

One Day Like This

by Hannah_1888

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 1

'Mr. Newton, if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times...you must take care with your measurements! This has bought you another D; if your next potion is as abysmal as this, points will be lost. Do you understand?'

The young Hufflepuff nodded minutely and scampered out of the room. Hermione, who'd been watching from the doorway, followed the boy's exit with a sympathetic gaze.

'Did you have to be so harsh? He's only little.' She placed a pile of marked exam papers on the desk.

'Did you have to ask such a redundant question? When have I ever been concerned by such irrelevant trivialities as *size*?' He looked at her as one would a bothersome child.

Hermione shrugged ruefully.

'So, what are the marks like for those tests?' Snape nodded towards the pile of parchments.

Hermione picked up a few of the second-year papers. 'Not too bad, actually; a couple of students, Wilde and Blackburn, I believe, managed Trolls...'

'Ah... Gryffindors.'

'Yes, *Gryffindors*.' Hermione glared at him briefly. 'Otherwise, the majority achieved Acceptables, or higher.'

He took the pile off her and pulled his second-year register towards him. 'Capital. There's the next lot for you.'

Hermione gave a sidelong glance at the new stack of parchments and sighed. '*Capital*.'

'Do I detect a note of dismay?'

'You do, Professor Snape; how very perspicacious of you.'

'Don't be facetious; now, take yourself off and do what you're paid for.'

'Yes, sir,' she muttered with a resigned smile.

Hermione collected up the papers and left the classroom just as the first few students trickled in for the next lesson. She walked the short distance to Snape's office and let herself inside, dumping her next load of marking on the table. Taking a quill and inkwell off his desk, Hermione settled herself down and opened the first paper.

Tick; tick; tick; cross; tick... She didn't mind it so much, really. Granted, it was monotonous, but Merlin, some of the answers she'd read had made her laugh so completely that she couldn't help but enjoy it.

'How should you stir a Shrinking Solution?'

With a stirring rod.

'List the properties of a Flobberworm.'

They wriggle about.

Snape, she'd noticed, never took any amusement from such ignorance, which was why she was always careful to maintain a stoic countenance whenever she marked work in his presence. It was a lesson she'd learnt early on.

Only a few weeks into her apprenticeship, when the whole experience was still awkward and new, she'd accidentally burst out laughing as she'd read one student's essay attempt.

'What, may I ask, is so funny about that piece of work?' Snape had immediately demanded.

He'd practically whipped the parchment out of her hands, almost without her realising.

'Oh, well, I just thought their distillation diagram was rather sweet...'

He sent her a look. 'Miss Granger, I don't care whether the student has bothered to include a pointless drawing, which, I might add, looks like it was completed by a Blast-Ended Skrewt...this exercise is not meant to elicit amusement; unless you take it seriously I'll give you cauldrons to scrub...I'd be interested to see whether you find that funny.'

Slapping the parchment back in front of her, he had marched back to his desk.

Git.

Hermione had carried on reading until it was time to write the comments at the end. Obstinate, she'd written:

'I thought your diagram was lovely, Miss Bradshaw.'

She found that marking was quite relaxing, as well. Apart from the crackling of the fire, the room was silent. It had taken her some time to become comfortable in Snape's dark, cavernous office, but several months down the line and she didn't even notice the pickled creatures anymore.

That had been an amusing conversation, though.

'Professor,' she'd ventured, after plucking up the courage for over half an hour, 'why do you have such a... wonderful collection of pickled bits and pieces?'

'Are they not to your liking, Miss Granger?'

'Well... no.' Hermione had admitted.

'And there is your answer.'

'So, their main purpose is to strike fear and discomfort into unsuspecting students?'

'Ah, not *just* students; Minerva hasn't been down here in years.'

He was right; no one, apart from students, ever ventured down into the dungeons unless they could help it.

Hermione scratched out a big red O at the top of an exam paper. Besides, when she'd agreed to take on this position, she'd had no illusions that there wouldn't be any grunt-work involved. He hadn't actually made her scrub cauldrons, yet, so that was all right.

She worked steadily over the next hour and finished her task with several minutes to spare before the bell sounded, signalling the end of lessons and the start of the weekend. Her duties ended with that sound, as well, but she lingered over collecting up her things. She had nothing particularly to rush out for, after all.

She was placing the marked papers on Snape's desk when the door opened and the man himself entered.

'That's another week out of the way...only another four more to go until they bugger off home for Easter,' he muttered, throwing himself into his chair.

Hermione smiled briefly. 'I've finished the rest of the exams.'

She turned to go, but his voice recalled her attention.

'Actually, Miss Granger, I need to discuss something with you. Have a seat.'

Hermione obediently sat, eyebrows raised slightly in interest.

Snape wrenched open a drawer and rummaged around for several moments. He removed a folder that Hermione immediately recognised as her own.

'Severing my contract?' she asked wryly.

'Would that I could, Miss Granger; would that I could,' he responded long-sufferingly, but Hermione took no offence...she'd learnt to bear his repartee with good grace. 'Unfortunately, it is likely I would be lynched if I did such a thing.'

He opened the folder and pulled out a sheet of parchment. 'In fact, I have been informed that, despite the many demands already upon a teacher's time, in the spirit of ministerial bureaucracy and red tape, we have to have a discussion to evaluate and appraise your progress thus far.'

'My progress? It sounds like I'm on probation or something.'

He ignored her attempt at humour and dipped his quill into an inkpot. 'Well, let's see.' His voice sounded bored and flat. 'Right; what were your reasons for choosing to take up an apprenticeship in the first place?'

Hermione laughed shortly and a tad bitterly. 'I don't think you've got enough space there, Professor.'

Snape looked at her and his expression relaxed a fraction. 'No doubt you are correct.'

Her apprenticeship; now that was an interesting story and a long one at that. She'd rather fallen into it quite by accident, but, in hindsight, she was glad she had.

'The Ministry don't need to know the details...'

'No, I suppose not...' she agreed.

'I'll fill in the blanks, shall I?'

Hermione nodded her acquiescence.

Snape began scratching the quill across the parchment, speaking aloud as he did so. 'I could not, in all conscience, pass up the chance of a lifetime to study with Professor Severus Snape.'

Hermione snorted, not unkindly. 'If you say so.'

Inwardly, she was rather grateful they could play fast and loose with the truth.

He smirked. 'Now then, do you feel the programme of study is proving beneficial?'

'Um, hmm, beneficial, you say...' She tapped her knee thoughtfully.

'I need not point out that whatever you say will reflect upon me.'

Hermione smiled inwardly. 'Is that a warning?'

He shrugged. 'We'll call it a friendly one.'

'Fair enough,' she said with a quiet chuckle. 'All right, yes, it has... it's proving beneficial...I'm learning a great deal.'

'What, if anything, have you learnt about yourself? Oh, for Merlin's sake, this is a pointless waste of time!'

There was a grim look on his face as he scanned through the rest of the document.

'Now, sir, it is important that we reflect from time to time...it is important for our personal development.'

Snape scowled. 'You've been reading my latest memorandum from the Ministry, haven't you? I thought I'd burnt it.'

Hermione ignored him and thought for a moment. 'I have learnt a lot about myself recently, of course I have, but with regard to my studies, I suppose I've learnt not to take myself too seriously.' She quirked the corner of her mouth self-consciously. 'What's the use of acquiring all this knowledge if you have no one to share it with?'

'Are you coveting my job, Miss Granger?'

'No, not quite, but I've been considering the possibility of going into teaching, in some sort of capacity, anyway.'

'Well,' he began, 'if you ever need reasons why you should *not* go into teaching, you know where to find me. Now then, I must fill in this next part by myself, and you must fill in this section, highlighting if there are any particular issues or concerns you wish to raise at this present time.'

He held the parchment out to her, but Hermione made no move to take it.

'It is fine.' She shook her head briefly. 'There aren't any issues or problems that I wish to address.'

He looked at her calculatingly. 'Very well, I shall complete the details and owl it off to the Ministry forthwith.'

'Thank you, sir. If that is all, I'll wish you a good weekend.' Hermione got up to leave.

'You too, Miss Granger,' he replied distantly, as he began writing once more.

She watched for a moment, deciding there wasn't much she wouldn't give to know what it was that he felt compelled to put down for the Ministry.

She closed the door behind her and walked slowly down the dim corridor. What would she do this weekend? The usual, no doubt; spend a few hours in the library, do some work on her research dissertation, possibly stroll down into Hogsmeade, and then, of course, her appointment in the Infirmary with Madam Pomfrey.

It was mostly the same pattern every weekend, but Hermione could not summon the energy to feel sorry for herself.

If not happy, she was content, and that, she resolved, was enough.

'How are you, my dear?'

Hermione sat down on a bed in the empty infirmary and smiled at the mediwitch.

'I feel quite well, actually, Poppy.'

Poppy Pomfrey produced her wand and began waving it over Hermione. 'Good, I'm glad to hear it. Let us see what the spell tells us.'

Hermione waited patiently as the older woman moved around her.

'That curse is definitely diminishing nicely. At this progress, I shouldn't wonder that it will dissipate for good in the near future.'

'I really hope so.'

'Now then, have you tried any magic lately?'

Removing her wand from her sleeve, Hermione looked at it contemplatively. 'No, I... I haven't really needed to... I hate feeling so wrung out after casting just a few ordinary spells.'

Poppy sat down opposite her. 'You should probably get back into the habit casting a few spells each day...just some simple spells, nothing too strenuous. Your magical strength is returning and it will help your body get used to it again.'

Hermione nodded.

'If you do that for the coming week, keeping account of how you feel from day to day, next time, we will discuss how it has gone.'

'I will do that.'

'Good girl...now, if you do feel significantly different during the course of the week, inform me immediately, all right? You'll be back to normal very soon, I'm sure of it.'
Poppy patted her on the shoulder and got up.

'Thanks, Poppy.'

Hermione left the Infirmary, grateful for the mediwitch's optimism. Once inside her rooms, she pulled out her wand and aimed it at the pile of books on her bedside table. She was always afraid that, despite whatever the level of her magical strength was at that current time, she would suddenly find it had disappeared altogether. She knew it was silly to think like that, but still...

'Wingardium Leviosa.'

The books levitated easily up into the air and hovered when she stilled her wand movements. After a moment, she lowered her wand and the books slammed onto the table with a thud. Sitting down, she stared at them ponderingly. She felt fine, but *Wingardium Leviosa* really was the simplest of spells...it was one of the first spells taught at Hogwarts.

The last time she'd tried magic at regular intervals, she'd worn herself out for several days. Even then, it had only been a few basic Summoning and Banishing charms.

Hermione lay back and gazed up at the canopy of her bed. A soft thump surprised her, and she turned her head to find Crookshanks had leapt up beside her.

'All right, Crooks?' she crooned to the ginger cat, stroking his fur soothingly.

He purred and rubbed his head gratefully into her hand.

For six months she'd been without full use of her magic. Six months since she'd been, well *attacked* was the only way to describe it. The work of an, admittedly, unbalanced relative of an imprisoned Death Eater seeking whatever vengeance they could. The attack hadn't been personal, as such...it was Hermione's misfortune that she'd been the one to cross paths with them first.

It had all happened so very quickly. One minute she had been walking through Diagon Alley, and the next, everything had gone black.

She often consoled herself with the knowledge that it could have been worse...much worse.

She had known nothing until she'd woken up in St. Mungo's, a few hours later.

Ginny was at her bedside. 'Hermione, thank Merlin!'

She blinked in confusion, feeling unaccountably drowsy. 'What the hell...?'

'You were attacked, Hermione, cursed by someone.'

'In the middle of Diagon Alley?'

Ginny nodded.

'Who?'

'We're not sure, but it looks like it might be a... rogue Death Eater or something from the curse they used. Harry and Ron were here, but they've gone out to help search for whoever it was.'

Hermione stared at her friend in shock. 'Well, what did they curse me with?'

Ginny shook her head and raised her hands helplessly. 'We don't know exactly; well, the Healer's didn't, so they contacted Snape.' Her eyes were wide.

This time, Hermione froze. 'What?'

How bad was it that they had to get Snape in? Visions of Dumbledore's blackened hand swam in front of her eyes.

'He's here with Professor McGonagall. He did something with his wand earlier, but they're waiting for you to wake up.'

Hermione was about to tell Ginny to go and get them when the door opened and in walked a Healer, Minerva McGonagall, and her former Potions master.

'What is wrong with me?' she demanded, a little querulously.

The Healer glanced at Snape, and the dark man stepped forward.

'Stand up,' he ordered, without preamble.

Hermione hauled herself into a sitting position. 'Stand up... why?'

'Miss Granger, just stand up.'

Hermione bit back a frustrated sigh and got to her feet. She looked at him expectantly.

'The only way for us to determine the curse you were hit with, is for you to demonstrate a spell for us.'

She frowned; what was he on about? Taking out her wand, still stowed up her sleeve, she opened her mouth.

'Expecto...'

'I'd choose something simple, if I were you,' Snape interrupted cryptically.

Hermione paused with uncertainty.

'Levitate that glass of water, there, on the table.'

She aimed her wand at the glass and silently cast *Wingardium Leviosa*.

Nothing happened.

Immediately, Hermione felt her cheeks flush crimson.

'*Wingardium Leviosa*,' she said, out loud this time. The glass rattled slightly, but it didn't lift into the air one inch.

'What is wrong with me?' she gasped, turning a distressed glance to Snape, who had been watching the glass carefully.

'*Wingardium Leviosa!*' Hermione all but shouted.

The glass shook harder, but she hardly had time to notice before a wave of nausea overtook her.

Slumping onto the bed, Hermione breathed deeply and steadily. Ginny's hand was on her shoulder, guiding her to lay back and put her head on the pillows.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. When she opened them again, Snape was standing over her, his wand outstretched.

'It is as I suspected; the curse is one that attacks a person's magic...attaches itself to it in a most debilitating way.'

She stared up at him incredulously. 'Am I... am I going *to die*?'

Ginny flinched.

'Not today, Miss Granger. The curse is not designed to rob you of your life...it means to rob you of your magical ability.'

'Oh, is that all?' she muttered, angered, somewhat, by his indifferent tone.

His eyes narrowed, and she looked away, wishing she hadn't said anything. She turned her attention to the others.

'So, what... Does this mean it's gone? I can't do magic anymore?'

Snape put his wand inside his robe, and shook his head minutely. 'No, though we were unsure what we were dealing with at the beginning, I nevertheless managed to halt the curse's progress, and thus, its effect on your system. By containing it, I have been able to use a counter-curse that, if I surmise correctly, should allow the curse to dissipate with time. You will, therefore, suffer only temporary difficulties.'

'Surmise? You do not know for certain?'

'I do not.'

'How long could it take for the curse to dissipate?'

Snape shrugged. 'Could be weeks... could be months.'

'Months?'

The Healer began speaking. 'Miss Granger, it is advisable that you do not attempt any magic, especially in the next few weeks, until your system begins to recover. Even then, you will have to limit your usage; you will tire easily and possibly make yourself ill.'

Hermione closed her eyes, hardly believing this was happening to her. She was aware of a movement, and her eyes flicked open.

Snape was leaving.

'Sir! Thank you,' she called, feeling a rush of gratitude. She knew she would no longer be a witch, were it not for him.

He nodded briefly and then disappeared.

'What the hell am I going to do for months without my magic?'

Ginny bit her lip.

'That's assuming it comes back!'

McGonagall stepped up to her bed. 'My dear, I think you can safely assume that it will. Severus' surmises are practically a guarantee...he's rarely wrong about this sort of thing.'

Hermione nodded, feeling herself calm slightly. 'Thank you, Professor. I appreciate you coming here, as well.'

'You're welcome.'

'I'll be all right...I managed without magic till I was eleven; I can manage without it again.' The two women smiled at her encouragingly, but Hermione knew what they were thinking...her circumstances were significantly different from what they were when she had been eleven.

'Severus thinks it best to inform as few people as possible about your ailment, Miss Granger. I'm inclined to agree with him.'

Hermione suddenly felt terribly vulnerable. 'You don't think they'll try and...'

'They'll catch them, Hermione,' stated Ginny confidently.

'I just think it's best to be careful,' McGonagall placated gently. 'Now, if you ever need anything, you just send me an owl, all right?'

How prophetic those words would prove to be.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for beta reading this :)

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 2

'Here is your essay back, Miss Granger.'

Hermione looked up from where she was currently replenishing the ingredients in the student cupboard, and her stomach jumped uncomfortably. No matter how old she got, she realised she would never quite get rid of the fear of failure. She always managed to do well; yet she always wondered if there would come a time when she would trip up spectacularly. It was a feeling that had only become magnified since becoming an apprentice...she had no peers for her work to be compared against; it was just her.

Snape placed down the scroll on the bench beside her and moved to sit behind his desk. She stared at the parchment with a frown. It was no good trying to determine from his demeanour whether she had done well or not. He, very much, kept his opinions for the page, though rarely were they particularly praiseworthy.

Hermione snatched up the parchment and unrolled it. She hadn't failed. There were, however, several instances of spiky, red handwriting on the pages, and she scanned through them, biting her lip. Rolling the parchment back up, she looked over at Snape who was marking a long line of potions; a small smile formed and she cleared her throat carefully.

'You know, sir, I can tell when you start correcting my punctuation that you're otherwise impressed with my work,' she said, without conceit.

Snape looked up with a raised eyebrow. 'I'd be more impressed if you put your commas in the right place.'

'Most of them *were*,' she countered.

'Pity about that mistake in your bibliography, though, wasn't it? Where you put Davies and Daniels in the wrong order.'

Hermione ripped open the scroll once more. 'Ah, yes; trust *you* to notice that.'

Damn! What a silly mistake for her to make!

'Fancy someone of your age being alphabetically-challenged.'

'Quite.' Hermione tried not to smile as she turned her attention back to the store cupboard. She pulled out the box of Bicorn horns and grimaced.

'Ugh! When was the last time this cupboard was cleaned out?' Hermione blindly reached to the back and pulled out another box. 'These Mer-scales look like they've been in here since I was a student.'

'If that's the box that feels slightly damp, then they've been there *since* I was a student.'

Hermione quickly placed the box back and shuddered. She felt her wand in her sleeve and wondered if she should try a few cleaning spells to eradicate the dust and cobwebs. Her fingers had closed around the end of her wand when she realised that Snape had joined her. She relinquished her grip. The last thing she wanted to do was to show weakness in front of him, which was silly, really, as he obviously knew all about it.

He picked up a handful of scales. 'They're probably all right, but might as well bin them now, just in case.' He also reached into the back of the cupboard, pulling out a jar that Hermione, for the life of her, could not imagine what it had originally contained. Whatever it had been, it had now turned to slime.

'Don't open it!' she protested, when he put his hand on the lid.

He tipped the jar sideways. 'Judging from the consistency... and the brownish tinge, I would say this is a very old jar of spleens.'

'Lovely,' commented Hermione tightly, turning away from the movement of the slime within the jar.

Snape put his hand up into one of the top shelves. 'Hmm, this feels interesting.'

She braced herself.

He removed another dusty box and opened it. 'Just some owl claws, and, ah, look: a spider.'

Hermione watched the spider scamper hurriedly around the box and she shivered, taking an involuntary step backwards.

Snape replaced the lid. 'Well, I'll leave you to it.'

She opened her mouth to object, but he'd already turned on his heel and left the room. Hermione stared at the door and grimaced. What had she said about not scrubbing cauldrons? She sighed, gingerly pushing the box with the spider in it away from her.

She shouldn't have teased him about her essay.

It was surprising, really, how quickly she'd fallen into the habit of not using magic. She could have spent the immediate weeks following the incident in Diagon Alley feeling distinctly sorry for herself, but owing to her rather determined nature, Hermione had simply got on with it. That was not to say it hadn't been hard to begin with.

Neither did it mean that she didn't long for her magic to return. She missed being able to Apparate; she missed being able to use everyday charms; she missed the comfort and security of her magic, a sharp reminder, Hermione realised, of how heavily reliant she had become on it.

She stirred her potion thoughtfully. Maybe she was now on the way to getting back to normal...none of her spells had completely failed her for some time. Still, no matter what anyone said, there remained a nagging doubt in her mind that the curse would never go...that it had caused irrevocable damage. She tried not to think so negatively, but she couldn't help it sometimes.

Hermione turned down the heat under her cauldron and, sitting down on her stool, she waited while her brew simmered for several minutes. Removing her wand, she looked around the empty classroom.

'Accio vial.'

The little glass vial flew swiftly into her hand. Hermione paused, as she often did after casting spells, to assess herself.

She felt fine.

'Engorgio.'

The vial grew to twice its former size. She had just finished transfiguring the vial into a test-tube when Snape entered. She noticed his eyes flick to her wand, and she put it down on the table.

'My rooms are full of partially transfigured objects,' she commented, with a wry quirk of her lips.

He didn't say anything; he merely crossed to his bookshelf and started flicking through a book. Hermione turned her attention back to her potion, unfazed. He was often in a mood that meant less talk, more silence.

Briefly, she toyed with the idea of transfiguring the test-tube back into a vial, but she was afraid to push herself too much, and heeding Poppy's advice seemed best.

She added the remaining ingredients to her cauldron and proceeded to ladle some into a flask. Once stoppered and labelled, Hermione took her finished product over to Snape's desk for inspection.

'Done,' she said simply.

'Very well,' he acknowledged, not really looking up from his work.

Hermione was about to return to her bench to clear away her equipment, when she caught sight of Snape's folded up *Prophet*. There was one small image that caused her to stop and stare. It was of Ron, and underneath it simply said '*page five*'.

'Um, do you mind if I...?' Hermione motioned to the newspaper.

'Go ahead,' he replied, waving his hand impatiently.

She took the paper and sat down. With a deep breath, she flicked straight through to page five. Being the close friend of Harry Potter, and helping to defeat a Dark wizard at only eighteen, meant that the Wizarding press often showed an interest in their lives, much to Hermione's consternation. Though, now she managed to avoid such speculation, secluded, as she was, in a remote castle. Still, she hadn't always got off lightly. Her attack had featured in it, thankfully, without reference to the full extent of her injuries, but the most infuriating article about her had appeared a short while after that.

Now, she was looking at a picture of Ron and the cause of that infuriating article...his current girlfriend, Lavender Brown.

Hermione would like to say that it was because of Lavender, entirely, that she and Ron had split up, but while it had proved to be the final straw, there were other mitigating factors. Going back to Hogwarts to complete her N.E.W.T.s had put a strain on their relationship, though a traitorous voice always reminded her that Harry and Ginny had managed while Ginny had returned to Hogwarts.

That's what the paper had said, anyway, when they heard of the split...that Ron had become close to Lavender, again, while she'd been away. Ron didn't deny it, though he was adamant he hadn't cheated on her. They'd finally broken up a few weeks after Hermione had lost her magic. Ron had been supportive during that time, but she'd been so fed up, full of frustration trying to get used to life without using magic, and full of self-pity at having to give up her fledgling career at the Ministry.

That was what had disappointed her the most...leaving her job. No doubt, her boss would have understood her predicament, had she notified them of her true circumstances, but she was reluctant to tell anyone else about it. Even now, months later, there were still only a handful of people who knew of her problem. Besides, she'd had no idea when her magic would return and could hardly expect her job to remain open indefinitely. So, she'd resigned.

Eventually, as her relationship with Ron deteriorated further, Ron suggested they cool things off for a while, and Hermione hadn't really protested. It was when, however, she saw the huge picture of Ron and Lavender sharing a moment, published in the *Prophet* with accompanying commentary by Rita Skeeter, that she felt it: the hurt...the realisation that she had made a complete mess of things, and the possibility that Ron had not loved her as much as she thought he had. Otherwise, why would he do this to her, only a couple of weeks after their separation?

Skeeter had seized the story and run with it; according to her, Ron and Lavender had been seeing each other for ages. Ron had apologised profusely afterwards, offering to try and get the *Prophet* to write a retraction. She'd just told him to leave her alone. So what if everyone thought she'd driven him away? So what if they thought she'd been cheated on? She didn't doubt that Skeeter had hit on an element of truth in there somewhere.

Hermione stared at the page before her. A part of her still felt resentment, but it didn't hurt so much to look at them anymore.

She snapped out of her reverie when a black-clad arm reached around her and picked up the newspaper. Hermione felt herself flushing, and she fervently wished that she'd taken it to her rooms to look at in private.

Snape studied the page for a moment, and Hermione tensed, wondering if he would condescend to pass judgement upon it...idle gossip was not an interest of his, by any stretch of the imagination.

'Never were two people more eminently suited,' he said finally.

Hermione spun round on her stool. '*I'm sorry?*'

'Well,' he replied, glancing between her and the paper, 'neither has two brain cells to rub together...'

She chuckled lightly. 'Lavender doesn't need *brains* to get by on.'

Snape shook his head. 'No, indeed; she's certainly found a novel way to peddle her wares.'

'That's one way of putting it...the Wizarding world's first glamour model.' Hermione frowned at the bitterness in her tone.

'Minerva nearly had a heart attack when she opened *Witch Weekly*, only to find Miss Brown advertising Twilfitt and Tatting's new range of lingerie.'

Hermione felt a faint heat rise in her cheeks at the thought that he might have looked at Lavender's more provocative escapades as a model. 'You seem to know an awful lot about it, Professor,' she said, a bit stiffly. 'Perhaps you are impressed by her *wares*?'

She couldn't believe she'd actually asked him that.

Fortunately, he seemed to take her tone to be more teasing than she had actually intended, for he simply smirked and folded up the paper. 'Ah, now, that would be telling, wouldn't it, Miss Granger?'

On balance, she would have preferred a straightforward denial.

'Just don't go looking in my bottom desk drawer, hmm?'

She openly gaped at him as he nonchalantly glided out of the room. He was joking, surely? Her gaze, unwittingly, was drawn to his desk, and she scoffed to herself.

He liked to throw her off-balance now and again...it was just one of his funny ways.

Hermione picked up the paper again and studied the picture of Lavender and Ron. After a moment, she shook her head and slapped it back onto the table.

No, she couldn't believe it.

There was no way in hell Severus Snape had lowbrow magazines stored in the bottom drawer of his desk!

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

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 20

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Chapter 3

For the next few days, Hermione found that Ron and her other friends remained on her mind a great deal. She often wrote to Harry and Ginny, though she hadn't seen them in a while. As for Ron, she'd neither seen him nor corresponded with him for several months. She missed them all, but couldn't help but wonder if the break from them had done her good.

Certainly, her bitterness towards Ron had lessened to the point where she was sure that she would like to rebuild their friendship in the future, and she believed it was the distance that had done it. Thus, part of her was now rather glad that circumstances had conspired to set her on course to Hogwarts, because things could have turned out *quite* different.

After the Ron debacle, and the subsequent fallout, Hermione had seriously contemplated moving back into her parents' house and finding a job in the Muggle world...she had to earn money somehow, after all. There it wouldn't matter about her lack of magic, and no one would be looking at her pityingly for losing her boyfriend to a glamorous 'model.'

Almost immediately, an obstacle presented itself...she had no Muggle academic qualifications to speak of. She'd been considering whether to get Harry or Ginny to magically fabricate a C.V. for her when she remembered Professor McGonagall's offer of assistance. She was sure her old Head of House would write her a reference that would aid her in the Muggle world.

She hadn't waited long for a reply...McGonagall had written back promptly, but there was no reference, only a request that Hermione should come and see her at Hogwarts.

She could remember her visit quite vividly.

Ginny Apparated her to Hogsmeade, saving her the tediously long train journey, and she was met at the gates by Hagrid. He escorted her to the Headmistress' office, giving her the password so that she might travel up the moving staircase.

'Miss Granger! I'm so pleased to see you again. How are you?'

Hermione smiled. 'I'm... I'm OK, Professor, thank you. I hope you are well.'

'Oh, very well, thank you. Now, take a seat.'

She sat.

'What is all this about returning to the Muggle world?'

There was to be no beating about the bush, then. 'Well, as I'm sure you can appreciate, Professor, I am having difficulty finding a job that does not require regular use of a wand...'

McGonagall smiled understandingly. 'Well, I'm sure we can find you something that doesn't warrant a return to the Muggle world! I know that is where you were brought up, Miss Granger, but you don't really want to turn your back on magic?'

'Of course not, and I don't mean to stay away for good, but what can I do? We are trying to keep it a secret. I'm thinking a break would do me good, anyway.' Hermione shifted in her chair uncomfortably, still feeling the sting of having part of her private life bandied about in newspapers.

'Your magic will return, my dear. Of that I have no doubt.'

'I hope so.'

'I have been thinking, and I believe I have the perfect solution for you.' McGonagall paused as the door opened.

'You wanted to see me, Minerva?'

Hermione stilled at the sound of Severus Snape's voice.

'Severus, I am trying to solve a problem of Miss Granger's...her current lack of an occupation. Take a seat.'

Snape sat with a brief nod in her direction. Hermione managed a quick quirk of her lips, unsure why his presence was needed. Snape's thoughts seemed to be on the same track.

'Forgive me, but why do I need to be involved in this little discussion?'

'Because, you are my Deputy, Severus, and I wish to hear your thoughts,' replied McGonagall serenely. 'I am to offer Miss Granger an apprenticeship.'

'An apprenticeship?' Hermione repeated.

McGonagall nodded enthusiastically.

Hermione gave a confused laugh. 'But I can't use my wand...'

'I know...'

'Well, I'd only be able to do Muggle Studies or... Oh...'. She paused as realisation hit her. 'Potions,' she said quietly, looking apprehensively at the man next to her.

He had his hand over his eyes and sighed loudly before speaking.

'Minerva, no one at Hogwarts has taken on an apprentice in years...there has been little call for such positions. Does the Ministry even still allow for such an arrangement anymore?' Hope tinged his voice, much to Hermione's consternation.

'Of course they do!' McGonagall looked over her glasses at Hermione. 'The bursary they provide is not excessive, but that reflects the fact that you will incur no living costs at Hogwarts.'

'You enjoyed Potions, didn't you?' McGonagall pressed further when Hermione remained silent.

'Well, yes...'. Hermione conceded carefully.

'Minerva, I haven't the time to...'

'Severus, of course you have the time! In fact, having Hermione around will free up your time...she can help with classes, and your marking and so on, whilst she is working on her project.'

Snape scowled deeply.

'That is all your duties will be, Miss Granger. You will carry out a research project...whatever you like...whilst occasionally helping out with Severus' duties. I need not tell you that such a qualification will go very far in the Wizarding world.'

Hermione bit her lip. She had no doubt that studying for a year with Severus Snape, of all people, would garner a certain amount of respect. It would also provide her with a significant sense of achievement, as well; how could it not? Who knew what she would have to contend with if spending six years as his student was anything to go by! Talk about showing strength of character!

'Professor, while I am very appreciative of such an offer, indeed, I just... I'm not sure it is what I want to do. I would not want to put Professor Snape to any particular trouble, especially if my heart weren't really in it.'

Truthfully, the idea did hold some appeal. Hogwarts was the perfect place to get away from it all, but could she hack it with Snape for a whole year? And the last thing she wanted was for Snape to be *forced* to take her on, which was how it was looking.

If only she could apprentice with Professor Flitwick!

'Don't worry about Severus...he doesn't mind,' McGonagall brushed off flippantly, and at the loud huff of disagreement next to her, Hermione felt even more uncomfortable.

'May I have some time to think about it?'

The Headmistress nodded. 'Certainly!'

Hermione smiled gratefully. 'Thank you; I'll let you know my decision in a few days, then.'

She didn't need to think about it...she would have to say no. She was gratified by McGonagall's offer, as well as her obvious desire to help her, very much so, but she had no interest in being foisted upon someone out of pity. Besides, she owed Snape, so inflicting herself upon him against his will would not be conducive to redressing that balance.

Hermione made her goodbyes. Snape said nothing and she began walking back down into Hogsmeade where Ginny was waiting for her in the Three Broomsticks. The day had not been wasted, by any means, but she was still very much none the wiser as to what she was going to do with herself.

It was a letter that eventually helped to change her outlook on the idea of apprenticing at Hogwarts.

For a few days, Hermione had bided her time before visiting Hogwarts with a view to respectfully decline the offer of an apprenticeship. It was during that time that the unfamiliar owl arrived.

Well, the owl had been unfamiliar, but the handwriting had not.

The only plausible reason Hermione could come up with for Severus Snape writing to her was that he felt more definitive action was needed...action to ensure she *did* impose upon his time and patience by accepting the Headmistress' offer. Therefore, she hesitated before unfolding the parchment.

Dear Miss Granger,

I am writing to you at the behest of Professor McGonagall. I am to inform you of my complete indifference as to whether you decide to take up the position of apprentice at Hogwarts, or, indeed, whether you do not. It would appear that I am also obliged to inform you that my indifference is entirely my own, and not as the result of any undue pressure from other quarters.

Yours sincerely,

Professor S. Snape

Deputy Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Her eyebrows had been practically in her hairline by the time she'd finished reading the short missive. If McGonagall had hoped this course of action would convince her of Snape's complicity, then she was sorely mistaken. She was now certain that McGonagall must have some sort of hold over him.

Still, what if there were a chance Snape would be willing to take her on? If that were the case, she found herself considering whether she really *did* want that chance. She'd never envisaged studying Potions beyond her N.E.W.T.s, but then, she'd never envisaged leaving her Ministry job after only a year, either.

Could she face life in the castle with all the teachers and all the kids? On the other hand, surrounding herself with a load of textbooks was rather appealing...

In the end, she'd gone back to Hogwarts with an idea as to how she would make her final decision. She would confront the Potions master, confident that he would speak to her frankly. Luckily, she'd happened upon him near the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmistress' office.

'Professor Snape!' she'd called down the corridor.

He paused and waited for her to reach him. 'What is it, Miss Granger?'

'Look, sir, about this apprenticeship... I really don't want to be a burden, I mean, even from your letter I can't help but think that you are agreeing to all this rather, um, begrudgingly...'

'You think I'm incapable of speaking my own mind?'

'Well, I just find it hard to believe that you would agree to something like this... willingly.'

'Are you implying that the Headmistress must have had me write that letter at wand-point, then?'

Hermione blinked. 'Not quite...'

'Perhaps she's blackmailing me?'

'No, I don't think...'

'Maybe she's even Imperio'd...'

'Severus!' The stone gargoyle moved and Minerva McGonagall stepped out from behind it. 'Stop aggravating Miss Granger.'

Snape looked away with a smirk.

'Have you made your decision, my dear?'

Hermione smoothed a hand over her hair. 'Well, I was just saying to Professor Snape that I have concerns about, ah, being a nuisance...'

'Wherever would you get that idea from?' the older woman blustered loudly. 'Tell her, Severus!'

Hermione shifted uncomfortably...fairly mortified as Snape's expression became exasperated.

'Miss Granger, I fail to understand why you are labouring under the delusion that you ever had any choice in this matter...that ~~either~~ of us had any choice in the matter...in the first place. Clearly, our esteemed Headmistress has decided that by hook or by crook, she'll have you back here.' He sighed heavily. 'For my own part, I will agree to have you as my apprentice... though, I will have some, ah, *stipulations*.'

'No doubt...' Hermione acknowledged, only a touch apprehensively.

McGonagall eyed her expectantly.

'Well, if Professor Snape is agreeable, then I think I'll accept.' She breathed deeply; Merlin, she hoped she would not regret it.

'Wonderful!' cried McGonagall. 'I shall contact the Ministry immediately so they can draw up the paperwork.'

She disappeared back up the staircase, and Hermione was left feeling rather dazed.

Snape began pacing up and down in front of her. 'Right then, Miss Granger...I shall want to see a research proposal within the next two weeks.'

Two weeks?

'Something befitting of an advanced level, involving both theoretical and practical work, *and* an idea that has some originality, but bear in mind we are *not* looking to reinvent the wheel, so reign in your flights of fancy...you will only shoot yourself in the foot. Examples of previous work may be found in the library, and believe me, I *will* recognise plagiarism when I see it.'

Hermione narrowed her eyes, affronted by his insinuations.

'Alongside your project and other duties, you will be tasked with essays to be completed on topics of my choosing. I will also teach you how to brew certain potions not covered under the N.E.W.T. curriculum. Failure to keep up with these tasks will result in a diminished final mark, regardless of the quality of your research project.'

When had she ever *not* completed work within required deadlines?

'As to your ambiguously termed 'other duties,' well, we will discuss them when I've decided what they shall be.'

His expression became distant, and Hermione wondered what delights he'd have in store for her.

'On commencing your work, you will be expected to come with a basic kit of ingredients, of which it is *your* responsibility to keep replenished. Your standard school cauldron will not be good enough; while the school has a selection of cauldron types, it is preferred that you try and get your own...the specifications of which I will forward to you in due course. You will be required to dress appropriately; you will be neither student nor staff, but that does not give you free reign to do as you please. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, you will be a representative of this school and will have a duty to behave in a manner befitting such.'

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. 'Very well,' she noted tightly, trying to assimilate all the information he'd just given her.

Suddenly, he was looking at her rather sternly. 'I am aware of your troubles, of course, and I know that you have been hesitant about taking up this position. Indeed, one might say that this is merely making the best of an unfortunate situation. I feel bound to warn you, Miss Granger, that I will not tolerate any half-heartedness on your part. If you don't feel you can commit yourself, I suggest you turn around and walk out of this castle right now. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly.'

And that had been that. Two weeks later, she'd returned to Hogwarts armed with, admittedly, *several* research ideas and fairly rippling with anticipation. The paperwork had been signed; Snape had had one more go at scaring her off...she was sure it hadn't been a coincidence that he'd showed her an abandoned room full of old, dirty, broken potions equipment and commented with deceptive flippancy that it could do with a clear out.

Within a short space of time, she'd moved into the castle, and her apprenticeship had begun. Regardless of her reasons for doing the apprenticeship in the first place, she knew she would try her very best. So, she couldn't say that she'd ever dreamed of studying as an apprentice, and so what if Potions had never been her most favourite subject in school? It was the challenge that appealed to her. Applying herself to such an interesting situation had really helped take her mind off the important issue of when her magic was going to return.

Though, that wasn't to say there hadn't been incidents along the way that conspired to preoccupy her mind with the curse that lingered inside her still. Those moments were becoming few and far between now; all the evidence was pointing towards a full recovery...very soon.

It would *have* to be soon; time was ticking on. She only had one more term to go at Hogwarts before her apprenticeship would end, and she would be back to square one. Still, her options would be much wider with a new qualification attached to her C.V. and the thought of her future exhilarated her.

This was all providing she actually qualified, of course.

She was sure that if her project were really rubbish, Snape would have said something, but he didn't say if it was good, either. Regularly, she handed in rough drafts of parts of her research for him to look at. He sometimes added annotations or corrections, but would it kill him just to say, 'This is coming along well, Miss Granger,' or something along those lines so she would know she was on the right track?

The only way she could determine his satisfaction with her work, she supposed, was through counting sarcastic comments. If there were none, Hermione generally took it to mean that it was fine. It had taken her a while, but she'd come to the realisation that, most of the time, it wasn't what Snape said, but rather what he didn't say that was suggestive.

Well, she would find out if her instincts were wrong when she got her marks back.

She was determined, though, to get at least *one* piece of praise from him before the school year was out, and nothing that could be construed as double-meaning, or back-handed, either. Him saying, 'Your potion is as it should be, though I think I might have aged ten years in the time it took you to complete it,' did not count.

Neither did the word 'adequate.' How Hermione hated that word! It always implied there was something more to be reached...something more to achieve; she wanted more than to just scrape by.

He loved words like that:

'That's an adequate attempt, Miss Granger.'

'Your potion is acceptable, sufficient, tolerable, reasonable, satisfactory...' The list went on; she wondered if he knew every synonym for the blasé adjective 'adequate.'

She wanted something clear and unequivocal...she'd be happy just with 'good.'

It had to be possible.

Surely?

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath, as always :)

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 4

Hermione often thought that being an apprentice at Hogwarts was, at times, a weird experience. Sometimes, she felt in a kind of limbo...not quite fitting in with the teachers, and indeed, not with the students, either. In many ways, she occupied a little niche of her own.

Naturally, many of those on the staff had more than made her feel welcome, especially those teachers who had taught her in the past. McGonagall, particularly so, and then there was Hagrid, of course. Still, sitting with them at the High Table at dinner or in the staff room was sometimes rather... odd. Months down the line, she still often felt it. The staff room was the worst...it tended to be rather cliquey. It hadn't taken Hermione long to work out the little groups and patterns.

There were those who rarely, if ever, used the staff room for socialising...Professors Sinistra and Trelawney to name but two. Hagrid, similarly, was often absent, though not because he was the retiring type...he was just too big. Professor McGonagall, as the Headmistress, was usually only there in the evenings, but when she was, she divided her time amongst everyone...it was her duty.

Madam Hooch, Professors Flitwick, Vector and Sprout, and sometimes Madam Pomfrey, tended to congregate together. Hermione termed them the 'regulars,' having known them all as a student. She enjoyed their company, but there was no getting away from the fact that they were a lot older than her and, as such, they had limited interests in common. Joining in conversations with them often meant sitting on the sidelines.

Then, there were the relatively new additions to the staff...new teachers for Transfiguration, Defence, and Muggle Studies. Hermione could understand why they appeared to have banded together...it was intimidating enough starting a new job without having to deal with colleagues who'd known each other for years and years.

Despite also being new, and quite near in age to the Muggle Studies teacher, Hermione didn't feel part of their group, either, and actually, she was fine with it. In fact, she was sure some of them rather looked down on her as just another student, only with certain privileges. Theoretically, she supposed they were right.

Snape occupied a rather unique position. He often sat alone reading, usually in the quietest part of the room. However, though he was also much younger than the older staff, he had the advantage of nearly twenty years of teaching at Hogwarts and could seamlessly attach himself to the 'regulars' should he be so inclined to.

It was all very hierarchical and it amused her to observe.

For her own part, regardless of whether she 'fitted in' anywhere, Hermione liked to sit in the staff room, even if it was just to read. It was nice just to be amongst people...she found her rooms could become rather lonely, even with Crookshanks.

Today, there was an empty armchair next to her Potions master...there often was...and she unobtrusively folded herself into it. The only acknowledgement she received from him was in the form of a brief glance up from his *Daily Prophet*. Tucking her legs beneath her, she opened her book.

Hermione regularly chose such a seating arrangement, mostly because she didn't feel so awkward sitting next to him...she felt less out of place, in a way. She supposed it was because, through working with him, she had become more used to him than anyone else in the castle. Hermione did wonder, though, if she annoyed him by such actions. It wasn't that she attached herself to him all the time, but as he had to put up with her throughout the day, she wondered if maybe he'd like nothing more than to see the back of her during the evenings.

Just in case, she made sure she said as little as possible.

She was very much aware of the difference in how she felt about him now, compared to the beginning of her apprenticeship. Her very first week, especially, had been tense to say the least! She was sure she had said nary a word for the whole of that time. He would give her instructions in the morning, and she would get on with them quietly, tending to her potions with such exaggerated care as if afraid that she would suddenly say or do something to send him off into an angry tirade.

She had been convinced something major would happen to set him off. Many times, she had entertained visions of him storming up to McGonagall's office to announce that they could not work together. Clearly, that had not happened, but it hadn't been a particularly enjoyable time. In fact, it had rather tired her out being on her guard all day.

At the time, it had seemed like she would never get used to spending so much of her day in his company...the whole experience was just so foreign to her. As a student, classes with him had very much followed a simple, universal pattern...get in, keep your head down, and hopefully, get out unscathed, although Hermione had not *always* managed to stick to said pattern.

In essence, her main issue during those first few weeks was that she'd had no idea what to say to him. She could manage the occasional, 'Do you have any more Moonstone?' 'How long do you want my essay to be?' Other than that, she'd been at a loss. Snape didn't seem to have a problem with the atmosphere; quiet was more than acceptable to him, but when the forced silence became nigh on debilitating for Hermione, she realised something would have to give. She had to talk...otherwise she'd go mad.

It was her disability with regard to casting spells that eventually helped to dissolve the excessively formal and strained atmosphere. Early on, Hermione had discovered that while spell-work wasn't necessary in the making of potions, as such, it was easy to forget how often it was necessary when cleaning up spillages, spoiled brews, and so on.

Once, she'd accidentally dropped a vial and had been picking up the broken pieces when Snape walked in, looking fairly harassed following his last lesson of the day.

'Miss Granger,' he'd demanded briskly, 'what on earth are you doing?'

She'd flushed and placed the broken glass onto the table. 'Well, I can't...*Reparo* it back together...'

He'd paused and sighed. 'Of course you can't.' He repaired the vial within a matter of seconds. 'Look, if you need to help with certain spells, then just ask...I'm not going to bite your head off; it's not your fault, after all.'

Hermione nodded.

'Just need to learn to leave your pride at the door.'

She'd fixed him with a surprised look and laughed briefly. 'Yes, that is true.' Her pride certainly did ache at the thought of having to ask someone to cast a simple *Reparo* charm for her.

Still, despite his words about not biting her head off, there had been times when he'd done precisely that. Not long after the vial incident, Hermione had had need of his help once more. He'd been in his office, as he was every evening for an hour dedicated to Head of House duties while Hermione had been brewing a rather difficult antidote in the classroom. In a nutshell, she'd gone wrong somewhere along the line, and her potion looked dangerously close to exploding.

He hadn't been impressed when she'd gone to fetch him.

He had sighed deeply and muttered to himself as he left his office...unfortunately, she ended up catching something derogatory about having to "babysit Gryffindors".

'How could you have *possibly* gone wrong with this potion, Miss Granger? You have the instructions before you...it could not have been easier if I'd brewed the potion for you myself!'

Hermione had bitten her lip, sure that to defend herself would only provoke him further.

'I can assure you, Miss Granger, that I have better things to do with my time than run around clearing up your messes!'

'Look, I'm sorry, but I didn't do it on purpose, and believe me, if I could rectify it without *your* help I would!' She couldn't help herself; in hindsight she thought it must have been the build up of tension that had caused her to raise her voice.

Snape glared at her. 'So, how *did* you manage to buggery up such a potion, then? Are you aware of just how much Unicorn hair costs?'

He banished her mess with an impatient flick of his wand.

'I don't know...I followed *your* instructions.'

'Are you implying my instructions were wrong?' he demanded dangerously.

Hermione held her ground. 'You tell me.'

He scowled and swiftly turned his gaze to sweep over her table for several moments until he picked up a jar, seemingly at random, and sniffed it. 'No wonder your cauldron was about to explode...what the hell were you using crushed snake fangs for?'

'I wasn't!' she protested incredulously. Hermione grabbed the jar off him and turned it round, showing him the label. 'There, it says powdered Bicorn horn!'

'This is patently not Bicorn horn, Miss Granger! Can you not smell the difference between the two powders?'

'No, I never noticed...why should I when the jar is labelled Bicorn horn?'

'Where did you get this jar?'

'The student cupboard...from where you *told* me to get it!'

Comprehension seemed to dawn on Snape's face and he slammed the jar down onto the table. 'Little bastards...' he muttered harshly and yanked open the doors to the student cupboard. He began removing several boxes and jars.

'What's the matter?' Hermione asked in confusion.

He unscrewed the lid on a jar labelled 'crushed snake fangs', containing a similar white powder, and peered into it. *This* is the Bicorn horn!'

'The labels have been swapped?' She could sense the anger fairly radiating off him in waves.

'Bloody kids, they think they're so clever!' he hissed. 'Have you ever seen anything so irresponsible? To think of the accidents that could have been caused by this!' He ferociously ripped off the labels and changed them back to their correct positions. 'If I ever catch who is responsible...!'

'I'm sure they didn't mean any particular harm...they're just kids messing about.' If she thought she could calm him down like that, she was sorely misguided.

He rounded on her. 'You would excuse such reprehensible behaviour, would you, on the grounds that they're *kids*? Mind, I don't know why I should expect anything more from someone who condones the throwing of fireworks around a classroom.'

Hermione's eyes widened perceptibly.

'Well, thank you for confirming it for me. It wasn't a difficult deduction to make, once all the facts became known; a firework thrown, certain ingredients stolen, and then, several weeks down the line, Miss Granger ends up in a hospital bed...as a cat.'

Her cheeks flushed, and she averted her eyes. 'I agree, that incident was... regrettable.'

He snorted and turned back to the cupboard, rifling through the contents. 'I'm going to have to check through all of this, now,' he spat impatiently.

At the increasingly loud, fractious noise of jars clinking together, Hermione stepped forward. 'Look, I'll do it...I won't have time to start the potion again, after all.'

He paused and looked at her. 'Very well, then.'

Hermione was soon left alone, and she stared thoughtfully at the task before her. Well, at least she knew it wasn't her own fault that the potion had gone wrong, though, clearly, that didn't warrant an apology from Snape for going off on one.

Still, one thing did intrigue her...how long had he been waiting for an opportunity to throw her second-year Polyjuice mishap back in her face?

It was bust-ups like that, however, that helped to ease Hermione into becoming used to dealing with him on regular basis. They helped her to realise that she didn't have to be a doormat in her interaction with him. He wasn't going to put her in detention, or, at worse, send her packing, if she dared to speak out against him or stick up for herself. Of course, she was sure there were limits to his tolerance, but she simply wasn't interested in pushing him as far as to find out.

'Miss Granger?'

Hermione jolted out of her thoughts with a start. 'Sir?'

Snape put a hand inside his robe and pulled out a roll of parchment tied neatly with a ribbon. 'Work experience,' he said cryptically.

Hermione frowned. 'What about it?'

He wagged the scroll. 'A new brainwave from the quill-pushers at the Ministry...as part of your apprenticeship, they have decided you must complete at least thirty hours of work experience in order to qualify. The work must be Potions-related, of course.'

She fought not to sigh. 'Let me guess...I have to organise it all myself?'

'Naturally, although they have included a selection of establishments you may wish to try.'

Hermione took the parchment from him and unravelled it. 'Are you interested in the grass roots of potion-making and the procurement of ingredients? Slug and Jigger's Apothecary is Diagon Alley's premier supplier of first-class ingredients... blah, blah, blah,' she finished, rolling her eyes.

'What that actually means is...are you interested in shovelling entrails and bagging up all manner of delightful bits and pieces?'

She nodded in agreement. 'How about this one: Are you intrigued by the development and improvement of potion-making apparatus? Apply to Potage's Cauldron Shop for more information about this exciting field.'

'Ah, the exhilarating world of collapsible cauldrons, clamps, and crucibles.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows. 'Captivating, I'd imagine,' she said lightly.

'Completely.'

She bit back an amused smile. 'Well, the rest are not much better...'

'You aren't limited to those options...that scheme is eventually going to be aimed at N.E.W.T.-level students, hence the menial nature. St. Mungo's, for instance, has its own apothecary. I've no doubt the work there is far more challenging.'

Hermione considered the parchment thoughtfully, and then glanced around the staff room to ensure she couldn't be overheard. 'You know,' she began quietly, 'my magical strength is much improved, but something may catch me out here.'

Snape considered for a moment. 'I shouldn't think they would give you anything taxing to do, in that respect. In any case, I doubt you would suffer as adverse a reaction as you have in the past.'

Merlin, no; she fully expected not to ever have to suffer the indignity of such incidents again. Her worst experience with the side-effects of the curse, he had actually witnessed and, well, inadvertently caused, too.

That *damned* curse!

She'd been working in the office, quietly going through her project, when Snape had suddenly appeared around the door.

'Miss Granger, I need you to look after my class.'

Her insides froze. 'I'm sorry?'

'I need you to look after my third-years for a moment...the Headmistress requires my presence in her office,' he said impatiently.

Hermione cleared her throat. 'Look after them?' She was sure she sounded like an idiot.

'Yes! Come with me.'

She got up and mutely followed him the short distance to his classroom. Her heart began to pound irritably.

'I cannot leave them unattended...they are halfway through making a Strengthening Solution. Just keep an eye on them until I return. If I am not back by the bell, get them to bottle their mixtures for me.'

Hermione nodded dumbly, feeling her nerves jangle. She had no idea what to do with a classroom full of unpredictable children, especially those equipped with potentially volatile cauldrons! What if, after Snape left, they began to run wild?

'Miss Granger will be keeping an eye on you while I go and see the Headmistress. There is a barrel of horned slugs awaiting disembowelment for anyone who causes any trouble.'

Snape swept from the room, and Hermione was left standing there, staring at a sea of faces. Unsure of what to do with herself, she sat down in Snape's chair and mentally braced herself. She noticed that at his departure, tension seemed to visibly flow from the shoulders of many students. This worried her slightly, but when they all remained focused on their work, she felt herself relax. Hopefully, Snape's particular brand of discipline could be sustained from wherever he was in the castle.

There was half an hour to go until the bell went for the end of the lesson. After sitting there dumbly for a few minutes, she wondered if she should do something, like get up and walk around, for instance. Or, should she...

'Um, Miss Granger?'

Hermione's head snapped around; there was a student with a hand up.

'Yes?' She got up and approached the girl.

'I think I've chopped my Knotgrass wrong.'

Hermione looked at the chopping board. The Knotgrass had been entirely annihilated by the young girl's blade. 'All right; get some more, but this time shred the grass finely with the very tip of your knife, so that you don't lose so much of the sap. Get rid of that mess.' *Before Professor Snape sees it*

With one incident dealt with, another soon presented itself; indeed, it happened very suddenly.

There was a telltale sputtering noise, and Hermione, with dread, glanced to the other side of the room in time to see one boy's cauldron begin to bubble furiously. In a matter of seconds, it began overflowing and the metal of the cauldron started to buckle. Students near the botched potion stood up, and a hubbub of noise began to fill the room.

Without thinking about it, Hermione had her wand out. 'All right; keep still, everyone.' In quick succession, she had doused the heat under the cauldron, and Banished it completely. Then, the contents seeping across the table were gone; another flick of her wand and the mess that pooled on the floor had disappeared, too.

She paused and stared at what she'd just done, hardly daring to believe that her spells had actually worked.

'Is, ah, did anyone get any of the potion on them?'

'Yes, Miss...I've burnt my hand.'

'OK, go up and see Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing. Everyone else get back to work.'

It wasn't until she got back to Snape's desk that she realised that she was shaking. For a brief moment, she wondered if she'd get away with it, but then the dizziness began to seep into her senses, and she sat down with a deep breath.

'Once your potions are finished... can you please bottle them for Professor Snape.'

Her stomach was beginning to churn when Snape reappeared through the door, several moments later. The students were milling around their desks, collecting up their things, and Hermione was sure she'd never been so pleased to see him in her life.

He gave her a look as he moved to sort out the array of vials, ticking off the names on his register as each student left.

'What on earth is the matter?' he said quietly, out of the earshot of nearby students. 'You look as white as a sheet.'

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but closed it immediately. She shook her head briefly and looked away, afraid she was going to be sick in front of them all.

Once the last student had left, he spoke once more. 'Well?'

'I had to... use my wand... cauldron exploded...' Hermione sucked in her breaths deeply, stubbornly trying to keep the nausea at bay.

Snape frowned. 'Come, I will take you to Madam Pomfrey.'

Tentatively, she hauled herself to her feet and immediately clutched at the desk to steady herself. 'I won't be able to make it that far.'

'To my office then...I'll get you something to settle your stomach.'

Hermione said nothing; all her concentration was focused on appearing normal as they entered the corridor...just in case there were students about. Luckily, it was quiet as she steadily stepped towards the office. They were almost there when she felt her knees nearly buckle. Stopping, she automatically reached out and grabbed Snape's arm. She placed her other hand on the wall beside her for support.

'I just... need a minute.' Closing her eyes, she focused on her breathing once more, utterly determined that she would not be sick, or even collapse in front of him. He remained silent, and she was grateful for it. Finally, she loosened her grip on him to begin walking once more, but he curled his hand around her upper arm, instead.

'You look like you're on your last legs.'

Hermione laughed very weakly. 'I feel like it.'

Once inside the office, Snape Transfigured a chair into a settee, and she sunk down onto it with relief.

'Here, drink this...it'll settle your stomach.'

She drank the contents of the small vial gratefully and lay back with her eyes closed.

'Would you like me to fetch Madam Pomfrey?'

Hermione raised a hand to her forehead. 'No,' she sighed, 'there's not much she can do...I just need to sleep it off.'

She could feel the bile beginning to rise in her throat, and she concentrated with all her might on getting her roiling stomach under control. Soon, the potion began to work, and she could feel the sickness begin to ease. Sitting up, Hermione rubbed her throbbing temples. 'It was only a few Banishing charms, for Merlin's sake!' she muttered in frustration. She'd never felt so drained.

Snape cleared his throat. 'I should not have left you alone with them.'

Hermione looked up to where he was leaning against his desk. 'It's fine...it's good to know my spells are *working* now, actually.'

'I must say, you were particularly unlucky that Jabez Yaxley was so proficient with a wand...you appear to be feeling the effects a lot more strongly than I would have originally anticipated.'

She sank back into the settee and rested her head against the soft cushion, letting her eyelids droop. 'I know,' she said quietly. 'Madam Pomfrey says the trace of the curse is still quite strong inside me, and I hate thinking of it like that.' It did unsettle her greatly to know she had dark magic lingering inside her. 'Why does it have this effect on me? I've tried researching it, but I've found nothing.'

Snape shrugged and picked up a sand timer off his desk, turning it about in his hands. 'It's difficult to say, really,' he said pensively. 'There is little agreed consensus as to how magic works, as such. Casting a spell, even a simple spell, requires focus, power, energy...all of which, potentially, can strain the body. This is partly why children are not encouraged to use magic until they are older. To simplify matters, we may look at magic as an energy source that strengthens the body in biological terms; hence, magical folk live longer, and so on. Your source has been compromised to the point where your body is fighting against your magic because of the strain it causes when you use it.'

'So, it's like I'm sabotaging myself or something? The curse has suppressed my magic, and my body is reacting against it, in order that I don't cause ~~fur~~ further damage through using magic...kind of self-preservation, I suppose.'

He moved away from his desk and began scanning one of the many bookshelves that lined the office. 'The reason you have found no information on the curse is because I believe it to be of recent origin. There were murmurings of this type of curse being developed by Voldemort during his first rise to power...what he deemed an infinitely ironic punishment for those who sided with Muggles. Though, as far as I was aware, nothing ever came to fruition; not least because of Harry Potter putting an early kibosh on Voldemort's machinations.'

'However, that is not to say that developments were not made, whether by Voldemort himself or one of his Death Eaters. Clearly, Yaxley managed to obtain the spell from somewhere, as I highly doubt it was of his own creation, or Yaxley Senior's, for that matter. This book may help you to understand more generally about magical theory. It has been deemed pretentious twaddle by some, mainly because of the complex subject matter, but you may form your own conclusions.'

'Thank you.' She took the book and looked at it appreciatively...she wanted to start reading it straightaway, but a huge yawn reminded her of why she was there in the first place.

'Sorry, I'm not going to be of much use today...'

'Well, I'm sure I would have some tricky questions to face were I to let you collapse into your cauldron.'

She stood up slowly, grimacing as her head throbbed. 'I should be fine by tomorrow.'

And, basically, she had been. She'd gone to bed once back in her rooms and had slept non-stop till the following day. Thankfully, she'd also had the weekend to recover her footing.

Poppy had not been impressed when she found out about her state. Indeed, she'd come to her rooms, firmly assuring her that Snape wouldn't be leaving her alone with a class anytime soon...she'd seen to that!

All Hermione could think was *how embarrassing*...she could just imagine the mediwitch berating him.

That had been months ago, though, and she was sure she'd never have to suffer through that kind of discomfort again...she just had to stop fretting about it. Besides, getting back out there again, to the outside world, sounded like a good idea. More than that, she had to begin planning what she would do once she left Hogwarts, and this experience might point her in the right direction.

'You know, I think at this stage you needn't worry so much about people finding out about your difficulties...they need never know the true extent of the matter,' said Snape contemplatively. 'The secrecy was to ensure you were not presented as an easy target to further vengeful attack.'

'I suppose,' Hermione agreed. 'To be honest, I'm surprised no one has found out. I thought someone was bound to comment that they rarely see me with my wand out.'

'You give the students far more credit in terms of observational skills than I do.'

A twinkle formed in Hermione's eye. 'Now, this is interesting; I was unaware that you gave the children *any* credit at all.'

She felt, rather than saw his glare. It was always difficult to predict his response when she teased him, but she could never resist having a poke now and again. It was a novelty she was sure would never wear off, not now the odds of her getting away with it were much improved.

Snape picked up his paper once more. 'Tread carefully, Miss Granger; *very* carefully, indeed.'

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but he caught her gaze and raised an eyebrow at her.

Hermione found herself sobering, unexpectedly.

Hmm, maybe, he had a point.

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath for touching up this chapter :)

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 5

It was her Wednesday afternoon off, and Hermione was sitting in the staff room, flicking through the *Practical Potioneer* with a cup of tea. Snape had made her take out a subscription as soon as she'd started her work, telling her that if she relied solely on 'old, outdated tomes,' he would automatically deduct marks from her.

She'd owed Flourish and Blotts immediately.

The staff room was empty as the majority of teachers were still in lessons, but the door was shortly flung open with some force, revealing Elsie Reigate, the Muggle Studies teacher. Hermione smiled in polite acknowledgement and immediately returned her attention to the journal in front of her. She was surprised, however, when Reigate threw herself down into a chair next to her.

'How do you put up with it?' Reigate burst forth, shaking her head.

'I'm sorry?'

'How do you put up with *that man*, day in, day out?'

Hermione frowned slightly. 'Do you mean Professor Snape, by any chance?'

'Yes!'

'He's upset you, I take it?'

'He's just blown his top because during my lesson today, I had the actual temerity to deduct some points from his House! He had the gall to accuse me of not knowing the full story...as if he had actually been there! I've never met anyone so awful, I...'

'Well, everyone's entitled to their opinion,' interrupted Hermione diplomatically. She was not interested in criticising him behind his back.

'You should have seen the way he spoke to me! It's *my* prerogative to discipline students in my classes as I see fit!'

'Look, I've no doubt he can be rather... difficult.' Reigate snorted, but Hermione ignored her and continued. 'I'm sure he must have had some reason for taking this matter up with you.'

Reigate merely looked at her as if she'd just arrived from another planet. 'I see. Very well, then,' she said tightly, and abruptly moved off to the sideboard and preoccupied herself with the kettle.

Hermione rolled her eyes and turned to her journal once more. She was sure that there must have been a particular reason for Snape deciding to take issue with the lost points. He might favour his own students, but he wasn't one for letting *any* student get away with their wrongdoings.

If Reigate thought she could engage her in a spot of Snape-bashing, then she was wrong. Hermione had no particular issue with him, and, in some way, she felt it would be very two-faced of her if she did get involved.

She wondered if that meant she had become a bit fond of him, in her own way. Hermione supposed such a development should not come as a surprise, really. She worked with him on a regular basis, and he treated her reasonably well, so why shouldn't she come to feel a sense of friendliness towards him? She might even suggest that he felt the same towards her, but she considered that might be going a bit far.

He seemed to be able to tolerate her fairly well, and that was good enough for Hermione...it was a significant improvement! Really, though, it was difficult to ever know what was going on inside his head. One might say that over the course of her apprenticeship, she had made a kind of study of him, picking up on certain patterns, habits, and so on.

For instance, she now knew never to approach or antagonise him following his double-lesson with the fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins on Thursday afternoons...not if she didn't want a torrent of vitriol thrown at her. He invariably stormed into his office following that period with a proverbial black cloud over his head.

She'd never met anyone who found so many of their fellow human beings so utterly trying. Impatience came easy to him, and so when he began to speak in short, clipped tones, Hermione knew that it was best for her to also speak briefly and concisely...labouring her points would get her nowhere.

Of course, when he was in an unutterably bad mood, you didn't need to be the sharpest knife in the drawer to notice it...the warning signs were there for all to see. If possible, Hermione would always make for the nearest exit; often, however, she had been forced to weather the storm. There had been that time when she had been in the office and he'd flung open the door, all but throwing a student inside. Following them was the unmistakeable stench of dungbombs.

'I suggest you leave us, Miss Granger, while I deal with *this*.'

Hermione had looked between him and the quailing boy with concern. 'Um...'

'Out, Miss Granger!'

He, actually, rarely raised his voice, but when he did, it was best just to obey...life was easier that way.

The door slammed behind her and reverberated loudly down the corridor. She'd stood there for several minutes, debating whether to leave and come back later, when the door opened and the poor boy came trudging into the corridor looking faintly ill. She returned to her work, but that incident had cemented his ire, and for the rest of the afternoon, she had had to put up with snappy remarks, impatient sighs and a grim countenance.

Several weeks later, the boy was *still* in detention.

It had become easy for her to distinguish between the different levels of his bad moods; it was determining when he was in a good mood that was the problem, and she would definitely use the term 'good' loosely, but there were times when he was almost... agreeable. During those times, she could have a civilised conversation with him without mishap.

Those times she liked best, of course, but generally, though, if she wanted to say something, it was easier at times to just say it and hope for the best.

At dinner that evening, she sat next to him. For a while she had internally debated whether to bring up Reigate's offence at his behaviour, out of interest to hear his side of the story, but it seemed a bit snitch-like, and Hermione refrained.

She let her eyes wander over the sea of children before her, and she saw something that gave her pause.

'Sir, what's wrong with Max Teasdale?' Hermione looked at the young boy at the Slytherin table who was pushing his food around his plate, looking visibly troubled. She had taken a bit of a shine to the little third year. She'd seen him in Potions a few times and knew that he often visited Snape during his office hours. He was very quiet and shy for a Slytherin and had a quality about him that often made her want to mother him.

'He's upset because he lost Slytherin thirty House points today.'

'What... *that* was him?'

'You heard about it, then?'

'Well, ah, Professor Reigate made a small mention about it...'

Snape snorted. 'I bet she did. Apparently, he deliberately hexed a Gryffindor student. Does that sound like something he would do? I think not. Indeed, he came to see me immediately, quite concerned that he would be in more trouble for losing so many points.'

'So, what happened?'

'You know Mr. Teasdale is one of a very small minority of Slytherins...compared to the Gryffindors...who has opted to take Muggle Studies. Well, they're practically sitting ducks in the ongoing tit for tat between the two Houses during that lesson! He is adamant he did not throw the hex, and I'm inclined to believe him. If Reigate had any sense, she would know the boy is too sensitive by half to risk the wrath of his house by doing something so brazen!'

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. 'He doesn't appear to have it in him to do such a thing to another student.'

'Of course he doesn't...it was some other student stirring things up.'

She wondered for a moment if she wasn't the only one to take a shine to young Teasdale...she'd noticed on occasion that Snape seemed to keep a particular eye on him. Unfortunately, it probably meant that there was a specific reason for it...a reason that Hermione would unlikely to ever be privy to.

'He'll be OK...he's a good student, I'm sure he'll earn the points back in no time.'

'He shouldn't have to,' muttered the man next to her. Hermione watched him send a swift glare down the length of the table where Reigate currently sat.

'It is, perhaps, unprofessional of me to discuss another teacher's *failings* with you.' He smirked at his exaggeration.

Hermione smiled. 'Well, I'm not going to say anything to her; indeed, I don't think she likes me, really.'

She turned her gaze to the Slytherin table once more. Spending as much time in the dungeons as she did, she was probably more familiar with them than any of the other Houses. There still persisted a certain wariness towards them from the other students, which was regrettable, but there seemed to have been an improvement since she was in school.

Undoubtedly, there was wariness towards *her* from the Slytherin students. Merlin, she'd never forget that time when she'd ended up in the Slytherin Quidditch stand during a Gryffindor versus Slytherin match! Harry and Ron would have had a fit had they seen her sitting amongst a sea of sliver and green during such an important event. The Slytherins *had* had a fit.

'What's she doing here, sir?'

'She's a Gryffindor!'

'She should be sitting over there with *them*!'

Snape had appeased them with one derisive comment. 'Miss Granger does not need reminding of her shortcomings as a Gryffindor, Mr. Crawshaw...she has to live with them every day.'

Her mouth had fallen open in pure outrage, and she was sure he knew that she would not risk retaliating in front of the students.

Still, Hermione had marked that one down for vengeance at a later date.

'So, how have you been doing this week, Hermione?'

'I've felt fine, Poppy. I've been casting Summoning Charms, a few Cleaning Charms, Transfiguring small objects, and it's been all right. I think that, possibly, I've been feeling more tired at night, but I may just be imagining it, you know?'

Madame Pomfrey looked at Hermione critically. 'Yes, by all accounts you look very well. This is very good news, indeed, Hermione.'

Hermione visibly brightened. 'Does this mean I can start on some more complex stuff?'

'Well, to be frank, my dear, I would not just yet. I think you should carry on as you have been for another week or so, just in case there are more cumulative effects building up. Do you see what I mean?'

'I might have a sudden relapse?'

Poppy nodded.

'I understand.' Hermione was disappointed, but she managed a smile nonetheless.

When she got back to her rooms, however, she was in two minds. She pulled out her wand...she was dying to conjure her Patronus. That would really show what state her magic was in.

But... she would be sorely disheartened if it didn't work, and even if it did, did she want to run the risk that she might make herself ill...send her two steps back? Oh, but then...

'*Expecto Patronum!*' she suddenly shouted.

It was fainter than she would have liked, and it didn't linger long, but it was there...her fully formed otter Patronus.

Hermione threw herself onto her bed, hoping and praying that she would not be suddenly overcome with dizziness. When she felt confident enough that she would suffer no adverse side effects, she reached over to her bedside table and picked up her latest essay that she was working on. Hermione read through it carefully, concerned that she would end up going over the specified length. In the past, she'd made the mistake of thinking that she could get away with going over a few inches or so. She was an apprentice, after all...it was important stuff she was writing about!

Snape patently thought otherwise.

The first time she'd done it, he'd drawn a big red line through a couple of paragraphs, and in the margin had written, 'Cut out the waffle!'

As he'd handed the essay to her he'd said:

'If I specify a set length, I expect you to adhere to it. Quality, not quantity, is a maxim you'd do well to subscribe to.'

Hermione would be prepared to bet money that *his* essays hadn't always been perfect.

In any case, she'd now ensured her handwriting was a lot smaller.

Every so often, Snape would use one of his free lessons to teach her about a certain topic. An outside observer might suggest that it was generous of him to give up his limited free time, except, of course, he made sure he profited. Why else was she in charge of his first- and second-year marking?

It was a small price to pay, though. No matter what one thought about the dour Potions master, there could be no arguing that he didn't know what he was talking about with regard to Potions. She often looked forward to such sessions.

'Good morning,' she said breezily, entering the classroom.

He gifted her with a look, but that was it. 'We're going to discuss Medicinal potions today, Miss Granger; I hope you've prepared some reading beforehand.'

Hermione's mouth fell open. 'No, you never gave me any advanced warning!'

He smirked. 'So, I didn't.'

Merlin, he knew how to irritate her. She sat down, frowning, pulled out some parchment, a quill and ink, and stared at him expectantly. He began lining up several vials of liquid in front of her and spoke as he did so.

'Medicinal potions...one of the most important, and indeed, most lucrative aspects of potion-making; headache solutions, for instance, are one of the best-sellers when it comes to retail. Not a particularly complex potion to make, but why bother messing around with cauldrons and ingredients when one can simply Apparate to the nearest shop and buy one ready-made?'

Hermione suppressed a smile at the bitterness in his voice. 'People lead very busy lifestyles,' she offered in a conciliatory tone.

Snape frowned. '*Lazy* lifestyles, more like. Do you know how many witches and wizards actually own a cauldron? I can tell you; at least half of the students here will leave Hogwarts and never brew another potion again. It's astounding! If it can't be done with a flick of wand, people don't want to know.'

From the way he was glaring at her, Hermione could tell he was starting to make himself cross.

'Well, it's all about time and efficiency, isn't it?'

'Is it?' he asked, distinctly unimpressed.

Hermione thought it best to change tack. 'Potions is hardly a dying art.'

'Maybe not right now, but give it time.'

'You have a lot of N.E.W.T. students...'

'All of them mediocre, and besides, a Potions N.E.W.T. is always going to look good on a C.V. compared to Care of Magical Creatures or *Divination*...doesn't mean that they'll do anything with it, though.'

Hermione shrugged. 'One might say the same about Herbology...how many people are interested in cultivating their own plants these days?'

Snape shook his head. 'You cannot compare Herbology with Potions, it...' He sighed. 'Look, I'm sure I could debate this all day, but I haven't got all day.' He looked at the potions in front of him, trying to regain his previous train of thought.

'All right; Medicinal potions...one of the most important aspects of potion-making, not least because for the majority of potions used in Healing, there is no charm equivalent. It's a potion, or nothing.' He pointed to the first vial in the row of potions he'd lined up. 'What is this?'

Hermione unstopped the vial, fairly sure from the colour that she knew what it was, but she knew better than to dive right in where Snape was concerned.

'Pepperup potion.'

He nodded. 'Now, the next one.'

'Ugh, Skele-Gro.' She grimaced at the smell.

He nodded once more, and Hermione continued down the line.

'Sleeping Draught.'

'Burn salve.'

'Pain reliever.'

'Antiseptic salve.'

'Categorise them into groups.'

'What kind of groups?'

'Miss Granger, I am not here to spoon-feed you!'

Hermione raised her hands in a gesture of acquiescence. She stared at the row of vials in concentration. 'Ok, well... all right, here we go; we can put them into groups according to the method of administration. So, the salves are used externally only. The Sleeping Draught, Skele-Gro and Pepperup have to be imbibed, and the remaining potions... Yes, they can be injected intravenously or subcutaneously.'

'You have kept up with recent developments, then? Healers have only recently begun to adopt an inherently Muggle practice, having previously seen no need to go to such lengths.'

'It is more efficient.'

'Indeed.' Snape moved away the row of vials, apart from the pain reliever, and introduced two new ones. 'Some more dangerous concoctions we have here...an opium tincture, sometimes known by the name Laudanum, as coined by Paracelsus, of course, and this, an anti-depressant, as the Muggles might term it. Analgesic potions and mood-altering substances are highly addictive through prolonged use. What are the current regulations applying to these potions?'

Hermione considered for a moment. 'It's illegal to brew them without prior authorisation from the Ministry, and each vial may be subject to a tracking charm so as to ensure they do not fall into the wrong hands. Only certain organisations are allowed to dispense them, and one has to have a prescription from a Healer.'

'Quite; one might argue that these regulations are merely for propriety's sake. I could, quite easily, take a stroll down Knockturn Alley and palm off a few analgesics for a nice sum, and no one would be any the wiser, certainly not the Ministry. It is not difficult to get hold of the required ingredients, and as long as I disguised myself...

'There is no simple cure for addiction, of course. Your task for the rest of the day is to devise, theoretically, a potion for aiding withdrawal from either of these potions.'

Hermione's eyes widened at such a task.

'St. Mungo's has developed such a potion, and you will work from this as a starting point, but this potion isn't as efficient as it potentially could be. There are many improvements that might be made.'

'So... why haven't they been made?'

Snape raised his eyebrows. 'You talk of time and efficiency; well let us bring money into the equation, shall we? Tackling addiction is not a priority for the Ministry, and those who are addicted are unlikely to be able to afford a more complex potion. I, however, have some ingredients I need to offload...they're about to expire...so we can afford to play at being researchers.'

'I see.'

'I don't expect you to have an actual brew by the end of this...just a recipe.'

Hermione was intrigued...was that a challenge?

'Right then, I'm off for a cup of coffee. You will bring your work to me following the last lesson this afternoon.'

It would be fair to say that she worked her arse off for the rest of the day. After several false starts, a lengthy rummage (~~careful~~ rummage) around Snape's personal store cupboard, and the consultation of several books, she had come up with a recipe that would, in theory, replicate the effects of an anti-depressant without addiction.

She was determined to brew the potion, and with just half an hour to spare, she had the finished article in front of her. Hermione looked at the shimmering vial proudly; the potion was a dark purple, and she'd even managed to ensure that there was a pleasant taste.

Collecting up her things, she walked confidently to the classroom and stood by his desk, awaiting acknowledgement.

'Well then,' he said finally, 'let us see what you have come up with.'

Hermione, brimming with anticipation, set the stoppered vial down in front of him followed by a scroll of parchment. Snape picked up the vial, gave it a brief once-over, and then shoved it away from him with an almost shrug, turning his attention to the parchment.

Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

'Are you not even going to open the vial?'

He looked at her with the expression of one who is perpetually surrounded by dunderheads. How that look always frustrated her.

'Miss Granger,' he began pedantically, 'for all I know, you could have put anything in that vial. How am I supposed to test it? I don't currently have a drug dependency, unfortunately, and while there are many things I'm willing to do for my art, purposefully compromising my health is not one of them.'

Hermione fumed to herself silently.

'Unless, of course, *you* are willing...?'

'No,' she replied through tight lips, huffing. 'So, how will you know if it is right?'

'I will know by reviewing your recipe, obviously.'

Because, of course, I could never come up with anything he has never seen before thought Hermione irritably.

'Well, you have certainly chosen to go right around the mulberry bush with this, haven't you?'

'Apparently.' Merlin, she had the strongest urge to hex him!

'See here, I would have substituted the berries for some Meadowsweet...same effect, but saves using the shrivelfigs, which as you know, are cumbersome to prepare and set back the brew by an hour.'

What the hell was Meadowsweet?

'Just tell me...does it have the potential to work?'

'It does.'

'So I did it. Well, then, that's all that matters.'

She could tell he was inches away from smirking. 'If you say so, Miss Granger.'

Hermione sighed; sometimes he was just too much for her. 'Is that all for today?'

He nodded.

'Good afternoon, then.'

She snatched up her vial...maybe she'd be able to get it tested someday.

Friday afternoon rolled around, and Hermione was really looking forward to the weekend for a change.

She would be going to stay with Harry and Ginny at Grimmauld Place for the weekend. They'd invited her, and as she needed to visit London to start enquiring as to her work experience opportunities, she could easily kill two birds with one stone.

Ron would not be there, but that was fine...she was still unsure if she wanted to see him yet. Still, she felt much more self-confident now than she had several months ago, and the gradual return of her magic had played no small part in that.

Presently, she was on her way down to Snape's office to enquire as to whether there was anything she might pick up for him while in Diagon Alley. She was about to knock on his door when she heard voices from within. Not wanting to disturb whoever was inside, Hermione wandered aimlessly up and down the corridor, waiting patiently.

She wasn't waiting long...the door soon opened, and out walked a man she'd never seen before. He was stuffing a sheaf of parchment inside a leather satchel and began walking towards the stairs without so much as glancing in her direction.

The door had been left slightly ajar, and Hermione knocked sharply before opening it fully.

Snape was sitting at his desk, staring into the middle distance.

'Who was that?' asked Hermione before she could stop herself.

Snape blinked and turned towards her. 'If I felt it remotely any of your business, I'd tell you, but alas, it is not.' He got up and, without further ado, swept from the room.

Hermione sucked in a breath...she should have just kept her mouth shut. Something had obviously annoyed him.

She crossed over to his desk to see if he had any work for her to mark. His office desk was rather large and contained all manner of things...books, exercise books, essays, trinkets, potions equipment...rarely, though, did he leave any papers lying around.

Therefore, she did a double take when she noticed a very official-looking piece of parchment featuring the unmistakable crest of the Ministry.

Hermione looked away...he would not be happy if he caught her snooping about his desk, but...

She glanced at it again, but once more quickly turned herself away. Immediately, she forced herself to leave. Her life would really not be worth living if he caught her, and besides, despite her curiosity, she respected his right for privacy.

However, she had seen something, though. The letterhead had said Department for Magical Law Enforcement.

Had that man been from the law enforcement?

If so, what did they want with her Potions master?

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath for the beta :)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

One Day Like This

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 6

'Hermione!'

'Hi, Gin! Long time no see, hmm?'

Ginny dragged her into a hug. 'Definitely! Come in.'

Footsteps could be heard coming down the hallway, and Hermione could see Harry grinning from ear to ear. 'All right, Hermione?'

She threw her arms around him. 'It's great to see you!'

'Okay, calm down,' he muttered, rolling his eyes purposefully.

She gave him a playful punch on the arm before following him to the kitchen.

'What's new, then?'

They talked for ages; Hermione informed them of how her apprenticeship was going and, rather triumphantly, of how her magic was beginning to return...she sent her mug of tea whizzing around the room for good measure.

'Oh, and I'm going to St. Mungo's for two days next week...a work experience thing the Ministry want me to do. They could only give me two days, though, so I'm going to do the rest of the hours in Slug and Jiggers.'

Harry and Ginny crinkled their noses with distaste.

'I know,' Hermione agreed, 'but, believe me, there wasn't much other choice.'

Eventually, Hermione forced herself to bring up the issue that she was sure her companions were tiptoeing around.

'How's Ron?'

Harry and Ginny shared a look. 'Actually, Hermione, um, there's something we wanted to tell you about that. Ron and Lavender have split up.'

'What?'

'Yes.' Harry nodded. 'Apparently, they had a huge row last night, and while that's not unusual, Ron reckons it might be it this time. He Floo-ed us this morning and told us that Lavender had taken her things and left.'

'It'll be all over the *Daily Prophet* soon, I'm sure,' added Ginny with a grimace.

'Oh, well...' Hermione was rather at a loss. 'I'm sorry, I suppose...'

'You don't have to pretend, Hermione. We understand that you probably don't give a damn...that's understandable.'

Hermione shrugged. 'I'm not sure what I think, right now, to be honest, but you know I don't really wish Ron any ill-will. '

'You're more generous than Harry...he can't stand Lavender.'

Harry shrugged wryly, and Hermione smiled.

'He's gone to stay at the Burrow for a bit...Mum's probably pampering him as we speak.'

'She's probably loving having him around.'

So, Ron and Lavender had split up. Did that mean anything for her? Did she care? Was she pleased by such a development? In actual fact, she felt ambivalent. Maybe, her indifference meant she was over him completely.

She hadn't seen Ron in such a while; she was sure it would be only through seeing him in person that she would fully understand how she felt about him.

It was just a case of when that moment would come.

After spending most of Sunday in Grimmauld Place, Hermione returned back to Hogwarts at around eight o'clock in the evening. En route to her rooms, she made the decision to stop off in the staff room and see if Snape was inside, just to let him know that she would be starting some of her work experience on Monday.

She opened the door and discovered that he was, indeed, inside. He was conversing with McGonagall, but to Hermione's amazement, as soon as he saw her, he abruptly got up and stalked towards her.

'I want to speak to you,' he hissed, brushing past her and out into the corridor.

Hermione stood there, dazed for a moment. McGonagall also looked surprised, and when she caught her eye, she shrugged in confusion.

With a deep breath, Hermione went back out into the corridor in time to catch Snape striding towards the dungeons. There was something ominously furious about his whole manner, and she wondered what on earth she could have done to warrant such an attitude...especially since she hadn't seen him since Friday afternoon.

Presuming he was headed to his office, Hermione grimly set off in that direction.

When she got there, he was standing by his desk, a tumbler of whisky in his hand. Hermione shut the door and stood still. 'What's wrong?' she asked, sure to keep her voice even, despite the butterflies in her stomach.

He set his drink down and looked calculatingly at her. 'Is it not enough,' he started, his voice soft, 'that I allow you to encroach upon my time, to invade my classroom...my office?'

Hermione was thrown completely. 'I don't understand,' she ventured.

'Apparently, it is not enough, because, clearly, you feel the need to invade my privacy, as well!'

She automatically stepped forward. 'Hang on a minute...'

'I will not *hang on a minute!*'

'Well, I have no idea what you are talking about!' she protested helplessly.

'Friday afternoon...there was a letter on my desk, which *you* read!'

Hermione was aghast. 'I certainly did not!'

He moved towards her, laughing bitterly. 'Oh, please! You'd have more chance convincing me that the moon is made of cheese than of your innocence!'

'I *didn't* read it!'

'It is my *endless* experience, Miss Granger, that people like you cannot keep their noses out of business that doesn't concern them!' His eyes were blazing fiercely with anger.

'Look, I admit I saw a letter on your desk...'

'See!' There was something almost like triumph on his face.

'I saw it...but I didn't *touch* it! I was checking to see if you had any marking for me...like I always do.'

'I don't believe you! It was not where I left it!'

'Perhaps, I knocked it accidentally, but that was it!'

'You read it. How many people have you told? You were with Potter, this weekend...'

Feeling quite angry herself, now, Hermione gathered up all her courage and closed the distance between them. She lifted her chin and stared defiantly at him.

'Read. My. Lips,' she stated forcefully. 'I did not touch, nor read, your precious letter! What's more, I'll thank you not to throw accusations in my face without any actual proof!'

Without really thinking about it, she moved to jab a finger into his chest, to emphasise her point, but he moved as quick as lightning and enclosed a hand around her wrist. Hermione stared at it in surprise, breathing deeply.

He was glaring at her intently, but quickly let her arm go.

'I didn't read it,' she repeated, 'and it's not my fault if you are careless enough to leave things lying about.'

Hermione spun round and quickly left the room. She kept walking and didn't stop until she reached the Entrance Hall. It was when she got there that she realised she was repeatedly rubbing her wrist. It wasn't that he'd hurt her, his grip hadn't been strong; it was just... the touch had rather burned into her skin...it distinctly unnerved her.

What on earth was in that letter that he felt so paranoid about? Was it something personal? Or something involving a student...no; he'd accused her of blabbing to Harry so it must be something personal.

Hermione could hear someone approaching, and she feared it might be that Snape had followed her for round two. It wasn't him; however, it was the Headmistress.

'Are you all right, Hermione?'

Hermione knew she must be curious about Snape's earlier behaviour.

'Yes, um... fine,' she answered distractedly.

'Really?'

'Professor Snape is just upset with me over something I *didn't* do.' Maybe she shouldn't blab to McGonagall, but she couldn't help it. She felt extremely bitter about the fact that he so obviously had no trust in her.

'I think I might have an idea why.'

'Oh?' Hermione looked at the older woman with interest.

'Come, let's go up to my office, and you can tell me whether I need to have a stern word with him.'

Hermione blanched. 'No, please don't. I'm sure that would only make it worse.'

'Well, I'll be the judge of that.'

They settled down in the impressive office, and McGonagall presented her with a cup of tea. 'So, what was that performance all about earlier?'

Hermione paused, unsure of what exactly she should reveal. 'He left a letter of some sort on his desk on Friday afternoon, and he thinks I read it, which I didn't! I saw it, but when I realised it was from the Ministry, I stopped myself.'

There was a knowing look on McGonagall's face. 'I see. Did you happen to notice if it was from the Department for Law Enforcement, by any chance?'

'Yes, it was.'

McGonagall smiled with resignation. 'I have told him umpteen times not to let it bother him, but it always does. He sulks for days after those visits.'

What visits? 'Oh,' said Hermione simply.

'He's being monitored by the Ministry.'

'What?' Hermione spluttered, hardly believing what McGonagall had just revealed. 'Why?'

McGonagall smiled for a moment, as if pleased by her response. 'Past events, of course; it's rather a complex issue. You see, many parents, especially those in the Muggle world, were concerned about sending their children back to Hogwarts following the end of the war. Indeed, they were understandably shocked by what had gone on during the war, not to mention that it had gone on in a school. Some were seriously considering removing their children to Muggle schools, and that is something the Ministry cannot risk.'

'I asked Severus to come back to teaching once he'd recovered, and he somewhat ungraciously accepted. Of course, that helped to compound the issue with those parents who were unsure about Hogwarts. No matter what side Severus was on, they felt he should not be able to teach. Well, I wasn't going to stand for that! Mind, credit where it's due, the Ministry were more than happy for him to come back here, but there had to be a compromise somewhere. For all intents and purposes, they keep an eye on him...they pay him a visit every so often, always unannounced.'

It left a bitter taste in Hermione's mouth. 'So they make sure he keeps on the straight and narrow...what on earth do they think he's going to do?'

McGonagall shrugged. 'It beats me, but it keeps them happy.'

Hermione rubbed her cheek thoughtfully. 'No wonder he's not happy about it, though.' Something else occurred to her. 'I'm, ah, not sure you should have told me. I mean, he clearly didn't want me to find out.'

'It does trouble him, and that is why I tend to make light of it, because it's just formality, and I wish he wouldn't let it frustrate him so. Still, no doubt ~~he~~*will* be furious if he finds out I've told you, but it's not actually a secret, though many are unaware of it, of course. I trust you to keep it to yourself, Hermione, and I see no harm in helping you understand some of what he is dealing with.'

'I won't mention it to anyone. How long is it going to go on for?'

'We are not sure...it's been nearly two years, so possibly for a few more, yet.'

Hermione shook her head negatively, indicating her feelings on the matter.

'In some ways, Severus could potentially benefit from this arrangement.'

'How?'

'Not everyone was pleased to see the downfall of Voldemort, as you have discovered yourself. Severus, of course, played a direct part in that and alienated those who would have once seen him as on their side. Some Slytherin students, for example, have had family members imprisoned. It's unlikely that they would try and attack him, but they might seek revenge through more subtle means...accuse him of questionable behaviour, have him caught in possession of certain Dark items, and so on. Should he ever need to defend himself, well, he has those Ministry reports to fall back on, because, needless to say, they never find anything about him that needs investigating.'

'The war might be over, but its grip lingers still, doesn't it?'

The Headmistress nodded sagely. 'Do you remember, Hermione, when I first offered you this apprenticeship, and you were, unsurprisingly, sceptical about Severus' willingness to co-operate?'

'Of course; that letter was rather... something.'

McGonagall smiled. 'I don't mind telling you now that there was an added bonus in you coming here, and I am quite sure you won't take any offence when you hear it.'

Hermione was suddenly very intrigued.

'I thought that Severus would benefit from spending a year working with you. Providing that you managed to get along fairly harmoniously, I considered what better advocate for his reputation than Hermione Granger? Now, my dear, I hope you don't think I aimed to use you; I had merely hoped this angle would help convince Severus.'

'No... I'm sure I'm happy to be of any help...' She was rather surprised, though.

'Severus being Severus, Miss Granger, it didn't convince him.'

'Oh?'

'One of Severus' problems is that he doesn't care much about protecting himself...maybe it's a male pride thing. In actual fact, I'm sure it was my appeal about the potential danger that you faced without your magic, which impressed him more. I tried to get him to write something encouraging to you, but that defiantly aloof scribble was all he could manage.'

Hermione looked at her hands with a smile.

'Of course, none of this excuses him for taking out his frustration on you. He didn't say anything particularly to upset you?'

'No, it's fine; I understand now...besides, I think he could tell I wasn't impressed.'

'Good...you should stand up for yourself.'

'I appreciate you telling me all this, and you have my word it won't go any further.'

Before she got up to leave, Hermione remembered her original reason for seeking out the Potions master in the first place.

'Professor, I'm going to be out of the castle for the next two days. I've arranged to spend two days at St. Mungo's, in the Apothecary. I thought I might stay at my parents' for the night, as well. I wonder if you'd mind passing the message on to Professor Snape? I'd rather not face him again tonight. I'll be back as usual for Wednesday.'

'Of course; best of luck at St. Mungo's, and my best to your parents, as well.'

Merlin only knew what Wednesday would have in store for her.

The following night, Hermione was relaying her day to her parents.

'I really enjoyed myself there, Mum,' she explained as she set the table. 'There was so much going on, and the people were really nice. They showed me around their research and development department, where they work on new treatments...that was *really* interesting.'

'You sound like you are really into all this. Do you think you will stick with Potions, then?'

Hermione nodded. 'Seems a shame to waste all the work I've done this year. I enjoy the practicality of it, and the thought of going back to a desk job after all this just seems a bit boring. Apparently, there may be a position opening in St. Mungo's in the summer...they gave me an application form, anyway.'

Her mother looked at her with a smile. 'Well, sounds like you could be in for a chance.'

'I hope so. I have to get Professor Snape to write me a reference to send off with the form, and if they are interested, I'll have an interview.'

'He'll write you a good one?'

Hermione paused in the motion of pouring out some wine. 'Good point. Well, I would not expect anything effusive...I don't think he is physically capable of effusiveness...but, I don't think he would write anything truly negative.'

She took a sip out of her wine glass. 'Would he?'

If he still thought her a snoop, he might, she realised. She hadn't mentioned that little issue to her mother. Well, she would deal with that issue when she returned to Hogwarts. There was no point dwelling upon it now.

'Oh, Mum, guess what?' Hermione asked, changing the subject. 'Lavender has dumped Ron...it's in the *Prophet* today.'

'I knew it wouldn't last,' her mother commented with a sniff. 'Was he seeing someone else again?'

Hermione smiled ruefully. 'No, not as far as I know.' Her mother possibly held more bitterness about the past than she did herself.

'Well, I hope he doesn't think he can worm his way back in with you!'

'Mum, we might become friends once more, but I would not be able to trust him like that again.'

She had considered this at length and had come to the realisation that she really did not want to rehash old ground with Ron. She felt it unlikely, but if he did decide he wanted to give it another try, Hermione was confident she would not.

She had a feeling, however, that before long their paths would cross once more, and it was probably time to let bygones be bygones.

Following her final day at St. Mungo's, Hermione arrived back at Hogwarts during dinner. Before going to her rooms, she thought she'd take the opportunity to run down to Snape's office and grab some of her work. He was probably in the Great Hall, and she'd rather avoid him a little longer, until she had no choice but to see him tomorrow.

The office was dark and, thankfully, empty, and Hermione quickly moved to her table to pick up some of her books. There was a scroll of parchment placed next to the pile of books, and she hesitated before picking it up. Was he so paranoid that he was now testing her by leaving unknown parchments lying around, in the hopes that he'd catch her snooping?

It was a ridiculous idea...this was her space, after all, and it was placed right next to her books. Mind made up, Hermione partially unrolled the parchment to discover it was her latest essay, which he'd marked. Sighing with relief, she placed the scroll atop her books and began the trek up to her rooms. Dumping her load down, she greeted Crookshanks, who was fairly buzzing to see her. Then, she turned the taps on in the bathroom to draw herself a hot bath.

While waiting, Hermione picked up her essay, for once feeling oddly ambivalent about discovering her marks. She leisurely scanned the pages and found there was nothing much out of the ordinary. She'd managed to do well; there were a few crossings out, a few ticks, and there was...

All she could do for a moment was stare in disbelief.

At the very bottom, in a rather small scrawl that absolutely screamed reluctance, was:

'This is a very good attempt, Miss Granger.'

She wasn't sure how long she stood there, trying to digest that brief comment.

Very good? This was practically effusive from him, it...

Suddenly, though, comprehension began to dawn and, shaking her head in bemusement, she rolled up the scroll.

Hermione knew exactly what she was dealing with here.

This was Severus Snape apologising.

AN: Thanks to Astopperindeath for beta-reading :)

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling

Chapter 7

'Miss Granger...what on earth are you doing?'

Hermione's eyes flew open in surprise, and she surreptitiously moved her wand inside her sleeve. Swivelling round, she found Severus Snape was standing at the entrance to the grounds.

'Oh, nothing,' she answered nonchalantly.

Snape crossed over to her, shutting the gates behind him. Several days had passed since that to-do with the letter. He hadn't mentioned anything further about it, and so they'd gone on as if nothing had happened, much to Hermione's bewilderment. In her experience, one didn't just ignore such incidents, but she considered it might be best to play by his rules...for now.

'Miss Granger, you were standing in the undergrowth, very still, with your eyes closed. I defy anyone not to find that behaviour questionable.'

'Well, in actual fact I was just admiring the... the, um... Oh, all right! I agree that I must have looked rather strange. If you must know, I was debating whether to try and Apparate into Hogsmeade.'

Hermione hadn't wanted anyone to know...it was something she'd wanted to try in private. She could conjure her Patronus, and now she wanted to Apparate.

Snape nodded in comprehension. 'Has Poppy permitted this?'

Hermione coughed. 'Not quite, but I didn't ask, so...'

'You were going to attempt this by yourself? In many ways, this is like trying Apparition for the first time, and you would do it unaided?'

'I *know* how to Apparate... and it's only down the road.'

'But what if something went wrong?'

Hermione expelled a noisy breath. 'Nothing was going to go wrong.'

'You know that for sure, do you?' He raised a disbelieving eyebrow at her.

She grimaced. 'So, what do you suggest, then?'

'Well, I am off to Hogsmeade, so I will Apparate there as well and be on hand to collect up any bits or pieces that you may, or may not, leave behind.'

Hermione chuckled. 'So, if I leave my leg behind, you'll chivalrously return it to me?'

'Quite.'

'Fine; all right, I'm going to Apparate to the alley by Zonko's.'

Snape nodded.

Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated with all her might on the alleyway...there was no way she was leaving *anything* behind!

Crack!

She stood with her eyes closed for a few seconds, breathing deeply. She was there, by Zonko's, and by all accounts, in one piece.

A further crack sounded, and Snape appeared a few paces behind.

'Look,' she said happily, lifting her arms, 'all body parts are present and correct.'

He surveyed her. 'Indeed, they are,' he agreed.

Hermione lowered her arms and smoothed down her robes, a little self-consciously. She wasn't sure why it was, but she found his appraisal oddly suggestive. Feeling a little heat rise into her cheeks, she mentally shook herself.

She'd imagined it, surely?

'You don't feel any side-effects? Apparition is a highly complex use of magic.'

'No, I feel perfectly fine, thank you.'

He nodded.

Hermione smiled a bit awkwardly at him. 'Right, then, ah, I'm going to buy a book to celebrate, so I'll see you later.' As she walked away, however, her thoughts remained more with him than on the achievement of having successfully Apparated after months of magical impotence, so to speak.

It was disconcerting, to say the least.

Hermione was cleaning her cauldron at the sink when Snape came marching into the room, rubbing his temples with a weary hand. During her first week, she'd had to suffer through a lecture on the advantages and disadvantages of using cleaning spells versus old-fashioned elbow-grease. She could use cleaning charms easily, now, but she found something almost therapeutic in scrubbing her cauldron, regardless of which method was more effective. Still, she did not envy those students who landed the task of scrubbing cauldron after cauldron.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him down a vial of Headache solution and sit heavily at his desk. Hermione made sure to carry on her task a little quieter, believing that he required silence.

She flinched in surprise, therefore, when he unexpectedly spoke into the silence. 'I've had some bad news,' he said.

'What do you mean?' she asked, turning round with a concerned expression on her face.

He moved his chair back with a screech and hefted his feet onto his desk, crossing them at the ankles. Hermione automatically frowned, as she always did, at his cavalier treatment of the furniture.

'The worst news,' he stressed, pinching the bridge of nose.

She took several steps towards him. 'What news?' She felt rather anxious; it must be bad if he felt he had to share it with her.

His head was tipped back against the chair, and he sighed, looking up at the ceiling. 'Our inestimable Headmistress, in all her infinite wisdom,' he began, with his voice full of distaste, 'has offered the use of the Great Hall to the Ministry for their annual dinner.'

'Oh, is that all? The way you were going on I thought something really bad had happened!'

'You don't understand, Miss Granger. There was no dinner last year, as the Ministry was still getting back on its feet, but they will want to make up for that this year. *You* will be expected to attend. All those who played a part in the War will be invited; all of the useless bureaucrats; everyone!'

Hermione felt her face fall. 'Everyone?'

'Yes, and they are the most tedious events known to man...you thought the Order of Merlin service was bad? Just wait until you have to suffer through all of this posturing, Miss Granger. Now, of course, I have *no* excuse to get out of it...not while it's being held where I bloody live!'

'I see.' Hermione could now understand his irritation perfectly. She hated those events, too. The *Daily Prophet* was always hanging around, trying to get interviews, and people she'd never met before would come up to her, and... Oh, surely this meant Ron would be there, too.

'Is there no way of getting out of it?'

'No, Minerva will not hear any of it. "It's one night, Severus!" "Live a little, Severus!"'

There was such a look of fury upon his face that Hermione almost laughed.

'When is it going to be held?'

'Sometime during first week of the Easter holidays, I believe.'

'Oh dear,' said Hermione sadly. 'Didn't I mention that that's when I'm going to France for a week with my parents? It's all arranged.'

Hermione sent him a sympathetic smile as she turned back to her cauldron. *He* might have no avenue of escape, but that didn't mean she couldn't save her own skin. It wouldn't take much to convince her parents to take a week off to visit the south of France.

In a flash, Snape was on his feet and standing behind her. She looked up at him in surprise.

He was smirking. 'Funny, that; I actually *don't* recall you mentioning anything of the sort.'

'Must have slipped my mind...silly me.'

A look passed over his features, and he brought his hand to his mouth. 'Oh dear, I've made a mistake, did I say the first week? The dinner is being held during the *second* week, not the first...*silly me*.'

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. 'What?'

'What luck...you'll be back from your sojourn on the continent.'

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly in triumph, and Hermione narrowed her eyes. *Git!*

'Well, thanks for that.' She shook her head grimly at being so comprehensively outfoxed.

'If I can't escape then no one else is, Miss Granger.'

'I can still arrange with my parents...'

'I will go and see Minerva this instant and inform her of your plans. She will be most upset that the girl she sees as a surrogate daughter would go to such lengths to deceive her.' His tone was mockingly soft and sad.

Hermione gaped like a fish.

'Fine! *Fine!*' she spat, eventually finding her voice. 'You win.'

Ugh, she'd never met anyone so smug.

'And no faking illness, either.'

'How do I know you aren't going to poison yourself or throw yourself down the stairs just to get out of it?'

'I do not fall down staircases, Miss Granger, and what kind of credibility as a potioneer would I retain if I managed to ~~poison myself~~?'

'Fine; I guess we just accept it then. Besides, thinking about it, it might be an enjoyable evening.'

She ignored his frown and went back to her cauldron. Actually, she really wasn't looking forward to it. Did she want her reunion with Ron to occur in such public circumstances? Or would it be a good thing?

Not to mention that she would have to go out and buy something new to wear.

Why couldn't she just stay in with a good book?

Hermione, with a little trepidation, crossed the length of the staff room to where her Potions master was currently sitting. For the umpteenth time, she wished she could just ask McGonagall to do it.

'Sir, I wondered if I could speak with you a moment?'

Hermione sat down, clutching her scroll of parchment tightly.

He sighed. 'What is it, Miss Granger? People have been badgering me all day, and I'd like to finish this article sometime this century.'

She inwardly groaned; she had definitely picked the best time to approach him.

'I've been thinking about what I'm going to do, once I've finished here.'

She noted that he had the grace to look mildly interested. 'Oh, and what have you come up with? Didn't you naively suggest at one point that you wanted to teach? You need your head examined; I'm sure Poppy wouldn't mind obliging.'

Hermione sighed long-sufferingly. 'You know, you *always* go on and on about how you hate teaching...what an annoying job it is...yet, you obviously love it.'

'I beg your pardon?' he spluttered, looking fairly scandalised. 'How dare you suggest such an idea.'

'So, why are you here, then?'

'Isn't it obvious? Clearly, being a teacher is not the most enjoyable occupation; however, being a teacher at *Hogwarts*, well, it's a cushy little number if one can get it. All of

my meals cooked for me, no cleaning, all of my laundry done, students on hand to do my dirty work, and ingredients and supplies available for my potion-making, the cost of which is often covered by the Ministry. Having to teach the ungrateful brats is just a regrettable downside, but we all have to pay our dues.'

Hermione wasn't sure if he was being serious or not. 'Well, it does sound rather comfortable when you put it like that...*If not a little superficial*, she added silently with a little disapproval. 'One day I would like to teach, but something else has caught my eye, for now. There is a position available in St. Mungo's in the research and development department. It was mentioned to me while I was doing my work experience. I have the application form here; I was wondering if you would agree to write a reference for me and send it to this address?'

He took the parchment she proffered to him. 'Hmm, Edwin Godolphin...'

'Do you know him?'

'Only vaguely...he's well respected, I believe. When do you need me to send it off?'

'I'm going to owl the form soon, so as soon as possible...if that's all right?'

'Very well.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Hermione left the staff room in higher spirits than those which she'd entered with. She really liked the sound of working in St. Mungo's...research was what she did best, after all.

A few hours later, after meticulously going through the application form, she attached the scroll to the foot of one of the school owls. Once the owl had disappeared from view, she found herself sincerely hoping that something would materialise from her application. She knew that a lot of it would come down to what Snape put in her reference. She prayed that no one had managed to put him in a foul mood in the time since she'd left him. The last thing she needed was for him to attempt to write it whilst dealing with his infinite frustration at the rest of the world.

It was not a prospect that inspired confidence, but there was nothing to be done but to wait and see.

As the end of term approached, Hermione was ready to hex someone.

'Sir, can't we conspire to cause an accident that would get us out of going to this stupid dinner? I don't mind taking the blame.'

'Miss Granger, are you blind? Can you not see that I am trying to brew a potion, here?'

'That's the point.'

'You will not distract me into making a mistake and blowing up my cauldron. Besides, I don't know what *you* have to dread about this...all your little friends will be there, much to my everlasting displeasure.'

Hermione huffed. 'Everyone keeps banging on about it...'

It was driving her nuts. Not a day went by without someone mentioning how excited they were, or worse, what they were going to wear. The other day, Hermione had nearly hexed Reigate's mouth shut after hearing for the millionth time about her new shoes. Then, there was Ginny who kept sending Floo-calls, asking if she knew what she was going to wear, and if not, did she want to go shopping? Or "Hermione, do these robes look nice?" "How should I do my hair?"

Hermione had half a mind to go in her work-robe, potion stains and all, in a fit of anarchy. Then, however, she remembered that her anarchist streak was very much a sliver compared to her conformist streak. So, no, there wouldn't be a work-robe, but it was a nice fantasy, nonetheless.

A scratching at the door sounded, and Hermione looked at in surprise.

'If that's your bloody cat again...'

Hermione meekly got up and opened the door. In trotted Crookshanks, who leapt up onto the nearest bench.

'He just gets lonely sometimes. Either that or he's hungry.'

'Well, he shouldn't be in here...cat hair gets everywhere, as well *you* should know.'

She glared at him. 'Ha ha...my poor aching sides.'

Snape glanced up from his chopping board. 'How can you even mistake cat hair for human hair? I recall Miss Bulstrode having rather long hair.'

'Well, she must have had a long-haired cat, all right? Besides, I was twelve. Also, do you have to keep bringing that incident up? I'd successfully blocked it out.'

'Just curious...'

'You've never made a mistake with regard to a potion before?'

She'd wondered about this previously. She didn't think she'd ever seen him fumble accidentally with an ingredient, or knock over a vial, or cut his finger, let alone actually brew something wrong.

'Put it this way, I've never turned myself into a cat.'

'Yet,' she muttered stubbornly under her breath. So, he was going to be cryptic about it...what a surprise.

Another noise distracted them, and they both looked to see an owl tapping at the window.

'It's becoming like a blasted menagerie in here,' Snape muttered as he crossed the room to open the window.

'It's for you, Miss Granger.'

'Oh.' She took the letter off him, and there was an unreadable look upon his face.

Glancing at the address on the front, she automatically froze. Clearing her throat uncomfortably, she stuffed the envelope into her pocket. She wouldn't open it here.

'How is Weasley these days?' Snape asked as he returned to his cauldron.

Hermione frowned; she should have known he'd recognise the handwriting as well.

'Do you care?'

He smirked. 'No, I really don't.'

She'd thought as much.

'I do care, however, when I have to suffer his gormless countenance splashed all over my morning newspaper. I can assure you, bacon has never tasted so bad.'

Hermione was impressed. From what she'd seen over the last several months, not much could come between Severus Snape and a bacon sandwich at breakfast.

'Ron doesn't like having his private business aired in public any more than we do.'

'Of course not; that's why he's always available to give his own comment on matters.'

He was right; Ron had given an interview to the *Prophet* the other day. Hermione shrugged. 'Some people *are* interested, I suppose...a Quidditch player, friend of Harry Potter etc. Hell, people are even interested in what *you* get up to.'

Oh dear, she'd said that with a bit *too* much incredulity.

He snorted darkly. 'Oh yes, I know very well what they're interested about.'

Hermione was sure she hadn't imagined the bitterness in his tone, but she was unsure as to his meaning. Was he referring to his problem with the Ministry? Were the vultures at the *Prophet* waiting for him to make a slip-up, as well?

'Things will die down, eventually,' she offered diplomatically. 'The novelty of it all will soon wear off and people will stop caring.'

He didn't say anything, and Hermione knew it was not worth pressing the issue any further.

She felt the weight of the envelope in her pocket, and she sighed. 'Come on, then, Crooks.'

The ginger cat dutifully followed her as she left the office for the privacy of her rooms.

Dear Hermione,

You know what I'm like with letters, but I just wanted to say that I'm sorry that we have not spoken in such a long time. I never wanted to stop being friends with you, and I miss having you around. We'll all be at Hogwarts for the Ministry's dinner, and I hope that we can talk properly and sort things out.

Harry told me that you are feeling better, and I couldn't be more pleased for you.

See you soon,

Ron

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath! And thanks to everyone who has reviewed, I appreciate it.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 8

Madam Pomfrey bustled around the Infirmary, humming slightly under her breath as she tidied away a selection of potions left out on her desk. Hermione sat patiently on a nearby chair. Maybe this would be the best time to tell her, she decided, and she probably *should* tell her.

'I thought you might like to know that I, ah, actually Apparated last week.'

The school matron stopped and turned wide eyes on Hermione.

'You did what?'

Hermione fidgeted. 'I Apparated to Hogsmeade.'

Madame Pomfrey spluttered for a moment. 'My dear girl, do you know what trouble you might have caused yourself? I assure you, Splinching oneself is not something to be taken lightly. Why, I have probably encountered some of my worst ever cases during Splinching incidents...some are fatal! And the psychological impact alone is bad enough. Can you imagine how distressing it is to discover your arm or your leg is suddenly gone?'

'I'm sorry...' Hermione wished she hadn't told her now. 'I know it's a serious matter, and I would not have attempted it unless I was truly confident.'

The mediwitch remained unconvinced, so Hermione ploughed on.

'Professor Snape said...'

Madame Pomfrey narrowed her eyes. 'What does Severus have to do with this?'

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times. Why the hell had she mentioned him? 'Well, ah, he was there, you see...'

'He knew about this, and he *still* let you continue?'

Oh, bugger; she'd dropped him in it with Madame Pomfrey...again.

'Um, I think he knew that I would attempt it regardless of what he said, so he decided that the next best thing would be to be on-hand... just in case,' Hermione placated in a reasoning tone.

'Yes, Hermione, *just in case*...splinching *could* have occurred; wait until I see him!' She shook her head in vehement condemnation.

Hermione groaned silently to herself.

The majority of students had gone home for the Easter break, but the castle was by no means as quiet as it usually would have been. Instead, it was filled with Ministry officials who were responsible for planning the dinner. The Great Hall was undergoing a severe makeover...being repeatedly charmed into all manner of set-ups as they decided on decorations and layouts. And the house-elves, much to Hermione's eternal disgust, were hard at work in the kitchens devising potential menus.

McGonagall was watching over the proceedings with a stern eye, but Hermione hadn't seen sight or sound of the Headmistress' deputy for several days. She supposed it was hardly surprising that he was avoiding getting involved. She would venture to suggest that he was uneasy about the presence of the Ministry. He hadn't been in the Potions classroom or his office during the many times she had gone down to the dungeons to do some work. For a while, she assumed he'd taken refuge in his quarters, and Hermione had no idea where they were.

As time wore on, though, and she thought about it further, she began to wonder if he was even still in the castle. If she discovered that he had wormed his way out of attending the dinner, she would have words for him! Even if she had to wait until after her apprenticeship was over for them to be unleashed.

On second thought, she might just unleash them anyway...she'd be certainly annoyed enough.

'Gin, I don't want anything too fancy, you know me, I...'

'Hermione, look at these! Ron won't believe his eyes when he sees you in this!'

Hermione looked at Ginny stupidly. 'One, I wouldn't be seen dead in something that garishly pink, and two, I have no interest in impressing Ron.' She picked up some green dress robes and immediately put them down...they were velvet. She shivered; she had a weird aversion to the feel of velvet.

Ginny smiled. 'Never hurts to let a bloke know what he's missing.'

'Yes, well, he might get the wrong impression.'

As she glanced distractedly around the shop, Hermione considered that part of her wouldn't mind showing Ron what he was missing. Her bitterness hadn't disappeared completely, it seemed.

'You could probably have the colour changed.'

'Hmm...?' Hermione saw that Ginny was still preoccupied with the pink robes. 'What about the fact that the robes are slashed to the thigh? As if I have the aplomb, or the legs for that matter, to pull that off!'

'What's wrong with your legs?'

Hermione shook one of her legs in demonstration. 'They're not long enough.'

'That's what high heels are for!' Ginny admonished.

'I don't do high heels, especially stilettos...Merlin! I'd look a right arse trying to walk about in them!'

'Plenty of time yet to get some practice in...'

'Gin, I'm *not* wearing something like that...end of story.'

Ginny grinned. 'It was worth a try.'

'If you like it so much, why don't you wear it?'

'Harry would kill me.' She laughed. 'Besides, you're right...it's not really appropriate.'

'Oh! But you would let me go out in it!'

They both laughed and moved to inspect some more dress-robes.

'Knowing my luck, I'll probably turn up and find I've got the same robes on as someone else. Can you imagine if it was Trelawney or someone? I'd have to leave!' Hermione smiled sardonically.

'Well, you know it won't be McGonagall...unless, you *were* planning on tartan.'

'Gin! Professor McGonagall is just very proud of her heritage.'

Ginny sighed at length, rifling through a rail of robes. 'I wish Harry was Scottish...I think he'd look good in a kilt.'

'Even if he was Scottish, I'm sure you would be hard-pressed getting him into *skit*,' Hermione scoffed. 'Personally, I've never seen the attraction of a man in a skirt...'

'Ooh, these are nice, Hermione! I love the embroidery around the edges.'

Hermione looked with interest at the robes Ginny held. The colour was not garish this time, but a deep, wine red. The material shimmered slightly and...

'I know exactly what kind of make-up will go with this,' began Ginny excitedly, 'and do you remember that necklace you bought when we went shopping a few months ago?'

Well, that'll...'

'Hang on, hang on. I haven't tried them on yet.'

'What are you waiting for, then?'

Hermione was summarily shoved into the dressing room, and she stood still for a moment, clutching the robes with her eyes closed.

One week...*one* week and it would be over.

'So, Ron wrote to you then, did he?'

After shopping, Hermione and Ginny were sitting at a table outside the Three Broomsticks, sipping Butterbeers. The sun shone pleasantly, and Hermione was glad for the respite after being reluctantly dragged into the hairdressers to get her hair trimmed.

'Yes.' Hermione sighed. 'It was brief...said he was looking forward to seeing me.'

'Are *you* looking forward to it?'

'Yes, and no, I suppose.'

'Well,' said Ginny firmly, 'regardless of whether Ron is there or not, *we* are going to have some fun! Who knows, maybe you'll meet some handsome young Ministry professional...'

Hermione blanched. 'Meet someone?'

'No harm in keeping a lookout.'

Hermione shook her head; what was it about disgustingly in love people feeling the need to spread the joy? 'I'm not really bothered about meeting anyone.'

'You're not still into Ron, are you?' Ginny questioned carefully.

'No, I'm sure I'm over that; I'm just happy being on my own for a bit.' She knew that would not be acceptable to Ginny.

'You've just got *used* to being on your own, is what you mean. Granted, you've had a lot on your mind this last year *and* you've been stuck in castle full of kids and oldies, but soon you'll be free to get back out there.'

'Oldies'?' Hermione smirked. 'Not all of them are old, and Professor Snape keeps me company...'

Ginny jeered loudly in surprise. 'Now, this is interesting! Just what have you been getting up to in that Potions classroom, Hermione?'

'I didn't mean *that* kind of company!' Hermione looked around in embarrassment, in case anyone had overheard. 'I just meant in a friendly sort of way *Merlin*...!'

Ginny laughed, thoroughly enjoying herself. 'You've gone bright red.'

'Yes, well, I have to face him when I go back, and I do not need those sorts of insinuations in my head!'

'I'm only teasing.' Ginny smirked, and Hermione couldn't help but laugh quietly.

'It's bad enough that I thought he leered at me the other day, and...'

'*What?*'

'I know! How ridiculous is that?' Hermione shook her head in rueful amusement as she sipped her drink, remembering her Apparating incident.

'Well, you are not unattractive, Hermione.'

'Thanks, Gin, but I still think I imagined it.'

Ginny shrugged dismissively. 'He's a man, isn't he? They're all the same.'

'Yes, but he's like no one I've ever met before, really.'

'That's a bit profound.'

Hermione laughed. 'You know what I mean.'

'Perhaps, it's just difficult thinking about him as any ordinary man, simply because he was our teacher for so long.'

Hermione made a noise of agreement, but inwardly she was unsure...she hadn't considered him as her teacher as such for a while, though in a way, technically, he still was. She just didn't think that there was anything *remotely* ordinary about the man. Not one bit.

'So, maybe he does fancy you,' commented Ginny airily.

The only noise to be heard was Hermione choking loudly on her Butterbeer.

As the date of the dinner drew closer, Hermione increasingly was being driven outside by the hustle and bustle going on within the castle. But the days were bright, and she didn't mind it too much. At present, she was strolling around the outer edges of the castle, enjoying a few moments of simply letting her mind wander.

Moving around the back of the castle, she could see the array of greenhouses stretched out before her. The panes of glass glistened in the sunlight, and she wandered over to Greenhouse number three to have a quick look if Professor Sprout was around.

There was no one there silence reigned so Hermione carried on her walk. She was passing by some of the smaller, lesser-used greenhouses when there was something that did catch her eye. Pausing, she changed direction and walked towards the greenhouse situated furthest away.

There was definitely movement from within, a dark, somewhat familiar outline...

The door was propped open, letting in some of the spring breeze. 'Ah,*here* you are,' said Hermione from the doorway.

Snape didn't look up from the small table at which he sat, flicking through a book. His robe hung over the back of his chair, and he was wearing one of the brown overcoats Professor Sprout always made them wear when in the greenhouses.

'So it would seem, Miss Granger. I congratulate your powers of observation.'

She smiled with resignation...always so dry, he was; it was best just to play along with him. 'They are rather exceptional, aren't they?' she replied lightly.

'Is that the only reason for your currently exercising them upon me...to show off?'

Hermione stepped inside the greenhouse, looking with infinite interest at the many plant pots. 'No,' she said distantly. 'I was just wandering around and discovered by accident where you've been hiding all week.'

Snape got up from his chair. 'I have not been hiding,' he argued irritably, 'I've been working. The holidays may be your time in which to *wander around*, but for me it is my time to work.'

'Sounds like hiding to me...you haven't been at dinner all week.' Hermione examined a potted Mandrake as she spoke.

'I've had dinner sent to my rooms,' he revealed, rather stiffly.

'No, you're definitely not hiding, then.' Hermione allowed herself a lop-sided grin. 'I didn't know you were interested in Herbology.'

'Miss Granger,' Snape complained, rushing forward, 'must you insinuate yourself so close to my Digitalis? It is imperative the flowers are not disturbed!'

Hermione stepped back, bristling inwardly...she knew what she was doing, after all. 'Just admiring the colour you've managed to achieve with them...'

However, her indignation was forgotten when she became distracted by the sight of his hands. His sleeves were folded back slightly, and his hands showed the signs of having recently been covered in muck. A part of her, rather ridiculously, marvelled at the fact that underneath his perpetually buttoned robes he *did* have arms, but something more pressing bothered her.

'You've been reading a book with your hands in that state?'

He flashed her an irritated glare. 'So?'

'You'll get it filthy,' commented Hermione, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

'I repeat...so? It's not as if I was reading the bloody scriptures of Merlin; it's nothing a charm won't fix.'

Hermione huffed quietly with disapproval. Snape ignored her, setting about moving a bag of compost to the bench in the middle of the greenhouse. She watched as he produced a pocket-knife from his coat and slit the bag open.

'Why are you growing so much Fluxweed? Don't you get enough of that from the Apothecary? I should know...I've sorted through your deliveries enough times.'

Snape paused in his task, and there was a look of contemplation on his face. 'It's funny; I have felt there's been something missing this week, Miss Granger, and for a while I was hard pressed to discover what it was. Suddenly, though, it has returned...a sort of unexplained buzzing in my ear; but I see it's just you...*asking questions*.'

Hermione blinked. That was a bit harsh, wasn't it? 'Maybe you should see Madame Pomfrey...sounds like a bad case of Tinnitus to me,' she grumbled, somewhat offended.

He looked at her, but she got the impression that whatever he was going to say, he decided not to. He turned his attention back the bench in front of him.

'Those deliveries are organised by the Ministry,' he explained evenly, 'and one cannot always guarantee the best quality. It's fine for the children, but I prefer to use my own ingredients whenever possible.'

'Oh; you let me use the stuff from the Apothecary,' she muttered, feeling a little disgruntled.

Snape merely shrugged and picked up his trowel, placing compost within several small pots laid out before him. She watched him for a moment and realised that he looked different, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it what it was. She wondered if it was because he was in the light. So often, she only ever saw him in the artificial, dim glow of the dungeons. Everything was so bright in the greenhouse. He looked younger, almost, without the usual play of dark shadows following him that characterised the depths of the castle.

He should get outside more often, she decided.

She approached the bench. 'May I help with anything?'

'Well,' he said ponderingly, picking up a seed and placing it in a pot, 'there's a pile of Mooncalf dung outside that needs shovelling...'

Hermione knew she should never have opened her mouth. 'Oh, what do you know? I said I'd have tea with Professor McGonagall this afternoon.'

Though still focused on his task, the corner of his mouth lifted, and Hermione knew that she'd amused him.

'What if I said Minerva has informed me that she is gone to Diagon Alley this afternoon?'

'Ah! You won't catch me out this time!' Hermione smiled triumphantly. 'I really am having tea with her.'

'Fair enough; I'll just have to get one of the house-elves to do it.'

Hermione took an involuntary step forward in outrage. 'You're joking, right?'

He removed his hands from within the pot and wiped off the excess dirt. 'Am I?'

He looked at her, calmly raising an eyebrow in challenge. Hermione narrowed her eyes. How he lived to bait her, but it was always so difficult to judge when he was being serious or not. Suddenly, he was smirking. 'I can see you storming out there right now to begin shovelling it yourself.'

He actually chuckled quietly.

'I'm glad you find me so entertaining.' Hermione frowned, distinctly unimpressed.

Still smirking, he carried on with his task.

With a little ill humour, Hermione decided to bid him goodbye. She moved to leave the greenhouse, the frown remaining fixed upon her face, and her conversation with

Ginny resurfaced to the forefront of her mind. She snorted silently. Merlin, he didn't fancy her...she was just his source of amusement!

'Miss Granger, before you leave, I have a bone to pick with you.'

She paused and closed her eyes in resignation. Taking a deep breath, Hermione turned round to face him, the epitome of nonchalance itself. 'What bone would that be, Professor Snape?'

'Namely, never let me rely upon your deplorable discretionary skills again. Thanks to you, I had both Poppy and Minerva furnishing me with their particular views on my being an accessory to your heinous crime.'

So they had caught up with him, then. 'Sorry; I didn't think they'd be so annoyed.'

'Have you ever met those two women?' he asked sardonically. 'I can assure you, my ears were ringing with lectures about responsibility and...'

'Ah!' Hermione interrupted. 'Maybe *that's* what's causing the buzzing in your ears...'

She looked at him with raised eyebrows.

There was an indecisive expression on Snape's face, and then he rolled his eyes reluctantly. 'Maybe it is,' he acknowledged with a little sigh of surrender.

Hermione left the greenhouse with a spring of satisfaction marking her step.

As the weekend drew nearer, so Hermione came to simultaneously dread and anticipate the Ministry dinner. The Great Hall looked wonderful, bedecked in all kinds of finery, but what was it all for? So that everyone could sit around and pat themselves on the back for a job well done? Hermione rather thought so.

Still, it would be a chance to catch up with some of her friends... and Ron, of course. How she hoped that she would surprise herself and have an enjoyable time. However, the Yule Ball, all those years ago, seemed to have set an unfortunate precedent in terms of having a good time at such events.

The last one she'd attended had been the Order of Merlin service, shortly after the fall of Voldemort. Notwithstanding the empty pomp and ceremony of the whole thing, which had been distasteful to her, Ron had got spectacularly drunk, and she'd had to take him home early. With no Sobering potion on hand, that had been one *hell* of a long night.

As she studied her dress robes, hanging from the door of her wardrobe, she decided it seemed prudent to expect the worst this time around as well.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for her beta reading skills, and thanks also for the reviews. I appreciate hearing what people think about the story :)

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 9

So, this was it. The event of the year, by all accounts.

Hermione sipped her wine and glanced rather indifferently at the merriment around her. Part of her really wished she hadn't bothered coming, no matter what Snape, or McGonagall for that matter, might have said. To put it frankly, she was bored.

Seeing all her friends had, in part, made up for her lack of inspiration. They'd all been seated close together at dinner, and she'd enjoyed talking and reminiscing. Talking to Ron, however, had been awkward...she'd felt awkward as soon as she'd clapped eyes on him. Luckily, that was about the only thing she'd felt. Hermione was sure she would have had to hex herself if she'd felt a sudden pang of longing or some such other inconvenient emotion.

They'd managed a stilted conversation...the usual pleasantries. But Ron had never been particularly eloquent, and she, for once, hardly knew where to start, so they'd just sat there at a loss.

It was a step forward, though...they were in the same room, after all.

Hermione had a good idea why it had been more awkward than she'd expected. How could she have not anticipated Lavender Brown's presence? She should have prepared herself for it. Having said that, *why* Lavender had been invited, Hermione didn't know, but she supposed her type of fame must count for something.

Lavender being there had dampened her enthusiasm where Ron was concerned. She considered it must be doubly uncomfortable for him, with ~~two~~ two ex-girlfriends in the vicinity, but she wasn't filled with a huge well of sympathy for him.

She missed his friendship, though, however reluctant she was to admit it. Maybe once she left Hogwarts, they could work on becoming proper friends again.

A pink blur caught her eye, and Hermione was pulled from her thoughts. Frozen in complete horror, she was unable to act on the part of her brain that was telling her to 'Move!'

Unless she was *very* much mistaken, Lavender was making her way directly over to her.

'Well, hello there, Hermione! Long time no see!' Lavender beamed brightly.

Hermione resisted the urge to drown herself in the punchbowl.

'Lavender...' She smiled tightly. 'How lovely to see you again.'

Lavender simpered and pulled Hermione into a hug, squealing, 'Oh, Hermione, look at you! You look the same as you ever did!'

Hermione felt herself colour at the meaning behind Lavender's words. The same could definitely not be said for Lavender. Hermione took in the rather low cut robes, showcasing a curvaceous figure that had drawn many a glance over the course of the night, the flowing blonde hair, and tried not to outwardly grimace...she'd forgotten what it was like to patronised by the likes of Lavender Brown.

'No hard feelings, eh, Hermione? We're both victims here, after all.'

Hermione nearly laughed aloud; Lavender really was priceless...she had more front than Diagon Alley.

'How's the modelling coming along?' she asked, simultaneously wanting to stick her fist down her throat. Why did she always feel the need to make polite conversation? This was the cow partially responsible for stealing away her boyfriend!

'Oh!' Lavender gushed, pouring herself some punch. 'Did you see my interview in *Witch Weekly*, this week?'

'I don't read it,' Hermione dismissed.

'You don't? Oh, Hermione, what a sweet thing you are! Of course *you* don't read it.' Lavender smiled broadly. 'Between us, though, I hope Ron doesn't get the wrong impression from it. He's a sweet bloke, but we're not right for each other in the long run. Oh! Maybe you two should try again...I think he still likes you, you know.'

Hermione could only stare at that insanity that was Lavender Brown.

'What have you been up to this past year then? I have been so busy that I haven't been able to keep up with all of my little friends.'

'Potions,' Hermione began, feeling about two-foot high. 'I'm two-thirds of the way through an apprenticeship with Professor Snape, and...' She trailed off in confusion at the sudden wide-eyed look Lavender was sporting. 'What?'

Lavender smirked. 'Professor Snape, eh? You know, I have had my eye on him tonight.'

Hermione felt her stomach jump. 'I'm sorry?'

'Oh yes! What a difference a few years and a change of perspective can make, hmm? There's definitely *something* about him, don't you think?'

Hermione fought hard not to gape.

'Don't be so coy, Hermione, you must have thought about it. You've worked with him, after all. It's many a woman's dream to be the one that turns Severus Snape's head.'

'What... *it is*?'

Lavender smirked. 'But of course; what a challenge to snare the man whose unwavering devotion to one woman is infamous.'

Hermione stared at her former classmate in disbelief, but Lavender was looking out into the sea of people, and Hermione knew she wasn't imagining the predatory edge to her expression.

'Yes, what a success that would be, and what a coup for my... Well, anyway, we shall see what the night brings, but I'd be willing to bet that could have him by the end of it. What do you say?' Lavender threw Hermione a devious smile.

'I'm not really a betting person...' said Hermione weakly.

'Of course you're not, never mind; see you later!' Lavender winked.

Watching the blonde move off towards the table where Sybill Trelawney sat slumped over a bottle of sherry, Hermione narrowed her eyes. She knew exactly what Lavender had been about to say: 'What a coup for my *career*.'

Was that what Ron had been? No, she couldn't think about that now. That whole debacle was done and dusted.

Snape, on the other hand... What she should do? Hermione swirled her drink contemplatively. Images of sordid kiss and tell stories splashed over all manner of Wizarding press flooded her mind, and her heart thumped in her chest. He might even lose his job, she realised. The *Daily Prophet* would jump on a story like that, and if Lavender twisted things...

Hermione sipped her wine. It might even be the opportunity for those who would like to see him get into more serious trouble. Placing her empty glass on a table, Hermione resolved that she could not let it happen.

Where had he gone? She'd last clocked him conversing with the Headmistress. As she quickly scanned the hall for him, it suddenly dawned on her that she was being rather over the top. After all, this was Severus Snape...he wasn't stupid; he was always on guard! He would be bound to see through the likes of Lavender Brown, and besides, Hermione was sure he wasn't the type to be bowled over by physical attributes alone, if, indeed, *anything* bowled him over.

But then... there had been that time when he'd teased her about storing magazines in his desk, and she'd never got to the bottom of that. Maybe he hadn't been teasing her.

Hmm, no, she was sure she was being silly; but still, it couldn't hurt to be vigilant.

Eventually, she spied him sitting alone at a table...*for the moment*. Hermione took a deep breath and smoothed her new robes down...his professional honour and integrity was at stake.

She meandered her way around the dance-floor to the quiet part of the hall, and approached him cautiously. He looked rather pensive, and she wondered for a moment if she should disturb him.

'Hello, Professor Snape.'

He looked up at her. 'Ah, Miss Granger; how are you faring this evening?'

Without waiting for an invitation, Hermione slid into the seat next to him and covertly glanced around the immediate environs...Lavender was nowhere to be seen. 'Oh, I'm fine, good, never better, really.'

Merlin, what was she so nervous about? She turned to find him looking directly at her, and she brushed her hair away from her face repeatedly. 'What?'

Snape shrugged. 'Nothing; you just seem unusually... jittery.'

'Jittery?' Hermione scoffed with raised eyebrows. She suddenly wished she'd brought a drink with her. At least it would have been something with which to occupy her hands, which, granted, *were* shifting all over the place. 'No no, I'm not jittery, quite the contrary.'

'All right,' he conceded, plainly unconvinced.

Hermione looked to shift the focus from her. 'Is your evening proving to be as bad as you anticipated?'

'Worse,' he admitted grimly, draining his glass.

'Oh.' He was in a lacklustre mood, then. Would that make him more susceptible to Lavender's particular form of flattery, or no? Hermione shook herself mentally; she was thinking herself into knots.

Nothing else was forthcoming from her companion, and so she turned to her attention to everyone else around her. Harry had escaped from being pestered for photos and conversation to dance with Ginny, and they, at least, looked to be enjoying themselves.

Hermione sighed, unable to help but wonder when she herself had become so... dull. Surely she would like to be up there, dancing and having a laugh. She hadn't danced once all evening.

She turned to Snape. 'Look, I'm going to get a drink, do you want...' She suddenly found herself looking straight at Lavender Brown, who was watching them from the other side of the hall.

'I'll have another Firewhisky, thank you.'

'What?' uttered Hermione distantly, immediately tensing when Lavender began walking towards their table. 'What did you say? Look, it's the Easter break, you know...my break, too...you can't order me about now. Get your own drink!'

It was probably the first time in her life she had seen Severus Snape look truly confused.

'You *just* offered...' He didn't look impressed.

Hermione bit her lip, realising her ridiculousness. 'All right, all right; hang on.' Getting up, she walked as fast as she could to the bar without outright running. Hurry up, hurry up! She tipped a measure of Ogden's into a tumbler, and then unceremoniously sloshed some punch into a goblet. Spinning around on her heel, she came face to face with a chest.

'Oh, Neville!' Hermione put the goblet down and shook her hand free of excess punch, breathing deeply. 'Sorry, Neville...didn't see you there.'

'No problem, Hermione.'

Picking up the goblet again, Hermione froze when she looked across the hall. Lavender had homed in on her prey.

'Bugger!' whispered Hermione in annoyance.

It was no big deal, though; surely Snape would send Lavender on her way, dispatch her with a few choice remarks? He would not be fooled by the expanse of leg on show, or the fluttering eyelashes. He was not like most men...he had principles, and standards, and he... *was looking at Lavender Brown's breasts*

Hermione felt herself flush with anger, and she averted her eyes to the drinks she was holding. She'd ~~definitely~~ seen his gaze flick to Lavender's chest...the git! The bloody git! Bravely looking once more towards the pair at the table, Hermione bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. Even from where she was stood, she could easily see the way Lavender giggled coquettishly and the way *he* smirked knowingly.

Clearly, she'd been too generous in her earlier assessment. Ginny had been right; he was just like the rest of them. Hermione gritted her teeth and began moving across the floor. The urge to get the hell out of there was strong, but while Snape might be inches from losing her respect, it didn't mean she was going to let him make a fool of himself. It was time to run some concerted interference.

Hermione came to stop behind Lavender, purposefully ignoring the dark man next to her.

'Lavender!' interrupted Hermione sweetly. 'You're sitting in my...'

'Hermione! Do you mind? I was just telling Severus about my latest commission at *Witch Weekly*.'

Severus? Hermione couldn't help it; she immediately looked at the man in question, expecting him to show some sign of affront at Lavender's presumptuousness. She was immensely put out to see him sitting there calmly. He'd never extended to her the liberty of using his first name, and why the hell did he want to listen to Lavender rabbit on about herself?

It *had* to be so he could let his eyes wander freely. Merlin, how could she have got it so wrong about him?

She resisted the urge to throw the drinks over both of them, and instead leant over, placing the tumbler in front of him. 'Your *whiskysir*.'

Snape looked at her briefly. 'Thank you, Miss Granger.'

'Oh! Did you bring us some drinks? You are a sweetheart, Hermione!' Lavender promptly removed the goblet of punch from Hermione's hand.

'No, that is my...' But Lavender was clearly not listening; she'd already turned back to Snape with a flick of her glossy blonde hair. Hermione fumed silently for a moment, not quite being able to comprehend Lavender's sheer audacity.

'Excuse me, Lavender, but you are...'

Lavender spun round with a frown. 'What *is* it, Hermione? Severus and I are trying to have a conversation!'

'I said,' Hermione began, bristling, 'that you are sitting in my chair. Can you not see where I left my cardigan on it?'

Lavender giggled. 'Well, I'm sure I didn't notice it, did I, Severus?'

Hermione watched in mounting horror as Lavender reached out and actually *patted his thigh*. She thought that *this* time, Snape would surely have some remonstrance to make.

Her blood ran cold when he didn't bat an eyelid. He sipped casually at his whisky, and then looked straight at her.

'There's another seat here, Miss Granger, if you wish to join us.'

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. Was she dreaming this? Holding the black gaze, she wondered what on earth had got into her professor. There was a glint of something in his eyes, but she had no idea what it was. Had he drunk too much? This wasn't characteristic Snape behaviour, was it? Still, the bottom line was that he wasn't going to stick up for her. He was more than happy to let Lavender walk all over her. Well, fine, she would let him make a complete arse of himself.

'No, thank you; I'm quite sure I would have nothing to say that would interest either of you.'

Hermione turned to leave, feeling unaccountably hurt and foolish. She paused, however, when she overheard uncharacteristically muted tones from Lavender. Oh, that was it!

In her mind, she wondered if this would be the moment where the evening went the way of all the others...to disaster. But regardless...there was no way she could stand for it any longer.

Hermione whirled around accusingly. 'What did you say?'

Lavender looked up in surprise. 'Merlin, what are you on about now?'

'What did you *just* say?' Hermione glared fiercely.

Lavender's expression suddenly turned calculating and she stood up, almost towering over Hermione in her high heels. Hermione wasn't put off one bit.

'I said, "Thank Merlin for that!" How rude you are, intruding into private conversations all the time!'

'I'm rude?' Hermione laughed bitterly. 'That's rich coming from you! You self-obsessed piece of...'

Lavender remained unmoved. 'You're just jealous of me; you always have been! I pity you, you poor excuse for...'

Hermione reached for her wand...she didn't care what state her magic was in.

'Going to hex me, Granger?' Lavender hissed, stepping closer to Hermione. 'Try it.'

Hermione stared into the heavily made-up, blue eyes. 'Get out of my face.' Surprising herself, she shoved Lavender on her upper-arms, sending the other woman back a few steps.

Lavender's face darkened with fury. 'How dare you shove me! Why don't you just do us all a favour and go back to your stupid books!' Lavender reached out with one hand and nudged Hermione's shoulder, hard.

Hermione was prepared...she'd taken on worse than Lavender Brown.

'Why don't you do what you do best and go and wave your tits under someone else's nose!' Hermione clenched her fists.

Lavender laughed harshly. 'Oh my, we *are* jealous aren't we? Poor Hermione; feeling inadequate, *again*...'

'That is enough, Miss Brown.' Snape had finally decided to intervene.

'Me?' scoffed Lavender. 'You've changed your tune! You were practically slobbering over me just now! Merlin, how pathetic you...'

'Don't talk about him like that!' Hermione lunged forward. 'It's obvious to anyone you are a conniving little sl...'

A hand closed around her forearm in a strong grip and pulled her back. 'That is enough! People are beginning to stare.'

Hermione stilled, but continued to glower at her adversary.

'Severus, what on earth is going on here?'

'Nothing, Minerva; it's just a situation that got a little out of hand. It is over with, now.'

McGonagall watched them all in confusion.

'You'll regret this, Granger.' Lavender straightened her robes and flounced off without another word.

'Miss Granger, I'm...'

'Get off!' hissed Hermione, shaking her arm free of Snape's grip. She stalked off without looking at either him or McGonagall...she was too mortified. Exiting the hall, Hermione went outside and sucked in a breath of cold night air.

'Stupid girl!' she hissed to herself.

Merlin, the indignity of it all! Nearly getting into a full-blown fight in the middle of such an important occasion! Had she completely taken leave of her senses? She should have just risen above it and let them... carry on.

'Miss Granger?'

Hermione gave a quick, resigned, glance to her Potions master, who had appeared out of the main doors. She really wasn't in the mood for talking. Not one bit.

Snape said nothing further, and that unnerved Hermione somewhat. Was he actually put out that she'd spoiled his chances with *Lavender*? The thought was infuriating!

'Just... tell me, for my sanity's sake, that you weren't really taken in by that...*performance* in there.' It was so ludicrous; she'd have to rethink her whole outlook, and re-question her judgements, she realised, if it proved she didn't know Severus Snape as well as she liked to think.

'It amazes me, really, that after everything I've done in my life, people still think I am capable of acting like I was born yesterday,' he replied finally, shaking his head in mute wonder.

'Well, you were certainly at pains to prove otherwise,' muttered Hermione, quietly irritated. What was he playing at?

'Was I?' he answered lightly. 'Perhaps, I enjoy the attention.'

'Oh, happens to you often, does it?' Hermione frowned at the tinge of accusation in her voice.

'You'd be surprised what an Order of Merlin and a sob story can do for one's popularity. I've even had a student try it in the past.'

'A student?' Hermione questioned in surprise.

Snape smirked. 'Shocking, isn't it? Can't imagine that happening in your day, can you?'

Hermione smiled. 'Well, no, but I can't say I've given it much thought.' It pleased her to note that he spoke without arrogance or pride. Possibly, her instincts were right after all. 'If you were someone else then you might enjoy the attention, but I don't think you do. However, I'll admit to being slightly confused by your behaviour.'

He looked at her enigmatically, and then sat down on nearby a stone bench. 'You know, you should have just accepted my earlier invitation to join us...it promised to be a right laugh.'

'What *are* you talking about?'

What machinations had his mind been up to now? Why the hell would she have wanted to be a party to that charade?

'Come now, Miss Granger, as soon as I spied Miss Brown come none too subtly sashaying across the floor, I knew what she was playing at. Ex-students do not normally place themselves in my company at such occasions. I had no doubt...*no* doubt...she was scheming at my expense; so I decided to have some fun at hers, and I would have done, had you not escalated the situation.'

'Well, I'm sorry I spoiled your *fun*,' she commented defensively. 'How was I to know? I was concerned Lavender would take you for a mug...'

'Give me some credit...I don't care what she looks like now; the last time I saw Miss Brown she was sitting behind a school desk. I'm not interested in ex-students, or a Weasley cast-off for that matter.'

Hermione unexpectedly felt herself flush hotly...she ignored it.

'I was mildly surprised to see how eager you appeared to injure her.' He chuckled softly.

'As you know, Lavender and I have history, and I wasn't about to let her walk all over me again.'

She didn't mention the fact that she couldn't stand the thought that he might prefer Lavender's company over hers.

'So, thanks, by the way, for nearly allowing me to get into a fight!' Hermione grimaced at the thought of her behaviour...Lavender wasn't worth it, really.

'I thought you might like the chance for some one-upmanship.'

Hermione said nothing...she was sure Lavender had had the upper hand all along. What was it she had called her? *Jealous*. Maybe her actions *had* been more out of inexplicable jealousy than as a noble quest to ensure the maintenance of Snape's reputation...she just hoped *he* hadn't picked up on it.

It was a worrying thought, really, and something she would have to examine at length, later on.

'She does make me feel inadequate, at times.' The quiet words fell from her lips without realising, and she cringed at herself.

Snape said nothing, and Hermione felt an awkward tension close around her. She moved to sit beside him and scrambled for something else to say. 'So, what exactly was this *fun* supposed to entail? Were you going to lead her on and then make a fool of her? Give her some classic put-downs?'

'You sound like you don't approve.'

'I don't know about *that*...' Hermione idly scuffed her shoes against the grass.

After a moment, he said, 'They're charmed, you know.'

'What's charmed?'

'Her chest.'

Hermione's jaw dropped. '*Her chest is charmed?* She's kept that quiet!'

'Yes. I was building up to asking who'd done her spell-work...just to see her face. It's a very competent charm, so I'm confident she could not do it herself, and there are those who are handy with a wand that are open to such commissions.'

'How can you tell they are charmed?' Hermione's eyes were still wide.

Was that why he had been staring at her breasts...to ascertain if they were magically enhanced? Trust him!

'It's not readily noticeable, but if one is so inclined, it is possible to sense a longstanding charm, and with the aid of a discreet revealing spell...there it was.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I imagine she would not want such a thing becoming common knowledge, indeed. Ugh, what a silly, silly cow...' she muttered impatiently.

'And a manipulative one, at that.'

'Merlin, can you imagine? A quick *Finite Incantatem*, and they'd be gone; just like that.'

'My thoughts exactly,' he agreed.

Hermione lost herself for a moment in imagining Lavender's shocked face if her chest suddenly deflated in front of everyone. She'd bet that picture would look good in the *Prophet*...

'By the way, how did *you* know what she was up to?' Snape asked, with interest.

'Oh, she told me, in a roundabout way.' Hermione paused and considered her next words carefully. 'Does it... really happen to you often...people coming on to you, I mean? I think *my* Order of Merlin must be broken.' She smiled despite herself.

He snorted. 'Well, there have been a few incidents, and as I say, they must think I'm incredibly stupid. We can swap medals, if you would prefer, and work on perfecting your sob story.'

'All right.' She laughed before becoming serious once more. 'You know, granted, Lavender was an easy one to spot, but how do you know they are all after a slice of notoriety? For all you know, you might have spurned some poor woman who was genuinely interested in you.'

'Excuse me? What *are* you on about?'

What *was* she on about? She was wading into murky water here...very personal and uncharted murky water.

'Well, I'm just saying, you know, you might have blown a chance for...'

'A chance for what?' he spat out incredulously, suddenly becoming angry. 'Do you imagine me to be desperately longing for someone to help "heal the wounds of my tragic past" as that infernal Skeeter woman put it?'

Hermione blinked. 'Not as such, but why not?'

'Have you forgotten to whom you are speaking?'

'You don't think you could love someone else?'

He flew to his feet and rounded on her. *Love?* he thundered, his face twisting into a grimace. 'Don't talk to me about love...the very idea of it offends me!'

Hermione was taken aback. 'Why on earth should it?'

'I have no time for it...and *it* has no time for me.' His voice was matter of fact.

'But what about Harry's...'

He cut her off with a glare. 'Oh, yes, *that*, and look what it did to me. Do you honestly think I would want to willingly put myself through that again?'

Hermione decided she might as well commit herself to the argument. 'Just because you were unlucky once doesn't mean you would be again. There's someone out there for everyone.'

Snape laughed harshly. 'Don't tell me you actually believe that crap, do you?'

She flushed uncomfortably at his sharp tone and said nothing.

'If such a thing is true, then why are so many people alone?' he challenged.

'Well, all right, not everyone is lucky enough...'

'Your argument falls apart right there,' he dismissed. 'It's just a polite excuse for the fact that some people are just not made for love, relationships...whatever.'

'No, it's not, it's...'

He wouldn't let her speak, however. 'Miss Granger, don't patronise me. I would have thought you of all people would understand that not everyone gets the happy ending.'

Hermione looked away for a moment, uncertain. 'You know, so things didn't turn out as everyone expected with my relationship with Ron, but that's not going to put me off. Not everyone just gives up.'

He snorted facetiously, and Hermione looked at him in confusion.

'A word of advice you'd do well to remember...if you have no expectations, then you'll never be disappointed.'

Hermione looked at her hands...it was possibly one of the most poignant things she'd ever heard. She found she regretted immensely that he thought that way.

'Perhaps, I am naive,' she began quietly with a shrug, 'but there it is...it's what I think.'

Snape said nothing for some time; he merely stood looking out over the dark grounds. Eventually, his shoulders relaxed, and he turned back around.

'I suppose we can call it optimism, rather than naïveté.' He sighed deeply. 'After all, you shouldn't listen to me...I'm old and jaded. You should hang onto your hopes and aspirations, Miss Granger...for as long as possible.'

In the dim light, she thought he might have smiled at her, or a close approximation of such, but then he was gone...disappearing back up the steps into the castle. Hermione stared into the space in which he'd stood, not fully understanding what had just happened.

She felt troubled by the fact that he obviously felt he did not deserve happiness, and completely deflated by the fact that someone's outlook could be so bleak. What's more, she realised it shouldn't even have come as a surprise, really. Thinking about it, if she'd been through the torment he had, she would probably want to give happiness up as a lost cause, as well.

Still, she found she would like to prove otherwise to him, but how she would go about that, she didn't know.

Ugh! She had so many different thoughts swirling around in her head, and there was still that whole Lavender thing...

There was, also, something else niggling at her. Despite his parting words, Hermione was left with the distinct impression that ~~he~~*id* see her as naive...youthful in her idealism, and perhaps, unsophisticated, even.

That bothered her...immensely.

Unwilling to dwell on it any longer, she got to her feet and made her way back into the castle. She was halfway across the Entrance Hall when she suddenly stopped still, frozen to the spot. 'Oh, bugger...' she breathed loudly in shock.

A group of people standing outside the Great Hall looked at her oddly, and Hermione self-consciously forced herself to carry on walking. She walked into a deserted corridor and leant against the wall.

In a moment of perfect clarity, she now understood it all.

He didn't fancy her; she, Hermione Granger, ex-student, apprentice, and Weasley cast-off, fancied *him*.

She let the back of her head thump against the stones as she sighed and closed her eyes.

No, it would definitely have to be *this* moment that sent this evening down into the books as a bad one.

Very bad, indeed.

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

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 10

On Monday, Hermione was getting back to her work. The students were back, and classes had resumed. She hadn't spoken to Snape since that night, and she was annoyed to discover that she was feeling slightly apprehensive about seeing him. She wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't as if he would mention what they'd talked about. No doubt, she'd probably think she'd imagined it all by the end of the day!

She couldn't stop thinking about it, though. Having replayed the conversation several times in her head, she almost had it committed to memory. Lavender had continued to haunt her as well, and she'd half expected to see mention of their little heart-to-heart in the newspaper account of the dinner, but luckily, it had obviously fallen under the radar.

Hermione struggled to evaluate the reasons behind her behaviour during that night. How she wished it could be put down to the fact that she just had it in for Lavender...vengeance for the Ron thing. Being able to say it was simply her desire to protect Snape's reputation would be a plus, too.

Hermione hated to consider it, but really, she had been jealous of the attention Lavender had received from him. There was no other explanation to suffice.

Of course, she now knew that he had been insincere, but still, the fact remained that at some point she had felt actual envy.

It made her head hurt, really.

'Morning, sir.'

Hermione stopped short when she saw the set-up on the table, and she groaned internally. There was a selection of ingredients laid out and nothing else. She knew he was setting her one of his *challenges*.

'Miss Granger. You have one hour to produce a potion from at least three of the ingredients I have given you. You are to use no books...just your little grey cells.'

My little grey cells are otherwise occupied thought Hermione grimly.

Sighing a bit too loudly, Hermione moved around the room collecting up her equipment. She set her cauldron down with more force than was necessary and winced when it clanged loudly. Settling down on her stool, she placed her chin in her hand and stared unseeing at the bottles and boxes in front of her.

Powdered root of asphodel and...

Was she really jealous? *Really?*

Focus, Hermione!

She tapped her fingers on the wood of the desk. All right, asphodel, knotgrass, daisy roots...

She couldn't believe she was jealous. Perhaps, she'd just been *automatically* jealous because it was Lavender. Professor Snape was *her* friend (of a sort), and she didn't want Lavender getting the upper hand with that as well. It was not that she wanted him for herself in that way.

Was it?

How would she have felt if he'd been letting, say, that annoying Reigate woman drape herself all over him? Covertly, she glanced at him. Hmm, she couldn't see that happening... Mind, she couldn't say she would have saw it happening with Lavender, either, sham or not.

She rubbed a hand irritably over her hair. Who was she kidding? He could have been letting Trelawney come onto him, and she would have stewed with jealousy. The fact that it was Lavender only meant that she'd had the impetus to get involved.

Merlin! Five minutes had already passed! Hermione gave herself a mental kick...this wasn't the time or place.

She studied the remaining ingredients, almost goggling at the last one in the row.

Resisting the urge to glare at him, Hermione nonchalantly picked up the innocuous sprig of lavender and studied it.

Oh, he was subtle...she had to give him that.

As the close of the hour approached, following several intense moments of toil and determined concentration, Hermione ladled out her potion into a flask and took it over to Snape's desk.

He studied it for a moment. 'You made a Clarity potion?'

Hermione nodded, not registering the interest upon his face.

Had she ever felt physically attracted to him? She couldn't ever recall ever getting hot and bothered at the thought of him.

'You could have simply used an infusion of lavender and witch-hazel and concocted a burn salve, or you could have used the asphodel to make a simple sleeping potion.'

'I suppose...' she answered, shrugging her shoulders distractedly.

She'd never looked at him and found him appealing, as such. She'd never spent time admiring the way he looked, and...

'Miss Granger, are you even listening to me?'

His eyes were narrowed dangerously.

'Yes, sir, you expected me to go for the easy options. I apologise for *learning* from my past mistakes.'

He did not look impressed.

'A bit too facetious, perhaps?' Hermione asked tentatively, while raising an appeasing eyebrow.

'A little bit, yes,' he admonished.

She nodded, appearing to be suitably humbled. She'd been set this kind of challenge before. However, the first time round she'd been so eager to impress him by getting it right, that she'd made the first potion that had come into her head. While it had been theoretically correct, she had been criticised at length for not taking her time and thinking more subtly.

'Indeed, I feel bound to say I did not expect you to make this particular potion.'

'Oh.' This was unexpected; had she actually surprised him for once? She made a mental note to check later if there had been any sightings of pigs flying through the sky. It had been the most complicated potion she could recall from memory alone. She'd chosen well, for once.

He raised a hand to move a strand of hair out of his face.

What did she think of his hair? That was one of his features that most were drawn to at first glance. She'd never been one for longish hair, though. And what of his dark looks? Ron was completely different...

'Yes,' Snape continued, unaware of her internal monologue, 'especially as it seemed to take you a while to get started. I was not expecting a great deal...staring into the ether seemed much more a pressing task for you.'

Hermione blinked. 'Yes, well, I just, ah, wanted to be sure of what I was doing.'

Oh, wait; Viktor had been dark as well.

'Miss Granger, what is wrong with you today? Unless I am very much mistaken, you appear to be away with the fairies!'

'Sorry, I'm just a bit distracted, that's all.'

'Well, forgive me for boring you to distraction...'

'It's not that...'

'I would appreciate it if you at least *attempted* to look interested in what I'm saying!'

Hermione sighed impatiently. 'Aren't I always interested in what you have to say?'

Merlin, this was the problem...she was too interested in whatever he had to say!

He shoved her potion towards her, clearly still annoyed. 'No matter; this is all for today...I have to prepare for my next lesson.'

So saying, he stood up and turned his attention to the board.

Hermione shook her head wearily and began quickly clearing away her things. She left the room without another word and immediately headed out of the dungeons.

Clearly, she could not go back down there again with her head still in the clouds. Not if she didn't want him being pissed off at her all the time.

Dodging the corridors full of marauding students, Hermione took a shortcut to her rooms, whereupon she flung herself onto her bed. Despite her earlier thoughts, deep down, she knew that she must be attracted to him. Perhaps it wasn't his looks that had attracted her in the first place. There had never been a frisson of excitement when she'd first clapped eyes upon him after leaving Hogwarts, or even after. No, this was the worst possible kind of attraction. It wasn't based on superficial lust...she was drawn to his character... his personality.

Merlin, did she actually *like* derisive comments being thrown at her? Maybe he had been right when he'd said she needed her head testing.

It was no use denying it. Whatever it was, and however it had come about, it was there, and she was stuck with it for the foreseeable future.

Yay, thought Hermione.

Hermione had cancelled her subscription to the *Daily Prophet* shortly after they'd published Rita Skeeter's article about her and Ron. That wasn't to say that she did not read the paper...she just did not want to personally line their coffers.

A few copies of both the *Daily Prophet* and the *Evening Prophet* were delivered each day to Hogwarts and left in the staff room for perusal at leisure. That was usually where she obtained a copy. Or, if the opportunity arose, she would avail herself of Snape's if he left his lying about his office.

She often didn't bother with the *Evening Prophet*, half the time, it was just a rehashing of the earlier edition. Therefore, she would ignore the flurry of owls that appeared around dinnertime with the newspaper attached to their claws.

There did come a point when she was forced to take note of the evening tabloid.

She arrived slightly late for dinner one evening, having had to stay in the dungeons to keep an eye on her cauldron. Unobtrusively folding herself into her seat, she was serving herself a portion of shepherd's pie when she started to feel distinctly uneasy.

Glancing up, she caught several students looking at her. Immediately, she felt a flush rise in her cheeks, and she surreptitiously checked that she hadn't spilt anything down her. There was nothing, but looking again, there were definitely people looking at her.

Snape seemed to notice her fidgeting, and he spoke to her. 'Something wrong?'

'I don't know...'

The Headmistress, however, on his other side, required his attention, and he turned away to speak with her.

Hermione, meanwhile, picked up her knife and fork and began slowly picking at her plate. She resolutely kept her gaze downwards and only looked up when a throat cleared next to her.

'What's wrong?' She was somewhat perturbed by the grim look on the Potion master's face.

He flipped open a newspaper, which had been handed to him by McGonagall. One of the headlines on the front page immediately jumped out at her.

YAXLEY JUNIOR TO BE RELEASED

At least she knew why they were looking at her now.

Snape was watching her with interest.

'Oh well,' she said quietly, turning back to her dinner, pushing the paper away. She wasn't interested in reading the details, not yet, anyway.

Still, eyes were on her, and she felt a pulse of irritation. What did they want her to do, break down in frightened hysterics? She knew he wasn't going to be in custody forever; he had to be released sometime, after all. Maybe if the Ministry had been fully aware of the extent of the curse he'd used, he would have been imprisoned for longer, but what difference did it make really?

'He'll be under the watchful eye of the Aurors for some time yet, Miss Granger.' Professor McGonagall's voice was reassuring as she spoke past Snape.

Hermione nodded. 'I know, and it's fine, really. I just hope he's learnt his lesson and doesn't go after anyone else.'

She wasn't concerned for her own safety. What was the point? Hell, after recent revelations, she felt more afraid of the man next to her than she did of anyone else.

'What is your current situation with that curse, Miss Granger? What does Poppy say?' asked Snape quietly.

'Oh, ah, it's still there, sir, but isn't strong enough to affect me so adversely anymore.' It was like a shadow that wouldn't disappear.

Snape nodded thoughtfully. 'Perhaps, if you'd be so good as to come to my office, say, in an hour, I might have something of interest to you.'

'Of course,' Hermione started, brimming with intrigue, but before she could enquire further, he'd excused himself and left the table. She watched his retreating form and heard herself sighing. It wasn't until she saw McGonagall looking at her that she realised how plaintive it must have sounded.

'Are you sure you are OK?'

'Positive, yes; thank you, Professor.'

Hermione exhaled with relief...potential embarrassment neatly averted.

Snape was poring over a particularly battered old tome when Hermione entered his office that evening. Was that what he had for her...a book? Granted, she loved books, but it was hardly something to be cryptic about. He'd given her loads of books to read in the past.

He turned his attention away from the text at her arrival and moved to stand in front of his desk. She stood still and looked at him expectantly.

'Do you know where the curse hit you, Miss Granger?' he began, without preamble.

'Well, no, not exactly, but Madam Pomfrey assures me that it was on my back...'

Suddenly, his wand was in his hand, and he was stepping silently around her.

'It hit you precisely here,' he enunciated crisply, and Hermione fought not to flinch when she felt the tip of his wand touch her near her right shoulder blade.

'I see,' she commented rather redundantly.

'The imprint of Dark magic is still here, of course; its grip will hang on for as long as possible. That is the way of all Dark magic, but... if you will allow me?'

Hermione ignored the butterflies in her stomach and nodded.

His wand began moving in what appeared to be arbitrary movements, but Hermione had no doubt that they were full of purpose. He muttered softly, and then her body was tingling. Part of her sincerely hoped it was only because of the spell. Rather unnecessarily, her eyes fell shut.

Around the area of her shoulder blade, she felt several pulses of energy, but before she knew it, everything was still once more. The tingling stopped, and Snape's wand was gone. The only sound Hermione could hear was her somewhat elevated breathing.

'That didn't hurt, did it?' He was still standing behind her.

Her eyes popped open.

'Is it... is it *gone*?'

'It would appear so,' he remarked silkily.

She felt her heart give a little leap of joy, hardly daring to believe it. Finally! She breathed to steady herself.

'Well, thanks...' Her voice caught slightly. 'I mean, I thought I'd be stuck with it for a while longer...I couldn't find anything in the library, and...' She was babbling. 'I appreciate it, very much.'

'It was no trouble,' he dismissed.

No, all in a day's work, it would seem, Hermione decided.

He was standing in front of her once more. 'I mean it,' she pressed earnestly. 'You don't know how I have hated having it linger inside me...even when it's immediate effects wore off.'

'It's fine; maybe I should have suggested the use of this spell sooner.'

Hermione smiled. 'It doesn't matter.' Feeling a bit awkward, she clasped her hands together, only to uncomfortably find that they'd become a bit clammy.

'Let's just hope he doesn't come along and cast another one on me!' She aimed for light-heartedness, but didn't quite achieve it. 'Or anyone else, for that matter.'

'Minerva is right; they'll be aware of where he is at all times.' He shifted his gaze away from her, and Hermione was surprised to feel the loss.

However, she became confused when she witnessed an almost-smile about his lips.

'What?' she asked self-consciously.

'The, ah, energy from the spell seems to have had a negative effect upon your hair.'

Her hands flew up to the top of her head, and she could feel several strands sticking up wildly. 'Oh.' She tried to flatten it in vain.

'I'd give it up as a lost cause if I were you.' The corners of his mouth lifted momentarily, and Hermione felt an answering smile form.

Now her palms really were getting a bit sweaty. How often did he smile at anyone?

It was probably best to wrap up the conversation, she decided...before she made a fool of herself. Not to mention that she probably looked horrific with her hair enjoying a life of its own. 'Thank you, again; it is a real weight off my mind.'

A relief, indeed...she felt like she should go and run about the grounds to enjoy the moment of carefree abandon that she felt needed to be unleashed.

He nodded, and Hermione moved to leave. As she walked, she wondered if there was anything she could do to repay him. What, though? She could hardly imagine him accepting a gift of some sort, though she had her work experience at Slug and Jigger's coming up soon, and... Ah.

No doubt that was it, she realised, feeling both regretful and ironic. Three days of quiet while she was away would probably be payment enough for him.

He'd likely call it bliss or some such other superlative.

She would be prepared to put her last Galleon on it.

AN: Thanks for reading, and thanks to astopperindeath for editing this :)

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 11

Arriving back at Hogwarts after three days away fulfilling her obligation to the Ministry at Slug and Jiggers', it would be fair to say that Hermione was in a foul mood. From eager anticipation at the beginning of the week, she'd degenerated into the irritable mess she was in now. She couldn't wait to have a bath and then get straight into bed. Her back ached, and she'd strained her shoulder cleaning the top shelves in the Apothecary. Magic had been forbidden on the grounds of potentially compromising the stock. To round things off, she hadn't been able to sleep properly at Grimmauld Place, and now she was knackered.

Climbing the steps to the Entrance Hall, the doors swung open, momentarily startling her.

'Oh, hello.' There was *that* look again; increasingly, she noted there were times when Severus Snape would look at her as if her very presence amused him. It wasn't so much that he smiled; it was something about the way his eyes glittered in an almost sly manner. She wasn't sure whether it boded well or not. It was probably the latter.

'Hi,' she answered quietly, not really pleased to see him, all things considered.

'Is the Apothecary still standing after suffering you for three days?'

Hermione gave him a brief and insincere smile. 'Mr. Jigger asked me to give you this.' She removed a package out of her robes.

Snape examined the package, which as far as she knew, contained some ingredients of some sort. 'Ah, excellent; you did not enjoy yourself, then?'

'I did not,' she stated tightly. 'The place stinks, they treated me like a slave, and Slug is a lascivious pervert.'

Snape raised his eyebrows, but did not look unduly scandalised. 'He has a reputation for being such.'

'Oh! Thanks for letting me know! I kept wondering why this seemingly sweet old man kept telling me to take my robe off...as if it was hindering all the fetching and carrying I was doing!' Hermione felt herself flushing with indignation. Ugh, what a creep he'd been!

'Don't laugh,' she added haughtily, when he snorted. 'I've been offered a full-time position, if I want it.'

'Well, there's an offer you can't refuse.'

'Quite,' she replied dryly.

'Look, take this down to my office for me, will you? I've got Quidditch practice to attend.' He held the brown paper package towards her.

His eyes narrowed, daring her to object. Hermione grimly snatched the object from his hand and stalked up the steps. She heard a quiet chuckle as she left him.

Breathe, Hermione, breathe; attacking one's mentor was strictly prohibited under Ministry guidelines.

Following her diversion to the Dungeons, Hermione went to her rooms. What a trying few days it had been! As if having to deal with a lecherous old man was bad enough, staying at Grimmauld Place had worn her out, too.

Ron had been there.

Harry and Ginny had conspicuously left them alone for an evening, an action for which she could have cheerfully hexed them. Alone, they had ended up staring into space for a while, she sipping a glass of wine and Ron a can of beer.

'How's Quidditch going?' she'd asked, as a last resort.

'All right, thanks, but I'm actually thinking about giving it up. They want me to join the team full-time, but I'd rather concentrate on my Auror duties.'

'Oh.' Hermione was impressed. She'd had doubts about him juggling two different careers, but was pleased to hear that he was committing himself fully to the Aurors.

'I think that Lavender liked me playing Quidditch.'

She swallowed uncomfortably; there was a conversation killer if ever there was one. Ron appeared to agree as he drank at length from his can, looking vaguely annoyed.

'Tell me about Hogwarts.'

Hermione glanced at him to gauge the sincerity of his interest. Liking what she saw, she consciously tried to remove the awkwardness from her voice.

'Hagrid asks after you often.' And always apologises afterwards, she added silently. 'Things seem a lot calmer in the castle since we were there...a lot quieter.'

Ron nodded. 'Not unsurprising, all things considered; though, maybe it's also because you are also seeing it from the other side of the coin.'

Hermione looked at him contemplatively. 'Yes, I suppose you're right. The students seem as hectic as ever.' She smiled. 'I doubt they get up to half of what we did, though.'

Ron laughed.

She shifted in her chair, warming to her subject. 'Guess what? Professor Snape knew all about the Polyjuice in the second year. He actually ticked me off for you and Harry throwing the firework!'

'Serious?'

'Yes!'

Ron shook his head. 'To think we thought we'd got away with it so cleverly. Didn't take any points from Gryffindor did he?'

'No, though I think he might have wanted to.' She felt a smile spread over her face.

'Is he still a git then, or what?'

Hermione frowned. 'No, not really,' she replied cryptically. 'Gryffindor are on course to win the Quidditch Cup.'

Ron didn't seem to take note of her swift changing of the subject.

'Good! I wouldn't mind going back there to watch a few matches.'

'Professor McGonagall probably wouldn't mind...'

From there on, the conversation had petered out, and Hermione had gone to bed regretting that simply talking to Ron had turned into such an onerous task.

Hermione marked her final first-year essay and pushed the pile aside. Reaching inside her robes, she pulled out a thick piece of parchment and unfolded it. She'd received the missive only a few hours ago.

She felt a thrill run through her each time she read it.

Standing, she moved over to the table where Snape had a brew simmering. She'd been tasked with keeping an eye on it while he was in his last lesson of the day. It was a Thursday, the dreaded Gryffindor and Slytherin class, and Hermione was being extra vigilant toward the potion. She was not going to suffer his ire today and let it spoil her good mood.

She almost dropped her wand in the cauldron when the door suddenly swung open with some force. Spinning round, she saw the Potions master slam the door shut and then proceed to shrug off his robe. He flung it angrily to the ground.

She had just enough time to notice that there were several large stains covering the robe before he blasted the material into nothingness with his wand.

Falling into his chair, he leant down and started rummaging furiously through his bottom drawer.

'Sir?'

Had he been anyone else, Hermione was sure he would have jumped; instead, he merely snapped his head towards her.

He sighed with resignation. 'Ah, I forgot you were in here, Miss Granger.'

Confused with this display, she moved towards him. He reached back down and pulled out a small bottle of Ogden's from the drawer.

'Allow me,' Hermione offered, as he began rifling through the objects on his desk. Picking up a beaker from her table, she Transfigured it into a tumbler.

He nodded his thanks, and downed the measure in one, closing his eyes briefly in satisfaction. Hermione, undeniably intrigued, came to stand next to him. 'Bad lesson, I take it?'

He glanced up at her briefly, and if he thought anything of her proximity, he chose not to elucidate it. 'A cauldron explosion. I dread to think what was put in it...the cauldron literally splintered into pieces. I was able to act just in time to ensure that those in the immediate environs were not skewered.'

'Ah, no wonder your nerves are shot...'

'They're not *shot*...' he dismissed irritably.

He brought his left hand, which had been resting in his lap, onto the table to fiddle with the glass tumbler.

'Looks like someone got skewered, though.' Hermione nodded towards his hand.

'Hmm? Ah, yes.' He raised hand and examined the back of it. 'It's just a scratch.'

He produced his wand, but Hermione lightly put a hand to his arm.

His gaze flashed first to her hand and then to her face.

'You should put something on it before you heal the cut, otherwise who knows what you'll trap in there.' She pushed away from the desk and approached one of his cupboards.

'Stay away from my Dittany,' he ordered.

Hermione picked up a jar of antiseptic. 'It never crossed my mind to waste Dittany on you.' As soon as the words had left her mouth, she bit her lip. It was the type of thing he would have said to her, but she was never quite sure if he appreciated her playing the same game.

'I'll remember that the next time you are wounded.'

She set down the jar in front of him. 'Here...for yourwound.'

She watched him rub some of the salve onto his hand. She was suddenly reminded of the time when he'd grabbed her wrist. It was one of the very few times he'd actually touched her, and in hindsight, it seemed she'd felt something then.

He picked up his wand once more and traced the tip along the cut, murmuring quietly.

While he was preoccupied, she took the opportunity to let her eyes travel over him. Since realising she was attracted to him, to her infinite chagrin, she found she was easily fascinated with looking at him. It felt normal to study him so, and she considered the possibility that she'd been doing it for a long time...it was only now that she was conscious of it. An increasingly popular pastime for her was trying to work out what it was that she liked about him most.

Without the presence of his robe, it was possible to see that he was a rather thin man, but his stature suggested certain strength in his physique. His features were unconventional, but they spoke of the kind of life he had lived, and she liked that.

The cut healed, he replaced his wand up his sleeve. Shoulders slumping forward a fraction, he poured himself another measure of whiskey.

'Hang on, it's only four o'clock.'

'The benefits of a Sobering potion...I can get smashed several times in one night.'

She looked at him, appalled. 'You're joking?'

'Yes...' he acknowledged, but as an aside, added, 'that's what weekends are for.'

Hermione looked at her hands and frowned. Despite his teasing, he seemed unusually glum; the bite she was used to was missing from his voice...it was almost half-hearted.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' he replied shortly, tightening the lid on the bottle of whisky before shoving it back in its drawer. 'I hear that you had some good news today.'

'Oh! Yes, I've got an interview at St. Mungo's next week.' Hermione smiled at him happily.

'Well, well,' he said, raising his eyebrows as if surprised.

Hermione bridled. 'What?'

Snape shrugged flippantly. 'I just didn't expect my plea to actually work.'

'Your plea?'

'Yes, your reference consisted of "Please, *please*, will someone take this bothersome girl off my hands! I'm willing to pay..."'

Hermione gave a reluctant laugh. 'That's not very nice.' She'd been waiting for a remark like this, and anticipating it did not make things any easier.

'It's the truth.'

She decided to dive right in. 'I don't believe you.'

He eyed her speculatively. 'That's your prerogative. Still, poor Mr. Slug is going to be disappointed when he hears you are seeking employment elsewhere.'

She snorted. 'He'll get over it, I'm sure.'

She was only interested in one person being disappointed about her future plans, but by all accounts, he couldn't wait to get rid of her. She crossed back over to the cauldron and stirred its contents wistfully.

How could she ever get him to look at her as anything other than a "bothersome girl"? She could make her hair a little smoother, adorn her face with make-up, smile a little wider at him, or even wear her robes a little more alluringly, but she doubted it would make a difference.

Hell, she could walk up to his desk and flash her breasts at him, and he would probably reply, with infinite indifference, 'Pray put those away, Miss Granger.'

She almost laughed aloud at the thought.

Well, if she ever got desperate, she could always try that as a last resort.

To Hermione's mind, that incident in his office following the cauldron explosion seemed to be the start of something that confused and disheartened her. There was perhaps no link, other than from then on his behaviour appeared to change. It was small things at first, which she did not believe so out of the ordinary. He might snap at her suddenly or become quiet and reticent, but she could deal with it and had dealt with it in the past.

It was not until the day she arrived in his office to find her stuff had been moved that she began to see the wider pattern emerging.

'What's going on?' she asked him with great uncertainty.

He spoke flippantly as he replaced several beakers into a chest. 'I've cleared some space for you in one of the disused rooms down the corridor. I don't need to remind you that your final draft of work is due in four weeks from today, and as this is the busiest time of year for me, too, I thought it best that we don't get under one another's feet.'

Hermione could only stare. In other words, he'd thrown her out of his office. 'You, um, didn't have to do that...'

She watched him shrug his shoulders.

'It seemed sensible...probably should have made such an arrangement from the off.'

Where had this come from? 'I'm sorry if I've been a nuisance, um...' She thought they'd got along fine in his office.

He stilled and then finally deigned to look at her. 'I just think this is more practical.'

Hermione forced herself to look agreeable. 'Sounds good to me, then, ah, where exactly...?'

'Second door on the right.'

She left without another word. Entering her new workspace, she shook her head sadly as she put the pieces of the puzzle together. He'd been off with her for several days, she realised, and this incident cemented her suspicions completely. For some reason, he was speaking to her less and less. He always appeared to be busy with something, and while he did not dismiss her quite out of hand, whenever she tried to draw him into conversation, he seemed evasive and distant.

Was she reading too much into it? There was some logic to his argument, after all. In theory, they would probably find it easier to work in a solitary environment. He had all the end-of-year exams coming up, and she had only a few weeks to put the finishing touches on her project.

But he hadn't even consulted her about moving. Did she really annoy him so much that he couldn't wait until a few more weeks when she would leave for good?

Hermione picked up her quill feeling frustrated. She hated this room already.

Why was it that just when she thought she understood him, he threw her off completely with some oblique action or some enigmatic remark? Maybe she would never work him out...she'd just have to put up with it.

Oh, well, she could do distant also, if need be.

She just... didn't want to.

AN: Many, many thanks to astopperindeath for editing this for me :)

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 12

'Miss Hermione Granger,' said a bespectacled old wizard peering at a sheet of parchment in front of him, 'welcome to St. Mungo's. Please, sit down.'

'Thank you, Mr. Godolphin; I'm very happy to be here.'

Hermione took a seat in front of the large desk that dominated the small, circular room. She smoothed down her robes and willed her nerves away. There was nothing to be worried about.

'You have an impressive C.V., Miss Granger. Most applicants come to us after doing a few years in the private Potions industry, which can be limited. But you chose to undertake an apprenticeship...they are not as popular as they once were. So many are so eager to get straight out into the irresistible world of work...and money of course.' He smiled broadly at her.

'I enjoy research, and so an apprenticeship seemed the best option,' she explained simply.

'An apprenticeship with Severus Snape, no less...you must be very brave.' His smile became a toothy grin.

Hermione smiled weakly. 'Perhaps.'

'I have no doubt that you must have learnt a great deal from him; his students usually are very competent. I don't know the man personally, although his reputation is very well known to me. I confess, therefore, to being interested as to how your apprenticeship came about?'

'Oh, well...' Hermione cleared her throat. 'I just asked him, you see, and um, at first he was rather reluctant. He'd never taken on an apprentice before, but I persisted, and in the end he agreed. Possibly the Headmistress had something to do with that.' She quirked her lips self-consciously.

Godolphin chuckled quietly. 'I see. Well, this is all immaterial of course...we want to know if you are right for this job! Your credentials appear sound, but let's hear a little about what you have been working on during your apprenticeship, Miss Granger.'

Hermione felt herself relax; this was comfortable territory.

As far as interviews went, Hermione felt that it had gone well. She didn't think there was anything else she could have done to improve her chances of acquiring the job...it

was up to them to decide whether she was worthy of it. She'd left with the assurance that she would be informed of their decision within a week.

She hadn't really given much thought as to what she would do if she was unsuccessful. She supposed she'd have to cross that bridge when she came to it, and, well, there was always Slug and Jigger's.

Hermione shuddered.

She felt a piece of parchment rustling inside her robes as she walked, and closed her hand around it. Ron had sent her a brief note, wishing her the best of luck for the interview. It had been a pleasant surprise, and she appreciated the sentiment.

Ginny had Flooed, sending her and Harry's best wishes. Her parents had Owled the day before. McGonagall had given her a reassuring pat on the shoulder as she'd left the castle, and Hagrid had given her a 'good luck' rock cake he'd made for her to, theoretically, munch on. In reality, it was untouched in her pocket, but it was the thought that counted.

The person who perhaps should be most interested in seeing her succeed, considering the work he had put in himself, had said nothing to her. He'd disappeared early from breakfast, and that had been that.

She wouldn't have even minded a sardonic expression of good luck, but no, it would seem he could not give a fig. Hermione felt sure that he would have wished her good luck in the past, but his recent behaviour was just... odd.

He seemed to have stepped back several paces, and she, unsure of what to do, had done the same. It hadn't been difficult; by removing her from his office, she hardly ever saw him. What was she supposed to do about it? Demand to know why things had suddenly changed? As if he would even admit that there was anything to change in the first place!

Ugh, it annoyed her to no end.

But maybe it was for the best. She would be leaving soon, and it would be a lot easier for her to go with the knowledge that she was wasting her thoughts on him. She missed their banter, though. She found potion making to be far less enjoyable when she was not being kept on her toes.

Hermione had wracked her brains for a reason why he would act in such a way. Had she offended him? It was unlikely. Probably, it was simply a case of her having more invested in their relationship than he did. It was likely that he saw no difference in their interaction. At the end of the day, she was just his apprentice; he had more important things with which to occupy himself.

Rounding a corner onto the fourth floor, she pulled up short when she saw the object of her thoughts standing close by. Minerva McGonagall was standing next to him, and they were both staring out of a large, arched window. Hermione stepped back around the corner, out of sight, and leaned heavily against the stone wall. She didn't want to face either of them right now.

It was as she was about to retrace her steps that she heard the Headmistress speak, and the sound carried to where she stood.

'I wonder when Miss Granger will be back. I hope she got on well at St. Mungo's.'

Hermione froze to the spot. She really should leave, she decided, but...

'I'm sure it was fine,' was the flat response of the Potions master, and Hermione had to strain her ears to pick up his low tones.

'No doubt,' agreed McGonagall confidently. 'She is such a lovely girl, don't you think?'

Hermione held her breath.

Snape made a noise of what sounded like disdain in his throat. 'What does loveliness have to do with anything?'

'Come, now, Severus. You may be a cold logician at times, but surely even you can appreciate the softer qualities when you see them?'

'Why should I? They mean nothing.' Hermione could imagine the sneer upon his face.

'You may think so, but I would have to disagree. In Miss Granger's case, they are enhanced simply because she is unaware of the charms she possesses.'

'Do all women think in such flowery terms?' Snape goaded. 'Or is it just you?'

McGonagall appeared to ignore him. 'You will miss having her around when she leaves; I know you will.'

'If you mean that I have got used to having her underfoot, well, I am sure I will find it no hard task to readjust to my former existence.'

'She has seemed a little down, lately.'

Hermione looked at her hands. Had she really been so obviously disheartened this week that people had noticed? She didn't like the thought of that one bit. Note to self...cheer up!

Snape remained silent.

'I hear that you managed to dispel the curse completely,' McGonagall observed.

'Well, by now, it was sufficiently weak enough to respond to a counter-curse.'

'No one knew anything much about the curse...how did you find a counter-curse that would work?'

Snape seemed to hesitate for a moment. 'Are you quite sure you wish to know?'

McGonagall was firm. 'Quite sure, Severus.'

'Let us go somewhere a little more private, then. I'd rather not discuss it here.'

Hermione almost panicked when she realised they might see her. But when she heard their footsteps set off in the opposite direction, she sighed with relief.

She'd never previously considered where he might have got the counter-curse from. She'd assumed, perhaps naively, that because the curse was weak, he'd been able to use any generic spell. Clearly, though, it *did* matter where he'd got it from; otherwise, what was the point of the secrecy?

Should she go up to him and demand to know what spell he had used? She had a right to, didn't she? It ~~was~~^{was} her body he'd practised it on.

Merlin, she should have asked at the time! Instead, she'd been perfectly happy to let him cast random magic on her. But then, that was the point, surely? She trusted him; did it really matter where he'd found the counter-curse? His judgement was sound, wasn't it?

Regardless, it was all academic now, but her curiosity would be infuriated for some time.

Hermione had not entered the staff room all week, unsure of whether she would be welcome to take up her usual position next to the Potions master. It was not that he could have done anything to stop her, but she did not want to impose. As such, she'd generally opted to avoid having to make the decision, and thus she stayed away from the place.

Following her day at St. Mungo's, and overhearing that oblique conversation between Snape and McGonagall, Hermione found she would like to make a stand, so to speak. Why should she have to feel awkward? She had as much right to go in the staff room, and if he wanted to ignore her, then fine. She would simply rise above it from now on.

As soon as she entered, McGonagall spotted her.

'Hermione! Tell me how it went today. All right, I hope?'

Hermione crossed over to the Headmistress and spoke with her quietly. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied the Potions master sitting at the other end of the room, a mug of tea in hand. It was only while she was halfway through explaining what they'd asked her during the interview that she realised he'd got up and left.

Fighting the urge to groan out loud, she wrapped up her conversation with McGonagall as soon as she could without seeming rude and then left with the excuse of heading to the kitchens to get some dinner.

In actual fact, she headed straight for the dungeons, knocking on the door to Snape's office. Hermione crossed her fingers that he was in there. She was going to make him talk to her.

He was inside. 'Come in.'

'Good evening, Professor Snape,' said Hermione airily as she opened the door. 'I hope I am not disturbing you, but I have some library books to return...one of which I believe you borrowed off me.'

It was a flimsy excuse for her intrusion...she wouldn't be able to go to the library until it opened tomorrow morning, but still, she was in.

'Ah, yes, I have it here, somewhere.' He looked through a stack of books on his desk, and Hermione stared at him, willing him to ask her about her interview. She wasn't going to bring it up herself...she had to retain *some* of her pride.

'This is the one...Victor Entwistle?'

She swallowed a sigh. 'Correct.'

He handed her the book, and Hermione almost snatched it from him in her irritation. He glanced back down to the essay he was marking.

'Thanks.' It was like banging her head against a brick bloody wall. 'See you tomorrow.'

'So when do you start, then?'

She clutched the book tightly to her chest in surprise. 'I'm sorry?'

'Did they not offer the job to you on the spot?' He raised an eyebrow in query.

'No, they did not...'

He made a noise of disapproval deep in his throat. 'You must be slipping, Miss Granger.'

Hermione felt herself brighten, and she took a step forward. 'Perhaps *you* didn't offer them a large enough bribe.'

He shrugged dismissively. 'I named my price...they can take it or leave it. I'm sure I can find someone else to palm you off to.'

This was more like it! 'Who says I am yours to sell?' she challenged.

'According to the Ministry, until the first of June, I can do what I like with you.'

Hermione almost blushed. 'It says that, does it?'

He smirked. 'Not in so many words, but let us say the small print is open to interpretation.'

'Well, as long as you don't sell me to Slug and Jigger's, I don't mind.'

'Maybe I will spare you that,' he said with a dark chuckle.

Buoyed by his apparently good mood, as well as the fact that he'd probably said more to her tonight than he had all week, she stepped closer to his desk. 'Do you have anything you wish me to do?'

'No, I don't think so...'

Up close, she noticed that he looked a little tired, and for the first time she wondered if there was something else on his mind that accounted for his indifference lately...something that had nothing to do with her. She would probably never know.

'Actually...'

A knock at the door interrupted him, and a young boy appeared. 'Sir? Sorry, sir, but there's a fight going on in the common room.'

Hermione heard Snape swear under his breath as he rose from his chair. She sighed as he disappeared, dropping her book onto his desk with frustration. The movement sent a quill to the floor, and she moved behind his desk to pick it up. As she did so, her leg knocked heavily against something. Grimacing with pain, Hermione looked down to find one of the drawers had been left open slightly. She lifted her foot to nudge it shut, and she saw something that she recognised.

Leaning down, she pulled the drawer towards her. It was the book that he had been reading that night when he'd dispelled her curse.

It was a large book, the cover of which was made of brown leather and heavily embossed. However, there was no title or name of an author visible. Biting her lip, she quickly lifted the book to check the spine. There was nothing on there either, though the cracks in the binding implied the tome was of some significant age. Taking a deep breath, she flipped open the cover. The parchment was thick and yellowed, but empty. Lifting several of the pages at a time, it seemed the whole book was blank.

Confused, Hermione closed the book and swiftly shut the drawer. Merlin, how she wished she'd never eavesdropped earlier on today!

She quickly moved to the other side of the desk, and she brought a hand to her mouth as she thought. It was possible that the book was charmed to appear blank...she'd definitely seen him reading it before. It was also possible that the book had absolutely nothing to do with the counter-curse.

Crossing slowly over to the door, she hesitated. Perhaps she *should* just straight out ask him about the counter-curse. It would be a reasonable enquiry, and how else would she ever satisfy her curiosity? Mind made up, she sat down in a chair and waited for him to return. It was as her courage was beginning to wane that he reappeared, looking fairly surprised to see her still there.

'Was there something else you needed?'

Hermione nodded, steeling herself. 'I, um, wanted to ask you about the counter-curse you used on me last week.'

Snape looked at her curiously. 'What about it?'

'I'm just interested in how it worked...'

He slumped elegantly into his chair and pinned her with a surveying look. 'By the very nature of its name, it cancelled out the presence of a negative curse. What more needs to be said?'

Hermione smiled reluctantly. 'I'd gathered that much. I just never realised that such a spell existed. I mean was it a generic counter-curse that worked only because the actual curse had significantly faded? Or was it something more particular?'

He drummed the fingers of his left hand briefly on the desk. 'Why are you asking me this now and not last week?'

'Does it matter?'

'I think it does.'

Hermione looked at her hands. She'd known it would not be straightforward. She was unsure if she was about to make a mistake, but it seemed best to just go for it. 'I overheard you and Professor McGonagall this evening.'

His expression didn't flicker. 'Eavesdropping, eh? I would not have thought you capable of such behaviour.'

She frowned at the derisive note in his voice. 'I'm sorry for it, but I accidentally overheard the tail end of your conversation, which, I might add, was conducted in a public corridor.'

He didn't need to know she'd heard a lot more besides.

'So, you've been wrestling with your curiosity, rather than your conscience, all night, then? Is this why you have been in my drawer?'

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, but outwardly she remained calm.

'It was partially open when I left,' he pressed.

'So, I shut it.' She felt rather unsure of where this was all headed...he seemed deceptively unruffled by it all.

'You shut it,' he repeated slowly. He reached down and opened said drawer, retrieving the mysterious book and dropping it loudly onto his desk.

'Going to dust it for fingerprints?' Hermione clenched a fist tightly; what was she doing baiting him like this?

She thought she saw a flicker of amusement pass across his face, but she couldn't be sure.

'I think we both know what we would find if I did.'

Hermione made sure to keep her face impassive. 'Is there any relevance to this book?'

Snape opened it and flicked through several pages. 'Oh, well, it appears to be empty...'

'So it would seem... Look, if you're not going to tell me, then I'll just go.'

He remained unbothered, and Hermione closed her eyes in frustration. He drove her up the wall sometimes.

Something within him appeared to suddenly give, though, and he exhaled loudly. 'Does it matter where the counter-curse came from?'

'Probably not.' She paused and considered him for a moment. 'But I should still like to know.'

Snape laced his fingers together and shrugged. 'Fine; if you must know I devised a counter-curse by recreating the original curse.'

Hermione felt her mouth go dry. 'I'm sorry?'

'This book, which I tracked down through Lucius Malfoy, has at some point been in the possession of Voldemort, Grindelwald, and many, many others. Its origins are estimated to be from as far back as the founding of Hogwarts.'

He sounded offhand, as if what he was talking about was no big deal, but at the same time, he seemed to be daring her to object with indignation or disapproval.

'This book contains the recipe of an arcane potion that creates a similar effect to the curse that was used upon you. This potion was used as a punishment centuries ago, though its effects were reversible. Over time, the potion fell afoul of misuse, and the Ministry sought to remove any record of it. It is my belief that Yaxley senior used this book as a basis for creating your curse.'

'You *recreated* the curse,' Hermione repeated dumbly.

'Theoretically, of course...I have had no one to test it on, after all. Still, the counter-curse worked, though whether it would have at the onset of your difficulties, I don't know.'

She could hardly believe that he had done such a thing, and her disbelief was surely written all over her face.

'Who could resist such an intellectual conundrum?' he said, by way of explanation.

Naturally, Hermione thought wryly. She would never dare suggest that it was anything other than an intellectual conundrum. Still, when she was feeling particularly pathetic, she could always let herself fantasise that he'd done it because he'd wanted to help her.

'Isn't it a bit dangerous, though? I mean, what if the Ministry caught you dabbling in the Dark Arts?'

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she realised she'd said a bit too much.

His eyes narrowed. 'Why should *they* find out?'

Hermione fidgeted. 'That book is incriminating...if someone recognised it...' Hell, McGonagall had said the Ministry visits were always unannounced!

'Miss Granger, please; I assure you there is no way any Ministry imbecile would be able to work out what is in this book, and unless you are planning on dropping me in it... ?'

'I think you should return it to Malfoy, or even get rid of it full stop.'

'And destroy the only chance we have against that curse? You might have faith in humanity but I, however, do not. Who knows who Yaxley might have shared the curse with?'

Hermione rubbed a hand over her forehead; he had a point. 'Maybe we should have told the Ministry the full story...'

'There's nothing more the Ministry could have done. No doubt, they would have redoubled their efforts in tracking down Dark items and artefacts, and so on, but they would likely destroy them. We *need* books like this. Where do you think I got the counter-curse that I used on you the first time round from?' *Standard Book of Spells Grade 5*'

'I never thought about it,' she admitted honestly.

'I know a lot about Dark magic, Miss Granger...'

'I suppose.' Hermione remained silent for a while. There had been a warning note in his voice, but she decided that it was almost acceptable, or normal, for him to know so much about Dark curses. That's why she'd never wondered about it before. Snape *knew* about Dark magic; it was like saying the earth was round. 'We all have to have a hobby...' she offered, slightly tongue-in-cheek.

He gave a short laugh. 'Yes, well, there are far less scandalous ones I could take up, I'm sure.'

Hermione waited a moment. 'Like, knitting, perhaps?'

'Knitting?'

She bit the inside of her cheek. 'Yes; or I could see you fishing.'

'I think some of my brain cells just shrivelled up and died simply at the *thought* of that kind of boredom.'

Hermione laughed, and then became serious once more as a thought occurred to her. 'So, you were not entirely sure if that counter-curse would work on me, then?'

He shook his head slowly.

'So, theoretically, *anything* could have happened?'

There was a ghost of a smirk about his lips. 'You were a very tractable guinea-pig.'

Hermione snorted quietly. 'Charming...'

Maybe she would make sure to be less *tractable* in future.

Snape leant forward and retrieved a scroll of parchment from his desk, throwing it lightly towards her. 'The Ministry sent these the other day, but I have not had chance to give them to you.'

Because you've been avoiding me, Hermione added silently.

'It's just some things for you to sign; a declaration that it's all your own work et cetera. Remember you need two copies of your work.'

'Two?' This was news to Hermione.

'Yes, the Ministry will be forwarding a copy for someone else to mark as well...someone you won't know. We will decide together on your final award.'

'Is this to rein in your renowned hastiness when handing out top marks?'

'Of course,' he replied blithely.

Hermione smiled slowly, wondering what it could possibly be that had him in such an amiable mood following his recent bout of aloofness. She half-debated whether to bring it up, but then, it was probably best not to question it. She watched as he rubbed a hand over his eyes.

'Tired?'

He hummed in agreement.

Maybe that was her answer right there.

'I'll leave you to it, then.' She stood up, and her eyes were drawn to the contentious book that remained on his desk. 'You will, ah, get rid of that book, won't you? Or at least put it somewhere safe?'

He scowled long-sufferingly, and Hermione raised her hands defensively. 'All right, all right; you know what you are doing, I'm sure.'

'Considering I've been doing it since before you were born, that would be about right, yes,' he muttered dryly.

Ah, yes; since before she was born. As if the issue of their respective ages had ever eclipsed her! It had steadily become a perpetual thorn in her side, but there was no point in dwelling on it now.

'Well, then, goodnight, sir.'

'Goodnight, Miss Granger.'

She shut the door behind her quietly, realising that she would have *much* to dwell upon in the very near future, though.

She would have to face it all at some point...it was unavoidable.

AN: Thanks, everyone, for the reviews - I appreciate knowing what people think of the story. Thanks, also, to astopperindeath for beta-reading :)

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 13

It was a grey and cloudy day, and Hermione pulled her coat a little tighter against the breeze as she collected plants down by the lake. That was when the letter arrived. An owl swooped down with a screech and dropped the envelope at her feet. Putting down the basket she held, Hermione picked up with the missive with something approaching dread. The coat of arms of St. Mungo's was on the seal, and her stomach lurched uncomfortably.

Clearly, there was nothing else for it...she couldn't stand staring at it all day. Hermione tore open the envelope and ripped out the letter from within. Her eyes rapidly scanned the page, and it took several moments before she became fully cognizant of what was before her.

She had the job; she actually had the job. 'Bloody hell,' she whispered to herself.

Hermione slowly folded up the letter. She was finally going to restart her career; she was going to get back out there! Picking up the basket, she turned to head back to the castle and belatedly realised that something was missing.

She didn't feel ecstatic.

There was no urge to dash inside with glee and tell everyone her news. Granted, she was happy and pleased, but the feelings were unusually subdued. This was the culmination of several months of hard work, and she was feeling rather blasé.

Disgustingly blasé, really.

It would be fine if she could say that her nonchalance stemmed from the fact that she'd never once considered the prospect that ~~they~~*wouldn't* offer her the job. But her ego wasn't that overblown; it wasn't *that* straightforward.

Hermione began making her way through the undergrowth. She knew the truth of the matter. It was all down to him, of course. For one thing, she would no longer see him on a regular basis; in fact, who knew when she would ever see him again? Part of her rebelled at the fact that her happiness was subject to another, especially one who didn't even realise it. Still, she was quite sure she would have ended up missing him, irrespective of the extraneous feelings she'd developed...it was just that now it was worse.

And there was really nothing to be done about it. There was no point getting het up or inconsolable over it. Realistically speaking, it was just something she would have to simply 'get over.' It wasn't as if she loved him.

Hermione paused mid-stride. Did she...? No, she didn't love him...she just wouldn't mind having a chance to go down that road with him. A smile of resignation crept over her face...what a hole she'd dug herself into!

She just prayed it wouldn't get any deeper.

It was as she was crossing the Entrance Hall that she heard him call her name. The Potions master appeared from the steps leading to the dungeons, and immediately he approached her. He started peering into the basket balancing on her arm.

'Weed, weed...' he muttered irritably, picking up grass reeds and dropping them onto the floor.

Hermione snatched the basket away. 'I know they're weeds! Don't worry; everything you asked for is in there!'

'Dandelions?'

'I wasn't just picking stuff for *you*, you know.' She knelt down and retrieved the "weeds" off the floor.

'What on earth do you want with a pile of...?'

'Severus!' the voice of the Headmistress rang out. 'Have you organised that staff meeting for tomorrow?'

'It was the highlight of my day, Minerva.'

McGonagall nodded with wry approval.

Hermione put her hand in her robe pocket and pulled out her letter. Seeing as they were both there... 'I, ah, start at St. Mungo's on the first of July,' she stated.

McGonagall gasped, smiled widely. 'Well done, my dear!'

Hermione smiled. 'There is a condition...I have to pass my apprenticeship with a merit or more.'

'Oh dear,' Snape commented. 'Do you have a Plan B?'

Before Hermione could respond, McGonagall had intervened. 'You are going to pass with flying colours, Hermione; ignore him.'

'I always do.' Hermione quirked her lips, but when she glanced at Snape there was no hint of amusement upon his face. Indeed, he was looking at her rather gravely, and Hermione felt the humour die in her throat.

She looked away, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. 'I should, um...' She lifted the basket in explanation, and with a quick smile, hastened down into the dungeons.

At least she knew where she was with a basketful of plants.

It was not long after she'd received the job offer from St. Mungo's that Hermione handed in her completed research project. There had been a few days remaining before the official deadline, but if she were honest, she'd been happy to see the back of it. She felt sure it was completed to the best of her ability, and she was fed up of worrying herself over it.

She could hardly believe how quickly the time had gone, but she had only one week left at Hogwarts and *still* she wasn't filled with anticipation and excitement! She had a great new career to embark upon, yet all she wanted to do was go and sit in the dungeons. She should be full of butterflies, but she just was not. She wanted to hex some sense into herself.

What a difference nigh on a year could make! She'd never have imagined such a development occurring in the past, but what could she do? She liked him, and it was a fact she could not change. She was going to miss him, but she would have to get on with it. It was best to be pragmatic...she felt none of the insufferable indignation and dejection she'd felt when she'd first discovered her feelings for Ron. This time was different; she'd never allowed herself to imagine anything between her and her former professor. What was it he had once said? To never have expectations was to never be disappointed.

Perhaps he had been right.

She might secretly hope that he felt something for her, but, really, she expected nothing of him...he'd never given her a reason to get her hopes up. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that she would come to care for someone who would not feel the same, but, and this was the most confusing part, she found she was *glad* that she had come to see him in the light she had.

Hermione often thought of that conversation they'd had on the night of the Ministry celebration...she couldn't forget it. She'd wanted to prove to him that things didn't have to be so negative, and now... well, now she could.

She could... tell him that she cared about him, prove to him that not everyone was out to capture fifteen minutes of fame. *she* had no ulterior motive.

She might possibly make a fool of herself and embarrass him, as well as herself, but she wanted him to know. He deserved to know...he had done a lot for her over the years, and she could do this much for him.

Even if he laughed at her, she would make him believe her.

Maybe it would restore his faith in himself. She'd never met anyone who viewed themselves so negatively before.

Hermione could not say her actions were as entirely selfless as they might appear. But the only other option was to leave without telling him, and that would mean wondering for all time about what could have happened. Would it be easier for her to move on if she knew for certain that her feelings were unrequited? Because, deep down lurked the possibility that he might, inexplicably, feel the same. It was something she secretly hoped for, but at the same time something she determinedly kept at bay.

Coming to such a decision was all well and good, but acting it out was another thing entirely. How does one go about revealing such a personal thing? Especially to a man who would likely scorn such sentiment? Each time she saw him, she waited for an opportunity to present itself...it never did. Why should it? It was not as if they ever indulged in deep conversations about feelings, or love, or relationships.

Hermione knocked on the door to his office and let herself in. He was probably sick of the sight of her after the amount of time she kept wandering in over the last several days. She wouldn't allow him to be distant with her, anymore, and she was nothing if not persistent.

'What are you doing down here, Miss Granger? I told you, I cannot give you any information about your marks yet.'

She smiled ruefully. 'No, I know. I was just bored...'

Snape twirled the quill in his hand. 'So you thought it would be acceptable to come and annoy me?'

She ignored him. 'What are you doing?'

'Marking exam papers; I don't seem to have anyone else to foist them onto anymore.'

'I won't miss that,' Hermione commented dryly. Actually, part of her would, she realised...she was pathetic.

She moved around the room in a pensive fashion, picking up certain familiar objects. She'd even miss the pickled creatures. Not just pathetic, it seemed she was insane, too. Her meanderings took her near to his desk, and a noise of irritation sounded from him.

'Miss Granger, I cannot concentrate with you hovering about like some lost lamb.'

Hermione blinked. 'Sorry,' she said quietly, looking at him contemplatively. After talking herself into mustering the courage to tell him, she realised she just wasn't brave enough. 'I'll leave you to it.'

She was halfway to the door when his voice stopped her. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, I... I'm just feeling a bit reflective, I suppose.'

'One would never believe that you had just completed a significantly hard year of work.' He raised an eyebrow.

'A bit gloomy, am I?' She smiled briefly.

'Indeed; that's what spending so much time in these dungeons does to you...it'll do you good to get out of here.' He glanced briefly around the dim office, and there was a hint of a frown in his eyes.

'Don't say that,' she admonished quietly. His expression flickered at that, and she could tell she had his full attention. Hermione suddenly realised that maybe this was the best opportunity she was likely to get...she should just go for it. She didn't have much to lose, in any case. The words stuck in her throat, but eventually she got them out. 'Maybe I don't want to get out of here...'

'Hogwarts does tend to have that effect...'

'It's not the castle,' she said significantly.

Snape stared at her for several moments before lowering his quill, and his gaze, to the desk.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'I want to tell you something.' She moved forward till she was standing in front of his desk. Already she could feel her cheeks heating up. 'It's

difficult for me to say, but I think I'll regret it if I leave without saying it, I...'

'Don't...' he interceded softly.

'What?' she asked, completely confused.

'Don't say it.'

She laughed nervously, and he looked at her. Hermione stared back; incredulity rose in her throat, and it was reflected in her voice. 'You *know* what I want to say?'

He remained impassive, but then he looked away.

'Do you?' she pressed.

He stood up and moved away from the desk. 'Please, just leave it be.'

She closed her mouth, which had opened in surprise. 'You do, don't you? You know that I...?' Her mouth became dry with dread. 'Why shouldn't I say anything?'

How did he know?

'Because once it is said, it cannot be unsaid. I've not *any* wish to hear it.'

Hermione breathed shallowly, and her heart thumped painfully in her chest. 'Well, I'm sorry my feelings are so offensive to you.' Merlin, she hadn't expected this! 'It's okay, you know, I'm not expecting anything from you. You said yourself you have no interest in former students, or Weasley cast-offs.'

He looked at her then, no doubt surprised that she'd remembered such a throwaway remark. How could she have forgotten it, though? It had plagued her ever since.

'So, why are you here, then?'

'You implied before that you did not deserve happiness, or... lo...' She couldn't bring herself to say 'love', so she carried on hurriedly. 'And I just wanted you to know that you do inspire... that is to say, *I*... care about you...yes, *I am* going to say it,' she stated boldly when he closed his eyes, 'you can't stop me.'

He stepped closer to her, and his voice was bitter. 'I should be grateful to you, then...thankful for your consideration?'

Hermione could hardly believe her ears. 'No! That's ridiculous!'

'Is it? I fail to see what else you hope to gain from this demonstration. Makes you feel good, does it? Your good deed for the year done.'

Hermione closed her eyes in frustration. 'Why is nothing *ever* simple with you? I'll admit, my motives were not entirely selfless...haven't you ever wanted to just get something off your chest before? But, Merlin, you make it sound like I want you to be indebted to me or something! For some inexplicable reason, I acquired feelings for you, and that is that!'

The more she spoke, the more his face became pale. *I just want you to be happy*, she thought helplessly.

'This is nonsense,' he said dismissively, his expression stoic.

Hermione looked away and shrugged sadly. 'Perhaps it is.'

What a disaster. She'd never expected him to dismiss her completely out of hand. Full of embarrassment, she moved as if to leave, but suddenly turned back to him. 'How did you know what I wanted to say? I didn't know myself until recently.'

He sat back down at his desk and began fiddling with a quill...he said nothing.

'Well, was it obvious?' she asked bitterly, feeling mortified that he had already known for some time. A terrible thought occurred to her, and she closed her eyes. 'Was this why you chucked me out of your office? To protect yourself against my predatory advances?'

'No,' he answered eventually. 'I had a suspicion...I can assure you, not many people treat me the way you do. Though, admittedly, I preferred to think that I was mistaken.' He rubbed a hand tiredly over his hair. 'But the look on your face just now said it all. I would hesitate to agree with you on how strong you believe your... feelings to be.'

'You would, would you?' Hermione accused with impatience.

'Indeed. We have spent a lot of time together this year. It is perhaps not unlikely that you believe yourself to have formed an attachment, though I find it difficult to believe. I assure you, you will soon forget about it.'

It wasn't often that he could not meet her gaze...in fact, it was pretty damn rare...but now he refused to look at her, giving her pause. Hermione took a step forward and placed her palms onto the desk, leaning forward to bring her gaze level with his.

'That's what you've decided, is it?'

He raised his head and reared back slightly. 'Yes, it is.'

Hermione decided she might as well chance her arm. 'You know, what/ don't understand is why you are making a big deal out of this. I mean, I was quite sure you would be indifferent about the whole thing...I was prepared for it. Yet, this complete objection? You say you believe I'll forget you once I've left, so why make a fuss? Why can't you stand to hear me talk? Why not just humour me, safe in the knowledge that I'll soon be gone; soon to get over you...my *silly crush*? Unless...' She stared at him...straight into those dark eyes. 'Unless you don't really want me to forget about you, unless you feel...'

She trailed off in surprise as his eyes flashed, and she slowly straightened her posture. 'Perhaps, you are not as indifferent about the matter as I would have thought.' She felt surprisingly calm.

He got up again and moved away from her, and that action alone proved to her she was on the right track.

'You're not, are you?' stated Hermione, shock beginning to creep into her system.

'Think what you like, it makes no difference to me.' He was defiant.

'Do you feel the same as me?' She held her breath.

He closed his eyes impatiently, and when he opened them, his look was as firm as ever. 'It doesn't matter what I feel or think...'

'Of course it does! I can't believe that you... why did you not say anything just now, or...'

'Miss Granger, I am not going to discuss it!'

'What...are you embarrassed or ashamed to care about me?'

'No,' he said with a sigh.

'Well, then, I'm struggling to precisely understand what is going on here, s...' Merlin, she couldn't call him sir at a time like this! 'Why do you have such a problem with me speaking about this?'

He advanced on her slightly, and spoke fiercely. 'The whole thing is ludicrous, quite frankly! There is nothing to be gained here.'

'Of course there is!'

'No, there isn't. You don't seriously think there could be anything between us, do you?'

Hermione hated the look of condescension on his face. 'I know you have a problem with me being a former student, but...'

'The issue is not that. You are half my age, for Merlin's sake...as if that would work!'

'It's a significant age-gap, I agree, but not insurmountable and not even that big a deal!'

He shook his head. 'Miss Granger, I could stand here and give you reason ~~after~~ *reason* why it would not work, and I *know* that it wouldn't! No! Let me finish, because I am only going to say this once. I am not getting involved with anyone. I have consistently been dealt a bad hand when it comes to *any* kind of relationship...I have always come out the other side with nothing. Why should now be any different?' He sighed. 'Why should I dare to raise my expectations now?'

Hermione didn't know what to say.

'I would rather have your friendship than nothing at all.'

It was probably the most sincere she'd ever seen him, and it took the wind out of her sails quite unexpectedly.

'You see, now, why I didn't want you to say anything? Already it has changed things between us.' His expression became set with determination. 'I will not discuss this matter any further.'

'No, please, don't go...'

Before she could do anything, he'd left the room. Hermione put her head in her hands in complete disbelief.

He *would* be discussing it further; by Merlin he would.

It would be fair to say that all Hermione could think about for the rest of the day was that conversation, and she struggled to determine what exactly she should do. There was no way she was just going to leave it, but was there a way to convince him? If there was, she wasn't sure she would be able to pull it off. Not only that, he was comprehensively making sure he kept out of her way. She would have to seek him out herself, and the best chance of that was catching him when she knew he would *definitely* be in his office.

So, she waited until the clock approached seven o'clock, and then she descended to the dungeons, knowing that he would be finishing up his Head of House duties. She knocked on the door, not really knowing what she was going to say once she was in there. She felt sure, though, that she knew how the conversation would begin...he would tell her to leave or some such other dismissal.

He threw his quill down with some force when he saw her. 'I am not in the mood for this, Miss Granger. I told you earlier that this conversation was over!'

'Why should *you* decide when it's over?' she demanded.

'Because, evidently, you are labouring under some misjudgement that there is actually anything to say when there patently is not.'

'There is *too* much to say...you just don't want to admit it.'

He snorted in disagreement. 'And you know me so well, of course.'

'I think I do know you.' Her voice wasn't as confident as she would prefer.

'You do not.' He shook his head firmly. 'There is much you don't know about me.'

'Then let me get to know you.'

'There is no point.'

Hermione closed her eyes tiredly. '*Why?*'

'Nothing good can come from it.'

'How do you know that?'

'It is common sense,' he said flatly.

'Common sense?' she spat, becoming frustrated. 'There is no logic to this! You won't even give it chance. Of course there is good to be gained from this! It could be great, it... You would really just dismiss such a possibility? You would pass up the chance to be happy?'

'*Happiness*,' he scoffed. 'You don't know what you are talking about.'

'*You* don't,' she accused. 'I can't believe you are being so stubborn about this! How can you be so close-minded and so negative?'

He pinned her with a piercing look, and Hermione felt her courage quail somewhat.

'I'll tell you why I'm being so cold about this,' he began quietly, but firmly. 'I'll tell you why I'm *not* being negative...I'm being realistic. I'll tell you why I can sweep this under the rug as no more than a mere trifle to be dealt with. The simple truth, Miss Granger, is that one does not miss what one has never had. One does not *need* what one has never had!'

Hermione suddenly couldn't look at him, and she sought desperately for something to say.

'I do not need this,' he clarified. 'Now I am telling you, *this* is all that needs to be said.'

Silence rang out about the office, and was only broken when Snape cleared his throat. 'Look... I need you to fill in your evaluation forms for the Ministry. If you could leave them on my desk once complete...' Then, with a swish of his robes, he was gone once more.

Hermione remained standing there, trying hard to digest everything he'd just said. For the first time, she fully considered the possibility that she was way out of her depth.

Despite her previous hope, the hole she'd dug for herself had just become a lot deeper.

Now, she just had to decide whether to get out or to keep digging.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for her beta skills, and thanks, also, for reading.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 14

After that rather unbelievable day of discovery and defiance, Hermione hardly knew what to do with herself. How could she turn her mind to anything productive whilst trying to deal with those revelations? So, for lack of anything better to do, she took to walking. Since early morning, she'd wandered aimlessly around the grounds, low in spirits, but enjoying the sunshine and one of her few chances left to take pleasure in the castle. The lake looked inviting, and Hermione went down to the shore and looked out over the expanse of water. She sighed contemplatively; it was wonderfully calm and still, and she wished her mind was as serene. She should be looking forward to the prospect of her new job...her life was getting back on track a year after that incident in Diagon Alley, yet she was full of disappointment.

She was beginning to consider that Snape had maybe had a point all along...she shouldn't have confronted him about her feelings. Things would likely become extremely complicated because of it. Prior to all this, she'd imagined they might remain friends of a sort once she'd left, but now, even that was looking unlikely.

He had had the advantage all along. Why hadn't she realised the truth of the matter as well? In her defence, he was hard to read, and whatever feelings he had for her were clearly reluctant, but still... And was that why he had become oddly distant in recent weeks? Perhaps she'd surmised wrongly before. It wasn't just to protect himself from her, but her from him as well.

No matter; she didn't want protection, or need it.

Hermione sat down on a large rock and bent down to pick up a few smooth pebbles. It was going to be so much more difficult to leave knowing that her feelings were not completely unrequited; already, she wanted him more because of it. Hope could be a debilitating thing, she decided ruefully.

Curling her forefinger around the pebble, she brought her arm back and threw it across the water, watching as it skimmed daintily across the surface. This was how she occupied herself for several moments until the sound of footsteps surprised her, and the current pebble she was aiming at the surface landed with a messy splash into the water.

'Only two bounces, Miss Granger? This is disappointing.'

Hermione frowned, not really pleased that he had found her. But nonetheless, she was rather intrigued that he had actively sought her out. She'd expected him to sustain a wide berth around her until she left.

'What can I do for you, Professor?' Inwardly, she marvelled at the absurdity of all...she couldn't even address him by his name.

He stepped closer, practically snarling at her. 'What the hell is this?'

Somewhat taken aback, she looked to find him brandishing a roll of parchment. She didn't need to look twice...it was the evaluation form she'd filled in for Ministry. 'Did I fill it in wrong?' she asked blandly, picking up another stone.

'I should say you most certainly did!' he hissed.

Hermione swung her legs gently against the rock. 'I think I know how to fill a form in.' She could hear him unravelling the parchment, but she kept her gaze elsewhere.

'Imagine my surprise, nay, *horror*, when I saw what you wrote in the comments section.'

'Those forms are confidential...you shouldn't have read it.'

'Oh, excuse me, was that why you left it open, unsealed, and in full view on my desk? So, I wouldn't see it?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I fail to see what the issue is. I had some extra comments to make and I made them. Can't you take a bit of praise?'

'Miss Granger, you have used the term "wonderful" in the same sentence as my name! Are you insane? They'll never believe you wrote it...they'll think I did!'

'Don't be silly,' she scoffed impatiently. 'As if anyone would you believe you to be that narcissistic. It's got my signature on it...they'll know it's not forged.'

'You will change it immediately!' he demanded.

'Why? It's what I think.' She could feel him glaring at her, and she resisted the urge to fidget.

'It's suspicious, is what it is!' he thundered.

Hermione sighed in frustration.

'Perhaps you want them to question the professionalism of your apprenticeship? You don't mind the credibility of your work being scrutinised? I'm sure St. Mungo's would love to find out that we are under investigation as to our conduct!'

She snapped her head towards him. 'Is that what this is all about? You are afraid that doubt will be cast over my apprenticeship if we were to become involved? Nothing has gone on, so they wouldn't...'

'It is not an invalid issue,' he interrupted. 'Mark me, they would investigate, and even if they found no evidence, the damage would have already been done. People are always eager to think the worst of me, if not you.' He paused for a moment, as if weighing up his next words. 'Do you remember that letter on my desk that I accused you of reading?'

'Falsely accused,' Hermione muttered bitterly.

'Well, perhaps you might like to know what it was about...I'm sure you'll think twice about associating yourself with me then!'

'I already know.' The words were out of her mouth before she could censor herself.

The only sound for a while was his breathing, and she braced herself. 'You know,' he stated with forced calm. 'So you did read it.'

'For the last time, I did not read it!' Hermione wished she'd just let him tell her on his own. 'Professor McGonagall told me,' she explained hurriedly.

He gave a short laugh of incredulity. 'She told you; of course, silly me for thinking anyone can respect my wishes!'

'She just wanted to defend your behaviour towards me, and I never told anyone about it. As you can plainly see, it did not put me off, either.'

He said nothing, and when she ventured to look at him, he had turned away from her slightly.

'Look, I didn't write those comments for the benefit of the Ministry...I would have immediately sealed it if I had. I'll change it, don't worry.' Hermione considered her next words carefully. 'I just thought, you won't let me tell you how I feel, well, maybe I should write it down instead.'

His reply was some time in coming, but when it did, her stomach sank. 'This is folly, Miss Granger.'

'Yes, so you keep saying.' She swallowed back her bitterness and got to her feet. 'You know, I'd rather you just come out and say if you don't feel the same way. I wonder if this is all just some misguided attempt to avoid hurting my feelings.'

She was beginning to doubt he felt anything for her.

'It would be better if it was,' he admitted softly.

Hermione snorted; that made her feel loads better. 'You won't even try...'

'There is no point...'

'You don't *know* that it wouldn't work.'

'I'm not willing to take that chance, Miss Granger. Tell me, do you still talk with Mr. Weasley?'

Hermione was confused. 'Sort of.'

Snape chuckled dryly. 'Exactly..."sort of".'

'But, we will be friends properly, again, someday,' she assured him confidently.

'Do you know why that is? It's because you have years of friendship to fall back on. What do we have? A few months of bickering over a cauldron? I told you, I'd rather things stay as they are, but already I see that this will not be so. I told you once I had no use for the softer emotions, and I stand by that. I say quite unaffectedly that I do not have many friends, and I don't need to remind you of how I spoiled the most significant relationship in my life by clouding the issue with *feelings*.' He picked up a stone and threw it soaring across the surface of the lake. 'Jealousy, obsession, misery...that's where it'll end up, and I want no part of it.'

'It doesn't have to be like that...'

He said nothing, and Hermione sighed, beginning to realise that she was repeatedly banging her head against a brick wall. 'Does my friendship really mean that much to you?'

He nodded.

'Well, if you want me to forget this, then I suppose I'll just have try to.' What else could she do? Right now, she had no idea.

'It is for the best.'

Hermione could only look at him for a moment. 'How can you be so detached? So unaffected... I wonder if I...' She put out her hand to touch him, but he immediately stepped out of reach, and her hand fell uselessly back to her side.

'My life is here at Hogwarts.' He nodded towards the horizon. 'Yours is out there somewhere.'

Hermione followed his gaze and frustratingly wished that it was only physical distance that stood between them. Suddenly, she couldn't bear to stand there with him any longer. 'I'll edit the form and have it on your desk by this afternoon.' That said, she turned and walked back towards the castle. It all seemed such a waste to her, but clearly he would not be moved. She felt there was more to be said, but she didn't know where to start, and he was obviously not going to listen.

Once back inside, Hermione made a decision...this would be her last night in the castle. She'd planned to stay until the end of the week and leave after the Leaving Feast, but there really wasn't any need for her to stay that long.

There was nothing to hang around for, especially not now.

'Thanks for everything, Professor.' Hermione stepped forward and embraced the older woman.

'Oh, now, you are very welcome, my dear.' McGonagall smiled sincerely at her. 'It was a pleasure having you back here.'

'It feels weird to be leaving all over again...I'll miss the castle.'

McGonagall glanced around their surroundings. 'It has that effect, doesn't it?' She placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder. 'I wish you every success at St. Mungo's, and of course, you'll keep in touch?'

Hermione nodded. 'I'd like that very much.'

After leaving the Headmistress, she headed in the direction of the dungeons. As much as she would prefer to take the easy option, she knew she could not leave without saying goodbye. She hesitated several times before mustering the courage to knock on his door.

As soon as he saw her his expression clouded over.

Hermione sighed heavily. 'Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything about... that. I've just come to say goodbye...I'm going home.'

'I see.'

She tried to decipher if he was bothered by this fact, but his expression remained inscrutable. She ploughed on. 'Regardless of anything else that has passed between us, I just wanted to say thanks for your time and expertise this year...I've actually enjoyed it,' said Hermione, keeping her voice even.

'You're welcome,' he replied stiffly, and she could tell from the way his hand fiddled with his quill that this was one of the rare moments where he was discomfited. She regretted, really, that it had come to this. It was all so formal and uncomfortable...things had changed. 'Well, then, goodbye, and take care, sir...'

'Severus,' he interrupted quickly, possibly surprising the both of them.

Hermione stared at him, managing a smile that she hoped did not appear as pained as it felt. 'Hermione, then.'

If 'Severus' was all he was willing to give her right now, then it would have to be enough.

He nodded. 'Goodbye, Hermione.'

She'd only taken a few steps, however, when she stopped. It was not enough, really; in fact, it was nowhere near enough. There was something else she wanted before she could leave. He was watching her intently as she approached him once more, but this time, she moved around his desk to where he sat.

She registered the slight widening of his eyes, but determinedly ignored it. 'There is something I want, which I hope you will not also begrudge me.' Bringing her hand lightly to his cheek, she quickly leant down to press her lips to his. It was only brief, but Hermione closed her eyes and committed to memory all the feelings she felt at the contact. Sighing, she pulled back and stared into his stunned eyes. 'There, and now I have it.'

Hermione let her hand drop from his face, wishing that she could let it linger, but she knew she was pushing it. It was time to go before he started admonishing her for her impetuosity. She'd moved only half a step away, however, when she felt a hand grasp at the back of her robes. Throat closing with anticipation, she hardly dared to breathe as she wondered what it was that had compelled him to stop her. A myriad of scenarios flashed through her mind, and she turned around slowly.

He was staring at her, but Hermione could tell that whatever instinct had made him grab her, he'd already suppressed it. Perhaps she'd hesitated for too long, but his expression was darkening, and he looked away.

'What?' she encouraged quietly, fervently hoping that something would be forthcoming from him. Had she unconsciously hoped that her leaving would impel him to act?

He shook his head. 'Nothing...' His voice held only a fraction of hesitation. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Severus, please...'

'Farewell, Hermione.'

His hair hid his expression, but Hermione could tell he was distinctly unsettled. She could hardly bear to move from the spot where she stood. She didn't know when to admit defeat, but she, at least, knew when to retreat. Hermione squeezed his shoulder gently and left the classroom, her fingers lightly touching at her lips.

She really wanted to say more to him but felt that maybe it was now time for them both to regroup. Some time away from the castle might give her the perspective she needed. Though, he had made it significantly more difficult for her after that display. What would it be like if he didn't repress his emotions? What would happen if he allowed himself to take a chance?

Crossing the grounds, she turned her head and gazed at the castle for a moment. This time the small smile that played about her lips was entirely genuine. She recalled all those months ago when she'd first decided to come to Hogwarts, and the apprehension she'd felt about such an opportunity. Despite the subtle ache of her heart, she couldn't regret her time in the castle as an apprentice. She'd come to care for a man whom she couldn't have, even though he begrudgingly felt the same. The only obstacle in the way was the man himself...she wondered how many had been in that situation before? But she did not feel hopelessly dejected or depressed, as one might have expected...she did not resent her feelings. Maybe, she would come to feel differently about it in time, but right now she was determined to care about him, even if from afar.

Ever since that night of the Ministry dinner, she'd wanted to disprove the reasons for his negative outlook, and she resolved that one way or another, she would see him happy.

Resuming her path to the gates, Hermione did not look back again.

She drew comfort from the fact that, deep down, she was convinced that this would not be the last time her path crossed with Severus Snape. Not if she had anything to do with it.

She had time, and she could be patient, if need be.

AN: Many thanks to astopperindeath for beta-reading. Thanks for reading :)

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

One Day Like This

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 15

After leaving Hogwarts, Hermione had a month to fill before she started at her job at St. Mungo's. In the meantime, while she looked for her own flat, she was staying at Grimmauld Place with Harry and Ginny. Both of whom were more than happy for her to stay as long as she wanted, but Hermione knew that she would be encroaching upon their life as a married couple, and besides, she'd become used to having her own space at Hogwarts.

For the most part, she had the house to herself during the day, and while she appreciated having a bit of time to herself, at the same time, she became frustrated with being at a loose end. Without any occupation, her thoughts would drift in awkward directions. Usually, they were heading up north to a certain castle in Scotland. It wasn't that she could not sleep or eat, or anything as dramatic as that, it was just as if she were carrying a heavy weight around in her chest all the time. A weight that wanted to know what he was doing or thinking... And then she'd get angry with herself for being so ridiculous because it had only been a week or so since she'd left him.

Several times, she'd thought about picking up her quill and writing to him, but each time she did, she hesitated. She had no idea what to write apart from the usual pleasantries, which she knew he would have no time for. He despised small talk. And besides, there was something highly dissatisfactory about writing...she wanted actually *see* him. It was hard enough to know what he was thinking when one spoke to him face-to-face, so Merlin help her try to decipher a letter! But whatever happened, Hermione knew that the first move would no doubt be down to her. She couldn't imagine him having a sudden change of heart and rushing down to London to tell her that everything was fine. Merlin, no.

If a letter was not the way to go, then she had another option. In two weeks' time, her results from her apprenticeship would be finalised, and she would need to go to Hogwarts in order to receive them. It was, perhaps, a risky strategy leaving it a fortnight before seeing him again. He might even in that short time have become used to her being gone. Or he might discover that it really was an infatuation that was running its course. Regardless, it was a risk she would have to take...she was sure he would not appreciate stalker-like behaviour, after all.

'Bloody cow!'

Hermione raised her eyes from her book. 'I beg your pardon?'

Ron flopped down onto the sofa, holding a copy of *Witch Weekly*. 'Lavender is seeing someone else...the Seeker from the *Cannons*.'

'Oh... Sorry.' Hermione rolled her eyes internally; were they really going to discuss this?

'It's not *that*; I mean, I don't mind that she's found someone else. It's just that she said some things about me in an interview, well, not by name, but it was obvious she was referring to me. According to her, I'm boring and unexciting.'

Hermione sighed. 'Let me have a look.'

Ron hesitated before handing over the magazine. Hermione flipped the pages open until she arrived at a glamorous photo of Lavender splashed in the middle of the double-page spread. There were also two candid ones of her walking with a man Hermione could not have identified even if her life had depended upon it. She scanned the page until she came to the part where Lavender began talking about her relationships.

'I'm just looking for some passion and some excitement in a relationship. Things can get so boring so quickly, I've found, but I'll never get bored with Gavin.'

Hermione handed the magazine back to him with distaste. 'She could be talking about anyone.'

'Of course it's about me!'

'Does it matter what *Lavender* thinks? She's all mouth and no substance, after all!' She stilled; Ron had actually liked Lavender, so maybe she should have checked her unabashed dislike for propriety's sake.

Ron merely shrugged. 'Yes, I suppose, but still... I'm not boring, am I?'

'No...'

'And I'm not unexciting in...'

'Ron!' Hermione interrupted briskly. 'Please, don't go there.'

'Sorry,' he said sheepishly.

Hermione sighed. 'Just ignore it, and don't think about retaliating! That's just what she wants.' She'd found that one out the hard way. Hermione still had flashbacks to that night, and it still annoyed her.

Ron huffed and threw the magazine irritably onto the coffee table. 'Yeah, maybe...' he acknowledged.

Hermione watched him for a moment. She'd often wondered if he'd ever realised that Lavender's assets were magically enhanced, but she could never bring herself to ask. It was just too funny. She bit her lip and hid her face in her book.

It wouldn't do to suddenly start giggling out loud.

In the days leading up to her results being published, Hermione became increasingly restless. The days seemed to slow down inexorably, and she couldn't stop herself from fretting about what she would say the Potions master when she saw him. Should she confront him again? Or should she act casual? Or should she just play it by ear? Why was there no book for this kind of situation?

More significantly, it would be different, she realised. He was no longer her professor, teacher, mentor, or whatever. He was just Severus Snape, and she was just Hermione Granger.

Could it be any simpler?

Considering past experience, then yes, it probably could. She had a feeling that no longer being his apprentice was going to make little difference in terms of his standpoint. She supposed he would still champion the other factors that put them on a more unequal footing...age, experience, to name but two. He could not see a way past them.

So, what *could* she say to him when she saw him? Despite regularly wracking her brains over the problem for some time since leaving Hogwarts, Hermione could not say she was any closer to a solution. Really, it was all down to him and his willingness to change his mind.

It seemed the only thing she could do was reassure him of her sincerity of feeling by being quietly persistent. But, as a small voice reminded her, she could not be persistent forever. She would have to give up at some point.

It was just a case of being able to recognise when that point arose.

'Hope it goes well for you, Hermione! Let us know as soon as possible, all right?'

'Of course, thanks, Gin.'

'Now, Hermione, I know how stressed you get about your work, but just don't get too upset if you don't do as expected. This is Snape we're talking about here, after all.' Ron looked at her with a patronising expression.

Hermione merely looked at him dumbly.

'Ron!' Harry was laughing and shaking his head ruefully.

'What?' Ron asked defensively. 'It's true! When did he ever give anyone top marks! All I can say is thank Merlin he was not responsible for marking my Potions O.W.L.! And, you *do* get disappointed when you fall short of your own expectations!'

'I will not be getting upset, Ronald, and for your information, Severus wasn't the only person marking my work.' Hermione left the room, but managed to catch Ron's whispered '*Severus*?' to Harry as she went.

She gave a mental shrug at her slip of the tongue; oh, well, it was good to keep them on their toes. Besides, she had more to worry about today than what Harry or Ron was thinking.

Hermione Apparated to Hogwarts and paused outside the gates for a moment to calm her nerves. It didn't work...she still ended up entering the grounds feeling faintly sick, and to her chagrin, the path up to the front of the castle appeared to have doubled in length since the last time she'd walked it. Finally reaching the Entrance Hall, she stood still and breathed calmly. Should she go down to the dungeons or up to McGonagall's office? She wasn't sure...

'I wonder what you are doing here?' a voice rang out teasingly, and Hermione looked up to see the Headmistress standing at the top of the marble staircase.

Hermione swallowed down her remaining nerves and managed a weak reciprocating smile. 'Hello, Professor.'

'I have the letter here.' McGonagall descended the steps and produced a large cream envelope from within her robes.

Immediately, Hermione felt her heart begin to beat hard within her chest as McGonagall proffered the envelope towards her. She took it and ran her hand over the parchment.

'Go on, then,' urged the older woman expectantly.

Hermione blinked. 'Oh, um, where is Professor Snape? Surely, he would like to be...'

'Severus? He's, ah, not here today.' McGonagall eyed Hermione with particular interest.

The butterflies that had fluttered in Hermione's stomach all morning suddenly ceased, sinking into a feeling of dismay. 'He's not? What... Has he gone home?'

'No, he left early this morning for the Forbidden Forest...something about mushrooms...'

'He's gone to get... mushrooms?' Hermione couldn't believe her ears.

'Well, *he* did not call them mushrooms, of course, but fungi are all the same to me. In any case, he said it was urgent he get them today.'

A likely story, Hermione decided. 'I just thought... It doesn't matter.'

She couldn't believe he wasn't here to give her results. Feeling deflated, Hermione took the envelope, marvelling at what a sad state of affairs it had come to that she actually had to summon enthusiasm.

With a deep breath, she ripped it open.

'Well?'

Hermione cleared her throat. 'I passed...I got a distinction.' A genuinely relieved and happy smile spread across her face.

McGonagall laughed happily. 'Excellent! I'm so proud of you!'

'Thank you, Professor.'

'Severus will be pleased, too, I'm sure.'

Hermione made sure her smile didn't slip. 'I hope so.'

Was he avoiding her on purpose? The thought annoyed her so much that, after she had bid goodbye to McGonagall, she realised she had half a mind to hunt him down, forest or no forest. There were a few things she wanted to say to him! Staring in the direction of the entrance to the forest, she considered for a moment. He'd left early...how long did it take to collect mushrooms? Not long, surely.

Moving closer towards the trees, Hermione sat down on a wide tree stump and stared at the certificate she still clutched in her hands. It was real disappointment she felt that he wasn't here. He must have known her results would be published today!

On the other hand, it was, perhaps, a bit self-absorbed of her to think he was avoiding her. Maybe he really did need mushrooms.

Of course he didn't!

How long had she been anticipating this moment? And the git had the cheek to do a disappearing act! She half-wished she'd never kissed him, at least then she wouldn't have been able to replay it in her mind over and over. She knew she shouldn't...it was useless, not to mention pathetic; it had only been a peck, after all. If he was avoiding her, no doubt it was because of how they'd left things. He probably thought she would try and accost him again. Hermione clenched her jaw. Why did she bother troubling herself over all this? She actually had no concrete sign that he felt anything for her. All she could do was read between admittedly blurry lines.

'Hermione, are you all right?' Minerva McGonagall was standing behind her. 'I couldn't help but notice you from my window...'

Hermione felt a flush of embarrassment rise in her cheeks. 'I was just... I thought I might catch Professor Snape returning...'

McGonagall nodded and took a place on the stump next to Hermione. She inhaled deeply before speaking. 'I don't think he's in the forest, my dear,' she said sympathetically. 'If he's avoiding something, then he will make sure he avoids it completely.'

'Oh.' Her cheeks burned further. So, he could be anywhere, then.

'I wasn't going to say anything, but has something happened between you and Severus?'

Hermione wasn't sure what to say. 'Things have become a little complicated...put it that way.'

'I see... Anything I should be particularly concerned about?'

'Oh, no, not at all; I've just discovered that he is one extremely stubborn man.'

The older woman nodded in agreement. 'I'm afraid he is not a man that does anything by halves. He stands by his convictions. I had a feeling something was going on, though; indeed, I must say that he has seemed a bit out of sorts, lately.'

'Has he?' Hermione was suddenly very alert.

'I am not one to profess to understand the machinations of his mind, but, yes, he has not seemed himself.'

Hermione didn't say anything...she didn't know what to say.

'I don't know what to tell you, Hermione. I could tell you to be patient with him, but even then...'

'I know... I could be wasting my time,' she admitted quietly. 'I've already tried talking to him, but he is resolute.'

'He always has been, ever since I've known him,' agreed McGonagall.

'What, um... what was he like as a student?' Hermione ventured cautiously. She knew hardly anything about him in that respect. 'I don't mean to pry, of course, I just...' She shrugged.

'Oh, well, I should say he was a very quiet boy...not necessarily shy, just reserved, even then,' commented McGonagall briskly. 'Definitely one of the most talented students I ever taught. He rarely volunteered in lessons, yet he always knew the answers when I called on him...indeed, I don't think I ever caught him out! You know, he used to sit there with such a... bored expression on his face, as if he'd rather be elsewhere...as if he didn't have anything worthwhile to learn from me. I was quite offended! Some might put it down to arrogance, but I think he just didn't want to draw attention to himself.' She smiled wistfully. 'I can't believe how long ago it was, now. He was a brilliant student, much like you yourself were; it was just a... bigger burden for Severus... on top of everything else.'

Hermione nodded silently in understanding.

'As much as he tried to blend in, he still stood out. Notwithstanding his friendship with a Muggle-born Gryffindor, and his intellect, he was always rather striking in his appearance with that long, black hair of his... listen to me, Severus would have a fit if he could hear me talking like this!'

They both smiled for a moment.

'He's a difficult man to get to know, Hermione. If I've learnt anything over recent times, it's that in all the years I've been acquainted with Severus, seven years as his teacher and eighteen as a colleague, I've never *really* known him. I liked to think I did, but all that's since come out about him after the war...I had no idea. He played his part so well... he should have become one of those Muggle actors.'

McGonagall's words did not inspire Hermione with confidence. Maybe he had been right when he said she knew nothing about him. 'He certainly managed to fool us all...I still find it difficult to fathom, at times.'

'Oh, I couldn't believe it, at first. I was convinced he'd betrayed us, and then, when I found out, I felt awful. It was selfish perhaps to be preoccupied with my own guilt, but I'm afraid I was not very good to him that year when he was Headmaster...none of us were.'

Hermione tentatively laid a hand on the arm of the older woman. 'You weren't to know... no one was. That was the whole point, I suppose...'

They were both quiet for a moment. Hermione was unwilling to leave, as she knew this was her last proper chance to see him, but... she couldn't sit there all day. Part of her wondered if she really even wanted to. Why should she be the one to lay herself open all the time? A voice in her head reminded her that it was because she knew he wouldn't. He'd never even explicitly said that he liked her...all she had to go on was the odd look, or action, and it wasn't much, really. Was it enough to justify all of this perseverance? She had to face up to the prospect that she could be wasting her time.

It was bitterness on her part, but she had to regain her self-respect somewhere along the line. Especially as it seemed increasingly like she was chasing shadows. She was going to get nowhere.

'I had best be getting back, Professor...everyone's expecting to hear my results. Thanks for everything, again.' She managed a smile for the older woman.

'Would you like me to speak to him...?'

Hermione paused for a moment. 'No, he probably wouldn't appreciate it...he'll probably be angry that I discussed it with you in the first place. I'll give it some time and some thought...maybe I'll write to him soon or something.' She really didn't know what she would do.

She walked towards the Apparition point, and shut the gates behind her. Looking around at her surroundings, she heaved a large sigh. So, there it was; she was thwarted

again.

Hermione turned her attention to her certificate, and her gaze was drawn to his signature on the bottom of the page. Her resentment suddenly gave way to an irritating feeling of affection. Already, she was beginning to excuse his behaviour, and it was galling. Why should she excuse it? He talked about friendship, and he couldn't even make an effort for this.

Maybe, he just didn't care enough.

Whatever it was, she had to put it out of her mind for now. She'd passed her apprenticeship with flying colours, and she could hardly go home with such news looking like a miserable old cow! She hadn't had much to celebrate in a long while, and she would make the most of it while she could. She *should* make the most of it...she'd worked hard, and the culmination of it was in her hands, taking her into an exciting new job in two weeks' time.

Besides, there was always time for her to be a miserable old cow tomorrow.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath, as always, for beta-reading. Thanks, also, to those reading and reviewing, I appreciate it.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 16

Over two weeks had passed since Hermione had gone to Hogwarts to receive her certificate. And as far as *that* whole state of affairs was concerned, that was it...*another* two weeks of nothing. In all honesty, she had been busy during that time with preparing for starting at St. Mungo's, as well as spending time with her parents, but that did not mean that she hadn't spent some time thinking about the reluctant object of her affections. But the fact that the intervening time between leaving Hogwarts had elapsed so quickly gave her pause for concern.

It was a month later, and life, well, it had gone on...that was the reality of the situation. If there had ever been an opportunity for them, had it passed them both by? Very soon it would be another month, and then another, and surely she would come to think of him less. His features would become less pronounced in her mind, and the ache inside her would dull to fade away.

In the long run, it would, perhaps, be the easiest thing to let happen. Still, whenever Hermione considered it, a large part of her wanted to resist. She could not bring herself to let go just yet.

She had to see him, if only for one more time, and then she would know. She would know what she had to do.

And there was only one thing for it, short of barging into Hogwarts and demanding to see him. Hermione pulled a piece of parchment and quill towards her.

Where on earth should she start...?

It was only her second week at St. Mungo's. Her first had been spent completing the induction process. In the space of a few days, she had focused on learning about everything and anything, from her actual responsibilities and duties, to the mundane, such as health and safety, and the ins and outs of her contract. It all served to build up her anticipation to starting her job proper. She hadn't been able to wait to put on her robe and get down to some *actual* work. There was nothing more frustrating than having to sit about and watch everyone else get on.

This week, however, she could get stuck right in.

'Yaxley comes out of Azkaban today, Hermione.' Harry looked at her seriously while trying to flatten his hair.

Hermione looked up from her breakfast and smiled reassuringly. 'I've told you that it's fine. I know the Aurors will be monitoring him...his movements, magic, and so on. It's not as if I can walk about with one eye over my shoulder all the time. Besides, they wouldn't let him out if they thought he was a threat.'

Harry hummed in half-hearted agreement. 'Still, never hurts to be careful.'

She grinned. 'Constant vigilance, eh?'

'Yeah,' he laughed softly, 'constant vigilance.'

Ron entered the kitchen and headed straight for the rack of toast in the middle of the table.

'Morning,' said Hermione pointedly.

'Oh, hi,' said Ron around his toast.

'Have you moved in without telling us?' she queried with a quirk of her mouth.

Harry laughed. 'He seems to consume most of the food in this house, I know that much!'

Ron grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry. I just thought I'd see if you wanted me to escort you to work, Hermione...Yaxley is...'

'Stop right there!' Hermione interrupted. 'I do not need anyone to take me to work.' She got up and patted them each on the shoulder as she passed by. 'Though, I do

appreciate your concern, of course.' She left the room to go and get ready for work, before they could continue to badger her. If Yaxley valued his liberty, he was unlikely to approach her once more.

An envelope caught her eye on her dressing table, and she picked it up. She still hadn't sent it. She put it in her bag each day, but never went to the Owl Office. She didn't know why she was being such a coward about it...it didn't contain anything earth-shattering. It was short, detailing a bit about her new job, and so on. It was the prospect that he might ignore it that forestalled her.

At least while she was uncertain of what he was thinking, she could continue to hope.

Hermione dropped the letter into her bag.

But... maybe today, she thought.

A couple of days later, Hermione weaved her way through the crowded Atrium, clutching a file of papers close to her chest. She stopped at large sign and glanced down the list. No, she didn't want Law Enforcement, or her old department of Magical Creatures; ah, Health was on the third floor. There had been some sort of clerical error when processing her contract, and unless she didn't want to get paid at the end of the month, she would have to go and see the people in Personnel.

Turning towards the nearest lift, she bumped rather forcefully into a wizard who had his nose buried in a sheaf of parchment. Her file was knocked from her hand, spilling some papers, and her bag tumbled to the floor. The wizard paid her no heed, however. *Bastard*, Hermione hissed to herself as he walked off.

Kneeling down, she swung her bag back over shoulder and started collecting up the papers. A pair of black boots came into view and Hermione looked at them, freezing in surprise. A hand reached for her file, and she almost lost her balance when she saw the white cuff at the end of a black sleeve.

A black sleeve she'd quite possibly recognise anywhere.

'I don't recall you being this clumsy at Hogwarts.'

Her heart actually skipped a beat, and she snapped her head upwards to see Severus Snape calmly watching her. Of all the... Why wasn't ~~he~~ as surprised to see her as she was to see him? Curse his superior nonchalance!

'It's a talent I've only acquired recently,' she answered, a little tightly.

He offered her his hand to help her off the floor.

'Thanks,' she said quietly, quickly wondering, despite herself, how her hair looked. The feel of his hand unsettled her, and she made sure to appear fully composed as she let go of it.

A quick blush stained her cheeks as she looked at him, and a vision of the last time she'd seen him flashed through her mind. Suddenly, it felt as if it had only been yesterday, not several weeks ago.

'Um, what are you doing here?' she asked, for a lack of anything better to say.

'Could ask you the same thing...'

'Well, ah, I'm working, and before you say anything, yes, I *do* know this is the Ministry!'

Snape smirked appreciatively, while Hermione distracted herself by unnecessarily fiddling with her pile of papers. She felt a little uncomfortable...unsure of how she was supposed to act. She was finding it difficult to even look at him for any length of time.

'Are you here all day?' She hadn't failed to note that he hadn't revealed his purpose for being in the Ministry in the first place.

'Yes,' he replied, sounding faintly irritated by that fact.

'Right...' He was looking at her, but she could not determine what exactly he was thinking or feeling. Was he pleased to see her? But then, he ~~was~~ *actually* here, standing right in front of her...he could have chosen to ignore her (again). He could have simply pretended he hadn't noticed her, and she probably would have been none the wiser.

She'd been waiting for a moment like this...she'd be a fool not to try and make it count.

Hermione took a deep breath...this would be his, their, last chance; she would do no more. 'Could we, um, meet somewhere later on?' The crowd bustled on around them, but she noticed that since she was standing next to the infamous Severus Snape, she was getting a wide berth.

'Do you think that is wise?' he answered finally.

It wasn't an outright rebuff, at least. 'You wanted to be friends, well, that's what friends do.' She didn't know why he was bothering to think about it. After the stunt he'd pulled last time, there was no way she was letting him worm his way out of seeing her. She raised an eyebrow in challenge, wondering if he would dare to go back on his own words.

He appeared to consider her for a moment, and when he spoke there was an undercurrent of reluctance that Hermione resolved to ignore. 'There's a pub across the road...'

'The Red Dragon?'

'You know it?'

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. 'Their sandwiches are to die for.'

'*Sandwiches*,' he scoffed. 'It's their cask ale you should want to try.'

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. 'No, I don't think so...'

He pulled a watch out of his pocket. 'I'll be there at five o'clock.' So saying, he nodded briefly before sweeping off across the Atrium. Hermione watched his progress until she couldn't see him any longer and then headed into one of the lifts, shaking her head slightly in wonder.

Perhaps luck was beginning to fall on her side...finally!

As the day wore on, however, Hermione began to feel a bit irritable. She'd found it difficult to concentrate on the more important matters at hand, like actually brewing some potions without bringing down the whole lab! And when her mind did turn to the prospect that awaited her at five o'clock, her thoughts became progressively grim. Was she doing the right thing?

She thought back several times over their encounter in the Atrium. He hadn't needed much persuasion to meet her, but then, she had sort of fenced him in by taking the

friendship line. What annoyed her most, however, was how he'd brusquely marched off after telling her he'd be in the pub at five o'clock...what if she couldn't make it for five? He'd just assumed it was convenient for her! Plus, she hated that he could just talk to her as if the last few weeks hadn't happened.

Cool, calm and collected; it was infuriating.

On the back of her bad mood, Hermione deliberately entered the pub a few minutes after Big Ben had chimed for the fifth time. She slowly glanced around the dim interior. If he wasn't there, by Merlin he could look out! Luckily for him, she spotted him at a table at the back. Consciously trying to loosen her grip on her earlier irritation, she crossed over to him.

'Hello,' she said, sliding into a seat. 'Is this for me?' She nodded towards the wine glass on the table.

He shook his head slowly. 'No, I'm waiting for someone else...'

'I'll just go then, shall I?' The corner of her lip twitched.

'Bye.'

She smiled and sipped her wine, surreptitiously glancing at his attire. She assumed that the black overcoat he wore was his outer robe transfigured. He'd changed the collar of his shirt to something that would not, to the Muggles, make him look like a throwback to the Victorians.

'I'm sorry I was late,' said Hermione, rather unnecessarily; it had only been a few minutes after all.

He shrugged. 'You're here, now, aren't you?'

The flippancy in his tone frustrated her. 'I must say, I'm surprised to see that you are. You were not so eager last time.'

He didn't say anything, and Hermione wished she had just left it for the moment. For all that she'd told herself to forget her annoyance, and not to mention any of that business for the time being, she had within the first few minutes.

'I imagine you were very pleased with your mark,' he said eventually, giving her only a brief glance.

Hermione sighed internally. 'Yes, of course.' He was just going to ignore it, then. She should have expected nothing more.

He nodded and then occupied himself with his drink. She also took a rather generous gulp, thinking that at this rate she would finish the glass in record time.

'How have you been?'

'Fine,' he replied shortly. 'And you?'

'Fine,' Hermione repeated. Merlin, this was actually painful! She gave a small, rueful shake of her head. The silence that stretched between them was precariously close to becoming strained. She tried again. 'Are you doing anything nice on the weekend?' Immediately, she cringed inwardly. *Doing anything nice on the weekend?* What kind of opening gambit was that? She braced herself.

Snape's countenance seemed to automatically fill with impatience. 'What do you think?' he accused.

She shrugged defensively. 'Well, I don't know...why shouldn't you have any plans?'

'Doing what?'

'Perhaps, you're going somewhere...'

'Where?' He was frowning at her with annoyance.

'I don't know, do I? That's why I'm asking! Maybe, you're visiting somewhere, or indulging in a hobby, or something. I was only making conversation.' Merlin! He was in a right joyful mood! For the umpteenth time, Hermione wondered why on earth she was bothering with all of this. She was distracted from her indignation, however, when she heard him say her name for possibly only the second time ever, and suddenly, she remembered.

'I have spent the majority of my life cooped up in a castle in the middle of nowhere, Hermione, with rarely much time to myself...where on earth would I have to go?'

She'd obviously struck a chord; indeed, she was slightly taken aback by the bitterness evident in his tone. 'You have some time now...two months till school starts again, and there are no other claims upon your time anymore...'

He was staring into his glass. 'I suppose not.'

'Well,' said Hermione brightly, wanting to lift his mood. 'For once, your time is to do with what you please.'

'To do *what*, though?' he pressed.

Hermione paused to think of a response. How had they even got into this conversation? 'I don't know,' she admitted quietly. 'Anything... nothing; you could travel, or something.'

Was he feeling restless? Alarm bells began to ring in her head...encouraging him to go off travelling would not be conducive to achieving her overall aim!

He frowned contemplatively. 'It might interest you to know that I have never once been outside of this island of ours. Mind, I've not travelled within it much, either.'

She was surprised at him revealing something so personal. She did not know a great deal about his past. Had he never gone on holidays as a child? Hermione doubted he had had many of the experiences she'd had when she was young.

'I bet you have travelled,' he stated.

'Not very widely; I've been to Europe a few times, France and Spain mostly, but we holidayed a lot at home, too. My parents have a love-affair with the West Country.' She considered him for a moment. 'You know, you can do what you want now. Maybe it's time to try something new.'

Like me, she added silently.

He opened his mouth to speak, but appeared to hesitate. Then, he sighed. 'I have not the energy for all that... positive thinking crap, and I will hex you if you utter that damned cliché "a fresh start".'

'Charming! It's not crap, you know, and I'm not really suggesting anything as radical as positive thinking, anyway.'

'You don't think I'm capable of practicing optimism?' He affected a look of offence.

Hermione lifted her lips in amusement and shook her head negatively.

He smirked. 'Fair enough.'

'What I'm saying is, it's time to just have some fun, maybe, to enjoy yourself.'

'Clearly, we know where *you* were when they were handing out the optimism...front of the bloody queue.'

Hermione frowned. 'I fail to see the difficulty...you aren't under any obligations anymore.'

He opened his mouth to retaliate, but suddenly shut it, shaking his head as if she wouldn't understand.

'What?' she urged, not wanting to be patronised.

'It's just, when you've lived the life I have...' He waved his hand dismissively. 'It's just self-pitying tosh.'

Hermione lowered her gaze, having some idea of what he was getting at.

He sighed heavily. 'I have had a trying day,' he said by way of apology. 'I'll be fine once I get to the bottom of this glass.'

'I'm not trying to trivialise anything, you know; I just think you can't live in the past...no one can.'

He said nothing for several moments. 'What do I do, then?'

'Only you can decide that.' Hermione smiled briefly at him. It was all down to him.

Whatever happened between *them* would be down to him, too. Watching him, she decided was unsure of what to make of his mood tonight. Could his discontent be a good sign...a sign that he was re-evaluating his life...that he would be willing to open himself to change? But that, of course, did not mean she would figure anywhere herself.

She shook herself mentally; all thoughts seemed to lead to that conclusion, lately.

'Another drink, then?'

'Why not?'

Hermione returned with the drinks, and they sat in quiet for a few moments, but this time the silence was not so cloying. 'It's nice to go out somewhere without having eyes turned upon you,' she observed, glancing around the pub. 'Can you imagine if this was the Leaky Cauldron?'

'Ashamed to be seen with me, are you?'

Hermione snapped her head towards him. 'I would suggest the other way around,' she fired back, perhaps a little too vehemently.

He looked briefly surprised, but then his mouth set into a grim line. 'I told you I wasn't ashamed,' he muttered impatiently.

She sighed. They'd been talking fine, but it would always come back to one thing. 'It's *not* the same, anymore.' This was the first time she'd really noticed it.

'Excuse me?'

'This.' She motioned her hand between the two of them. 'It's different; I sometimes wish we could rewind and go back to being at Hogwarts.' When things were simpler, and when there wasn't an overarching tension marking their interaction.

'And you wouldn't open your mouth a second time around?' Snape questioned, a tad snidely.

'Choosing *not* to say out loud what I felt would not change the fact that there was something to say in the first place. Neither would it change the way you felt. It just would have grown even more unbearable than this already is!'

He looked slightly taken aback by her candour, and with a frown, he twisted his glass around with his fingers. 'What would make it more bearable?' he asked, after a time.

Hermione glanced at him, a little surprised, and part of her regretted her choice of words, unwilling to consider that she might have offended him. 'It's... fine really...don't listen to me. I mean, it's... good to see you again, regardless of anything else.'

She smiled a small, sincere smile and took a sip of her wine. He nodded his head a fraction, and she took it to mean that he was pleased to see her too. It was something, at least.

'Slug sends his regards.'

Hermione suddenly choked on her wine and coughed violently for several moments. Wiping the moisture from her eyes, she glanced at him in disbelief. His hand was over his mouth and she knew he was trying not to laugh.

'Serious?' she asked, once her breathing was under control once more.

'Oh, yes; he always asks after you whenever I go in the Apothecary. I think you've really offended him by not going back there since.'

Hermione shivered, as she always did, at the thought of the old man.

'So I assured him that you wouldn't stay away forever...'

'Thanks!' She managed a small laugh nonetheless.

They continued to talk for some time more; he enquired as to how she was getting on in St. Mungo's, and Hermione related everything she had done so far. It was then that she realised she'd been longing to talk to him about it. It was refreshing to talk about her work with someone who was genuinely interested in what she was doing. She meant no disrespect to her friends, but talking about cauldrons or cutting techniques was hardly up there with their choice topics of conversation.

She knew that he was full of ideas and opinions, ones that often went against the grain, and often she wondered about the untapped potential he contained. Just considering what he'd achieved in terms of editing his sixth-year Potions textbook, Hermione felt he would be an asset to any research team. He knew so much, and yet he could be so secretive about the knowledge he held, and she liked that about him. There were times when he flaunted his cleverness, but she knew that was only to infuriate her, and she couldn't help but like that, too.

She was happy that she was here talking to him, even if wasn't quite like 'old times,' but she meant what she'd said earlier. She did wish they could be back at Hogwarts, because, deep down, she knew they could not carry on like this indefinitely...*she* could not carry on like this. It was a nice fantasy, but continuing to see him on a regular

basis, as a friend, well, she'd never get over her feelings like that.

Hermione wished she could say that it was enough for her, but it wasn't, and it never would be while she had this wretched feeling of yearning inside her. She would be setting herself up for a major fall.

Did he feel it too? Or could he easily rise above it - settle for less - as he professed to be able to do?

She watched him as they prepared to leave; she stared rather vacantly as his hands travelled over the buttons of his coat and then to his sleeves where he tugged at the cuffs.

Was this the moment where she had to decide to give up...to admit defeat?

He turned to her. 'Ready?' he asked. From the way his expression seemed to drain, she knew that some of her emotions must be written all over her face.

She blinked and cleared her throat. 'Yes,' she replied, picking up her bag hurriedly.

Somewhat unsettled, she followed him out onto the street. What now?

'Well, I shall bid you good...'

'Severus,' Hermione interrupted briskly. 'What... what is going on here?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You know what I'm talking about...are we just going to ignore it? We can't...'

He stared at her openly.

'I can't forget about it,' she admitted, almost regretfully.

His eyes became suddenly downcast. 'I *know*...' he acknowledged. 'But... do we have to discuss it now? I have had a good time, this evening; let us not spoil it by going down that road...there is plenty of time for that, after all.'

So he had enjoyed himself, despite the awkward moments and uncomfortable topics of conversation? Hermione found herself somewhat humbled by that. 'I had a good time, too.' She smiled. 'And, yes, there will be time enough for all of that.'

Just as long as he did not put it off forever, and that *he* did intend on seeing her again, as his words implied. He said he didn't want to spoil things...did that mean things eventually would be spoiled? For better or for worse, though? It was probably best that they did delay that conversation, she decided, just in case nothing had changed for him.

'When can we...?'

'I will Owl you...you are living in Grimmauld Place, correct?'

Hermione nodded, and an irritable scowl formed on his face.

'What?' she asked with a weak laugh. 'You don't approve?'

'No.'

'Well, it's good to know you'd rather see me out on the streets!'

He chuckled quietly, and a swell of happiness rose inside her, prompting Hermione to sincerely thank whoever that unsuspecting wizard was who'd unceremoniously shoved her into the path of Severus Snape.

Sometimes all it took was a nudge in the right direction...literally.

'You're home late...long day at work, or...?'

Hermione threw her bag down and collapsed into a chair with a sigh. 'No, just stopped off at the pub for a few drinks.'

'Ah, it's good to hear that you're getting on with the people there.' Harry smiled pleasantly at her.

Hermione wondered if she should tell them the reality of the situation. If anything did come of her feelings for Snape, it would probably be best to ease them in gently.

In a study of nonchalance, she picked her papers out of her bag, as if to read them, and said, 'Actually, I had a few drinks with Professor Snape.'

There was an elongated silence.

'Oh,' said Ginny eventually.

Ron, however, engendered no such diplomacy. 'How the hell did that happen?'

Hermione glanced at him blandly. 'I bumped into him at the Ministry, so we decided to meet and have a chat.'

Ron continued to look confused.

'Ron,' she began, 'I got to know Professor Snape quite well when I was his apprentice. It's not as if I'm going to ignore him now that I'm not.'

He laughed, looking at Harry and Ginny. 'She makes it sound like she was living with him, not learning Potions from him.'

Hermione allowed herself a small smile.

'How come it's Professor Snape now, then? He was *Severus* the other week, which is just weird.'

'Why on earth is it weird? In case you've forgotten, it's *his* name.' Irritation was beginning to rise at Ron's teasing.

'Really? I thought his name was Greasy...ouch!'

Harry had swiftly kicked Ron in the shin.

'Just be grateful Harry stopped you finishing that sentence, Ronald!'

Ron had the grace to look contrite. 'Sorry, it was only going to be a joke, for old times' sake, but then, you never did get onboard with that whole thing in the first place, did you?'

'No, I did not.'

Hermione wondered what their reactions would be like if they found out how she really felt about their former professor. She felt she could almost predict them. Ginny would probably be surprised, but supportive. Harry would probably be dumbstruck, though he might, in time, get used to the idea. If anyone was going to overreact, then it would be Ron. All she could hope for was to be proved otherwise. Their friendship was really back on track, and she'd hate for all that work to have to come undone.

Suddenly, she wished she had someone to talk to about what was going on...someone who she could go to for advice. She could not go to her mother...the reactions of her parents she could *not* predict. She was sure, though, that it would shock them. There was no one else to turn to. McGonagall had some idea of what was happening, but she had a feeling that if she spilled out *all* her woes to her, she might try to interfere.

Still, there was a small, flickering light on the horizon to draw inspiration from. After weeks of silence, Severus Snape was actually going to Owl her, and though it might have taken a while, it was still progress.

And progress she could definitely work with.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for beta-reading. Thanks, also, for reading...hope everyone is still enjoying the story.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 17

It was early morning, and Hermione sat alone in the kitchen...Harry and Ginny had already left for work. She was leisurely drinking a cup of tea and eating a slice of toast, and that was how the morning post found her when it arrived. As soon as she heard the tap on the window, she did *not* glance hurriedly at the owl to see what missives it held in its claws. Neither did she sigh irritably when she saw that it was only the *Daily Prophet* and Ginny's copy of *Witch Weekly*.

All right, she did do both those things, but only because he still hadn't Owled yet. And, okay, so it had only been two days since she'd seen him at the Ministry, but the anticipation was going to kill her.

It was while she was sorting the post into a neat pile that she saw something that made her groan with disbelief and momentarily forget her thwarted hopes.

Ron's face was grinning up at her from the front cover of *Witch Weekly*.

Exclusive interview with Ron Weasley page 4!

What the hell had he done now? Picking up her tea, she went and sat on the sofa and opened the magazine. Her eyes almost fell out of her head at what she saw.

What the hell?

The headline, quoting Ron's own words, read:

'Hermione was the best woman for me'.

Hermione frantically looked down the page, her eyes picking out all sorts of sentences that made her stomach clench with horror.

'I made a mistake...I was an idiot to let her go.'

'We had such good times together... but maybe we got together too soon after the war...'

'We're really good friends again, so who knows what the future may hold?'

Hermione felt her body fill with complete dread when she read the banner across the bottom of the page.

So, who should Ron have stuck with? Turn over to find out!

'What the fucking hell!' Hermione shouted when she turned the page.

On one page was a picture of her, and on the other was one of Lavender. Naturally, they'd chosen one of Lavender's professional photographs, preening and flicking her hair at the camera, while hers from back when she'd received her Order of Merlin.

There were boxes floating around the photographs, and Hermione couldn't believe her eyes when she realised they were awarding marks out of ten for certain factors like 'beauty', 'occupation' and 'style'.

Hermione Granger went back to Hogwarts to complete her N.E.W.T.s, following the war, and is considered as one of the foremost intellects of her generation. She was all set to have a glittering career at the Ministry of Magic, but for reasons only known to her, chose to abandon her career to study Potions with former spy and current deputy

Headmaster of Hogwarts, Severus Snape. It is now understood that she will begin working for St. Mungo's research and development department. Witch Weekly gives her eight out of ten.

Lavender Brown left Hogwarts, as many of her peers did, without any N.E.W.T.s, but has actually shown to be genuinely talented in the field of Divination. Since school, she has enjoyed lucrative contracts with top clothing companies and caused a stir recently when she modelled Twilfitt and Tattings' new range of lingerie...eight out of ten.

Hermione Granger is a conventionally attractive young woman, but is unfortunately blessed with a head of unruly curls that are just begging to be tamed. Not known to be particularly fashion-conscious, we did like her choice of outfit for the Annual Ministry dinner, a few months back...seven out of ten.

Lavender causes many a woman to become green with envy. She has the whole package a bright and bubbly personality, long blonde hair that is in perfect condition, and her curvaceous figure is considered to be one of the most attractive to the opposite sex...a true natural beauty...nine out of ten.

There were a couple of other paragraphs, but Hermione passed them over in disgust. At the bottom of the page was the overall score out of ten, and she had come one point behind Lavender.

We want to hear what you think! Who do you think should win in the battle of the exes?

Shutting the magazine, she stared at it uncomprehendingly for several minutes. Had she really just read something so demeaning? And some of the things they had written! But *Witch Weekly* had never liked her for refusing to give interviews to them. No doubt they thought her aloof and stuck-up.

Still, she was actually going to kill Ron. The thought of everyone reading that piece of crap! How could she not feel some humiliation? Lavender, on the other hand, would be immensely pleased...maybe she'd even had a hand in it.

But Merlin, what in the name of arse had Ron been thinking? What was all this rubbish about them becoming "really good friends again?" Anyone reading that article would think they were on the verge of getting back together, and...

'Oh no, oh bloody hell, no!'

What were the odds of Severus Snape getting his hands on *Witch Weekly*?

When Hermione returned home from work later that day, she was pleased to see that Harry and Ginny were not the only people in the house. A rather contrite-looking Ron got up when she entered the living room. She, however, didn't care how contrite he was; hell, he could have been indulging in self-flagellation all day, but she had something she wanted to say.

'Sit,' she demanded.

'Um, shall we leave you to it?'

Hermione ignored Harry. 'Explain, please.' She slammed the magazine down loudly in front of Ron. 'Explain what the hell you thought you were playing at!'

Ron raised his hands defensively. 'Look, Hermione, I swear I didn't know they were going to print all that rubbish about you and Lavender!'

'I explicitly told you not to retaliate, but not only do you ignore me, you have the bare-faced cheek to actually drag me into it...to use me in your pathetic tit for tat with Lavender!'

'I didn't think you'd mind, I mean, you hate Lavender...'

'For Merlin's sake, Ron, I have come off the worst! Did you seriously think *Witch Weekly* was going to risk antagonising their prize cover girl? The girl who sells their magazines? All you have done is succeeded in making us both look like fools! Hermione sought to get her breathing under control.

Ron sighed belligerently. 'Look, I'm really sorry, OK? I made a mistake.'

Hermione shook her head. 'You knew what you were doing...it just didn't turn out the way you wanted it to! I have had pitying glances all day in work. People coming up and patronising me, saying, "Don't worry, Hermione; we can't all look like Lavender Brown, after all!" And what the bloody hell was all that about us potentially giving it another go?'

'I never said that.'

'You didn't have to! Anyone with half a brain could read that it was implied!' Ron opened his mouth, but Hermione spoke over him. 'Did you even consider how I might feel about this? Or the damage you might have caused...?'

'What damage?' he accused with incredulity. 'You're not seeing anyone; you haven't since we finished!'

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. She could hardly tell him that he might have just undone any progress she had made where Severus Snape was concerned. 'Just, don't ever do anything like this again...I'm warning you, Ron.'

He nodded tightly and looked away, a look of frustration upon his face.

Hermione turned on her heel with a huff and retreated to her bedroom. She stretched out on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Surely, it was unlikely that Snape had managed to see that article. But then, it was possible that as he was still at Hogwarts, one of the other professors had a copy, and he could easily find out about it.

He'd said he would Owl her, but maybe she would have send one to him first, just to check. She hoped that if he did see the article, he would realise that it was simply Ron talking out of his arse. She *still* couldn't believe that they'd printed all that rubbish about her!

She could just see Lavender's sickly sweet smile, and one day, Hermione resolved, she would wipe it right off.

During her lunch hour the next day, Hermione made her way into Diagon Alley with a view to going to the Owl Office. She'd composed a letter to Snape last night. It had taken her a while to write just a few lines, and no doubt he'd return with some quip about her thinking he was an idiot. She hoped so, anyway. They had actually had discussions about the Wizarding press, and they both knew that neither could stand to be displayed in it.

Hermione stepped through the wall at the back of the Leaky Cauldron and into the cobbled street. However, before she had time to comprehend anything, an arm shot out from nowhere and tugged her forcefully into a nearby alleyway. Yelping in surprise, she reached for her wand immediately, but a hand closed over her mouth and another trapped the hand moving to her sleeve, leaving her wand uselessly trapped. Her free hand came up to grab the arm of her assailant, but she could do nothing more than dig her nails painfully into his skin and breathe frantically.

A face came into view. 'Stop that...I'm not going to hurt you.'

Hermione froze in horror...it was Yaxley.

'I promise I won't...look I haven't got my wand. I just want to speak to you.' He loosened the hand over her mouth a fraction and raised his eyebrow in query.

Hermione nodded slightly, inwardly unsure as to whether she should believe him.

'Please don't run...' He removed both his hands, and Hermione immediately produced her wand and jabbed it into his chest.

'I wanted to say I'm sorry.'

She paused at that and looked at him fully. He was only a few years older than she, but physically he looked much older. 'You're sorry?' Was this some kind of joke?

He nodded vigorously, his eyes wide. 'I'm sorry for what I did, and I wanted to thank you for not telling the Ministry...'

'I didn't do that for you...it was because I had no magic!'

His expression became urging. 'You *must* understand, I'm sorry...'

Several cracks of Apparition suddenly pierced the air, and Hermione looked around in shock.

'Severus?' she whispered in confusion as he grabbed Yaxley from behind and pressed his wand to his throat. Harry was there, too, and three other Aurors materialised behind him.

Harry enquired if she was all right and then proceeded to magically bind Yaxley's wrists.

'We warned you about this, Yaxley, didn't we?'

'Please, I was just...'

'Save it,' snarled Snape, and shoved him towards the waiting Aurors.

'Hang on, he hasn't done anything...' said Hermione hurriedly.

'He's breached the conditions of his release...that's enough,' stated Harry as Yaxley disappeared with the Aurors.

'I think he just wanted to say sorry...'

Both Harry and Snape looked at her stupidly.

'It's true.' She shrugged. 'He said he was sorry.'

'So, you *willingly* decided to come into a darkened alleyway with him, then?' Snape asked dryly.

Hermione coughed. 'No, he forced me to, but...'

'Exactly...he forced you to. How do you know he wasn't lulling you into a false sense of security?'

'Well, I don't, but...'

'So we should just let him go about his business, then?' His eyebrows were raised.

Hermione fought not to groan in aggravation. 'What are you doing here, anyway?'

Harry cleared his throat. 'Look, I need to get back to the Ministry and sort this out. If you are all right, Hermione, I'll see you later. See you back at work, Snape.' He nodded and Disapparated.

Noticing that they were now alone, Hermione felt some of her impatience die away to be replaced with discomfiture. 'He didn't take my wand off me, you know. In case you didn't notice, I had mine pressed into his chest.' She began walking out of the alley. 'What are you doing with the Aurors, anyway? Moonlighting?'

He ignored her attempt at humour. 'Now that school is over, I am required to lend my services to the Aurors. We have been tracking Yaxley to see what other connections he might have.'

That's why he'd been at the Ministry the other day, then. 'So they would keep an eye on you in case you fall back into your Death Eating ways, but would value your assistance in such matters nonetheless?'

'That's about right, yes.'

They stood still on the pavement, but Hermione noticed that he seemed to prefer looking down Diagon Alley than at her. She bit her lip.

'My, ah, original purpose in coming here was you, actually.'

'Oh?' For some reason, he didn't seem particularly interested.

'Yes, I was going to Owl you about something you might have seen in *Witch Weekly*? Did you see it?'

'I did, yes.'

Hermione's stomach sank.

'Rather sickening, it was.' His mouth set into a grim line.

Her spirits lifted. 'Yes, I quite agree. I just hoped you wouldn't think that... well, you know.'

'It's fine.'

She let out a little sigh of relief...thank Merlin for that!

'I never expected anything less.'

'I'm sorry?'

He looked at her then, and from his tightly controlled, blank expression, she knew that she'd completely misinterpreted him.

'Did I not tell you that this would happen?'

She shook her head slowly, a cold feeling of dread suddenly descending upon her. 'No, no, you've got it wrong, Ron was...'

'It's fine; you wanted to keep your options open...' He shrugged to indicate his understanding.

Hermione suddenly had an urge to hex him. 'Are you suggesting that I've been stringing you along until something else caught my eye...like I'm some kind of *idiot*?' She ignored the slight flicker in his expression. 'Merlin, you're actually pleased by this, aren't you? You're pleased because you think it proves that you were right! Everything can go to hell, just as long as you are always right!' She stared at him in disbelief, and her anger gave way to sadness. 'Oh, Severus, you really think I lack enough basic human decency that, were I getting back together with Ron, I would let you know through an article in a magazine?'

Even after what she'd said during their conversation at the Red Dragon...after everything?

He didn't say anything.

'Right,' said Hermione, a little shakily. 'Well, at least I know where I stand now.'

Without another word, she Disapparated away. She thought she might have heard him say her name, but it was too late...she would not ~~could~~ not, cry *one* tear in front of him.

She'd been deluding herself, she realised. If he could doubt her sincerity and think so negatively of herself easily then there was nothing worth hanging on to, was there?

Her patience had officially just run out.

After an eventful morning, much of the remainder of Hermione's day passed in a blur. The evening found her making hot chocolate in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, following a very relaxing soak in the bath. The only thing to break her peace was Ginny arriving home and rushing into the room.

'Merlin, Hermione! Are you all right?'

'No, not particularly,' she replied, without really thinking.

'I don't blame you! All we can be grateful for is that he didn't hurt you again!'

Hermione blinked, realising stupidly that Ginny was talking about Yaxley. 'Don't worry, Gin. I'll be fine. I don't think we'll have to concern ourselves about Yaxley, again. I think he was genuinely sorry.'

Harry appeared around the door. 'I'm going to go and get a takeaway, anyone want anything?'

'No, I'm not very hungry, thanks, Harry,' said Hermione. 'Say, you never mentioned that Professor Snape was working with the Aurors.'

Harry shrugged. 'I wasn't allowed to...it's all been very hush-hush. None of us knew anything about it until he turned up one day, and the boss said he'd be helping out.'

Hermione nodded slowly and turned back to stirring her cup. Why was she even interested? She should be working hard to put him out of her mind.

Once Harry had left, Ginny turned towards her once more. 'Hermione, you really don't seem yourself...are you quite sure you are OK?'

A knock on the front door sounded before Hermione could reply.

'I'll be right back.' Ginny squeezed her arm reassuringly and disappeared out into the hallway.

She needed some biscuits to go with her drink, or maybe some cake *that* would comfort her. She didn't care about what happened with Yaxley...she cared about what had happened afterwards. Her anger had abated somewhat during the course of the afternoon, especially as she began to consider that his belief in the article said less about her than it did about his own nature...his pessimistic outlook, and his... complete lack of self-esteem. She should have seriously anticipated such a response...she'd *known* he had been waiting for something like this to happen.

It was just completely disheartening to realise that she hadn't really got anywhere with him. It seemed so easy for him to think the worst of her, and ~~could~~ that ever change?

A few moments later, Ginny suddenly reappeared looking a bit dazed.

'All right?' asked Hermione distantly.

'Snape is in the library!' she hissed in disbelief.

Hermione spun round in shock. 'What?'

'Severus Snape is here...come to see you, and he's waiting in the library.' Ginny looked like she was brimming with uncontrollable interest.

'He's come to see me?' Hermione looked down at herself. 'But, I'm in my pyjamas...I'll have to go and get changed.'

'You can't keep him waiting...he looks grim enough as it is! Just stick your dressing gown on and you'll be fine...he's not going to care what you're wearing!'

'Gin, I have moving ducks on my pyjamas!'

Ginny shoved her unceremoniously out of the door.

'You don't understand...' Hermione protested, but Ginny, however, had shut the door.

Pulling out her wand, Hermione spelled the ducks to shrink, and she tied the belt of her dressing gown tightly with resignation. *will not be embarrassed*, she decided firmly. Had he come to throw some more accusations? If so, he would not get away so lightly, again. She'd tell him to turn around and never come back.

Tentatively, Hermione pushed the door to the library open. He was standing by the fireplace, his cloak hanging unclasped around his shoulders. She aimed her wand at the fireplace and a fire sprung to life.

He turned around.

'Hello,' was all she could manage.

He appeared to take note of her attire. 'I apologise for intruding; perhaps you would prefer I come back another time?'

'No, indeed, it's fine.' It was a miracle in itself that he was here, at Grimmauld Place of all places, and she was hardly about to look that gift horse in the mouth. She sat down in an armchair...at least then her pyjamas were less visible. 'Please, sit.'

'I'll stand, if it's all the same.'

She shrugged and looked at her nails. For a moment, the only sound was the crackling of the fire. Venturing a glance at him, she wondered if he had become transfixed by the flames...he was staring into them, unmoving.

Eventually, his voice sounded. 'I have... come to apologise, Hermione, for the way I spoke to you today.'

'Oh.' This was a bit of a surprise. She glanced more fully at him, suddenly rather interested.

He continued to stare away from her. 'You were right, of course. I did your character a disservice.' He shook his head in frustration. 'Deep down, I know that you would not do such a thing...I know it. But I can only say that... Well, I am a man full of doubts.' His voice was flat, and he seemed uncharacteristically contrite. Hermione wasn't sure she liked it. Sarcastic jibes were her comfort zone. 'Or maybe it's not even that,' he continued. 'Maybe it's just easier for me to think the worst, and then I can go on living in my own little world of bitterness, mistrust, and self-denial.'

'It is fine...don't worry about it,' she offered diplomatically, quite struck by his sincerity.

'That's very gracious of you, but I think it does matter.'

'It is fine; I understand. You know, even though I've never agreed with your doubts or protestations as to why we should not pursue a relationship, I've understood where they come from...why you have them. It's just easy to forget sometimes, in the heat of the moment.'

'You shouldn't have to make allowances.'

Hermione didn't know what to say to that, but there was something else preying on her mind it had all afternoon and she felt she had to bring it up, even though she was wary of his response. Standing up, she moved to where she could see him properly. 'Severus, even if that article were true, after everything you have said... You've made it clear that we owe each other nothing. There's never been... I suppose what I am saying is, you can't have your cake and eat it.'

It sounded like an ultimatum, and Hermione considered that it was probably a good thing. What was the use of him getting jealous, or of her getting jealous for that matter? There was nothing between them that stopped them from being free agents...nothing set in stone. Some sort of resolve would need to be reached, once and for all.

'I know,' he admitted quietly.

She gathered up her courage and touched his arm lightly. 'What do you want, Severus? You know what I want.'

'Still?' He snorted.

'Yes.' She just needed some sort of affirmation from him. She didn't know what she would do if he refused her again.

For the first time probably since she'd entered the room, he looked directly at her. Hermione automatically glanced at his lips, remembering the last time she had stood this close to him. Her throat became dry, and she resolutely flicked her gaze elsewhere.

'I thought I knew what I wanted, but now I am not sure,' he revealed, a troubled expression upon his face. 'Well, I haven't been sure for a while, in fact.'

Hermione felt her heart jump in hope.

'I thought this was all going to be very straightforward, and it was looking that way, but I did not count on you complicating things.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you; you have made this more difficult for me than I think you realise. You asked me once how I could be so detached; well, I'm sorry to say that we cannot all wear our hearts on our sleeves...it doesn't mean we feel any less, however.'

Hermione lowered her gaze. She had been guilty of thinking she was affected by events more than he was...that she was having a harder time than he. A finger touched her chin, lifting it upwards. 'Do you know how long it took me to stop thinking about you after you imposed yourself upon me that last day at Hogwarts?'

His fingers fluttered down her jaw, and there was a look of intense interest on his face as his eyes followed their path.

'It was hardly much of an imposition,' she breathed as his touch moved down her neck and over her collarbone. She wanted to close her eyes, or grab him, or something, but she was afraid to move, in case he came to his senses again.

'Perhaps, but it was enough to make me want to forget my argument.'

'Until common sense prevailed once more,' she added deprecatingly.

His hand suddenly left her skin and moved to brush some of her hair to rest behind her shoulder. With the movement, his expression became dark. 'Yes, common sense; nothing has changed, even now. I'm still not good for you. I make bad judgements, have no idea what is good for me, and one day you would end up being affected by this. It is an established fact, my dear Hermione, that whatever talents I may possess, I am quite lamentable at living my own life.'

His hand fell away, and he stepped away from her to sit down on the settee, leaning forward slightly to contemplate his clasped hands.

Hermione took a deep breath. 'It's never too late to learn, you know.' She reached out and grasped one of his hands, enfolding it within hers. 'You just need someone to teach you.'

She felt that his next response would signify a turning point, for good or for bad.

He looked up at her, and she determinedly held his gaze. Suddenly his hand wasn't lax in her grip, his fingers grasped hers. 'You would teach me, would you?'

His voice was low, with a hint of challenge, and Hermione moved her thumb over the back of his hand. 'I would.'

He stared at her for what seemed an age, but really, it could only have been a few moments. Still, Hermione felt self-conscious under such appraisal and wished for the umpteenth time that she wasn't standing there in her dressing gown. Having seemingly made a decision, he tugged gently on her hand, a question in his eyes.

Without thinking twice, Hermione settled down next him, curling her feet underneath her...not failing to notice that she'd never been this close to him before.

There was a sigh next to her. 'I think... I think/ need to change.'

She tentatively clasped her hands around his arm, remaining silent.

'And, I'm not sure that I can.'

Hermione stared at her hands as she tried to formulate a response. Eventually, she squeezed his arm encouragingly. 'You're a brave man, Severus...can't you brave this with me as well?'

'Bravery,' he scoffed, glancing down at her. 'Bravery conveniently masks a multitude of sins, doesn't it? Rashness; foolhardiness; perhaps even stupidity...'

'You don't really believe that.'

'Perhaps not...' he acknowledged, after a moment.

'Besides, maybe you don't need to change, as such; more like adjust, and there's a difference.'

He smirked. 'Is there? Sounds like semantics to me.'

Hermione smiled. Her thumb moved repetitively over the material of his robe, and she reflected, for a moment, over the fact that she was practically slumped against his side, and it was fine...clearly he didn't mind. If she had the courage, she might lean her head against his shoulder, and it would probably be fine, too.

'Anyway, I said I would help you, didn't I? Plus, you may not have noticed, but I'm not an expert at all this, either. I'll need some help, too.'

'I sometimes forget that it is you who is the younger one. I feel like it is I who has everything to learn, not you.'

'We both have things to learn from each other,' she corrected.

He hummed in concurrence, and Hermione bit her lip, the slightly wistful note in his voice giving her pause.

'Have I worn you down?'

'I'm sorry?'

She sat up straighter and looked at him seriously. 'I don't want you to just give in to me. I want you to actually want to be with me.'

'I do,' he muttered irritably, and Hermione smiled.

'Are you ever not grumpy?'

'What do *you* think?' The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. 'So then, what will we do? What shall you teach me about life? What thrills shall we endure?'

Hermione shrugged. 'Whatever you want...'

'How about bungee-jumping, or deep sea-diving or...'

'Now you're just making fun,' she admonished. 'We have a problem if that's your idea of doing something different...I've had enough of that kind of excitement to last me a lifetime!'

'Fair point,' he agreed.

'Well, we'd never been to a pub together before, so already that is something new and different. We'll just go from there. Besides, what *dyou* need to go bungee-jumping for...you can fly!' She poked him on the arm.

He glared at her offending finger, but became distracted by something else. 'Are those *ducks* on your pyjamas? They appear to be struggling.'

Hermione flicked her dressing gown to cover up her pyjamas. 'They're, um, struggling against a Shrinking Charm I placed on them. Everyone has to have a pair of novelty pyjamas,' she said defensively. 'I bet even *you* have some.'

She watched him raise an eyebrow. 'Well,' he said, 'that's *forme* to know, isn't it...'

And for me to find out Hermione finished automatically, and to her relief, silently, as well. She felt a blush form at the direction of her own thoughts, and her eyes widened when she saw that there was a smirk about his lips. Maybe she hadn't imagined the suggestive lilt in his tone. Quick, Hermione, think of something witty to say! But her mind was a complete and utter useless blank.

She was saved from becoming flustered, though, by the sound of the front door opening and closing.

'Harry's back,' she said regretfully.

He looked at her. 'I'd, ah, better go, then.'

Neither made any effort to move, but as the footsteps down the hallway became louder, and Harry could be heard calling out to Ginny, Hermione patted his arm and reluctantly uncurled her legs. As she stood, she ran a hand over her hair. 'Severus, I... well, I just want you to know that, though we've had this conversation tonight, I know it doesn't mean that everything is suddenly going to be all right...you know, all problems solved.'

He nodded thoughtfully as he clasped his cloak together, and his expression became hesitant. 'But... we shall try and make everything all right, shall we?'

'Yes.' Hermione smiled, pleased by such a remark. 'We shall.'

'Good.' He leant down and surprised her by kissing her cheek. 'Now, I must make good my escape.'

Hermione suddenly grabbed his arm. 'Meet me in the courtyard of the Leaky Cauldron...Sunday morning at ten o'clock, all right?'

She had a cunning plan.

Well, it was hardly cunning, but it was a plan, nevertheless. If he wanted her to teach him, then that is what she would do.

After weeks of talk, it was time for some action.

AN: Thank you for reading.

Thanks to astopperindeath for editing this chapter :)

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

One Day Like This

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 18

The following morning, Hermione came downstairs to find Harry and Ron preparing to go out and watch the weekend Quidditch. Ron accosted her as soon as he clapped eyes on her.

'Hermione! Can you believe that bastard Yaxley?'

Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly. 'He didn't hurt me.'

'Yeah, well, what kind of an idiot risks his liberty to say sorry?'

'Snape wasn't impressed when he got back yesterday,' observed Harry. 'In fact, he was in a foul mood.'

Hermione's ears pricked up.

'He thinks he owns the place,' grumbled Ron. 'What is he even doing there?Git'

Hermione held her tongue, and thankfully, both Harry and Ron soon left. She went into the kitchen.

'Gin, can I, um, tell you something?'

'Of course you can!' Ginny rolled her eyes, as if she were stating the obvious. 'What do you want to talk about?'

It was something she'd been considering for a while, but the events of the day before had decided things for her.

'It's about me and Severus...Professor Snape.'

'Oh.' Ginny pulled out her wand and aimed it at the sink. Dishes began levitating, arranging themselves to be washed.

'We're, ah, sort of seeing each other.' Hermione didn't dare to breathe.

The dishes suddenly fell out of the air and clattered loudly into the sink. Ginny spun round wildly, her eyes impossibly wide, and her voice shrill. 'I'm sorry; did you just say you are *seeing Professor Snape*?'

Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear. 'I did, yes.'

Ginny looked completely speechless. 'You're seeing him?' she repeated slowly, as if she thought Hermione hadn't fully understood the significance of her own words.

Hermione nodded. 'Well, it's all a bit up in the air, really, but I think so, yes.'

'Up in the air? Hermione, you're going to have start from the beginning.' Ginny pulled out a chair and sat opposite, still sporting a look of complete shock.

'There's not much to tell. I began to have feelings for him, and I told him...'

'You *told* him?'

Hermione bit her lip in confusion. 'Should I not have...?'

'No; I just don't think I'd have had the guts!'

'Oh,' Hermione chuckled weakly, 'well, it wasn't easy, but anyway, the gist of it is that I found out he cared about me, too.'

Ginny clapped a hand over her mouth. 'Go on,' she urged.

'That was it...he refused to do anything about it. He felt... maybe even still does...that we are too different and that a relationship would only end in disaster.'

'Oh my... OK, this calls for a cup of tea.' Ginny stood up and filled the kettle, and Hermione watched apprehensively, waiting to see what her verdict would be.

'I mean, he has a point, doesn't he?' observed Ginny as she picked two mugs off the shelf. 'The odds are so stacked against you!' There was something like wonderment in her voice. 'He's an older man; you both come from completely different backgrounds.' She reached into the fridge for the milk. 'He was your teacher; you were his apprentice. He was a Death Eater; you are Harry Potter's best friend.' Pausing, she touched her chin thoughtfully. 'And then there's that whole history he has with Harry's mother to take into consideration. Not to mention you are two very differently natured people...completely different, really.'

Hermione could only stare at her friend. 'I'll just go and kill myself now then, shall I?'

Ginny blinked and then laughed. 'But imagine if it*did* work? What a story that would be!' Her expression became distant. 'What a triumph against the odds!'

'Are you, um, going to swoon, or something?'

Ginny ignored her, still lost in whatever fantasy she was currently imagining. 'It's like something out of one of those Muggle films!'

'Gin!' Hermione said loudly. 'I assure you, when you are actually living the story, it's not nearly as romantic as it sounds. In fact, it's been nothing but torment and frustration,

to be honest.'

Ginny sat back down. 'Yes, I suppose you are right.'

'You don't think I am making a mistake, then? Or that it's weird?'

'Hermione, please...you are one of the most levelheaded people I know. If you don't know what you are doing, then there's no hope for the rest of us!'

Hermione smiled gratefully.

'How do things stand now, then?'

'I think he's finally come round to the idea. Though, at this stage, I am not ruling out a change of heart, again.' Hermione sipped her tea. 'Do you think there's anything I can do to encourage him, or keep him convinced?'

Ginny thought for a moment. 'I think you should just be yourself, be friends...have a good time. All the rest will fall into place in time.'

Hermione sighed at length. 'I don't need to start wearing bright red lippy, then...?'

They both laughed.

'I thought something was going on when you were at Hogwarts.' Ginny smiled knowingly.

'You did not.'

'Ah! Don't think I didn't notice you both disappearing outside during the Ministry dinner!'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Oh, yes, *that*. Well, the less said about that, the better.'

'I cannot wait to see Harry and Ron's faces!'

Hermione blanched violently. 'Don't you dare...they cannot find out yet! No one can.'

'I know, I know,' said Ginny smoothly. 'I promise I won't say anything.'

Hermione suddenly regretted opening her mouth.

'I won't!'

Sunday morning dawned not a moment too soon for Hermione. Practically leaping from her bed, she wrenched back the curtains. Her prayers had been answered...it wasn't raining. Now she just had to hope the sun was shining elsewhere too, as they would not be staying in London.

By the time the clock chimed a quarter to ten, Hermione had changed her clothes and fiddled with her hair several times. Eventually, she settled on tying her hair back into a ponytail...her hair did not cope well in the wind, and where she was taking him *would* be windy.

Grabbing her bag, she hurried out of the door and Apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. She was not going to risk Flooing, at all...soot was never a good look. Would he like what she had planned? Or would he think her sentimental? Boring, even?

Stop fretting, you silly cow, she hissed to herself.

'Good morning, Severus,' said Hermione brightly as she entered the courtyard behind the pub.

It was quiet with nobody around, so she reached up with determination to kiss his cheek. There, it was done now. She didn't have to keep worrying about how she should greet him. She surreptitiously gauged his reaction as she stepped back.

'Good morning,' he replied smoothly. Well, he hadn't shoved her away, so that was always a good sign.

'How are you today?'

'Well, now that I have chanced upon your eager countenance, suspicious and not a little apprehensive. Just what have you got planned for today?'

Hermione smiled broadly. 'Don't worry; you'll get through the day in one piece, I assure you. There will be Muggles around, though, so before we go...' She nodded towards his robes.

He reached up and began undoing the tie around his neck. Hermione suddenly didn't know where to look and felt immensely ridiculous for it. He pocketed the black silk and ran his wand over his robe and shirt until they dissolved into something more befitting of a Muggle.

'Right, then; I shall Apparate us.' A little voice rang out in her head, crying *don't Splinch him!* She mentally acknowledged it and curled a hand around his arm. Within a moment, they were standing on a grassy cliff top overlooking the sea. Hermione glanced up at him hesitantly. 'You, ah, said before that you had never travelled much, and while I realise that this is not the most exotic place in the world, it's where I had some of my best times as a child.'

He glanced around for a moment, and then nodded slowly. 'So you have brought us west, then...Devon or Cornwall? I'll plump for the latter.'

'Yes, you're right.' She smiled, pleased that he'd remembered. 'I thought that it would be good for us to, um, well, to spend some time together that wasn't at Hogwarts, or whatever.' She wasn't sure she wanted to call it a date; it sounded trite...inadequate. She was on the verge of wringing her hands when he finally replied.

'Sounds like a good idea to me, too.' He looked at her. 'Where are we exactly?'

Hermione turned her gaze to the view before her. 'This is Land's End, the most westerly point in England; isn't it wonderful? There's nothing lying between us and North America apart from miles and miles of ocean.'

'Apart from the Isles of Scilly, of course,' added Snape, after a beat.

Hermione laughed. 'What...are you a walking atlas now, or something?'

'Actually, Dumbledore used to spend a lot of time down here in the summer, researching the history of Merlin and all those Arthurian legends. He once regaled us all with a scintillatingly long-winded tale about how he spent a whole week scouring the village of Tintagel.'

'Did he find anything?'

'No,' he snorted, though not unkindly, 'nothing that the Muggles hadn't already found, anyway. However, he was adamant to point out that he had interpreted a little more.'

Hermione smiled, but was unsure of how to respond. She could probably count on one hand the amount of times she had heard him mention the former Headmaster's name, and she did not know what to make of that. She did not want to encourage him to talk about it if he did not want to, but she would have to confess herself interested in what their relationship had been like. She would like to think the best of Dumbledore, but sometimes she had to wonder at just what kind of man had been hidden behind the half-moon spectacles and garish robes.

'He did what he had to do, no more, no less,' said Snape, as if he knew where her thoughts were headed.

'As you yourself did?'

He gave a sidelong glance at her. 'I suppose.'

Hermione privately thought he'd done a little more than his duty. 'We can go there, if you like...to Tintagel, I mean. I didn't bring us here to simply stare at some cliffs and some sea, after all.' She hadn't missed the slightly pensive note in his voice as he spoke about the Headmaster.

'Yes, all right, then.' He touched her arm. 'I was worried you were going to take me to sit on a beach somewhere.'

Hermione paused and looked at him with disappointment. 'But I brought my bucket and spade!'

A small burst of laughter issued from him, and the corner of his mouth lifted in appreciation. Hermione filled with pleasure and took his arm once more. 'Right, I think I remember where I can Apparate to.'

'Hang on,' he interrupted. 'I don't suppose you could take us to the Lizard peninsula, as well?'

She looked up at him, stifling a smile. 'Plants?'

He nodded. 'Pomona raves about the amount of rare species to be found there.'

Hermione's eyes lit up. 'Oh! In work, I've been using some Mese...*Mesembryanthemums* from here.' She always stumbled over that word. 'They're excellent.'

'Apparently the best Butcher's broom in the country is to be found here, not to mention the Cornish heath.'

'What are we waiting for, then?'

With a *crack*, they were gone.

A few hours later, after spending time studying plants atop windswept heaths and grasslands and visiting Tintagel castle, the two of them were sitting on a bench, enjoying that most traditional of Cornish delicacies...the pasty. Hermione had brought them to a quiet spot overlooking the sea in St. Ives. She'd directed him away from the harbour and busiest tourist part of the town, explaining her reasoning as thus: 'I actually had a whole pasty stolen from my hand by a rogue seagull once while I was sitting there.'

Snape gasped melodramatically. 'What cheek...'

'It was actually quite traumatic!' Hermione had admonished. 'They are menaces.'

The silence between them was companionable, and Hermione felt her mind wandering, listening to the sound of the waves hitting the rocks below until she was struck by something. She turned to her companion.

'Now, there's something else you must have while at the seaside. Wait here for me, OK?'

Snape nodded. 'Very well.'

Hermione returned about five minutes later. 'Here you are. I wasn't sure what flavour to get, but who doesn't like strawberry?' She proffered an ice cream cone to him.

His expression was a picture of disgust. 'I'm not eating that.'

'Why not?' She bit back a smile. 'I got a chocolate flake in it especially.'

'I don't care whether you made the bloody ice cream *or* the bloody flake! Besides, where's *yours*?'

'I got myself a tub.' She sat down and showed him the small tub and plastic spoon and laughed when he glared at her. 'Actually, the tub is for you...I thought it was more civilised.'

He took the tub off her with a grumble. 'I hate ice cream, anyway.'

'No, you don't. Don't think I never saw you sneaking a spoonful of vanilla ice cream during dessert at Hogwarts.'

'Stalker,' he muttered under his breath.

Hermione almost choked on her flake. 'I wasn't a stalker!' she protested loudly.

'Every time I turned around, *there* you were.'

A faint blush rose in her cheeks; she *hadn't* followed him about like some lost little lamb. 'That's because you were stalking *me*.'

He was quiet for a moment. 'I rather think I did quite the opposite.'

'I suppose you did, yes, in the end,' she agreed, suddenly feeling rather serious.

'Although,' he ventured distantly, 'if you were always there when I turned around, well, maybe it was because I was always looking for you in the first place.'

Hermione stilled at his words, fully appreciative of the fact that he could admit to such a thing. He'd never given much concession as to his feelings. And his words, though ever enigmatic, did speak volumes. She felt, rather than saw, him shift on the bench, as if uncomfortable with revealing such depth of personal feeling. One day, she resolved, there would be a time when discomfort or self-consciousness would disappear.

'When did you realise that you cared about me?' It was something she'd wondered about...she could not deduce a particular point where his manner had changed towards her.

Snape raised an eyebrow and looked at her rather appraisingly.

'Oh, I'm not... I'm just curious. / had an epiphany on the night of the dinner.' Maybe if she revealed something, he would not feel so reticent.

His eyes narrowed in thought. 'The dinner?'

'Yes...wasn't it obvious?'

'Should it have been?'

'Yes,' she laughed. 'Have you forgotten about that whole debacle with Lavender?'

'No, of course not, but...' His expression was blank.

'I was consumed with jealousy.'

'Oh... I thought you just couldn't stand her.'

'Well? What about you? Was it... was it when you moved me from your office?'

He shrugged and there was a faint frown upon his face. 'There was no real Eureka moment. I suppose the closest I came to having one was when I found myself balancing a handful of lacewing flies over your cauldron.'

Hermione gasped loudly. 'You were going to sabotage my work...my apprenticeship?'

'I didn't think you'd mind...' he commented dryly.

'I would have!' Hermione laughed. 'You're not serious, are you?'

'Maybe...'

She smiled and turned her attention to her ice cream for a moment. Something else was niggling at her. 'Severus, would you ever have got in touch with me after I left Hogwarts? Even just as a friend?'

He looked at her and his expression was rather grave. He cleared his throat and shifted on the bench. Hermione got the distinct impression that she wasn't going to like his next words.

'I don't think I would have,' he admitted softly, and Hermione's heart sank. 'I wanted to, but I could not. For instance, I regretted that I wasn't there when you came to the castle for your results, but justified to myself that I was doing the right thing for both of us. I hoped in time, it would just... go.'

The atmosphere between them became suddenly tense. 'You do wonders for a girl's confidence, you know,' Hermione commented, slightly bitterly. She could feel him looking at her. Why wasn't she enough to inspire him to throw caution to the wind? Could she ignite a passion within him that would make him want to forget everyone and everything?

'You know that I...' He trailed off. 'You know it wasn't as simple as that.'

'No, I suppose it wasn't.' She did truly believe that. As much as she would like to imagine that nothing else mattered...that having requited feelings meant everything was fine, it didn't work like that. Her pride appreciated knowing that he had felt some regret over his decisions, and he had said to her before that it had never been easy for him. It was folly to think that either of them could have abandoned all reason, or ignored what else was important to them...they were just... not those kinds of people. And that, Hermione considered, was okay.

Her thoughts continued to command her attention, and she was only distracted when she felt ice cream dripping onto her hand from her forgotten cone.

'Oh, bummer...' She pulled out a napkin with a grimace, and began wiping her hand. 'Argh, it's dripping everywhere...'

Suddenly, though, it wasn't dripping on her anymore. Indeed, she was staring at an empty hand. ~~her~~ empty hand. Snape had grabbed the cone flung it over onto the rocks below.

'Problem solved.'

Hermione was still staring at her hand in disbelief. 'I can't believe you just...'

'Hush,' he urged, and he touched her jaw, turning her face towards his.

He kissed her before she could do anything.

'I believe it was my turn, after all,' he murmured, after a moment.

Hermione was suddenly reminded once more of that time she had dared to kiss him on the lips...it seemed like an age ago. She placed a hand on his cheek. 'Does this mean it's my turn, again?'

She caught his gaze, and he nodded. Hermione kissed him back, only this time, she made sure that it wasn't brief. She brought her other hand to his jaw and held his face to hers. Eventually drawing apart slightly, they both stilled for a moment, as if to move would undo the last few minutes.

The moment was broken, however, when Snape opened his mouth. 'Your hand is really sticky.'

Hermione snatched her hand back with a laugh. 'Sorry.' She took out her wand and cast a cleansing charm, flushing with pleasure at the small smile upon his face.

It was fairly late when Hermione opened the door to Grimmauld Place, feeling more light-hearted than she had in a long while. Maybe she was even a bit light-headed after that last drink she'd had. She smiled to herself. It was a smile, however, that soon dissolved when she entered the living room to see Harry, Ginny, and Ron sitting in complete silence. She flung her bag down on a chair.

'Merlin, is everything all right? You look like something terrible has happened.'

Ginny suddenly flashed her an apologetic look, and Hermione felt a jolt of fear run through her.

'What's going on?' she asked shakily.

Harry leant forward and unfolded the copy of the *Evening Prophet* that lay on the coffee table.

'Oh, for Merlin's sake! Don't tell me there's more about me and bloody Lavender in there!' Hermione snatched up the paper angrily. 'I'm going to have to complain about this. It's...' The words died in her throat when she saw the photograph on the bottom of the front page. Her blood ran cold, and her heart began to beat faster, resulting in

an almost painful throb in her neck.

'It's me and Severus,' she said simply, her voice coming out in a sort of whispered croak.

'We'd established that it's you and *Severus*,' commented Ron snidely, not looking at her.

'What's going on, Hermione?' put in Harry.

So Ginny hadn't enlightened them, then. Hermione moistened her dry lips, and tried to regain her equilibrium. 'It's um...'

The picture wasn't even suggestive, well, in a subtle way it was, but it wasn't conclusive. They were walking it must have been taken while they were on the way to the pub, later in the afternoon. She was talking about something. Hermione couldn't even remember what about, now. He was looking ahead, not even appearing particularly interested. But then, Hermione watched herself smile broadly and curl her hand around his arm. Whatever it was that she was talking about, he suddenly looked at her, as if he was laughing. From there, the photograph went back to the beginning.

'What is there to say?' Hermione shrugged, outwardly calm, inwardly bristling with a mixture of annoyance and disbelief. 'We were just talking.'

The caption under the photo implied otherwise, but Hermione resolutely ignored it.

'You went all the way to Cornwall to *talk*?'

'He's my friend...'

'Oh, pull the other one, Hermione! Have you *seen* that photo?' Ron glared at her.

She wasn't ready for it to come out yet. 'It's nothing...' Maybe if they were any other people, then it would be believable, but they were not. They were Severus Snape and Hermione Granger...could it really be *nothing*?

Harry's words echoed her thoughts. 'Ron's right, Hermione; this *is* Snape we're talking about, here.'

'If Hermione says it's nothing, then we should respect her word,' said Ginny diplomatically, but firmly.

Ron ignored her. 'Just admit it, Hermione. Go on, you're having some sort of disgusting affair with him, aren't you?'

'It's not disgusting!' she protested loudly.

'Oh, but it *is* an affair, then.' Ron sneered triumphantly.

Hermione shook her head in sadly. 'You make it sound sordid, and it's not.'

Harry rubbed a hand over his face, his eyes wide. Ron merely shook his head in disbelief.

'How long has it been going on for?' Harry asked.

Hermione crumpled up the paper and dropped it onto the table, hissing, 'For about *three* bloody days!' It was ridiculous!

'So there is still time for you to come to your senses, then?'

'I don't *need* to come to my senses, Ron.'

'Listen to yourself...he's a murderer!'

Ginny put her head in her hands. Hermione stared at Ron in astonishment.

'Oh, Ron, don't start that now.'

'Why not? It's the truth.'

'He's not a murderer, Ron,' said Harry quietly.

Ron scoffed. 'You wouldn't be saying that if he'd been on the Dark side, would you?'

'The point is, Ron, that he wasn't on Voldemort's side, and he hadn't been for years!'

'The point is, *Hermione*, that he ever was in the first place!'

Hermione clenched her fists. 'He made a mistake...you *know* he regretted it!'

'I'm *sick* of you always defending him...'

'Well, I can't help it if I feel he needs defending! For crying out loud, a lot more us would be dead were it not for him!'

'Oh, all hail Severus bloody Snape!'

'Ron, you are trying my last nerve...this bitterness doesn't suit you!'

'Why should *he* get a second chance?' He stood up, looking at her grimly. 'Why should my brother lose his life...why should Teddy Lupin grow up without any parents, while men like the Malfoys, and *Snape*, people who helped begin the whole mess in the first place, get to start again?'

'Ron,' Hermione began sadly, 'you can't make judgements about who deserves to live or not...it doesn't work like that.'

'Don't patronise me, Hermione.'

'I'm not; I'm just saying... I know losing Fred was especially hard for you and your family. It's just...'

'It's just *what*? Everything is all right because he's *sorry*? Forget about everything else! You are deluding yourself, Hermione, and you are wasting your time on him.'

'Ron, calm down,' said Harry firmly.

'Don't *you* start...don't pretend you understand this any more than I do, Harry! It's sickening, it's...'

Hermione had her wand out, and suddenly Ron was silent, despite his lips still moving. A look of fury passed over his features.

'I'm not going to listen to one more word of this.'

She turned around and left the room. Ginny called out to her, but Hermione carried on down the hallway and out of the front door. She paused on the steps, breathing deeply. A few errant tears trickled down her cheeks, and she wanted to stamp her foot in pure frustration. Why did this have to happen now? Why not when she was more prepared for it?

She would not go back in Grimmauld Place tonight, and there were only two other places she could go. She could go to her parents', but would face some tricky explanations as to why she was there, and she could not stomach even the thought of it after that performance in there. The only other option was to go to Hogwarts and hope that Severus Snape had not suddenly changed his mind, now that some of his original misgivings were looking like they may be about to come true.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for beta-reading! Thanks for the reviews that have been left, too.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling

Chapter 19

Hermione moved quickly up the path to Hogwarts, aggravation marking her every stride. Night was beginning to gradually descend, but there were only very few lights glowing from within the castle. Gryffindor Tower was completely shrouded in darkness, and the windows of the Great Hall were full of shadows. She reached the doors and stopped. Would they even be unlocked? Could she just wander inside? She lifted her hands and the heavy doors shifted under her weight...clearly, she could, then.

She paused in the Entrance Hall. This was actually verging on the ridiculous...she had no idea where his rooms were! Neither did she know who else was in the castle. How was she going to explain herself if she suddenly bumped into Filch, or someone? Although, if he'd seen the *Prophet*, then she probably wouldn't need to explain. Swallowing uncomfortably, she headed for the staircase down into the dungeons, which were made all the more eerie by the fact that they were deadly silent. There was something rather unnerving about silence in a place she was used to being bustling and noisy.

His classroom was locked. No surprise there. She tried his office, but it was locked too. Hermione bit her lip in frustration. What was she going to do now? Wander aimlessly around the depths of the castle, or...

'Miss Granger?'

Hermione nearly died of fright. She spun around to find herself face to chest with the Bloody Baron.

'Oh, hello, Baron.' She breathed a sigh of relief.

'Severus informed me to keep an eye out for you. If you'll follow me.'

He was expecting her? That was interesting.

Hermione dutifully followed the ghost down the corridor, past the Slytherin common room, and to a part of the dungeons Hermione had never had cause to visit before. The Baron paused outside a nondescript tapestry and then floated off.

Hermione looked at the tapestry rather dumbly. Should she knock? The tapestry began to shimmer before her eyes, however, and a door materialised. It opened.

'Hello; I had a feeling I might be seeing you again today.'

She sighed at the sight of him. 'So it would seem...you saw it, then?'

Snape nodded. 'Minerva kindly left a copy for me on my desk.' He stood aside to let her in.

Hermione entered and couldn't help but look around her surroundings with interest. Would she be able to gain more insight into his character through a glance around his private domain? 'Can you believe it?' she asked quietly, her gaze moving around the room. 'Practically the first time we go anywhere, and someone not only sees us, but takes a bloody picture, as well!'

Snape made a noise of acknowledgement, and she looked at him to determine what he was thinking. He was standing in front of the fireplace with his hands in his pockets. His robe was missing, and with his shirt un-tucked, Hermione felt herself considerably drawn to the fact that he looked a little dishevelled. He moved to sit down in an armchair, and she turned her attention away from him. She stepped towards the settee in the middle of the room and looked at the bookshelf lining one of the walls.

'I thought it was unlikely anyone would recognise us down there, and no one knew we were going.' There was a large piece of carpet covering the flagstone floor, and she looked at its faint swirls of pattern contemplatively. 'I didn't even see anyone take that picture...did you?'

'I did not,' he replied. Of course he hadn't; he surely would have said something if he had.

There were no photographs in the room, or paintings. Only lamps and a few tapestries adorned the walls. Hermione lifted her eyes from a table covered in quills and parchment and felt irritation swell up within her once more. 'It just gets on my nerves so much! They have no respect for privacy whatsoever! Why should they be bothered about what we do? Does anyone *really* care?'

She hesitated when there was no response forthcoming, and she looked at him fully once more. He was flicking through the *Practical Potioneer*. 'Do you even care?' she pressed, somewhat miffed. 'Clearly, you are not even listening to me!'

He sighed and flipped the journal onto the small stool near his feet. 'I am listening to you; I just feel that your irritation is superfluous.'

Hermione goggled at him. '*Superfluous*? Do you not grasp the significance of this occurrence? We will be bombarded with Owls asking us to confirm whether it's true...all the little details they'll want to know, and if we don't give it to them, they'll simply go ahead and speculate. Isn't that what you were concerned about before...that insinuations would be made? That my character, as well as yours, would be questioned?'

He raised his hand in a dismissive gesture. 'It would have happened at some point, regardless.'

'But this soon, though? We'll... never get any peace, now.' It would hinder the progress of their rather fledgling relationship, surely? And how could ~~he~~ be so unflappable about this?

Snape got up and poured her a small measure of Firewhisky. 'Here, drink this...you'll feel better for it.'

'Drink doesn't solve *all* problems, you know,' she muttered, rolling her eyes.

He looked at the glass in his hand as if he'd never seen it before. 'It doesn't?' he asked, affecting confusion.

Hermione smiled and took a sip, not really prepared for the burn at the back of her throat. Her eyes watered slightly, and she reached up to wipe them.

'Have you been crying?' he suddenly asked, with a note of accusation in his voice.

She stilled before removing her hand. 'No, not really; I was just annoyed. Ron said some things...'

'Ah.' He moved back to his chair. 'You see, this is why I am able to be calm about this. You expected me to be outraged, did you not? And I do regret that they've found out this soon... But I have no one to care about what I do. There'll be gossip, no doubt, amongst the staff, but nothing I can't handle. You, however, have your friends, your colleagues, your parents. They will all judge you, and already, I think I can say that at least one has been none too kind. That does bother me.'

Hermione said nothing.

'I have had people whispering behind my back since ever I can remember, Hermione. No doubt they may suggest I have used some Dark and terrible way of ensnaring you. But it won't be anything I won't have heard before. Or they may decide to focus their attentions upon you. Indeed, maybe I have everything to gain from this. Maybe you're taking advantage of a poor, troubled former spy who's having a mid-life crisis, as the Muggles term it.'

Hermione smiled despite herself and moved to stand nearer his chair. 'Well, we can avoid that sort of speculation as long as you are not photographed buying the latest model broomstick. Then *I'll* be worried you're having a mid-life crisis.'

Snape smirked for a moment, but spoke seriously once more. 'I wish there was something we could do about it, but there is not...I suppose we just rise above it. Though, inevitably, they will move their attention onto something else.'

Hermione thought for a moment. 'Well, I don't care about it, as long as you don't.'

He surveyed her dubiously for a moment. 'Weasley did *not* upset you, then?'

Hermione sat on the arm of his chair and looked at her hands. 'No, he did,' she admitted. 'He was particularly angry about it.' She'd known he would likely be the one to object most, but the depth of his hostility had taken her aback. She'd had no idea that his dislike for Snape ran so deep.

Snape picked up his journal and started casually rifling through the pages. There was a scowl upon his face. 'Surely he gave up his right to concern when he binned you for that tart.'

'Thanks,' she replied dryly. 'Just what every girl likes to be reminded of...being***bin***ned. Besides, we actually binned each other to begin with.' She thought for a moment. 'But he's my friend. I value the opinion of my friends...we've been through so much together. It's hard to completely destroy such a bond.'

His hand turning the pages of the journal suddenly stilled, and Hermione gently plucked it out of his grasp. He offered no resistance, and she knew he hadn't really been reading it.

'My friends mean a lot to me, Severus, but that does not mean I'd drop you for them. And likewise, I would not drop my friends for your sake, either.'

He glanced up at her. 'We will never get on, Hermione. Do you want that...two separate lives, one with me, and another with your friends, and never the twain shall meet?'

Hermione bit her lip. She hadn't really thought much about it, but he had a point. 'I'm sure that in time you would learn to be tolerant of each other...I'd never expect you all to be the best of friends.'

He snorted. 'Good.'

'Ron will get used to it, I'm sure.'

'What did he say? Played the Death Eater card, did he? Maybe even the mur...'

Hermione's hand shot out to grab his arm. 'Don't.' She sighed and leaned against the back of the chair. 'Don't *you* start all that, as well.'

He huffed, but reluctantly heeded her.

'I'm going to have to move out of Grimmauld Place, though,' she said, after a moment of silence, placing her arm along the back of the chair to keep her balance. Her hand could reach out and touch his hair if she let it. 'I found somewhere the other day; it was a little more expensive than I would have preferred, but now I think I'll go for it.' It wasn't fair on Harry and Ginny to have that kind of fraught atmosphere in their home.

'I've money, if you have need of it.'

Hermione snapped her head towards him. 'What?'

He shrugged. 'What have I had to spend years of salary on, apart from the necessities?'

'Still, I'm an independent woman, you know.' Hermione crossed her arms primly.

'My apologies to your wounded pride.'

'Besides, can you imagine if it came out that you were paying for my flat?*Two* words: gold and digger.' She smiled wryly.

'I think a proper gold-digger would know better than to prey on a teacher. We don't earn that much, I can tell you.'

There was something Hermione wanted to ask him. Though, considering he'd showed no compunction in the past about telling her what she didn't want to hear, she was a

little hesitant. But she knew it was best to talk about certain things, and at least then she would know where she stood with him.

Hermione leant her elbow on the back of the chair and tapped him on the shoulder.

'What?' he asked, raising his eyes to her.

'You didn't think this an opportunity for you to change your mind about us, then?'

He frowned slightly. 'No, it... it never crossed my mind, all right?'

Hermione's face lit up, and his own expression softened somewhat. 'I know that in the past I showed a good degree of scepticism, but now that I've committed myself to the idea, I'm not going to suddenly turn my back on you. What do you take me for? I do have *some* knowledge about the work involved in relationships, I'm not...'

'All right, all right,' she appeased as irritation began to rise in his voice. 'Forget I said anything.'

She heard him grumble unintelligibly under his breath and felt a such sudden rush of affection that she leaned over as far as she could, grabbed his chin, and planted a smacker of a kiss on his cheek, making a sound of satisfaction as she did so.

His answering expression was one of such priceless horror that Hermione couldn't help but laugh heartily.

The first time Hermione woke up in Severus Snape's bed was not the momentous occasion one might have anticipated. Well, it was momentous in some respects, of course, but the reason she'd been in there in the first place was rather trivial. She'd had to sleep somewhere, after all, and when, the night before, she'd nearly dislocated her jaw with a huge yawn, he ordered her to go to bed. Even in her drowsy state, a part of her had inwardly blushed at such a suggestion.

'Oh, I couldn't...' she'd argued, rather weakly.

'Just go,' he had replied, calmly unruffled, 'I will be fine out here.'

She'd wanted to argue something along the lines of, 'It's your bed, you shouldn't have to give it up,' or even to tentatively suggest that they share it; it was only sleeping, after all. However, Hermione had been positive she would not be able to articulate herself without becoming extremely flustered and instead, she'd bade him goodnight before scuttling off to the bedroom...alone.

She justified her lack of courage through consoling herself into thinking she'd saved them both a great deal of awkwardness and discomfort.

They could keep all that for another day.

Presently, it was early morning, and Hermione was quietly letting herself into number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She toyed with the idea of sneaking straight upstairs to her bedroom, but decided that it was perhaps best to face the music straight away. Hopefully, Ron would be at his own flat.

It was with relief that she encountered only Ginny in the living room.

'Hermione!' She smiled. 'Are you all right?'

Hermione nodded. 'Is, ah... anyone else around?'

'Harry had to go in early today, and Ron isn't here.'

Hermione threw herself onto the settee with a lengthy sigh.

'Was, um, Professor Snape angry about the *Prophet* thing?'

'To be honest, he had to calmme down.' She noted the almost bemused look on Ginny's face and reasoned that it probably did sound rather strange to the untrained ear. Her eyes alighted on the morning newspaper. 'Go on, then; what's the damage?'

Ginny grimaced. 'It's only just arrived...I haven't looked yet. Shall I...?'

Hermione nodded tightly; it was best to get it over with. Ginny took up the paper and unfolded it.

'Right, well, there's no picture on the front page, at least.'

'At least?'

'Yes; there is, however, a headline, um.' Ginny paused. "*Canoodles on the Cornish coast*"

Hermione almost laughed. 'Because, of course, that picture of us was clearly us canoodling!'

Ginny smiled and opened the paper.

'Is it a really big article?'

She glanced apologetically over the top of the paper. 'It's a whole page.'

'Photos?'

'There's a much bigger version of the one from yesterday, and one each of you. Do you want me to read the article aloud?'

Hermione rubbed a hand over her eyes. 'Sure.'

'Yesterday, the Evening Prophet exclusively revealed that Hermione Granger, 20, has been enjoying the company of none other than notorious former double-agent, Severus Snape, 40. A source who witnessed the pair on a cosy walk through the picturesque Cornish town of St. Ives said: "They looked like they were together...you could just tell. Hermione couldn't take her eyes off him."'

Hermione scowled to herself.

'While neither Miss Granger, nor Mr Snape has officially confirmed their relationship, if the rumours are true, it will likely cause a huge stir. One might reasonably ask how Hermione Granger has come to be involved with her former teacher, and indeed, for how long. Eyebrows were raised twelve months ago when Miss Granger suddenly left her job at the Department for the Control of Magical Creatures to take up an apprenticeship post at Hogwarts with none other than Severus Snape, current Potions master and deputy Headmaster at the school. The Prophet can confirm that Snape has never taken on such a student before, and those few who did dare apply were swiftly

rebuffed.

'It appears to have been a clever move on Miss Granger's part. A source close to her added that the young Hermione was always rather enamoured of her professor: "She was always talking about him when we were in school...now we know why.'"

'What the hell?' shouted Hermione in indignation.

Ginny continued.

'Severus Snape, the man who devoted his life to avenging the death of his childhood friend Lily Potter, nee Evans, is, by all accounts, not a man to be trifled with. Though integral to the defeat of Tom Riddle, he is a man whose character and integrity has often been subject to speculation. Indeed, one must ask if Miss Granger really knows what she is getting herself involved in.'

'And one can only wonder what Harry Potter must be thinking, now that his best friend has seemingly taken up with his former nemesis. All we can say is, watch this space.'

'Who on earth is this source they keep referring to?' Ginny sported a deep look of confusion.

A light came on in Hermione's mind and she froze. 'I'll bet you every single thing I own that it is our good friend, Lavender Brown.'

Ginny's eyes widened. 'No... *Really?*'

'Only she would want to make me look like a pathetic, love-sick girl who has finally bagged her schoolgirl crush!'

Ginny shook her head. 'Merlin, what a conniving....'

Hermione hit her head against the back of the settee in frustration. 'We'll never know, though, if it was her.'

Hermione resolved, however, that she would be keeping her eyes peeled for any clue as to Lavender's involvement. Maybe she was paranoid, but deep down, she knew it was her.

'Hi.'

Hermione slid somewhat apprehensively into a seat at an inconspicuous table at the back of the Red Dragon.

'I think we're all right,' commented Snape, surreptitiously glancing around their immediate vicinity. 'I can't see anyone watching us.'

Her shoulders sagged a bit in relief. 'Is one o'clock too early for a glass of wine?'

'That bad, is it?'

'How many Owls did you receive this morning?'

Snape smirked. 'Three.'

'I had ten! Some from the *Daily Prophet*; two from *Witch Weekly*; and listen to this, I actually had an anonymous one informing me that I should stay away from you.'

His expression clouded over.

'Oh no, it wasn't that. They were warning me for *your* sake...saying I sounded like a predator, and that I was simply after the glory or something!' Hermione looked at him incredulously.

'Well, at least there have been no Howlers,' he offered in a conciliatory tone. 'Though, I am expecting at least one telling me I should take up with someone my own age.'

Hermione grunted in agreement. It wouldn't be surprising if one of them did receive a Howler.

'By the way, how long have you been enamoured of me, then?' His eyebrow was raised, indicating that he did not believe one word of what had been printed.

Hermione groaned. 'I think I know who is responsible *for that* bit of embellishment.'

'Miss Brown?'

'Thank you! Yes, I thought so too, and I will find a way of proving it.' Hermione sighed and shrugged. 'It's not so bad, though. The people in work have been looking at me differently, but no one has dared to outright ask me what's going on. And at least reporters can't get into St. Mungo's. By the way, if you see a beetle anywhere, crush it.'

'Skeeter?'

Hermione nodded vehemently.

They talked for a little while longer, but Hermione was soon looking at her watch. 'Argh, I'm sorry, but I have to be getting back now, I have a brew that might explode if I leave it any longer.' She didn't want to go back to work. She didn't want to go anywhere where people would be looking at her and whispering about her. Her brew could explode, if it really wanted to.

But there was no use in thinking such thoughts. She stood up and edged towards him slightly. 'Can I...?'

'Can you what?'

She saw by the glint in his eye that he knew what she wanted. 'I want to give you a kiss goodbye,' she said briskly, without hesitation. 'But I don't know if I should.'

He stood up abruptly. 'This is ridiculous,' he muttered. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and mumbled something quietly under his breath. 'There.'

Hermione could feel a thrum of magic around her, but there was no visible sign of it. Before she could ask what he'd done, he'd slipped an arm about her waist.

'Oh, are we...'

Her words were cut off by his lips, and, really, that was fine by her. Indeed, as she brought her arms about his neck she considered that maybe they did too much talking. It was something to think about for the future.

'It was just a little spell to divert attention,' he explained when they pulled apart.

'So we could do anything and no one would notice?' Immediately a blush tinged her cheeks. Had she actually said that out loud? 'I didn't mean... you know, anything like that.'

'Pity.'

He was joking, of course, and Hermione chuckled, but there was an undercurrent of something in his eyes that she knew was no joke at all.

Reluctant to resort to clichés, she nevertheless couldn't help but admit that it left her feeling rather breathless.

When Hermione arrived home from work that day there was a journalist waiting for her. He practically popped out from behind a nearby car, startling her into flinching violently.

'Miss Granger, can you confirm...'

Hermione hurried inside and slammed the door. She leant against it, feeling infinitely fed up. She would have to move out soon. This was Harry and Ginny's home and they shouldn't have to put up with their peace being disturbed.

How about her own peace? *How will Severus and I ever be able to go anywhere?* she thought helplessly. Maybe maintaining a dignified silence was not the best way to go. If they officially confirmed things, perhaps the interest would wane. Or perhaps it would intensify. It was a double bind. Clearly, regardless of what the official line was, the press were only interested in getting a scoop...some potentially scandalous picture or some incriminating gossip.

Possibly, if she grabbed him and started kissing him in the middle of the Atrium that would silence them once and for all. She doubted, however, that either of them had the guts for that sort of thing...not at this stage, anyway.

She sighed. But this was only the first day, after all. It was possible that if they hung onto their reticence a bit longer, the press would get tired of chasing them and back off for a while. *Or* there was always the option of going out in disguise. Hermione smiled at the thought. Maybe they'd leave that until they go *really* desperate.

One thing she did know...she had not gone to all this trouble of winning round Severus Snape only to be able to see him for a sneaky five minutes in a gloomy old pub during her lunch hour!

No, indeed...it was simply not good enough.

AN: Thanks to astopperindeath for the beta read :)

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 20

After suffering a setback, Hermione finds her life heading in a different direction.

One Day Like This

All characters belong to J. K. Rowling.

Chapter 20

Witch Weekly 14th July, 2000.

Our regular readers will remember that last week's edition of Witch Weekly included an interview with Ron Weasley, along with our feature, 'Battle of the Exes,' between Lavender Brown and Hermione Granger.

In light of recent events, we would like to appeal to Mr. Weasley that he heeds our advice when we suggest that he would be better off with Miss Brown. It has been reported that Miss Granger, somehow, has managed to catch the reclusive Severus Snape, the man infamous for his almost life-long dedication to Harry Potter's mother. Neither party has been forthcoming about the truth of such rumours, but many will agree that their silence on the matter speaks volumes. Readers will recall how Ron spoke so fondly of Miss Granger in his interview and seemed to suggest that they were on the way to a reconciliation. Obviously, Hermione had other ideas.

This is not the first time Hermione Granger has exhibited a particularly cavalier attitude towards men. She's been linked to Harry Potter in the past, and a source who was at school with Miss Granger reminds us that: "She went out with Viktor Krum when she was only fifteen!"

Has Severus Snape, a man twice her age, fallen victim to Miss Granger's insatiable taste for famous men?

We can only wonder who is next on her list.

Hermione didn't see Ron for several days following their argument over the photograph in the *Daily Prophet*. In the intervening days, Hermione had signed the lease on a new flat and was due to move in within a couple of weeks. Harry and Ginny had said they would be sad to see her go, but she was unsure whether to believe them. She couldn't blame them if they were relieved to see the back of her. For her own part, she was looking forward to having a place to call her own.

Eventually, Ron came to Grimmauld Place from work one night, looking very much like he'd been dragged against his will by Harry. Not wanting to prolong the tension, Hermione decided to offer an olive branch by being the one to break the ice first.

'How are you, Ron?'

'Fine.'

And that was it...nothing else was forthcoming. 'Ron, please don't be like this. We were getting on so well...'

Ron snorted. 'So I thought, too. You're continuing with this charade, then?'

Hermione kept her impatience at bay. 'It's not a charade.'

'What do your parents say about this? I can't imagine they're overjoyed!'

Hermione blinked. Her parents didn't know. Since spending a year in Australia, they'd never renewed their subscription with the *Daily Prophet*. They were still living in ignorance as to what situation their only daughter had got herself into.

Ron shook his head. 'Good luck with that one.' He abruptly left the room.

Hermione turned to Harry who sighed irritably. 'I don't know what's going on with him, I really don't.'

Though she would rather not admit it, Ron had a point. She had no idea how her parents would react. She felt a bit guilty that she hadn't mentioned anything to them when she had seen them last, just a few days ago. But it was a conversation she'd need to have when she was eminently prepared. It was one thing to fall out with a friend, but Hermione had never done so with her parents, and she wanted to avoid it all costs. Part of her was still rather unsure as to what exactly she should tell them, anyway. She would like to be a little more confident in her relationship with Severus Snape before dragging her parents into it.

One day... she kept telling herself. *One day* she'd tell them.

Professor Severus Snape

C/O Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Professor Snape,

I should like to know your intentions towards the young Miss Granger.

I think the poor girl has been woefully misrepresented in our vulture-laden press. Why...has everyone forgotten how she was cruelly attacked in Diagon Alley by Jabez Yaxley only a year ago? I can only imagine what effect that must have had upon her life. I once had occasion to converse with Miss Granger over a delicate matter concerning a case of some very angry gnomes taking up on my land. She was most helpful in advising me the best course of action and even offered to come and take care of the matter personally, because I am not so handy with a wand in my old age. I have not always been treated with the same patience and respect by Ministry workers.

*She seemed such a nice young girl that I should not want to see her messed about with in any way. The *Daily Prophet* should be ashamed!*

Yours faithfully,

Mrs. Branwen Bishop

The Grange,

Stow-on-the-Wold

Gloucestershire

'How many owls today?' Hermione asked, before sipping her vodka and orange.

'One,' replied Snape grimacing, 'but a Howler, and a rather charming one at that, asking me if I made it a habit to get into bed with all of my students.'

Hermione gasped. 'That's outrageous! Why do they always conveniently forget that I am not your student anymore?'

They were once more sitting in the Red Dragon following the end of their respective working days. They'd taken to using Disillusionment charms as they entered, just in case there was someone lurking about watching them. Hermione was fast becoming exasperated with the situation.

'How about you?'

'The usual. I never thought I'd be referred to as a 'Scarlet Woman' twice in my lifetime...I mean *me*.'

'That was a particularly nasty article in *Witch Weekly*. It's stupid, really...you were made out to be some sort of man-eater, and me, a poor damsel being taken advantage of!'

They both laughed at the ridiculousness of it. 'It's either laugh or cry,' Hermione mused. Suddenly her expression froze. 'Oh! I can't believe I nearly forgot!'

Snape looked at her in confusion, while Hermione produced that week's issue of *Witch Weekly*.

'What...do you want to frame that article or something?'

'No, no,' she answered impatiently. 'Look at this.' She turned the magazine towards him, and there was something approaching smugness on her face.

His lip curled in distaste. 'It's Miss Brown, wearing various hideous sets of robes.'

'Look where she is...where they took the photos.'

'She's on a cliff-top somewhere...' He glanced up at her, comprehension beginning to dawn. 'Surely not...?'

Hermione nodded excitedly. 'I'd recognise that coastline anywhere. What do you think the odds are of her being in Cornwall doing a photo-shoot, while we were also there?'

He examined the magazine once more. 'Do you think she is responsible for the photo, as well as the comments, then?'

Hermione stared at Lavender's pouting face. 'She said she'd get me back for that altercation at the Dinner. She quite easily could have seen us without us noticing.'

'Maybe it's time you showed her you're not a pushover.' He raised his eyebrow suggestively. 'I'm sure we could come up with ~~something~~.'

Hermione smiled. 'I'm sure we could.' It was galling, though, as they still had no concrete proof. What she really wanted was to see Lavender face-to-face. Then she would know. But when were their paths ever likely to cross? It was something to think about, though, at least.

Hermione huffed impatiently. 'Do you know what? I am sick of all this, and I am sick of this pub, too. Tomorrow is Friday night, and we are going to do something!'

'Like what?'

She looked at him. All she wanted was to spend some proper time with him. 'Anything...dinner?'

'Oh, don't get too excited,' she commented dryly, when he merely shrugged his acquiescence. He only smirked in reply.

'What is your taste in food?' she asked.

He frowned. 'The usual...my tastes were nurtured by the Hogwarts' house-elves and are as eclectic as bangers and mash and custard tarts can be.'

'Hmm, they were nice, though.'

'It may have escaped your notice, Hermione, but I'm hardly a gourmand.'

'Well, we're in London, we can probably get just about any cuisine known to man...we should continue our aim to do something different. Hang on, I've an idea.' Hermione surreptitiously looked around to see if any Muggles were close by, and then carefully touched her wand inside her robe pocket. She Transfigured a beer mat into a small map of the world.

'Close your eyes and pick a place.'

He looked at her with disbelief. 'Are you quite serious?'

'Yes.' She nodded with enthusiasm.

'I must be mad,' he muttered, jabbing his finger onto the parchment.

'Again; you've picked the middle of the Caspian sea.'

He huffed.

'Hmm, we'll call that Japan. Japanese, it is, then.'

'No, I'm not eating raw fish,' he argued flatly.

Hermione frowned. 'Fine; pick again.' She didn't mind too much; the thought of sushi didn't fill her with anticipation, either.

'You picked that on purpose, didn't you?' His finger had landed, conveniently, on the British Isles.

'I fail to see why we can't just have a roast dinner.'

'It has to be *different*.'

'But it *is* different...we've never had a roast dinner *together*.'

'Of course we have! We had one every Sunday at Hogwarts!'

He rubbed a hand over his face, and Hermione hid a smile, knowing that she was beginning to annoy him. 'Actually, your finger landed on Scotland, so...'

'Don't even mention haggis, neeps, or tatties...Minerva would drag us to the Three Broomsticks every bloody Burns' Night and the only thing that tasted good was the Scotch.' He paused for a moment.

'Do you really think this is a good idea, Hermione? Why don't you just come to Hogwarts? Minerva is away visiting her sister...I practically have the castle to myself. The house-elves can cook whatever concoction you want. I've no particular wish to be set upon by some good-for-nothing journalist while I'm contending with some disgusting haute cuisine you've ordered us.'

Hermione couldn't help but smile at his grumpiness. 'Fair enough. I suppose it would be better having a bit of privacy.' In fact, it sounded like a much better idea. 'All right, then, but the house-elves are *not* going to cook.'

'Can *you* cook?'

Hermione bit her lip. 'Sort of.' Her range wasn't very broad however. 'I'll tell you what, seeing as it'll be Friday night, end of the week and all that, I'll just bring some fish and chips with me.'

He almost looked relieved. 'That's more like it.'

Hermione shook her head in resignation, but felt secretly pleased...she loved fish and chips from the chip shop. Culinary sophistication was clearly wasted on the both of them.

Dear Mrs Bishop,

I hope you don't mind that Severus showed me your letter, but he felt that I would appreciate your concern, and I must say that I do. It was very kind of you, indeed. It's heartening to know that there is someone who sees through a lot of the rubbish that has been printed. I hasten to add that you needn't worry about me...everything is completely fine.

Once again, I thank you for your concern, and I send my very best wishes to you.

Yours sincerely,

Hermione Granger

By the time Friday afternoon came and her day at St. Mungo's had come to an end, Hermione was feeling fairly excited. It would be quiet at Hogwarts; they could leave all those ridiculous articles and letters at the gates. The castle was like its own little world, and if they had it practically to themselves... well, maybe they could even make a weekend of it...

Hmm, that could be... interesting. It wouldn't hurt to anticipate such an occurrence.

After leaving the hospital, Hermione stopped off at a telephone box to phone her parents. That was another reason why she couldn't wait to move into her new flat...she'd have a phone!

'Hi, Mum, it's me. Listen, I, um, won't be there for dinner tomorrow, but I could make it for Sunday instead?'

Her mother indicated that whatever she wanted was fine.

'I'll bring round some pictures of my new flat for you and Dad.' *And maybe inform you that I'm seeing my former teacher, as well* 'Anyway, I'll see you on Sunday, OK?'

Hermione stared at the receiver after she'd put it down. She really wasn't looking forward to telling her parents. But surely they wouldn't do anything drastic like disown her! It wasn't as bad as all that! They would be shocked, naturally, but she was confident they would not be unduly scandalised. Although, on second thought, maybe her father would be.

Oh, well, she could bury her head in the sand for a few days more...she was getting rather good at it.

F. A. O. Miss Hermione Granger,

St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies

Dear Miss Granger,

Here at the Wizarding Wireless Network, we would like to invite you to take part in an interview regarding your relationship with Severus Snape during our Witches Hour programme. We are sure that at this stage you would like to put your own view across and we think the W.W.N. is the best way for you to do that. Our listeners would love to hear how you managed to catch the eye of a man who held onto a love for nigh on twenty years! Tell us about the year you spent with him as his apprentice; how did you feel about him when you were a student? What do your friends say?

Would you encourage other women to find an older man? Are you bothered by the age difference?

We would really love to hear from you!

We would also, of course, offer to recompense you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Cornelia Higglesbottom,

Editor of Witches Hour

Wizarding Wireless Network

'Some git from the *Prophet* just came spilling out of the Hog's Head as I walked past, three sheets to the wind he was, and shouting, "Are you going to see your fancy-man, Miss Granger?" "Can we have a picture?"' Hermione dropped the bag she was holding onto the table. 'It was all I could do not to tell him to piss off.'

'Did he see you coming to the gate?'

Hermione nodded tiredly. 'The gate is open...you don't think he'll try and come in, do you?'

Snape thought for a moment. 'I'll go and get Filch to lock up the main doors early, just in case.'

'All right, I'll sort this out.' She indicated the bag of fish and chips and paused. 'Hang on, did the house-elves lay this table?'

He looked at her testily. 'I *am* equipped with the basic skill of lining up cutlery in the right place, you know. It may surprise you, but I have functioned in civilised society for several decades.'

Hermione narrowed her eyes. 'The house-elves always fold their napkins this way.'

'*Bugger!*' she heard as he closed the door behind him.

Snape returned several minutes later informing her that he could see the 'drunken arse' loitering outside the gates, but that he would not be coming any nearer. Following that, they sat down and ate the fare Hermione had brought. It had smelled so nice that she had very nearly started without him, entertaining herself with a vision of him returning to find her with her plate half empty, and her mouth unattractively stuffed full of chips.

She felt a little odd, sitting there with him, and she wasn't quite sure what, or why, it was. Perhaps it was because they'd had precious little quiet together recently, not since that visit to the West Country, and was that really only a week ago? Maybe she was unsure how to act now that they were alone. Or was it that she didn't know how *he* wanted her to act? He said so very little at times...gave so little away, that it was hard to pitch her behaviour.

She took a sip of her wine, and as he drained his tumbler of whisky, she considered that maybe they were both thinking the same thing, both desperately drawing fortification from artificial means.

It led her to wonder that, at times, maybe they were both *glad* of the hullabaloo they'd caused in the press...it gave them something else to focus on rather than what was actually happening between them. So they were in a relationship, but what exactly did that mean? Was it burying one's head in the sand time, again? Well, maybe that was bit of an exaggeration. After all, it was early days, and they had made significant progress, but there was something further that needed to give. She wanted to be able to be able to touch him, touch his arm, or his hand. He kissed her without compunction, and sometimes there was an unguarded look in his eye that made her feel rather warm, but she wanted him to suddenly take her hand, or perhaps to just touch her hair, and she wanted him to do it without hesitation. Because he did hesitate, as if his touch would be unwelcome.

But what was the point in thinking about it, or worrying about it? If she wanted to lean against him when they sat together then she just should. If he wanted to kiss her without warning, then he just... *should*.

And as she studied him while he collected up the dishes and summoned a house-elf to take them away, she realised that he had nothing to worry about where she was concerned. If only he realised that, as well.

Despite it being the middle of summer, the dungeons rarely became warm, but with the small embers burning in the grate, it was warm enough to take certain liberties. He had removed his robe, and it was an action that continued to fascinate her. How could something so banal be so eminently intriguing? Was it because it was new? She'd never seen him without his robe until very recently, and as she repeatedly drew her gaze over him, part of her couldn't help but think: *Well, that's one layer gone...what about when the waistcoat goes, and then the shirt, and then...*

He was looking at her a little strangely.

Hermione smiled and moved away from the table to sit down on the settee while wondering apprehensively if he would join her or choose to sit in his armchair. There was the slight hesitation in his movement as he approached her, and so she calmly sipped her wine, letting him know that it was his own decision. She didn't want to push him into anything, regardless of her inner monologue just now. She almost sighed in relief, though, when he did sit down beside her, and she sent him a wide smile to show her approval.

'I can imagine what'll be in the *Prophet* tomorrow. "Granger seen entering Hogwarts at eight o'clock in the evening, but didn't emerge until blah, blah, blah!" And there they were, back onto their failsafe topic once more...they were both as bad as each other, really.

'I shouldn't worry about it too much. I think people are soon going to get fed up of hearing about us, especially as we haven't given them much cannon fodder.'

No, because there was no cannon fodder to give.

'No, you can't really wring much of a story out of a photo of us walking down the street, or me having a look around Madam Malkin's; I mean, what the hell did they think I was buying in there? Were they hoping I'd come out and show them a bag full of saucy lingerie or something?'

That was the trouble with spending a lot of time with someone, Hermione realised. With familiarity she tended to let her mouth run wild, and that was fine, except, she could do without making herself blush. He seemed a little thrown at the direction of the conversation, too, for he occupied himself with producing his wand and Transfiguring the small coffee table in front of them into a foot stool. He propped up his feet with a small sigh.

Hermione lifted her feet and quickly put them back down again. 'Well, that's not fair, is it?' She lifted her legs again. 'I can't reach.'

He sent a cursory glance to her feet. 'Not my problem, dear girl.'

She dug her elbow into his ribs. He flinched and glared at her.

'What?' Hermione looked at him, suitably unconcerned. 'Perhaps I'll just use you as a foot rest?'

So saying, she swung her calves up to rest upon his knees, buoyed perhaps by her recent reflections, or maybe she just had drunk too much wine. She fervently hoped no ladders had appeared in her tights since she'd put them on.

'Merlin, they weigh a ton!'

'Oi!'

Hermione, however, was rather pleased with the new vantage point her seating arrangement afforded her. She was angled more towards him, her side leaning into the back of the settee. She could see him better now. She was not sure he appreciated it as much. He appeared a little uncomfortable with her eyes fixed on him.

Hermione flicked her gaze to her hands. There was something about this whole press issue that she did feel needed discussion, and she knew it to be potentially sensitive.

'Severus, do you mind that your past is being dragged through the news once more?' He stilled. 'I'm sorry for it,' she admitted softly.

'Don't be...it's not your fault.' He shrugged flippantly. 'Thanks to Potter, it's all been aired before now, and... maybe a small part of me finds that curiously liberating.' He quirked his mouth a little self-consciously. 'Besides, you are hardly having a better time of it. I regret that you have been subject to comparisons with... with her.'

Hermione bit her lip, but then smiled gently. 'It's all right...at least you haven't been compared against Ron, I suppose.'

Snape groaned. 'Perish the thought. All I can say is that I am glad my time at the Ministry will be ending shortly. If I have to put up with one more pathetic glare or snide remark, I will curse him.'

'I'm sorry about that...he still hasn't come round. He's being completely stubborn about it.'

'Do you know why that is?' His tone suggested that *he* knew.

Hermione had no idea. 'Why?'

Suddenly he put his hand on her thigh. Hermione used all her self-control not to jump in surprise. Had he been reading her mind earlier?

'I think he might be jealous.'

'Jealous?' she repeated, her mind concentrating on the feel of his hand on her leg. And she could feel the heat of it, even through her skirt.

'Perhaps there was more truth in that interview he did than you first thought.'

Hermione rested her head against the back of the settee and considered this for a moment. Ron still had feelings for her? Or, perhaps, rediscovered feelings for her was more apt. He dumped her for Lavender, and now he wanted her back? She wasn't sure that sounded entirely plausible, but then, it could account for the depth of his objection.

Belatedly, she realised Snape was surveying her, waiting for a response, and she made sure she was unequivocal.

'Oh, well, if that is the case, it's a bit late now, isn't it?'

His eyes met hers rather determinedly, and his hand moved almost absently down to her knee. 'It is,' he agreed emphatically, his voice impossibly low. Hermione's heart gave an almost painful thud as she stared at him, relishing the sense of possessiveness he seemed to be exuding. He hadn't read her mind earlier on, of course, but maybe she *had* underestimated him. She couldn't look away from the intensity visible in his eyes, and any sense of frivolity she had felt suddenly sobered in a moment of increasingly palpable tension. What was happening? As his hand travelled slowly down to her foot, all she wanted to do was capitalise on this charged atmosphere between them...she wanted to... Hell, *anything*. Telling him that his hand was going in the wrong direction might be a start. Telling him to lean a bit closer might be another. Suddenly, she yelped loudly and automatically moved her feet out of his reach...his fingers had deliberately tickled the sole of her foot.

She stared at him in disbelief. She couldn't believe he'd done that. He started chuckling, softly smug, and the low sound spurred her into being bold. How dare he tease her like that? 'Git,' she muttered, folding her legs beneath her and getting to her knees. His laughter subsided, but a smirk remained as she carefully slid a hand over his cheek and into his hair. His eyes watched her keenly, as she pressed a firm kiss to his lips.

'Bloody git,' she whispered, kissing him again, but pulling back quickly. He frowned and she smiled...turnabout was fair play, as they say, but she wasn't quite about to cut her nose off to spite her face.

His frown dissolved into a look of what seemed to her like shy expectation, and she felt humbled by it.

Leaning forward, she kissed him again, and this time his hands came to rest on her hips as he kissed her back. She could feel him try to deepen their embrace, but Hermione fought against him, gently biting his bottom lip. *She* wanted to be in charge right now. A sound of amused surrender emanated from within his chest as he opened his mouth to her.

In response, she moved her hand, which was bracing her weight against the cushions, to curl about his neck. The advantage of which meant her body slumped against his, and he could bring his arms around her. He'd never held her as tightly before. They broke apart for a breath...Hermione rather needed several...and she noted with pleasure that his chest heaved beneath hers.

'Severus,' she breathed, feeling pleasantly dazed. Their eyes met, and she smiled happily. The corners of his eyes crinkled slightly in reply, and then he was brushing her hair behind her shoulder and seeking her lips out once more. Without any real conscious thought, she was moving one of her legs to sit astride his lap, bringing them even closer. The sounds of satisfaction they made were almost in unison.

His lips wrenched from hers and then his teeth were against her neck. 'Hermione,' he murmured raggedly, 'you're...' He didn't finish whatever he was about to say, and Hermione wasn't sure she would have been able to register it anyway. Her faculties seemed to have deserted her without warning. Eyes closed, lips parted, the only thing tangible to her was his ministrations to her throat, and the fact that she was brazenly pressing her breasts into his chest.

She couldn't even find it within her to feel remotely self-conscious.

How long had she been imagining being this close to him? She wanted to touch him. She wanted to stop clinging to his shoulders like some limpet, she... At her touch on his chin, he raised his eyes to hers. Kissing him repeatedly on his cheek, lips, anywhere, she put her fingers to his throat.

Soon, though, she dropped her forehead against his, a noise of pitiful laughter emitting from her. 'Severus, your bloody cravat won't budge.' She tugged repeatedly at the ends of it.

'All right, woman, don't garrotte me.' His voice was a little unsteady.

'Look at you,' she said quietly, touching his collar as he loosened his tie. 'I can't get at you anywhere...you're all buttoned up.'

'It's a metaphor,' he replied, a little apologetically, and they both laughed, slightly breathlessly.

Finally, she pulled away his collar and kissed her way up from his collarbone to his jaw. Mimicking his own movements, she tentatively swiped her tongue across his skin and felt a reciprocal shiver pass through him.

'Merlin,' he muttered, gasping quietly, and Hermione could only sigh contentedly at the fact she could cause such a man to quiver beneath her. Encouraged, she tried twisting her body against him and smiled when she felt his hands clutch at her tighter.

Her smile vanished, though, when she felt said hands disappear under her shirt. They burned against her skin, and she trembled slightly as they moved higher. Immediately, and rather frenziedly, she sought the warmth of his mouth once more, uncaring that she felt like her lungs would burst.

Fumbling at the buttons of his waistcoat, she gasped loudly when his hands touched her breasts. Their mouths broke apart. There was nothing else for it; she needed him. 'We should move...' began Hermione, but trailed off when she saw the look in his eyes. They were glazed with passion, but there was something oddly grave about his expression. His hands dropped to her waist, and Hermione automatically grabbed them through her blouse, making sure he did not remove them altogether.

A pang of fear coursed through her. Merlin, after all that he didn't actually want her. He didn't fancy her enough, he...

As she caught her breath, she thought she detected something approaching vulnerability in his eyes, and then, in a moment of clarity, she knew what to say.

'If we do this, it will suddenly all feel so terribly real, won't it?' she said softly.

He blinked, as if surprised by her observation. 'Yes.'

She understood. Before, perhaps he could pretend that what was going on between them was something less than it was. But they really would be putting themselves on the line for this, and for thereafter...emotionally, physically... She lifted her hands to his shoulders. 'We don't have to...'

He brought a hand to her face and touched her bottom lip with his thumb, causing it to tingle. 'No, I want to... I just... I suppose I worry that you'll change your mind one day...'

When you'll have so much more to lose Hermione realised. When they both would.

'I won't change my mind; I want to take this risk with you, Severus,' she said simply. What more could she say? Words were words...maybe she should show him how much she wanted him. Making a decision, Hermione grabbed the bottom of her shirt and lifted it over her shoulders.

'There...what are you going to do about*that*?' she demanded, trying to appear more confident than she felt, sitting there in her bra.

She placed two fingers under his chin and lifted it up when he only stared. 'Well?'

He moved his head in contemplation, and any doubt in his expression had melted away, though she was not naive enough as to assume she'd never see it again.

'I have a few ideas.'

She smiled at him. 'A few, eh? Well, I think you'd better show me, then.'

He did not need to be told twice.

AN: Many thanks to astopperindeath for beta-reading!

Not long left to go now; thanks for reading.