had become the laughing stock for the entire Slytherin House, but it never deterred her. Even McGonagall had a few conversations with her, clearly letting her know that, competition notwithstanding, she would get any other available apprenticeship, with herself included, and it was not necessary to kill herself in the process.

Harry, sweet dear Harry, was the only one who tried to gently reason with her, saying that it was, perhaps, all about her whimsical vanity, rather than the actual apprenticeship, and it wasn't the position itself she wanted, but the acknowledgement from the man who offered it. Subconsciously, she probably knew all along that he was right. In the moments of painful lucidity, when Draco Malfoy's mediocre potion earned an approving half-smile or a terse word of praise while her own highest reward for objectively brilliant efforts was the rare lack of harsh criticism and insults, she knew that something was horribly wrong with how she was going out of her way to become Snape's apprentice. But she was irrevocably obsessed and also believed in the man's overwhelming sense of justice.

It was true; he was, and always had been, a right bastard to her, but there was no way in all the nine circles of hell he wouldn't have agreed that she was the best, of that Hermione was sure. And she hoped for it, lived on this hope, scrambling through her seventh year, teased, misunderstood, friendless, still hurting from the war and bereft of any support but this hope.

When, a month after the end of the school year, it was announced that the Potions apprentice position had been awarded to Draco Malfoy, Hermione was so shattered, she sat, emotionless and numb from shock, for hours in her room at her parents' house, holding the parchment with the 'thank you, but no thank you' official note and dumbly staring out the window. Then there was the crying, intermingled with hysterical laughing and followed by a subsequent calming draught extravaganza, which caused her to lie in bed for two days, absolutely detached to the point where she had to be dragged to the bathroom to take care of herself. Then there were a few nights out with Harry and Ron when she cried and hiccupped drunkenly in their arms, and they all played 'think of the nastiest name for Snape' game. Inebriated, Ron tried to rekindle their relationship, and she submitted out of the sense of spite and futility, and it ended in an awkward morning after and final parting of the ways. Then she allowed herself a week of epilogical moping and moved out of her parents'. Her new home was a dilapidated little house in Scotland her family owned that had been, at one time, used as a summer house but had since been boarded up. It was too shabby, and its facilities were stuck in the eighteenth century, but it had the advantages of a garden and no rent-paying and thus had to do. She started anew, from scratch, and her movement since then was slow: one step forward, one step back.

And now, the same man who she blamed for tramping all her hopes to dirt and making her a bitter hag at the tender and wayward age of nineteen, again stood between her and her chance at life.

Pulling her last strength together, she let the magic surge forth from her in a Gryffindorishly blunt wave. She was no match for him when it came to subtlety and cunning, but this could have won her a small purchase, and it did, cracking his shield with the sheer amount of force that she put into it and knocking him squarely in the chest. He came to his feet faster than an average wizard, but not fast enough. The next thing he saw was that she now was standing in the middle of the clearing and pointing her

wand at what seemed to be...oh, the horror...a small pool of seawater, complete with seaweed and even a few small fish, obviously conjured together with it, levitating above the invaluable remaining mushrooms, for which it was absolutely deadly.

"You know what it is, Snape," she half-said, half-sobbed, her wand hand shaking slightly. "One wrong move and I will release it."

"This is ridiculous," Snape muttered, his wand hand that had been aimed at her, faltering and lowering to his side. For a long moment, he just stood there, watching her calmly, but with such intensity that she felt naked, as if every single detail about her, every blemish on her skin, every nervous flutter of her eyelashes, every treacherous drop of moisture in her eyes, spoke volumes to him. He looked like he was soaking up this information, cataloguing it, making use of it to get to her even more. A thought passed through her mind that he was perhaps using Legilimency on her, but she discarded it as something absolutely of no consequence.

"Why don't you banish this egregiously idiotic body of water, and then we'll talk, Miss Granger," Snape said in a tired and strangely defeated voice that alerted her.

"Talk?" She laughed, a short, miserable, broken sound that made him visibly cringe. "Since when are you the one to negotiate, Snape?"

"I said talk, not negotiate," he answered curtly.

"I have nothing to tell you!" she yelled, and her wand hand shook, making the small piece of sea above her vibrate precariously like jelly.

"You may have nothing to tell me, but you surely have something to ask me, so do it while I'm at it," he barked back at her, obviously running out of his sudden bout of patience.

It was true. She had it, the big 'Why' question she had been first too humiliated and then too proud to ask. But it had always been there, haunting her for years, three letters she saw everywhere she went. Why? Why? Why had he not taken her on?

"No, I don't," she sniffled, like a petulant baby, persisting in its folly. "I know why. It's just because that's who you are. It's because you'd always hated Harry and me by extension, and nothing I did managed to change it or make you think I was a human being worth your while."

"All you did was disgusting brown-nosing your way into my good books," he interrupted grumpily, but she paid no mind.

"Oh, of course, Professor, what else did I have to offer? Nothing would have compared with the handsome amount of Galleons you must have got from Malfoy as a reward." She laughed bitterly, hoping her tone was as heavily smothered with sarcasm as she intended it to be.

For some reason, it broke the carefully constructed shell of his composed demeanour as that of an egg, and he erupted in a fit of rage as magnificent as it was sudden. His position and cast changed in an instant from all slumped shoulders and furrowed eyebrows to whipped duel stance, wand pointing at her, eyes flashing like malevolent coals left after bale fire.

"You hold that tongue of yours, Miss Granger, unless you want to see it hanging on that oak for birds to pick on," he hissed, his normally smooth, deep voice mutilated beyond recognition by a rising wave of primal fury.

Hermione shivered, dread running its little cold fingers up her spine, but didn't back down.

"Like I said, we have nothing to discuss, Snape. Now, leave, or I'll release the water," she uttered with far less conviction than she actually felt.

Snape seemed to have composed himself some because his posture relaxed slightly.

"Why would I do that, Miss Granger?" he asked with a feral grin. "If it seems that I will be coming out of it empty-handed in any case, why leave now? This showdown has been rather... entertaining so far." He started moving slowly, circling the clearing, and Hermione absolutely did not have a good feeling about it.

She felt tired; the slow summer haze had started to seep through the oak branches into the coolness of the forest, and she was uncomfortably staring against the sun which peaked and frolicked in the leaves, creating a blurred kaleidoscope in the line of her sight. The fact that Snape was moving in such a direction that she was gradually turning directly opposite the sun to follow his movement did not help the situation at all.

"You know the sad thing about you, Miss Granger? You are so disgustingly incorruptible, so self-righteous, that it clouds your judgement. You see only black and white. No shades of grey and, I'd even say, no colours."

Did he have a point? Was it professional baiting or just a distracting manoeuvre?

"If only you would snap out of your wallowing in self-pity and entitlement and apply the grey matter that apparently sits useless in your skull, you'd have seen it way before you went through that circus."

She could hardly see him now, an ambiguous shape, a dapple of black against the dull green and occasional ochre or the wood, streaked with mingling sunlight.

"Don't play your games with me, Snape!" she cried out, desperate, in his general direction. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't you? Think, Miss Granger, think. Lucius narrowly escaped Azkaban, and it cost him his entire fortune, his reputation and connections included. Narcissa is in St. Mungo's mental ward without hope of ever having a normal life again. What would you have had me do? Leave my godson to the vagaries of fate where his family's former friends shunned him, his former enemies were enmeshed in that hideous Witch Hunt, and both would not mind to get one up against his father? At least now, he has a Mastery and a reputable job, and he is somewhat safe and left alone."

"Oh..." The small lake above the clearing trembled, the few fish scattering in all directions, as Hermione's wand hand wavered with the dawning sense of her own selfish stupidity and utter, utter shame.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she whispered brokenly and quietly, as if she wasn't even addressing him, but rather musing aloud. "Save us all the trouble... but then again, why would you even care?" Tears were streaming down her face freely, now.

"Unbreakable Vow. I swore to protect him and keep mum about it. The vow didn't cancel when I thought it should."

The next few seconds were a mess of movement, which she struggled to place in the exact sequence, but she was sure she heard a pop of a Banishing Spell, even though it did sound a bit off, and felt a slight Stunner knock the air out of her lungs. After that, she was staring upwards into the fleeting shadows of clouds and muzzy leaves, and then two coal-black circles materialized amidst the blur, slowly assuming the shape and the intensity of her former professor's eyes. He was holding her bodily down with her wrists clutched firmly in his hands above her head. Soft rain was falling on both of them, and when a few drops smashed into her lips, she realized they were salty. The circles were ruined, and, inexplicably, her head became light with ridiculous relief.

"For the record, I never once told you that I thought you were unworthy, Hermione." Snape's voice was raw with honesty, and it excited her. Even more than hearing a compliment from him, however veiled, excited her.

"But you could have told me, just once. A simple 'well done, Miss Granger' would have sufficed, but instead you seemed to just... keep the exact score of my ineptitudes and present it to me at any chance," she puffed out, becoming very aware of his sinewy body pressed flush against hers.

"Is that what you were after? Words? Who would have thought, judging by your determination to please?" He sneered at her, an angry grimace which made her feel uncomfortable and dirty.

"Get the fuck off me, Snape," she growled and tried to shimmy out of his 'embrace', which only led to her being pressed more intimately into him.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what was it that you really wanted? All of your teachers made most lavish use of praise when it came to you, and you could have been a head-hunted Curse-Breaker or a mediwitch by now. I think it runs deeper than that. Are you sure you aren't a closet masochist?" He was obviously taking an obscene amount of pleasure from baiting her this way, effectively straddled and struggling in the green moss.

"I wanted to be your apprentice! I wanted to study Potions with you, from you. I wanted to make a difference! Thanks to your refusal, the only other available Potions master didn't take me on, and I'm still a nobody. And yes, some fucking encouragement wouldn't have gone amiss!" she cried out indignantly, swallowing bitter tears of helpless anger and trying to free her hands desperately from his hold.

"Do cease this ridiculous wriggling. You'll only hurt yourself." Snape used his best teacher's tone.

"Stop holding me down like some tramp," she spat back at him.

A raised, furry question mark of his elegant eyebrow showed that he was amused enough for her to know that she shouldn't elaborate on that in order to avoid making a bigger fool of herself. As if accepting her silence, he changed his position slightly, rendering her almost immobile and bringing his face closer to hers, so that the ends of his hair were brushing her cheeks.

"Your deplorable manners offered no opportunities for palliative measures, Miss Granger," he quipped and stared at her, as if searching her eyes for something.

"You could have applied after Draco was out. I would have taken you on," Snape continued after a pause, and his tone was so surprisingly reproachful, it knocked out all the fight from her.

She thought it must have been a hard confession to make and licked the last tears that were running down her face from her lips.

"Why didn't you? If it was the apprenticeship you were so after? Your pride suffered so many blows at your own hands during your seventh year; surely it wouldn't have been much to your detriment?" he asked, and his eyes flickered, following the movement of her tongue and generally having an effect on her similar to that of a boa constrictor on a white, fluffy, unsuspecting rabbit. "I thought you would have," he went on in a rough, almost husky half-whisper, his look now roaming about her face and making her aware that she must be flushed.

So... it had hurt him? Disappointed him? *What?*

"I... I don't know," she breathed out, and she really didn't. What had it been that stopped her from trying again? Wounded pride? Arrogance? Childish vulnerabilities? Or something else entirely?

Something stirred within her, something she was not comfortable with. It was as if he were conversing to a part of her that she herself wasn't aware of. As if something deeply hidden, or so mercilessly repressed that it was almost forgotten, moved to the surface of her. This new (or old, depending on how she looked at it) part of her made her suddenly notice how lush and sooty his eyelashes were, and that his breath was fresh, and he smelled of herbs and books, thick summer haze and earthly warmth, and cleanliness, with an exquisite, hardly there tang that was probably... just him. And she specifically couldn't fail to acknowledge her own physical hankering in response to it all.

Her head swam with processing this new sensory overload, and a small, panicking voice in her mind screamed that she was rapidly approaching waters that were darker and deeper than she'd ever cared to probe. It was quickly shut off when she realized that his deft thumbs, consciously or not, had started rubbing small soothing circles on the sensitive skin of the insides of her wrists.

"Oh. My. God." Snape's teasing tone was laden with mockery. "Your know-it-all status has just been most thoroughly debunked."

Distracting, distracting, he was strategically distracting her. From what? From the fact that it hurt him that she hadn't understood? That he had been disappointed she hadn't returned? Was he still disappointed?

She tried to shake away the film of lust, for lust it certainly was, which was enveloping her brain, and form a question, demand an answer, but he chose this exact moment to bring his face even closer to hers, closer, closer and just a tad to the side, his movements accompanied by a mad thumping of her heart. And then he was purring in her ear, caressing, decadent sounds. "Yes, my dear mulish, obstinate Miss Granger, I did wish for you to return, so that I could take you on and revel in the fact that I'd won, that I had it my way." He paused, and she didn't stop to think exactly what he thought he had won because the 'take you' part of his speech shot right through her brain and down, down along her nerve endings, crackling with passion, setting fire in her, and turning into a glorious throb in her cunt.

"But surprisingly, you didn't act upon my whim, just like I hadn't acted upon yours," Snape added and grazed the shell of her ear with his crooked teeth. It took all of Hermione's willpower to stop her eyes from rolling to the back of her head.

"So, it would seem, Miss Granger, that we're at an impasse here, hmm?"

Trying to catalogue her sensations, Hermione vaguely registered that his hands had released her wrists and were now caressing her forearms with fluttering touches. A part of her, which was currently thinking with her quim, passed to her knowledge that it would be a stupid move, but she still tried to use this moment and get her hands free and throw him off her. He was so much faster, so deliciously predatory when he pinned her wrists again and applied even more of his weight to hold her down.

"Uh-uh, Miss Granger, we're not finished here yet," he whispered across her cheek and brought his eyes directly opposite hers, watching her with carnal deliberation. Which excited her beyond wild. "And don't even try to play the 'get off me, you fucking pervert' game with me because..." His mouth was so close to her; they were sharing the same wisp of air. "I can already smell you."

Mortified and unbelievably aroused by his explicit words, Hermione scrambled for a smart comeback, but Snape's mouth covered her lips, and whatever was to come out of them died in his searing kiss. His lips were unexpectedly gentle, though there was no mistaking the message as to exactly who was in charge here. She opened up with much more eagerness than she would have foreseen in herself, and he dipped his tongue in her mouth. His taste was pleasant, and it felt oddly comfortable, like an old, cherished habit, and at the same time, excitingly new. He ended the kiss languorously and looked at her as if appreciating the work. A slow, victorious smirk was tugging at the corner of his mouth, threatening to take over his expression.

The smug bastard.

"I like you much better when you're rubbing up against me like an affectionate Kneazle, Miss Granger."

Oh God, was she rubbing up against him? Apparently, yes since one of her knees was in a very tell-tale vicinity of his thigh.

This time, she chose to remain silent on purpose, hoping to make him feel at least somewhat off-kilter, and huffed indignantly at him.

A hint of worry in his otherwise perfectly complacent face told her that it worked.

One of his hands trailed down her arm and brushed a lock of hair away from her face, then almost tenderly, if tenderness could ever be associated with Snape, followed a few tear streaks on her cheek. Hermione stilled, mesmerized and completely taken with this new, private Snape she couldn't believe had chosen to make himself known.

"Let's try this again, girl," he said, his low voice pleasantly rough against her hearing, like Crooks' sandpapery tongue against her hand.

And then he was kissing her, fingers tangled in the knotty bramble of her hair, with terrifying frankness which called upon something equally candid inside her, and she

couldn't help but give into his demanding lips and his giving tongue. At one time, her anger and indignation with the man, and subsequently, with her own self for being, as she put it, snogged into agreement, or whatever it was that was Snape's agenda, caught up with her, and she bit her no longer prominent teeth into his lip viciously, drawing blood and thinking, *There, arsehole* in a fit of petty pique, but he only smiled at her, a wondrous, understanding smile, which took all the revenge value out of her little act.

There were few words exchanged, although she was positive that he could be pretty eloquent, and dirtily so and wished she'd know for sure, castigating herself immediately for such a thought. As if her thoughts went straight to his head, Snape drawled, "Miss Granger, is there anything that could stop your incessant judging of anything you do or think?" while his hands were spidering their way slowly under her shirt and up her ribs.

"Are you using Legilimency on me?" Hermione asked, her brows furrowed.

"I don't need to. You're hopelessly transparent." He chuckled and bit down on the side of her sensitive neck. "Let's give you some real food for your thoughts."

And immediately, all of their clothes slithered magically off, Hermione emitting a loud squeak of surprise to Snape's absolute delight.

She felt horribly self-conscious, trying frantically to remember when was the last time she shaved her legs and at the same time not to listen to a gloating inner voice, sounding like Ginny and telling her that she indeed should have got more sun during the summer. And much to her chagrin, Snape took his time, cataloguing, no doubt, all of her flaws, noticing every single indentation or scar, the jutting hipbones and her rather under-toned thinness.

"Good God, Miss Granger," Snape murmured, after studying her face for a few seconds. "We do need to occupy that mind of yours."

And in a matter of moments, he was down, the skin of her naked chest and stomach was tingling with the difference of temperatures between his surprisingly warm body and the fresh humid air of the hillside undergrowth. The effect was quite sobering, and it suddenly hit Hermione that she was naked, with Snape, whose head was currently between her legs and perilously close to her quim, hands already running up and down her inner thighs.

"Wha-what are you doing?" It came out much less resolute and much more like she was some hypocritically modest damsel as she tried to scramble upwards.

He held her hips and looked up at her, and there was something absolutely magnificent, something beautifully empowering, something that made her feel, for the lack of a better word, victorious in the way that Severus Snape looked, hair dishevelled, wiry shoulders bare, two red spots gracing his high cheekbones, charcoal eyes even more opaque with obvious lust, all command and power, and between her knees.

"Do you mind?" he asked, excruciatingly slowly, making sure his exhaled breath teased her sensitive flesh.

Could she say yes? Oh God, she couldn't say anything, anything at all, so she just shook her head and immediately sunk under the wave of sensations that a single finger sliding down from her mons, along her slit, without quite dipping, created in her. Hermione gasped and shuddered, feeling suddenly over-sensitized. Her hot skin and still chilly morning air made a heady combination, creating a mass of tiny tingles in her body.

"I was wondering what you'd look like, spread open and ready to be touched," Snape murmured. "For the last half an hour, I was thinking what your cunt would look like. Would your nether lips be plump and closed, like two segments of an orange, or small, tight, and opened when slick with your moisture?" he mused while his finger was doing unspeakably marvellous things to her now, diving inside shallowly and then out, circling her in indefinite eights of sheer pleasure, chasing away any coherency there was in Hermione's brain.

"I'd wondered how long it would take before you'd let me lick you." That sounded unbelievably cocky, even for someone as condescending as Snape, but Hermione didn't give a damn. All she cared about was that his fingers, which were delicately parting her, and entering her and then treacherously retreating only to pluck at her clit and make her squirm, would not stop their sensuous exploration of her body.

"I wonder if your taste is as rich and sweet as your scent," Snape uttered and, bringing his mouth to her centre, blew lightly. There was only so much teasing, tactile and vocal, that Hermione could take.

"Please," she whimpered, miserable with want and not sure exactly what she'd say if he asked "Please what, Miss Granger?"

Which he did, of course, and Hermione could have registered her happiness at predicting him just this once, if she hadn't been too far gone.

"Please what, Miss Granger?" he insisted huskily, spanning his hand over her indrawn abdomen.

"Do... ugh, do something, anything," Hermione managed between panting, tilting her hips upwards to get him back to her needy quim.

"Ah, your abandon is lovely. However, your response is dangerously vague," Snape teased gently and slyly as his wandering finger crawled down her perineum and circled her tight pucker below it.

Hermione tensed, and immediately his body was back over hers, the warmth of his lean torso relaxing, his sinful, sinful lips whispering in her ear, as he fondled her breast.

"Never fear, my dear. I'm not going to stretch... your limits." And she immediately felt hotter and lighter, as if her hearing was one of her erogenous zones and his voice a finely tuned stimulus.

She didn't have time to feel lost for the lack of his warmth over her body again because the next instant saw his mouth finally applying itself in a most generous way to her cunt. His thumbs opened her, and his tongue entered her, and her inhibition left her because very soon she realized that she was moaning: loud, desperate, aroused like never before, feeling impish, deliciously dirty and decadent, and somehow, very beautiful.

Hermione tried to hold out longer, but a few flat, masterful laps of Snape's tongue...and she was coming in waves, her inner muscles contracting and fluttering, her hands clutching the green moss in which she lay like some wood nymph being ravished by a dark spirit of the forest.

As the blinding pleasure of her orgasm abated, she felt the now familiar weight of his body over hers and a flush creeping over her face at the thought of how fast he was able to bring her over the edge. Opening her eyes, she expected to see a smug grin, but instead his face was just pleased in such a simple and quite unguarded way for Snape that in her mellow state, she found him striking and fascinating and almost giggled at the thought.

Snape's gaze slowly trailed over her features, and he took in her wild hair, splayed over her mossy pillow.

"Green suits you. Especially when you're bare-arsed naked." With that, he hooked her knee over his elbow, brought it up, and then she was exquisitely filled. He stilled inside her for a moment, closing his eyes and inhaling noisily through his nose.

His first movements were shallow and evenly sparse, as if he was letting her feel every cell of his cock entering her and then retreating. First the bulb of his head, stretching her, and then the rigid body with straining veins, and it was pure, unadulterated bliss. Hermione's hands snaked around his shoulders, and she tried to open her legs even wider, to bring him closer, deeper, faster.

"Impatient little thing, are we?" Snape purred so good-naturedly, it sounded like an endearment as his hand firmly held her hip down, and as soon as she complied with his request, no, scratch that, demand, he rewarded her with a deep smooth thrust and a wet open-mouthed kiss to her neck which then moved to one of her nipples.

Emboldened by the kindness in his voice, or still tripping high with his sweeping sexuality and aftershocks of her orgasm, Hermione brought her lips to his ear. "I want you to fuck me in earnest, Snape," she whispered and accentuated her point with a sharp nip to his earlobe.

He hissed, a delirious mix of pain and pleasure warping his face, and swiftly locked her wrists in his hands above her head again.

"Is that a challenge?" he growled, but his eyes sparkled with pleasure.

Instead of answering, Hermione tipped up her chin defiantly and smoothed her calves up his thighs in what she thought was a clear enough invitation.

Snape's level of perception didn't fail to deliver.

Her mouth formed a beatific 'Oh' as his first rough, powerful thrust took her by surprise, but she didn't have time to savour it because there immediately followed another one and then more, earnest, just like she had asked, plunging and taking. It seemed like he was not only opening her quim, spreading it, but also tearing through to something that lay dormant deep inside her soul, an unadmitted hurt, a long-neglected sore, a cesspool of old insecurities. She felt suddenly vulnerable and emotional, and no matter how hard she tried to clear her head and scold herself for such a weakness, her eyes swam a bit again.

"You are so good, Hermione, so good. Your cunt feels so tight, so hot," Snape all but chanted in her ear, shifting the angle so that each time his cock buried itself to the balls in her, his pelvic bone hit at her clit. "I would fuck you into eternity. I would leave no spot on your body unattended, no orifice unclaimed."

His words, which were gradually turning into barely sensible but still incredibly arousing nothings, were punctuated with the sure, forceful swings of his hips. She would be sore for days, she was positive, and a deeper, weird, practically masochistic part of her, which was yet a terra incognita to her own self, insisted that she refrain from using healing potions when it was over, that she live and walk with his marks for as long as they stayed on her body.

As he pounded her, cruel, taking thrusts, he planted languished, soothing kisses to her neck, shoulders, and sides of her face, and nipped at her lips lightly. The contrast between his unrelenting cock and his caressing mouth drove her steadily to another pinnacle and cleansed her of all the bad blood between them, at least in her books. In acceptance of that, she curled her fingers and caressed his hands, still holding hers in an iron grip. For a moment Snape's movements slowed, and he looked at her somewhat warily, but then covered her mouth with his as his hands weakened their hold and his fingers intertwined with hers.

One of his hands left hers and moved between their bodies to rub maddening circles at her clit, and she thought she'd explode with the sensations it brought.

"Now, Miss Granger. Come for me. You are magnificent when you come," he purred, his voice raw with exertion, and it was all it took to tip her over another peak, and she felt herself clench around him, milking him, and then he followed with a grunt, riding her in jerky, uneven movements, gathering her to him tightly before coming to a sweeping, overwhelming full-stop.

The first thing Hermione saw when she came to was an eyebrow, cocked in an arrogant, but absolutely not unkind way over a charcoal eye framed by matted lashes. The first sensation she registered was a feel of something cool and feathery tickling her cheek. She focused, and it turned out to be a stem of grass Snape was trailing around her face. They were still gloriously naked, and his leg was thrown in an unceremoniously possessive way over hers.

"You ruined my fairy circles, witch. Do you have anything to say for yourself?" he asked, his tone much more serious than the glint in his eyes would suggest.

"They weren't *yours*. They were mine just as much. And I would have shared if you had been able to act like a decent human being," she said, not quite believing it herself, but since all of the circles were indeed ruined by his bollocks up Banishing Spell, it was a moot point.

"I do not share," he intoned slowly after a pause during which he palmed her breast, his eyebrows knitting together.

"I know," she replied and averted her eyes with a sigh. Now that the fantastic and almost fairy-tale-like (and the setting was quite appropriate) sex was over, stark reality started to seep in. She would have to go home to her dingy little cottage, and tomorrow she would have to get up at half-six again so that she'd be on time for her weekly conference. Mr. Viley-Hobblegrowth, her manager, would brag and drone about the batches of dull potions to be completed, and heaps of ingredients to be dealt with, and unhappy customers to be coddled. And probably get behind her when the staff was filing out of the conference room so that he could look at her arse yet again.

"You know, if you send your application tomorrow and come to the interview, say, Friday at seven-ish, I must admit there's a very good chance you'd be a Potions apprentice starting next Monday. Free lodging and food, and not one, but two," he paused and his brow arched pointedly, "libraries at your full disposal."

Hermione laughed softly with a tinge of sadness.

"So, I didn't get to brown-nose my way into becoming your apprentice, but I just fucked it through?" She knew she was being unfair, but the loss of all the fairy circles was becoming the more grievous, the less the post-orgasmic afterglow was clouding her head. She looked around at what less than an hour ago used to be a paradisiacal, out-of-this-world spot, shaded with droopy oak foliage, and which now was a few piles of deteriorating fungi of rather mundane exterior, and sighed again.

Starting to feel somewhat awkward when he didn't answer, she got up and rummaged for her clothes.

"Were you honestly upset when I didn't show up at your door after Draco left and bug the hell out of you?" she asked over her shoulder, squeezing back into her jeans.

He looked back at her with the dreary reproach in the limp twist of his thin lips.

"I was," he replied shortly and started to get dressed in the same detached manner in which he did right about everything.

"I..." Hermione really wanted to apologize, but the sad sight of the dead circles killed her apology before it escaped her lips.

"I'll have to say no," she said instead. "It's flattering to know, but... too much time had passed. I've changed, and I think I won't be able to... to..." She waved her hand from him to her and back to him, unsure of what to call it, or what she was even trying to let him know, or to simply articulate to let it be known to her own self. Maybe it was 'us' or 'what happened to us'. "Being your apprentice, that is," she finished lamely and looked away.

"I see," he answered, all dressed and pent up again.

Nodding curtly, he looked at her as if trying to gauge her state, turned around, grabbed his basket and crossed the clearing. Then she watched him walk into the hillside beyond, a patch of black in the streaming sunlight. Suddenly, he came to a halt, turned around to look at her one last time, and with a dainty pop Disappeared. He could have done so from the clearing since the mushrooms were dead and no precautions of non-use of magic were necessary, and Hermione wasn't sure if it meant something that he didn't.

She picked up her own reed basket and walked out of the forest, feeling a bit numb in the head, but strangely enervated and in need to walk it off. The sun-dusted air, hot and humid with yesterday's rain, was messing up her already thoroughly disarrayed hair and making her fingers stick to each other. She took a long look at the grassy hills, and dim glens, and at small, dense clouds inscribed in the misty azure, listened to the ripe silence interspersed with the sounds of minute creatures, scurrying about, and a barely there rustling of the grass, stabbing upwards for the last summer sun and almost still on a windless, drifting midday.

She sniffled helplessly, and her face crumpled, and after a few seconds of struggling with herself, Hermione slumped down next to a juniper and cried.

She was woken none too gently when it was almost four in the morning, her head leaden and her limbs barely controllable after three hours of non-being, which had followed a night out with Ginny...a really bad idea, as far as Hermione was concerned as of now.

"Wha-whaddaya doin immah house? Howya know whhrrr live?" she mumbled, trying to pry away strong hands that were shaking her back to life and finally looking at the face of one rather annoyed Severus Snape.

"Really, Miss Granger. Give me some credit here." Snape rolled his eyes and stuffed a hangover potion in her hand. When she gulped it down and gave him what was the closest semblance of an inquisitive look, considering her state, he rolled his eyes yet again.

"Your house is permeated with the scent of cheap bar alcohol, and you're sleeping half-dressed. And your potions cabinet is quite dismally equipped, while we're at it. Come. I don't have all night." Snape stretched his hand to help her up.

Intrigued, she took it and was hauled mercilessly up. It wasn't even remotely intimate, and yet, even in her addled state, she was painfully reminded of their encounter two weeks ago. And those were very miserable, very dull two weeks.

"Where are we going?" she managed to ask with much less of a slur, donning her jacket and boots.

"You'll see," he said and led her out of the cottage and into the night. Then he put his arms around her and Disapparated.

She opened her eyes, and her first thought was that she'd ended up in wonderland. They were standing up on a snowy cliff, somewhere high in the mountains, whose remote silhouettes were visible everywhere around, somewhere in... She wasn't even sure which continent they were in, even the night-time being too uncertain a hint. The rarefied air was crisp, and she was forced to inhale with more effort, revelling in the feeling of cold freshness rushing into her lungs with each breath. She looked up and saw clear, dark sky, a starry mist filling up the dome.

"Where are we?" she asked, still marvelling at the magnificence of the scenery.

"The important question, Miss Granger, is why are we here," Snape answered in clipped tones and gestured to her right. She turned around and gasped, covering her mouth in utter bewilderment and awe. There, in a small distance, stood a single tree. The tree. It looked like a regular mountain pine, but for a glowing iridescent film of rainbowy colours on its snow-covered branches, merging, joining and twining, like petrol stains in rain pools, with the exception of giving out an unearthly ethereal glow. The sight was breathtaking, and not only due to its beauty. The film on the snow was nothing other than a colony of rarest magical bacteria, their qualities for potions making as stunning as their price. A scoop of that snow could make up for the fairy circles loss in heaps and beyond.

Understanding dawned on her, and she beamed at the man standing next to her. Even his deadpan face couldn't take off her joy.

"You are, of course, perfectly aware that it takes two to collect the snow correctly. I'll let you have a few scoops as a reward for your help," Snape informed her shiftily and started for the tree.

She was, of course, perfectly aware that it was a blatant lie, but who was she to argue?

"How do *you* know of all these places?" she called to him cheerfully, shivering with cold and sweet anticipation and hurrying after him.

"Experience, Miss Granger," he answered, not looking back, and for some reason, she was absolutely sure he was smiling to himself.

As she trotted after him, scantily dressed for such harsh weather, feet sinking into untouched snow, but feeling elated and so happy, she wanted to hum something or other silly; she thought that she was going to be filthy rich tomorrow. But that wasn't the single most beautiful thing in her life any longer.

FIN