

Regarding Severus Snape

by hexgirl

A mysterious woman, a Muggle pub and Severus Snape. Is there more to her than meets the eye?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 10

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Thank you to JKR for letting us play with her toys so nicely. And apologies to her for making them do things she never intended them to do. (I think they rather enjoy it, though).

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The Potions Master: Part one.

Pretty little blondes with pert breasts and pouty mouths did not usually make eye contact a second time with Severus Snape. If the unthinkable happened and a pair of unsuspecting eyes were caught in his black glare, the owner of the blue ones, or brown, or green, would be sure to look anywhere at all but in his vicinity. That was one of the depressing unwritten givens of Snape's life. He hardly even noticed it anymore, and sometimes he didn't even feel a stab of regret. He was therefore moved to study the daring young woman in more detail from the shadowy recess of his quiet little table located at the back of a very depressing and overpriced Muggle town centre drinking hole.

He was not mistaken; she was coyly glancing in his direction now and again. He hardly dared to move as he watched her, took in every detail of her face, figure and clothes. It seemed difficult to imagine that a woman with her obvious assets was sitting alone in a pub, buying her own drinks and shunning the male populace with what appeared to be several irritable put-downs. Her hair was straight and long, hanging like thick satin drapes around her face and shoulders. She wore it loose, and her fingers sometimes ran through it distractedly as if she was enjoying the feel of its luxury as much as her admirers, the male clientele, were enjoying the sight of her in all her loveliness. Her face was almost angelic in its perfection huge blue eyes framed by dark lashes peered in his direction. But it was her flawless little nose that held him spellbound; next to his monstrous beak it was practically exquisite in its precision. She wore a tightly-fitting dark red blouse with tiny black buttons which seemed to enhance her high round breasts, small waist and curvaceous hips. Her tight black skirt stopped short at the knees, revealing a pair of very shapely calves and ankles. He could see only one leg from his position, but for all her physical attributes, the revelation of a foot encased in a four inch high black stiletto shoe was the thing which set Snape's pulse racing. This woman was splendid to behold, yet Snape was the only man since her arrival an hour ago to whom she was giving a second, third and fourth shy glance. He allowed himself to glory in the rare treat.

The bar was relatively quiet; it was a midweek evening, after all, and unlikely to draw in the surplus punters expected on a Friday or Saturday night he would never dream of setting foot in the place then. However, a Wednesday evening could be endured without too much distaste: the beer was bearable, the food acceptable, and the clientele restricted to after hours office workers, unwilling to face whatever awaited them at home.

A wine bar is how the blurb on the menu and on the coasters described it, but Snape paid no attention to the abstract art adorning the walls, the chrome bar stools or the

chocolate brown leather couches. He was only interested in the silent empty booths dotted around the sides and the distinct lack of magical patrons. Snape revelled in the anonymity offered by Muggle pubs. In them, no one knew that the dark stranger drinking alone in the corner was a former wizarding triple agent, a vindicated murderer and the survivor of a hard-fought war against evil. Obscurity amongst the non-magical population was his reward, and if he never clapped eyes on a fellow witch or wizard again, he would feel himself fortunate.

Snape's mouth curled itself into a smile, rarely seen, as he observed a suited dark-haired man approach her table. The man had the kind of confidence which came with a life-time of good looks and rare rejections. He flashed her a self-assured grin before issuing the chat-up line which should have been received with pleasure and gratitude. His smile faded a touch when the rebuff came, but he was evidently not in the business of giving up easily. A second attempt was delivered, and once again, he was spurned. But it was when Snape noticed her hand slipping furtively into the pocket of her jacket, and saw the slight jerk of her hidden fist, that his interest really piqued. The woman stared directly into her would-be-suitor's face and spoke a single word. The handsome man's retreat was quick. He stood and turned, so that Snape saw the dazed look in his expression it was almost as if he had been...

Confused!

She was a witch! Shit! He should have guessed. Why else would a thing of beauty be playing cat and mouse with a dour-looking, big-nosed recluse? Her interest in him could only be professional.

As he walked over to her, the tiny shake of her hand as she placed her empty glass on the table fuelled his confidence. This was not going to be an unpleasant task. He made sure that he held her in his gaze for a little longer than comfort could endure. She dropped her eyes to the table and back again at him, too terrified, or so it seemed, to ask what he meant by standing there, intimidating her with that dark look.

'Can I buy you a drink?' he said at last. It was more of a statement than a question; he had no doubt of her answer.

'Thank you, yes,' she replied. The little croak in her voice betrayed her anxiety. 'I'll um have another ... gin and tonic please.'

He nodded once and made his way to the bar. The handsome man with the expensive suit was now propped on a bar stool fingering a tumbler of some undefined amber spirit. The man stared at his usurper with incredulity as the older man ordered a gin and tonic, along with his own pint of bitter. Snape felt the waves of resentment coming from two feet along the bar, and counted this among one of his better days.

'Thank you,' she said, picking up the glass which he had just placed in front of her, 'would you care to join me?'

Well, he had not intended to buy her a drink only to bugger off and enjoy the sight of her drinking it alone. He swallowed the sarcastic reply, however, and pulled out the opposite chair, placed his pint glass on the table, and took a seat. Her voice sounded familiar; something about the way she had pronounced the last phrase had him riffling through his memory of long-forgotten students, ex-colleagues and even the paid tarts in Knockturn Alley. He remained in the dark, though, as he continued his assessment. The northern accent was a fake. He had been simulating an educated one for years he knew the real thing when he heard it, and this was not it.

She was attempting to hide her apprehension, but Snape did not miss the shake in her voice or her dilated pupils. He could sense fear and vulnerability in an adversary as easily as a fox senses an injured bird. Moments passed, and she seemed on the verge of breaking the silence, but apparently trepidation got the better of her, and she chose to remain silent instead.

'I'm Heather,' she finally said, 'Heather Gunn.'

'Severus Snape.'

'Is that your real name?'

'Why would I make up a name like Severus Snape?' he snorted.

'To sound exotic?'

'I have always found it to be more of an affliction than anything pertaining to glamour.'

'I like it,' she said softly. 'It suits you.'

The air around her had a faint aroma of sweet lemons; the combination of that and her chocolate-box prettiness was a heady blend. He would not allow himself to be lost to her charms; it would be so easy. Snape forced himself to stare at the table in front of him to remedy her intoxicating presence.

'And what would a woman like you be doing drinking alone?'

'A woman like me?' she replied.

'Don't play coy; you understand my meaning perfectly well. Women who look like you do not have to buy their own drinks, nor do they sit alone waiting to be approached. Are you a prostitute?'

Her cheeks turned pink in response to his insult, and she looked as if she would quite like to slap him across the face with a perfectly manicured hand.

'Is that why you bought me a drink?' she replied, affecting calm. 'You thought I was a whore?'

Snape shrugged. 'A rational conclusion given the circumstances. You are dressed to entice, you were trying to get my attention by batting your eyes at me with all the subtlety of a street-walker. Why should you be surprised if I naturally conclude that you expect to be paid for your services? If you are a prostitute, perhaps you would be so good as to name your prices, then we can be done with this charade and get down to business? I presume you have premises?'

He sat back in his rather uncomfortable seat and waited for the indignant explosion which would surely follow his contemptuous slur on her virtue. He was under no illusion that the intention of this witch, whoever she was, was not to sell her body, but he was buggered if he was going to let an opportunity like this slip away. Oh yes! This was the most fun he had had in years.

'I'm not a fucking prostitute,' she replied through gritted teeth. 'Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you speak to me like that. And if I was, don't you think I would have chosen the good looking guy with the normal-sized nose drowning his sorrows at the bar, instead of the weirdest looking man in the entire fucking city?'

'Two "*fuckings*" in one sentence? Are you sure you are not a hired slut? You certainly have the vocabulary of one. I wonder what else you could do with that mouth.' This time he was sure she must react with violence; at the very least he expected to feel the ice-cold splash of a gin and tonic in the face. She remained seated, however, and though her cheeks were still crimson and her chest heaved with the effort of remaining composed, she did nothing more than glare her outrage at him.

It was the outraged glare that nudged his brain into realisation. The combination of her expression, and the way her accent had slipped when she berated him, pointed to a name he had never expected to hear again. Who else would make the journey across Britain to locate her hateful ex-teacher?

Granger!

What in Merlin's name was the insufferable know-it-all doing looking him up? This could only be some misguided Gryffindor mission-of-mercy. Emancipating House Elves had clearly lost its charm. Was she now looking up former Death Eaters to rehabilitate? He remembered the badges she had made as a fourteen year old at Hogwarts, oh so many years ago, emblazoned with the word "S.P.E.W.": the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. Perhaps she could have new badges made up for her latest

project: "S.D.E.N.A.H": Society for Death Eaters in Need of A Hug.

She interrupted his self-indulgent amusement, and this time the voice was unmistakably Granger.

'You, Severus Snape, are a vile, malicious, foul-mouthed creep. No wonder you're sitting on your own like some pathetic loser. Who would want to spend more than two minutes in your disgusting company?'

'You! Apparently,' he replied with a smirk. 'You have been sitting here for at least ten minutes now, and although I have done my best to offend you, you still seem intent on staying for more. I really am at a loss to know how to provoke you to leave.'

'Fine,' she said, standing up and wavering slightly on the heels which she was evidently not used to wearing, 'I'll go then.' She snatched up her bag and jacket and tottered to the door as quickly as her stilettos would allow her.

Snape followed her outside. He was not yet done with her; there was a great deal more mileage to be gained from this liaison.

'Wait!' he shouted, as she rounded the corner which led away from the bar and towards the quieter district of town. 'Heather!'

She stopped at the sound of her name and whirled around to face him.

'Why are you following me? I told you, I'm not a prostitute!' she hissed.

'Allow me to apologise,' he said, assuming a contrite tone. 'I'm not used to company as you so bluntly pointed out. You can't blame me for suspecting ulterior motives when the most attractive woman for miles seems interested in me. May I at least walk you to wherever you are going?'

Heather seemed suspicious of his sudden change of heart but not unwilling to accept his apology with a begrudging shrug.

'Well, alright then. I was just going to walk to the bus stop,' she replied. 'Walk with me if you want to.'

He fell into step beside her, and the unlikely pair walked in the direction she had pointed out as her destination.

The street was full of shoppers and office workers on their way home. Snape noticed how many eyes followed her as they passed through the crowds, away from the commotion of town centre life and towards the relative calm of the outer reaches of the city. Neither spoke as they walked: he was not inclined to, and she seemed to need to focus all her concentration on staying upright. Eventually, the road became so quiet that the side streets leading off it were quite deserted dirty alleyways reeking of vomit and piss and littered with Muggle overindulgence. It was as they passed one such grime-hole that Snape acted. He grabbed her by the arm so forcefully that she let out a shriek of fear as he dragged her into the alley, shoved her ruthlessly up against the wall, one hand around her exposed white throat and the other against the brickwork. His body pinned her fast.

'Twenty-points to Gryffindor for brewing a very fine Polyjuice Potion, Miss Granger, but fifty points off for your abysmal attempts at stealth,' he growled, squeezing his fingers around her throat.

'Fuck!' she managed to expel.

'And a further ten points awarded for your charming new vocabulary.'

'You're hurting me. Stop it, Professor, please.'

He relinquished his hold on her and took a small step backwards, watching intently as her hand flew to her neck protectively.

'An explanation if you please, Miss Granger,' he said softly, 'and make it a good one or I'll be forced to use an Unforgiveable on you, and I haven't decided which one yet.'

'You wouldn't dare!' she retorted.

'Really? Are you sure about that? I'm certain you are well aware that I am well practiced in all three, and I am equally sure that not a soul from the wizarding world knows where you are.'

'Yes, alright,' she said, hastily, 'I know you can, I'm just not sure you would.'

'But there is always an element of doubt.' He reached into the inside pocket of his shabby black jacket and took out a long black wand, drumming it ominously against his palm as he waited for her to react. 'What do you want, Granger? Why the ridiculous disguise?'

She sighed, as if the game was so up she had no option left but to confess.

'I wanted to see you.'

'Obviously.'

'I wanted to... check on you.'

'Why would you give a flying fuck about my current whereabouts? You need to do better than that, or do I need to Imperio you?'

'I had to see you because... because... my life is a mess. I can't make it work, any of it. I don't sleep, I can't concentrate on work, I can't concentrate on anything,' she said, biting her lip and fiddling with the zip on her bag. 'I can't get you out of my head, you see.'

'Are you serious, Granger?' He was taken aback. He didn't know what he had expected her to say, but an admission of failure from the star of Gryffindor was somehow disconcerting. He had imagined her to be some rising success at the Ministry by now.

'The last time I saw you...' She broke off and stared at his booted foot.

'I was lying in a pool of blood on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, where you left me for dead,' he finished for her.

'Don't!' she wailed. 'Don't! I can't get rid of the image from my mind. We did! We left you to die, all alone in there. We didn't even try. We didn't know, didn't know you were on our side all along, were trying to help us, gave us the Sword of Gryffindor, saved Harry's life, risked your own and...'

'Yes, yes, enough of the theatricals,' he interrupted, impatiently. 'I know my own history, I had it rammed down my throat at my trial often enough. Are you telling me that you are here because somehow my tragic history is preventing you from... making a go of it?'

She nodded slowly, and Snape was amused to see that she was struggling to prevent the fall of tears which had formed in the big blue eyes that belonged to someone else.

'In that case, get out of my sight. I need your guilt like I need a dose of spattergroit. Go and find some other maligned Death Eater to snivel at.'

He tossed her a look of contempt as he turned to stride away, but it seemed that she had finally become mistress of the shoes.

'Please, Professor!' She grabbed his arm, preventing him from taking any more steps away from her. 'Just hear me out.'

He turned back to face her, curious and surprised at her tenacity, and raised his eyebrows in anticipation of her tale of misery and remorse. Her expression had relief emblazoned across it, but she seemed unable to know where to start. Rehearsal of this moment had apparently been forgotten or omitted.

'Hurry up, Granger, I haven't got all night,' Snape said.

'Really,' Hermione replied, 'because that's not how it looked to me.'

'I haven't got all night for you.' His sneer earned him a petulant pout, and if this had been the real Heather Gunn, he would have liked nothing better than to shove her back up against the wall and taste those perfectly formed lips for himself. But Hermione Granger was under there, and from all he had heard so far, she had not come here with kissing in mind.

She leaned heavily against the wall and looked directly ahead, waiting for the couple taking a short-cut down the quiet side street to pass them before speaking.

'Like I said,' she said at last, 'I've been having trouble concentrating on anything.'

'It's been ten years. Get over it,' Snape replied, impatiently.

'I can't. I have tried, really I have. I even went for Therapy. It's a Muggle thing,' Hermione said in reply to the quizzical look. 'It didn't help. They thought I was mad, wanted to give me drugs to stop the hallucinations. I nearly took them.'

'Muggle drugs? Merlin, Granger, things must be bad!'

'Yes. They are,' she replied with feeling. 'The nightmares have got worse recently. They always include you in some form or other... usually dying horrifically.'

'You think you're the first to be cursed by terrible visions instead of sleep?'

'You have them too?' she asked.

He nodded. 'If I don't dose myself up with Dreamless Sleep Potion. What would you expect with my melodramatic past? You should do the same, instead of resorting to primitive methods.'

Hermione glanced at him, and then seemed to find a great deal of interest in the plastic drinks carton recently discarded on the floor next to her foot. 'I don't really think I should,' she replied, softly.

'Why not? If it stops the horror, and allows you to go on with your life, and more importantly stops you from harassing those you feel you have wronged...'

'Only you.'

'What?' Snape replied, irritably.

'You are the only one I feel I need to put right a wrong,' she said. She paused, and seemed to gather herself before continuing. 'I won't stop the nightmares, because I don't deserve peace.'

'Oh! Spare me the fucking Gryffindor histrionics, Granger! I refuse to listen to any more of your drivel. Take the potion and leave me alone!'

'I'll do anything!' She called after him as he began his familiar stride down the alleyway, anxious to put distance between them. The desperation in her voice evoked something within his conscience it wasn't pity, he had experienced precious little of that in his forty-eight years to recognise the emotion, even if it presented itself gift-wrapped. It was something more akin to comprehension. Snape knew what it was to desire forgiveness. The sensation had been his constant companion, his motivating influence, for the greatest part of his life. He hardly knew what it was to live without it.

What he would not give, even now, to hear the words, 'I forgive you, Severus' from Lily. But the dead cannot forgive, they continue to point the finger from the grave, and those they accuse have no choice but to bow their heads and wait for their own end elusive as even that paltry act seemed to be for Snape. It was recognition and curiosity, therefore, which prevented him from leaving her to her torment.

'That is quite an undertaking,' he replied, and turned to face her, slowly making his way back to her side. "Anything" requires some careful thought.' He tapped his mouth with a long, pale finger, giving the impression that he was giving her proposal his fullest attention.

'Within reason,' she added, apparently regretting her wild assertion.

'Ah! Now that changes things considerably, Miss Granger, as I cannot possibly know what, to you, seems reasonable. You have taken infinity off the table and replaced it with a set of restrictions from which I am now required to work out your level of acceptance.' He stowed away his wand as he spoke. 'For instance, I presume we are talking in terms of you doing something for me?' She nodded cautiously and waited for him to elaborate. 'That could involve practically anything. Were you thinking along the lines of baking me a cake? Sexual favours? Perhaps you would be willing to risk life and limb for me should I require it?'

'Do you require it?' she asked. They eyed each other in equal measures of intensity and wariness.

'Not particularly,' he answered at last, 'but I notice no reaction to my suggestion of sexual favours.'

The features were Heather Gunn's but the determined raise of the chin was all Hermione Granger. 'If that would make things right, then I don't see it as an unreasonable request,' she answered.

Her reply took Snape by surprise, though he remained impassive. He had expected righteous indignation at the very least; perhaps even a humiliated tear or two, followed by a vow to have nothing more to do with him. Her resolve to prostitute herself, if he wanted it, was the greatest proof yet of her earnest belief in her own guilt. He was almost lost for a retort in the face of his former student's willingness to comply with whatever outrageous suggestion he deigned to ask of her.

'I would rather pay for a professional, Granger,' he finally answered. 'I doubt you have the skill or the experience to satisfy my needs.' He suppressed a smirk as he noticed the flush of embarrassment suffuse her cheeks in the failing light of the warm September evening. 'I doubt Weasley has the imagination to prompt you to excel in the bedroom.'

He expected her infuriated huff to be followed by a magical reprisal. She had reached in her pocket for her wand, but apparently, it was comfort and familiarity she needed from the object, not retribution.

'That, Professor, is none of your business. But as you brought it up, you may like to know that I have no idea what Ron's imagination entails, although I doubt it has much of a capacity, as I am sure that he and Lavender Brown, or rather Weasley, keep that aspect of their marriage strictly behind closed doors.' Her expression was pure Granger as she showed him the fury and resentment in Heather's enormous blue eyes.

Snape was taken aback by the revelation. 'If not Weasley, then who? Not Potter?'

'Ron and Harry are not the only suitable males in the wizarding world,' she replied. 'Besides, Harry is married to Ginny. He and I were never like that with each other. He is my friend, nothing more. And haven't you listened to a word I've been saying? What part of "my life is a mess" would lead you to conclude that I have made a success of

romance? I can't hold down a job, I can't keep a boyfriend, I don't have many friends and I can no longer sleep without you appearing in some wretched and bloody state accusing me of cowardice and betrayal.' She paused, seemingly to get her breath, but had evidently not done yet, as she held up her hand to prevent his reply. 'I want to make amends, Professor,' she continued with a forced calmness. 'I want you to tell me what to do to take the horror away. I don't want to see you on the floor of the Shrieking Shack anymore.' She stopped again and looked him full in the face. 'And if you don't require fellatio, what do you want?'

Snape had the grace to show his astonishment at her heartfelt candour. He folded his arms across his chest and drummed his fingers contemplatively against his elbows. He was almost tempted to take her up on that last proposal. Heather's lips would look extremely fetching wrapped around his cock. But the image of Hermione Granger, aged eleven, eager and enthusiastic, waving her hand irritably in the air to get his attention, spoiled the pleasant reverie. He wondered what twenty-eight year old Hermione looked like. Was she still all teeth, hair and Gryffindor decency? She had managed to have the teeth charmed to a less than unsightly appearance in her fourth year, as he recalled, but he doubted even her prodigious ability would be enough to charm the riotous nest on her head to order now that would require considerably skilled wand-work.

Voices could be heard above the noise of city traffic. A group of three or four men rounded the corner, obviously on their way from one pub to the next. Young, confident and exuberant, their shouts and accompanying laughter as they made their way up the side street towards the dark alcove, inhabited by the witch and the wizard, were too much of a distraction for Snape to make his reply.

They passed by the dubious pair, and Snape's fist tightened instinctively around his wand in anticipation of the jibes and taunts which would surely follow once they had been noticed. He was not disappointed.

References were made to Heather's assets as well as to her choice of "shagging partner". Suggestions were also forthcoming regarding what a good time a "real man" could show her. It was the reference to the big nose, however, that did it. The nearby skip, overflowing with coke cans, chip wrappers and all variety of Muggle excess, seemed suddenly to leap into life. Four bemused and terrified grown men ran the length of the alley as fast as they could in a bid to escape the Burger King boxes and beer bottles which were hurling themselves out of the skip, apparently intent on inflicting bodily harm upon the fleeing men.

'Whoops!' said Hermione, grinning at the sight of the disappearing transgressors.

'You are aware, are you not, of the laws concerning the use of magic in the presence of Muggles?' said Snape, raising an eyebrow.

'They were very rude. And also drunk. Besides, who's going to believe they were attacked by the contents of a rubbish dump?' replied Hermione. She threw him the defiant look he remembered from her childhood days. 'Who's going to report me? You? The Ministry think you're in America.'

'I couldn't give a shit about the Secrecy Statute,' replied Snape, 'but that does raise yet another intriguing point, along with the other one you have yet to answer: how did you find me? And why the absurd attempt at deception?'

Hermione smiled, and Snape noticed how breathtakingly beautiful Heather's features appeared when pleased. 'Harry is an Auror. Did you know?'

'I'm not following Potter's career particularly closely, no.'

'Well he is. And pretty senior, too. Like me, he had a feeling you were still around. Auror work brings forth a lot of contacts; most of them make Mundungus Fletcher seem as honest as the day is long, but they are the useful ones. We scoured underground wizarding society to try to locate you. It wasn't easy. I've been trying to find you for the best part of a year. You did a good job of hiding.'

'Not good enough, it seems.'

'I was determined,' she replied almost apologetically.

'And what Miss Granger wants, Miss Granger gets.' Snape glared at her. 'And Heather Gunn's form?'

Hermione's self-satisfied expression faltered. 'My plan was to appear like a woman who no man could resist. I found Heather in a Muggle hairdressers; she was having her highlights done. It was easy enough to Accio the hair from the brush.' She paused and threw him another rueful look. 'I wanted to make sure I got your attention without you realising who I was. I knew you wouldn't have anything to do with the real me. I thought I would get to know you for a bit...'

'And then reveal yourself to be, not the exquisite Miss Gunn, but the woeful Miss Granger?'

Hermione winced, 'No, I thought... it seems silly now... I thought by getting to know you I could work out what needed to be done.' She fiddled with the silver heart chain around her neck and clutched her wand tightly. 'I thought if I could just work out the part of your life which I could influence for the better, and have a positive effect on you without you knowing it was me, I could stop feeling responsible and move on, knowing that I had done something good for you for once.'

Snape did not know whether to laugh or curse her for her deluded admission. Did she really think that repentance was as easy as doing a good deed and walking away? If she truly felt responsible for leaving him to die, then the feeling of remorse would never leave her, not for all the Victoria sponges and blow jobs in the world. If it were that easy he would have been a free man years ago when he had first saved Potter from Professor Quirrell's dismal attempts on his life.

He knew what the honourable course of action should be: he should send her packing accompanied by several insults, a humiliating put-down and a lecture on expiation. He didn't hate his new, and unexpectedly alive, post-war life; on the contrary, he liked seclusion and anonymity it wasn't that. But he did see this as fortuitous; a chance for something he could not yet name or understand to occur. He did not intend to let it pass. He was still a Slytherin at heart: a misanthropist, allegedly; an opportunist, undoubtedly.

Snape pointed his wand at the marauding debris caused by Hermione's spell, now scattered indiscriminately about the neglected alley-way. There was a sweeping motion of his arm and a muttered word, then the cigarette packets, drinks cartons and discarded food-stuffs sprang back into life, rose into the air and flew obediently back to the skip. Hermione mirrored his wand movement and the stragglers joined their comrades in the rusting old container, leaving the street cleaner than it had been when they arrived.

Snape stowed away his wand once more and turned to Hermione. 'I see no reason for your plans to change,' he said. 'You may continue. With my consent.'

Hermione looked as if he had just given her permission to jump in the skip along with the rest of the rubbish.

'What do you mean?' she asked. 'How can I do that? I meant to spend time with you, work out what I could fix for you. How can I do that now? Can't you just tell me what I can do for you?' She rubbed her forehead furiously, as if that would help her to make sense of him. 'Do you still make potions to sell? I could help you with that... take some of the burden...'

'I do not need an assistant, and if I did I can't imagine that working in close quarters with you in my cellar would be tantamount to enhancing my life.' He did not ask how she knew of his underground potion-making activities.

'Then what?'

He took out his wand and took a step nearer to her. 'Give me your hand.'

She wore the expression of a woman about to relinquish her soul, but she held out a trembling hand and allowed him to grasp her wrist with his so that her palm was facing upwards. Snape knew it was taking some effort for her to allow her hand to remain in his possession without yanking it back, but he did not have physical pain in mind as he tapped the fleshy part of her thumb with his wand. Slowly, as if an invisible quill were writing across her smooth pale skin, several rows of ink-formed words appeared in spidery-black script. He let go of his hold once the spell was complete, and Hermione held her hand up to her face to read the message inscribed on her flesh. She looked

back at him enquiringly.

'It is the address of a coffee shop I visit from time to time on Saturday mornings. You will meet me there this Saturday,' he said.

Hermione looked back at her palm. 'Why?'

He threw her a chilling glare.

'Perhaps there is some aspect of my life which could benefit from your... input, perhaps there is not,' he began. 'But that is for you to uncover. I give you one month to put those celebrated brains of yours to use and work it out, Granger, starting on Saturday. I have not yet decided where we will meet after that, or how often, but I expect you to comply with wherever and whenever I decide.'

'You mean,' she clarified, 'we are to meet up and... chat until I work it out?'

'If I feel like chatting. I may not.'

'You're not planning on making this easy are you, sir?' she replied.

'Achieving repentance is never easy. I do not know if it is even possible, but it must be attempted, nevertheless.'

Hermione stared into his cavernous black eyes.

'Have you achieved it, Professor?' she murmured bravely.

He returned her gaze coldly. 'Ten o'clock. Do not be late,' he answered before turning and Disapparating on the spot.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 10

Severus and Hermione spend some time together while Hermione attempts to figure out how she can atone.

The Potions Master: Part Two.

The first meeting was a disaster. True to his word, Snape had little to say. He was surprised when Hermione turned up once again Polyjuiced as Heather Gunn, and still more so when she announced that she presumed he would find it easier to talk to her that way. He was pleased to note, however, that she had dispensed with her inexperienced attempts at glamour and opted for a more casual look. Heather's face and body were still extremely desirable offset in a pair of jeans and a plain blue cotton top. Her hair looked just as pretty tied in a long, thick plait, and her face was fresh and captivating without the contents of a department store make-up counter smeared all over it.

He sipped his coffee and answered her many questions relating to his life since his unexpected survival in monosyllables, asking nothing of hers in return. He refused to answer questions relating to details of his survival and enjoyed her look of disappointment and annoyance as she watched him stand and leave without arranging a second meeting.

An owl was dispatched three days later to tell her she had an hour to get to the large city library in the middle of town. This time he specified that she should not continue her masquerade. He had become quite fond of being eyed with envy and begrudging admiration by the male public in response to his beautiful companion, but he was aware that the presence of a goddess was not the way to ensure obscurity.

In the library, Snape revealed to her his partiality for solitude after the years of enforced service to a pair of manipulative masters. He was forced to interrupt his dialogue, however, in order to tell her unequivocally that note-taking was not permitted, though it amused him to see the extent to which she viewed their arrangement as a project requiring the same degree of effort and enthusiasm as a piece of Arithmancy homework.

In looks, adult Hermione Granger was everything that Heather Gunn was not: understated, unadorned and unexceptional. She was no conventional beauty, but Snape found he preferred to look at his grown-up former student, who had lost her girlish awkwardness, rather than the charming features and curvaceous figure of some overdone Muggle.

The library get-together resulted in a joint walk to a local historical spot: a recently uncovered Roman wall on the outskirts of town, sheltered and unseen by the tall office buildings surrounding them. The perfect place from which to Disapparate. He left her another hand-message to arrange their next meeting and was pleased to note that she seemed less apprehensive this time when he took out his wand and asked for her hand.

Their two subsequent rendezvous took place in the city art gallery. If Hermione noticed that Snape stood transfixed by the painting *Dante's Dream*, she didn't let on, although he did notice that she was more interested in the description of that painting than any of the others. He watched her squinting carefully at the notes on the wall beneath the enormous, gilt-framed canvas. He knew it by heart; he came here to look at it often enough:

This painting shows an episode from the 'Vita Nuova'. In it Dante dreams that he is led by Love to the death-bed of Beatrice Portinari, the object of his unrequited passion.

This is Rossetti's largest ever painting. In it he creates a visionary world through soft, rich colours and complex symbols. The attendants wear green for hope while the spring blossoms signify purity. The red doves indicate the presence of love, and the poppies symbolise the sleep of dreams and death.

Snape supposed she was making some fanciful romantic deduction based on what she and the rest of the wizarding world now knew about his own forlorn, loveless past. He wanted to tell her that he liked the composition, found the colours soothing, appreciated the symbolism. In short, liked it for anything but any comparison there may be to himself and his own dead love. Lily Evans was a subject to be dwelt upon internally, however, not one to be voiced out loud; doing so would somehow demean her memory. He walked away from the painting in the trust that Hermione would follow.

They had lunch in the gallery's small café. If tea and crumpets could be described as lunch, but as it was half past twelve, Snape supposed it could hardly be anything else. She remarked on his pale skin and emaciated appearance, and he wondered if she was hoping that feeding him up à la Molly Weasley was a plausible route to her self-imposed recompense. He assured her that his eating habits suited him admirably and were in no need of a major overhaul. She sighed as she bit into her crumpet and fiddled with her hair, an action Snape had come to understand to be a sign of agitation and deep thought.

The two hours spent at the art gallery were amongst the fastest he had ever known, a fact which he attributed to Hermione's relentless chatter, her interest in his life and her eagerness to please.

Her incessant catechism slowed to an occasional enquiry about his potion-making business as they wandered away from the art gallery and towards the poorer end of town. They were heading towards a disused, boarded up shop which they had used on their previous meeting as a convenient Disapparating spot.

The faded sign announced itself, rather diffidently, as an independent book store. The boards on the windows and the faded paintwork were evidence that the book-buying public preferred the glitz and glamour of books sold in vast chain stores boasting a cappuccino to go with their read and a loyalty card to entice them back. The tiny shop before them may have once been a vital source of knowledge, but now it lay abandoned and uncared for, as uninviting as a Knockturn alley curio shop.

Snape waited for the passing man, woman and child to disappear from view before tapping the lock with his wand. He muttered the Alohomora incantation which would command the lock to turn and allow them access. The pair passed through the door unseen, and once inside, Hermione turned to relock the door with the counter-spell.

Inside was so dark in contrast to the brightness of the afternoon sunshine that a Lumos charm was required. The spell lit up the room with a gentle glow, casting shadows and enhancing the dusty barren shelves which had once groaned under the weight of their burden.

Hermione sighed. 'I think empty book shelves make me sadder than anything. Even when my parents moved and I saw my empty bedroom for the first time.' Hermione's Lumos spell bathed her in an unnaturally eerie light. A faint red glow seemed to emanate around her so that she was shrouded in a delicate radiance, making her edges seem brightly fuzzy. Snape noted the subtlety of her charm with approval. Most casters of Lumos managed to create nothing more than a harsh white light, effective but without refinement, and without attempting to modify or improve upon it. He resisted the urge to interrupt her with a compliment.

'Of course, that was because my feelings at the time were closer to a sense of impending doom and hopelessness than sadness,' she continued. 'But I wasn't to know how things would turn out.'

'An extreme reaction to a change of address,' Snape observed.

'Oh! It was just before I went on the run with Harry and Ron. I used a Memory Charm on my parents to make them forget they had a daughter. I got them to sell up and move to Australia. For their own safety,' she added.

Once again he suppressed the urge to offer praise. 'I presume you reversed the process once the war was over?'

Hermione shook her head and lowered her wand. The light it was creating dimmed a little and Snape was obliged to fortify his own charm in compensation.

'I went to see them,' she explained. 'Once it had all died down.' She paused for a moment. 'They were happy. How could knowing they had a magical daughter, who belonged to a dangerous world they could never share, improve their lives? I watched them for a bit, then I made up my mind to leave them alone.'

Snape nodded. 'A difficult decision, but I can't tell you it was the wrong one; I doubt that to be the case.'

Hermione raised her wand and smiled weakly. 'Ron and Harry still think I'm insane for abandoning my parents,' she said. 'It's nice to have someone who understands.'

'Realising that those we love are better off without us, and finding the courage to let them be, is more difficult than any of life's trials.'

Hermione gazed at him intently. 'You should know, Professor,' she said softly.

She seemed on the verge of saying something else, but instead she whispered the word *Nox*. Her wand-light vanished, and the darkness enveloped her so that she was barely more than a dark silhouette. She walked towards him and stopped once the gap was almost closed. He watched her: confused, uncertain, yet enthralled. The light from his own wand lit up her face, and he could see the hesitation outlined in her features, yet her eyes held his steadily. She was so close now that he imagined he could feel her warm breath on his face, and although he thought he heard her whisper his name, he was still startled when she reached out a hand to his shoulder, stood on her tiptoes and brushed his cheek with her lips.

The warmth and intimacy of her chaste kiss was more than he had experienced since his early childhood, and even that was too dim a memory to enjoy anymore. Her hair still smelled of lemons, and for a moment he was certain that if he could only feel her arms around him and bury his face in those long brown tangles, then the big dark hole he stared into every night would go away. He reminded himself of her motives: forgiveness is what she was after from him; once she gained that she could move onto the forgetting part. She was not here to provide genuine friendship. He mirrored her step backwards and folded his arms across his chest.

'You really must be starved of affection, Granger,' he said, 'if you are imagining a kindred spirit in me.' Hermione glared at his response and all but stamped her foot in annoyance.

'One peck on the cheek does not mean I'm ready to declare ourselves soul mates,' she replied. 'You really do have to spoil everything, don't you? It was... RELIEF! That's all! Relief that someone finally doesn't judge me as a hard-hearted lunatic.'

'Then you should find yourself less Weasley-shaped friends if you wish to find another being who does not see the world as some sugar-filled haven where everything is fixable and good always triumphs,' Snape replied.

'Why do you think I sought out *your* company?'

Snape snorted. 'You must be desperate.'

'As I already explained,' she replied.

'And yet you appear no closer to your goal.'

'My goal?'

'Have you forgotten the purpose of our little get-togethers? Or have you begun to imagine your company alone sufficient enticement?' he said.

'I have not forgotten the reason why you lower yourself to grant me an audience, no. And as a matter of fact, I believe I am beginning to work out my purpose.' She raised her wand and lit it again. The light fell on her features, illuminating her defiance.

'Oh, do share, Miss Granger,' said Snape with a crooked smile.

'I don't think I'm ready to do that yet,' she replied. 'So if you would be good enough to give me directions.' She shot out her hand, palm upwards, for him to reveal their next destination. He ignored it, however, and continued to scrutinise her coolly.

'I will let you know when I decide,' he said. He Disapparated so quickly that Hermione was denied either an angry retort or a resentful acceptance.

Their next three meetings took place in the evening, and in an uninspiring, non-descript Muggle pub Snape claimed as his local. He had begun to grow curious about Hermione's self-professed failure of an existence and allowed himself an occasional delve into her own post-Hogwarts life. She answered his questions with as much relish as he had, which is to say, with no enthusiasm at all. She had little to say about her current working-life, claiming that she was taking a "much-needed holiday" from the

Ministry. Snape was convinced that no Ministry Department had arrangements which allowed employees, however promising, to take time off to atone for past sins. He considered using Legilimency to find out what she was concealing but would not have been surprised to find her a passable Occlumens, and besides which, she was discerning enough to detect a forage into her mind, and he was not inclined to antagonise her just yet.

She was, however, willing to discuss her personal life.

'It does not surprise me that you and Weasley did not remain together,' he observed one evening over his usual pint of bitter.

'I suppose it shouldn't surprise me either,' replied Hermione thoughtfully. 'I thought we were meant to be together at one time, but there are only so many Quidditch anecdotes one can listen to without needing reciprocation. And to be honest, books and knowledge aside, he was getting fed up with my need to talk about... well, *you* what the three of us had done, or not done. Ron didn't feel we had acted wrongly, you see. Harry did though. Obviously you know all about that; you heard him speak in your defence at your trial.'

Snape remembered only too well. His trial had taken place six months after the fall of Voldemort. His expectations for the outcome had not been high; he saw little in his future but Azkaban and an eternity left to rot with his fellow Death Eaters. But when the Saviour of the wizarding world turns up at your trial declaring you nothing short of the "People's Champion", not a soul dares to question it. He was acquitted and declared as much a victim of Voldemort's regime as a Muggle-born witch or a "blood-traitor". Snape, however, found the remorse of his colleagues and former Order members hollow and empty; he saw nothing but guilt and self-reproach in their eyes. Warmth and friendship seemed as beyond them as ever. He retreated from the world he had longed to join as a small boy living in Muggle misery. He sold his hovel in Spinner's End and used the proceeds and the money which had been accumulating in a Gringott's vault to buy a large Victorian town house something akin to the house he had made his regular reports to in Grimmauld place, but without the evidence of Dark wizardry along every hallway.

He felt content enough to live out his days in relative comfort, with Muggles for the neighbours he rarely saw and never spoke to, and only the occasional delve into the magical world when the potion-making business he maintained demanded it. He had never expected another being from that world to care enough to make contact with him; no one had ever taken the trouble in ten years, save for the annual invitation to the Victory Day Ball that arrived by owl-post every year, as welcome as snow in April. Though why the celebrations were held in November rather than on the anniversary of Voldemort's demise was beyond Snape's comprehension.

He watched the young woman seated across from him, perched on the edge of a wooden chair, a shadow of the irksome little girl who had been the cause of too many extra night-time prowls along the corridors of Hogwarts. Stolen potions ingredients, illicit forays into the forbidden forest any spot of both Potter and Weasley found themselves in, she was sure to be there behind them: the brains behind the daring.

She was taller now than he had ever imagined her to be her hair less wild, almost wilted along with her enthusiasm and grit. She was virtually as pale as he was, giving the impression of someone who preferred to sit indoors with a nose in a book, avoiding the sun like a nocturnal creature. Her eyes had always given everything away: huge chocolate-brown orbs, once full of excitement and yearning, now looked at him with a mixture of sorrow and regret, and he did not know whether it was for him she wasted her distress on or herself.

It was the first time she had ever mentioned the trial; he saw the trepidation flicker across her face as she wondered how he would respond.

'If you expect me to feel gratitude towards Potter for speaking the truth, you are deluded,' he replied sharply. Hermione flushed and took a hasty sip from her glass of orange juice.

'I don't' she replied. 'Of course not. Harry doesn't expect that you should either.' She chewed her lip and seemed to be considering something. When she finally spoke, it was as if she had reached some long-debated decision. 'He would like to speak with you,' she said.

Snape scowled. 'Is that what this is all about?' he replied. 'Put on an act of penitence, gain my trust, then hit me with, "Potter wants a word"?'

'No! I swear! This is not about him!' Hermione replied heatedly. 'He can make his own damn Polyjuice potion and get you to proposition him if he wants a bloody chat. I'm past sorting out his problems, or anyone else's for that matter. All I can focus on right now is you, so don't you dare accuse me of duplicity!'

He could see her outburst was heartfelt, and the idea of Harry Potter beneath the facade of the beautiful Heather Gunn was nauseating enough to drive out any ill-favoured thoughts towards Hermione. He nodded his acceptance and wondered how it was possible that he was beginning to find the company of Hermione Granger almost bearable.

'Professor Snape, can I ask you something?' Hermione said after a peaceable lapse in conversation.

'You don't usually require permission, Granger.'

He had meant for some time to stop her from calling him by his old formal title as if they still had the relationship of student and teacher. But the subject seemed too intimate to introduce, and although he did not want her to call him "Professor" or "Sir", the notion of Hermione Granger calling him "Severus" was too ludicrous to contemplate. He saw no option but to allow her to continue with the inappropriate official address. Besides, once the subject of titles was broached, then she would have to reciprocate by inviting him to use her first name and that would never do. "Severus and Hermione" sounded like friends, confidants, intimates. They were not friends, nor would they ever be; the idea was absurd. It was much safer to think of her as Granger.

She tilted her head in contemplation. 'Do you ever miss anyone?'

Her question surprised him; she usually went in for a more tactful line of questioning, although he had always seen through her attempts. This was as direct as she had ever been. He could not question her bravery for alluding to a subject which no one else had ever dared to mention since it became public knowledge. He had seen the question in the eyes of every witch and wizard, nevertheless the question Dumbledore had once asked: "After all this time?"

'If you are referring to what I think you are, I advise you to rethink that question,' he replied, ominously.

'Oh! No, I didn't mean anyone in particular,' she replied, her voice wavering with embarrassment. 'I really meant, do you miss Hogwarts: teaching, colleagues, students, anyone you used to know.'

'I notice you didn't use the word *friend*,' he replied softly.

'Well, I don't suppose living the life of a triple-agent allowed you to have many of those, sir.'

'Nor does having a sour disposition and a reputation for admiring the Dark Arts,' Snape answered, a trace of a smile accompanying his self-deprecating sentiment.

Hermione smiled back. 'Yes. Well I suppose not. Do you? Miss any of it?'

What did she want to hear? That he missed the status of being simultaneously Voldemort and Dumbledore's right-hand man? That he felt insignificant now that he was no longer Headmaster of one of the most prestigious magical schools in the world? Did she want to hear him lament his loss of prominence in wizarding society?

He felt only release.

'I disliked teaching in general and the company of children in particular,' he replied.

'You hid it well.' Hermione smiled.

'Being enslaved to a couple of power-hungry wizards was also no picnic,' he continued. 'Added to that remains the fact that my fellow teachers and Order members were

never exactly all-embracing, even when they had every reason to believe me a servant of the light. Their eagerness to believe in my treachery, whilst not surprising, was hardly a cause for celebration. I live a life of freedom at last. My responsibilities are to myself alone. I eat when I like without fear of a summons from one master or the other. I work at an occupation I enjoy, and I do so at my own pace and without the pressure of expectation. The thrill I feel at no longer having to worry about the life of an idiotic, mediocre, thoughtless Gryffindor "Saviour" cannot be described in mere words. In short, I couldn't be happier.'

Hermione appeared to be mulling over his words. She stared into her empty glass of juice and sighed. 'So, you wouldn't describe yourself as lonely?'

'I prefer my own company.'

'But... all the time?' Hermione was persistent. 'I mean I'm finding your company surprisingly... not unpleasant, some of the time...'

'I'm flattered.'

'... but I'd want a break from it. Don't you just yearn for someone to talk to?'

Snape smirked. 'Well, I had my books when the going got tough; now I have you to enrich my dull existence,' he replied.

'You're laughing at me.'

'And you make it surprisingly easy.' He set down his own glass on the table top and fixed her with a gaze that it amused him to note always made her flush. 'Ending my solitude is not the answer you are looking for, Granger.'

She dragged her eyes away from his and stared at her hands. She fiddled with the silver ring on her index finger and raised the question which seemed difficult for her to contemplate. 'What if there isn't an answer?'

'Then at the end of our agreed time, you go back to your life, and I continue with my pitiful excuse for one.'

'Which you love... apparently.'

'Which I prefer to anything I have experienced before,' he replied.

Hermione looked up and there seemed to be a faint trace of optimism in her eyes that he could not fathom the reason for. She smiled and picked up both their empty glasses. She made her way to the bar and ordered two more drinks. When she retook her seat, Snape nodded his thanks and continued on the subject of Hermione's quest.

'It would not surprise me if you spend your evenings after our meetings sitting at a desk with a quill and parchment, formulating a clear and concise, if utterly useless, plan of action,' he said.

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise. She had the look of a child caught pilfering chocolate. Snape noticed her cheeks glow softly in the dim light of the pub.

'Writing down your thoughts and ideas is an excellent way to make sense of everything,' she replied, loftily. 'Muggles call it brainstorming.'

Snape sneered. 'How very *Muggle* of them.'

Hermione's agitation was becoming more apparent. Her ring fiddling was reaching the point of irritation, and her habit of furrowing her brow, as if in a constant state of perturbation, was beginning to try his patience.

'What if I said I needed longer than a month?' she said at last. 'What if I said a month isn't long enough?'

'Nevertheless, a month is all you have.'

'But... ' she had moved on to shredding the damp cardboard beer mat now as she made her plea, '... I only have a week left.'

'Until October 30th. Yes.'

'You worked out the date?'

He raised his eyebrows in response to her surprise. 'And you did not?'

She shrugged. 'These three weeks have gone so fast,' she said, reaching for another beer mat to obliterate.

If Snape had been a fanciful man, he would have described her attitude as regretful. But Snape was a pragmatist; only a deluded fool could imagine that a young and talented witch would enjoy his company enough to convey disappointment over its imminent conclusion. Yet, despite his certainty of the relief she would feel once her duty was done, he could not help but observe that her behaviour that evening seemed strangely withdrawn. There was more melancholy in her words and actions on this, their eighth meeting, than he had witnessed before.

He noticed her agitation as she made short work of the moisture-soaked coaster. Her fingers worked deftly. He was moved to admire the meticulous dexterity of her movements even whilst performing such a mindless, banal task. It was no wonder her manipulation of magic was equally skilled, though he would never tell her so. He could only conclude her sullenness to be a symptom of her realisation of the futility of their meetings. He reasoned that as she had made no progress, despite earlier assurances to the contrary; she now knew that her efforts were nothing more than a waste of time.

As they left the "Red Lion" and strolled towards the narrow, cobbled alleyway behind it, Snape contemplated Hermione's mood. She was right; these meetings had been an utter waste of effort on both their parts. He was beginning to find himself anticipating each rendezvous with an eagerness he could not account for. He looked forward to her conversation, noticed the way she smiled despite herself when he made some mordant comment. He was even beginning to form an opinion on which clothes suited her best. He could not allow himself to continue on this foolish path which could never be of any benefit to either of them. With grim determination he made the decision to release her from their informal contract. Whatever it was he needed from Hermione Granger was not in her power to give. Prolonging their time together could only serve to increase the ache when the time came for her to leave him.

They halted by the backyard gate of the pub and Hermione held out her hand, as usual, for instructions.

'I will send you an owl,' he said, ignoring her gesture. There was no need to discuss his decision; she would feel obliged to argue, and he was unsure of the strength of his resolve if tested. She would soon understand herself dismissed when October 30th arrived without word from him. She would no doubt feel relief and a Gryffindor sense that she had done everything within her power to make amends. She could get on with making a success of the life she was supposed to live: return to the Ministry, find an eligible young wizard, have babies, wait for their letter from Hogwarts. And he would return to his potions and solitude. The regret would soon pass once he had got used to her absence again, once he remembered how much he preferred being answerable to no one.

He had no explanation for the disappointed look in her eyes when he did not take her hand. She let it drop forlornly by her side, reached into her coat pocket and took out her own wand.

'Just this once, may I decide where we meet up next?' she asked cautiously.

'That is not our understanding,' he replied. 'I believe I made it clear that I was in control of this arrangement.'

'Yes, I know and you are, but I would like to at least make a suggestion.'

What did it matter? His decision or hers, there would be no next meeting; he would allow her a crumb, just this once.

'Very well,' he replied. 'Where do you propose we meet?'

'Hold out your hand then.' Her request took him by surprise. He had expected her to name some Muggle tea shop, or perhaps another library, as the next venue. However, she held out her hand for his, her eyes alive with warmth and pleasure in response to her small triumph. He did as she asked, allowing her to take his right hand in her left.

Her hold was determined, yet soothing as she slowly pried apart his fingers in a manner which Snape did not feel wholly necessary for the purpose of the simple charm she was about to use. The need to hurl a sharp comment at her to hurry along the process rose in his chest, but the sensation of Hermione Granger gently parting his fingers as if she was tending to the wing of a damaged sparrow restrained any abusive remarks. The feel of her flesh on his, as innocent and inconsequential as it was intended to be, was worth more than the touch of a dozen hired whores who would give their bodies willingly and without restraint, but money cannot buy affection. Hermione's touch conveyed such a profusion of compassion and tenderness that Snape was obliged to call on all his powers of self-control just to keep his eyes fixed on her and suppress an appreciative groan of longing.

'There,' she said softly, once she had completed the gratuitous task of readying his hand. 'You do have nice hands, Professor,' she added. The blush was in her voice, though he could not see her pink cheeks which were hidden by a drape of brown hair and the murky atmosphere of the alley.

'Get on with it, Granger.' He found his voice at last. He couldn't afford his control to waver in the face of her softness. He rebuked himself for his pathetic enjoyment at the trivial physical contact and feeble compliment. Her warmth was insincere, he told himself. He had been alone for far too long if he was beginning to interpret every smile, kind word and fleeting encounter as evidence of admiration. But he knew that he would lie awake that night, fantasising over her words and touch. He would imagine himself responding to her gesture. He forced that thought to the Patronus-conjuring area of his mind, and observed her raise her wand and tap his palm with its tip.

Snape watched as she performed the simplest of magical acts with such grace and precision, his intention to take in every detail of this last encounter; it would have to sustain him for some time. He felt the pleasant rippling sensation of an invisible quill lightly tracing a path across the flesh of his palm to reveal Hermione's choice her decision for the next meeting which would never take place. She let go of his palm, still tingling from her spell as he raised it to his eye-line and read, "*A walk in the park meet me by the statue of Oliver Cromwell at 11 O'clock on Sunday.*"

It hardly needed magical intervention to convey such a simple address, but he did not criticise her for once. He wondered how long she would stand by the statue waiting for him before realising he wasn't going to turn up. He hoped he would find the courage to let the hour pass without giving in to weakness.

'Very well,' he said.

Her eyes sparkled with delight at his approval. Her tentative smile broadened, illuminating her face like a Lumos charm.

'After you,' he continued, inviting her, for once, to be the first to Disapparate. He told himself that he wanted to make sure she had really gone, but later that night he would remember the turn of her head and the stray lock of hair which she brushed from her face as she made to leave. He would recall with a pleasure he had no explanation for, the look of hope and resolve in her eyes as she disappeared into the night air.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione turns up at Snape's door. She is in no mood to be fobbed off.

Hermione Granger: Part One the first.

'What the hell do you think you are playing at?'

The door opened to reveal her former Potions master. His scowl went some way to make reparation for his appearance, a mere spectre of the formidable Head of Slytherin, but Hermione was incapable of responses beyond fury. She ignored the ominous furrow of the brow, the dark eyes that flashed incredulity at her audacity, and the thin lips which moved to begin the attack. The doorway provided little shelter from the rain which was slicing through the air like a million tiny arrows, soaking her through so that she practically dripped a lake onto his top step. She pushed past him and walked uninvited into his hallway.

'Granger, what in ...?'

'How am I supposed to use my "*celebrated brains*" if you don't turn up at the agreed place and time? You said I had a month; you haven't contacted me for a week,' she said, her voice rising with her anger.

'Won't you come in?' he answered, a half-hearted attempt at a sneer apparent in his drawl.

Hermione waited for him to turn and close the door on the weather. She shook the moisture from her hair and noticed for the first time that there was something diminished about the intimidating wizard whom she had known since she was eleven. As a teacher, he had always been immaculately dressed, despite the lack of variation in the colour and style of his wardrobe. She had been surprised to find that isolation and the passage of time had little changed his clothes preferences. He still wore a predominance of black, though no billowing robes seemed to have made it beyond Hogwarts. Nevertheless, dark trousers, boots and a plain black woollen coat, with the occasional white or dark shirt beneath it, was all she had known him to wear during the previous three intensive weeks. She was startled to note a definite crumpled and unkempt aspect to his appearance, usually so pristine. His personal hygiene had obviously been neglected: his hair, as black, straight and lank as it was ten years ago, was even greasier than usual; she doubted if he had had a shave for days.

Trying hard not to stare, she glanced around his dark entrance hall and noticed an open door to her right; she marched inside on the presumption that this was his main living quarters.

'Why is it so dark in here?' She wanted to know. Snape had followed her into the room, but rather than abuse her for her intrusion as she had expected, he walked straight past her as if she were a piece of furniture he hadn't quite worked out where to put, and threw himself into what was evidently his favourite armchair by the fire.

She followed his languid gaze into the dying embers of the grate and made her way over to him. 'And what's with the facial hair?' she continued accusingly, staring at the dark shadow which clung to his chin and jaw. 'Have you been drinking?'

He clearly had been drinking; she had caught the whiff of alcohol on his breath at the front door, once he had finally answered her incessant hammering. And now he was fingering a tumbler of some indeterminate ochre liquid, which was evidently not his first.

'None of your business on all three counts.'

Good! At least he was showing some spirit. Severus Snape without a sardonic quip was a fearful prospect; she preferred his anger to dejection. He turned his head slightly so that she could just about make out the look of disdain he was now sporting. 'If you must know,' he said, 'I'm tired of our little... arrangement. As such I am perfectly at liberty to break it if I wish.'

'NOT FAIR!' Hermione yelled. 'I want my month!'

'If I ever need a shrew to comment on my habits, I will inform you by owl,' he replied. 'As it is, I will say this once: you have no further obligation to me; I release you from our agreement.'

Hermione folded her arms and glared at him as he drained the contents of his glass and tapped his wand against the rim. She noticed a half-empty bottle of firewhisky on the mantelpiece and watched as a measure disappeared from it to reappear in the tumbler in his hand.

'That is not for you to decide,' she said, heatedly. 'I *do* have an obligation, and I *will* fulfil it, with or without your consent.' She watched as he took another swift swig without bothering to argue.

'You're drunk, Professor. It's not even dark outside and you're drunk!'

'Not nearly as drunk as I intend to be,' he spat.

Hermione exhaled deeply and glanced around the room. What little light there was came from the glow of the fireplace and a small chink in the drawn curtains. The room was large and reasonably comfortable from the little she could make out. Bookcases filled with dark leather-backed tomes lined the walls, but little else could be discerned in the near-darkness. She turned to move towards the window, obscured for the most part by long, thick drapes. Perhaps allowing a little light into the drab sitting-room would alleviate his sour temper? As she placed a hand on the heavy curtains to draw them back, his deep drawl cut across the room.

'Did I give you permission to touch or rearrange my belongings, Granger?'

She ignored him and pushed one of the curtains aside, just enough to afford herself a view of the street beyond. Similar Victorian town-houses to the one she now found herself in made up the rest of the street, blissfully unaware that number forty-eight was home to a reclusive wizard. She observed the pumpkins adorning the windows of the houses opposite, carved into grotesque grinning plump skulls. A cardboard caricature of a witch flying on a broomstick was stuck to the same window. Hermione was amused to notice a certain resemblance to Professor McGonagall in the profile of the cackling hag. Dancing skeletons bobbed up and down on pieces of elastic, and a sweet-filled bowl in the shape of a rotting hand sat perched on the window-sill in readiness for trick-or-treaters.

The evidence of the next day's Halloween festivities pointed to a possibility she had overlooked until that moment. The significance of the day for wizards was far more poignant than a mere excuse to dress up like ghouls and eat sweets. For Snape, she realised, the day was potentially an even greater source of distress. She turned her head to observe him.

'Professor Snape, are you wallowing?'

'What?'

'You are! Really, sir, it's been twenty-seven years get over it!'

It just sort of slipped out. The reason for his morose condition suddenly became as clear as Sleeping Potion: the next day was the anniversary of the death of Harry's parents. Twenty-seven years ago, Lily Potter had placed herself between Lord Voldemort and her son, refusing to step aside. Hermione contemplated the possibility that every Halloween brought forth this state of depression and anguish from Snape and was shaken by the implications.

Was it possible that the strength of his feelings had not diminished over the years? The fulfilment of his promise to Dumbledore, the vow to himself to protect her son and avenge her death, and his success in doing so, had apparently not released him of his devotion and grief. Not only did he continue to remember the woman he had loved, but was apparently still in agony over her loss. Hermione doubted whether he had ever spoken about Lily to another human being. Even though Dumbledore had known of his attachment, she doubted if the former Headmaster had ever encouraged his right-hand man to make use of his shoulder to cry on.

Hermione wondered how Snape could bear to carry so much pain and sorrow alone. She could hardly stand to remain by the half-closed curtains watching his misery, like some thrill-seeking voyeurist. The desire to run to him caught her off guard. She wanted to cast herself as the melodramatic heroine, kneel by his side and take his hand in hers, just to let him know the salve of human contact. But she understood him well enough to know that soft words and kindness were not the way to his soul. He would not relinquish his iron-clad armour without a struggle.

Hermione watched his anger fermenting from across the room. She realised that at some point in their re-acquaintance, she had decided that beneath the disregard, the loathing and the hostility was someone else. She had seen glimpses these past few weeks, and she wanted more. The possibility that she was beginning to romanticise this fiercely defensive man was shoved to the darkest recess of her mind, along with her self-esteem and her better judgement.

'Get out!' he snarled. 'I'm not interested in your contrition, and I do not need a lecture on how I should be spending my afternoons. Get out before I hex you into oblivion!'

'I seriously doubt your chances,' Hermione replied calmly. 'Half a bottle of firewhisky won't help your aim.'

She left the window the gap where she had parted the drapes allowed a streak of light to penetrate the room. The beam made its way across the floor, painting a stripe of colour onto the objects in its path, ignoring the darkness beyond its reach. Rather than create more brightness in the room, it seemed to add to the gloom, serving as a reminder of what was missing. Hermione crossed the shaft as she made her way across the room to Snape's chair, positioned well away from its scope; the harsh radiance briefly lighting her up like a prima ballerina before she joined him in the shadows once again.

Hermione was surprised that he did not argue the point as she sat herself down in the armchair that was twin to his. The pair sat sentinel by the fireplace. One slumped back in his seat, legs outstretched, both arms resting on the arms of the chair. The other sat bolt-upright, hands folded carefully over her knees, like a teacher waiting for her young charges to settle down. Snape looked as if picking up his wand and attempting a hex was beyond his capabilities, but Hermione was more worried by the fact that he appeared to care very little about that fact. He scowled at her persistence, but a verbal retribution seemed as likely as a curse at this point.

He continued to sip slowly from his glass. 'If your time is so insignificant that you can afford to waste it on watching me drink myself to a stupor, go right ahead,' he said.

'I fully intend to,' she replied, 'since you're not fit to be left alone.'

The next ten minutes were excruciating. Neither spoke. Each minute felt as if it lasted for five. The clock on the mantelpiece seemed to be mocking their silence by ticking every second away louder and slower than the previous one. But Hermione would not relent; she maintained her rigid position and stared into the grate, painfully aware of the intense gaze of her very drunk companion.

Snape finally broke the silence. 'As you are so determined to play the martyr, perhaps you could make use of your time more fruitfully,' he said.

'Meaning?' Hermione wondered if he had some Potions-related errand for her to run. She hoped he was of a mind to ask her to fetch him a Sobering-Up Potion.

The smirk which spread across his face was almost mischievous. 'I recall that you were willing to do anything to make amends for allowing me to bleed to death?'

'You didn't bleed to death.'

'You didn't know that.'

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and nodded slowly in reply. 'I said within reason,' she whispered.

'I believe it is reasonable to ask you to get on your knees,' he answered, still smirking, but with a definite hint of menace disguised by the cold softness of his voice. He tapped his tumbler with his wand once more, and the dregs at the bottom swelled to a generous measure as the bottle on the mantelpiece diminished.

Hermione opened her eyes and met his stare. 'You want me to beg for forgiveness?' She felt her fingernails dig into her flesh as she tensed.

The look he gave her hurled her straight back into the dungeon classroom fifteen years ago, where all her endeavours had been met with criticism, harsh words or flagrant disregard. It was a look intended to belittle and humiliate, to ferret out idiocy wherever it tried to hide and reveal it for public scrutiny and general censure.

'Charming as that image is, Miss Granger, it is not what I had in mind,' he answered.

Hermione had never needed to call upon her reserves of Gryffindor courage more. Facing a fury-filled Bellatrix Lestrange, wandless and alone, was barely less daunting than staring into eyes which seemed to emit the chill of the dungeon. His words bore the evidence of his intoxication. The slow drawl, which never failed to quicken her pulse, was now becoming slurred and, combined with his unkempt appearance, Hermione was put in mind of Dr. Jeckyll's fiendish alter-ego, Mr. Hyde. The Muggle reference would have made her giggle nervously if it wasn't for the fact that Severus Snape, her former teacher and current new-found acquaintance, had apparently just asked her to give him a blow job.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione turns up at Snape's door. She is in no mood to be fobbed off.

Chapter Four.

'I... beg your pardon?' Hermione answered, her priggish reply an attempt to regain some control and the appearance of dignity.

A month ago when she had stood before him, dressed as some glamorous beauty begging for approbation, Hermione would probably have complied, with little hesitation, if not complete willingness, had he asked her to get on her knees for him. But since that evening, she felt that they had reached a level of uneasy regard. She had confided in him, shown him her vulnerabilities, and he had listened, if not with sympathy, at least with some degree of tolerance, perhaps even understanding. He had been guarded with her; that was to be expected, but he had stopped responding to her every question and attempt at conversation by wounding her with unreserved relish. He had begun to listen to her, respond to her, as if she were not the irritating child he took pleasure in deriding, but another adult, an equal... a friend. Or had it all been an illusion? Nothing more than a fanciful construct of her own making, based on little more than the absence of scorn?

He downed another glass.

'Do I have to spell it out to you?' he said, his lip curling with his contempt. 'Perhaps you need to consult the library? If it can't be cross-referenced in a book, it's hardly worth doing, is it? I wonder how you got as far as you did without consulting *The Hermione Granger Guide to Life*, available in hardback and recommended for "insufferable know-it-alls" everywhere.'

It took several deep breaths and more digging of fingernails into flesh to overcome the urge to flee from the room, sobbing like her eleven-year-old self. However, she folded her arms across her chest protectively instead.

'Fine,' she replied loftily. 'Where would you prefer it? In the bedroom, or will just here do?'

His black eyes pinned her to the back of the chair seemingly scrutinising her face for signs of surrender. She tried not to blink or gulp, but, as the saliva in her mouth had dried up anyway, she doubted her ability to perform the simple act of swallowing. She could see the uncertainty in his eyes, as cold and mocking as they were. His bluff was being severely tested. Seconds turned into minutes as the two of them played the game of "chicken", until finally, he let out a long breath, which seemed to physically deflate him. He turned his head away from her to stare blandly into the fireplace once more. 'Perhaps not,' he said. 'You're not my type.'

'And what,' she demanded, 'exactly is your type?'

'Reasonably priced, with a fertile imagination,' he scoffed, but the conviction was no longer in his voice.

'Well, I'm glad you have standards.'

He turned back to face her and she noticed that as he lifted his glass to take another sip, his hand shook and he almost missed his mouth. 'While we are on the subject,' he drawled, 'I plan to call upon the services of a prostitute this evening. Were you intending on staying to watch?'

Hermione grimaced, but held her ground. 'You aren't capable of doing any such thing,' she said. 'I doubt you could manage to make it to your bedroom, let alone remain conscious long enough to perform. You may as well stop trying to shock me into leaving, Professor... I'm staying! You're not fit to be on your own in this state. You're likely to set yourself on fire attempting a Lumos charm!'

She saw the resigned glare and considered herself the victor in this particular battle.

She was not wrong: he was unconscious within ten minutes. She watched his eyes close and his head roll forward. The half-filled glass began to slip from his fingers, and she raced forward to prevent the spillage. She removed the tumbler from his wavering grasp and placed it gently on the table beside him before carefully manoeuvring his head into a more comfortable position.

Trembling fingers brushed the hair from his eyes, and she was startled to see that the deep fissure between his brows remained there even in repose. But still he looked

more peaceful than she had ever seen him in the absence of a scowl, sneer or intimidating glare. She had never noticed thick dark lashes, distinctive now that they lay closed against his pale skin. He was even thinner than she remembered him to be: all angles and jutting cheekbones. And that nose! She had never really dared to stare at it for too long, fearing retribution of some form or other, but now she couldn't tear her gaze away from the grotesque, hawkish beak, which did nothing to enhance his looks.

Feeling a sense of inevitability, as if nothing could stop her, not even the dread of the sleeping dragon waking from his slumber, Hermione reached out her hand and traced her forefinger along the bridge of his hook of a nose. She continued slowly down until she reached his mouth: fuller, somehow, when not contorted into some spiteful smirk or forming a biting insult. Lightly, oh so lightly, she ran her finger across his lips, and fleetingly considered the idea of pressing her own to them before wondering what the hell was compelling her to act so gratuitously. A sudden involuntary jolt from him brought her back to reality, and she sprang backwards, startled. She needn't have worried; he was past wakefulness at this point. She could have straddled his lap, run her fingers through his hair and planted a passionate kiss on his lips, and still he would barely have stirred.

She managed to get him upstairs using a Levitation charm and a great deal more care than she recalled Sirius Black using in the tunnel of the Shrieking Shack fourteen years previously. Once she had safely deposited him in the room which had the most inhabited look about it, Hermione stared down at Snape's unconscious form lying prostrate on the bed and pondered on her next course of action. The idea of going home and leaving him to sleep off his inebriated state alone did not present itself as an option. She had seen him fall into unconsciousness before. She had watched while blood had flowed like a river from his carotid artery his face the colour of chalk, his body motionless, and she had done nothing but stare at his still and broken body before turning and leaving him for dead. Hermione did not intend to leave him comatose and alone again, no matter how ruthless his insults were likely to be when he awoke in the morning to find her keeping vigil.

She looked around the bedroom and located a wicker chair by the window. She would Transfigure it into something more comfortable, sleep there and accept his wrath, regret or dejection in the morning. But first was the task of removing his clothes and finding something for him to sleep in. A quick scan of the neatly ordered room found a pair of pyjama bottoms folded over the back of a chair. Hermione laid them out on the bed next to his inert body and shook her head. Did the man have no imagination when it came to colour? Even his night-time attire was an uninspiring shade of dark grey. A simple Replacement Charm removed his daytime clothes and dressed him in the pyjama bottoms without compromising his privacy. In the absence of finding a suitable top for him to wear, she concluded that bare torso must be his bed-time wearing preference. She used her wand and a muttered incantation to fold his clothes neatly and placed them in a pile on top of a chest of drawers next to his bed.

He barely moved as he slept, but his breaths were shallow, and he emitted an occasional guttural moan as if his dreams were preventing him from absolute rest. She watched the rise and fall of his chest, as pale and absent of colour as his hands and face, the only evidence of flesh she had ever been privy to before today. The sight of so much of it at once: a whole expanse of arms, shoulders, chest and abdomen, seemed slightly immoral, as if she were crossing a forbidden line and would be punished for her voyeurism. Hermione looked, nevertheless, hypnotised by the sight of her semi-naked professor: the scattering of black hairs across his chest, forming a pathway down to his navel and beyond, the jut of his under-nourished hips, the taut skin, muscles and sinew of his arms. She had imagined his teaching robes to be the cover for a body too puny to withstand the exposing effects of a tight sweater. She was wrong.

Her eyes fell on the scar positioned just above his jugular, its serrated edges a blatant reminder, as if she needed one, of injury incurred by an animal attack rather than a weapon or a spell. It did not look like the kind of injury from which one usually stands and walks away; she wondered how his survival had been possible, or if he would ever tell her. This time, Hermione managed to overcome the urge to reach out and draw a finger along the contours of the ugly blemish desecrating his marble-white skin. Instead, she gripped her wand and flicked it in the direction of the bed sheets, so that, instead of lying on top of them, he was now lying comfortably beneath the covers.

Once she had satisfied herself that she had done all she could for him, she wandered onto the landing in search of the bathroom, easily located across the hallway. Her Lumos charm revealed that the spacious room was lined with various shelves and cupboards in addition to the usual fittings. The shelves were crammed with bottles, vials and jars of varying sizes and colours. Like Snape's bedroom, all were neatly labelled and ordered the room had the appearance of his old Potions store cupboard back in the dungeons of Hogwarts. Hermione was captivated by the profusion of potions and ingredients adorning the shelves and any other available surfaces.

On the wall opposite stood a large cabinet. Hermione made her way over to it, curious to know what Severus Snape kept for his personal use. Many of the students of Hogwarts had accused him of poor hygiene, but Hermione doubted that to be the case his teaching attire had always been immaculate, if unvaried. The cabinet, too, had the appearance of a Potions supply cupboard; it was almost as tall as she was, and she was surprised to find that, on opening it, the inside door concealed a full-length mirror: Snape did not present as the kind of man who liked to see all of himself at once. Her reflection peered back at her with a disapproving frown.

'You shouldn't be snooping around other people's bathrooms!'

The loud and reproachful voice resounded around the room and seemed to emanate from the air about her. Hermione gasped, but her recovery was quick as the voice continued to chide. 'And do something with your hair, it looks terrible!'

'Be quiet,' she hissed at the mirror. 'He's sleeping you'll wake him.'

'Well!' replied the mirror haughtily. 'If you are here to pilfer from his stores, I may as well warn you that my voice can carry down to the cellar. I won't hesitate to shout for him.'

'Don't you dare!' said Hermione. 'Of course I'm not here to steal anything. I'm looking for a Hangover potion. I have the feeling he's going to need it in the morning.'

'Again?' answered the mirror, its voice loaded with disapproval. 'Third shelf from the top, four along. And tell him he needs to brew some more, he's getting through it faster than he gets through Calming Draught.'

'He takes Calming Draught?'

There was a pause during which the mirror seemed to reconsider its rash declaration. 'None of your business!'

'But you just said so,' said Hermione.

'No I didn't!'

'You did!' insisted Hermione.

'I most certainly did not!'

'Oh! For heaven's sake!' Hermione replied, frustrated by the obstructive attitude of the mirror. 'You just said he takes more Hangover potion than Calming Draught.'

'He does. He also gets through more Hangover Potion than Babbling Beverage, Shrinking Solution and Wolfsbane but he doesn't take those either,' the mirror replied smugly.

'You're being deliberately obtuse,' Hermione retorted. 'I'm only trying to help him.'

The mirror did not reply.

'Did you hear what I said?' Hermione demanded.

'I'm exercising my right to remain silent,' replied the mirror after a moment's pause.

'You're a bloody charmed object,' hissed Hermione furiously. 'You don't have rights.'

'And you,' replied the mirror, 'are a very rude young woman, *and* you're not as pretty as they usually are. Look at the state of you. No lipstick, no blusher, no mascara. And your hair is ... *brown*. You're hardly going to appeal to him wearing jeans and a cardigan. Are you from an agency? He ought to ask for his money back.'

Hermione studied her reflection. The purple semi-circles under her eyes looked like smudged mascara against the almost grey tone of her skin. She noticed how tired and drab she looked, like a woman who has not experienced enough frivolity in life to claim the right to fresh-faced youth and perky prettiness. Hermione looked older than her years she could have passed for someone ten years her senior from the expression in her eyes alone eyes which seemed to have a perceptiveness about them, which was no longer as a result of quick intelligence and eagerness of mind. They had the sort of look which declared that nothing else could surprise them again. No wonder she wasn't his type; she doubted she was anyone's type.

'I'm not from any agency,' she replied calmly. 'I'm not paid to be here. I'm here because...' She was about to confide in a mirror. Had her life really come to this? Looking for empathy from a cantankerous bathroom cabinet?

Apparently it had.

'Professor Snape was my teacher many years ago. He wasn't a nice teacher, but I think he was a good one in some ways. At least... he taught me a lot. And not just how to mix asphodel with sopophorous beans to produce Draught of Living Death. Anyway, the point is, I never really understood that as a child, or even as a young adult. I owed him a great deal as it turns out, and I let him down. Badly. I want to make amends if he'll let me, and I don't really know how to do that, but I do know that whatever he needs, if it is in my power, I will try my best to provide it; and right now he needs someone to watch him while he is vulnerable and I intend to do that. So I suppose I am here to provide a service of sorts, but not the kind you are referring to.'

'A simple 'no' would have done,' the mirror remarked disdainfully, and Hermione couldn't help but smile at the resemblance between the mirror's unaccommodating attitude and its owners.

'I have some questions for you,' said Hermione. The mirror was silent. 'Are you exercising your right again?'

'No, I'm deciding whether or not to trust you,' sniffed the mirror.

'My name is Hermione Granger, I...'

'Hermione Granger?' repeated the mirror, a note of incredulity obvious in the tone. 'The insufferable know-it-all?'

Hermione sighed. Snape, too, had confided in the mirror then. She could imagine the scene at the end of a difficult day of double Potions with Gryffindors and Slytherins: an angry Professor Snape venting his spleen at his bathroom cabinet. The image would have made her laugh out loud if it wasn't for the fact that she had obviously been featured quite prominently in his rants.

'You stole ingredients from his stores. He was very angry about that.'

'Yes, but I...'

'And you set his robes on fire.'

Shit. Snape knew about that? 'Well, yes but I thought...'

'You turned your wand on him and knocked him out cold,' the mirror persisted.

'That's true, but there was a good...'

'You were the cause of a great many of his headaches.'

Hermione was thankful that the mirror did not seem to know of her most recent abuse of its owner. She was surprised that Snape had kept that little nugget of information to himself. But as no accusations of perfidy or desertion were hurled at her, she felt confident enough to continue.

'I made mistakes,' admitted Hermione. 'And I want to make up for them. If you'll just answer my questions instead of accusing me of things I am perfectly aware of, we may get somewhere. I presume you are loyal to him? Know him better than anyone? I bet he's told you things he would trust no living soul with.'

'Of course he has my loyalty. I have been with him all his life. I belonged to his mother before him. He has spent his life trusting no one, quite rightly. Everyone has let him down: his parents, his childhood friend, his mentor, his colleagues... *you*.' Hermione cringed while the mirror paused to draw imaginary breath. Either that, or it was exercising its right to remain silent again. Hermione did not interrupt the uncomfortable pause.

'But you are the only one who ever bothered enough to make it past the front door,' the mirror admitted before lapsing into silence again. Hermione waited for her approval or rejection.

'I have decided to trust you,' the mirror replied. 'Because everyone needs a chance.'

'Thank you,' said Hermione. 'I appreciate you giving me one.'

'I meant him, not you. He's the one who needs a chance.'

'I can ask you some questions then?' she enquired, ignoring the slight.

'You may ask, I may not answer.'

'You really are extraordinarily like him.'

'Thank you. But flattery won't work on me. What do you want to know?'

'Does he seem... happy?' asked Hermione, unsure of where the question came from.

The mirror snorted. 'Of course not. But at least now he's not in a constant state of misery. He *had* started to take more care of his appearance until the last day or two. He's never been a vain man, despite being a handsome one.' Hermione chose not to argue that point; she wondered if the mirror had been charmed to flatter its owner, or to ignore his flaws. 'Recently he had seemed different.'

'In what way?'

'He just... checked himself more. I always reassure him, of course. "May I compliment sir on his choice of shirt this evening", that sort of thing,' the mirror replied, apparently taking pride in its deferential posturing.

'But he seems so... bedraggled tonight. Does he always get like this at this time of year?'

'What time of year?'

'Halloween.'

'Not that I've noticed,' said the mirror. 'He has periods of moping, understandably, but he soon pulls himself together and gets on with it. Halloween has never been

particularly significant.'

Hermione was puzzled by this revelation; she had been sure that tonight's drunken binge had been in response to the reminder Halloween brought forth of Lily's death. Perhaps the mirror was wrong or mistaken. She could hardly take the word of a piece of bathroom furniture as holy writ. She decided to treat any information she learned from the object with caution.

'But have you noticed the *very* recent change in him?' she continued.

'Of course. He stopped... bathing. He only dropped by the cupboard for, ahem, mind-altering potions of which I will not speak. Suffice to say that my master has seemed depressed these last few days. And before you ask, he has not given any indication for his reasons.'

'I see,' said Hermione, trying to piece together this new information and slot it into her "Lily-moping" theory. It did not fit. She decided to try a different line of questioning.

'You mentioned women. Can I ask...?' She felt compelled to pose this question, yet dreaded the answer, nevertheless. '... How often does he... have company?'

'Company?' The mirror sounded confused. 'If by "company" you mean the witches sent by the agency, I should say, once a week, not that I can imagine *that* to be any concern of yours.'

Hermione was staggered by the revelation that Snape apparently sought out the services of a prostitute with such alarming regularity. She hadn't expected him to live a life of monastic celibacy, and she knew she had no right to judge him, lonely and friendless as he must be. But somehow she was beginning to harbour feelings of possessiveness towards him. She considered him her... *project* seemed too clinical a word to use, yet that's how it seemed. He felt like her responsibility, hers to nurture and soothe if he would only let her. She couldn't quite determine why the idea of someone else providing him with comfort, however sordid or fleeting, made her flesh crawl and her jaw clench.

She identified these new and strange sensations as manifestations of weeks of sleep deprivation, and declared herself done with the mirror as she thanked it, without enthusiasm, and took the vial of potion she had been looking for. She was about to exit the room when a voice called her back.

'I suppose the invitation might be something to do with it.'

Hermione stopped and turned back to face the half-closed cabinet. She crossed the room quickly, and opened the door to face the source of the voice once again.

'Invitation?' She knew perfectly well what the invitation was because she had received it too. The annual Victory Day Ball invitation arrived by owl-post every year, and this year happened to be an important one: the tenth anniversary of the fall of Voldemort.

'There's to be some celebratory ball,' said the mirror. 'He was muttering to himself about it yesterday.'

'Is he going?' asked Hermione.

The suggestion of weary boredom in the mirror's tone implied that the object would have preferred to make a non-committal shrug rather than the unhelpful verbal response of, 'How should I know?'

Hermione returned to the bedroom and placed the vial of Hangover potion on Snape's bedside cabinet. She took out her wand, pointed it at her makeshift bed for the evening and Transfigured the wicker chair into a size and shape that could easily accommodate her. The chair now had the appearance of an oddly manipulated contemporary sculpture, as she stretched out her tired limbs and pondered on her new knowledge: vexing and illogical as it was. She recalled how angry Snape had seemed when she dared to accuse him of wallowing in misery. Surely it was for his dead love that he pined? There was no other conclusion, no way of piecing together all the information and making it fit neatly together. Harry had revealed the contents of Snape's bequeathed memories: he had loved Lily; his wretched, drunken binge was evidence of the fact. Hermione could work with that. She could be the listening ear, the comforter, the empathiser, the missing piece of lint in his marred and thwarted life. The relief she felt on realising that she finally had an objective was only slightly diminished by her recent bathroom conversation. Determined not to let that spoil her new sense of purpose, she reminded herself that the mirror was just a mirror, after all, not a purveyor of great insight and shrewd counsel.

Hermione thought of Hogwarts as she lay in wait for fatigue to kick in: of the Yule Ball during the year of the Triwizard Tournament. She remembered her beautiful blue ball gown, and how relieved she had been to be escorted by Viktor Krum. He had seemed like merely an adequate substitute for a blind and senseless Ron at the time. But that was a lifetime ago; another world, another girl. Cinderella did not have hair that eluded even magical management, and Prince Charming did not have the mark of a skull and snake magically carved into his left forearm. She positioned herself so that she could see Snape's sleeping form as she gradually drifted into sleep. A vague feeling of elation managed to inhibit, for a moment, the expectation that the morning would bring fresh accusations and wrath from the black-haired, sleeping enigma. Her last thoughts were of dancing couples, a rousing waltz, and a tall dark man with the biggest nose she had ever seen.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione deals with the aftermath of her sleepover.

Chapter Five

Hermione's first sensation on waking was the chill of cool bedroom air on her skin. There was the split-second confusion, experienced as mild panic until she remembered where she was and recalled the events of the previous evening. Her eyes remained closed, though she knew the alteration in her breathing pattern would give her away should the figure in the bed happen to be alert too. She listened intently for the sounds of heavy, rhythmical breathing that would tell her he still slept and give her the all-clear to open her eyes. The only sound that reached her ears, however, was the unmistakable sound of deliberate movement. A body shifting position, a hand reaching out to replace a glass object on a wooden surface, a long and irritated out-take of breath.

There was no option but to open her eyes and accept the onslaught she knew would be heading her way as soon as she admitted to wakefulness.

'And once again I am forced to beg for an explanation. Have you decided that your way to atonement is to plague me with your continuing and odious company?'

Snape had pushed himself up into a sitting position: chest still bare, arms folded, his facial hair almost a full beard. His hair was now so greasy he might have just walked out of the shower, if it wasn't for the distinctly grubby aspect to his look. His expression was pure malice.

Hermione sat bolt upright in response to her morning greeting. She had hoped to have time to calm down the mop on her head before sharing it with her companion, but any chance she had had to make small reparation to her morning state was gone. She was to be seen at her very worst without even a splash of cold water to force her eyes to sparkle and compel her pale cheeks to glow. She pulled her blanket a little higher, suddenly acutely aware that she was skimpily clad in knickers and a vest-top underneath the bed-covers. She wound them tightly around her middle, bunching handfuls of scratchy blanket with one hand behind her as she swung her legs over the side and stood up.

'Is your purpose to actually move in?' he continued, scowling as if he were looming above her in his Potions classroom, a swirl of black robes and sour looks, instead of sitting semi-prone and half-naked in his bedroom.

'Had I known how intent you were on "making amends", I would have assumed a new identity and fled the country instead of merely dismissing you.' He had picked up his wand, which was lying next to the empty vial of Hangover potion, as he spoke. Hermione feared for a second that he was about to point it in her direction and either vanish the blanket or inflict some ominous dark spell on her. He did neither, but tapped the slender wooden implement against his palm, observing her mortification with evident enjoyment.

'Of course I'm not moving in!' she replied, bending to scoop up her jeans, cardigan, shoes and socks from their hiding place beneath the wicker bed-chair. 'I only stayed because I wanted to make sure you were alright.'

'How touching. What, I wonder, do you imagine I did before you turned up four weeks ago dressed like a slut and raving about guilt? Do you think I have never been too drunk to remain conscious before?'

'I wasn't here then; I am now,' Hermione retorted, her free arm fiercely clutching her clothes and shoes to her chest, 'so get used to it. Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes. I suggest you freshen up before coming downstairs.' She scuttled past him towards the door, the wooden floorboards cool and refreshing against her bare feet as she dashed out across the hallway into the sanctuary of the bathroom before he had time to abuse her any further. No doubt he would redouble his efforts once he joined her in the kitchen which she had yet to locate.

Hermione found the room she was looking for at the end of the entrance hall. Last night she had entered the hallway drenched and disgruntled; now her hair was tamed, her face clear and her mouth minty fresh. She walked into the kitchen, closing the door behind her and took stock of the room. She felt her skin tighten as the October air greeted her, and she observed at once that this wasn't a well-used place. Snape's kitchen put her in mind of Harry and Ginny's back in Grimmauld Place, save for the fact that theirs, though well-ordered, was a vibrant animated space a Weasley kitchen to rival Molly's. Snape's, however, had a dormant, neglected feel to it, as if the owner came in here rarely and reluctantly.

Motes of dust danced in the sunlight, which flooded the kitchen from the window above the sink the only source of natural light in the room. Hermione made her way over to a large fireplace, which dominated the far wall. A muttered '*Incendio*' and a flick of her wand soon had the flames dancing and crackling beneath the cauldron in the grate. She noticed with satisfaction the heating power of a fire not just physical heat, but atmospheric warmth, too. The room seemed inhabited now, active with the promise of industry and bustle. She recalled that she would likely soon be joined by an irate and reproachful Severus Snape and reasoned that the offer of tea and toast might have some calming effect on his temper. With that in mind, she set to the activity of preparing breakfast of some sort, though the disregarded atmosphere of the kitchen gave her the feeling that her endeavours could be futile. She doubted to find a cupboard well-stocked with anything but potions ingredients and the air of abandon.

In a high, wooden cupboard, which hung on the wall next to the sink, Hermione found crockery: a pale-blue china tea-set with a delicate pattern of tiny white flowers the kind of thing grandmothers keep for best never meant for use, but there to fulfil a vague hope that the right occasion would one day require its use. She dared not use that one: the cups looked as if a generous measure of hot tea might finish them off. Several unwashed mugs in the sink looked like the safer option, though it took a combination of magic and might to get them clean. She set the clean mugs on the table and searched the room for something resembling sustenance. Surely the man ate? She found it hard to imagine Severus Snape sending out for pizza every night.

Hermione had found no concessions to Muggle technology in any of the rooms she had so far been privy to. Snape had obviously managed to either destroy or disguise the gas and electricity supply to the house: there were no light fittings and no plug sockets. This house ran on magic alone. She was as likely to find a gas oven or an electric toaster as she was a DVD player or a plasma screen TV.

There was no refrigerator, but she did find a bottle of milk hidden away in a pantry. The store cupboard obviously had some sort of Cooling Charm cast over it: she felt the hairs stand to attention on her arms in response to the chill air as she stepped inside. She found half a loaf of bread to go with the milk, and a few minutes searching found a jar of strawberry jam, a pot of honey and some butter.

The table was soon loaded with breakfast items, and by the time the self-allotted twenty-minutes was up, Hermione had charmed four toasting forks to hover over the flames with a slice of bread each. The homely smell of toast filled the air, and the fat black kettle was whistling through its spout for all it was worth. The kitchen was a picture of domestic felicity, spoiled only by the arrival of Severus Snape.

Snape's entrance reminded Hermione of the overbearing teacher he once was and of why Neville Longbottom had feared him enough to see his form when confronted by a Boggart. The man knew how to project a sense of menace. His penetrating black glare and familiar scowl seemed to add inches to his already formidable stature as he took in the unfamiliar scene of tea, toast and the promise of sympathy. Hermione watched his eyes scan the room quickly, lingering on the fireplace and the obedient toasting forks, now gliding through the air back to the table like soldiers on parade.

She was relieved to see that he had taken her suggestion of freshening-up quite seriously: the beard was gone, his hair was newly-washed and he strode into the kitchen wearing fresh clothes and an expression of renewed contempt. The unmistakable odour of whatever he used for soap accompanied him. Hermione caught its scent above the warm kitchen smells and savoured the contrast between that and the stench of alcohol and disregard, which had been the previous evening's offering. Ready to face his offensive with a charming smile and a congenial welcome, she wished him a good morning and gestured for him to sit while she poured him a generous helping of hot tea.

'A word of advice, Granger: when in someone else's home it is customary to wait to be asked to sit, drink and eat. Your place is to accept or decline politely, not barge in and decide what's on the menu. As for staying for a sleep-over I find a little warning, so that I can prepare the guest bedroom, preferable to waking up to the sight of some misguided interloper lying spread-eagled at the foot of my bed.'

Hermione smiled benignly as planned. 'You won't mind if I take the advice of a man whose hospitality includes asking for sexual favours with caution? Only I rather think that our situation has lent itself to a different set of rules.'

For a brief second, Hermione thought she detected a flash of discomfort at the reminder of last night's indiscretions, but it was gone so quickly that she was sure she had imagined it. She waited with trepidation for his next move, hoping he would give in without grace and sit down anyway. There were things she wanted to discuss with him, and she wanted his retribution out of the way for the sake of progressing towards a more cordial understanding.

Hermione was determined to regain the hesitant rapport she had worked so hard to achieve. He had seemed to be becoming more at ease with her company, and for her part, she had looked forward to their meetings more than anything she had experienced in the way of friendship for a very long time. She had found him to be observant and insightful though his observations tended towards the mordant it was true yet she found she liked that, preferred it to the infinitely more juvenile humour she had shared with Harry and Ron. Snape's humour was biting and sometimes cruel, often at her expense, but it amused her, nevertheless, and she had found that he was just as capable of turning his caustic wit on himself as anyone. Pleasant thoughts of his deep sardonic drawl kept her awake at night, these days, far more than images of his broken and bloody body.

She wanted him back.

Her theories of why he had pushed her away varied from hour to hour, but the one which she feared the most persisted in torturing her as she lay awake in the small hours, wondering why he had left her alone with Oliver Cromwell a week ago:

Her repellent company reminded him of what he had lost in Lily.

Hermione had spent the last six nights staring through the grey tones and shadows on the ceiling, a solid night's sleep as elusive as her peace of mind. When she dwelt on Snape's enormous capacity to love, so at odds with the ruthless brute he had seemed as a teacher, she felt such a sense of reverence towards him that she had come to believe, if she excited no emotion from him more fervent than genuine approval, she would count herself content. She had tried to recall the point in time when his opinion of her had begun to matter so much, but there had been no defining moment, no shock realisation like a religious conversion – it had been a gradual ascent, a steady progression from dislike to respect.

Snape pulled out a chair and sat down in it with folded arms. His brimming mug of tea lay in front of him untouched.

'Is it not to your liking?' she asked pleasantly, sitting down opposite and taking a slice of toast from the pile. 'There's milk in the jug.' She pushed it towards him as she spoke.

He paused for a moment before seemingly unable to resist the seductive sway of a hot cup of tea. He picked up the milk jug and poured a splash into his mug.

'I take it you made use of the Hangover Potion?' Hermione continued.

'Evidently.'

'You're welcome.'

'I didn't ask for it.'

'But you needed it.'

'Nor did I ask to be judged.'

'I'm not judging. Toast?' She pushed the plate towards him and he grudgingly took a slice. Hermione bit into hers, a feeling of unreality accompanying the pleasant sensation that only hot buttered toast can provide. 'Your mirror says you need to brew more. You're getting low.'

Snape merely grunted in reply.

Hermione couldn't say why she was so surprised when he reached for the pot of honey, or why she should find amusement in the fact that he obviously had a preference for something pleasantly syrupy, rather than the sharp, tangier flavour of marmalade. She had not expected him to choose sweet over tart.

'So am I to expect an encore tonight, or are you done with your Halloween binge?' she enquired.

'Speaking in riddles won't help your cause,' he replied sharply. 'Are you presuming I need a motive for drinking a bottle of firewhisky?'

'I think so, yes.'

'Well this should be good.' He set down his mug of tea, leaned back in his chair and stretched out his arms on the table in front of him in a gesture of mock-attentiveness.

Hermione sipped from her cup in an effort to appear unperturbed by his raised eyebrow and ominous smirk. She considered the easy option of backing down and laughing off his challenge with a bland denial, but this was her chance to confront him, and she may never have the courage again.

'Harry is my friend. I know the significance of the day,' she said. 'It's the anniversary of the death of his parents. Of the death of his mother,' she added, so quietly she could have been muttering the words to herself. Snape heard them, however. She saw a look of astonishment in his eyes as if her words had taken him by surprise. And just when she was sure he would explode in an inferno of outrage and bile, he threw back his head and laughed. The sight was quite disconcerting, she had never seen him laugh before and was quite astounded that he had the ability. Laughter and Severus Snape was as incongruous as Percy Weasley and rule bending. The sight of his mirth in the face of her statement gave her more reason for unease than his fury-filled censure.

'You think my drinking a result of mourning?' he asked, once his laughter had died down.

'Well... isn't it?'

'Am I to understand that you believe me in a grief-stricken state because I am lamenting the loss of a childhood infatuation nearly thirty years ago?'

'Infatuation?'

'Have you been confusing love with remorse, Granger?'

'You're denying it? That you loved her? The trial... your memories... I thought...'

His amusement at her apparent mistake was gone. The transformation from humour back to resentment was so sudden that she began to doubt her own short-term memory. Snape's expression was now hard to judge as he observed her with apparent fascination.

'Enough! This subject is not up for debate. You can finish your tea and get out.'

The notion that Professor Snape was suffering from what Muggle psychologists termed as "denial" crossed Hermione's mind. She wasn't about to accuse him of emotional repression though – he looked in no mood for a forage into his psyche.

'We've been through this, Professor. Fine, talk about whatever you like, but before I go there's something we need to discuss.'

'There is nothing we need to discuss. Your intrusion is unacceptable. You will find my aim to be perfectly accurate this morning, and I don't advise you to wait for proof.'

His wand was lying idly on the table next to him; Hermione glanced at it and was reassured to know that her own was tucked away safely in the belt of her jeans.

'You think your reflexes are better than mine?' she said, sipping slowly from her tea and savouring the soothing sensation of heat combined with the caffeine boost.

Snape snorted. 'Are you challenging me to a duel, Granger? I may be out of practice, but I rather think that overcoming an inexperienced witch, with enough neurosis for a stint in St Mungos, not beyond my capabilities.'

'That is below the belt, even for you,' she replied, setting down her mug with a thud, so that the contents splashed over the sides, forming a pale brown pool of moisture around the base. 'And most definitely comes under the heading of cauldron, kettle, black. It takes one to know one, Professor. And of course I'm not challenging you to a duel. I'm not some hormonal student with a point to prove.'

She pushed her plate containing a half-eaten slice of toast away from her and folded her arms across her chest with as much defiance as the gesture could convey.

'Then say what it is you have to say. I have no time for your amateur dramatics, and your persistent probing is giving me a headache. You have two minutes before I Confund you.'

'I'd like to see you try.'

'Would you indeed? Another challenge?'

She eyed his wand warily again, but his hands were occupied with his breakfast and he seemed unlikely to carry out his threat.

'Did you receive the invitation?'

The jerk of his head at Hermione's abrupt question revealed his unease. She waited for him to answer, but he merely sipped his tea in silence, clearly unwilling to give her a reply.

'You did then?' she ploughed on. 'Me too. I can't believe it's the ten year anniversary already. A decade has gone so quickly.'

'Lucky you. Every year has seemed like a dozen to me,' he replied.

'Even though your life is so wonderful?' she asked, smiling pleasantly.

He ignored her.

'Are you going?' she asked, trying hard to sound as if it was a question of no importance, that she didn't care either way whether he was attending or not.

'What do *you* think? Have you ever known me to be there?'

'How should I know; I've never been to any of them,' Hermione replied.

Snape lifted up his head and stared at her in surprise. He seemed about to say something then evidently changed his mind, and instead sneered at her. 'Out of some Gryffindor sense of undeserving I suppose?'

'Like you, yes.'

His expression was an alarming mixture of seething resentment and indignation, but as he seemed intent on stewing quietly, Hermione proceeded to probe.

'You said you don't miss it, but what about curiosity? Don't you wonder about them all? McGonagall, Flitwick, Slughorn...?' She paused. '... Harry?'

'I presume you are in contact with Potter?' he replied.

'He and Ginny, sometimes Ron, are my only contacts. They have children of their own now. Their youngest is just turning one.'

'Thank Merlin I'm not still teaching,' Snape replied, and Hermione noticed his lips quiver in response to her own laughter at his acerbic quip.

'You didn't answer my question,' she continued.

Snape sighed. 'There are so many of them, Granger it's all I can do to keep up.'

'That'll be the day. I mean the one about being curious.'

Snape drummed his fingers on the table. 'I try not to think of it. Occasionally I do,' he admitted.

Hermione trailed her finger through the tea-puddle on the table, making circular swirling patterns in an attempt to occupy her fingers and appear nonchalant. 'Why don't we go?' she said.

'We?' Snape demanded.

'Why not?'

'Together?'

'Yes.'

'Do you have any idea of the gossip and attention we would provoke?' he replied. At least he wasn't saying no.

'I don't think I care,' Hermione said.

'Severus Snape: Death Eater, murderer and maligned Headmaster; and Hermione Granger: Gryffindor's favourite daughter and Harry Potter's best friend, attending the tenth anniversary Victory Day Ball together? The idea is inconceivable.'

'I don't see why.'

Snape pushed back his chair and stood up. He picked up his wand and paced the room, clearly in a state of agitation as a result of Hermione's unexpected proposal. She watched in fascination as he strode from one end of the kitchen to the other, his expression shrouded by the curtain of long black hair which fell forward as he walked. He walked to the sink, his back now toward her. She turned and watched, noticing his knuckles pale as he clutched the edge of the work-top, staring out of the window into the sun-filled autumn morning. She folded her hands on the table in front of her, waiting patiently for him to work through the dilemma he seemed to be facing.

Minutes passed, and Hermione was beginning to wonder if he had forgotten her presence. Perhaps staring into space for long periods of time was usual behaviour for him, a symptom of solitude and the unfamiliarity of company. She was about to clear her throat loudly in the hopes of reminding him that he wasn't alone, when he lifted his head as if he had remembered his breakfast companion and turned around to face her, leaning against the sink and grasping his wand in both hands.

'You are delusional, Granger. This is not your way to atonement. I am weary of your persistent questioning of my every word and action. It was an interesting diversion in the beginning, I confess, but now you are beginning to bore me. I do not care if you are suffering from the pain and misery of guilt that is for your own conscience to bear, not mine. If you wish to achieve a state of penitence, do so in your own time, and stop wasting mine. I am a busy man, with a business to run and associates to see today, so you can finish your tea like a good little girl and be off. Go and crawl back under whatever guilt-ridden stone you saw fit to construct for yourself. I am done with you.'

Hermione's eyes were fixed on the table as he made his speech; she dared not lift them to meet his in case the lump of ice in her throat melted into the tears of disappointment and humiliation which she knew would be met with scorn. She stood though, without a word or a glance in his direction, and made her way across the room towards the open door, knowing with the dread of certainty that she was unlikely to see him again. Every step brought their separation a little closer to inevitability. She passed through the kitchen door and into the dark entrance hall, sure he must realise his error and call her back, but the only sound was her own heart hammering beneath her ribs; no assured footfall could be heard crossing the stone-flagged floor behind her, no deep drawl calling her back with a begrudging acceptance of his mistake. She was out of decent lingering time by the time she placed her hand on the latch and heard the click of the lock: her cue to leave. Regret, resignation and loss of hope united as one to see her out of the door and out of his life.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 10

Severus has a proposition for Hermione. Will she accept?

Chapter Six

'Settle down, 9C, concentrate. Take out your Hamlets and turn to page three hundred and eighty. Emily, will you read Hamlet's lines? And, Lauren, please read Polonius!'

The sporadic noise-level of thirty-two vociferous students soon settled into a monotonous drone, as an unenthusiastic Emily Wright began to read out one of Shakespeare's finest. Their teacher, Miss Granger, sat herself down behind a high, metallic desk and let her eyes wander over the familiar heads, now obediently bowed over Act III, scene II of Hamlet. Satisfied that she had their compliance, she turned her own attention to the speech, currently being butchered by a fourteen-year-old who could no more understand Hamlet's descent into madness than her teacher could pick out a Goth from an Emo.

'Miss!' Hermione looked up to see a hand in the air, striving for attention.

'Yes, Lauren.'

'Did Hamlet's dad really like cigars?'

The classroom erupted into giggles, and Hermione allowed them a two minute indulgence before bringing them back to order.

'If anyone has a sensible comment to make about the Prince of Denmark, please raise your hand. Until then, Emily, please continue.'

'Tis now the very witching time of night

When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out

Contagious to this world...'

Emily's lack of enthusiasm was palpable, yet even that did not deter from Hermione's quiet enjoyment of the beautiful prose, which at once saddened and repelled her. Her sadness was for her reminder of the magical world she had all but abandoned, her repugnance for the Bard's mistaken assumption of the evil nature of witchcraft. Her own wand was tucked away discreetly in the inside pocket of her coat and felt as distant from anything wicked or malicious as a kitten in a pink bow.

'Miss?'

The same voice of classroom rebellion accompanied the same arm: poker-straight and pointing at the ceiling.

'Lauren?' This time Hermione allowed the hint of annoyance to reveal itself in her tone. The classroom rang out with the stifled sniggers of the timid and the unabashed laughter of the bold in response to Lauren's second silly observation of Act III.

'Any more juvenile comments to make before we resume, Lauren?' Hermione enquired.

'No, Miss.'

Lauren and the rest of the class turned their attention to Hamlet's soliloquy once again, but Hermione was too nettled to allow herself the self-indulgent enjoyment of a prose that even the desecrating influence of a reluctant teenager could not usually mar. Instead, her mind wandered away from her current location to her own experience of education. Hogwarts had had its share of the Emily Wrights and Lauren Bankses of the world, but no amount of apathy or dissidence from the students of Hogwarts could detract from the sense of wonder, belonging and contentment she had felt as a child, feeling her erudite way around the world of magic. Hermione thought of Harry and Ron, and of Hagrid, the half-giant. She thought of her teachers: Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout and, of course, Snape fierce critic, harsh task-master and, as it turned out, hopeless romantic. She thought of her recent experience of him, as abrasive as ever, but with the promise of something unnameable hidden beneath the surface like looking at something through frosted glass: blurred around the edges, almost defined, but not quite. She recalled how he had looked the last time she had seen him almost a month ago, leaning against his kitchen sink, mocking her with his censorious gaze, and belittling her with his harsh condemnation; a rejection to be counted as her best yet.

With a start, she realised that Emily had stopped speaking, and with an irritation that only Lauren Banks could provide, she realised why.

'Miss?'

'LAUREN! Will you please...?'

'... Miss, there's a weirdo outside!'

Hermione, who was about to issue her most disruptive student with her first official warning of the afternoon, turned with the rest of the class to the direction she was pointing.

The far window ran the length of the classroom so that the view outside was a panorama of deserted school-yard, playing fields and a haphazard line of tall oaks which stood on the perimeter, indicating the outer edges of Mill Dam woods.

The "weirdo" was standing by one of the oaks. Hermione could see at once why her pupil might label him so, despite her teacher's instinct to admonish Lauren for her rash denunciation of what may be nothing more than a local out for a stroll. Even from a distance of two-hundred yards, the black-clad stature could not be mistaken: the rigid bearing (even as he leaned with folded arms), and the singular intense stare, which seemed to be aimed right into the heart of the classroom, announcing himself present and waiting. Hermione fought to retain her composure as she realised who the intruder was and attempted to settle down the class.

'Call the police, Miss!' suggested a voice from the back.

'He's probably a paedo!' shouted another.

'He looks a bit tortured,' observed Emily. 'Someone should go and see what he wants before we call the police.'

'Do a bit of torturing more like,' scoffed a dark-eyed boy behind her. 'He looks like Vlad the Impaler!'

'Or a vampire,' said Lauren. 'That's probably why he can't come out of the trees into the sunlight.' The class erupted into laughter again, and the dark-haired boy made a gurgling vampire noise and pretended to bite Emily's neck.

'EVERYONE BE QUIET!' yelled their teacher over the din of excited speculation and welcome distraction. The class obeyed immediately. Miss Granger rarely raised her voice. She didn't need to. Somehow the pupils in her classes always behaved; they knew there would be consequences if they did not. Not that anyone had ever received a punishment more significant than an official warning or some other vague threat, but there was always the feeling that there was only so much rebellion she would tolerate.

'Sorry, Miss, but he is weird though. Are you going to call the police?'

'All of you continue reading your Hamlets. I'll go and have a word with our visitor. Now settle down, or I'll be handing out detentions!'

Hermione was aware that the whole of 9C, and probably every other classroom on this side of the school, was now pressed up against their window. She picked her way between thick brown patches of mud, lying in wait like booby traps as she crossed the playing field towards the unexpected intruder.

He had been watching her approach from the safety of the oaks, but as she got closer, she saw him straighten up ready to greet her; his eyes maintained their scrutiny until she stopped abruptly with a gap of two feet between them. Her racing pulse did nothing to soothe her anxiety, but she was determined not to make it easy for him. Let him speak first; he owed her that much.

His unyielding gaze and persistent silence were starting to make her angry. She was glad of the feeling; it was easier to deal with than apprehension. She had almost decided to turn around and leave in frustration without a word having passed between them when he finally spoke.

'You said you were taking a break from the Ministry,' he said, glancing beyond her and towards the uninspiring grey school building.

'A permanent one,' she replied, pulling her coat tightly around her middle to keep out the biting December breeze. 'What do you want? You're scaring the kids.'

'What do *you* know about teaching Muggles?' he asked.

She swallowed the desire to question his right to interrogate. 'Quite a bit actually. There's more to life than turning teapots into turtles.'

'There's more to magic than turning teapots into turtles,' he replied.

She didn't answer but noticed through her quiet anger a look of trepidation waver across his face. She had not forgotten the intensity of his look, but her memory had shrunk his nose to a more pleasing size. She almost smiled at the trick she had played on herself.

'How long?' he asked.

'How long what?'

'How long have you been a teacher... *here*?'

She wanted to yell, *none of your business*, but instead found herself saying, 'Five years.'

'Why the secrecy?'

'Why do you think?' she replied.

'And what is it you think you know enough about to teach Muggle children?'

'I teach English Literature, and I happen to know a great deal about it.'

Snape looked over her shoulder, and she noticed him tense. 'We seem to have company,' he said.

Hermione turned to follow his stare and, with a mixture of irritation and amusement, saw one of her colleagues making his way over to lend his support.

Chris Jones, the Head of IT, joined the two of them in a matter of minutes. 'Can we help you?' he asked Snape curtly.

Snape let his indifferent gaze settle on the new arrival. 'I very much doubt it.'

Chris Jones glanced at Hermione, cleared his throat and continued. 'You're aware that you are trespassing? This is private school property,' he said.

Hermione cringed at her colleague's feeble attempt to gain the upper-hand. The paleness of Snape's skin was almost translucent under the ineffective wintry sun no wonder Lauren Banks had termed him a vampire he did appear like some strange creature of the night. Chris Jones, in comparison, was several inches shorter, with a stockiness that could only be achieved by a regular gym membership. His bright complexion and the gloss of his wavy brown hair were those of a man who eats five a day and cycles to work whatever the weather. She could sense his apprehension, nevertheless, and so could Snape, who looked as if he would gladly and ably stick a knife into the gut of the new arrival. Hermione watched their stand-off with fascinated unease. She would have sniggered like a school girl if it wasn't for the knowledge that Snape was quite capable of casting a retaliatory Confundus Charm if riled.

'Am I?' said Snape, who somehow managed to make the two inconsequential words sound like an invitation to a pistol duel at dawn.

'It's fine, Chris,' said Hermione quickly. 'This is... a friend of mine. He's going now. Everything's fine. I'll be back inside shortly. Would you check on 9C for me?' She flashed a broad, confident beam at her colleague, who responded with a softening of his expression.

'A friend?' said Chris Jones.

'Yes. From way back. He just wants a quick word, then he'll be off. Honestly, Chris please go back inside,' Hermione pleaded.

Chris Jones eyed Snape warily. The dilemma of making the right decision without compromising his authority was palpable. It was there to see in the set of his jaw, the rigidity of his shoulders and the hesitancy of his movement.

'Please,' Hermione pressed. 'I'm *fine*.'

Her final entreaty seemed to be the deciding factor. With another suspicious glance at Snape, he nodded, warned Hermione not to take too long and made his way back across the field to the school building.

Snape watched his departure and snorted. 'And now you're seeing a Muggle?'

'What? How could you possibly conclude *that* from such a short encounter?'

'He touched you on the arm... twice; a gesture of intimacy rarely seen between mere colleagues. I'm quite sure/ never touched Minerva on the arm in all my years at

Hogwarts.'

Hermione grinned. 'She'd have hexed you into next week.'

'Yes, I've been on the receiving end of Minerva's hexes and she was surprisingly spry for her age,' he smirked.

'I still don't see how two arm touches concludes a relationship.'

'He was your Knight in shining armour, anxious to save you from peril. And he responded too easily to your suggestion of checking on your class to be anything less than enamoured.'

'He's not *enamoured*, he's just a friend. Alright, a good friend. Alright, we've been on a couple of dates. Not that it's any of your damn business.'

He was beginning to try her patience. She could feel a hundred pairs of eyes watching her as she stood out in the cold, indulging Severus Snape, who was here to...?

'What is it you want?' she repeated, irritated that somehow he was making her do all the work, despite her determination to play the part of a spurned heroine and watch him squirm. 'You treat me abominably, throw me out of your house, ridicule me, and now you turn up at my place of work to what? Gloat?' She saw him flinch as if her words were a physical assault. 'And what if I *am* seeing him? He happens to be attentive, and thoughtful, and kind and...'

'Have you told him?'

'None of your... NO!' she spat. *What* do you want, Professor? Only if I don't seem to be making any headway at persuading you to leave, they will call the police!'

'Is that supposed to be a threat?'

No! I'm just impressing on you that we don't have much time, so if you only came here to see my decline for yourself, might I suggest you leave you've seen it now, I've failed in the wizarding world, but I have a perfectly nice life in this one... the *real* world, so I'll say goodbye.' She pulled her coat tighter still and turned to tread the boggy path back to her classroom.

'I have a proposition!'

Hermione stopped. She turned around to face him but kept the extra distance between them; she felt the gesture gave her a small advantage.

'I've heard your propositions before. I'm not your type, remember?'

His expression had a trace of shame in it. 'A different type of proposition. However, in view of your current relationship status, I rather think this a wasted trip.'

'I'll decide what my relationship status is, Professor! What type of proposition could you possibly have in mind to include me? You said I bored you.'

'I said no such thing.'

'Yes you did.'

'You misunderstood my meaning,' he said.

'Uninteresting, tiresome, dull, dreary, tedious! How did I misunderstand your meaning, sir? Is your dictionary different to mine?'

'As none of those adjectives accurately describes you, perhaps you should conclude that the context, not the word, was misunderstood.'

Hermione almost faltered in response to the nearest Severus Snape had ever got to offering her a compliment, but the advantage was hers and she knew she was unlikely to be given the chance to hit back with a crippling put-down again.

'I don't care anymore,' she said. 'You're not worth it. I think I can learn to live with the guilt.' She saw him receive the words like a physical blow and relished the smug feeling of superiority as she registered her triumph. She wondered if that was the reason for Snape's savage behaviour the digs, the jibes, the hurtful remarks did they give him tiny stabs of pleasure, knowing that he had the power to wound?

'The nightmares have gone away then?' His answer caught Hermione off guard and rendered her speechless. 'I thought not.' He appeared cheerless, however, as if the news brought him so little pleasure that he was no longer able to enjoy his small victory. 'You look as if you haven't slept in a month.'

His observation of the outward signs of her weariness fuelled her resentment. How dare he notice her exhaustion, he was the cause.

'If you came here to get your insult fix, I can tell you I'm not in the mood,' she bit back.

'It's a fact, not a slight.' His tone was almost conciliatory.

'If you have something to say, I suggest you say it as I escort you through the school grounds to the gate.'

'Before the cavalry turn up again?' Snape replied.

The two made their way around the edge of the perimeter towards the far school yard, and the path leading around the building towards the entrance gate.

'Well?' prompted Hermione when they had reached the gate.

'You received notification of the date change of the Victory Day Ball?'

'Yes, not that it affects me. Why?'

'The ball will now be held two weeks from now.'

'I can read.'

I have been considering your proposal of a month ago... that we go together.'

Hermione gave no indication that she had heard him.

'Perhaps I should say, *reconsidering*.'

'How did you know where I work?' interrupted Hermione.

'You are not the only one with influential contacts.' Snape cleared his throat apprehensively. 'Well?'

'Why now?'

'For a variety of reasons; mainly because it would be advantageous to both of us.'

'How so?'

'I have decided that returning to the wizarding world would have, shall we say... beneficial aspects. My research has reached a stage which requires more legitimate business associates in order for it to progress. I need to be remembered. Visible. Known again. And I can't do that from my current anonymous position. The ball will attract the most influential figures in the wizarding world: Ministry officials, representatives from the press as well as my old colleagues. Slughorn is still there. I have need of his... input.'

Hermione felt a familiar rush of adrenaline surging through her veins as her mild annoyance became sheer indignation.

'And you are telling me this because?'

'Well I can hardly go alone. The invitation specifies a guest,' he explained.

'And you couldn't think of any other unattached witch desperate enough to accompany you to a social function in order to advance your career?'

Snape let out a long, irritated sigh as if her resentment was beyond his comprehension. 'I presumed you would *want* to go. The situation would be mutually beneficial.'

'A month ago I did think it would be a good idea. I thought we were beginning to... get used to each other. You soon cured me of that.' Hermione dug her hands deep into the pocket of her thick, mauve winter coat and turned away from him to face the school.

'We had an arrangement,' Snape said to her back. 'Our meetings had a purpose. They were not intended to be "get to know each other" sessions.'

'But they were. And we did. Intentional or not.' Hermione had spun back round to face him. 'I confided in you. I told you things I've never told anyone else. And I was getting to know more about you. Apart from the black-wearing, insult-hurling ex-teacher, I found out that you prefer tea to coffee, firewhisky when you want to get drunk and bitter when you don't. You have a weakness for Muggle literature, a wicked sense of humour, a surprising appreciation of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and you can quote Shakespeare, Dickens and George Eliot. We were becoming...'

'What?'

'Friends,' she muttered to the pavement beneath her feet.

'We were not friends, Granger.'

'I know that now. I'm just telling you how I saw it,' she hissed. 'You found me no different from my thirteen-year-old self: irritating, full of annoying questions and...'

'Desperate for my approval.'

Hermione's scowl could have rivalled one of his best. 'I should have known I was asking for the impossible. You found my company annoying.'

'On the contrary, I found your discourse surprisingly agreeable and your observations, for the most part, not unintelligent. If it were otherwise I would not be standing here making this futile proposal. My reasons may not be noble or altruistic, but the outcome would be no different from your own proposal four weeks ago, so why you should now find the idea an excuse to take offence, I am unable to comprehend.'

Hermione barely registered the second almost compliment; her mind, for the moment, was on retribution. 'You turn up here looking like a sinister bad guy from a Muggle movie, you tell me you've changed your mind so that you can reacquaint yourself with anyone who can help you with your dubious research! On top of that, you tell me that you are asking me because I'm available and not as annoying as I used to be, and I'm supposed to be grateful?'

'I am trying to point out the advantages, but as your pride has been dented and your ability to see a project to its completion questioned, I see that I am wasting my time.'

'What project?'

'I believe / was your project.'

'You told me to go. Quite forcefully! I don't think I misunderstood *that*!'

'You give up too easily.'

Hermione was momentarily stunned. She had gone along with his assertion that they meet up regularly. She had turned up when and where he had stipulated, even left work early on pretence of a migraine on the one occasion when he had wanted to meet on a Wednesday afternoon. She had put up with the variations in his temper, never knowing how his mood would be when they met, demonstrating the patience of a martyr in the face of his ill-humours and episodes of sullenness.

Forcing herself to bang down his door and demand entry in response to her dismissal was hardly the action of a spineless apathetic, lacking backbone and resolve. She felt a petulant resentment rise in her chest at the unfairness of his careless words. She bit back the girlish desire to prove him right by marching back inside with her nose in the air to accompany the witty retort she had yet to compose. She would show him the meaning of dogged determination, even if the cost was compromising her pride.

Or perhaps it was the bleak look in his fathomless black eyes, which compelled her to answer with, 'Ok.'

She noticed a fleeting moment of relief in his expression, but it was soon concealed beneath his inscrutable mask.

'Good,' he said. 'Then you will tell the Muggle that his services are no longer required?'

'What?' Hermione replied heatedly. 'Why would I do that? You said this was a practical arrangement.'

'Nevertheless, I am not escorting a woman to a ball if she is attached elsewhere.'

Hermione's will was barely her own. Severus Snape was asking her out on what was very nearly a real date. The added beats to her heart evoked by that notion, combined with the giddy anticipation of what on earth she was going to wear, rendered her incapable of doing much beyond blind acceptance. She told herself that it was all part of the bigger plan: that she was duty-bound to submit to his whims; after all, it was the least she could do. He was a hero, a brave and true soldier in a war against evil. He had suffered for the cause, put aside peace of mind and personal safety forever. He had barely cared for his own life, his own happiness or his own wellbeing. Voldemort's demise and Harry Potter's safety had been his driving force. And she, Hermione Granger, hadn't even attempted a Tergeo charm to help him as he bled. How could she now refuse this request? It was hardly unreasonable.

'Fine! If you can call two dates an attachment.'

The ghost of a smile played about the corners of his mouth, but he only nodded his satisfaction. 'There are certain conditions you need to understand before we proceed,' he said.

'You mean apart from dumping the first boyfriend I've had in a year?'

He folded his leather-gloved hands in front of him. 'I do not dance.'

'Won't be much of a ball then.'

'You may dance if you must, as long as you limit your dancing partners to personal friends.'

'I suppose so,' she agreed, glancing over his shoulder towards the school, almost afraid that Chris Jones might show up again with reinforcements. But the school grounds remained deserted, despite the uncomfortable feeling that the building itself was watching her betrayal of the Head of IT.

'Secondly,' he continued. 'I shall not be prevailed upon to sit for an evening in the company of any former-student other than yourself. No Potter, no Weasleys, no Lovegood and certainly no Longbottom.'

'Sounds like it's going to be a fun evening. I suppose you know that Neville is the Herbology Professor now?'

'Merlin save the dunderheads from the dunderhead. At least he is as far away from the Potions Lab as geography allows.'

'Any other conditions I should know about? I take it/m allowed to talk to my friends?'

'You may speak with whomever you chose. Within reason.'

'Too right I may,' she replied. 'Well in that case, I have a few conditions of my own.'

Snape raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

'First of all, I would prefer it if you call me Hermione. It's my name, after all.'

'Unacceptable,' he replied. 'You will be Miss Granger in public and Granger when we are alone.'

'You could at least think about it,' Hermione retorted. 'I agreed to *your* unreasonable requests.'

Snape appeared to be contemplating. 'I shall consider it,' he conceded.

'Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. 'I won't hold my breath. Secondly, I won't be your escort for the evening just to be ditched as soon as we get there so that you can work the room. You have to at least make it *look* as if we are a legitimate couple.'

Snape's expression was unreadable again, but he took some time to answer. 'You *want* our former friends and acquaintance to believe we are... together?'

'Well, yes. I assumed that was the plan. I mean as friends... not together in the... romantic sense. It would lessen your credibility as a business prospect if everyone in there is wondering what the hell we are doing together. Don't you think?'

'Agreed,' he replied. 'However, it will be difficult for them to accept. Many may find the idea of the two of us happening upon each other and becoming bosom buddies difficult to swallow.'

'You have your Slytherin guile and I have my Gryffindor guts between us, I'm sure we can make them believe anything we want them to.'

Hermione had never seen his smile reach his eyes before, she was transfixed by the momentary softening of the scarab black orbs, usually so remote.

They suddenly became aware of the distant steady drone of a bell over the sound of passing cars.

'It's lunch time,' said Hermione, looking towards the school and observing the slow trickle of bodies emerging from various doors placed around the building.

Another sound a high-pitched tone which seemed to spring from Hermione herself caused Snape to jerk his head in surprise. She delved into a deep pocket in her coat and retrieved a small, black oblong tablet, which she slid open and pressed to her ear. She turned away from him as she spoke into it.

'There really is no occasion to worry,' she insisted. 'Please inform everyone that I am absolutely fine. I'll see you shortly in the staff-room. Yes I know that, but there's really no need.' She replaced her mobile phone in her pocket and gave him a look which dared him to mock.

'You really have embraced Muggledom,' he said. 'I take it your Knight was checking up on you?'

She nodded and glanced quickly at the growing throng of figures now dotted about the school grounds behind them.

'Come on,' she said, grabbing his hand suddenly. 'I'll walk you to the bus stop.'

'Bus stop?' he asked, once they had negotiated the traffic and reached the other side.

'It's a euphemism for a good spot from which to Disapparate,' she explained, smiling. 'Down here.' She slotted her arm into the crook of his and guided him through the wooden stile which guarded the entrance to a narrow path lined with trees and hedgerows. They walked along the dirt-track for a few hundred yards, avoiding puddles and sticky patches of mud until Hermione tugged at his arm and led him through a gap in the brambles into a small clearing.

A light mist of rain began to fall, and the ground between the trees was black with the glistening damp layers of dead leaves which sagged beneath their feet. Hermione detached herself from Snape's arm. 'This is a good place,' she said. 'I sometimes use it.' She walked towards a fallen tree trunk, perched herself on the edge and took out her wand.

'You have Muggle repellent charms in place,' said Snape, walking towards her.

'For extra precaution, yes.'

He nodded his approval as he joined her on the tree trunk. 'You had better not tell Arthur Weasley you have one of those Muggle contraptions; he won't leave you alone all night,' he observed drily.

Hermione turned to him and smiled. 'I thought you would be more disapproving.'

'You are playing the part of a Muggle. I would expect you to embrace every aspect of all that it entails.'

She took out her phone and slid up the lid. The artificial light it emitted was harsh in the dimness of the wooded clearing. Her phone in one hand and her wand in the other: the physical representations of her magical abilities and her Muggle background.

'I'm not "playing the part of a Muggle"; she said. 'It's part of who and what I am.'

'You are deluded, Granger.'

'Stop telling me I'm delusional.'

'Then stop deluding yourself. You are a witch. You cannot escape the fact. You do not belong amongst Muggles.'

'I *am* a witch. I love being a witch, but I don't hate my Muggle side either. It's quite possible for the two to work together,' she replied.

Snape took out his own wand. He pointed it languidly at the branch of a tree and blasted it with a Severing Charm. The branch fell to the floor with a dull thud.

'Not in my experience,' he said.

Hermione took a chance. 'Your parents?'

Snape nodded and prepared to attack another branch until Hermione's hand gently grasped his wand arm and guided it back down to his side.

'I knew nothing but their conflict,' he said, allowing her intervention. 'I learned from an early age that magic and Muggles should never mix.'

'I don't believe that,' she replied softly. 'Maybe your experience of a mixed marriage was unhappy, but there are good and bad people in both worlds.'

'I'm well aware of that, yet I found precious little of the former in either.'

This was the nearest Snape had ever reached to sharing anything from his past, and Hermione was damned if she was going to let a little thing like responsibilities of work get in the way. Her thumb discreetly found the off button on her phone and she stowed it away in her pocket. She held her wand in both hands, twisting it through her fingers as she spoke.

'But *some*,' she said gently. 'You did find *some*.'

'Yes,' he admitted. 'But never for long.'

She was surprised when he allowed her to take a gloved hand in hers, and even more so when no objections were made to a head tentatively leaning into his shoulder and resting against it with a deep sigh.

They remained like that for minutes, Hermione constantly expecting him to pull away and make a curt exit at any moment. But although he didn't exactly relax into the gesture (his hand did not curl around hers, nor did his head tilt in response to her movement), he seemed intent on remaining so barely a muscle moved as they sat in silence in the cold, damp clearing.

It was Hermione who broke the spell.

'You know, it might be fun to make them think we're a proper couple,' she said lifting up her head.

He turned to look at her. 'It would provoke even more attention than we can already expect. Perhaps even animosity. That is, if anyone would believe it possible.'

She smiled. 'We could make them believe it.'

'They would think you Imperioed, or under the influence of Amortentia.'

'Honestly, Professor! You and I as a couple isn't *that* much of a stretch,' she replied, letting go of his hand.

'I am surprised at your naivety. I am twenty years your senior, with neither good looks nor charm to recommend me as a romantic prospect. Tell me, Granger, if not via the Dark Arts, why else would anyone believe Hermione Granger happy to settle for Severus Snape?'

Hermione was too stunned by his answer to reply immediately. She stood from her position and took several steps into the middle of the clearing, her back to Snape, her head bowed, contemplating the comforting familiarity of the wooden instrument of magic in her hands.

She thought of her failed, brief romance with Ron more anticipation and expectation than an actual relationship once they had finally declared themselves a couple. She considered her recent love interest with Chris Jones, who was all the things she had declared him to be: considerate, compassionate, attentive. He had the good looks denied Snape: a wholesome, sun-kissed, white-toothed kind of handsome which always made her feel like she should try harder with her own appearance. Yet thoughts of him never raised her pulse rate not even by a single beat per minute. And when she lay awake at night, it was not *his* voice caressing her thoughts with his silken vowels and velvety consonants.

Snape's proximity had always provoked a physical reaction; as an eleven-year-old hopeful, it was trepidation. But that soon turned to a reverential respect, though it was still coupled with the same tinge of fear. By the time she had reached the end of her penultimate school year, and discovered him to be a traitor, the respect had turned to disappointment, anger and a sense of betrayal. She had believed in him, dared to see past the brutish aspect. She had known, with a sense of certainty, that he was no self-serving, power-hungry Death Eater in search of glory he was above all that. Then, when the final battle was won and Harry had shared all he knew of Snape's true loyalties, her disappointment and anger were turned on herself. She felt ashamed. She had been right, after all, to give him her faith. Right to chide those who doubted him; yet Hermione, who prided herself on insight and wisdom, had believed him capable of betrayal, murder and cowardice. She despised her own cowardice, her own failure to see beyond the sneer when it really mattered.

Snape had moved to join her. He was standing directly in front of her with his back to the sunlight so that his features appeared in shadow. Hermione looked up at him and felt such a rush of compassion for his self-doubt that before she had time to debate the wisdom of her actions, it was too late.

If he was surprised by her kiss, he didn't show it. His lips, she discovered, were cool and soft beneath her own. His body was tense, and his arms remained by his side. But later that night, when Hermione went over it for the hundredth time, she was sure he had lowered his head and parted his lips just a little. She let go of his coat lapels and broke the kiss, suddenly saturated with a sense of awkwardness and hesitancy at her own audacity. His expression didn't change. There was no smirk and no look of revulsion. It didn't appear that he was about to attack her with a vicious put-down or a spiteful retort. The two eyed each other warily for longer than comfort could endure, until Snape finally ended the torture.

'I will be in touch,' he said softly. 'Expect an owl.'

'Right,' she replied. 'An owl.'

'With details,' he explained.

'Details, yes.'

'Arrangements.'

'For the ball, yes,' she replied.

'I'll say goodbye then.'

Hermione's smile remained in place for the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening. The following day she woke up with it plastered across her face and wondered if she could ever feel miserable again.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 10

A mysterious woman, a Muggle pub and Severus Snape. Is there more to her than meets the eye?

Chapter Seven

Hermione felt more phantom than physical as she glided amidst the shocking pinks, emerald greens and midnight blue splashes that constituted the magical guests of the tenth anniversary Victory Day Ball. She felt as if she had tumbled head first, Alice-style, into one of her dreams: every detail seemed real enough, yet she didn't feel quite present. If it were not for the indisputable evidence of her solidity, she would have doubted that this was any reality she had ever been familiar with. But the indication was there people greeted her, spoke to her, complimented her on her appearance, wanted to know everything about her long absence. She must have replied in kind, because no one, so far, had appeared bemused or affronted.

Minerva McGonagall was the first of the Hogwarts staff to greet her; she had been moved to display two glistening eyes and her assurances that Hermione had been missed and thought of constantly. The Headmaster, Filius Flitwick, was next; he had shaken her hand so vigorously that she had been obliged to ask for it back. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, had treated her to a breath-stopping bear hug, told her she was the last person he had expected to see, and introduced her to his wife, Hannah. Hermione spoke to Percy Weasley, Ron and Lavender, and Luna and Xenophilius Lovegood. Even Draco Malfoy was present, if not prominent. He and his partner, a tall, thin woman, spoke only to each other and very few other guests. Hermione had never expected to feel anything like pity for Malfoy junior there had been times when she longed to re-enact the forceful slug she had visited on his smug, pale face in her third year, but all that had changed. She could only see him now as another victim of pure-blood supremacy. She caught his eye as she wandered from former acquaintance to old friend in her dream-like state, and though she didn't quite have the nerve to strike up a conversation, a half-smile and a slight nod, which she was happy to return, felt like more of a resolution than the fifteen minute full-on conversation with Minerva.

The entirety of the wizarding world, at least Hermione's experience of it, appeared to be congregated into the Entrance Hall, waiting for the doors of the Great Hall to be opened: the signal to announce the commencement of the evening's festivities. The notable and perturbing exception to the party, however, was a certain former Headmaster and supposed current escort to Hermione Granger.

Hermione's elation, following her last meeting with Snape, had lasted for forty-eight hours. The expected owl had arrived three days after his somewhat diffident goodbye. It was a short, curt missive, so formal that she would have wondered if it had been sent by some Ministry Official if it wasn't for the signature, which declared itself to be from Severus Snape. The note informed Hermione that he would call on her at 7:45 on the evening of the ball and requested her address by return owl. He had ended the note in the trust that she had suitable attire for a formal function and on the assumption that she had managed to end her friendship with "the Muggle".

Hermione knew she had no right to be disappointed by the dismissively decorous tone of the note. It was not as if she expected him to refer to her as "my love" or to send assurances of his devotion although thoughts of his sonorous drawl uttering such protestations actually brought a pink tinge to her cheeks. Yet she had hoped for something which would at least reassure her of his acceptance of her friendship. She had replied by sending her address, as requested, as well as her affronted assurances that she would most certainly be suitably attired, along with her hopes that her escort could also make that claim. Her postscript confirmed that the unfortunate Chris Jones had indeed been dispatched with. The only reply she had received to that note had been over a week later. It arrived on the morning of the ball, and instead of the confirmation she had expected it to contain, it expressed a short apology, which stated that, due to unforeseen circumstances, he would not be able to call on her as arranged; he would see her at the ball and trusted she would be punctual.

Her preparations were thrown into turmoil at the prospect of having to turn up alone. She had almost decided to send a reply owl, informing her ungallant escort that she had caught a cold and couldn't make it, but a severe self talking-to and a couple of glasses of red wine decided her fate. Besides which, she had paid the Muggle hairstylist a fortune to create the elegant pleat which she had needed magical intervention to produce for the Yule Ball fourteen years previously. And she would allow nothing to prevent her from wearing the beautiful charcoal-grey robes, purchased two days previously from Madam Malkin. The finest dress-maker in wizarding Britain had needed no Alteration Charm to compel the robes to caress her figure in exactly the right places. The fit was so perfect and the result so dazzling that they might have been tailor-made for her.

He was twenty minutes late. The guests had been told to arrive at eight o'clock and were packed into the Entrance Hall, chatting, laughing, being reunited with old friends and colleagues waiting to be called into the Great Hall. Everyone Hermione spoke to had asked after her partner. All had responded with varying degrees of scepticism, incomprehension or amusement when she had assured them that her escort, Severus Snape, would be arriving shortly.

'Severus never comes to these functions,' Madame Pomfrey explained patiently to Hermione.

'Yes, I know he hasn't been to any in the past, but he's coming to this one.' Hermione had noticed the sense of panic in her own voice, as if she didn't quite believe it herself. Madame Pomfrey had given her the look she normally reserved for patients suffering from irreversible magical maladies.

Harry and Ginny appeared to be the only ones not to doubt her, which was hardly surprising, as she had informed them a week ago of her plans to attend the ball. Hermione had wondered, at the time, why they had been more surprised when she had told them of her intention to accept the invitation, than when she tentatively admitted who it was she would be going with. She had expected astonishment at the very least. Harry's animosity towards his former teacher had vanished along with his belief in Snape's treachery. Hermione had, nevertheless, anticipated spending quite some time patiently convincing and explaining. Yet both Harry and Ginny had seemed as if it was news they had almost been waiting for, and if they didn't show delight at the information, they certainly didn't show abhorrence either.

'He'll be here,' said Harry, offering Hermione the champagne flute he had just retrieved from one of the silver trays, floating servilely around the perimeter of the room.

'He's cutting it bloody fine,' hissed Hermione, taking it from him and downing a third of the glass in two anxious gulps.

'Why did he say he couldn't escort you himself?' asked Ginny.

'He didn't!' Hermione's head appeared to be on a swivel. Every time the great oak doors opened to admit someone new, her neck craned over the flamboyant head-pieces and coiffed hairdos, in the hopes of glimpsing a pair of supercilious black eyes searching her out. She almost muttered aloud the expletive which had formed itself on her lips when the new arrivals turned out to be only Bill and Fleur Weasley. She berated herself for her lack of charity; she knew she should be pleased to see them; it had been so long.

It was almost eight-thirty. The guests were beginning to glance towards the Great Hall doors in anticipation of the beginning of procedures. This was a formal affair; there was a Master of Ceremonies in attendance. The guests would be announced into the Great Hall in couples with a brief reference to their title and the position they held in the wizarding world. Hermione dreaded the next five minutes her mind conjured up the unthinkable scenario which awaited her if Snape didn't turn up soon. She envisaged the formal proclamation:

Professor of Herbology, Neville Longbottom, and his wife, Hannah.

Glenda Chittock, presenter of Wizarding Wireless Network show, Witching Hour, and her husband, Charles.

Gaspard Singleton, celebrated inventor of the Self-Stirring Cauldron and the Hands-Free Chopping Knife, along with his wife, author of books for young witches and wizards, Esmeralda Cartwright.

Hermione Granger, teacher of Muggle reprobates.

He clearly wasn't coming. The anticipation of her humiliation fuelled her anger. Fury and resentment surged through her veins like cold venom. This whole charade had apparently been some malicious, elaborate hoax, his way of making sure she suffered in the extreme for what she had done. He had meant it when he had called her company odious. The ferocity of his anger at her betrayal ten years ago was obviously far greater than she had believed; he had been looking for vengeance, for a way to see justice implemented. His warped, cruel mind had realised how best to humble and destroy her: have her stand in front of everyone she had ever known or cared about, and let them see her failure; let them laugh at the star of Gryffindor behind her back, or worse still pity her. The only thing preventing her from actually shedding tears was the small pleasure stimulated by fantasies of how she would get Snape back for this. She imagined him on the receiving end of a Canary Transfiguration Hex and relished the image of him draped in bright feathers and chirping cheerfully, with a very indignant scowl etched onto his yellow face. Or perhaps an Entrail-Expelling Curse would wipe the slate clean, she thought darkly; he may think twice about crossing Hermione Granger once he was wearing his guts as a new set of robes. But no! Personal disfigurement wasn't satisfying enough; she wanted to really see him suffer maybe she would break into his Potions lab and destroy every last cauldron, vial, instrument and stinking vital ingredient she could point her wand at.

The door to the Great Hall opened. The Master of Ceremonies appeared, resplendent in crimson silk robes, matching wide-brimmed hat, and a full silver beard, almost as long as Dumbledore's. With the use of a Sonorus Spell, he called calm on the room and requested everyone present to form an orderly queue. Hermione politely refused Harry and Ginny's insistence that she go in to dinner with them; she'd be damned if she was going to hide in the shadow of Harry Potter again. She'd had her fill of being friend to The Chosen One glad though she had been to be there for him when it mattered. Let the congregation know, if they must, that she was Hermione Granger, destroyer of Horcruxes, teacher of Muggles, and owner of two cats. The red-robed wizard could announce her mediocrity to the lot of them for all she cared any longer.

Figures moved around the room, readying themselves for the formalities. Lost partners were searched for and found, others walked together towards the stone steps leading up to the Great Hall doors. Hermione lost sight of Harry and Ginny in the co-ordinated commotion. With a sudden failure of courage, she realised that if she hung back as everyone grouped at the far end of the room, not a soul would notice her absence. The evening was frost-filled and bleak with the promise of snow in the air. Yet even the harsh weather conditions beyond the doors seemed a more welcoming prospect than the certainty of condescending sympathy within.

She allowed the witches and wizards, in all their finery, to push past, letting them get ahead of her while all the time she shuffled slowly backwards, careful to avoid catching the attention of anyone who might take pity on her and insist she accompany them. The gap between herself and the crowd widened as she edged her way towards the entrance door. She took one last lingering look at the brightly coloured throng before turning around to make her great escape.

'Going so soon?' said Snape.

In her determination to leave unnoticed, Hermione had been unaware that the door behind her had opened to admit one more guest. She hadn't noticed that a tall dark figure had been standing behind her and watching her turmoil for several minutes. The great oak doors framed him in shadow against the back-drop of the black night beyond.

'Oh!' she gasped, the dilemma of whether to react with outrage, relief or jubilation, rendering her inarticulate.

He glanced towards the rear of the thinning crowd and raised an eyebrow. 'You were leaving?'

'I *thought* you weren't coming,' she spat.

'Why would you think I wouldn't come? I informed you I would be late. You received my owl I take it?'

She nodded feebly, feeling foolish for her earlier self-pitying doubts and misgivings.

He continued, 'My supplier of Ashwinder eggs from Angora was in the country. He rarely makes contact meeting him was essential then, of course, the eggs...'

'... needed to be frozen, yes. I understand the urgency, I just... panicked.'

He didn't look much like the greasy git from the dungeons, standing there before her. His travelling cloak was folded neatly over his left arm; he wore velvet robes so black that all his previous outfits seemed a dull grey in comparison. His hair was tousled from the cold night air and swept back from his face instead of hanging down limply over his pale cheeks, and he smelled of cauldron smoke, winter evenings and soap.

He held out an arm. 'Shall we?'

'Once more into the breach,' she muttered as she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, relishing the feel of slippery soft velvet and the joy of relief.

Walking arm-in-arm across the stone-flagged floor, Hermione glanced up at him. 'You never gave me an answer,' she said.

He quirked an eyebrow.

'Are we going to dupe them all or not?' she continued.

He let go of her arm and moved to stand in front of her. 'Are you prepared for the attention it will bring?' he asked.

'Are you?'

'I have endured worse. I believe appearing in front of the school as Headmaster, when most believed I murdered the last one, was more gruelling.'

'Yes, I suppose it was,' she answered. 'And I've already spent half an hour suffering their patronising kindness. It was obvious no one believed you were coming: either with me or without me.'

'It will be worse than that when they think I have either deceived you, or you have deceived yourself. I doubt they will believe you could ever *formea* feelings of attachment towards your old Potions master.'

Hermione's smile was mischievous. Snape's timely arrival had not only removed her fears, but it had also ignited a tiny flicker of an almost forgotten emotion. Elation sparked in her gut. Perhaps it wasn't the kind felt by fairytale princesses, enchanted by love's first kiss, but it was the beginning of something good, something that didn't feel bitter or cynical or wretched. A glimmer of optimism warmed her spirit like the smallest present under the Christmas tree. It gave her a powerful feeling that anything was possible, and nothing was insurmountable. The feeling of recklessness made her reply more flirtatious than she had intended.

'We'll just have to try extra hard to make them believe it then... Severus,' she said, making to grasp his arm again.

Snape's expression showed signs of bemusement, but he smiled, nevertheless. He lifted his head to look towards the doors and the handful of guests waiting to be

announced into the Great Hall. Some of them turned around to see who was dragging behind, their surprise on realising the newcomer obvious.

A look of intent flashed in his eyes seconds before he bent towards her. She held her breath as his eyes sliced into hers. A burning sensation seared into her skin: the reaction to his fingers lightly tracing a path from her bare shoulder to the curve of her chin. His thumb brushed her lips in one seductively deliberate stroke. Nothing else existed when she parted them, as if compelled by magical force to accept the anticipated kiss. His head dropped to hers, his mouth touched her own, an achingly soft pressure just for one brief moment before forcing her lips apart with his and turning the kiss into a deep, forceful act of possession. She felt his tongue slide into her mouth, and his hands gripped her shoulders as if she would fall to the floor like a marionette if he let go. She clutched at his waist to steady herself and responded with a stifled groan of suppressed want. If she had been harbouring any doubts about her own feelings towards him, she now knew that whatever she felt emotionally or intellectually, the fact remained: her physical response to him was unashamed pleasure.

She was kissing Severus Snape. Not some chaste, sweet act of friendship, but a fierce, impatient lover's embrace. And though every bit of reason she could summon cried out in revulsion, every inch of flesh craved for more attention. She didn't want to feel his hands on her shoulders; they should be caressing all of her: her arms, her waist, her breasts, her hips. And his lips she wanted them to move down to her throat to feel teeth, tongue and flesh tear across her skin. She wanted his passion and his anger, his bitterness and resentment; she wanted to feel what he felt and she wanted to be naked beneath him when she did.

He withdrew from the kiss unhurriedly, loosening his grip on Hermione's shoulders and moving his hand up to the nape of her exposed neck. He pulled her gently towards him and lowered his face to her ear. She could smell him, almost taste him; she could feel the coarseness of his jaw scraping against her soft skin, sending currents of desire pulsating along her spine. His hawk-like nose nuzzled into her hair, and she prayed for him to move a little lower. She wanted to feel his heavy breath on her skin and hear deep reciprocal sighs of pleasure as tongue and teeth moistened the soft flesh of her ear.

Every nerve-ending shivered with pleasure in response to his warm breath on her skin; but Hermione's shameless enjoyment was short-lived when, instead of more kisses, he muttered in her ear, 'Well that should give Minerva something else to disapprove of.'

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 10

A mysterious woman, a Muggle pub and Severus Snape. Is there more to her than meets the eye?

Chapter Eight

Familiar places, when returned to after a long absence, often seem somehow less than whatever the imagination fashions them into. Rooms are smaller, colours less vibrant. Even the climate of one's remembered past is warmer in summer and whiter in winter than anything possible in reality. Not so Hogwarts. Since arriving at the school gates, everything Snape encountered had actually surpassed his memory and his capacity to create and imagine. The grounds, even in the dead of night, were vaster than he recalled as he swept through them towards the great oak doors. The castle's facade was even more impressive, and the entrance hall itself was statelier than he remembered. But his capacity to imagine had never been called into question more than the vision of womanly perfection which greeted him as he threw open the huge wooden door. Even from across the room, as she edged towards him, she appeared to him like a fairy queen from some once-remembered Muggle fable. He watched the creature in mute fascination: unable to move forwards, unable to speak. She was dressed in silk the colour of storm clouds. The fabric of her robes seemed to pour over her body like liquid, clinching her waist, then sweeping down gracefully to gather in a pool at her feet. She looked as if she had emerged at that moment, newborn and fully-formed, from a lake of molten pewter. Her hair was gathered at the nape of her neck in an intricate pleat; a few tendrils falling teasingly about her bare shoulders, begging to be touched.

It was only when she turned around and almost collided with him that he realised the "exquisite angel" was none other than his date. It was with great effort that he called upon all his *Dark-Lord-deceiving* powers of Occlumency to appear unaffected by the sight of Granger in a dress. His facade was inscrutable; but he was grateful for the high collar of his dress robes, which hid the rise and fall of his Adam's apple as he swallowed his admiration. When she anxiously asked him if he was prepared to go through with the real couple charade, he almost snorted out loud, just from the relief of knowing he could legitimately touch her. He would berate himself for his foolish weakness in the cold light of day, but for tonight he intended to take what was offered and savour the pleasure it would bring.

He would have interpreted anything she said at that point as an invitation to kiss her, so it was a great relief when she boldly suggested they make extra efforts to ensure their success. And when she called him Severus, nothing could have prevented him from leaning down to taste her. Her response to the kiss was no less surprising than his own; he had only meant it to be a display for lingering guests who happened to turn around and see the return of the spy for themselves at least that was what he told himself. A peck on the cheek was what he intended. But her skin was like carved marble in the candlelight, and she looked so beseeching staring up at him expectantly. What was a lonely wizard to do when the woman he has come to see as unique, gifted and beautiful parts her soft lips and pierces his soul with her smile? He was not made of cold steel, despite appearances to the contrary. It seemed that she would have been more than adequate in the field of espionage herself. Her response was ardent; it was as if she meant it, as if she had wanted it for some time.

Was it possible that her passion was genuine?

'That should give Minerva something else to disapprove of,' he had said.

His own reckless lust for the girl was beginning to cloud his judgement; he could have sworn he had read disappointment at his words in eyes that mirrored his own desire.

'Who gives a flying ...? I don't give a damn what Minerva, or any of them think.' Defiance and mischief flashed in her eyes. Hermione Granger was full of surprises, it seemed. He found that he had a liking for devil-may-care Granger; it gave her an edge and appealed to the latent fiend who existed in the darkest shadows of his mind and longed for company. He picked up a curl, which lay against her bare shoulder, and rubbed it softly between his fingers, unsure of the meaning of her almost imperceptible shudder in response to the gesture. He hoped it signalled pleasure, but suspected revulsion.

'How long have we been together?' he asked, testing her power to withstand an interrogation.

'Three months.'

They turned together and walked up the stone steps leading to the Great Hall. They stood arm-in-arm, defying the assembly to judge them, as the Master of Ceremonies announced them in to dinner.

'How did we meet?' he whispered in her ear. The announcement of Professor Severus Snape and his partner, Miss Hermione Granger, prompted the room to near silence, and all eyes turned towards them. Two seconds of hush, followed by a return to glib chatter and forced laughter, accompanied the returning witch and wizard as they made their way to their table.

'I sought you out. I had things I needed to talk to you about,' she answered. They nodded and smiled at old acquaintances already seated at their tables.

'Good. The most effective form of deceit is to pepper it liberally with the truth,' he replied.

'Because if I believe it, they will believe it,' Hermione responded.

The Great Hall was set out as it had been for the Yule Ball during the Triwizard Tournament. The four House tables, the symbol of disunity, were gone; in their place were at least two hundred round tables, each with a place setting for six guests. Snape and Hermione were the last two to arrive at their table, which was already occupied by Professor Slughorn and his guest, Wilbert Slinkhard. Professor Vector and her husband, a serious-looking wizard in deep blue robes, were also seated at the table. Preliminary introductions and brief expressions of surprise and pleasure were made, but no further opportunity for enquiries were possible as the Headmaster, at that moment, climbed up a convenient set of wooden steps to enable him to reach the podium. He asked the room for silence and began his welcome speech.

'What do you see in him?' Snape murmured into Hermione's ear.

'Who? Flitwick?'

'Don't be obtuse. They will want to know what could possibly have tempted you to a man who is viewed by most as sinister at best.'

'Oh!'

She picked up her goblet of wine and took a sip before making her reply. 'He makes me laugh,' she said, giving him a sly look before once again appearing to be absorbed in the Headmaster's speech. 'He understands my love of books and my preference for solitude. He understands it because he shares it.' She stopped and clapped along with everyone else at some reference Flitwick had made to the sacrifices made during the war. Then she leaned over and spoke quietly again into his ear. 'No one would disagree that it is easier to see him as the villain of the piece. He has a cruel tongue and an unforgiving nature.'

Her lips brushed his lobe, her breath was warm and enticing, and her words were confounding. 'He doesn't pretend to be nice,' she continued. 'He doesn't pretend to be a hero, even though I know he is. We *all* know he is.'

Snape tried to focus all his attention on the Headmaster, but every nerve ending was concentrating on the woman whispering her apparent admiration for him in his ear.

'He is the best kind of hero,' she continued, once she had paused for a sip from her glass and a smile of approval at whatever it was Flitwick was saying, 'because he never expected recognition, that wasn't his motivation. He did it for the best of reasons: he did it out of remorse, not for glory or reward.'

He stared diligently towards the front of the Hall, seemingly gripped by the welcome speech. He was far more aware, however, that his partner had just placed her hand gently on top of his own; a futile gesture of affection, in his opinion, since no one could see it under the table.

'And if that doesn't earn him the respect of us all, I don't know what does,' she murmured, almost to herself.

Snape was momentarily stuck for an appropriate answer. He could not afford to succumb to the allure of Granger's pretence, no matter how much his soul yearned to hear it. He turned his attention to the Headmaster's gratitude that so many had been able to attend the ball this year. More polite clapping around the room conceded to his sentiments.

'You seem to have given it some thought,' he replied, recovering himself.

'Yes.' Hermione turned to give him a dazzling smile.

'I suppose if you said it with enough conviction, there would be some willing to believe in your ingenuous delusion.'

Hermione laughed at the joke Flitwick had just made at the expense of the Ministry before turning her attention back to her partner. 'Perhaps you're the delusional one, Severus,' she said.

There was no opportunity to reply, even if something suitably sardonic had come to mind. The Headmaster ended his speech by inviting everyone to tuck in, and the table was suddenly groaning under the weight of platters of dressed salmon, carved turkey, ham and beef. Dishes of piping hot roast potatoes and the largest selection of vegetables that Snape had seen since he had last eaten at Hogwarts over ten years ago, adorned the table, the signal for the commencement of the feast.

The occupants of the table, along with the rest of the Hall, erupted into lively conversation as the feast began. Slughorn and Snape soon became embroiled in some potions-related matter, and Hermione was left to answer Professor Vector's curious enquiries regarding her former Potions professor and their relationship. Her questions went very much in accordance with Snape's speculation; she wanted to know how they had met, how they became involved, *why* they became involved. Hermione was surprised, however, when Professor Vector seemed to receive all her answers with little astonishment, but with what instead seemed to be approval. Hermione had expected condemnation and a certain amount of hostility from his ex-colleagues as well as her own current and former friends. She considered that perhaps Professor Vector had a more accepting nature than most and was unlikely to be representative of everyone else's views.

A lull in conversation brought Hermione and Snape's attention momentarily back to each other.

'Professor Vector seems happy for us,' Hermione said softly.

'Indeed?' Snape replied. 'She grilled you on the whys and wherefores?'

'Yes. Precisely as you supposed. She didn't seem at all surprised.'

'You gave her the hero speech?'

'I almost had to lend her my hanky,' Hermione replied.

'She didn't want to know about the obvious physical obstacles?'

'I don't follow.'

'We are hardly a match made in heaven.'

Hermione was humiliated by Snape's inference that she possessed some physical characteristic which was unappealing enough to expect people to actually comment. She wondered what exactly it was that he objected to and couldn't prevent her mind from wandering back to the conversation she had had with his mirror, who had accused her of plainness and lack of effort. She had never harboured any pretensions to beauty or charm, but being unfavourably compared to a paid tart had been hurtful, nevertheless. Then there was the only other female in his life: the Goddess amongst women, the pinnacle of femininity, the witch who resided at the very top of Snape's pedestal. Hermione had once seen a photograph of Harry's mother. With her beautiful emerald green eyes and her auburn hair, hanging down to her waist, Lily Evans must have seemed like the Lady of Shalott herself to young Severus Snape. Hermione thought of her own plain brown mess, tamed tonight only by the skill of a hair stylist. Her own hair, she had to concede, had always been an object of irritation, ridicule and mirth, yet she had never quite been able to bring herself to have it cut. If Samson's hair was the representation of his strength, then Hermione's was her identity. Without it, she couldn't say who she was: she had always been the bushy-haired know-it-all.

Severus Snape was a man with standards, or so it seemed. He may not be the possessor of good looks or considerable attractions himself, but he evidently prized beauty above all things in others. She turned to glare at him, stung by the implications this revelation had on her own self-esteem. 'You always hated my hair, didn't you?' she snapped. 'I suppose it *does* have a life of its own, and I know it can be very irritating to be around, but honestly, I do think it rather shallow of you to hold my hair against me it's only hair, it has nothing to do with the person I am underneath ...'

'Granger! You can't possibly imagine I was referring to you?' said Snape, incredulity matching the amusement in his eyes.

'Oh!' She turned a shade pink at the realisation of his statement. 'You mean yourself?'

'Obviously!'

Hermione snorted with relief as she took a bite from a glazed carrot, dangling on the end of her fork. Snape's attention was stolen once again by Slughorn, while Hermione and Mr. Vector discussed Muggle Christmas traditions versus wizarding ones until coffee was served and the feast was over.

On Flitwick's command, the guests stood as one. With a flourish of his wand, tables glided gracefully to the edges of the room, revealing a raised platform as a stage at the far end and a large expanse of empty marble floor in readiness for musicians and dancing, respectively.

Slughorn managed to scoop some Ministry official, apparently out of thin air in order to introduce Snape to the first of many "people of influence" present that evening, leaving Hermione free to wander off in search of a friendly face. She found Ron and Harry on their way back from the punch bowl with drinks for Lavender and Ginny.

'I told you he'd turn up,' Harry said, grinning. 'Want one?' He offered her a short fat glass filled with some ruby-coloured slop containing several pieces of soggy fruit which floated forlornly on the surface. Hermione shook her head and eyed Ron warily. She anticipated the worst reaction of all from him at the very least some adolescent explosion in response to the revelation that Snape was her date. She supposed it might have been easier if she had explained everything beforehand, but the opportunity had simply not arisen. She and Ron still maintained their friendship, though it was based on acknowledgment of what once was, rather than anything they now shared. With Harry it was different; their friendship, having never been tested by experiments with romance, had flourished and continued as it ever was. Yet, regardless of whatever difficulties she and Ron had overcome, Hermione could not bear for him to feel either pity for her or revulsion at the choices she had made. She was startled, therefore, when he smiled back at her with what seemed to be a reassuring gleam in his eye.

'If you're expecting the same reaction you got at the last ball we went to, you'll have a long wait,' he said.

'I was expecting worse,' Hermione replied. 'Victor Krum was bad enough but ...'

'... The greasy git is even worse,' he finished for her.

'Yeah! Well, at one time maybe, but ... we've all been through too much.'

'What have you done with Ronald, Harry?' Hermione replied. Ron's apparent unequivocal acceptance was bewildering, but she was relieved nevertheless. 'Is he Confunded?'

Harry smiled and shook his head. 'He can be quite reasonable sometimes,' he said.

'Cheers, mate,' Ron quipped. 'Seriously Hermione, you, of all of us, have never failed to make the right decision. If you think he's worth spending time with ... I mean, as long as you don't invite me and Lavender round for dinner.'

Hermione beamed at her two friends and threw an arm around each of them. 'If *were* ever to entertain, you two would definitely be invited,' she said. 'But as this whole thing is just a ruse, you can relax; there will be no "evenings with Severus and Hermione"; we are not an item. We're just friends ... kind of. I don't know *what* we are, actually.'

'Well, I'm officially lost,' said Ron.

'Oh! It was my idea.' Hermione unhandedly handed the two of them and apologised to Harry for the punch spillage which her affectionate gesture had caused. She pulled out her wand and aimed it at the burgundy stain on his bright white shirt. '*Tergeo!* I thought it would be better for him to make contacts and appear as a more reliable business prospect if he were part of a conventional couple,' she explained. 'You know, because everyone sees him as some weird hermit. I thought if he were seen in a different light with a woman people of influence would think of him as a standard of normality, rather than a strange recluse to be avoided at all costs. He's been on his own for so long now ...'

Harry and Ron exchanged dubious looks.

'Well, you look like a proper couple to me,' said Ron. 'If it's fake, you're both bloody good at pretending.'

'Just don't let on to anyone else. Please?' Hermione replied.

'Yeah, okay! If you say so. Uh oh! The bat ... sorry, I mean, your boyfriend's on his way over. Catch you later, Hermione. He might be all right, but I'd still rather not have to make small talk with him.' Ron bent down to whisper in Hermione's ear. 'By the way you look amazing tonight. He's a lucky greasy git, fake or not.'

Snape approached Hermione and stood by her side, watching Harry and Ron disappearing into the crowd with the speed of a pair of Seekers after a Snitch.

'Was it something I said?' he drawled.

'More like everything you have ever said.' Hermione smiled at him and took hold of his arm in hers.

'I take it you regaled them with the truth of our situation?'

'I did. But, they were more stunned by the idea of it being a con than the idea of it being *real*. They didn't seem to have a problem with the "obvious physical obstacles" and quite frankly, I have to say, I find the idea ridiculous myself. *I'm* not conventionally pretty; *you* are not conventionally handsome. So far we are matched. And by the way, you look rather, erm ... good tonight.'

She knew she was blushing, but hoped the dim lighting would hide her crimson cheeks. She covered up her embarrassment by filling the would-be profound silence with more profusions of why she considered his statement absurd. 'Tall, dark and mysterious works very well for you.' She ignored the two raised eyebrows that followed her statement. 'Plus, your voice is very, erm ... appealing. And your eyes are rather ... I suppose I'd call them unusual.'

'*Unusual?*' Snape repeated. He had the look of a man caught in the glare of a cobra: fascinated, compelled and fearful all at the same time.

'Yes. Sometimes when you look at me ...' She stopped, suddenly aware of the surreal turn of their conversation. She was about to reveal that she viewed her former teacher as a man who was capable of inciting appreciation, and not merely as a result of knowing that he hadn't turned out to be a bad-guy after all. The realisation was creating an altogether different physical reaction: her face was on fire, her pulse galloped, and she felt slightly nauseous. There was, however, no way of un-saying what she had just begun to say.

'Go on,' he said, giving her the very look she was attempting to describe.

'Well, it's quite ...' She suddenly became fascinated with the clasp on her silver bracelet. '... intimate. More of touch, almost, than a look.' She risked a side-long glance and wished she hadn't; the intensity of his gaze had increased, if anything, but she detected amusement behind the severity of the stare. 'And at other times,' she continued, 'you look at me, and it's as if I'm not even there, or *you're* not. You go blank, but that only makes the other times more ... stirring.'

Snape appeared to have been shocked into silence; a silence which threatened to turn an uncomfortable pause into a humiliating duration. Hermione desperately rifled her depleted stores of awkward moment fillers. She contemplated opening up a discussion on the weather, but dismissed it as too dull. She thought about asking him how it felt to be back at Hogwarts, but rejected *that* as insensitive. Only the deepest agitation, and a wish for an end to the unease, drove her to ask him to reciprocate.

'Of course, you may very well be asked the same question,' she said. They walked arm in arm away from the dance floor, towards a less crowded area and found a clear space to stand and watch the dancers and other guests. They stood by a table piled high with golden goblets, perfectly arranged in a pyramid, magically charmed to cascade like a waterfall, filling the goblets with wine the colour of blackberries as it flowed. They each took a glass from the bottom of the ornate presentation, but rather than teeter and fall, the glasses were immediately replaced, restoring balance to the display.

'I seriously doubt that question will come up, Granger,' he replied.

'Hermione. Who calls their girlfriend by her last name?'

He ignored her request. 'And I have no doubt that not a soul will question *me* on my choice of partner.'

'You can't possibly be sure of that. Draco might. He's here with someone. What if he wants to know?' Hermione persisted.

'What Draco Malfoy does or does not think is of no concern to me; he needs to worry about his own questionable reputation.'

'Someone else then.'

Snape sighed. 'Very well, if, in the unlikely event that someone wants to know what on earth I am doing wasting my charms and virtues on an impressionable witch, I will tell them it was either you or the *Flesh-Eating Hag from Wakefield*, and you have your own teeth.'

Hermione giggled and slapped his arm in mock annoyance.

'Git.'

'Know-it-all.'

You can't think of a single reason? Not even in the spirit of "what if"?

'On the contrary, there are many.'

'Name one.' She raised a hand to Luna, who was on the dance floor doing a very strange version of a waltz with a wizard Hermione didn't recognise.

'Don't rush me,' he said, appearing to concentrate very hard. 'I'm sure I can think of *some* thing.' He tapped a long forefinger rhythmically against his thin lips and made several noises which sounded like 'Hmmm.'

'Think quickly or I'll tell everyone your nickname for me is ... Mimi,' she retorted, raising her goblet to her lips and quirked an eyebrow at him.

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Try me.'

'Granger, I always wondered why you weren't sorted into Ravenclaw; now I see it is Slytherin who was cheated,' he replied.

'Is that the compliment?'

She had no opportunity to hear his reply as the moment was lost to the first interruption of the evening.

'I hope I'm not intruding on a private conversation,' said the Deputy Headmistress, whose approach had been unseen by Snape and Hermione.

They both answered at once. 'Of course not! Not at all!'

'I just wanted to thank you for coming, Severus.' Professor McGonagall continued. 'I have hoped to see you every year. There are things, you see, which need to be said.'

'Minerva ...' Snape began.

'I know it is presumptuous of me to expect you to listen, but I only ask for five minutes, Severus.' Professor McGonagall sounded uncharacteristically ill at ease, but her determination and sincerity were obvious.

'If it is past grievances you wish to discuss, I can assure you, Minerva, that no discussion is necessary,' Snape replied.

'Perhaps not, but would you deny an old woman five minutes?' she replied. Professor McGonagall seemed to relax a touch when he gave his assent with a curt nod. 'Hermione, I apologise for stealing him away from you, I'll be as brief as possible.'

Hermione watched in astonishment and disappointment as Professor McGonagall and Snape walked towards the doors which led to the entrance hall for their private tête-à-tête.

The next hour dragged on relentlessly for Hermione as she had no further opportunity to return to her partner. Snape's attention was required by everyone, or so it seemed. She saw him in conversation with several wizards she was unable to identify as Neville whirled her around the dance floor with an enthusiasm she could not match. She and Snape made eye contact briefly at the end of her waltz with Neville, but Snape and the wizard he was in discussion with seemed too engrossed to give Hermione an opportunity to join in. She did, however, manage to murmur in his ear a reminder that he owed her a compliment. 'I'm still waiting, Severus.'

Snape found the opportunity to reply some minutes later as she stood at one of the drinks tables. He disengaged himself from a stout, balding wizard long enough to mutter in Hermione's ear, 'You were right, Granger. Damocles and I were just discussing the properties of Wolfsbane Potion, which I'm sure you are aware he discovered, when he changed the subject from the correct brewing temperature of the second stage of the process, in order to ask what in Merlin's name I'm doing wasting my time with the young witch with whom everyone seems to want to dance. I told him that my book collection was in need of reorganising and I couldn't afford a librarian.'

'I take back the hero stuff,' she retorted.

Her amusement was short-lived, however, as the aforementioned Damocles, famous inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion, interrupted their banter by reappearing at Snape's side with yet more enlightening reflections on the minutiae of the brewing process. Hermione excused herself once the conversation reached a point which highlighted her own neglect of the subject. She walked away, wishing she had thought to bring a copy of *Advanced Potion Making* with her, and vowing to seek it out as soon as she

returned home.

She accepted Percy Weasley's invitation to sit beside him while he apprised her with latest Ministry policies and procedures. She barely heard his animated description of the part he had played in the new *Muggle-born Discrimination Act*, she was too distracted by the sight of Snape standing at the other side of the room in deep conversation with an attractive witch in elegant, emerald green robes with whom he had just been dancing.

'Who's that with Severus, Percy?' asked Hermione, rudely interrupting his flow.

'Ava Hetherington ... and it is now unlawful, *unlawful* mind, to discriminate on the grounds of blood status.'

'Who is Ava Hetherington?'

'Some *Daily Prophet* reporter, I think ... so discrimination is now a punishable offence, not simply an undesirable one.'

'Oh, really? That's nice.'

'Hermione, are you listening to me? I thought you, at least, would be interested in laws to prevent intolerance and prejudice.'

'Oh! I'm sorry, Percy. I *am* interested, really interested,' she replied. 'Would you excuse me though? There's someone I have to ... sorry, Percy.'

She had noticed Snape standing alone for a moment and could not let the opportunity pass. If she didn't get to him quickly, some other person of note was bound to steal him away from her again, and she had no intention of allowing that to happen. She had spent most of the evening watching the wizard, whom she knew to be cold, distant and silent, in animated conversation with the "Who's Who" of wizarding society. It seemed that the man once shunned, despised and feared was now at the very top of everyone's "must be seen with" list.

Hermione was overjoyed for him; proud of his seemingly successful return to the magical world he had spurned for so long. At least, they were the feelings she knew she should be experiencing. If she was truly the friend she had intended to be for him, pleasure and delight should be radiating from her very toes and fingers. Instead of which, she was aching with a sensation she hadn't experienced since Lavender Brown first threw herself at Ron in their sixth year. Every time she watched Snape's growing ease, she felt her own tentative connection to him fading just a little more. Why should he now care about her need to hear his forgiveness; her wish to make reparation for her negligence ten years previously? She had approached him in that Muggle wine bar with some vague belief that he was in need of a fairy-godmother: some benevolent entity who could walk into his life and soothe away his ills with a kind word and a cheery smile. How could she have been so deluded? *He* was essential to *her*; it had never been the other way around. The only company he had ever really needed was the sort that could be procured for a fee. She had learned from his bathroom mirror that he made full use of the services available to wizards with the means to pay for them. How could it be that she felt less desolate at the idea of him with his hired whores, than she did as she helplessly observed his triumphant homecoming? He would never need her now; he was no longer the Death Eater-turned-spy, the hated murderer or the brutish teacher without mercy or compassion. He was the returning hero, the brilliant Potioneer and God help her, but his nose didn't even look so much like a grotesque beak anymore. He was a catch, and someone else was bound to snare him soon.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione is finding Snape's triumphant 'homecoming' difficult to watch.

□

Chapter 9

Snape was standing in the wake of one of at least two dozen frost-covered Christmas trees. The tall firs edged the walls of the Great Hall, adding to the illusion of nature's intrusion already created by the magical ceiling now dark, starless and filled with heavy clouds ready to burst and turn the world white. The slender figure of Hermione Granger appeared between himself and a backdrop of music, dancing and chatter. He watched her approach from his new-found sanctuary and found it impossible to equate the elegant, silk-draped woman heading his way with the book-laden, hand-waving girl he had once found only an irritating object of derision.

He was very much enjoying the momentary respite from the unexpected attention he had been receiving all evening. He had anticipated icy politeness and gracious indifference from the wizarding elite, instead of which he had been practically welcomed back as a much missed member of the magical world. His reception had been nothing less than astonishing: he had been sought after, introduced to notable witches and wizards, prominent officials and fellow experts in the field of Potions research. There had certainly been no need to feign a relationship in order to induce interest, although he would never admit as much to Hermione. Their pretence had been something of a revelation to Snape: not only was their supposed romantic involvement accepted and approved of, it was seemingly an event which was looked upon as worthy of congratulations and good wishes.

He had spent almost as much time throughout the evening assuring curious enquirers that there were absolutely no plans to tie the knot just yet, and just as long wishing to be left alone so that he could actually spend some time with his "heavenly vision in silk" as Slughorn had described her. The whole evening was having a strange intoxicating effect on Snape: his warm reception, the familiar ostentatious surroundings, fine wine, plentiful food and the entire room believing the witch on his arm to be his own doting, beautiful angel. As long as he remembered that the "doting" part was a temporary, one-night only arrangement, he might leave Hogwarts this evening in the realisation that this could now count among one of his four most satisfactory days to date.

Snape's one of four seemed about to turn sour, however, as Hermione, having made her way over, now stood before him wearing an expression which was remarkably similar to the one he had seen when she had marched into his hallway, uninvited and dripping wet, all those weeks ago.

'I'd like to dance, please!' she said by way of a greeting. Her voice shook with the effort of maintaining her composure.

'I believe we discussed this,' he replied, unsure of the motivation behind her anger.

'You said you don't dance! You do dance; you just danced with Ava *Whats her name*. And if you can dance with her, you can bloody well dance with me!'

'Would you mind explaining your petulant behaviour?' Snape asked.

'You told me you wouldn't dance, yet as soon as some witch in a dress that leaves nothing to the imagination shows an interest, you can't wait to thrower around the dance floor. How do you think that makes me look?'

'I can assure you my motives were business related. Ava Hetherington is the deputy editor of...'

'Yes! I know who she is!'

'And I have danced with one woman all evening, whereas you have barely left the dance floor.'

'Well, what else am I to do when you're off schmoozing all evening?' Hermione replied heatedly.

'Making influential contacts was rather the point of this evening and our little ruse if you recall. You are forgetting yourself, Granger. This is not a pleasure trip; we are here for a purpose: my purpose. If I decide to dance a foxtrot with Aurora Sinistra, a tango with Madame Pomfrey and the quick-step with Professor Trelawney, I need neither your permission nor your approval to do it.'

The impulse to add that he would infinitely prefer to manoeuvre around the dance floor with Granger in his arms than any other living soul surprised him, but he had no trouble suppressing that particular troublesome thought; it would not do to incite her antipathy once she discovered his weakness for her. He had imagined her in his arms often enough these last few months, although his imagination had compelled her to do far more intimate acts than dancing. When the fantasies had first begun to prevent sleep from descending, he had made some attempts to refuse them access to his mind. There could be no place for Hermione Granger in the part of his head that enjoyed the heat and touch of a willing, lust-filled woman. She did not belong in the depraved corners of his mind. She was his former student and practically half his age; for the majority of the time he had known her, she had been merely a girl. How could he possibly be having lewd thoughts about a woman who was once a child in his care?

He had tried desperately to rely on his old favourites to keep Hermione out. The witch who sold him potions ingredients at the Apothecary could surely be relied upon to replace thoughts of Granger. Madam Fouracre was an attractive enough witch, and Snape's imagination regularly found the two of them closing up shop early on a Saturday afternoon while she showed him her full range of rare and exceptional goods. Make-believe Madam Fouracre was a filthy little witch who could always be relied upon to drive away any chaste thoughts, should they dare to intrude on his pleasure. Their Saturday afternoons of lust and debauchery usually, and satisfyingly, ended by the shapely witch (now divested of her robes), bending over the shop counter and shouting out her pleasure while raking her long, red manicured fingernails down his sweat-soaked back. He rarely even bothered to cast an imaginary Muffliato, in the trust that all of Diagon Alley would hear his name leaving her lips in a frenzy of ecstasy, along with half a dozen expletives and a fervent plea that he must not stop on any account.

Unfortunately, more often than not of late, Granger had been the witch who greeted him with a coquettish smile and a flirtatious wink when he entered the make-believe Apothecary, demanding to know when his make-believe order for Boomslang Skin would be arriving. Granger was the witch who replied to his serious request by slowly unbuttoning the make-believe buttons of her tight red blouse, which was uncannily like the one she had worn in that Muggle wine bar three months ago. It was Granger who would sashay around the counter, point her wand at the door to lock it, then proceed to perform the most tantalisingly slow, arousal-inducing make-believe strip-tease his imagination could conjure. And it was Granger's warm brown eyes searing into his, once she had made her way down his naked torso: an unhurried, exquisite descent with lips, tongue and hot breath until she reached a very real aching erection.

His success in dispelling her from the part of his mind reserved for gratuitous acts of a very pleasurable nature, had, so far, been unsuccessful. He was very well aware that he was guilty of over-compensating for his nightly romps with Granger by ensuring her distance with an aloofness only he was capable of, but tonight he had been allowing himself just a glimmer of hope. The faintest possibility had been tugging at his shirt-tails all evening. He had observed her behaviour towards him, and even allowing for the fact that she was playing the role of devoted girlfriend, he had to conclude that she was throwing herself into the part with more zeal than was strictly necessary.

Hermione's face betrayed a deep red flush of anger as she opened her mouth to speak.

'Then go and make influential contacts, Professor. Dance the bloody cha-cha-cha with the *Minister for Small Business Enterprises* if that gets you what you want. I'll see myself home.' With a flourish of escaped curls and the hiss of silk robes, she spun around and left an astonished Severus Snape to contemplate his next move.

He watched her retreat until she was consumed by the crowd. He struggled with the instinct to chase after her, prevent her from leaving, offer his apologies and hope for her compliance. Her behaviour was beyond comprehension. These were the words and actions of a jealous lover, not a reluctant former student with a guilt-fixation.

How was he supposed to even begin to interpret the complexities of her mind? He considered the possibility that in her eagerness to atone for what she believed to be her terrible mistake, she had begun to confuse the idea of penance with affection. He knew what it was to have regret gnaw away all genuine feelings of love, admiration, friendship and romance. Remorse had been his own burden; it had hung about his neck like Coleridge's albatross for almost all of his adult life.

Hermione Granger had wrought havoc on his safe haven of an existence during the past three months. She had brought discord where there was harmony, disquiet where there was calm, and yet, more significantly, light where there was none. The prospect of returning to life without her was now no longer a question of something he would bear and eventually recover from. He did not want to recover; he did not want her gone. But to have a woman in his life who was there only because of her own naive confusion, there as a result of misunderstandings, unrest and delusion, was no better than ensnaring her with a Love Potion. Under such circumstances, she would never really be his. Despite the prospect of losing the only being to show him any real affection, he could no longer let this charade continue. Things had escalated much further than he had ever intended. She must not be allowed to leave without understanding the truth. He made his excuses to the Headmaster, who had just approached him with a request to introduce him to yet another "fellow-enthusiast", and made his way to the Entrance Hall.

Hermione had reached the castle gates by the time Snape had caught up with her. In her eagerness to leave, she hadn't even bothered to summon her travelling cloak.

'It doesn't do my already dubious image any favours if my partner runs away,' he said as he approached her. 'What are you doing out here in the cold without a cloak?'

Her wand was out and pointing at the enormous metal chains which coiled around the iron gates. She reeled around suddenly at the sound of the unexpected voice and cast a hasty Lumos charm.

She threw him a glare. 'My partner won't dance with me,' she said, 'and I can't seem to tear him away from his adoring public.' The first delicate flecks of snow were beginning to descend, falling on head and shoulders, only to evaporate at the merest suggestion of warmth. Snape noticed Hermione's shiver against the biting touch of the cold night air and unbuttoned his jacket deftly; shrugging it from his own shoulders, he placed it around hers.

'My actions tonight have been nothing more than attempts to secure my prospects, as we both agreed.' He was pleased to note that, despite her grievance and attempts to make a dramatic exit, she still accepted his chivalrous act of exchanging his comfort for hers. He watched with jealous eyes as she nuzzled her cheek against the velvet collar of his jacket, and drew the sides tightly around herself.

'You disappeared with Professor McGonagall. How could she assist you with your endeavours?' she asked.

'She had things she wished to say to me privately.'

'So she said,' Hermione replied. 'What things?'

'She felt she needed to apologise.'

'For what?'

He paused, reluctant to divulge the contents of his conversation with Professor McGonagall. 'For her behaviour towards me during my tenure as Headmaster. She was,

shall we say, disruptive.'

Hermione laughed. 'I bet she was! But how was she supposed to know you were working for Dumbledore? How else should she have acted under the circumstances?'

'As I explained,' Snape replied.

'So she wanted your forgiveness?'

'I did not see that there was anything to forgive.'

'You were ages with Professor Flitwick too.'

'We had a remarkably similar conversation,' he explained with a deep sigh.

'And Arthur Weasley?' she asked. 'What was he burdened with?'

Snape hesitated and considered reminding her coolly that his private conversations with the rank and file of wizarding society were none of her business. But he had not rushed out into a freezing cold December evening like some lovesick romantic to antagonise her at the first hurdle. He chose, for once, to indulge her instead. 'He too was remorseful for having thought me a murderer and a betrayer. He also wanted to thank me for the part I played in preventing his son's demise. Apparently, he felt the loss of an ear to be a small price to pay.'

'So... you forgave him as well?' she asked.

'He seemed to need me to say it, though I hardly saw the need.'

Hermione shivered, despite the extra layer.

'Then you have been busy forgiving everyone? Everyone except me. Apparently I'm the only one whose behaviour was too reprehensible to expect it. Have I still not done enough? Can't you just say the words to *me*?' she responded. He could hardly stand to see the look of hurt and disappointment in those gentle, pleading eyes.

'To you? No. I will not.' She flinched at the directness of his refusal and turned away from him as if her tears were too shameful for him to see. Her head drooped and her shoulders shook, but she remained silent, seemingly unable to trust herself to make a reply.

He took a step towards her and made to place a hand on her shoulder before recollecting himself and withdrawing his arm at the last moment. 'You remember that I questioned your Sorting?' he said after a moment's pause. 'I don't doubt it any longer; you were well placed. Ravenclaw insight eludes you still in favour of Gryffindor recklessness.'

'Please don't blame my own shortcomings on my House,' she managed to reply, taking a step away from him so that she was now standing beside the castle gates. Snape watched as she gripped the metal bars and stared out into the dark like a hostage contemplating her freedom.

He couldn't help wishing his arms were still encased in the jacket that comforted her without compassion.

'You misunderstand me. I thought you would have worked it out by now,' he said.

'Something else I've missed?' Her laugh was mirthless. 'Well you know me... if it isn't in a book...'

He ignored her reference to his attack on her two months ago. 'You know, I suppose, that after every traumatic event comes the inevitable fall-out of self-examination?'

She shrugged.

'It is often the case,' he continued, 'for those involved, once the intensity of the event is over, to find their survival inexplicable when so many friends, family and colleagues were not so fortunate.'

'If you are talking of "Survivor's Guilt", there is really no need to bother; I'm quite aware of it. It is a well documented Muggle psychological response to a shocking event a negative reaction based on a mistaken and irrational perception of wrongdoing during the traumatic event. Why do you bring it up?' She turned around to face him, her back now resting against the iron bars of the gate.

'I was not aware of the term, but yes, your definition is, of course, almost word perfect.'

'I haven't been reading up on it if that's what you think,' she replied, half expectant of another insult aimed at her book-reading prowess.

'My point relates to the events of this evening,' he answered.

'You think there are people here experiencing survivor's guilt? Yes, I suppose many are.'

Hermione was aware of the snow, now beginning to fall with more confidence. It settled on Snape's hair and shoulders, yet he hardly seemed to notice the vast approaching arctic conditions, studying her face as he was, with an intensity that was both disconcerting and rather thrilling. 'Perhaps now that you have absolved *them* from their imagined guilt, they can move on.' Her reply was churlish, but she couldn't banish from her thoughts the idea that she was about to have her terrible wrong-doing dissected and evaluated without mercy.

'It is not of *their* conduct that we are speaking; it is yours,' Snape replied.

Hermione bowed her head and waited for the assault.

'It is true,' he continued, 'that there are many unable to scrutinize their actions during times of conflict and feel pride at their deeds or misdeeds.'

'I know this,' she replied, interrupting his attempts at explanation. 'You think I don't know? I... '

'Hermione!'

She had often imagined how her name on his lips would sound. And though she had used every grain of imagination she possessed to recreate the exact timbre and intense quality of his voice, the fantasy had fallen short of the reality. It was as though she had never heard it spoken before. The hush of an orchestra to allow the deep, rich note of a cello to soar into the dark could not have sounded more melodic.

She was silenced at once.

'You *will* let me finish!' he said, betraying a note of exasperation at her interruption.

He paused, and his eyes, usually so guarded, revealed only compassion and sincerity.

'*You*, however, cannot be counted amongst them.'

She opened her mouth to protest and was silenced with a look.

'Your conduct during the whole was exemplary,' he continued softly. 'If there is anyone who should feel pride for their behaviour, it is you.'

Hermione was unable to answer immediately. Once her mind had processed the unthinkable, impossible notion that Snape, in just a single sentence, had exalted her to the highest cloud in the sky, she was so dumbfounded that brain and mouth refused to work together. It was barely conceivable that, rather than view her as the girl who did not care enough to help him when he needed it most, he perceived in her nothing less than a shining example of the consummate crusader.

'But I left you,' she mumbled.

'I was dead.'

'No!'

'I was dead!' he insisted. 'At least, I was beyond the skill of even the most able of Healers certainly beyond anything you could have done.'

Hermione shook her head and swallowed the hard lump that was forming in her throat. 'How can that be true? You are here.'

She tensed as Snape walked towards her and reached into an inside pocket of his jacket. He took out his wand and flicked it in no particular direction. She watched his body visibly relax and knew he had just cast a Warming Charm upon himself. He tapped his wand against his palm and seemed to be lost in thought. Hermione was silent as she watched his actions.

'I am here as a result of the tears of the Phoenix,' he finally said.

'Fawkes?'

He nodded. 'The only possible remedy to the injury I received.' He paused again and sighed as if he had made some momentous decision that gave him no pleasure. 'As I was losing consciousness, my thoughts were of ... *her* ...' He stopped. Even the use of the objective pronoun in place of her name seemed to trigger the need to collect himself. '... Of the hope that I had done enough for Potter to do what he must. Then I thought of Dumbledore and *his* sacrifice ... it was those thoughts that earned me the loyalty of Fawkes.'

'Then it was your own loyalty that saved you,' said Hermione.

'Perhaps.'

'I should have stayed with you.'

'You had work to do. A Dark Lord to defeat.'

There were so many emotions to deal with at once. The revelation that perhaps she could now count herself as absolved from blame was not an easy concept to process. She felt relief, excitement, and a sense that freedom from this burden was hers for the taking if she could only bring herself to believe him. But there lay the conflict: she was eternally grateful that far from forgiving her, he had never blamed her from the start; nevertheless, she knew that forgiving herself would be a longer procedure. There were many restless nights yet to be spent debating the subject of her own absolution, but at least she now had the chance to begin.

'If all you say is true, then why leave it until now to tell me?'

'Because it was not *my* clemency that you were in need of, it was your own. I hoped you would come to realise it without the need for my intervention,' he said.

Hermione stared at him. 'How was I supposed to do that?'

Snape gave her a look that seemed to wonder at her inability to see what should have been obvious.

'Exposure,' he said.

She returned his look with a mixture of exasperation and genuine curiosity.

'Exposure to the object of your supposed guilt,' he continued. 'Distance can increase the intensity of an emotion.'

'I don't see how,' she replied, determined to absorb everything he had to say for fear of this uncharacteristic candour being some once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.

'Haven't you heard that absence makes the heart grow fonder?' he asked. 'The same can be applied to any strong feelings: hatred, anger, jealousy, guilt ... love. All increase if the subject is no longer visible and no longer able to act as an influence to assuage those emotions by their actions.'

'But surely no one can feel anger indefinitely; not without reason. Over the years if there is nothing to fuel it, it becomes less intense, until there is little left of the original emotion.'

He shook his head and folded his arms across his chest. 'On the contrary, without the presence of the person we feel anger towards, the emotion festers and multiplies because their absence gives them no chance to prove themselves otherwise.'

Hermione did not need to ask if this was how his love for Lily had survived for so long without an object to give it sustenance or encouragement. What was now so stark and manifest had never before occurred to her: Severus was a man of unwavering sentiments. Once his sensibilities had been stirred, he was resolute to the point of fanatical.

'I don't suppose "out of sight, out of mind" is a concept that troubles you much then?' she retorted. 'Your theory sets me up for life as a bookish over-eager child who gives you nothing but grief, asks too many questions and tries too hard to be accepted.'

'And then you returned as a woman: a woman who carried an unnecessary burden, a woman barely recognisable, with her enthusiasm and boundless energy all but gone, yet still wearing her principles like a protective shield.'

Hermione couldn't quite determine why it was that her stomach lurched excitedly just because he had referred to her as a woman. It seemed as if he were elevating her to the status of grown-up, which despite their faux-kiss earlier in the evening, she had never really felt. In his company she was awkward and self-conscious, and she had no idea whether to blame it on their former relationship or her current feelings. There existed a new level of awareness now, however. Now she knew that he had never viewed her as the unfeeling monster at the beck and call of Harry Potter. And if he had never considered her in need of atonement, then why would he willingly suggest spending so much time together just so she could "make amends"? And why did he put such an abrupt end to their encounters without giving an adequate explanation? A possibility niggled at the back of her head. She dared to consider the idea that he actually liked her company. Perhaps even more than that: was it possible that he felt something for her too?

Hermione felt far removed from the Muggle teacher with a cross to bear as she stood before her former professor dressed like a princess, armed with a newfound freedom from remorse and immersed in hope. She felt as if anything could be possible tonight. Severus Snape had kissed her; it had felt unfeigned, and she was starting to believe that it had been as significant for him as it had been for her.

'My principles have always been my guide,' she answered.

'Or your crutch.'

'It doesn't matter which; they have kept me from becoming ... lost.' She flinched at her own melodramatic confession.

Snape shook his head. He appeared to have a great deal more to say on the subject, but for whatever reason, he chose not to pursue it.

'We will be missed,' he said instead, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the castle. 'We both disappeared without explanation.'

'They'll probably think we couldn't wait to find some cosy corner to sneak off to,' said Hermione. 'In case you hadn't noticed, everyone seems absolutely fine with the two of us as a couple, despite your fears that we would be condemned as a pair of oddities.'

'I am happy to be proved wrong,' he said.

Hermione's smile was as hesitant as her composure as she shuffled her feet, stared at the glistening white path beneath them and cleared her throat. She hoped that the suggestion she was about to make would sound like some blasé idea which had only just popped into her head. 'Since everyone thinks we are together anyway, perhaps...

He gave her an incredulous look. 'Perhaps what?'

'Well, would it be so bad?'

Snape's snort was hardly surprising, but it was not the reaction she had hoped for. 'What is it you are proposing, Granger? Friendship? A working partnership? *Marriage*? I should perhaps inform you that I am not looking for a bosom buddy, I don't need a business partner, and you and I as a romantic prospect is absurd.'

'I don't see you as a friend either as a matter of fact,' she replied heatedly. 'And you may recall that I have a job that I'm perfectly happy with. As for marriage... I hardly think so.'

She stopped and shivered, pulling his coat closely around her. The wintry conditions seemed to be having a numbing effect on her brain as well as her finger tips. It seemed that the two of them had reached a point whereby the only course to follow was no longer one of pretence and dread of rejection. Hermione could not endure another moment of uncertainty. He would hear her out, and to hell with the risk of humiliation. 'Why not a romantic prospect? It's not such a bad idea.'

'Granger! Didn't you hear a single word I have just said? You are guiltless, no longer bound to me. Yet still you are confusing remorse with affection?' he said, a touch of his former impatience revealing itself in his reply. 'Time to move on. I'm certain the Ministry will be more than willing to welcome back their protégée. You will find some fresh-faced, Ministerial over-achiever, no doubt, to sweep you off your feet.'

'Percy is taken,' she retorted.

'There are always more Weasleys.'

'I tried a Weasley; they're not for me!'

'Then try elsewhere,' he answered with annoyance. 'You will soon come to realise what a great mistake you almost made tonight.'

'Don't you dare say that!' Hermione replied. 'I am perfectly capable of understanding my own feelings.'

'Feelings?' he dared to repeat the word with a sneer in his tone.

'Feelings, yes! Oh, fuck!' She took a step towards him. 'I'd like to see a Ravenclaw admit this: I don't want anyone else. I want you, Severus! If you don't feel the same way, well just have the decency to say so instead of using me and my insanity as an excuse to keep me at bay.'

His expression did not alter, his arms remained by his side, but his eyes were alive with conflicting emotion. Hermione took advantage of his silent agitation and laid a hand tentatively on his chest.

'Why?' he said, neither responding nor preventing her action.

'Why?'

'It is a reasonable question. I have never incited affection in anyone before. I have given you no special treatment.' His chest rose and fell heavily beneath his shirt, and she felt his heart pound out a steady rhythm against her hand. 'You yourself have described me as harsh and unforgiving, which I do not deny. You will forgive me, therefore, if I am suspicious.'

Hermione felt as if he had just given her the all-clear to make her pitch. This was her one chance to convince him of the absolute sincerity of her feelings. She had thought about it often enough; she was prepared for this moment had rehearsed for it mentally for weeks now just in case the moment should ever arise.

'I don't have much experience of love or romance,' she said, withdrawing her hand and rolling the chain of her silver bracelet between finger and thumb. 'There was Viktor Krum when I was fourteen and Ron when I was seventeen. Viktor and I tried again for a time after Ron, but it didn't work out. Since him, I've never been able to feel an interest in anyone else. There have been some opportunities, the occasional date, but nothing of significance.'

She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts, unwilling to allow this moment to pass by without giving it her very best attempt. 'I came to realise that in all that time, the one presence, the one influencing factor in my life, has been you. I have feared you, respected you, craved your approval, hated you, cried for you, and longed for your forgiveness. You have always been there, like some shadowy and foreboding guardian angel, pushing me to do better by your indifference or your contempt, forcing me to use my wits rather than relying on books.'

'I have enjoyed your company more than I could have ever imagined possible. I have come to understand your disposition, sour and unaccommodating as it has often been. I like your dark humour and your cynical view of the world.'

I like the way your eyes soften when you think I'm not looking, and the way you try not to smile when I say something amusing. I love the way you hold my wrist so carefully when you cast a magical message onto my palm, and I hate it when you let go. I love your scowl and your smile, rare though that is. When I say goodbye to you at the end of a meeting, I feel bereft of your company within minutes, and I have literally counted down the hours until I see you again. These were the things that couldn't be said out loud. They had seemed possible at four in the morning as the birds were starting to sing, but alone in the dark is a different prospect when feet away from Severus Snape's adrenalin-inducing presence.

'I feel different around you: safe, contented, happy ...' she admitted. Her voice trailed away as she saw the look of astonishment on his face. It was clear that he had never considered the possibility that she had slowly and completely been falling for him for some time now. His dark eyes, however, showed no look of pleasure at her heartfelt admission. His brow furrowed in agitation, and it was all she could do to resist telling him how much she liked that too.

'It doesn't matter,' she said, smiling weakly. 'I know it isn't the same for you.' She sighed heavily as she came to her decision. 'I barely exist, do I?'

The fall of heavy snow seemed unlikely as the flakes lessened in intensity, drifting idly to the floor without a sense of purpose or direction. A thin covering of white lay over every surface, appearing more like a fragile gossamer veil than a thick winter blanket. She shrugged his coat from her shoulders and handed it back to him, oblivious to the abrupt change in temperature which gripped at her bare arms. Hermione's unsuitable little heels barely made an impression on the icy ground as she spun around to make

her escape. Her only thoughts were to put as much space as possible between herself and the insensible object of her admiration.

She berated herself for her hopeless belief that he might feel something for her in return. Severus Snape had only ever cared for one woman, and it was not Hermione Granger.

The padlock fell open at her command, and the chains slowly uncoiled, until the gates were free from their restraints. She pushed them forward, acutely aware that the man behind her had still not moved a muscle or uttered a sound. A sense of futility accompanied her as she made to pass through the gates.

'You danced four waltzes.'

His unexpected statement halted her progress.

'You danced the first with Charlie Weasley,' he continued. She caught the slight tremor in his tone which was usually so detached and guarded. 'He held you so tightly I wondered how you were able to breathe, let alone answer all of his constant babble.'

She didn't trust herself to turn around.

He paused before resuming as if he needed to collect himself.

'The second was with Ernie McMillan who was in danger of having his wandering hands hexed into withering stumps, and if he ever comes near you again, I swear I will do it.'

She tried to concentrate on her breathing and willed herself not to speak.

'Longbottom was a great deal more respectful. He held you at arms length and spoke only occasionally.' Snape paused momentarily as if he was waiting for her to reply. When she did not move, he went on.

'You danced the fourth with Potter. He at least was in no danger of a curse. You spoke to Flitwick, Slughorn, Malfoy, Percy Weasley and McClaggen. McClaggen was fool enough to put his arm around you, a liberty for which I intend to see him pay, believe me.'

Hermione's heart hammered, her head ached and her stomach clenched. She was too afraid to turn around in case her sick mind had conjured up this scenario to ease her pain. If she looked at him, he might disappear, or stop, or sneer.

He was still there when she plucked up the courage to face him. And though he had stopped speaking, there was no sneer and no scowl; his expression was as fearful as hers.

'Barely exist, Hermione? You are all that exists.'

It felt as if the moment demanded a fanfare at the very least. Surely a choir of angels should be appearing right about now to give the moment its due reverence? But there was only Hermione Granger, Severus Snape and the air between them, thick with hesitation.

It was the moment of recognition: the moment when one becomes aware that feelings of attraction are reciprocated, as tangible as words scribbled on a piece of parchment now obvious to both, realisation takes the place of cringing uncertainty. Two outcasts who have shared little more than barbed insults given by one, tolerated by the other, locked in a moment of mutual understanding. Yet it seemed to be the greatest of all leaps to take the plunge and change their footing from clumsy strangers to intimates.

Neither spoke as they walked back towards the castle. They didn't know what to say or how to say it silence seemed the safer option. Hermione, having no intention of relinquishing either her status of plucky Gryffindor or object of desire, slipped her hand inside his and smiled to herself as she felt it accepted with a firm pressure.

A/N Only one more chapter to go. Thanks to everyone who has stuck with it so far

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 10

As Hermione and Severus have been together for a year, they take a look over the past twelve months and review their early, nervous beginnings.

Chapter Ten

A/N Well here it is, finished at last. I'm so sorry for the length of time it took to get this written and posted. I hope its length makes up for the wait.

The statue of Oliver Cromwell towered above Hermione, but the Lord Protector did nothing to shelter her from the relentless drizzle; she needed an Impervius Charm and an umbrella to do that. The monument in the park was, perhaps, not the best choice of venue for a seasonably cold, damp October day, but the place had significance for Hermione, and she had no intention of allowing a cool breeze and a drop of rain to spoil it.

It was almost a year since she had last stood beneath the same statue. That day had also been wet, she recalled, though she had endured it for a full hour, waiting with futility for the man she was expecting today: black-clad and punctual to the minute, as always. Although she did not doubt him this time, despite challenging past experiences, Hermione had deliberately arrived earlier than arranged. She simply wanted the pleasure of spotting him as he approached, of savouring the moment, the jolt of excitement as she recognised his form in the distance. She loved to watch his advance, relishing the knowledge that the tall dark figure, striding up the tree-lined avenue towards her, would soon be close enough to smile that rare smile he saved only for her. Remembrances of the first time she had seen it still had the power to turn her insides into a butterfly sanctuary.

The park was almost deserted: an occasional dog walker and a woman with a pram and a toddler passed by, although she barely noticed her environment; she was far too engaged by her own thoughts. Today was another "first". A year ago to the day, Hermione Granger had swallowed a vial of Polyjuice Potion and, dressed for enticement, had set out on her task to tempt her former Potions master. She recalled how desperately deluded she must have been to have imagined herself capable of duping Severus Snape. Yet despite her failure to hoodwink him, the outcome, in the end, had far exceeded expectations. Hermione had been looking for forgiveness from him, but instead of his absolution, he had given her insight, and instead of a hard lesson in shouldering responsibility, he had given her his approval, and implausibly his affection. She

knew that warmth and expressions of fondness were not easily conveyed by Snape, and as she waited for his arrival beneath an ineffective statue and a serviceable black umbrella, Hermione recalled his first struggle to articulate his feelings for her. It was on the evening of the tenth anniversary Victory Day Ball.

Severus and Hermione were making their way back to the castle hand-in-hand, too anxious to break the silence, too exultant to notice the weakening Warming charm, and too intent on their own thoughts and of what the other must be thinking to care about the effect of their sudden departure from the ball. If she could have analysed it, she would have recognised the beginning of that obsessive and irrational state that prevents, for short periods of existence, all awareness of other spectators. A state exclusively enjoyed by two people in the first bloom of newly realised affection, to the detriment of politeness and the irritation of all around them.

The Thestral-drawn carriages were queued up around the courtyard ready to transport everyone back to Hogsmeade for either their train journey home or to the nearest Disapparition point. The first few guests were filtering through the front entrance and starting to find their way to the carriages. Hermione slowed down as they approached the first enormous black-winged skeletal creature.

'I had hoped I would never find out what they looked like,' she said, stopping to stroke a long, dark leathery nose. 'Though I was curious.'

'This one is empty,' said Snape. 'Perhaps we should claim it before the entire populace of Hogwarts decide it's time to leave.'

Hermione nodded and walked towards the carriage door which he obligingly held open for her. Inside was warm and snug, if a little cramped. Snape took a seat opposite Hermione, and they sat for a few minutes in silence as they waited for the carriage to begin its journey.

She waited for him to re-introduce the theme of mutual feelings, but he seemed unwilling to pursue the subject, staring fixedly out of the window and towards the Hogwarts entrance. How was she supposed to interpret his silence? Her first instinct was to read regret in the broodiness of his expression. She had forced him to speak against his will, or at least against his better judgement, and now he was trying to calculate his way out of the mess his words had created. She had almost decided to break the silence with an observation about his successful evening when he finally turned to look at her.

'I have no experience in this area,' he said. Self-doubt was the cause of his diffidence then.

'I'm hardly an expert.'

'Mistakes will be made. Omissions.'

Was he telling her to expect a rough ride? Was he afraid that he was bound to scare her off?

'I don't doubt it,' she replied. 'You don't have the disposition for romance, but my expectations in that department are not unrealistic, Severus. I don't need constant reminders of affection. Empty words are meaningless.'

'I am likely to give offence without intending to. I am not equipped with the ability to offer compliments. Even when they are due.'

'I would suspect you were Confunded if you did,' she replied, smiling.

'Expressions of feelings are beyond me.'

'Then I will judge you by your actions, not your words.'

He took her hand in both of his and made circles of her palm with his thumbs. He held her hand as if it were a fragile glass trinket he was afraid to break, and she trembled at the tenderness of his touch, so at odds with the harsh demeanour he presented to the world. 'You deserve better,' he said softly.

'Are you are trying to talk me out of this?' she replied. 'If so, I'm afraid you're wasting your time. Once I've made my mind up, I'm quite determined, you know.'

That rare smile reached his eyes and banished the intensity usually found there. 'No, but should you at some point in the future complain at my insensitivity, I will always refer to the fact that you were forewarned.'

'Ah! This is your disclaimer then? I think it only fair, in that case, to add one of my own. If I do misinterpret one of your foul moods or bouts of sullenness as a sign of your waning affection, I feel it only fair to warn you that I'm likely to react with an equally foul tantrum. I may even resort to a hex.'

He interlaced his fingers with hers as she spoke and examined them closely as if he were conducting an experiment on the theme of "possible things to do with Granger's hands". For Hermione, the sensation of her hand in his, accompanied by those smooth, self-doubting words, were as intoxicating as free-flowing wine. To be cared for by a man like this must surely be worth all those years of anxiety and unnecessary anguish. Perhaps, she mused, there is some great universal law of symmetry which states that one can only truly find happiness if one has suffered proportionately for it. Surely, in that case, they were both contenders for the title of Lord and Lady blissful.

'It wouldn't do for both of us to react morosely to every perceived slight,' he said.

'You do the sulking; I'll do the foot stamping.'

'I do not sulk.'

'Yes you do, but I've decided to find it endearing.'

The compact seating arrangements forced them into close proximity which was highlighted by the fact that they were leaning towards each other. His knees were parted to accommodate hers and their hands remained locked together.

'I intend to let you get away with that in lieu of omitting to compliment you on your appearance this evening,' he replied.

'Well I did promise to judge you by your actions, rather than your words.'

His lips were cold; his nose was a block of ice against her cheek. She was more conscious of him this time without the awareness of a crowd to inhibit her. She could experience the moment as a complete expression of desire and realization, crushed between his body and the leather seat of the carriage. His arms surrounded her, and his hands gripped her as if she would disappear like a snowflake if he let go. Her own arms found their way around his waist as their mouths became locked in a kiss that disregarded etiquette, sense and reason. Desire and longing and a lifetime of regret seemed to be unleashed in the single motion of one man and one woman united in an act so commonplace that half of Hogwarts at that very moment was likely to be similarly engaged. But none of them could match the fire and intensity of two dark figures, oblivious to their environment, and fixed only on each other.

The rain had finally stopped. Hermione closed her umbrella. She shook the handle vigorously until bat-like wings shed fine droplets of moisture onto the stone steps of the statue. With only ten more minutes to wait, she glanced around her environment to check for observers. Seeing none, a Drying spell quickly followed by a Cushioning charm made a comfortable seat of the bottom step. The promise of afternoon drizzle looked to be another inaccurate prediction, as fat grey clouds thinned out into a willow pattern high above, and the sun's pale yellow light seeped through the gaps, replacing cold, damp dreariness with warmth and optimism.

Water from Oliver Cromwell's left foot dripped onto a step above her. A man in a blue track suit jogged casually past; white ear pieces disconnected him from birdsong, distant traffic, and the detached voices of a nearby playground. Hermione, lost to her own thoughts, was as ignorant of her surroundings as the runner with his synthetic method of tuning out of one world in favour of another. She unbuttoned her coat to make sitting less restrained and brought her knees up to chest level, wrapping her hands primly around them. Her silver bracelet caught her eye and almost instinctively her hand went to her throat to check for the matching necklace she rarely removed.

The necklace triggered a new train of thought another first, another instance of fretful apprehension and awkward insecurity, wrought from desperately wanting to please and be pleased.

Hermione had been unable to remember the last time Christmas day had been anticipated as an event to be enjoyed rather than endured. As it turned out, Christmas was to be their first meeting since the night of the ball. Two weeks had elapsed following that day, during which time the return to the wizarding world of one of its lost sons had meant a diary full of meetings, engagements, interviews and official visits.

Ministry officials had been around to inspect Snape's premises for suitability in order to declare it a legitimate place of business. The fact that he had neglected to make his business "official" for the past ten years did not seem to weigh too heavily on the insincere minds of Ministry might. It seemed that their proclivity for discriminating on the worthiness of those deemed fit for prosecution was as arbitrary as ever, and fortunately for Snape, he now fell into the category of "turn a convenient blind eye".

Hermione had received an owl on the morning of December 24th.

Hermione,

I trust you are well? I regret that my time has not been my own since we last saw each other at Hogwarts, and I now find that Christmas is upon us already. I presume you have plans for tomorrow by now? I had hoped we could agree on a mutually suitable day to meet. I have provisions to purchase in Diagon Alley next week; perhaps you would be free to accompany me? We could have lunch in the Leaky Cauldron; I hear it is much improved now that Tom, the barman, has retired.

Severus

Hermione had been as relieved as she was overjoyed to receive an owl from Severus. She was beginning to doubt the whole thing again and had almost reached the point of turning up on his doorstep to request an explanation, but images of an irate, indifferent or surly reception prevented the visit.

Hopes of a romantic, Severus-filled lead-up to Christmas had been dashed by his first owl-post which had arrived two days after the Ball; it had wished her well, assured her of his own continuing good health, and promised her another owl with an update on his busy schedule. She wondered if they would ever reach the kind of casual comfort with each other that is borne of intimacy, time and mutual understanding. Hermione tried to picture the two of them as a couple so used to each other's quirky little ways that provoking misunderstanding was no longer a possibility. How she envied blasé Severus and Hermione: that mythical future couple who had lived through the difficulties, learned some important lessons and now enjoyed the contentment of easy understanding.

She read his five lukewarm lines several times. On first reading she decided that he had already tired of her and was looking for a gentle way to let her down. Fortunately, she recalled that Severus Snape did not do gentle let-downs. After some study and a great deal of agonising over an adequate interpretation, she decided that he was the unsure one. He did want to see her; he just didn't know how to ask. He hadn't mentioned his own plans for Christmas day, therefore she wondered if he had any. Hermione had been invited round to Harry and Ginny's for Christmas dinner on the understanding that she may very well cancel at the last moment if a better offer should arise.

She sent her reply by return owl.

Severus,

As a matter of fact my plans for the big day didn't work out, and it turns out that I have none. I don't suppose you are free? I have a very forlorn turkey and a Christmas pudding that I have no chance of getting through by myself. Plus I'm very curious to hear of how you've been coping with all those Ministry officials running riot over your much-loved privacy. I hope you've managed some degree of politeness; I almost feel pity for whichever Junior Minister they sent to check up on your cauldrons and store cupboards.

If you can't make it, I would love to accompany you to Diagon Alley for shopping and lunch; if you can, be at mine for three o'clock.

Hermione X

She had folded up the piece of parchment, tied it to an impatient leg and watched it fly away, before she began to have second thoughts about the addition of a single kiss after her name. But it was far too late for futile worrying now.

Her reply had arrived by disgruntled owl less than an hour later.

See you at three.

By the time 3p.m. on Christmas Day had arrived, Hermione had worked herself up into such a state of nervousness that she had surpassed terror, gone beyond agitation and had actually reached the most glorious of all states, aided along by a large glass of sherry. With the edges of sobriety gently rubbed away, she was now experiencing a delicate balance between severe apprehension and utterly undaunted. And as she had no idea what to expect from her dinner guest, she dismissed any stomach-clenching fears of him turning up sullen and uncommunicative with a ruthless determination that Godric Gryffindor himself would have been satisfied with.

She opened the door with a flourish, wearing a slightly revealing black knee-length dress, a matching pair of kitten-heel shoes she'd had to practise walking in and a wry smile.

Severus wasn't wearing black. The revelation that he could, and did, wear what could definitely be considered achromatic was something of a revelation and almost cost Hermione her composure. True, the so-called variation in colour was nothing more than a dark blue shirt under his usual dark jacket, but it was such a rarity that she had to stop herself from pointing out the anomaly.

'You're late,' she said, seemingly referring to the thirty seconds which had elapsed since the clock struck three.

'And you are impertinent,' he replied. 'You said three o'clock.'

'Two weeks late,' she explained, smiling as she led him down a short, brightly lit hallway towards the kitchen.

'An eventful two weeks. It's been some time since my life has been considered so worthy of scrutiny. The excess of fawning Ministry attention makes me wonder if I shouldn't consider a career in politics.'

'I would imagine you've had your fill of politics,' replied Hermione, entering the kitchen and watching his eyes move around the room to take in the unfamiliar sight of an abundance of Muggle appliances.

He snorted. 'I'd rather teach and that's saying something.'

'You mean you're not tempted to return to Hogwarts?'

'Not even if they turned the House Cup green and gave it to Slytherin every year.'

'I bet McGonagall asked you though,' said Hermione, waving a burgundy-coloured bottle questioningly in his general direction.

'The question may have been broached.'

He nodded in reply to the mimed offer of a drink.

'Don't be evasive.' She poured out two evenly matched glasses.

'Old habits,' he admitted, taking the proffered glass of wine from her hand. 'Filius asked, as a matter of fact. He offered me my old Potions position. Horace has finally had enough. I assured him that being in the constant company of children was something that should never have been afflicted on me. And I should never have been afflicted upon them. What the hell was Dumbledore thinking of?'

'God knows!' agreed Hermione with feeling. 'Although, in hindsight, a lot of his judgements were questionable. I mean, I thought the world of Hagrid, but he was never teaching material; it's a wonder there weren't more injuries. Draco got off lightly with that scratch he got from Buckbeak in our third year. And as for Lockhart... though at the time I was as taken in by the golden locks and perfect smile as anyone.'

'You were?' Severus raised an amused eyebrow.

'I was eleven. By the time I was twelve, I got it.'

'The benevolent façade has duped many discerning witches,' he replied, and Hermione wondered if he was referring to Lily.

She stopped and smiled. 'Well this is weird.'

'What is?'

'Us. Having a normal conversation.'

'What did you expect, abuse and slander? I am hoping to be fed. Even I am capable of civility when a meal is in the offing. And something smells very appetising.'

Hermione giggled, relieved to know that there was a way for them to be with each other in the aftermath of their declaration of love. She had been harbouring a dread that they had reached a zenith from which there was nowhere else to go but down. Sweet words, soft caresses and professions of longing were never going to be their way. Severus simply wasn't capable of that kind of intimacy, and Hermione was quite certain that she would prefer his continuing reticence in matters of the heart. But how else was there to behave once certain words had been said? He had told her that she was everything to him. Were they now required to treat each other with the adulation expected of two people in the exhilarating, breathtaking period between the elation of first avowal and the humdrum of acclimatization?

But as he had not even wished her a heartfelt Merry Christmas or told her that she looked very nice in her Christmas dress, she had no reason to worry that the floodgates had now been opened and that Severus Snape would now begin quoting sonnets to her.

'What shall we drink to?' she asked.

Severus Apparated in between a tall oak and a horse chestnut. He took a brief moment to get his bearings, then headed towards the open space lined by sparse shrubs and trees that functioned as the pathway leading to the main feature of the park: the statue of Oliver Cromwell. The monument soon came into view as he made his way towards it, and from his position at the end of the long avenue, he could just distinguish the slight figure of Hermione Granger, seated on the bottom step. As he made his approach, he could make out her dark turquoise coat which hung open to reveal his favourite dress, the one he had seen for the first time ten months ago on Christmas day.

It had taken a great deal of effort to keep his eyes focused above her neck-line that day, how they had wanted to drift down and linger there. She had asked what they should drink to. He would have liked to suggest they toast whichever god it was who saw fit to ensure she wore the beguiling little number which showed off just enough cleavage to entice but left enough covered up to embrace decorum. Instead he suggested 'new beginnings'. She seemed to like that. Her eyes sparkled like the ruby red wine as it caught the light when she touched her glass to his.

They both took a sip. He noticed an alteration in her expression. A look of uncertainty appeared in warm brown eyes. There was a pause before she blurted out, 'I think we should get the kissing over with.'

He didn't know whether to laugh or take offence.

'Get. The kissing. Over with?' he repeated, emphasising each word back to her slowly, enjoying the appearance of a pink flush which spread across her chest and neck. 'I take it then. That you find the act repulsive but necessary?'

'Oh! No! No!' she replied, heatedly. 'Not at all! Just the making the first move part.' She took a nervous but apparently reassuring sip from her glass. 'So far, I've found the act to be immensely pleasurable, but I was hoping you might have initiated it by now, and if one of us doesn't make a move at some point ... well it's going to hover between us like some big ...'

'Elephant in the room?'

'Yes. And I think it's about time we were more relaxed around each other.'

He gazed at her intently, daring her to look away.

'So,' he reiterated, 'you want me to kiss you?' He was enjoying watching her squirm so beautifully with embarrassment and determination. She nodded, hardly able to look him in the eye, though he never broke contact with hers.

'Come here then,' he commanded softly.

She walked towards him, and he took her glass from her hand, depositing it on the table beside him, along with his own.

Inches apart, she looked up at him expectantly.

'You're absolutely sure?' he said.

'Severus, just kiss me, or I won't be responsible for my actions.'

'Harpy,' he said as he bent towards her.

'Tease,' she managed to reply as his lips grazed hers.

Once initiated, it seemed that neither was inclined to end it. Her mouth was warm and eager beneath his, and he wondered how he had survived the previous two weeks without her kisses and the feel of her arms around him. As he tasted the sweet wine on her lips, he realised that to be without this, without her body and her hair and the smell of her softly scented skin, would be to truly know deprivation. The fear of no longer having her to touch and hold intensified his hunger and with it surfaced an impulse to possess her, to take her right there on the kitchen floor. It rose in his belly like an old wayward friend: the sort who knows how to access all the exciting, forbidden places, but leaves you feeling remorseful and wretched for going along with the illicit fun.

It was the aroma of a well-cooked turkey that brought him back to the reality of food, the edge of the table digging into his thigh and common decency.

They ate turkey, stuffing, roast potatoes, sprouts and gravy with a degree less tension, but neither of them were particularly conscious of what passed their lips or whether or not the vegetables were over-cooked. Conversation, however, was easy enough; there was plenty to say on the subject of Severus's new and legal business enterprise, and almost as much discussion of Hermione's work and her assurance of how much she enjoyed her job as a Muggle school teacher.

After dinner, they moved to a small but comfortable sitting room. Severus was amused to find that it housed several shelves crammed with books. Other than her library, he noticed a television in one corner and several other Muggle-trappings dotted around the place.

'This is not the house of a witch,' he declared.

'It is the house of a Muggle-born witch,' she corrected him. 'There are some things which magic just can't compete with. Television for one.' She nodded her head towards the black, shiny, angular object taking up space in between a fire-place and a small, decorated Christmas tree. Severus raised a derisive eyebrow, but opted to remain indifferent to her statement. He noticed a photograph of a middle-aged couple on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. He mused on Hermione's estranged Muggle parents and decided that her rejection of the wizarding world, coupled with her wholehearted adoption of all things Muggle, was her means of staying connected to them.

Hermione took a seat on the couch and asked him if he would like to watch something on the television.

'Not particularly.'

'Is it an anti-Muggle thing?' Hermione asked accusingly.

'No. Merely that it seems wasteful to spend precious time staring at your television when my attention could be more enjoyably spent elsewhere,' he replied, hoping she would comprehend his meaning without having to say it outright.

She wasn't called the brightest witch of her age for nothing. Hermione smiled as he took a seat beside her. 'Nice recovery,' she replied.

'Well, I wasn't sorted into Slytherin for my inclination for snakes.'

'Hmm. Why were you sorted into Slytherin?'

'I should have thought it obvious.'

'Not really. Not when you look at the facts: you have shown the loyalty of a Hufflepuff.' She ignored the darkening scowl and hurried on. 'You have the wit and intelligence of a Ravenclaw.' He raised his eyebrows in amusement. 'And you know what you take from Gryffindor.' His sneer was as contemptuous as any she had received as a would-be protégée in his Potions class. 'It seems to me,' she continued, 'that your sorting could have gone any of four ways.'

'The same could be said of your sorting. It could have gone at least three ways, though you wouldn't have lasted a day in Slytherin,' he replied. Hermione flashed him a challenging look, but allowed him to continue without disagreement. 'In fact, the same could be true of almost anyone. The child becomes the House he was sorted into, no matter how limited his natural capacity for the characteristics of that house. The Sorting Hat either makes a guess or does as it is told. Why else do you suppose Pettigrew landed his spot in Gryffindor? He saw Potter and Black enter the noble house of the brave of heart and had already determined in going wherever it was they were going. There was nothing valiant to detect in his cowardly heart. Like me, I imagine he asked for his House.'

Severus attempted to hide his fascination for her bare ankles, calves and knees and determined not to leer as Hermione kicked off her shoes, folded her legs beneath her and sipped thoughtfully from her wine glass.

'I suppose that makes sense,' she said. 'You know, the Hat wanted to put Harry into Slytherin, but he begged for anything else. Still, that doesn't explain my own sorting. I asked for nothing. I was a Muggle-born; what did I know of House rivalries?'

'You hadn't already read **Hogwarts: A History**, even before you arrived?'

'Yes,' she conceded, 'from cover to cover and practically all the other books on the list too. I probably was hoping for Gryffindor, though I rather arrogantly expected Ravenclaw.'

They sat in contemplative silence for a few moments, which Severus was in no hurry to end. Hermione spoke first.

'Severus?'

'Yes.'

'Do you ever regret your sorting?'

He took his time with his answer. 'You are asking if I regret my life. It is Christmas. I believe it is a day of celebration, not a time for dwelling on what-ifs. Let us just say that my sorting brought me to this point, and I am glad to be here.'

Her smile let him know that he had made the right answer. Perhaps he wasn't going to be as thoroughly inept at relationships as he feared after all.

'That's worth drinking to,' she said.

Another pleasant few minutes were sat in silence. This time Severus was the one to intrude on it.

'I'm guessing that one of those contraptions plays music,' he said, nodding towards the two neat speakers sitting side by side on a shelf by the fireplace.

Hermione had relaxed so completely that she had settled herself snugly into a curled-up position beside him, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder. He had been contemplating initiating their kitchen intimacy again, but was unsure of whether or not she would consider that part of their evening over and done with. How he wished there had been some book he could have consulted on the proper procedure for seducing a witch without committing some enormous blunder and scaring her off for good. He had no experience to help him along, and he was hardly likely to ask any of his male acquaintance, such that he had, for advice.

'Yes,' she replied. 'Why? Do you want me to put some on?'

'I believe I owe you a dance.'

Inspiration had not deserted him. It was an innocent enough gesture that would ensure she would be pressed tightly against him for at least the next ten minutes. He didn't want her cosy and snug on his shoulder; he wanted her eager and willing in his arms. He rose from his seat, took her glass from her hand, and held out his other for her to join him. He was pleased to see her willingness in her enthusiasm for his suggestion.

She chose a suitably slow melody that lent itself to swaying gently together in time to the music. His arms snaked around her waist and drew her close as she rested her head on his shoulder again, her arms about his neck.

'This is the best Christmas I've had since I was a child,' she murmured. Her warm breath against his skin was delicious and almost unendurably pleasurable. His fingers drifted beneath her hair and caressed the nape of her neck enticingly revealed by her low-back dress. 'I usually spend them with Harry and Ginny, and it feels as if I'm gate-crashing someone else's Christmas.'

Severus moved his hand to her soft brown locks, stroking her hair languidly as she spoke. Content to listen to her speak without joining in.

'How about you?' she asked, forcing his reply.

'My Christmases have ranged from indifferent to excruciating,' he replied. 'Although, during his tenure as Chief Megalomaniac, the Dark Lord did throw some memorable parties. Of course, the ritual killing of his transgressors tended to dampen the festive spirit somewhat.'

He didn't think he would ever tire of her laugh, though it would never cease to surprise him that she could find something in his dark humour to find amusing.

'Why am I laughing? That's horrible.' She took a step backwards and lifted her head to look up at him. 'Is it true?' Apparently finding nothing to read in his face but the desire to amuse, she slapped his arm playfully, as Severus pulled her back into his embrace.

'You will let me know when it's kissing time again won't you?' he said.

She giggled again. 'I'll write out a timetable for you if you like,' she replied. 'But perhaps today we could be spontaneous.'

He had played it just right so far. They had been together for hours, and all they had done was talk, eat, kiss, dance and laugh. He was beginning to feel confident enough to believe that their foray into couple-dom wasn't so foolhardy, self-indulgent and reckless after all. Perhaps "Severus and Hermione" was not such an incredible concept: the stuff of fairytales and cheap romance novels. He felt an abrupt tension in her body and a lessening in the fervour of her kiss, then she pulled away; a self-conscious expression suddenly apparent in her eyes.

'I have a present for you,' she said, apprehensively.

'A gift?' he replied. 'This is unexpected.'

*'Well, it **is** Christmas.'*

'I suppose you were expecting something from me?'

'No, of course not,' she replied, too quickly. 'My present to you is more of a practical thing really; it's... well you'll see.'

Hermione took him by the hand and led him to the small, sparsely decorated tree. She stooped to pick up the only present under it and handed it to Severus. He began to remove the carefully wrapped paper, conscious of her anxious scrutiny of his actions.

'What is it?' he asked, once the wrapping paper was dispensed with, and being none-the-wiser.

'It's a mobile phone,' she replied.

'I see,' he said, staring at the box and wondering what in god's name had given her the idea that giving a wizard a Muggle communication device would be just the thing.

'Owl post is all very well,' she explained, hastily, 'and obviously parchment and ink are far more tangible, but no owl can fly as fast as a text message or a phone call can reach someone.' Hermione paused, as if waiting for a dispute. When there was no reply, she continued. 'And yes, a patronus could never be rivalled for its grace and beauty, but it just isn't as practical as a phone. You can use a phone anywhere and at anytime.'

'Not in Diagon Alley.'

'Almost anywhere,' she conceded. 'I've been longing to know how you were and how you've been getting on these past two weeks and just a line or a word would have done.'

'I sent you two owls,' he asserted.

'I know. I appreciate that, but with a phone there is so much less effort required. And you can put photographs on it and music. Look.' She took out her own phone and scrolled through her photographs of Harry, Ginny and the children. 'I don't have any of you though,' she said.

'I'm relieved to hear it. I don't have a face that begs to be gazed at for any length of time, though I see that hasn't prevented Potter from posing in front of a camera.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' she replied, kissing the end of his nose and once more provoking the urge to resume the intimacy again. He had a feeling that this evening may end better than he could ever have anticipated if he didn't mess it up by saying something to affront as usual.

'Will you use it?' she implored. 'I charmed it to react to a spell which keeps it functioning without the need for electricity. You just have to renew it with the Animatum charm every few days.'

'You seem to have thought of everything,' he replied.

'So you'll use it if I show you how?'

'I'll consider it, if you fill it with pictures of scantily-clad witches.'

'You'll have pictures of me and like them,' she replied, laughing as she began to take the phone out of its box to give him his first lesson.

'Accio Hermione's gift.'

He was amused to see her head jerk up in surprise at his unexpected Summons.

'You got me a gift?'

'Well it **is** Christmas.'

Once the small packet had reached his outstretched hand, he handed it over to an eagerly waiting Hermione. 'I hope it is suitable,' he said, feeling pathetically anxious over her reaction. He noticed her hand shake slightly as she opened the box and took out a fine silver chain necklace from which hung a silver tear-shaped pendant set with a ruby-coloured stone. She placed it gently on her palm without speaking, her head bowed so that he was unable to gauge her reaction.

'I notice you always wear the bracelet, so I had it copied and made into a necklace,' he explained. 'It can be altered if it isn't to your liking. It was done from memory, so there may be imperfections.' She clearly didn't like it. 'Perhaps the chain is too fine?'

She remained silent and unmoving as he made his speech, which sounded pitiable and desperate even to his own ears. He feared that somehow his brilliant, unique and thoughtful gift had managed to offend. That he had committed some terrible faux pas from which there was no recovery. Severus wished she would at least look at him, but, apparently, meeting his eye was as beyond her as speech.

'If you don't like it, you're quite at liberty to...'

'... It's perfect.'

She placed it alongside her bracelet, and he saw at once, with satisfaction, that his memory had been more than adequate. The match was flawless. 'I don't know what to say. It's... **perfect**,' she murmured.

Severus relaxed. He had spent too many nights lying awake in the hopes that the early hours would bring inspiration. The right gift seemed imperative. His instinct had been to give her a book, but he had dismissed that idea as uninspiring: the offering of one friend to another, not a gift from a lover, or rather, a hopeful lover-to-be. She had promised to judge him by his actions not his words, in which case his actions needed to be beyond reproach. His experiences of gift-giving may be inadequate, but his ability to know what was due was not. Being lackey to a Dark Lord and having the unenviable status of triple-agent honed one's ability to rise to the occasion. Severus had seen the bracelet often enough; she was always fiddling with it. She had even worn it to the Yule Ball, and he remembered it on her wrist when she had inhabited the form of Heather Gunn. The idea of duplicating it and having it made into a necklace had popped into his head while routinely checking on his store cupboard ingredients for Polyjuice potion.

'The bracelet was my mother's,' explained Hermione. 'I took it as a keepsake before I left them. It was part of a set, but she always wore the necklace.'

She handed it to him and turned around. 'Will you put it on?' she asked, lifting her hair so that he could place it around her neck. His fingers lingered on the curve of her shoulder and he couldn't prevent himself from leaning forward to kiss her perfectly-formed collar bone. She turned around to find his lips for a long and heartfelt thank you.

'If I had known how well it was going to be received, I would have got you the matching earrings as well,' he said.

'You've set quite a precedent, you know.'

'I knew there'd be a catch.'

Severus walked towards Hermione, lost in thought and memory. He saw her notice his appearance and knew she wouldn't raise a hand to wave acknowledgement or shout out a premature greeting. She would remain still and silent and watchful. How much a year of intimacy had taught him. He prided himself on being able to second-guess her every response, reaction and thought these days, though that had not always been the case, he recalled. He was reminded of another meeting which took place two weeks after their Christmas day date.

The only frustration to have arisen from what was an otherwise perfect first date was its conclusion. Severus had left her house at midnight without plucking up the nerve to take their physical intimacy beyond the stage of mind-blowing kissing.

They had spent their second meeting after Christmas on a Diagon Alley shopping trip, and their third entwined on Hermione's couch, drinking wine, listening to music and going over their unconventional courtship.

'There were so many low points that I'm finding it hard to choose just one,' said Hermione mischievously.

'I'm sure you could find something suitably excruciating to torment me with,' he replied.

'All right then, I'm going to go for the time you asked if I intended to stay for the prostitute.'

'Granger, if you are going to remind me of every abusive remark and personal insult, we're in for a long night,' he replied. Though he was relieved to find that she had now relegated his past indiscretions to nothing more worthy than amusing anecdotes to be viewed together as examples of how far they had progressed. 'Would a blanket apology and general retraction suffice?'

She giggled. 'Possibly. Do you take back calling me an insufferable know-it-all?'

'No! You **were** an insufferable know-it-all. Fortunately, your adult self seems to have developed attributes which off-set your ridiculous need to prove yourself,' he replied, pulling her into another long, languid kiss to make his point.

'Attributes?' she reiterated playfully, once they had parted. 'Such as?'

'Apart from the obvious physical ones, which I don't need to point out, your tolerance for being slobbered over by an ageing, charmless wizard is to your credit.'

'True!' she replied, 'But **I am** a Gryffindor.'

'Still insufferable,' he replied with a raised eyebrow and an amused smirk.

'Even your belongings managed to insult me,' said Hermione moments later. 'Your mirror,' she added in response to his inquisitive look.

'Well I'm not assuming responsibility for my mirror's reprehensible behaviour. I have plenty of my own to deal with although personally, I have always found the object to be insightful and discerning.'

'Oh really? Well your discerning mirror told me that I wasn't as pretty as the other girls from the agency.'

Severus snorted. 'The woman from the agency. There has only ever been one, and she is hardly in her first bloom of youth.' He was surprised when Hermione pulled away, wearing a troubled expression.

They sat in awkward silence for some time until Hermione apprehensively said, 'And she still comes to you?'

'Why wouldn't she?' he asked.

Hermione shot him a censorious look. 'Well I...' she stuttered. 'I presumed since. Well since you and I...' Her hesitancy was maddening. Why couldn't she just say what she wanted to say, instead of behaving as if she had just turned up for one of his detentions?

'Since you and I what?' he asked.

Hermione rose and walked over to the fireplace as if to find courage in the dying embers. 'I just thought that... I mean I know you and I haven't yet...' She hesitated again.

'Haven't yet what?' he prompted, unable to grasp this inexplicable change of mood.

'You know perfectly well what,' she said impatiently, spinning around to face him.

'I can assure you, I have no idea what you are talking about, but I suggest you spit it out soon, so that I can get on with explaining away whatever it is I am supposed to have done.'

'SLEPT together! Yet!' she hissed.

Severus was rarely astounded, but Hermione's candid statement not only astonished him, but also gave him hope: that small, inconsequential final word was the most encouraging thing he had heard in a very long time. Regardless, he was still unable to work out the cause of her obvious anguish.

'Ah!' he replied, hoping to get this latest hitch sorted out so that they could get on with rectifying the 'yet' problem. He cleared his throat. 'What has our not having slept together... **yet** got to do with Madame Laverne?'

Hermione looked as if she would very much like to throw a blunt object at him. 'You have to ask?' she yelled.

'Apparently.'

'My God! I know you can be insensitive, cruel even, but even for you, this is beyond belief. I do have feelings you know!'

'Believe me, I do. I feel I know them almost as well as you do. However, I am still waiting to be enlightened as to what it is that you seem to think I am guilty of.'

Hermione let out an exasperated moan along with an expletive or two. 'You have an agency woman visiting you on a weekly basis, and you have to ask why I am upset?' she replied heatedly.

'Do you expect me to shun the entire female populace on the basis that you and I have become an item?' he replied, also rising from his position and crossing the room to join her. 'I can assure you that although Madame Laverne does an adequate, or rather, more than adequate job, she is hardly well-placed to replace you in my affections.'

Hermione glared at him as if he had announced that he had just found a new Dark Lord to follow. 'And that is supposed to make me feel better? Knowing that she is skilled, but that you still like me best? 'Just not enough to... give her up.'

Severus Snape was not a patient man; nevertheless, he had been determined to play the part of the perfect guest this evening. His intention was to show her the best of him, as far as he was able, but this explosion and apparent show of jealousy was intolerable. His ego was flattered that he could be the cause of such blatant possessiveness, but he had to conclude that this emotional outburst was not the result of a rational mind. He had endured enough.

'That is quite sufficient, Hermione! You go too far. This evening is over!' He walked towards the door, stopped and turned around. 'You obviously need some time to contemplate this situation. If you feel up to viewing it in a more rational light, please send me word by owl. I cannot tolerate your absurd jealousy. It is misplaced, foolish and beneath you.'

Hermione's face was as pale as his. 'You're leaving? Just like that? No discussion? I either do things by your debauched standards or not at all?'

He was out of the door and had reached the hallway by the time she caught up with him.

'For all you know I might be just as good as she is,' Hermione called after him. 'Have you ever considered that there is more to it than just experience? Real affection, tenderness... passion! The knowledge that someone is there because they want to be, and not because they are paid to be; surely that is worth more?'

He had put on his jacket, and was about to open the front door as she made her fervent speech, but this time there was something about her words that began to make him question her meaning.

'What does it matter whether my cleaner does her job with or without affection? She can dust, mop, wipe and polish just as effectively without caring a sickle about who she does it for. And what is more, I would prefer whoever cleans for me to be emotionally detached. I have no wish to engage in a harmonious and meaningful relationship with the woman who scrubs my bathroom. I equally have no wish for the woman I am engaged in a meaningful relationship with, to use her formidable magical powers on Cleansing charms and Laundering spells.'

Hermione's furious expression had dramatically altered during his speech. Her cheeks still glowed, but her mouth slackened, and her eyes grew to the size of Galleons.

'Cleaner?' she murmured, her expression now showing a strange mixture of growing comprehension and horror.

Severus took in her suddenly altered demeanour: her reaction to what was apparently a revelation.

'Madame Laverne is your cleaner?' she reiterated.

'From the agency, yes.'

'And the name of the agency? She asked, softly. Fine black lines wrinkled up her forehead to complete her look of trepidation.

''Mrs. Scower's Magical Cleaning Agency'', if you must know.'

Hermione attempted a smile which faltered and gave up.

'Granger! I am getting the distinct impression that we have been talking a cross purposes.'

She nodded fretfully. 'Yes.'

'Am I to understand that you are surprised by the fact that Madame Laverne is employed to clean my house?'

Hermione's interest was suddenly stolen by the floor. She dropped her head, refusing to meet his eye.

'Hermione?'

She lifted her head, and managed to make eye contact with his shoulder. Severus was now fully conscious of the stupendous misunderstanding that had almost resulted in him leaving in a state of anger and confusion. 'Am I, in fact, to understand that you believed her to be employed on an infinitely more informal basis?'

She gave him a sideways glance and shrugged. 'Perfectly understandable mistake to make,' she replied without conviction.

'You mean to tell me that for all this time you have been under the impression that I have been hiring a prostitute once a week? Do you think I'm made of money?'

Hermione winced. 'Well you did mention them quite often.'

'As a device to drive you away; a highly unsuccessful device, I might add.' He watched her mortification with a sense of relief, amusement and wonder. He could hardly conceive that even though she believed him to be hiring whores with all the restraint of an alcoholic in a brewery, she still cared enough to discount his so-called compulsion, until she thought he was perfectly happy to openly continue his indiscretions despite his newfound romance with her. He could not fault her on loyalty. 'I won't deny that I have... on occasion sought the services... but not for some time, and only very rarely. I would never...'

'... You don't have to explain,' interrupted Hermione. 'I'm an idiot, and I feel like a complete fool.'

'Well! At least we are agreed on one thing,' he replied.

'I'm sorry, Severus. Sorry, but so relieved. I was at my wits end. I thought you were angry with me for expecting you to give up your weekly shag with a prostitute. It's just that when I first found you in that Muggle pub and you confronted me in the alleyway, you told me that you'd rather be with a professional than me, and I know you said it to scare me off, but I never forgot it. It was always there in the back of my mind. "He thinks I'm rubbish in bed". Then when your mirror made that remark... well two and two made anything but four, but the numbers seemed to point to the fact that you were hiring a professional, which you are, just a different sort of professional. I suppose I should have questioned the damn mirror more, but it wasn't exactly enjoying my cross-examination as it was, and I just wanted to get the Hangover potion and get out of there. I was already feeling wretched; it didn't need much to make me assume the worst. So you can see how I got the wrong end of the stick. And now you think I'm insane as well as an insufferable know-it-all, pathetically jealous and desperate to please.'

'Granger, shut up for one second! How am I supposed to kiss you when you won't stop rabbiting?'

Her bedroom was neat and orderly, almost as if it had been expecting guests. The dark blue covers on the double bed matched the parted curtains, whose sashes were released by Hermione to rectify the privacy problem. Severus could hardly believe his luck; it seemed that he really had finally been favoured by the heavens. At last, the gods had tired of finding amusement in his torture. Had some other unfortunate wretch finally caught their attention? He hoped it was that white-toothed, muscle-bound Muggle bastard who had had his eye on Hermione.

He watched her hesitancy and apprehension from across the room and misread it as a change of heart, despite the fact that she had all but dragged him up the stairs.

'This isn't necessary, Hermione,' he said, berating himself for his pathetic gallantry. 'We don't have to do this now.' The erection in his groin begged to differ.

'You don't want to?' she replied. And even he could see that her disappointment was heartfelt.

'I can't even begin to explain how much. Nevertheless, it can wait until you... **Shut up, Severus**, his ignoble desires screamed at him.

'Oh, but I am... I do... want to, that is,' she replied. She walked around the bed to reach his side and stood still, nervously contemplating him, waiting for him to make a move. He knew she still feared that he would find her inadequate, but he was more concerned that she would discover him to be so. He should tell her that he was hardly an experienced practitioner in the noble art of intimacy. All of his experiences to date had either been business transactions or the fumbling results of drunken encounters. He should tell her that for him, she didn't need to be proficient. Her willingness and desire to be with him was the most powerful aphrodisiac of all. He did not require skill and a practiced hand only her. But her anxiety itself fuelled his desire. The need to have her on his own terms was powerful. An animal instinct easily suppressed by decorum, cultural rules and fear of consequences, prowled in his gut. He felt it, nevertheless: the need to overpower her without tenderness or restraint. He deserved her. She was his glorious prize; he had waited long enough; he had been patient, made sacrifices. He had knelt at the feet of a reptile-faced tyrant with treachery in his heart, loathing in his gut and his fingers crossed behind his back. And he had done it for... the greater good? Perhaps. A means of atonement? Without a doubt. His reward could

never be his first love she was gone, but here was a young, beguiling, clever witch before him. She wanted him for reasons that he could not comprehend, but he no longer dwelt on purpose. He could almost smell her trepidation and desire mingled with the soft aroma of her perfume. And she was waiting for him to be the director.

The longing to cover her mouth with hard and bruising kisses rose again; the urge to feel the softness of her skin yield to his grasp was potent. He wanted to forgo ceremony and etiquette and banish that little red dress with a flick of his wand. He had earned that. Surely all those years of servitude had warranted him an unrestrained tumble with the best that Gryffindor's "class of 98" had to offer?

He had almost forgotten the intoxicating force of wielding power over another human being. Not the power of pointing a weapon into a face and threatening violence, nor the capacity to know a weakness and use it to belittle and humiliate; he had exercised his prodigious skills on students for years. But this was a different feeling; it was physical, visceral, primitive. It was the might of the strongest animal over the physically weaker, and the feeling of arousal it provoked was exhilarating; it ripped through him like a Blasting curse, and with it came the urge to display his dominance, to let her feel hot, coarse flesh, sweat and supremacy as he took her without compassion or subtlety. But these were only feelings: sordid, urgent and violent as they were.

He would do nothing to jeopardise this moment; he wanted more than her body, though he wanted that almost as much as anything he had ever craved. He ached to have all of her for his own: body, mind, soul, life and limbs. Yet more than that, he wanted her to be the possessor. He was not a man to take pleasure in variety; all he had ever desired was possession. Fidelity could never be a difficulty for him he had no interest in sexual diversity: consistency was what he longed for. Stability, repetition, familiarity. He had hoped to find it in Lily.

Lily, the only kindness he had ever experienced, but Lily had feared his intensity as well as his propensity for the dark.

Hermione's eyes seared into his, maintaining his focus, as her fingers reached behind her for the fastening of her dress. She stepped out of the crimson puddle at her feet and brazenly wrapped her limbs around him like a cloak.

Her willingness was his undoing.

Beyond sense and reason, she was begging him. She was some wild, unfathomable creature, full of heat and need and passion. She was impatient. She helped with the disrobing of his shirt and trousers. No, not helped, hindered in her eagerness and he was obliged to stop her again, so that he could remove them more efficiently. The only word that came to mind was 'fuck' as he looked over her gloriously naked body, stared into a face which mirrored his own desperate want so perfectly, and marvelled at his unprecedented nakedness in front of another human being, in front of Hermione Granger. He didn't know whether that one word which was beating out a mantra in his head was an expression of surprise or a command from his sub conscious. When the word appeared on Hermione's lips, there could be no doubt that, from her, it was a plea.

Well, what was a spurned wizard to do?

Severus Snape had been grateful for few things in life, although lately the number was increasing significantly. He was grateful for his magical powers, his survival against all odds, his new girlfriend, and the fact that, far from their first time together ending in her reassurances and his mortification, her orgasm, strident and intense as it had undoubtedly been, happened several thrusts before his own equally vocal and forceful completion. He was not a man to offer himself up to silent prayer or unnecessary epithets of sentimentality, but it took a great deal of restraint not to shout out a thanks to God, Merlin, Salazar Slytherin, Albus Dumbledore, The Dark Lord in all his fetid and decaying ignominy, and anyone else he had ever felt a modicum of reverence for.

What a sight she was: her hair, tangled, messy and damp with sweat and happiness; her breaths, shallow and rapid; her face, blotchy and reddened from exertion and passion. Her smile was contentment itself. He had a feeling that his own smile might just reflect the immense feeling of smugness he was experiencing at that moment. Naked and sated Granger wrapped around his body, head on his chest, exasperating hair in his mouth, and knee uncomfortably placed on his thigh, was almost enough for him to profess that it had all been worth it in the end.

She walked towards him as he approached. She never could wait for him to fully reach her. It was as if those last few seconds of waiting were too unbearable to simply sit there without action.

'You're late,' she said accusingly.

'I'm never late.'

'A year late,' she replied, slipping her arms around his waist and sinking into the sensation of his own pulling her tightly towards him. Their lips met for a rather-longer-than-usual-kiss for a greeting. A peck on the cheek was his usual means of saying hello, but Severus was reluctant to conclude this one. 'Apology accepted,' she said, when they finally parted, oblivious to dog-walkers, exercise-freaks and school-truants.

'Still insufferable, Granger.'

They turned together and thoroughly deserved to see the last rays of the sun firing up the sky, in a haze of glorious fire, before it slipped behind the horizon unseen by the witch and the wizard. Perhaps the perfect sunset didn't quite manifest itself as a final fanfare for Severus and Hermione, but it did begin to drizzle, though neither of them noticed as they made their way to the cafe in the park which sold the best tea and scones in the county.

□

THE END

A/N I do hope the ending was satisfactory and a fitting finale for Severus and Hermione. This is my first completed longer fic, and I'm very excited to have finished it. I have to thank Sevvy for reading, supporting, advising, encouraging and just all round loveliness, as well as Snapesgirl21/Schadenfreude for reading over the later chapters and giving me her thoughts, advice and encouragement too. Thanks to everyone who read it, and hugs to everyone who was lovely enough to review. I have loved hearing your thoughts over the past year.