

From Mother to Daughter

by septentrion

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One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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This was written for Leandra in the SSHG exchange. Many thanks to my betas, Juno Magic and Melusin, who made this readable for you.

Bill Weasley cast his wand aside in his haste to break the spell, but it was too late. The grey-haired man known as Wendell Wilkins was falling to his knees on the white tiles of his Australian house, his head clutched between his hands. His wife Monica rushed to his side.

"Wendell! Wendell! What have you done?" she yelled at the tall redhead before turning her attention to the fallen man. She barely dared to touch him for fear of hurting him more. When it became obvious that life was inexorably leaving her husband, she gathered him into her arms. She raised her teary eyes to the Curse Breaker.

"What have you done?" she repeated, her voice loaded with incredulity and anger.

Her question seemed to waken Bill from his stupor. "I'm sorry," he said, forlorn. His usually pale skin had turned even paler, almost ashen. He who had gone through the war without killing anyone...a feat in itself...had just killed the father of one of his friends with a simple reverse Memory Charm. How could that be?

"Dad?" A small voice asked, hesitant. Hermione Granger stepped around Bill and reached a hand towards the kneeling woman. "Mum?"

"Don't touch me!" the woman yelled. "You're like him, aren't you?" She pointed her chin up to the Curse Breaker accusingly. "You're a witch." *You're not my daughter*, was implied. Then, she tightly hugged her now dead husband and completely broke down.

Hermione seemed hurt by Monica's rejection. The two boys standing behind her put a hand on her shoulders as a sign of comfort, at a loss on how to proceed.

"We should take them to a hospital," Bill murmured. Tears were blurring the blue hue of his eyes. He bent down to pick up his wand.

"You're right," Hermione agreed quietly. She, too, was crying. She raised her wand at her mother.

"Stupefy!"

oOo

I smiled brightly at Severus. Ever since that dreadful day six months ago when I became a widow, he had been a light in my life. As the best Legilimens and one of the most powerful wizards alive, he was asked to help retrieve my memories. No one else was willing to take the risk of killing me, too. Fools. As it was, it appeared that my poor Wendell had been living on borrowed time. The spell Bill Weasley cast on him triggered an existing aneurysm. I would have been a widow last summer whatever the circumstances. That was why, even though I had regained all my memories, I still went by the name of Monica Wilkins...because my dear husband had died not knowing any better.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation."

He handed me his cloak to hang on the hat stand. "The pleasure is mine, Monica," he answered smoothly. A slight frown marred his face when he noticed Hermione hovering in the doorway leading to the living-room. I had the feeling she didn't really know how to act in front of the Headmaster of Hogwarts in a private setting. She was still a student there, after all. My daughter had insisted on finishing her schooling, whereas her friends, Harry and Ron, had elected to dive into a professional career. I would have made the same choice she had.

"Come in. The meal is almost ready."

I led him to the living room. In a corner stood our Christmas tree, a rather small fir tree that was threatening to collapse under the weight of tinsels and ornaments. Severus' presents had been there already when Hermione and I woke up. We exchanged our gifts to prevent an awkward silence from settling on the room. Hermione's discomfort was infectious.

"Thank you very much."

By the tone of his voice, I knew that Severus was very pleased with the black scarf I'd bought him. He smiled at Hermione's present for him: a book about the magical plants of North Africa. I shuddered when I remembered the photos of Severus being taken to St Mungo's after the battle of Hogwarts in Hermione's latest edition of *Hogwarts: a History*. I imagine some malicious people might have offered Severus that particular book. However impersonal a *gift* *Maghrebi Herbs* may have been, it was not about the war.

I knew she'd tried to apologise to Severus for her lack of care after Voldemort tried to kill him, and while Severus appreciated the gesture, he didn't make a show of it. I had to explain to her that Severus didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, especially when positive feelings such as friendship and love were involved. She was flabbergasted that I knew him so well already, which in turn showed me how little we still knew each other. In truth, I simply didn't know many people with whom I could share what had happened to me. While Severus, I believed, preferred a Muggle friend he could trust, speak freely to, and who wouldn't interfere in his life too much.

Severus' gifts to us were matching scarves, gloves and hats. This left us speechless until I hugged him tightly while Hermione, gobsmacked, watched us with teary eyes. When I stepped back, she shook his hand to thank him. I could see on her face that, if she'd felt up to it, she would have hugged him, too.

The rest of the day passed quickly. In-between dishes, we talked about many different subjects, joked about others, and overall had a great time, even though Hermione acted reserved at the beginning. By the end of the day, though not quite at ease with Severus, I could see that she'd thawed towards him a bit. I'm persuaded that Severus being very polite to her...a contrast to what she'd told me about him before...helped a lot. And it made me very happy that the two most important people in my life could get along.

Severus and I started seeing each other in January.

oOo

Her mother was dating Snape! Hermione had to read her mother's letter three times...when had her mother acquired a magical owl, by the way?...before the words made any sense to her. One month earlier, she would have thought her mother had lost her mind, but since Christmas lunch, she could see the appeal. The man sitting in front of her that day had not been the teacher and headmaster she knew. He had been charming, witty, and very patient when her mother had suggested treating his yellow, uneven teeth for free. It had even sounded like a private joke between them.

"Everything all right?" Ginny asked from her seat next to Hermione in the Great Hall.

"Yes. Mum's seeing someone, that's all." She did not think it wise to reveal that her mother, her very Muggle mother, was dating the headmaster. Either she would be mercilessly teased about it, or people would start accusing her of getting even better grades thanks to her family connections. No, thank you. She was not a Malfoy. Besides, Snape might want to keep his relationship with the Muggle Monica Wilkins under wraps, for the time being, both for his sake and the Granger women's.

"Oh. That's good, I suppose." Actually, Ginny seemed very relieved to hear that, somehow, her friend's mother had been able to move on.

After Hermione's father's death, the Weasleys had walked on eggshells around Hermione for months, to the point that her budding relationship with Ron had not survived. Even though an irrational part of her resented Bill for her father's death, she knew it had been an accident and did not hold it against him. But Ron could not get over the fact that he had witnessed it and had not been able to do anything to prevent it. His feelings of guilt had been suffocating, so she had suggested that they take some time apart. She had cried about her decision because it was the end of a childhood's dream, because she had broken a dear friend's heart, and because her own heart did not break due to their separation.

"Yes, it is," Hermione answered hesitantly. "She's invited me to have dinner and go to the theatre with both of them on Saturday evening."

"Must be serious if she wants to introduce him to you."

If only she knew. The last time I saw them together, I didn't recognise either of them. They were so different from what I thought them to be.

"Will you go?"

"Of course." She doubted she would feel very comfortable, but there was no way she was going to miss an evening out with her mother.

oOo

I wanted Hermione to feel at ease with Severus. I wasn't in love with him...I didn't think I'd ever love anyone like I had Wendell, my husband of twenty-five years...but he was attractive in his own way. His loyalty had no bounds, and he looked at me like a woman, not like the grandmother I was old enough to be. At least I wasn't old enough to be mistaken for his mother. And if he was going to be a permanent presence in my life, I needed my daughter to be all right with it. The best way to achieve that was to get them to meet outside school and, better yet, outside the wizarding world, hence the restaurant and the theatre tonight.

Severus and I had agreed not to bother with him picking us up at home, but to meet in front of the restaurant instead. His job claimed so much of his time; I didn't want to take up more than necessary. Hermione was nervous, but curious as well. That was a new development. I guessed that Severus' good behaviour at Christmas had helped. He had been at his most charming that day, though a bit indifferent towards her. Although the dynamics were a bit difficult, I felt almost like having a family again. That was the day I had been able to start thinking about moving on.

A very intuitive man, Severus had sensed the change in me and asked me out soon after. We just went for a walk in the country for our first date since it was sunny that day. The walk was followed by half a pint of cider at a village pub. I felt so relaxed, more than I'd been in months. I hadn't realised how badly I needed a friend. My parents have been dead for years, and a daughter isn't a confidante. I could talk to Severus; he was such a good listener, and I listened to him, too. Several dates later, we agreed to let Hermione know about us.

"Are you sure?" I asked him. Inwardly, I was thrilled that he'd suggested it.

"Absolutely. Hermione has been rather withdrawn since school started. Most of her friends have left school. Those who are still there don't seem to be as close to her as they used to be... I don't think it would be a good thing to keep our relationship a secret from her. She must feel she can trust you. You're the only constant in her life, right now."

Severus' answer elated me by its thoughtfulness and saddened me because it revealed his knowledge of loneliness and betrayal.

He arrived as I stood wool-gathering in front of the restaurant. Hopefully Hermione didn't mind my silence.

oOo

"Ladies." Gentlemanly, Snape stepped aside to let Hermione and her mother enter the restaurant. He held their chairs while they sat down. He smiled at them. Not a grin, that would have been too out of character, but a sincere smile that reached his eyes.

"How was your week?" Monica asked.

"Quiet enough," Snape answered. "Or what do you think, Miss Granger?"

Unprepared for being addressed, Hermione reddened and stammered her answer. "Er, right, yes, I agree."

"My week was rather quiet, too," Monica put in, rescuing her from Snape's amusement at her embarrassment. She managed to keep the conversation on dentistry and medicine for the next quarter of an hour while Hermione, feeling a bit like a fifth wheel, contented herself with contributing monosyllables when needed. Until Monica teased Snape about his teeth.

"And having a rat's nest in lieu of hair is a trait that runs in your family," he retorted.

Surely this was not his idea of a joke? Hermione decided she would not endure his barb. She had indeed inherited Monica's bushy hair, and her hair had always been a touchy subject for her. She would not flee either and cry like she had when he had made a disparaging remark about her teeth in fourth year.

"I believe you appreciate it well enough." Her eyes travelled significantly from her mother to him.

Snape stiffened. His cheeks took on the rosy hue of anger, and he looked ready to explode at her daring reply. If they had been at school, she probably would have gained a month's worth of detention, but she did not back down. Gradually, though, his posture relaxed. He considered her with attention, as if realising that she was not his student at that very minute. Respect replaced anger.

For the first time ever, Hermione glimpsed something like respect for herself in Snape's eyes. All it had taken was to dare answer his barb about bushy hair with another one. It felt as good as a hard-earned grade. Then, the conversation resumed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, though this time, Hermione participated actively in it. For the next two hours, she forgot how lonely her time at Hogwarts was, how out of place she felt in the post-war world without the constant presence of her closest friends.

Later that night, Snape walked them back to their car.

"I've had a very nice evening," he told them. "Thank you, Monica, and you, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt so at ease, she nearly asked him to call her by her first name. She refrained only because she would still have to call him "Headmaster" or "Sir" for the next four months, and she would not let him call her by her first name if she could not reciprocate.

"Thank you, sir."

"Severus, I've had a very pleasant time, too," Monica said.

Severus kissed her on the cheek. He watched them leave before he Apparated to Hogwarts' gates.

"So, did you enjoy yourself?" Monica asked while driving.

"I did, Mum." Hermione smiled. She was in a very good mood after a very enjoyable evening.

Monica's answering smile lighted the inside of the car. "Severus is a great man. I'm glad to have him in my life."

Hermione mulled over her mother's statement. The more she knew about Snape through Monica and her own observations, the more she thought he was a man worth knowing. After all her mother had been through, she deserved to be happy. Hermione sighed inwardly. To overcome the awkwardness Snape's presence still caused in her, she needed to get to know him better. She vowed to find a way to achieve that goal.

The next day, Ginny interrupted Hermione's musings. "How was your night out with your mum and her... friend?" the younger girl asked as she sat down at Hermione's table in the library.

Luna Lovegood was with her. "Your mum's seeing someone?"

"Yes, she is," Hermione answered. "I had a good time, but..."

The other two girls watched her with interest.

"He's younger than her. By ten years," she whispered. She was pretty sure Snape was not in the library, but you could never be too prudent.

"And?" Luna asked.

Hermione sighed. "I know, there's nothing wrong with that. It's just..." She struggled to find the words. "I didn't get to say goodbye to my father. He spent one year not remembering me, and when I met him again, he died before he could. And now my mum's with someone else." She unsuccessfully tried not to cry. "I... It's difficult to wrap my mind around that fact."

Ginny and Luna hugged her as tightly as it was possible when sitting around a massive wooden table.

Snape chose that moment to enter the library. The three girls straightened up in an attempt to look busy with their homework. The headmaster might have been a war hero, but he was still as demanding as before the war. That was the official explanation Hermione would have given if anyone had bothered to ask her why she was hiding her tears from him. In truth, she did not want to appear weak in his eyes, and above all, she did not want him to know what she was crying about.

"Miss Granger!"

Too late. He had noticed her red eyes and the lone tear running down her cheek.

"Come with me."

Hermione was beyond embarrassed. She was lucky that it was a Sunday morning, which meant the library was mostly empty. However, she was not a coward, so she let

her eyes meet his and raised her chin.

"Yes, sir."

There. Respect. Again. A smile nearly escaped Hermione's lips. She could do this.

Snape led her to his office. Its atmosphere, portraits notwithstanding, matched its current owner, she mused. Jars of potions ingredients, some of them gruesome and probably forbidden, lined up on shelves next to piles of books...the latter in obvious disarray. At the same time, the windows had been enlarged to let the maximum of natural light in. A lot of people would have objected to light being representative of Snape, but Hermione understood; she too could not stand darkness anymore.

When both of them were seated, Snape spoke. "Miss Granger, I'd like to talk to you about my... relationship with your mother."

She nodded. She was anxious to hear what he had to say.

"Quite unexpectedly, I have found a friend in her. A closer friend than I have had in a long time. I have the utmost respect for her, and for you."

He looked at her to see her reaction. She struggled to keep a blank face.

"I'll never be a hindrance in your relationship with her. You have my word on it."

Oh. Hermione had never expected to hear that. She had never expected to need to hear that either.

"All right," she said slowly as she processed his words. She breathed deeply. "I'll never be a hindrance in your relationship, either, as long as she's happy."

The admission cost her. She was jealous of their relationship, she knew, of how they were closer to each other than she was to her mother since she had taken her memories away. But irrationality was not her style. She was very good at doing the right thing. She could do no less for her mother.

Snape acknowledged her words. "Thank you."

"Is that all?" she asked abruptly. Doing the right thing was not easy in this case. She wanted to think about what had happened, to come to terms with it, and, perhaps, cry about it, too.

"You can go, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

She practically rushed out of the office, missing the concerned look on Snape's face.

oOo

Severus made a real effort to get closer to my daughter. He invited her to his office when he saw her crying in her friends' arms in the library the day after our outing. The poor soul was probably afraid that I would stop seeing him if Hermione wasn't all right with our relationship. And... I would have stopped seeing him if Hermione had wanted me to. After so many years being separated from her, even during the holidays, I wasn't about to jeopardise the tenuous bond between us. I had missed so much in my daughter's life already! After losing my husband, she was all I had left in terms of family.

Hermione didn't tell me about the meeting, though. I heard about it from Severus. I suppose she didn't know how to tell me that my "good friend" had explained his intentions towards me to her.

I could hear Severus saying, "Miss Granger, I have the utmost respect for your mother. She is a dear friend of mine." Then, his cheeks would redden a little. "I would never be a hindrance to your relationship with her. I... like her company." Or something like that. He would wait for Hermione to give us her blessing.

But I couldn't hear what Hermione would answer by myself. I had to rely on Severus' retelling of the conversation for that.

oOo

After a couple of weeks, Hermione had a plan of action for getting to know Snape better. She observed his comings and goings. She knew when and where to cross paths with the headmaster. For example, if she were in the Entrance Hall at noon each day, she would see him emerging from the staircase leading to the dungeons at least four times a week. Even though Slughorn was still Head of Slytherin House, the Slytherin students appreciated the attention they got from Snape. Slytherin headmasters were rather rare in Hogwarts' history, after all.

At first, she tried to be inconspicuous, acting as if she were just passing by. Since he greeted her cordially each time, she grew bolder and began asking him how he was. His answer was always very polite..."I'm very well, Miss Granger. Thank you for asking."...and such a sharp contrast with his previous indifference, if not downright meanness, to her. But those short exchanges started to attract attention.

"Sucking up to Snape?" a Slytherin girl sniggered at her once Snape had departed. That remark was followed by more sniggering on the girl's friends' part. Rude comments and puns around the verb "suck" were uttered loudly enough to make even a Gryffindor blush. It was obvious that Hermione needed to implement the next stage of her plan. Besides, longer conversations with the headmaster were necessary if she wanted to know him as well as her mother did...or almost as well.

oOo

If it weren't for the stiff muscles when I wake up in the morning, I would have felt young again. I'd seen Severus every week-end for the last few weeks. Our mutual understanding of loss and second chances had brought us closer still. It was his understanding of loss that brought him to pay attention to Hermione. In his way, he was trying to help me understand her, and it worked.

He told me about the war and her bravery. My daughter had lived through danger, torture, and death, and I had barely known about it. Wendell and I hadn't been by Hermione's side to support her, both as a result of ignorance and because she hadn't let us. Our daughter protected us from the ugliness of her world when it should have been the other way around.

I was so proud of her and so ashamed of myself.

But I didn't let my shame destroy my improving relationship with Hermione. For that, I had to thank Severus. He explained so many things to me about magic and the wizarding world. Coupled with what I knew of my daughter's character, I was persuaded she had made the best choices possible given her circumstances. I only wished it didn't hurt so much.

While my Saturday evenings were for Severus, my Sunday lunches were spent with Hermione, except for this week-end. I'd asked if we could switch days. When she asked why, I explained that I wanted to spend Valentine's Day with Severus. Her mouth had formed an 'O' of surprise. "All right," she'd said in a small, hurt, voice.

I tried to back-pedal. "We can leave it as usual," I assured her. A bit of disappointment wouldn't kill me.

"No, no, no," she practically yelled. "Your... suggestion took me by surprise, that's all."

"Why does it bother you so much to switch days?" I inquired.

"It doesn't bother me," she badly lied. "Let's switch."

I frowned, but didn't insist. If Hermione didn't want to tell me, I would never get it out of her.

So Hermione and I had dinner together yesterday evening, and then we went to the cinema. We laughed so loudly we attracted a bit of attention. Yet melancholy never really deserted her eyes. For the first time, I wondered if she had someone to spend Valentine's Day with.

And today, on Sunday, February the fourteenth, I was meeting Severus. How cheesy of me! But it felt good to let myself bask in the cheerfulness and false romantic ambiance of Valentine's Day.

I had booked a rather secluded table in an Indian restaurant. The intimate atmosphere of the place, the close quarters in which we found ourselves, led to an in-depth conversation about our expectations in life. I learned that, like me, Severus sought companionship and understanding. I covered his hand with mine at his words. He didn't take it back.

"What would you like to do?" he asked after I'd paid the bill. I insisted on that.

I didn't want to stop talking to him, so I discarded any activity that would require tearing our attention from each other. "Let's go for a walk," I suggested.

The good thing about Severus was that he liked to walk, preferably in the country, but he didn't object to walking in town, either. That day, we elected to have a stroll in Muggle London. I must say that Apparition is a handy ability to possess: no time lost with transportation.

I didn't really pay attention to where we were going. We walked along broad streets and narrow streets, through populated and deserted areas, next to old buildings and newer ones, through parks... All the while, our hands remained linked. I was reminded of the walks Wendell and I had often enjoyed. There were moments when I turned to the side to tell Wendell something and was surprised to see Severus instead. Was I really ready to move on? I hoped Severus didn't notice my reaction...

Eventually we needed rest, and Severus had to return to Hogwarts. He Apparated me back home. He didn't enter but kissed me before he left. It wasn't a kiss full of passion on my part, and not for the lack of trying. I greedily drank in the closeness to another human being, the physical contact offered to me. I tried to lose myself in the physical sensations, but I wasn't sure I still had any passion in me. When Severus broke the kiss, I showed him my gratitude for his gentleness with a small smile, hoping he didn't want us to take the next step in our relationship. My anxiety was put at ease by the understanding and unusual warmth in his dark eyes.

"Your friendship is precious to me," he said softly. Then he turned on the spot and Apparated away.

When I stepped into my house, I reflected that, sometimes, prayers would be better left unanswered.

oOo

What had Snape so deep in thought these days? Hermione wondered, not for the first time. He had been like that since Valentine's Day...a day she had had to spend alone. *What happened with my mother? Did they kiss?* The idea disturbed her. Not that she would deny older people physical pleasure, even her mother, but Snape?

However, since she had taken to watching him closely...she did not have that many ways at her disposal to get to know him better...she had noticed how gracefully he moved, how his features would soften when he was not addressing a student, how much he read, how silky yet male his voice was... She had noticed entirely too much, but it was too late to backtrack. She found herself understanding her mother's attraction to the headmaster. Attraction was not knowledge, though. If she wanted to be friends with Snape, she would have to spend time with him...without her mother. When he was with her mother, she was just Monica's daughter. And... she really wanted him to be her friend.

Hermione passed by the gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office easily, thanks to Professor McGonagall, who had provided her with the password...Queltzalcoatl, it was. She bet not a lot of students could pronounce it correctly. Her heartbeat increased when she knocked at the door. How would her offer be received?

Snape's voice carried through the thick wood of the door. "Enter."

So she did. She closed the door behind her and faced him. His eyebrows were raised.

"Miss Granger," was his only greeting.

"Headmaster," she replied likewise. "I hope this isn't a bad time?"

He gave her a mocking look. "Have a seat. What can I do for you?"

She smiled nervously. She had her speech ready. She could do it. "Well, as you know, I've chosen to do my seventh year at Hogwarts like a regular student, in spite of... the war. But... as much as I want to finish my schooling, I am... bored... a little."

Snape's posture...sitting immobile behind his desk, his hands steepled under his chin, his emotionless eyes tracking her every little move...did nothing to quiet her nerves. Yet, she carried on. She had crossed paths with real evil, after all, and Snape was not it.

"I overheard you...I was not trying to eavesdrop, I promise. I was just passing by," she hastened to clarify, though Snape gave no indication that he believed her. She breathed. "I overheard you saying to Professor Flitwick that you hadn't had time to sort out your personal library yet after you sold your house. I thought I'd propose to help you with that."

She cast him an expectant look. She was rewarded when astonishment appeared on his face; he had not expected anything of the sort. She started to squirm when suspicion succeeded it. "You're bored?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I am." Would he see through her lie?

Clearly he did. "Are you sure you don't have another motive?" His lips twitched; he was amused by the situation. Perhaps honesty would throw him off.

"Since you're dating my mother, I thought I'd like to get to know you better. Maybe we could even become friends." That was a bold proposition, but Hermione had not fought Voldemort with meekness. Besides, from what she had observed in the headmaster's general behaviour and based on the information she had managed to extract from her mother, honesty and sincerity always worked better with Snape.

"I have no idea what made you think you could strut in here and ask to be my friend." Hermione tried hard to hide her disappointment. Even if she expected his rebuttal, she could not help but hope he would accept her help. "However, I admit to being in need of help to sort out my books. I also know your abilities in regards to such a task, so I accept your proposal."

Hermione was ecstatic. She could not prevent herself from beaming at him, which in turn seemed to make him ill at ease, as if he were not accustomed to genuine gratitude from a student.

"When do I start?" she asked eagerly.

"I'll see you Saturday at ten a.m. in this office."

"Thank you, Headmaster." She stood up to take her leave.

"It is I who should thank you," he replied evenly. His eyes, though, were not as bottomless as they normally were.

oOo

April. Spring was upon us, at least on the calendar if not always where the weather was concerned. Hermione had two weeks off school and had elected to spend most of them at Hogwarts to revise for her NEWTs and to finish cataloguing Severus' books. Severus had even less time for me: since a lot of students didn't go home for the holidays, he was needed at Hogwarts to supervise the school. That was what he told me. I knew that was true, but there was more to it.

After Valentine's Day, I didn't expect our relationship to progress, at least physically. I won't lie to myself; I missed a man's embrace. But I couldn't picture myself with anyone other than Wendell. I wasn't ready, yet.

I wondered if Severus had picked up on my feelings, though in truth, if he had wanted more from our relationship, I thought I'd have seen it in his eyes. However guarded a man Severus was around others, he was almost an open book for me. I knew he'd watched me to ascertain my feelings and expectations; he'd tried to hug me on occasion, but I never acted more than friendly. After a while, he ceased trying to touch me as more than a friend.

That was how I guessed someone else had caught his attention. Severus was a patient man. If he hadn't stopped wanting me, he would have waited for me, for that was the kind of man he was: patient and attentive. The only thing that could have made him change his mind about us would be if he wanted another woman more than me...another woman he might even be in love with.

At least, I had his friendship, and he mine. And I dearly hoped the woman he had eyes for was worthy of him. There would be hell to pay if she hurt him, whether she was a witch or not!

oOo

Hermione was happy to spend four days with her mother. Really, she was. They had become closer than they had been since Hermione had started Hogwarts. Yet she dreaded those four days as well because she felt guilty. Why, oh why did she fancy the man her mother was dating?

The feeling had crept upon her, stealthily, like a silent enemy. She relished her time with Snape. Sorting books had led to discussions while sorting books. They broached a wide range of topics from the latest discovery in Transfiguration to philosophy or politics. Snape's mind never ceased to fascinate her. He was so knowledgeable, so intelligent, and willing to share his knowledge and opinions.

It had happened one day after two hours of sorting books together while debating the use of blood in magic.

"Why would using human blood be Dark magic? Then, why is using dragon blood not considered as such?" Snape punctuated his question with an angry flick of his hand.

Hermione reflected on his argument while distractedly putting away the book she was carrying.

"Dragon blood is different because of the animal's magical properties. That prevents using it in Dark magic and rituals, whereas human blood has been proven to be more efficient than, say, chicken blood in most poisons requiring blood in their composition."

"And who proved that?" he snarled, then looked at the title of the book he had just picked up before stashing it on a shelf. "Half-educated wizards who believed in superstitions and therefore made their experiments match their beliefs!"

"That's not true," she replied in an equally heated tone. "You know very well that Benjamin Turpidge built his experiment carefully, that..."

She stopped abruptly. Their debate had brought earnest passion to his features, and his body seemed to be vibrating with it. His eyes were burning with the heat of their argument. Books forgotten, his attention focused on her.

Trapped by those dark eyes, alive with passion, Hermione ignited inside. She could not recall what they had just been talking about. She suddenly saw him in a new light, not as her headmaster or her teacher, not as the friend he was becoming, but like a man she was attracted to. She did not understand how her world could be turned upside down by a man she had known for years. Her new awareness of him shook her to the core.

After that revelation, she cut their meeting short. She had the nagging feeling that Snape understood why, if his lack of protest at her hasty departure was any indication.

But the next week, she came back to carry on the cataloguing. And the next. And the next. She had offered her help to Snape; she had given her word, if only to herself, that she would finish cataloguing his library. The drawback was that she found herself more and more enthralled by him, to the point of forgetting sometimes that he was twenty years older than she, that he was the headmaster of the school she was attending, that he was ugly as sin.

However, there was one thing she could not let herself forget: he was dating her mother.

She was attracted like a moth to a flame to a man who was not available, and at a high risk of hurting someone she loved deeply.

Hermione pondered the situation carefully. There was no doubt that her mother came first. It did not matter that they were still a bit distant. Monica was the woman who had given birth to her, held her, and taken care of her when she was a little girl. She had always supported her daughter, even if sometimes grudgingly. And as thanks for that, Hermione had unceremoniously wiped her memories before shipping her to Australia, from where she had come back as a widow. She seemed happy with Snape, and she more than deserved that. With Snape, she did not have to hide what her daughter was; she could confide in him in a way she would not be able to with a Muggle.

Also, Hermione herself was still young and likely to meet someone she could love later on. Statistics were on her side: most people met their spouses at work. Besides, her attraction was probably nothing more than infatuation. She had to get over her fascination with the older and completely unsuitable man before she could find her hypothetical future other half. Since she'd managed to move on after her relationship with Ron died, Hermione thought herself strong-willed enough to get over Snape. It would not be easy, but if she put her mind to it, she would succeed.

The conclusion Hermione reached was that she would give up on Snape for her mother's sake. She would finish her schooling at Hogwarts and find ways to avoid the man as much as possible until she would be able to see him just as her mother's friend...or more. The knowledge of his schedule, so handy when she wanted to meet him in the corridors, could also be used to stay away from him. The only difficult part would be the Saturday mornings; they were nowhere close to finishing cataloguing Snape's books, and it would be rude and unlike herself to back out now. But she could do it. If the price she had to pay was a bit of suffering, so be it.

oOo

I loved having my daughter at home. So far, we'd had a great time going shopping, seeing a play, cooking together, and just lounging around at home. If only she'd reveal what was eating at her! Was she worried about me? I didn't miss the way she kept staring at me when she thought I wasn't looking, and today even more than before. Did it have anything to do with Severus coming for lunch today? Hermione was never very good at subterfuge. I was so, so tempted to ask her outright what was on her mind, but she'd only give me a false answer. All I could do was to observe her and be there for her if she needed me. I was torn from my musings when the oven timer went off.

"I've got it!" Hermione exclaimed. She rushed to take the chicken out of the oven and started to carve it by hand. She never used magic a lot when in the Muggle world, at least not in front of me, for which I was grateful. I really did have a great daughter. Meanwhile, I took care of the potatoes and beans.

When the doorbell rang, we both jumped...we had been so engrossed in our tasks. But only Hermione paled. I was right, then. She had problems with Severus. I went to open the door.

"Hello, Severus."

"Hello, Monica. How are you today?" He kissed me on the cheek, like he always did. It was just a friendly peck, like all his kisses since February. I didn't know if it was the effect of Hermione's presence at home, but I found I wasn't bothered by that anymore. Briefly, I inwardly snorted at that contradiction.

I smiled at him. "Good, thank you."

Suddenly I realised that I would very soon be ready to let go of any idea of a romantic relationship with Severus I might have entertained; I could feel it. I briefly wondered if such vain expectations were my way of avoiding my ever present grief over Wendell's death.

Severus followed me into the living room and nodded at Hermione as she stepped out of the kitchen to greet him. "Miss Granger."

"Headmaster," she answered.

Their eyes met. But after their curt greeting, they didn't turn their heads away. They stared at each other for a couple of seconds, just enough for me to get an inkling of what was going on. Hermione was attracted to Severus, and by the look of it, he was attracted to her, too. I doubted their mutual attraction had gone further than longing glances, not while she was a student, but I wondered if others had noticed it.

It dawned on me that the woman I had decided to relinquish Severus to was my own daughter.

I probed my feelings; I was a bit hurt, but not angry. I also felt relieved, for Hermione was a fine woman with a big heart and great intelligence. She wouldn't hurt him intentionally. And any man should be happy to share her life. As for Severus, he would take great care of my daughter; I wouldn't have to worry about her happiness. And he deserved more than companionship. He deserved love. I'd already had that in my life. The least I could do was to let him experience it. Besides, Severus' friendship was precious to me. I wouldn't ruin that with unbecoming jealousy.

"I'm going to take care of the kitchen!" I said quickly.

I didn't wait to see how they'd react to my hasty departure. In the kitchen, I took my time getting the dishes ready. At first, I only heard a shuffling of feet, then chairs being moved around and low voices. A conversation had started. I waited another couple of minutes before interrupting them.

"The chicken smells delicious," I announced as I put the dish on the table.

The way they started when I came in confirmed my suspicions. Hermione looked guilty, and Severus averted his eyes.

Hermione bolted from her chair. "I'm going to fetch the potatoes."

Severus stared at her disappearing backside. I saw him pull himself together and look at me. "Let me help you serve the chicken," he said as he stood up.

In the meantime, Hermione came back with the potatoes. She put them down on the table and resumed her seat. She never looked in our direction while Severus distributed the chicken onto the plates with a concentration worthy of a surgeon. What was happening? Why were they behaving as if they were trying to avoid each other?

Good heavens! I had my second revelation of the day. They weren't going to sacrifice what they could have together for an old lady's whim, were they? I wouldn't let them.

After that tense beginning, we relaxed more and more as the meal progressed. Conversation flowed freely between the three of us. I remarked, though, how Hermione's eyes always found Severus' and vice-versa. Every time it happened, embarrassment appeared on their faces, and they made an obvious effort to look away. Were they even aware they were dancing around each other? I was very tempted to shake my head at them.

Throughout the meal, I found excuses like forgetting the salt in the kitchen or fetching a spoon for the sauce to leave Hermione and Severus alone. They didn't pay any attention to my manoeuvres at first until Hermione made a remark about it. "You're being very forgetful today, Mum. I hope you're not coming down with something."

That was enough to make Severus suspicious. He scrutinised me from that moment on, but remained silent about it. I was pretty sure I was as transparent as Hermione. Alas, there would be no time for us to talk alone today. That would have to wait for another day.

After the meal, we moved to the lounge to have tea...which "took" me nearly fifteen minutes to prepare. When I came back, tray in hand, Hermione and Severus were engrossed in a lively discussion about some magical stuff or other and didn't see me at once. Hermione's eyes were on fire; I could find no other word to describe the passion they exhibited. Severus' were soft and amused, softer than I had ever seen them before.

When they took notice of me, Hermione was mortified. She blushed and trained her eyes on her clasped hands in her lap. By contrast, Severus stared at me. Inner conflict was visible in his dark eyes. I didn't need words to know what he was thinking: how he was torn between his desire for my daughter and his friendship with me. Honestly, didn't he know me well enough to realise I'd never ask him to choose?

I smiled at him and nodded, giving him tacit permission to pursue a relationship with my daughter. He understood my meaning at once. His first reaction, however, was an expression of nearly palpable disbelief, so I reiterated my permission with a more insistent nod and another smile. Then he finally responded with a nod of his own. But when his eyes met mine, I nearly choked from the depth of his gratitude.

oOo

When the day came to an end, Hermione said good night to her mother and went to bed. However, sleep remained elusive. Her mind was reeling with the day's excitement. It was not the first time the three of them had shared a meal, yet this one had been different somehow. She could not put her finger on it, but... Had Snape really paid more attention to her than to her mother? As incredible as that was, she had to admit that he had.

And her mother... It was as if her mother had left her alone with Snape all the time on purpose because, honestly, fetching the cake from the pantry did not take ten minutes. Snape had seemed puzzled by Monica's behaviour, too...until tea time. She wondered what had happened to change that. She had been too distressed by her inability to keep her promise to stay away from Snape to notice anything else. Later, though, she had noticed how Snape and her mother were acting more like friends than lovers, in a way that eerily reminded her of her own friendship with Harry. It was as if Snape had been visiting her and not her mother.

Her mind supplied her with a reason for their behaviour, but she just could not believe the obvious implication.

After a night spent tossing and turning, Hermione had still not come up with a more satisfactory explanation for her mother's and Snape's behaviour. In the morning, she entered the kitchen with bleary eyes.

"Good morning!" Her mother sounded chipper and happy. Almost... bouncy.

Hermione stifled a yawn. "Good morning."

"There's tea in the pot."

"Thanks."

They started breakfast in silence, though Hermione was dying to ask her mother why she had acted almost like a matchmaker the previous day.

Monica's voice interrupted her inner debate. "You look like you have something to tell me."

"Hm, well, yes," she stammered. She put her slice of toast down on the table and stifled another yawn. "Why did you leave me alone with Snape so many times

yesterday?" she asked in a rush.

Her mother blushed a little, but her eyes twinkled. "Was that uncomfortable for you?"

Hermione's cheeks took on a similar shade to her mother's. "No," she reluctantly admitted.

In a gesture so reminiscent of Snape, Monica raised her eyebrows to let Hermione know that she needed to elaborate.

"All right, Mum. Snape and I, we... are kind of friends, you know?"

"Kind of friends?"

Were all mothers that nosy and intuitive? Hermione squirmed in her chair and cast an annoyed look at her mother. "Yes. Friends," she answered tartly.

"If you say so," Monica answered cheerily. "Have you finished organising his library?"

"Not yet." Of course she had not finished. In spite of her efforts to avoid getting too close to Snape, he and she invariably ended up spending half their time together discussing academic topics, politics, even just wizarding world gossip instead of working. No amount of self-convincing and inner pep talk had managed to keep her from engaging him in conversation...when he was not the one engaging her in conversation, that was.

Monica merely offered a small smile to her daughter and did not broach the subject again. But when Hermione went back to school, Snape seemed to cross her path more often than usual...several times a day was certainly more often than usual. Most of the time, he neither scowled nor frowned at her. A smile even floated on his lips on occasion. And if she was lucky, he would brush her arm with his hand while passing her.

oOo

This was the last day of the school year. I parked my car and walked the rest of the way to the station. I wished I could see the Hogwarts Express; the way Hermione described it gave me the impression it was spectacular.

I hugged Hermione tightly as soon as she emerged from the brick wall of the station. It amazed me how non-magical people...Muggles, in wizarding speak...never took notice of that fact.

"Welcome home."

She returned the embrace. "Thanks, Mum."

We went back to our house, soon to be only my house. Hermione was planning to look for a flat as soon as she got her first pay from the Ministry job she'd been offered even before she finished her schooling. I was a bit sad at the thought, but such is life. Children grow up and leave their parents. I can now understand my own mother's tears when I married Wendell.

"Severus will join us for dinner," I said as I put my keys away.

"I know."

Of course she knew. I might have seen less of Severus since our lunch during the Easter holidays, but I was still his friend. In veiled words, he'd confided his subtle courtship of Hermione to me. It sounded like an old-fashioned romance, with discreet brushing of hands, shared looks, and chaperones. But while she was still a student, he couldn't take her out for dinner or for a stroll in the country. He could only make sure he saw her and talked to her every day. And he'd have told her I'd invited him.

Unpacking with magic is a lot quicker than by hand, so Hermione's was done in a blink.

Since I had already prepared most of the dinner, we did next to nothing in the afternoon. Actually, I did next to nothing, and Hermione fidgeted. I sighed. The situation had an air of déjà vu.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Might you have something to tell me?"

Hermione worried her lower lip, a sure sign of nervousness. "Please, don't be angry."

"Why would I be angry?"

"Professor Snape has invited me to dinner next Saturday, and I've accepted."

"That's wonderful!" I meant it.

She looked at me warily. "You're not upset?"

"Of course not. I've seen this coming for months."

"Oh..." She was speechless.

"Hermione." I reached for her hand. "I loved your father deeply, and I know I'll never love another man as I did him. What developed between Severus and me in the beginning was friendship and companionship, nothing more. When I guessed his feelings for you, and that you returned them, I decided to step back and just be his friend. You're two of the most important people in my life. Your happiness is mine, too."

I suddenly found myself engulfed in my daughter's arms. Her hair tickled my nose, but I didn't mind.

"Thank you, Mum. You're the best," she sobbed.

I patted her back lightly. "Don't mention it. I love you so much, Hermione."

We wordlessly cuddled on the sofa for more than an hour. It felt good, so good. I wanted it to last forever because, finally, I had my daughter back.

oOo

Hermione's summer after she left Hogwarts was the best of her life; she would bet her wand on it. But that did not mean it was easy.

"Phew!" She plopped down in her brand new armchair. "Who knew moving was so tiring, even with magic?"

From the next armchair, Severus snorted. "Take it as life experience."

She cast him a dark look. "Don't mock me!"

Her banter with Severus...she had been calling him by his first name since their first date...was proof of how at ease she felt with him.

He did not bother to correct her. Instead, he suggested that they had tea, which they drank in silence.

"Severus? I... Would you mind... spending the night with me?" She watched the window intently, as if she could see the truth of the universe through it. Her request had come out more bluntly than she had intended.

Severus carefully put his cup down, aware of the implications of such a request. "Are you sure?" His black eyes blazed with a passion so intense Hermione thought she would combust with it.

"Yes, absolutely." Resolutely, she met the fire of his eyes with a blaze of her own.

He held out his hand to her. "Let's put some sheets on the bed, then."