

# In Search of a Wand

*by devsgma*

This story begins shortly after the disastrous visit by Harry and Hermione to Godric's Hollow where they found Nagini. Hermione seeks to find a new wand for Harry after having broken his, and she gets a little more than she bargained for. Canon is changed only where absolutely necessary. EWE This was written for the SSHG Exchange 2010. The original prompt was provided by scarletlady.

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 5*

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AN: I am sending many kisses and thanks to the wonder that is Lariope for her marvelous beta skills.

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Hermione was sick to death of crying herself to sleep every night over Ron's desertion, and she was fairly sure Harry was probably tired of hearing it, especially after the disaster they'd made of visiting Godric's Hollow yesterday.

*It's quite simple*, she told herself while huddling on her bunk. *You're not going to do it any longer. He's not worth it.*

Harry was brooding and had refused her company after they'd read the chapter of Skeeter's book concerning Dumbledore and Grindelwald. Hermione knew, despite his protests, the loss of his wand had devastated him, and it was all her fault. She hadn't meant to, but it was done. While lying in her bunk, trying to keep warm, she decided something else. She was determined to try and get Harry another wand. After checking the contents of her purse, she'd formed a plan. They had plenty of Moody's Polyjuice potion left, and while Ollivander's wasn't an option any longer, there were plenty of witches and wizards out there that had one. Hermione felt a twinge of guilt for even thinking about stealing another's wand, but she justified it quite easily.

*Our need is greater. If I can get their name highly unlikely, but I can try I'll get them a new one later.*

*If I can't when Harry takes care of... him... they can easily get another one.*

Later, of course, depended on their survival, which had been drastically reduced when she'd destroyed Harry's wand, and there were no other options open to them that she could see. Taking over the "watch" at midnight, Hermione worried about leaving Harry there alone and unguarded, but she was sure when she put another wand in his hand, it would be worth it. A double dose of Polyjuice potion rested in her pocket and Harry's invisibility cloak was tucked out of sight under hers while she made a show of sitting in the door of the tent with *A History of Magic* in her lap.

"Sleep well, Harry," she said when he made his way inside. She waited until she could hear his soft snores before slipping her book back inside the tent. Standing, Hermione threw Harry's cloak over her head before stepping outside their wards.

One quick twist found her in Muggle London, alone and quite scared.

*Oh, gods. I can't do this.*

*I have to do this.*

*I should have brought Harry along.*

*He never would have agreed and even if he did with only one wand between us disaster before we'd even begun. I should go back.*

About to spin and return to the tent, she stopped and closed her eyes instead.

*Are you a Gryffindor or a coward like Ronald who only thinks about her own comfort?* she finally asked herself. *You're going to open your eyes and take the hair of the first person you see.*

There weren't many establishments open, and very few people were out and about. It wasn't until the third street over that Hermione found that *first* person she sought.

*Right, maybe the second person I see,* Hermione hedged when the first Muggle she saw was an elderly male who seemed to have trouble with arthritis.

*I could try a male, I suppose,* she thought as one particularly handsome young man walked by, *but I wouldn't know how to act properly, with the belching and the apparent hourly need to shift their private parts or the clothes! so female it is.* His companion had caught her eye, and while the woman was a bit brash looking in her opinion, she would do since she was about Hermione's height. Creeping up behind the pair as quietly as she could, Hermione reached a hand outside of the cloak and snagged a few blonde hairs.

"Ow! What was that for, love?" the woman asked the bewildered young man after stopping and putting her hands on her hips. "I'll have you know I spent several hours getting my hair just so. Don't you like it?"

"No. I mean, it's fine," he sputtered.

Hermione stepped back against a building while they continued on down the walk, their argument in full swing. Her heart was pounding, and it took a few moments before her hand quit trembling.

"Sorry," she whispered while pulling out the small flask that contained the Polyjuice potion. Slipping the hairs inside and closing the lid, Hermione shook it while looking around for a safe spot to take off the invisibility cloak. The small garden area of a restaurant, currently closed, seemed to meet her requirements, and it wasn't long before she watched the jumper she wore expand greatly.

"Oh, bloody hell," she muttered while reaching under that jumper to unhook and remove her suddenly uncomfortable bra. She shrank the bra and stuck it in a pocket before looking at the rest of her clothing. Other than the unfortunate disparity in breast size, she and her donor seemed to be about the same build. She hadn't been able to be too particular about her clothing as it would have made Harry suspicious, but the matching skirt and jumper weren't out of the ordinary, and the robes would do as they were completely nondescript. Her shoes seemed a trifle large, but not enough to worry about.

*Crap. I need a name,* a wild-eyed Hermione realized, suddenly tempted to run after the couple and hope to catch the woman's name.

*Don't be stupid, Granger. That would be a waste of time.* "Time have to keep track of the time," she muttered while checking her watch. Unfortunately, the only names that came to Hermione's mind were Potions ingredients. "Belladonna? Oh! Donna! No, not exactly a wizarding name, and I'll be damned if I use *Pansy*," Hermione muttered while trying to think. "Rowena would work, but Rowena what? Obviously I can't use Ravenclaw. Delacour? I could be an English cousin, and I know *some* things about them. Enough to pass for a *distant* cousin, anyway."

Having decided on a name, Hermione felt a little less anxious before it dawned on her that this was Boxing Day. It cut down drastically the number of places that would be open. "The Leaky," she whispered before taking the cloak off her head and mussing the hair her donor had spent several hours on. Brushing it down, Hermione Apparated and found herself in front of The Leaky Cauldron. Hoping it wasn't closed for the holiday, she was greatly relieved to feel the door under her hand open.

There were exactly four people inside the pub, counting the bartender, and Hermione felt her spirits sink. Walking to the bar, she took a stool and looked at the other three customers. One, a dark haired, middle-aged man, sat by himself in a corner and met her gaze briefly. There were two older women sitting at a table not too far from him, but they seemed interested in nothing but each other and the glasses in front of them.

"What'll it be?" a gruff voice asked. Hermione almost fell off the stool in shock, but managed to maintain her balance as she turned around to face not Tom. *Butterbeer* hovered on the tip of her tongue before she tilted her head in the middle-aged man's direction. "Uhm, whatever he's having?" she managed to say. The bartender gave Hermione what she thought was a leer before grabbing a glass and filling it with something from a tap. "Ten Sickles," he stated while still holding onto the glass. Pulling what money they had from her pocket, Hermione made sure he couldn't see while counting it out. She felt bad about spending some of their food money, but if she could manage to get Harry a wand for those few Sickles, it would be a bargain.

Picking up the glass, Hermione sniffed it before taking a cautious sip and grimacing slightly. *So that's what ale tastes like. Nasty.*

Having paid her "dues," so to speak, Hermione felt a bit better about looking around and decided quite quickly that the lone man would be her target. The women weren't as scary to contemplate, but there were two of them. If she managed to lift one of their wands there would still be one wand available to use against her.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione slid off the stool, still clutching the glass of ale, and headed in his direction. Feeling her borrowed assets sway under the jumper didn't help her confidence level as she walked in his direction. The added weight made her wonder briefly if she would tip over if she didn't keep her back as straight as the proverbial arrow.

"May I sit with you? It's Boxing Day, and I'm feeling a little lonely," she stated simply as she came to a halt. The man looked up, and his eyes narrowed slightly before they dropped to the borrowed breasts and then back to his drink.

"If you must," was the slightly slurred response.

Slipping into the seat opposite his, Hermione's spirits rose when she decided he was probably well on his way to being intoxicated. She couldn't help the smile that bloomed on her mouth when she estimated her chances of getting his wand were growing by leaps and bounds. Braving a larger sip of the ale, Hermione tilted her head and tried to see into the man's eyes.

"Are you all alone too?" she asked.

He drank the remainder in his glass before making a small circling motion with his hand. Hermione wondered if he was related to the Lovegoods and was re-thinking her options. "You're stating the obvious, Miss?"

"Rowena," Hermione said as the bartender brought over two glasses of ale. Her eyes widened slightly when he put one of them in front of her. "Oh, you didn't have to I've still got..."

"You're not playing the game correctly, Rowena," the man across from her said with a smirk. "Is this your first time out, then?"

"First time what?" she asked, completely confused.

"First time picking someone up," he stated while the smirk grew larger. "Come now, I'm the only man available other than the bartender, and if your tastes ran in the other direction, you wouldn't have come to my table."

He drank half of his ale and raised an eyebrow while looking pointedly at her two glasses. "Drink up, Rowena, and don't fret; I've already paid for a room. Although, until you walked in the door, I was contemplating merely using it to sleep."

Hermione's mouth hung open for a few moments before his hand slid under her chin, and it closed with a snap. "If that's not what you're doing here, it's time you left and let me get on with drinking myself into oblivion."

"That's you're crude and rude and thoroughly despicable!" Hermione stated as she rose.

"So? What other options do you have?" he asked with another one of his annoying smirks before he took a large swallow of his ale. "However, I do like where you're standing. It allows me to see your tits a bit better. What size are they?"

*He's right, but for the wrong reasons. I don't have any other options.*

Blushing, Hermione sat back down before the man opposite her gave a nasty laugh.

"Trying to play the coy virgin, now? Why else would you come in here this time of night Boxing Day or not with your considerable assets unbound if not to attract a mate for the night, *dear* Rowena?" he asked after finishing the newest glass of ale. He gave a surprisingly sad sigh before saying, "I'm not playing the game properly either, you see. My time is too dear for games. Do you wish to accompany me to my room or not?"

*Time!* Hermione thought before chancing a glance at her watch. A half-hour of her time under the Polyjuice had already flown by, and if she left the miserable sot where he was, where would she find another? She still had one dose of the Polyjuice she could take, but the chances of finding another easy mark were slim. Holding her breath, Hermione drank as much of the first glass of ale she could before banging the glass down.

"I will," she stated shortly.

"Good, and even though you haven't asked, you may call me Hershel," he stated. Rising, he put some money on the table and held out his hand. "Come, fair Rowena. We shall celebrate together in the best possible fashion."

Second, third and fourth thoughts ran through Hermione's mind while she stared at his outstretched hand. She could Apparate back to the tent and no-one would be any the wiser at this point.

*It's your fault Harry doesn't have a wand,* she told herself before rising and clutching Hershel's hand rather tightly when her head spun a little.

Hershel reached over and picked up the full glass of ale. "Get the other one, Rowena. No use wasting it."

Not sure that she wanted any more, Hermione did as he asked, hoping against hope that he'd pass out as soon as they reached his room.

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The short candles that had lit the room had long since burned down to flickering stubs of faint light that threw vast shadows around the room when Hermione woke. She was warm, relaxed, quite comfortable, and couldn't be bothered to identify exactly what had roused her. Heavy eyes opened to the unfamiliar room, and they widened quickly when she heard an unusually loud snore from beside her.

*Hershel ... he ... I ... Oh, bloody, bugging ... no, we didn't do that at any rate! Shite! I can't believe I ... with a perfect stranger ... and I ... need to leave! Now!*

Slipping gently out of the bed, Hermione used the faint light from the candles to find what she could of her clothing. Her skirt, jumper and shoes were located and slipped on, but she couldn't find her knickers. It was only as she pulled on her jumper that she realized she was once again wearing her own body.

*I've got others,* she told herself while snatching up her robe and making sure Harry's invisibility cloak was still tucked inside.

*Gods, I still can't believe I slept with a stranger! At least I knew Gavin for a few months before we... It must have been the ale!*

Grabbing her wand to Apparate, Hermione paused and stared at it while she chewed on her bottom lip. She'd started out on this mission to gain Harry a wand, and while the price had been higher than she'd originally planned on, she hated the idea of it being all for nothing. The lump in the bed that was Hershel seemed to be sleeping on his stomach and hadn't moved a muscle.

Hershel's clothing was mostly on the other side of the room, and Hermione crept carefully past the sleeping man. The clothing he'd worn was patted softly, noiselessly, and she was almost ready to give up when she noticed what she thought was the handle of a wand peeking out from under his pillow.

*I can do this.*

Her index finger and thumb found the barest edge of the hidden wand and started to gently pull it from under the pillow. Hermione kept glancing from those digits to the back of Hershel's head, whose snoring remained reassuringly consistent. It was almost half-way out when Hermione's eyes became fixed on the dark wand, sure that she'd seen it before. Busy searching the corners of her memory for where and when, she didn't notice when the snoring ceased, or the hand that shot out from under the covers to grab the wand back. The dark head on the pillow turned and spat, "I don't think so, my ... Granger? Oh, fucking hell!"

Hermione gasped, horror-struck at the sight of her old Potions master, before regaining enough sense to finally Apparate. Hermione didn't see him twist out of bed or hear the desperate, "Wait!" he bellowed before he dropped the outstretched hand not holding his wand. She also didn't see the defeated slump of his shoulders before he prepared to dress and return to Hogwarts.

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Hermione'd managed to pretend to be absorbed in *A History of Magic* when she returned and heard Harry stirring. She was more than grateful when Harry held out his hand for her wand and she was able to slip into the tent to find another pair of knickers.

Not long after that, they decided to break camp early, and when Hermione suggested they leave under the cover of the invisibility cloak, Harry didn't object. She had thought she'd heard someone moving around and was terrified it was Snape, that he'd somehow followed her, and she'd have to tell Harry where she'd been and what she'd done.

When they'd set up in the Forest of Dean and all the protective spells were again up, Hermione wound herself up in the blankets of her bunk. As tired as her body was, her mind wouldn't allow her to sleep until she'd gone over and over her unexpected assignation with Hershel/Snape.

*Who'd have thought **he'd** be out looking for a shag! How did he manage to get away from Hogwarts without... someone... asking where or why... I didn't sense a glamour,*

*but I suppose he...*

Hermione didn't feel at all brilliant when she realized that she wasn't the only one quite capable of brewing Polyjuice potion.

"Sometimes I'm so thick, I disgust myself," she muttered.

"Hermione? You all right?" Harry asked from the opening of the tent.

"I'm fine, Harry. Just reminding myself of something," she replied evenly, telling herself there had been no real harm done and to close her eyes. It only seemed like a few moments later that Harry was waking her up, telling her that someone was there.

"What do you mean? Who ... ?" she managed to stammer out before the reality of Ron being back hit her in the face. Ron, who had run out on them, was back and dripping water all over the floor of the bloody tent. Ron, who could have gone with her to find Harry another wand. Ron, who would have been the extra person she needed to have perhaps chatted up the women in the pub instead of Snape. Ron, who if he'd been with them at Godric's Hollow might have made the difference between the current reality and Harry's wand not having been shattered in the first place.

*It's all his fault!* Hermione decided when the full force of the fury she was feeling broke through the little restraint she had when she saw Ron raise his arms toward her. She didn't know, or care, what words she yelled as her hands and feet sought to pummel as many parts of his anatomy as she could.

Later, after all the explanations had been heard and Hermione no longer had so much adrenalin flowing through her veins, all she wanted to do was sleep and try to forget. And then Ron did the thing she could never, *ever*, forgive him for. He pulled out another wand and handed it to Harry.

Harry's buoyant spirits after Ron's return merely reinforced the fact she'd never be the friend in Harry's eyes or heart that Ron was. Hermione tried to convince herself part of it was due to the unexpected help in obtaining the sword from the unknown sympathizer, but it was difficult to maintain a cordial pretence. Most of the time she didn't, and she couldn't have cared less if they thought she was sulking. Maybe she was, but it no longer mattered, because it didn't matter to them.

She had been relieved to know it wasn't anything she'd done or hadn't done that allowed the Death Eaters to find them in Tottenham Court Road when they'd first left The Burrow. That small balm hadn't lasted long as Ron and Harry's constant talking only reinforced the silence that had almost echoed in the tent before his return. Hermione didn't appreciate Ron's groveling to try and get back in her good graces, and more than once, she'd glared in his direction and wondered, *How in the hell did I ever imagine myself in love with that spineless, arse-kissing... arse?*

She hadn't known, of course, that the Lovegood residence was almost as deadly a trap as Godric's Hollow had been, but her first thoughts were for the rest of the Weasley family and how it would affect them if he had been seen. Ron *was* still a friend, and his continued good health was important to Harry, so Hermione would continue to protect him and by extension his family when circumstances forced them into a corner, but she was no longer under any illusions about her feelings.

Later, looking back, Hermione was never quite sure when she had realized she was pregnant. It had lurked in the back of her thoughts, coming out now and then like a small mouse nibbling on what peace of mind she managed to have. It was a worry, but one that she couldn't do anything about, so it was shelved for later.

The first time she'd felt her baby move, Hermione had been at Shell Cottage after they'd managed to escape from the Malfoy situation; and while she was saddened at Dobby's death and all they'd gone through, it was a relief to be able to cry without anyone questioning why. The small, almost non-existent, flutter deep inside her abdomen had been a surprise. It had made her child *real* and filled her with a completely unexpected joy. Hermione didn't quite know why she felt the need to express it with tears, but there it was, and the love for the tiny life inside her blossomed into being.

*My child. I'm really going to... have a baby.*

She'd wanted so badly to talk to Fleur about being pregnant, but she held her tongue, knowing she'd probably tell Bill, who would in some manner let Ron and Harry know. However it turned out, none of them would have allowed her to continue on the quest. Whatever the cost to her or her unborn child, she had no choice. She had to if they were to have any kind of future at all.

They survived the break-in at the goblin bank, and the love for the tiny life inside her grew. They survived the fall into the water after they left the dragon's back, and so far, they'd survived watching the man who'd given one of them life be attacked by Nagini.

Hermione was a trifle numb as she blindly followed Harry and Ron out of the Shrieking Shack. Each step she took away from her child's father felt... so very wrong. When they'd reached the castle, the wrongness finally broke through and demanded action. She mumbled an excuse about needing the loo to separate from them, and Hermione raced back to the shack, hoping she was in time.

She couldn't let it end there. Her own conscience and the possible future censure of her own child wouldn't let her. What answers would she have when the questions about the person who had fathered him or her started coming? She didn't know if she'd be able to lie to her child about something so important, and the love for the tiny life inside her grew greater.

As she knelt beside Snape's body, her hand trembled slightly when her bottomless purse was opened. She Accio'd the antidote Smethwyck had developed when Arthur Weasley had been attacked and was thankful she'd had the presence of mind to *acquire* it so many months ago. She also pulled the Blood-Replenishing Potion she'd been hording and placed it near Snape's shoulders. She waffled over which one to administer first, but reasoned that if he didn't have any of the poison left in his system, it would make the wound easier to close.

Between the wizarding potions and the Muggle method of artificial respiration which was made easier when a bit of wand work took care of the compressions on the chest Hermione was gratified to feel a pulse in Snape's neck. It wasn't what she would call strong, but it was there. She frowned and wasn't at all sure what to do with him as she couldn't very well levitate him to the castle. Voldemort thought Snape was dead, and while the rest of the witches and wizards out there might not wish him dead, there were bound to be those on both sides that would attack him.

"It's best you stay here," she muttered and moved the still unconscious man to the broken down sofa. Hermione decided to dose him with a bit of the Draught of the Living Death to insure he'd stay there. After all her efforts, she didn't want him stumbling back out into the middle of the fray. If she and her child survived what was to come, she'd return and make sure he was taken to the infirmary. If not, when it wore off he would be strong enough to fend for himself.

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Hermione, after finding and restoring her parents' memories, had only a small window of time to try and regain their trust. She knew her parents had many late night discussions about what they wanted to do. While they missed some of the friends they had had in England, they didn't miss the stress. When Hermione finally filled them in on all that had occurred, they decided then and there that to move back would be insane.

When she knew for sure that they'd decided to remain, and to retain the last name she'd given them, she found the nerve to let them know they'd be grandparents. The shock on their faces grudgingly left when they found out she would be remaining in Australia with them. It didn't stop the endless questions about the father of her baby, but she made it clear that it wasn't Ron or Harry. It was Hermione's mother that made her stop and question the wisdom of keeping the father's baby totally ignorant of his offspring, but she couldn't bring herself to simply write a letter, and she was too far along to even think of traveling. It would simply have to wait.

Andrew would be turning one year old in a little more than two weeks when Hermione's mother brought up the subject again. Monica was sitting at the kitchen table putting new photos of Andrew in an album, and her hand caressed the baby's smiling face. She sighed and glanced over at her daughter, who was busy trying to keep the child's messy fingers out of her hair while she cleaned them off. She hadn't seen Hermione use magic in a very long time, and it worried her. While Hermione still received the odd owl letter from her friends, she hadn't actually seen *any* of them in over a year, and Monica was afraid she knew why.

"Are you going to wait until Andrew is eleven before you let any of them know he even exists? Are you... ashamed of him, Hermione?" her mother asked in a soft voice, concern etched in the wrinkling of her brow.

"No! Not at all!" Hermione stated, gathering Andrew close. "I just... I don't know that I want him in that world," she added quietly. "It's so dangerous."

"That's still your choice, Hermione; no matter who knows about him." Monica slowly closed the photo album. "Are you afraid his father will find out? You must have had feelings for him at one point; surely he's not that terrible, is he?"

"It's complicated, Mum," Hermione said for the hundredth time before she stood up and moved toward the nursery. Laying Andrew down for his nap was accomplished far too quickly, and she returned to the kitchen to discuss possibilities with her mother. Apparently the time for waiting had ended.

Grabbing a soda from the refrigerator, Hermione sat down opposite her mother before opening it. A small sip seemed to help the dryness in her mouth, and the can was something to keep her hands occupied. "Would... If I... go back... would you and Dad keep Andrew here for me?" Hermione asked before raising her eyes from the can and meeting her mother's gaze.

"When would you go?"

"Soon?" Hermione hedged and dropped her eyes to the can.

"He'll be a year old *soon*, Hermione. You need to make up your mind, one way or the other. If you're going to do it then do it. If you're not going to do it, don't pretend. Don't waffle about it until he's ten or fifteen and asking who and where his father is before realizing you never intended on carrying it out." Monica rose and slid the album in front of Hermione. "It wouldn't be fair to you or Andrew in the long run."

Hermione watched her mother walk out of the kitchen, leaving her alone with the soda and the album. Her bottom lip was worried to the point of being raw by the time she closed the album again. Seeing all the phases in Andrew's life, marveling anew at how quickly he'd grown and changed in the short year he'd been a part of her world left Hermione's soul bare and hurting. She knew how she'd have felt if she'd been denied that year in her child's life, but she didn't know how Snape would feel about even *having* a child. She'd never pictured him wanting them, but then again, she'd never pictured him in love with Harry's mum either.

She'd never actually seen the memories Snape had given Harry when he'd thought he was going to die, but listening to the testimony Harry gave on Snape's behalf made her ashamed of the whole lot of them when she remembered how he had been treated. It was amazing what a little knowledge could do when the bright light of truth shone on it.

Her judgment had been harsh, and she'd found him wanting when the Polyjuice potion had worn off that night so long ago. Hermione had only seen the dreaded Potions master and the wizard who had killed Dumbledore. The human emotions and soul housed in his body had never been considered because it had never occurred to her that he had them.

Hermione had wondered many times since what would have happened that night if she'd known even half of what she now knew. He had gone searching for human contact the most basic love there is in existence perhaps afraid of being rejected if he'd worn his own face, and she'd done just that. The idea of facing him again, seeing him sneer at her, had held her back more than anything else.

*He had the capacity to love someone else does he have the capacity to love his son? Do I have the right to deny him both of them the chance because I might feel discomfort in his presence?*

Rising from the table, Hermione tossed the can into the recycling bin before picking up the album and going in search of her mother. If she agreed Hermione would travel to England as soon as she could make the arrangements. Either way, she would be back in time for Andrew's birthday; she wasn't about to miss that.

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## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 5*

This story begins shortly after the disastrous visit by Harry and Hermione to Godric's Hollow where they found Nagini. Hermione seeks to find a new wand for Harry after having broken his, and she gets a little more than she bargained for. Canon is changed only where absolutely necessary. EWE This was written for the SSHG Exchange 2010. The original prompt was provided by scarletladyy.

AN: Thank you, Lariope, for all your hard work.

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The Burrow was the first place Hermione visited after finding a place to stay. She hadn't notified anyone she was returning, mostly because she didn't want any kind of party to mark the occasion, and partly because she was afraid there wouldn't be one at all. Since Hogwarts hadn't re-opened until this past fall, Hermione knew Ginny would be at Hogwarts for her last year, Arthur Weasley would mostly likely be at work, and that would leave Molly at home by herself. Or so she hoped.

Knocking on the door she listened carefully, but didn't hear anything or anyone moving around inside. After knocking slightly louder, she was about to go around the house and check the garden when the door opened.

"Hermione! As I live and breathe!" Molly exclaimed before throwing her arms around the girl on the stoop.

"Molly... can't breathe," Hermione whispered while trying to return the exuberant hug.

"Sorry, but I'd convinced myself I'd never see you again," Molly stated with a watery smile after releasing the other witch. "Come in, come in! Would you like a cup of tea or juice? I've just pulled a sheet of Arthur's favorite biscuits out of the oven so they'll go nicely with either."

"Tea would be wonderful, thank you."

Molly was still Molly, and Hermione was suddenly quite glad she'd started there. As she followed the Weasley matriarch to the familiar kitchen, it seemed like only yesterday that they'd been preparing for Bill and Fleur's wedding.

"How... how is everyone?" Hermione asked after taking off her coat and sitting down on one of the chairs. As Molly bustled about getting their tea and a plate of still-warm biscuits, she chatted on about different members of her large family. Bill and Fleur were expecting their first child, Harry and Ginny were getting married as soon as she left Hogwarts in the spring, and Percy was seeing a nice young witch named Audrey.

She became quiet while setting their cups on the table, and it wasn't until she'd taken a sip of tea that Molly continued.

"I'd always rather hoped that you and Ronald would end up together, but I'm guessing that's not why you've returned, is it?" Molly asked while offering Hermione the plate of biscuits.

"No. No, it's not, Molly. I'm sorry but it's not," Hermione said quietly before taking a small bite of a biscuit. "Is he well?"

"He is, but I should warn you, when he finds out you've returned..." Hermione was quite surprised to see the woman at a loss for words.

"You think he'll be angry?" Hermione offered with a worried frown.

"Oh, heavens, no," Molly replied quickly with a sad shake of her head. "He'll be over the moon, I'm afraid. Let him down gently, please?"

"I already did," Hermione explained. "When I left to find my parents, I told him there could never be anything but friendship between us."

"You did?" Molly asked with a surprised expression on her face.

"I did," Hermione said firmly.

"It's worse than I thought," Molly muttered before taking a large bite of a biscuit.

"What *exactly* does that mean?" Hermione asked.

"He's been full of all sorts of plans for when you returned, and he's *always* been quite certain that you would. He's still training to be an Auror, of course, but he's saved every Sickle he could while working part-time for George. He plans to build the two of you a house over on the next hill north of here," his mother advised with a weary sigh.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione whispered and put her head in her hands.

"I know, dear," Molly said. Reaching forward, she patted one of Hermione's knees and added, "It's not your fault he can't face facts, Hermione. After Fred... left us, there were a lot of things he refused to acknowledge, and I think especially if you've already told him it could never be he's merely holding onto a dream to get him through one day and on to the next."

That made Hermione feel worse than ever, not that she'd marry the silly twit over it, but some of her tentative plans were abruptly changed. There would be no dinner with just "the boys," and she'd avoid Ron like the plague if necessary. Her own life was complicated enough without having to relive part of it because Ron was stuck in the past. She was no longer responsible for taking care of him, hadn't been for over a year, and she was determined no one was going to put her back in that role.

Molly had mentioned Fred's name, and when she did, Hermione had noted the innate sadness attached to it. It took her breath away whenever she thought of something happening to Andrew, and she wondered how the woman in front of her had managed to survive after the death of one of her children. Bill's injuries and George's ear had been bad enough, but to have to bury a child... It was unthinkable.

Hoping to gain a bit more information before she left, Hermione drank half of her tea before asking, "How is little Teddy doing? Harry mentioned him once or twice, and it sounds like he's growing by leaps and bounds."

It turned out that Molly didn't see Teddy very often, but she did have a few pictures she showed Hermione, and they both agreed he was darling. Hermione longed to haul out the shrunken album she'd brought that contained Andrew's pictures just to show Molly, but the time wasn't quite right.

*His father needs to find out about him before anyone else. I can't imagine Snape showing off photos, but I can always send Molly a few.*

Other names were mentioned and the appropriate happiness or sorrow was expressed depending on the circumstances, and they were suddenly finally down to the name that interested Hermione the most.

"What about Professor Snape? Did he make a full recovery?" Hermione asked while picking up another biscuit. "These are really good. Do you think you could give me the recipe?"

"I'd be delighted to," Molly said with a beaming smile. She immediately jumped up and brought her recipe box to the table before finding a blank card to make a copy for Hermione. Hermione watched while this was done and silently cursed herself for attempting to make the previous questions seem less important to her than they were.

"Here you are," Molly said as she handed the card to Hermione. "Mind you use fresh coconut and not the dried type, or they won't taste nearly as good."

"I will," Hermione said with a smile while slipping the card into her purse. She had decided that rather than ask Molly who was no one's dummy another question about Snape, she'd do a little research at Hogwarts instead. She was fairly certain he hadn't gone back to teaching, but it would have been nice to know in case he was there. Molly surprised Hermione by shaking a finger in her direction, and she prepared to swear an oath to use fresh coconut when the older witch started speaking again.

"I don't know how many times I've had to listen to that man rant about your saving his sorry hide," Molly said with a smile. "I'd visit him every other day while he was at St. Mungo's since he had no one else and I'd be lumped in the same "do-gooder" category he'd put you and Harry in. The blame for *that* rests firmly at your feet, Hermione."

"What do you mean? He's not sorry he's alive, is he?" Hermione asked, worried that Snape would be extremely angry at being told he was a father, instead of being only mildly incensed.

"I don't think he is *now*," Molly advised. "In the beginning, he was furious about owing you a life-debt. He spouted some nonsense about only just having managed to get out from under the thumbs of his last masters and not needing a mistress taking over."

"Ah!" Hermione said when enlightenment dawned. "I never thought of that."

It put a whole new perspective on her situation with her former Potions master. One that could very well turn out to be entirely in her favor.

"Of course you wouldn't have," Molly said with a chuckle. "And I really doubt he would have either, except Rita Skeeter found out you'd saved his life and wrote a big article for the Daily Prophet, milking it for every last drop of romantic drivel she could."

"Oh joy," Hermione muttered lowly. There was now another angle to worry about. What would Rita Skeeter do with the information that she and Snape had a child in common?

*Oh, bloody hell. She'll turn it into some type of fairy tale love story or make me out to be a whore for both sides.*

"Did he go back to teaching?"

"Heavens, no!" Molly said with a laugh. "He has a small apothecary in Diagon Alley, and from what I hear, since he's hired someone else to do the actual waiting on customers, his potions sell quite well."

*Good to know*, Hermione told herself. They talked of other things while the rest of the biscuits were eaten and the last drop of tea disappeared. Feeling suddenly tired, Hermione stifled a yawn.

"Molly, thank you for the tea, but I really need to go," Hermione said before she stood and picked up her coat. "I haven't adjusted to the time change yet, and I'm completely knackered. I just had to stop by and see you first."

*And do a little digging to see what I'm up against.*

"That's quite all right, Hermione, dear. I'm thrilled that you did," Molly told her as she accompanied Hermione to the door. "I'd insist that you stay with us while you're here, but I don't think it's a good idea right now with Ronald and all."

"I agree totally, Molly, and it's fine, really. I've got a room at a Muggle bed and breakfast not too far from here, so I'll be very comfortable," Hermione told her before giving her a brief hug and leaving.

There was no way she was going to go see Snape before she'd had some sleep and a chance to formulate a plan of action. The last time she'd mapped out a plan on her own that ended up involving Snape, she'd wound up with Andrew.

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It took no time at all for the word to spread that Hermione was back. She'd had lunch with one of her old friends from the Muggle world, visited Ginny and Professor McGonagall at Hogwarts, and been invited for a supper at The Burrow, where the rest of her friends left alive had gathered. Ron and Harry had been there, of course, but it was easy to avoid any heart-to-heart talks in the crowd of people that were there and wanted to know how her life was going. She had no easy answers when questioned about why she hadn't as yet found a job, but when she told them that she was looking for a *career* and not merely a job, the person asking would smile or nod as if that made perfect sense.

Seeing all of them had been wonderful, and she was gratified to think that most of them were gradually putting the tragedies of what they had gone through behind them. There had been smiles, laughter, and many, many hugs exchanged, but there had also been the occasional sad silence when one of the fallen was remembered.

Angelina Johnson had been present, which had rather surprised Hermione until she realized Angelina was there with George. Molly hadn't mentioned their seeing each other, and Hermione wondered if it was as much a surprise to Molly as it had been for her. If it was, George's mother handled it well and had given Angelina a hug as warm as anyone else's.

At the time, Hermione had remembered how different Molly's reaction to Fleur had been in the beginning. She wondered, briefly, if it had more to do with the person than the circumstances, but she supposed losing a child could change a person's outlook a great deal.

Having one had greatly changed Hermione's perspective of the world and her parents' role in it. Not too long after having had Andrew, she had had a major epiphany and spent three straight days crying and apologizing to her parents for every situation that might have caused them concern while she was making her merry way through the wizarding world. Her mother had smiled gently and explained that she was probably feeling the effects of what was commonly called "the baby blues" and took her back to the Muggle doctor who had delivered Andrew. The medication she had prescribed had helped, but Hermione's vision of her parents had been altered forever. The advice, freely offered during Hermione's teenage years, was no longer seen as nagging meant to control, but rather as the love and honest concern they had for her welfare.

All of these thoughts and more ran through Hermione's head while she watched the interplay between mother and sons. She smiled when she realized that Andrew would have the same feelings toward her that she'd had toward her parents. It was no use thinking she'd do things a tad differently than her parents had because the perspective wouldn't be there until Andrew had his own children.

"I didn't think my family was that amusing," Ron said as he took a seat beside her.

"They're not amusing, Ron. They're... they're dear," she replied, continuing to study the dynamics between Molly and the rest of her brood.

"Dear? Are you mental?" he asked with a large grin on his freckled face. "Australia's sent you round the bend, love. It's a good thing you finally came back to us when you did, or there'd be no hope."

Hermione's face lost all traces of a smile as she turned her head to look at Ron. She made sure he was meeting her eyes when she said, "I'm only here for a visit, Ron. I'm not staying."

She hated seeing the light in his eyes die, but not enough to give him any false hopes. He nodded and dropped his head, but Hermione put out a hand and lifted his chin to meet her eyes again. "Please, understand. My *home*, my life, is now in Australia."

"Course I understand, Mione," he said while brushing her hand away. "No matter what you think, I'm not *stupid*," Ron said before he rose and headed out to the garden.

And that was her cue to go running after him, saying everything and anything to try and make peace. He'd be in the garden a long time if he was waiting for her. Harry had looked up when Ron left and then glanced in her direction with both eyebrows raised. She made a slight shrugging motion with her shoulders to convey the idea she had no clue what was wrong with Ron. Harry frowned and soon followed the other man into the garden.

Hermione sighed, rose and made her way over to Molly to begin her good-byes. She didn't feel like being the recipient of Harry's dark glares the rest of the evening, not to mention having to put up with the presence of a "wronged" and sulking Ron, so she used the excuse of jet lag yet again. The circuit of the room was quickly made, with a few invitations given and accepted before she was able to leave.

Later, flopping down on the bed in her room after kicking off her shoes, Hermione realized she was still using every delaying tactic she could. Her visit was into the third day, and she still hadn't worked up the nerve to beard the lion in his den.

"Tomorrow," she whispered while crooking an arm over her closed eyes.

As surely as if she were in the same room, Hermione could hear her mum's voice saying, *You're waffling, Hermione. Tomorrow will never come.*

"But it's so hard."

*Then it needs to be done as quickly as possible. The wait is always worse than the deed itself.*

The arm across her face was removed, and Hermione sighed again. This business of being a grown-up had been a lot easier to contemplate when she wasn't actually having to make decisions on her own.

After she sat up, Hermione looked at her reflection in the mirror over the dresser.

"Prove Ron wrong, quit talking to yourself, and do what you came here to do."

Going straight home wasn't an option. Her parents would never say they were disappointed in her if she did, but she would be disgusted enough with herself for all three of

them.

"Now, not tomorrow," she muttered before standing up, slipping her shoes back on, and repairing the damage of the day to her hair and make-up. It didn't take long as she wore very little, and the pins holding her hair in place needed only a small amount of readjusting. Picking up her coat and purse, Hermione concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, trying not to think about possible scenarios. She had apparently been a poor judge of character in Snape's case, and she didn't imagine she'd gotten any better at guessing what the man would or wouldn't do.

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Stepping into The Leaky Cauldron was a trial in itself. One that Hermione hadn't even thought of until her hand opened the door. She kept her gaze focused on the goal, half afraid that if she saw the bartender from before, she'd chicken out and leave. As she approached the door that lead into the alley, her eyes betrayed her, and she glanced over at the table they'd sat at that night. Three men, obviously enjoying themselves, had claimed it, and Hermione was glad. There was no room for any ghosts her mind might try to supply, and she felt much better about being there.

Once in Diagon Alley, Hermione looked to the left and then right to try and find the apothecary Molly had told her about. A frown marred her face when she noted that many of the shops had already closed for the evening.

"Excuse me," Hermione said to a passing witch. "Could you tell me where the other apothecary is?"

"There's only one, dearie," the woman said. "Right behind you. If it were any closer, you'd be standing in it."

"Oh, but I thought there was another one now," Hermione stated while turning to look at the shop which bore the sign *Slug & Jiggers Apothecary*.

"No," the woman stated with a frown. "I think it's gone under new management or some such, but it's still the only one in the alley."

"Thank you," Hermione muttered as the woman hurried on her way. If this wasn't the right shop, they probably wouldn't be very forthcoming about the location of a competitor, but she had to try.

When she opened the door, a light tone filled the interior of the shop, and Hermione stood still for a moment, filling her nose with remembered scents and the odors she associated with the infirmary at Hogwarts. Too many memories tried to fill her thoughts, and she firmly chased them away.

"We're just about to close, Miss," an ancient woman behind the counter advised. "If you know exactly what you need, I can help you, otherwise; we'll be open at nine in the morning."

About to nod and tell the woman she'd be back tomorrow, it dawned on Hermione that this might be the best possible time to try and talk to Snape. There wouldn't be any customers or salespeople to overhear.

"I don't need to buy anything," Hermione told the woman as she approached the counter. "I actually need to speak to Pro Mister Snape."

"Oh, he never talks to the customers. If you've a complaint of some kind," the crone advised with a smile, "you need to fill out one of these forms." Her hand had pulled out a piece of parchment, and she tried to give it to Hermione.

"I don't have a complaint. I just need to talk to him," Hermione said firmly.

"I'm sorry, Miss. My orders are clear. He's not to be bothered by the customers," the woman said while laying the form on the counter.

"Please, just Tell him that Hermione Granger is here to see him, please."

"Here, now. I thought you'd gone off and settled in Austria," the old woman said while getting up off her stool and moving around to the front of the counter. She held out her hand and added, "Thank you, Miss Granger."

Hermione had never known quite what to say to people who expressed their appreciation for what had been done during the fight against Voldemort. It had never been an issue in Australia; therefore, she hadn't gotten much practice.

"Australia," Hermione said while giving the woman's hand a firm shake and releasing it as quickly as she could. "I live in Australia now, and you're welcome."

"Oh, that ruddy island where the kangaroos and those little gray bears with the great, funny noses live."

Hermione had never heard it described quite that way before, and she couldn't help the small chuckle that accompanied her brief smile. "That's the place. But the koalas aren't really bears; they're marsupials. Could you tell him, please?"

"Mar-whatables? Yes, of course! My son is always telling me I'd forget my wand if I didn't keep it up my sleeve. You wait right here, and I'll go tell him." The older witch paused and patted Hermione's hand. "I'll tell him, Miss Granger, but there's no guarantee he'll agree. He never sees anyone. Ever."

"If he refuses tell him I'll keep coming back until he agrees."

The other woman laughed aloud before she turned and headed toward a door behind the counter. "I'll do that. My name's Gertrude, Miss Granger. Ester will be on duty in the morning, and if he refuses, I'll leave Ester a note to expect you."

Hermione waited and took the opportunity to walk up and down the aisles of merchandise for sale. The labels were all hand printed, and either Snape had someone else mark the contents or his handwriting had drastically changed.

Gertrude returned with a traveling cloak around her stooped shoulders and approached Hermione.

"I'm at a loss," she started out saying to Hermione, who had resigned herself to returning tomorrow. "He didn't say a word at first, but then he said he'd be out in a few minutes and that I was to close up shop as usual. You can sit on my stool to wait if you'd like. He put a nice cushioning charm on it, and it's quite comfortable."

"Thank you," Hermione said and then watched while Gertrude turned the closed sign around and secured the door behind her.

Gertrude couldn't have taken more than ten steps away from the door when Hermione heard another door close behind her. This was it, then, and she was far from ready.

"I had assumed, when I heard the nasty rumor that you'd returned, that you had the sense to stay away from me, Miss Granger. It appears I was mistaken."

Hearing that voice, slightly rougher than it had been during her years at Hogwarts, instantly transported her back to the scared eleven year old sitting down for her first lesson in Potions. The implied insult did its work when her hands clenched and her face flushed. Hermione was sure that in his eyes she was still a silly schoolgirl, and she was suddenly quite angry that people, including Ron and Harry, were attempting to keep her locked in the past.

Spinning around, she raised her chin and glared at him. "Do you think you might be able to can the insults long enough to let me tell you what I need to tell you, so I can leave and never bother you again?"

"I know what you're here to tell me," Snape snapped back. "I don't need to hear it, so save your breath, my patience, and just leave."



His words shocked and appalled Hermione into silence, and her face blanched. How could he know? Unless he'd had her followed or investigated?

"What do you *think* you know?" Hermione asked carefully.

Her reaction had apparently given Snape food for thought, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"The same thing everyone else seems bound and determined to do. *Apologize* for not trusting me, but then, yours is a slightly larger burden of guilt, isn't it?" he stated while walking closer. He stood over her, staring down into her face and hissed, "Did it finally occur to you, that had you not left quite so quickly that night, I might have been able to make contact with Potter, pass on the information Dumbledore wanted him to have that much sooner, and end the stupid war without so many having to die?"

Horror filled Hermione's eyes as she shook her head. "I never he wouldn't have listened! You have to know that!"

"Do I?" Snape asked while his infamous brow rose. "Do I, Miss Granger? How do either of us *know* what he would or wouldn't have believed since he was never given the chance? You or should I say *Rowena* was so filled with disgust that her libido had made her bed the dreaded bat of the dungeons she couldn't get out of there fast enough. Weren't Potter and Weasley enough for you? Or did they prefer each other?"

"No!" Hermione said fiercely. "Don't do that! Don't twist what happened and make it worse than it was! I was shocked it was you, yes! But I wasn't - I didn't..."

"My memory must be failing," Snape said while one hand held his chin and he gazed at the ceiling. "I see it quite clearly now. You *didn't* leave, and we had a nice chat over tea and toast for breakfast. I was able to slip you the bloody Sword of Gryffindor, Potter didn't almost die in that stupid pond, and we've all been living happily ever after." Snape's eyes returned to Hermione's as he added, "I shall have to send an owl along to Fred Weasley, Tonks and Lupin that they've been faking their deaths long enough. Isn't that a marvelous idea? I'm sure Teddy Lupin will be *thrilled* when his parents return unharmed."

Choking back tears, Hermione pulled her hand back to slap his face. The blow never connected as her hand was caught in one of his.

"What's the matter, Miss Granger? Guilty conscience bothering you?" he sneered.

"Why," she gasped while pulling her hand out of his grasp, "why do you have to be so bloody awful?"

"Because it works so well for me, of course," Snape replied before he walked over to the front door and unlocked it. It was swung wide open, and he bowed slightly as one hand made a sweeping motion. "I believe you indicated earlier that you'd never darken my door again?"

Hermione moved forward before she stopped in front of him and wiped her eyes. "Not yet, *Mister* Snape. You may think you know everything, but you don't." She pulled the shrunken album from her coat pocket with a hand that trembled. She quickly enlarged it, shoved it into his stomach, and made sure he had one of his hands around it before releasing her grasp. She took great pleasure in sneering back at him while she said, "Meet your *son*. If you have any questions, you can owl me in Australia."

For once she appeared to have had the last word in her dealings with Snape. His mouth opened and closed several times, his gaze going back and forth between her and the album as she walked out of the apothecary and, apparently, back out of his life.

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## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 5*

This story begins shortly after the disastrous visit by Harry and Hermione to Godric's Hollow where they found Nagini. Hermione seeks to find a new wand for Harry after having broken his, and she gets a little more than she bargained for. Canon is changed only where absolutely necessary. EWE This was written for the SSHG Exchange 2010. The original prompt was provided by scarletlady.

Hermione had left England almost immediately after seeing Snape, sending her regrets, for the invitations she'd accepted, with a few quick owls. He'd been informed he was a father and as far as she was concerned, her obligation had been fulfilled. What he chose to do about the information was entirely up to him. She wasn't going to wait around to find out if he believed her. Hermione rather hoped he didn't, and that would be the end of it.

Her homecoming could have been taken straight out of her dreams. Andrew's chubby little face beamed when he saw his mother. The squeal that came out of his mouth when his hands rose in the air brought tears to her eyes. As she buried her nose in the fragrant black curls on his head, Hermione knew she loved him enough for both of them.

Later that day, hovering over his crib watching him sleep, Hermione was struck by how much he resembled that bitter wizard she'd left behind in London. Andrew had her curly hair, brown eyes and skin tone, but he owed the color of that hair to his sire. His fingers and toes, currently covered in baby fat, were long and tapered, not at all like hers. She worried the most over his baby nose. One day, she would be positive there was a slight but discernible hook evident. The next, she'd be just as positive that it had been a mere figment of her imagination.

Her mother's discreet questions regarding her "mission" were answered to the best of Hermione's ability. She didn't tell her everything, of course; merely that she'd told Andrew's father he existed and had given him some photos. She still refused to "name names."

Their days soon settled back into the comfortable routine they'd established before her wild trip to London. Andrew's birthday, celebrated with a few friends, came and went without any missives from his father finding their way to Australia, and Hermione's eyes no longer searched the sky at the slightest hint of the sound of wings fluttering on air.

"Mum?" Hermione ventured one night after several more weeks had passed. She and her mother were sitting in the kitchen having a last cup of tea before bed, and Hermione'd been doing a lot of soul searching. Some of the understanding smiles on her friend's faces had come back to haunt her. What *had* she done with her life? She wasn't qualified to find a *career*, and unless she did something about it now, she might never be.

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm thinking about going to a university. I've got plenty of money left from Grandmother's estate, but I hate to think of Andrew being in child care the whole while. I was

wondering if you'd consider watching him at least part of the time?"

Hermione's mother smiled and put down her cup. "Of course your father and I will mind him for you, there's no need for a crèche."

"Yes, there is, Mum. What if you or Dad want to have lunch just by yourselves or take off to Sydney for a few days like you did before I found you again? I don't expect you two to give up your retirement and raise my son for me. I just need a little more of your time to get myself established in *some* type of career," Hermione explained while holding one of her mother's hands.

"It's bad enough that we've basically lived off you and Dad all this time. I want... I want to be able to build a home of my own... for my son. There are small flats available, close to the university that will be ideal to start us out," Hermione added softly. She watched her mother's chin tremble slightly before she gave Hermione a watery smile and a nod.

"I've always known the day would come when you'd decide something that would take the both of you away, but I'd hoped..." Monica took a sip of tea and gave her daughter's hand a squeeze. "When do classes start?"

"Late February, so I've got a bit more than two months to get myself enrolled, find a flat and get moved," Hermione replied.

Monica frowned slightly and turned a worried expression toward her daughter. "I've been assuming that you're talking about a Muggle university; are you?"

"Of course," Hermione replied easily. "Why?"

"I'm positive you're not going to qualify. You don't have the necessary GCSEs or A Levels, or *whatever* the equivalent is down here, Hermione. The last Muggle school you attended was when you were ten."

"I've thought about that, and I can tell a tiny little lie, say I was home-schooled, and take the tests, Mum," Hermione advised. She was nothing if not thorough and had taken everything she could into consideration.

The worried look didn't leave Monica's face. "Don't misunderstand, Hermione. I think it's wonderful that you want to further your education, but depending on what you decide to major in, you won't have the background for those university classes. In order to succeed, you'd have to study years worth of subjects you would have taken if you hadn't gone to Hogwarts."

"I'm a quick study, Mum. It won't take me long to play catch up," Hermione commented confidently.

"I'm well aware you're quite brilliant, young lady," her mother advised with a warm smile before she sobered and added, "but are you willing to short-change Andrew to do it? In order to do what you want, you're going to have to spend all your free time studying. There won't be a moment to spare for years.

"Andrew's just started walking; soon he'll be running, and you'll have to run to keep up with him, Hermione. He'll want to play, have his mummy read to him, spend time with him, and not have her nose stuck in a book. If you try to stay awake and study when he's asleep, you're going to suffer and become ill." Monica paused and asked quietly, "Have you considered anything in the magical world?"

"No, that's not an option," Hermione said stubbornly.

"What are you going to do when he turns eleven, Hermione? Tell him he can't go? That you forbid him to learn about who and what he is and can do? You told me that Harry was raised without the knowledge he was a wizard. Are you going to do the same to Andrew?"

"No! I don't know," Hermione said as she rose and took her cup to the sink. "He might turn out to be a squib, and then there'll be no problem, will there?"

"No, I don't suppose there would be, but do you really think he won't be magical?" her mother asked as she put her own cup in the sink.

"So, what it comes down to," Hermione said angrily while turning away from her mother, "is that you don't think I have what it takes to be a success in your world."

"Hermione, no! That's not it at all!" Monica exclaimed.

"Well, it sure sounds like it to me," Hermione muttered while heading toward the back door. She grabbed a light jacket and stopped when her hand hit the knob. "I need to take a walk and think this over. Would you listen for Andrew?"

"Of course," her mother said, and to Hermione's ears, she sounded defeated.

Hermione paused after opening the door and turned her head back in her mother's direction. "I know you're only trying to help, Mum. I just... I need to think." She closed the door quietly behind her and headed toward the front of the lot. Their neighborhood was quiet, secluded and perfect for a "walkabout," even if it was for minutes instead of days. Intent on putting one foot in front of the other, Hermione didn't notice a distant shadow in a neighbor's yard that moved to follow her.

As she walked, Hermione replayed the scene in the kitchen with her mother, trying to find *some* way to make her plans work the way she wanted them to. Deep down, she knew her mother had put her fingers on the many flaws Hermione had tried to gloss over. Her steps had taken her in a familiar direction, and Hermione found herself in the playground she'd started taking Andrew to. He wasn't old enough to do a lot on his own, of course, but Hermione slid down the slides with him and pushed him in the baby swings. Occasionally she sat in the larger swings with him on her lap, but she never swung very high, always afraid she'd lose her grip on him.

She headed toward one, and after taking the middle swing, pushed off, pumping as hard as she could. There wasn't much thinking done, but as she expended her energy, Hermione realized she was crying. Not loud sobbing tears, but a sad sorrow that needed release. The arc of the swing lessened and almost stopped while she cried. The lights in surrounding houses went out one by one, and the stars shone down that much brighter on Hermione's head and thoughts.

Her mother was right. She had to go back. There was no other way if Hermione was going to find a life for herself and her son. If she stubbornly pushed forward with her plans to attend a Muggle university, she would either end up killing herself while failing miserably or resenting Andrew for the time he would consume, interfering with those plans, and still failing miserably.

The dusty tips of her sneakers, and the patterns the soles left, were contemplated while she flirted with the idea of heading to America, or even France, instead of England to garner a magical career. She didn't know anyone in either of those two other countries, and her "notoriety" might actually help in this instance. Wiping the last of the tears off her face, Hermione stood and started heading back home. "Better the devil you know than the one you don't, I suppose," she muttered softly.

"I do hope you're not referring to me, Miss Granger," a dark, rusty voice stated briskly.

For the first time in a long while, Hermione spun and grabbed the empty sleeve where there should have been a wand. "I don't need any of your crap right now, Snape!" she stated hotly after seeing who it was. "What in the hell are you even *doing* here?"

Snape, who'd been leaning against a tree, straightened and smirked before replying, "Doing one of those things that Dumbledore prized. Spying."

"On me?" Hermione asked in astonishment and then added sourly, "or on my son?"

"A little of both actually," he stated before walking toward a bench and taking a seat. "Would you care to join me so we can discuss this situation rationally?"

"When horses pigs fly!" Hermione retorted before she turned and resumed her walk home.

"I suppose I could be persuaded to adjourn to your family's home. I would be *delighted* to finally meet your parents," Snape returned smoothly and stood up to follow.

"You wouldn't!" Hermione stated after spinning back around.

"I most assuredly *would*, Miss Granger. Either here or there, but this... issue... will be settled tonight, make no mistake," he stated firmly.

"The *issue* you're talking about is *my* son, you son-of-a-bitch! There's nothing to settle!" Hermione hissed after stalking back toward Snape and glaring him in the eye.

"I'm going to quote you here, Miss Granger. 'Do you think you might be able to can the insults long enough to let me tell you what I need to tell you, so I can leave and never bother you again?' or do you think that would be too difficult?" he sneered softly in reply.

Hermione sat down and crossed her arms, refusing to look at him. "Fine. What do you want?"

Giving a light snort, Severus sat down and looked at his former pupil. "Funnily enough, that was to be my first question to you."

Hermione turned her head, a quizzical look on her face and asked, "Are you mental? What could I possibly want from you?"

"That is precisely what I'm here to determine," Snape advised while pulling a sheet of parchment from his jacket pocket. "According to the dates involved, there is the possibility that I am indeed Andrew Matthew Granger's father, assuming you didn't involve yourself with anyone else during the period in question. The photos of him, you so thoughtfully provided, do prove that Weasley couldn't have been the sperm donor, which leaves Potter. The hair color could have been his contribution; however, since he and Miss Weasley are in *love*, and apparently have been for quite some time, it's unlikely. He appears to have my mother's eyes; therefore, I have concluded that I am indeed his father."

Hermione's mouth had dropped open during his discourse, and when he folded the parchment and put it back in his pocket, it closed, and her lips became a thin line. She stood, hands on hips, and glared at him. "You're a right bastard, you know that? And for your information he has *my* eyes."

"I should have known you'd be overly emotional. I only stated the facts, Miss Granger, nothing more," he said with an exaggerated sigh before he looked her in the eyes.

"You are incorrect. His eyes, like my mother's, are hazel, not a true brown like yours. I don't have a great deal of money to contribute to *Andrew's* upbringing, but I can send along a small amount each month, hence my question; what do you want?"

"Nothing!" Hermione hissed again. "Not one blasted Sickle, Snape!"

Snape turned a puzzled expression toward her and asked, "Why in the bloody hell did you bother to tell me about him then, if you wanted nothing from me?"

"For *him*," Hermione said and sat back down wearily. "For the future him, really."

She turned her head and gazed at her son's father. "That's why you're still alive, you know. I couldn't face the idea of telling my child that I'd let his or her father die without at least trying."

Enlightenment dawned on Snape's visage, and he slowly nodded his head. "It suddenly makes much more sense now. You didn't save my life because of any benefit in it for *me*, you did it for yourself."

"What? No!" Hermione sputtered and then frowned. "Maybe. I don't know any more. It's hard to separate the feelings I had toward you before we learned about the memories you gave Harry."

"At least you're honest, Miss Granger. That's a great deal more than most of your colleagues are," Snape stated calmly.

"Is that why you were so cruel when I came to see you?" she asked.

"Partly," he admitted grudgingly.

Hermione frowned while trying to remember *exactly* what he'd said that night in Diagon Alley. Something about her being in such a hurry to leave... *No! He said he thought I was disgusted! That it was him and not some random... I hurt his pride, feelings, or both.*

Hermione smirked as she looked in Snape's direction. *Did he expect me to kiss him and tell him what a great lover he was?*

The smirk disappeared and she shrugged slightly, still holding that silent conversation with herself, *Although, thinking back, he wasn't half-bad.*

*Better than Gavin at least.*

A frown returned to her face and the glance at the quiet man sitting beside her was a great deal less hostile than it had been earlier. *It couldn't have been easy. Carving out a life, existence, after being... his... servant and the people left not believing you'd been on Dumbledore's side all along until Harry who he probably still hates stood up for you and whitewashed your name.*

"Bugger it all," she muttered softly. *I'm feeling sorry for Snape.*

"Bugger *what*, Miss Granger?" her companion asked.

"You weren't supposed to hear that," she explained and then shook her head. "I can't believe I'm going to suggest this, and I doubt very much that you'll agree, but do you think you could call me Hermione instead of Miss Granger?"

"Why were you in London that night?" he asked.

His sudden change of subject threw Hermione off balance and she shot him a questioning glance. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just answer the question. Please," he added belatedly.

It was the please, more than anything else, that made Hermione respond. It was a shock to hear the word fall from the dour man's lips after all the years she'd known him. "I was going to try and nick a wand for Harry. I'd broken his when we made our escape from Godric's Hollow."

"And another piece of the puzzle finally makes sense," Snape muttered. "That's what woke me, your attempt to take my wand from under the pillow, and I startled you into leaving."

Hermione gave a gentle snort and said, "Yeah. Yeah, you did."

She stood and contemplated the man who'd come all the way from England. He hadn't had to, of course. An owl could have relayed all the information he'd told her.

*And he wanted to contribute to Andrew's "upbringing," so he's trying to be decent.*

Running a hand over her face, Hermione wondered if she was making a huge mistake when she asked, "Would you like to see him? He's sleeping, but if you're quiet, he won't wake."

Snape raised his face toward hers, and for one tiny moment Hermione could have sworn she'd seen a small smile lift the corners of his mouth.

*Not possible. Is it? He's going to refuse, isn't he?*

"I would," the infuriating man in front of her answered.

The rather long distance back to the Wilkins' home wasn't spent in silence.

"What have you told your parents about me?" Snape asked.

She should have known it was going to get sticky. "I haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"Haven't told them anything, really," Hermione replied and belatedly realized she was walking alone. She turned around and raised her eyebrows at him. "What? Did you expect me to tell them the father of my child was a former professor that I'd fallen madly in love with? That we waited until I was of age to consummate our grand love affair? That after the war was over we broke up?"

"Gods, no!" Snape said with a look of horror on his face. "They'd have thought I was pervert, lusting after students!"

"Exactly," Hermione said, quite pleased that she'd made her point. "Are you coming along or not?"

"They need to be told *something*," Snape insisted, "or that is exactly what they'll believe."

"What does it matter to you what they think?" Hermione asked, slightly bewildered.

Snape drew himself up and glared at her. "I am a lot of things, Miss Granger, but I have *never* been a molester of children, *nor* have I lusted after the students in my care."

"Really," Hermione shot back deadpan. "No one who knows you or knows of you would ever believe that you would, *Professor*."

"Your parents *don't* know me, now do they?" he asked with a raised brow. "I do not care to have the grandparents of... of Andrew think so little of his father."

Hermione laughed for the first time that evening and pointed a finger in his direction. "You were going to call him your son, weren't you?" She sobered suddenly when she acknowledged she didn't quite know how she felt about that. Andrew had been *hers* his whole little life, and by extension her parents, but this man technically had as much right to him as she did.

Turning around, Hermione waved her arm forward and started walking, "Come along, master spy, and you can tell me what you've decided to tell them that will save your honor."

"The truth, of course," he stated, quickly catching up with her.

"What?" Hermione said in surprise, halting in her tracks. "You want to tell them you were out to get laid, and I was going to try and steal someone's wand?"

"Of course not," Snape retorted, turning to look at her. "During the... hostilities... we ran into each other in London and both being somewhat in our cups the inevitable happened."

"It doesn't sound half-bad put that way," Hermione said while moving forward. "I mean, it's not *good*, but it's believable, and considering what we were all facing, quite understandable." She paused again, her thoughts about why he had been where he had been coming back to taunt her, and waited for him to stop and turn around. "I'm sorry I left so abruptly."

The expressions on his face changed too quickly for Hermione to try and read what he was thinking, and the light from the street lamp behind him didn't illuminate it all that well. "It matters not in the long run, Miss Granger. There are a lot of things I'd do differently if I could but I can't so we'll leave it at that, shall we?"

"Again with the Miss Granger bit? If we're going to try and pull the wool over my parents' eyes, you're going to have call me Hermione, *Severus*. It's not like I'm asking you to call me *dear* or *sweetheart* or any of those other stupid lovey dovey names."

Both of Snape's eyebrows rose, and he slowly nodded, "I believe you're probably correct, Hermione. You know your parents better than I." He frowned and said it again, "Hermione. It doesn't exactly roll pleasantly off the tongue, does it?"

"Yeah, well, Severus isn't exactly a picnic either," she stated grumpily as they approached her house. The light was still on in the kitchen, and Hermione knew her mother had probably waited up.

"Let me go in first. I can't just spring you on them without any warning," she pleaded, unsure if he would understand.

"Where would you have me wait?" was the surprisingly calm response. "I'm assuming one of your neighbors would find it slightly suspicious for a stranger to be hanging around your front stoop this late at night, and I have no desire to make the acquaintance of your local constables."

"Uhm, in the back. We have a table and some chairs on the patio," she advised while leading the way. "Over there," she said while gesturing toward the small grouping. "I'll be as quick as I can."

"Take your time, Miss... Hermione. I'm in no hurry to be anywhere else."

That comment, more than anything else she'd learned or thought about Snape, saddened her the most. Apparently there was no one waiting for his return other than the clerks in his store, and no one who would miss him if he dropped off the face of the earth.

Hermione wiped a hand over her face and opened the kitchen door. *Quit feeling sorry for the sarcastic bastard, and get the smelling salts ready for your mum.*

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She hadn't actually needed to haul out the smelling salts, but her mother had proved to be a little more stubborn than Hermione had anticipated. Monica had wanted to meet the father of her grandchild and was persuaded that it would be better, "Tomorrow, Mum. When Dad's already awake. You know how he gets when he's tired."

After making sure that her mother had really retired for the night, Hermione fetched Snape from the patio. It was quite strange to have him visit their home, especially after the fiasco in his shop. She really looked at him and noted almost absently the Muggle clothing he wore. His hair was a trifle long for an average middle-aged man, but there were exceptions to every rule. It occurred to Hermione that it probably wasn't all that amazing. He'd been a spy and would have had to blend in wherever he went.

She led him upstairs and to the door of Andrew's room. Hermione leaned against the jamb and allowed him to approach the crib by himself. She didn't want to see any

expressions that might cross Snape's face. A tiny bit of her was also quite afraid there wouldn't be any there *to* see. His hands, so like Andrew's, grasped the top railing of the crib, and the small lamp that was always lit allowed Hermione to note the whitened knuckles. She wondered if he was fighting the urge to touch Andrew or if he was angry again when she had to smother a yawn. Snape must have heard it, for he turned slightly before returning to contemplate the sleeping child. His hands gradually loosened their grasp, and he stepped back before turning and retreating out of the room and back down the stairs.

"You're welcome," Hermione whispered before she closed the bedroom door and followed. She saw him slipping out the rear door and hurried to catch up, grabbing the baby monitor from the kitchen counter as she did.

"Wait!" she called as he started around the end of the house. He stopped and waited for her with one eyebrow raised.

"I told my mother you'd come to lunch tomorrow," she said in explanation. "You can meet my parents and Andrew properly at the same time, if that's all right with you."

"It is, Miss... Hermione."

She laughed a little and shook her head. "You're going to end up sounding like a house elf if you don't completely drop the Miss."

"It could be worse," he replied with a small smirk. "I could get into the habit of calling you 'Mione like Weasely does."

"You do, and you'll die," she threatened lightly, not quite sure where this man had hidden her former Potions professor.

Severus frowned and then asked, "Why were you crying? On the playground."

Hermione ducked her head before shaking it and meeting his eyes again. "It's been a strange evening. One that has taken my emotions from the heights to the depths and back again. I've had to make some decisions, and it's not always easy to reconcile what I want... with what is possible."

"Ah," he said with both eyebrows raised. "You and I may have something besides Andrew in common after all. Good night, Hermione."

"Good night." She watched him walk to the side of the house with the most trees between their house and the neighbors. The soft pop of his Apparition was a sound she hadn't heard for a long time. Suddenly weary, Hermione went to bed, quite pleased to be so exhausted she didn't toss and turn at all.

"Tomorrow's going to be a corker," she muttered before dozing off.

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## Chapter Four

### *Chapter 4 of 5*

This story begins shortly after the disastrous visit by Harry and Hermione to Godric's Hollow where they found Nagini. Hermione seeks to find a new wand for Harry after having broken his, and she gets a little more than she bargained for. Canon is changed only where absolutely necessary. EWE This was written for the SSHG Exchange 2010. The original prompt was provided by scarletlady.

It might not have been a "corker" of a day, as Hermione had predicted, but it wasn't the smoothest day in history either. Monica couldn't understand why her daughter still wouldn't tell them the name of Andrew's father. They were in the kitchen starting lunch when Hermione's mother buried her face in her hands and then looked to the ceiling before glaring at her daughter.

"If you tell me it's complicated one more time... I'm going to scream," her mother stated, in a frustrated tone. "What am I supposed to call him? 'Hey, you! Yes, you the bloke who got my daughter pregnant pass the salt, please.' It's not funny, Hermione," Monica added when Hermione snickered.

"I know it's not, Mum, honest," Hermione said, trying to keep the smile off her face. As hard as she tried, she couldn't get the mental image of a scowling Snape raising an eyebrow in her mother's direction out of her head. She raised her hands in a pleading motion and then lowered them. "I'm just I know you'll know his name," Hermione admitted. "I've mentioned it in the past and rather than try to answer the questions I *know* you'll have now, I'd rather wait until he was gone and deal with any that might remain."

Her mother's eyes narrowed slightly before she nodded her head. "That at least makes sense in an 'avoiding the issue' sort of way. Why couldn't you have told us that much before? That we knew the boy?"

"Oh, Mum," Hermione said with a sigh and mentally kicked herself for not realizing the questions would still come even without a name. "For one thing: he's not a boy. For another: you've never met him."

"Not a boy?"

"No."

"Oh, dear," Monica stated before she bent over to check the contents of the oven. "Wizard or Muggle?"

"Wizard."

"Good, then your father will think twice about trying to hit him," was the satisfied answer.

"Mum!"

"What do you expect, Hermione? That he's going to greet this man like a long lost friend?" Monica asked throwing her hands in the air. "You're his *baby*. And mine, don't forget. From what you've told me but mostly from what you haven't I've gathered this was a one-night stand?"

**"Mum!"**

"If you're not mature enough to discuss the situation with your mother almost two years later, maybe you weren't mature enough to be in that type of situation in the first

place," Monica said sternly, suddenly reminding Hermione of Professor McGonagall. "I'm trying to get as much information as I can ahead of time in order to know how to deal with your father. If you don't want this whole luncheon to come crashing down around all our ears, you'll quit keeping childish secrets and help."

Hermione blinked several times before she sat down and said, "You're right. I'm sorry, Mum." She took a large drink of water while her mother sat down opposite her. "His name is Snape," Hermione said and saw enlightenment dawn on her mother's face. She'd told them some of what had been brought to light after it was all over, and that name had been mentioned more than once, "Severus Snape. He used to be my Potions professor at Hogwarts. He was also a spy, for the Order, but mostly for Dumbledore which you already know. One night, after I broke Harry's wand, I went to London to try to find him another one, but it was Boxing Day and all the shops were closed, and I ran into Sn Severus at The Leaky Cauldron and... Well, we both had a bit much to drink," Hermione finished lamely, hoping that her mother would let it go there.

"Why didn't you contact him after you realized you were pregnant?" her mother asked gently. "You said he was willing to help support Andrew, so it sounds like he might have been reasonable."

"Oh, Mum," Hermione sighed. "It wasn't that easy. We weren't..." *able to trust him*. "He had..." *killed Dumbledore*. "It would have been dangerous, for us and for him," she finally stated softly.

Her mother frowned before asking, "He didn't bother giving you a way to contact him later in case there were repercussions?"

Hermione blushed and shook her head before saying, "I didn't give him the chance. I I was a bit embarrassed and shocked about what had happened and Apparated."

Monica reached over and patted Hermione's hand. "Telling me the truth after all this time wasn't so awful, now was it?" She stood, took off her apron and headed toward the kitchen door.

"Mum? Where are you going?" Hermione asked as the timer on the oven started its strident ring.

"To talk to your father. Be a dear, baste the chickens and reset the timer for me, please."

"You're not going to tell him are you?" Hermione asked in horror after racing over to turn off the timer.

It was Monica's turn to chuckle as a small smile stretched across her face. "Of course, I am, Hermione. Selected phrases and parts of the truth so that he no longer feels it's necessary to try to 'kill the bastard' who left his baby high and dry." Monica had made quotation marks around certain words, and Hermione's eyes widened in surprise.

"Dad said that?" she questioned in almost a shrill tone.

"Hush, he'll hear you," Monica cautioned. "He's said it more than once, sweetheart. Earlier this morning as a matter of fact," she added before she left the room.

"At least one of you should have been a goose," Hermione muttered at the chickens she was basting a few minutes later when she heard her father's raised voice. "Mine would have blended right in, crispy skin and all."

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Later, after a somewhat tense but not disastrous lunch, Hermione put Andrew down for his afternoon nap. She had noted the almost-glare her father sent in Snape's direction and had fully expected the other man to respond in the same manner. He hadn't. Snape had been gracious, polite and openly appreciative of her mother's cooking. Her father's resemblance to a grouchy bear had lessened gradually, and by the time they were enjoying her mother's special cake for dessert, he was again smiling at Andrew's antics.

It was during this time that Hermione finally noticed something else. Snape hadn't been able to keep his eyes from straying in Andrew's direction quite frequently. The glances were covert, quickly moving from the child to something else in the dining room. His position, across the table from Hermione and Andrew, had made it fairly easy to track once she'd realized what he was doing. It was almost as though he was afraid to look directly at Andrew, and it puzzled her greatly.

Her mother and father, luckily or unluckily depending on whose point of view you wanted to take, had a golf date with some of their friends and left almost immediately after lunch. Wendell had kept looking from his daughter to Snape and had almost glowered at his wife when she urged him to "hurry" so they wouldn't be late.

"Mister... Wilkins," Snape said, as he'd risen from the chair he'd taken in their lounge. He approached Hermione's father as he dithered near the front door. "Would it ease your mind and allow you to enjoy the afternoon in your gracious wife's company, if I advise you that *nothing* unpardonable will occur during your absence?"

Her father's continence hardened for a moment while he searched Snape's eyes. He didn't say anything, but his expression softened before he gave Snape a slight nod and put his arm around his wife, pulling her out the door. "Come along, Monica. We'll be frightfully late for our tee time if you don't quit procrastinating."

"Me?" Hermione's mother protested loudly as the door closed behind them.

As she went back down the stairs, Hermione's qualms about being alone in the house with Snape intensified. She stuck her head around the lounge door and asked, "Would you like to have a cup of tea in the kitchen while I do up our lunch things?" It would keep her hands and mind busy long enough to gather the courage to ask him what had occurred to her during her morning shower.

She hadn't reckoned on her back being toward him the whole time, however, and more than once she twisted in order to see what he was or wasn't doing. He seemed to be completely absorbed in reading the recipes her mother had left out on the kitchen table. The dishwasher was finally as full as it could be and quietly starting its cycle when she sat down with her own cup of tea.

He raised his head when she approached and accepted the fresh brew she'd offered. "Did you find any that struck your fancy?" she asked, referring to the ones he'd set to the side.

A small smirk graced the corner of his mouth and he replied, "As a matter of fact, I did. I shall endeavor to gain your mother's permission to copy a few. Especially this one," he added passing her a small card and studying Hermione's expression. "It's the one we had for lunch, was it not?"

Hermione knew, without looking, which one it was and flushed as she automatically read the damning title of the treat. *Better than Sex Cake*.

*I should have begged her not to make that one. But it's so tasty.*

"Although, sadly, it isn't," he added and chuckled when his comment caused her eyes, wide open and almost shocked, to meet his. "Is your expression of astonishment because I find the name of the cake amusing, or that I'm sharing it?"

"A little of both actually," Hermione said with a small smile. She had a hard time reconciling *this* Snape with the one that stalked the halls of Hogwarts, but it was enough to encourage her to ask what she wanted needed to ask while her parents were absent.

"I want you to know I didn't lie last night when I said I wanted nothing from you, but..." Her words trailed off and took a sip of tea before continuing, "I've decided to return to England to the wizarding world and I want to know if you'll allow me to become your apprentice."

Snape's eyes narrowed slightly while he studied the young witch across from him. "Why?"

His question bewildered her in its brevity. Was he asking why she was returning to England, the wizarding world or why she wanted to be his apprentice?

All of the above?

"Because it's necessary," she stated simply.

"Why Potions?"

"Why not?" she asked in return.

"To what end?"

"The obvious one, of course. To eventually become a Potions master or mistress," Hermione replied, slightly confused as to what other end there could be.

"Is this one of the decisions you reached while crying your eyes out on the swing?" Snape asked with one brow raised.

"No, not exactly," Hermione said honestly. "It occurred to me this morning actually. What difference does it make when I decided?"

"Have you planned where you would ply your trade?"

"Why do you keep answering my questions with questions?" she asked with no small amount of frustration.

"Because my final answer depends on *your* answers, Hermione."

"I really hadn't thought about it much beyond the apprenticeship. Do I have to have all my goals lined up neatly before you'll even consider it?"

"Not really, no," Snape said soberly and then did something that Hermione remembered him doing numerous times at Hogwarts. He pinched the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand and meeting her eyes.

"I do not wish you to misunderstand what I'm going to say," he began, and Hermione knew, in her gut, that he was going to refuse her request.

"Don't bother," she said before she stood and took her cup to the sink. "You're going to say no."

"Not as bluntly as all that," he admitted calmly. "Don't you want to know the reason?"

Turning around, Hermione leaned against the cabinet, crossed her arms, and glared at him. "Because I'm a bushy-haired know-it-all that you are shut of and can't stomach the idea of teaching me again."

Snape had the audacity to smirk before he drank the last of his tea. He rose and placed his cup in the sink beside hers. "Obviously, you're no longer a know-it-all if you think that's the answer."

"Then why not?" Hermione asked, throwing her hands in the air. "I had excellent grades at Hogwarts. Is it because they gave me my Newts instead of making me take them?"

"No," was the frustrating reply. "I surmised that your decision to return to the wizarding world, and England, wasn't your first choice. Am I correct?"

"You are. What of it?"

"What would you have done that you've decided you can't?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter, because it's impossible," she said wearily before she picked up the baby monitor, checked the volume setting, and headed toward the door. "The decision was made a long time ago when I started at Hogwarts and didn't continue my Muggle education. That's it in a nutshell. I need some fresh air, coming?" Hermione asked with her hand on the knob. When he moved to follow her, Hermione opened it and walked toward the patio. She flopped down into one of the cushioned chairs and waited for him to take a seat. "So tell me why."

One of his eyebrows rose while his fingers drummed the glass table top.

"That's really annoying, you know," Hermione stated.

"I was endeavoring to find a way to phrase this that wouldn't send you off in another bout of tears," Snape advised while placing both hands in his lap.

Hermione gave a delicate version of a snort and asked, "That bad, huh?"

"I don't believe your heart will be broken," he said with another small smirk. "When you follow the recipe to make that cake, do you ever feel the need to try something besides the fudge or the caramel inside it? To try a different topping or another flavor of cake itself?"

She knew exactly what he was heading toward, but she still had to be honest. "No. It's quite delicious as it is, and I wouldn't want to mess it up."

He nodded his head. "I never saw that desire in you, Hermione. To take one of the *recipes* you'd been given in class and try to improve it, make it better, make it *more* than it is. Am I mistaken?"

A small sigh escaped her lips, and she shook her head no.

"You would make an excellent brewer for any established firm, but to be a master... I fear you would end up being a mediocre one and the 'smartest witch of her generation' wouldn't be happy with that, now would she?" he asked almost gently.

"No, damn it, I wouldn't," she agreed grudgingly.

"I offer a compromise."

He'd puzzled her yet again. "How is a compromise possible? Either I apprentice with you or I don't."

"Hear me out, witch!" he demanded with a trace of his old ire returning. "And wipe that smirk off your face; this is serious."

"Yes, sir!" she said with an open handed salute while letting her smirk grow.

Sending her an irritated glance, Snape continued, "You have been absent from our world for an extended period of time. Rather than see you rush helter-skelter into an equally unfulfilling career, I propose that you become my assistant until such time as you actually find your calling."

It was her turn to ask, "Why?"

"Why not?"

"Why not?" she echoed before flinging her hands in the air again. "Because it's... it's not *you*, that's why!"

"What isn't me?" he asked, and for the first time since she'd visited his shop in England, Hermione heard a hardness in his tones.

She almost let her tongue run away with her, but had the presence of mind to hold it. Hold it and think about what she'd been about to say. That he wasn't the caring sort of teacher that would have thought of the future happiness of his students, like McGonagall, Sprout or Flitwick.

All the things he'd done, endured and suffered through, merely to try and give them a future *at all* ran through her mind, and she was ashamed of herself. Ashamed that, once again, she assumed the face he'd presented at Hogwarts reflected everything about him.

"Maybe it is," she admitted quietly. It would keep her and Andrew afloat while she found out what vocation she wanted to pursue. "I think I'd like to take you up on that offer, Severus."

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Her parents, as Hermione knew they would, basically threw a fit later that evening when she explained what she'd done. Especially her father. She knew they were worried, and while it didn't upset her as much as it would have in the past, Hermione was still slightly perturbed.

"Mum," she had said with an exaggerated sigh, "you can't have it both ways. Either I stay here and try to find a Muggle way of earning a living, which will pretty much be impossible with no diploma or degree, or I go back to England and make a career there."

"Hermione, you can't!" her father exclaimed again when her mother had given up and left to put Andrew to bed.

It seemed to be his favorite sentence and Hermione's was becoming, "Why not?"

"This Snape fellow. How do you know you can trust him?" her father growled with his arms crossed.

"How can I not?" she asked her father softly. "He risked his life for us *daily* and almost died. He never asked for praise, medals or accolades. All he's asked is to be left in peace. I broke that quite neatly when I went there and told him about Andrew."

Her father had the grace to look askance at that, and Hermione knew she'd won when he said, "I still don't like the idea of you and Andrew traipsing all that distance away from us."

"I know, Dad. I know," Hermione said as she sat down on the arm of his easy chair and hugged him around the shoulders. "But you have to know I'll come back to visit and when we get settled you and Mum can come up for Christmas," Hermione promised.

Her father looked up at her, smiled a little sadly before wrapping one arm around her waist, and said, "Snow for the holidays would be a nice change."

"Yes, it would," Hermione agreed before she shook a finger at him. "Just don't go spoiling him rotten while I'm gone, hear? It shouldn't take more than a week or two to find us a decent place to live."

"Would I do anything like that?" her father asked with an innocent expression on his face, and Hermione smacked him lightly on the head before delivering a kiss in the same spot.

"You know darned well you'll try," she remarked dryly before rising and moving toward the stairs to finish dealing with her mother. His faint chuckles warmed her as climbed them, knowing that there'd probably be more than a few tears waiting for her at the top.

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## Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 5*

This story begins shortly after the disastrous visit by Harry and Hermione to Godric's Hollow where they found Nagini. Hermione seeks to find a new wand for Harry after having broken his, and she gets a little more than she bargained for. Canon is changed only where absolutely necessary. EWE This was written for the SSHG Exchange 2010. The original prompt was provided by scarletlady.

AN: In case I missed saying it before, thank you so very much, Lariope, for all your hard work.

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"I don't understand why you won't consider staying here," Harry said. "You'd only have to pay for your share of food. I wouldn't charge you rent, Hermione. It's not like I have a mortgage to worry about or anything, and there's lots of room."

"Doesn't Ron still live here?" she asked worriedly. Harry'd invited her for lunch, and after they'd eaten, the paper she'd purchased to look at rental listings had been spread out. Hermione had only returned to England the previous day, and had once again checked into the little B&B she'd stayed at before. She had planned on starting to look for an appropriate flat the following day, a Sunday.

"Well, yes and no," Harry replied.

"Exactly what does that mean?"

"Mostly he stays in the apartment over the store, so when he works there he doesn't have far to go," he explained. "George moved in with Angelina, so there's no problem there. He shows up for dinner here maybe once or twice a week. His mum insists he go to The Burrow on Sundays."

It wasn't going to be easy, and Hermione felt a guilty twinge when she realized she hadn't talked it over with Snape yet, but it was time to start letting her friends know about Andrew.

"Harry," she started softly while pulling another shrunken album out of her pocket and setting it on the kitchen table between them, "it's not that I don't want to. I have a son, so I don't think it would be a good idea."



"Wha... Huh?"

Hermione enlarged the album and pushed it in Harry's direction. "His name is Andrew Matthew Granger, and he's a little over a year old."

Harry's face blanched as his hand covered the top of the album. "But that means... When we were living in the tent, that you..."

"I was pregnant, yes," Hermione advised with a small smile. "It's nice to know for sure you can do simple math, Harry."

"It's not funny, Hermione. Have you told Ron?" he asked as he flipped open the cover and saw the first picture of Andrew in Hermione's arms.

"Andrew isn't Ron's, Harry."

"Oh, fucking hell," Harry whispered as he continued to flip the pages. "He has black hair, like *mine*."

"You and I both know you're not the father, Harry."

He looked up, and Hermione saw he was really worried. "You don't understand, Hermione. It doesn't matter that I'm not his father. Ron will never believe that I'm not. I mean, who else were you around then? No one. Just me."

Harry then proceeded to tell Hermione exactly what had occurred when they'd opened the locket the figures that had sprung into being and what they'd said to Ron before he'd found the strength to finally destroy the Horcrux.

"Snape is Andrew's father, Harry," Hermione said bluntly. She was tired of Harry always being concerned how Ron would take things. How Ron would feel about something. How Ron would see him. "I would appreciate your keeping it quiet for the time being as I haven't talked to him about it becoming common knowledge yet."

"Snape?" Harry asked in disbelief and then frowned. "When in the hell did you and he... There was nothing going on at school was there? I'll kill the bastard after all!" he declared angrily.

Once again, Hermione gave the sanitized version of how and where they'd met and further explained that Snape had been ignorant of Andrew's very existence until a short time ago. Suddenly, she could see herself repeating the same story, over and over to each of her friends. "I take it back. Tell anyone and everyone you like. If Snape doesn't like it, tough."

"Damn, Hermione. When you do something 'outside the box' you really do it, don't you?" Harry said with a slight smile. "How did Snape take being told he was a father?"

Hermione was trying to find a way to phrase what she'd done when another voice spoke up.

"Kreacher is thinking he would be pleased to clean the old nursery and help care for the young master," Kreacher advised solemnly in his bull-frog like voice as he put away the last of the dishes from their lunch.

"That's very sweet, Kreacher, but" Hermione started to say before Harry jumped in.

"That's two votes for your staying here and only one against," he said. "Come on, Hermione. Ron's going to be upset, and positive I'm the father, no matter where you stay. It might as well be here."

"I think you should be more worried about what Ginny's going to think, myself," Hermione advised with a smirk and watched the worried expression return to Harry's face.

"I don't suppose you'd visit her at Hogwarts and tell her in person would you?" Harry asked with a pleading expression on his face.

Hermione was tempted to tease him for a little while by arguing that Ginny was his fiancé, and he should do it himself, but couldn't. "I've already made arrangements with McGonagall for a quick visit this afternoon," she advised him. The visible relief reflected on his face made her add, "But *you* have to tell Ron if you want him informed."

A slightly crafty look came over Harry's face as he nodded, but he also said, "I'll do that, if you promise you'll quit talking nonsense about finding another place to live." The crafty look disappeared as Harry squirmed lightly in his chair and admitted, "It gets lonely here, Hermione. Especially in the evenings." He glanced over at the elf and added, "You'd be doing Kreacher a favor too, you know. He doesn't complain, but I know I don't make enough work for him."

Ron was no longer an issue as far as Hermione was concerned, and staying at Harry's home would solve a lot of problems for her. "Let's see how Ginny feels about it first, all right?"

"That would be a good idea, huh?" Harry said with a sheepish grin on his face. Looking at one particularly adorable picture of Andrew, Harry added, "You're a lucky witch, Hermione. Ginny and I want at least four." Closing the album and pushing it back in her direction, he grinned and said, "Show her the pictures, and she'll be putty in your hands."

Ginny hadn't ended up being putty in Hermione's hands; she'd been something much more valuable. She'd proved herself, yet again, to be a true friend with surprising insights. When she found out Hermione was moving back to England, Ginny immediately suggested she ask Harry if she could live at Grimmauld Place while cooling and ahing over the pictures of Andrew.

She, surprisingly enough, hadn't batted an eye when Hermione confessed who Andrew's father was. There had been no exclamations of horror or disbelief on her part, but Hermione had been slightly disturbed by the sly, knowing smile Ginny had sent in her direction. *What?* had been the response Hermione had wanted to give that worldly smirk, but had again managed to hold her tongue. She wasn't at all sure she wanted to know the reason for it. Now or ever for that matter.

After leaving Hogwarts, Hermione had considered stopping by Snape's apothecary, but was still somewhat hung-over from adjusting to the time difference. Instead, she returned to Grimmauld Place and breathed in the delightful scent of Kreacher's wonderful French onion soup. She glanced toward the wall where the Black matriarch's portrait hung and did a double take when her eyes encountered nothing but a hole.

"Whoa," she exclaimed in soft surprise. "I never would have thought of doing that. Good job, Harry."

Walking down into the kitchen, she saw Harry seated at the table. Hermione paused as she took in the odd sight of his head being tilted back and Kreacher putting a white cloth on his left side of his face.

"What did you do, poke yourself while you were cutting the portrait off the wall?" she asked, concerned that he'd really hurt himself.

"What? Oh, hi," Harry said sheepishly while sitting up and holding the cloth himself.

Kreacher turned away and muttered, "Master Ronald is being difficult, Miss Hermione. Waking the elder Mistress and causing dissent in the house of Potter."

"Ron is here?" Hermione asked, glancing around. *I am not nervous.*

"Was here," Harry stated and dropped the cloth long enough for Hermione to see the reddened skin on his left cheekbone.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," Hermione said softly. She moved over and pried the chilled cloth from his fingers. "Let me see," she chided while gently touching it.

"Ow! That hurts!"

"I suppose it does," she said sadly before giving the cold compress back to him. "What happened?"

"Exactly what I thought would happen," Harry advised grumpily. "Ron accused me of being Andrew's father." He sent Hermione a sad smile and added, "At least there's nothing holding you back from moving in here any longer. Apparently, he'll never be caught dead in this house again, took what few things he had here, and made a grand, furious exit." Harry stood, walked over to the counter, picked up a small sheet of parchment, and handed it to her. "I just got this from Ginny. She must have sent it right after you left."

Taking it, Hermione's eyes widened before she looked up at Harry. "She really wouldn't do that to you, *would* she?"

Harry snickered before sitting back down. "I don't feel like taking the chance, so it's settled, right? You're moving in."

Now that all the problems had been sorted, Hermione should have been happy about being able to stay at Grimmauld. Shouldn't she?

*Why aren't I?*

Ron had done what Harry had told her he was worried about. He'd basically called Harry a liar and turned his back on him. Hermione wasn't all that broken-hearted about his newest defection, but Harry ever the optimist where his friends were concerned probably was. What Hermione was feeling, however, was guilt.

*I shouldn't. It's not my fault that Ron's a spoiled brat who's never grown up.*

"If I do," Hermione started out saying, holding up a hand when Harry opened his mouth. "If I do, you have to understand that it'll only be temporary."

"But, Hermione"

"Harry, listen. Please," she begged him. Finding the way to express the need inside her without hurting him wasn't easy. She glanced down at her hands before meeting his steady gaze. "I want my *own* home. I want a place where I can decide how to decorate or *not* if I don't want to. I want to be able to put down roots and make a real home for Andrew. When you and Ginny get married you'll need that nursery upstairs for those four children you want. I know it won't be right away, but... Am I making a mess of this? Do you understand?"

Using his free hand, Harry reached across and squeezed her shoulder. "You're making perfect sense, Hermione."

"Oh, thank Merlin," she said in relief. "I'm so sorry Ron's being an idiot, Harry. He'll come around in time. He always does."

It was Harry's turn to sigh, and his eyes dropped, as did his hand. "I don't know that I care any longer, Hermione. I've been the best friend to him that I possibly could, from that first day on the train, and this is the third time he's basically told me I'm not worth knowing. What does it take for one bloke to know another?" He asked, raising pain-filled eyes to hers. "He's going to be my brother-in-law one day, but I don't think he'll ever really be my friend. I'm tired of... having to prove myself to him."

"Oh, my," Hermione said sadly. "I'm so, so sorry, Harry."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and smiled in a resigned way. "In a way, it's a relief. I can live my own life without worrying that I'll *overshadow* him. I don't have to hold back in Auror classes any longer so I won't leave him behind."

"You've been doing that? Harry, that's just plain stupid!" Hermione exclaimed without thinking. She clapped her hand over her mouth for a moment wondering what took over her tongue sometimes. She sent a half-arsed smile in his direction and said, "Sorry?"

Harry grinned and nodded his head. "It was, wasn't it?"

"Master Harry and Miss Hermione need to prepare for dinner, please," Kreacher said as he ladled the delicious smelling soup into a tureen. "Kreacher is thinking it will be a shame to toss such lovely soup away over the likes of Mister Ronald."

A real smile bloomed on Harry's face before he hastily put the charmed cloth back on the red cheek. "That smarts! He's right, Hermione. Ron may be Ron, and an idiot, but it doesn't have to ruin everything. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Hermione stated softly before she stood and kissed Harry on the forehead. "Now, go wash those filthy mitts of yours before Kreacher tosses the soup."

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Instead of being used to hunt for a flat, Sunday had been spent helping Kreacher ready the rooms she and Andrew were going to use. It hadn't taken very long, and Hermione was amazed at what a difference there was in the house. Apparently, while they'd been living in the tent, Kreacher had finished cleaning it from top to bottom in preparation for his Master's return.

He had also successfully defended "the house of Potter" from the few Death Eaters that had managed to gain entry when Hermione'd accidentally brought one back to the stoop when they'd fled from the Ministry. She'd found a strange cloak in one of the bedroom wardrobes and asked Kreacher whose it was. "That is belonging to one of the dark wizards who wished to lay in wait for my Master. It will be returned."

She'd winced when Kreacher told her they'd tried to gain information from him on their whereabouts, afraid that they'd hurt him, but was slightly shocked when he basically smirked in her direction. "Kreacher knows where they be, Miss Hermione, and the cloak will join its owner. Kreacher led them to the places the elder Mistress had prepared for the enemies of the house of Black."

*And doesn't that sound rather ominous.*

"Could... Andrew find these places?" Hermione asked worriedly as Kreacher started to leave the room with the cloak.

"Is possible if taken there," Kreacher advised and then added, "but not possible because Kreacher is the only one knowing where they be and would only lead enemies of the house of Potter there."

"But he's a child, Kreacher, and children go where they're not supposed to. Could he find them accidentally while exploring in the house?" she asked as she followed him out of the room.

Kreacher turned and shook his large head. "The elder Mistress is not wanting the bones of her enemies to lie in her home, Miss Hermione. Is improper."

"Thank you, Kreacher." *I think.*

The elf turned back toward the stairs and made his way down, the cloak flopping along behind. She was tempted to ask how many "bones" lay in these places, but wisely decided to inform Harry of what she'd learned instead.

*It wouldn't do at all for Kreacher to decide that Ron was now an "enemy" of the house of Potter.*

Leaving Harry to sort out Kreacher and the places Mrs Black had "prepared" Hermione spent the remainder of the day familiarizing herself with the neighborhood. It was

something she'd never been able to do before and was delighted with the park directly across the street. It was close, fenced and nicely maintained. A number of people had their children out playing, bundled up against the cooling temperatures.

*It will be quite lovely in the spring,* Hermione decided before taking herself off to explore the shops in the area. At the end of the day, she was tired, but quite satisfied with her excursion.

*Tomorrow, I'll visit the apothecary, find out when I'm to report to work, go home and pack up,* Hermione decided before going to sleep.

Monday morning dawned clear, very crisp and quite wonderful in Hermione's eyes. Although she missed Andrew dreadfully, she knew she'd be seeing him in a day or two instead of a few weeks. After she skipped onto the stoop of number 12 Grimmauld Place breath fogging up just a little Hermione smiled, turned on her heel and Apparated to the alley beside The Leaky Cauldron. Slipping past the few customers inside the pub, Hermione noted a few of them appeared to be hung over, while others were busy filling their faces with breakfast.

The same lovely tone sounded when she opened the door to Snape's apothecary, but the witch sitting behind the counter wasn't Gertrude. She was younger, busy labeling bottles and only raised her head when Hermione approached. "May I help you, Miss?"

"Are you..." Hermione closed her eyes for a moment trying to remember the name Gertrude had mentioned the first time she'd visited this shop and failed. "I'm sorry. Gertrude told me your name, but it's been a while since I was here. Would you tell Mister Snape that Hermione Granger would like a few minutes of his time, please?"

The other witch put down the bottle, tilted her head and gave Hermione a once over. "I could, but if you're going to put him in another snit like the last time you were here, I don't know that I want to. You're much shorter than I thought you'd be," she commented coolly with a smug smile before rising and looking down on Hermione. She turned to move through the door behind the counter. "Wait here. And the name is Ester. Ester Spellworthy."

As the door closed behind Ester, Hermione stuck her tongue out at the door. It was a very childish action, but one that kept her from tossing a bottle at the woman's head.

*I am not short! She's... just abnormally tall!*

Rocking back and forth on her feet, her purse banging into her knees, Hermione gazed around the shop a little more than she'd done during her first visit. She vaguely remembered entering it with her parents during one of their shopping trips when they'd all been a bit agog with the novelty of magic but nothing struck her as being any different. It was the same boring row upon row of bottles or the single dose phials in their wooden stands.

She frowned slightly, wondering why the magical version of the Muggle drugstore had never expanded their side products. Whenever Hermione went to the local pharmacy for her mother, she always ended up buying *something* else because it snagged her fancy.

"To what do I owe the honor of your visit today, Hermione? I was expecting an owl advising me when you'd be arriving," Snape stated from the doorway Esther had disappeared behind. He was wiping his hands on a soft looking cloth, and while he didn't appear upset, he wasn't exactly smiling.

"I had a few questions and thought, maybe, that you might show me around?"

Esther had slipped back onto Gertrude's stool and was quite openly watching the exchange with a slight scowl on her face. Hermione didn't know and didn't care if Esther was privy to everything that had occurred before, but something about the other witch rubbed her the wrong way.

"A reasonable request and one that I am fortunately able to accommodate at the moment," he advised before moving out of the doorway and gesturing with one hand for her to proceed him. "After you."

The setup he had wasn't anything extraordinary, but she followed along dutifully and made mental notes about where he kept the supplies as well as the stirrers and ladles. There was a large storage room where various sizes of cauldrons were kept on ancient looking wooden shelves, along with a cupboard that had a door that wouldn't open when she tried.

"Precious ingredients?" she asked after trying the door of the cupboard once.

"Among other things," he replied with a smirk. "Come now, Hermione. I'd expected to be bombarded with your questions by now. Are you suddenly as omnipotent as Dumbledore was, or has the unthinkable happened and you've run out?"

Instead of being upset over an old insult that kept resurfacing, Hermione chose to believe that he was teasing. *It's possible. What other way could a sarcastic bastard tease?*

"No such luck," she replied with a cheeky grin. "I've merely been biding my time, waiting for you to drop your guard."

"Consider it dropped," he replied easily while taking a seat on a stool and implying with a hand that she should feel free to sit on the other one near his workbenches.

*Why couldn't he have been this approachable at Hogwarts?*

"I'd planned on sending you an owl asking when you wanted me to report to work, but it didn't take long to find a place to live, so I thought I'd come in person and hope that you'd show me where I'll be working," Hermione advised while trying to make herself comfortable on the stool. It was too high; obviously, it had been designed for his much longer legs, so she compromised by hooking her feet over the rungs. "Most of the questions I might have had... you've answered by showing me around."

"This is a red letter day, indeed," Snape commented dryly. "Not only are you out of questions, you've managed to find a decent flat in London on short notice. You didn't use a Confundus Charm on a previous occupant, now did you?"

Hermione's mouth gaped open for all of two seconds. "No! Of course not!" she sputtered indignantly.

Snape sent her a smirk and said, "It's been known to happen."

Her eyes narrowed slightly as her head tilted. "You knew I hadn't done that, so that was merely to ruffle my feathers, wasn't it?"

Snape's smirk grew larger. "I wasn't aware you were an Animagi with an avian form, Hermione, so it's unlikely that was my goal."

It took Hermione a moment to translate that sentence, and she rolled her eyes. "I'm not, and it's a figure of speech, which you know very well."

"It's hard not to use what one knows will work, Hermione," Snape told her with a half-smile on his face.

"Try," she said dryly and crossed her arms.

"I shall endeavor to remember your preferences," Snape remarked before asking, "Where did you find lodgings so quickly?"

"Grimmauld Place. Harry offered, Ginny seconded and..." Hermione's words trailed off as she watched Snape's face freeze right in front of her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She was on the receiving end of one of "those" glares he'd been infamous for. The cold, nasty tones that followed fitted her memory exactly. "Do you intend to deny me total access to Andrew?"

"What? No!" Hermione stated in total bewilderment.

"So you say," he said almost bitterly, before rising and walking around to the other side of the workbench. "Isn't it odd, then, that you would choose to live under Potter's roof?"

"Oh, for pity's sake!" Hermione said as she jumped off the stool and glared at him across the bench. "There you go, jumping to conclusions when you haven't heard all the facts!"

"What other facts?" he asked with a sneer.

"Number one: It's not permanent. It's only until I can find a place of my own. Number two: It'll keep Andrew out of a crèche until I find someone trustworthy to tend him while I'm at work." Hermione's tone had started out angry. She paused and waited until Snape met her eyes. Her voice was calm and quite controlled when she added, "Number three: Harry would welcome you into his home. If you don't believe me, I'll ask him and let you see it in a Pensieve, shall I? He knows you're Andrew's father, and it doesn't matter. He still offered."

"Potter would tend him? What happened to his Auror training?" Snape asked in a neutral tone.

"He's still in training," Hermione replied. "Kreacher wants to watch him for me."

"That insane elf?" Snape asked in astonishment.

"He's not insane! Well, not really," Hermione hedged, thinking of the places Kreacher'd mentioned just the day before. "Harry's been kind to him, and he's completely different now."

"Perhaps I should see this elf for myself," Snape sniffed and raised a brow in her direction.

"Is that a subtle, Slytherin way of asking yourself for dinner?" Hermione asked, risking a small smile.

"It is *not*," Snape retorted dryly.

"Seven o'clock and don't be late!" Hermione admonished as she started walking toward the door."

"I don't close until nine," he protested, following her for a short distance.

"Gertrude is quite capable of closing the shop on her own," she shot back, "because, as she told me the first time I was here, you don't *ever* consent to see the customers, now do you?"

"Gertrude needs to learn when to keep her mouth closed," Snape replied with a slightly sour look on his face. "There was a time when all good employees would have been burned at the stake rather than betray their employers."

Rolling her eyes as she opened the door into the display side of the shop, Hermione wondered how Kreacher, and more importantly Harry, would take the news they were having company for dinner.

*I may end up getting myself kicked to the curb in record time!*

There had been no kicking to the curb, but Harry had been totally gobsmacked when she told him about her impromptu dinner invitation as soon as he'd returned from training. Then, to his credit, the first thing that occurred to him were the spells Moody had put in place against Snape. It had been a very long time since she'd been bothered by either, and Hermione had completely forgotten about them. Between Harry and Kreacher, they were completely nullified.

"There wasn't much left," Harry remarked rather sadly when he joined Hermione in the kitchen. He looked around and frowned. "Do you suppose we should use the dining room instead of the kitchen? It might remind him too much of Order meetings."

"No," Hermione said while shaking her head. She arranged the napkins the way she liked them and hoped Kreacher wouldn't object. "Unless you want him to think you're playing master of all you survey."

"Huh? Hell, no! I just... don't want him uncomfortable is all," Harry explained, running a hand through his hair. "This will be the first time I've seen him since he was in St. Mungo's. Not that he was all that happy to see me there either, but..."

Hermione took pity on him. "You're nervous, Harry. It's understandable, and I'd be willing to bet my last Sickle that he's just as nervous, so he'll probably overcompensate and be the sarcastic bastard we both remember."

"Snape? Nervous? Never!" Harry said firmly.

"Yes, and it's Severus, remember?"

"It might be Severus to you, but he hasn't exactly given me permission to use his given name, so I'll be calling him Pro Mister Snape until he indicates otherwise," Harry said while lifting the lid on one of the steaming pots on the stove.

"Master Harry is risking curdling the lemon glaze for the bread pudding," Kreacher warned while taking the lid from Harry and replacing it.

"Bread pudding?" Harry questioned while making a face. "I don't like bread pudding, Kreacher."

"Kreacher is making treacle tart for Master Harry and Miss Hermione. Bread pudding is for Mister Severus," Kreacher explained and then opened the oven to show them a perfect offering. "Missus Molly made it, and Kreacher saw Mister Severus remove the last piece from the larder while Missus Molly is elsewhere."

"I remember that!" Hermione exclaimed. "Ron went looking for it later, and I always wondered why Severus had that smug little smile on his face."

Harry was looking at Hermione with a slightly amazed expression on his face.

"What?" she asked in exasperation. "I *do* remember that. Is that so hard to believe?"

"No, I believe you," Harry said with a smile. "It's... His name. You say it so effortlessly."

"Practice makes perfect, Harry," she advised, "and it would probably help if you asked him to call you Harry."

"It'll be a cold day you-know-where before he does *that*!" he said while leading the way into the lounge and tossing a few more logs on the fire.

"Oh, I don't know. He calls me Hermione, even though he did tell it didn't exactly roll pleasantly off the tongue."

"You're joking," Harry stated.

"No, I'm not," Hermione said with as much sincerity as she could. "And I told him Severus wasn't exactly a picnic to say."

"You... said that to Snape... and lived?"

"He's not as bad as you remember, Harry."

"Yeah, he is!"

"No, he's not."

"We could go round all day about this, Hermione. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt, but if I die tonight, I expect you to help Ginny with my funeral," Harry demanded while opening the cupboard that Sirius had always kept his spirits in. He picked up a bottle and squinted to read the label. "What should I offer him to drink?"

"Unless you're planning a drunken evening, I would advise against that particular bottle, Mister Potter," Snape stated from the doorway and watched while the bottle shattered on the floor. "Just as well. That was a particularly nasty blend."

"Mister Snape is arrived," Kreacher said belatedly.

"Thanks, Kreacher. We noticed," Harry said before he pulled his wand and cleaned up the mess he'd made.

Kreacher ambled over to Harry and shook his finger at him. "Master Harry is not to be doing Kreacher's work," he grumbled before he turned and headed toward the kitchen. "Dinner is being ready."

Raising a brow at Hermione, Severus asked, "And this is the elf you said was no longer insane?"

"I said mostly, if you recall," Hermione reminded him as she started after the elf.

"No, you said he wasn't really, and that he was completely different," Snape said while walking beside her.

Harry watched amazed as they left the room.

"Hey, remember me? I'm the host," he said to their backs. Tossing his hands in the air, he trudged along behind.

"You're rather difficult to forget even at the best of times," Snape remarked drolly, turning to look at him. "I've attempted it more times than I care to remember."

"I told you so," Harry said while meeting Hermione's eyes.

"Remember what I told *you*," she stated with her arms crossed.

"Before you two come to blows, perhaps you could relate this conversation to me so I'll know how to play referee," Snape stated snidely while glancing from one to the other. "I was under the impression I had been invited for dinner, not a free-for-all."

"See!" Harry said while pointing a finger at Snape.

"Exactly!" Hermione said before throwing her hands wide. "I told Harry that you were probably just as nervous as he was about your coming to dinner tonight and that you'd be the sarcastic... professor we both remembered. Thank you for proving me right, by the way, but I also told him you weren't as bad as he remembered."

"I see," Snape said to Hermione while his chin lifted and his body stiffened. "I'm to be the butt of the joke, as usual. I have seen the elf, so I'll bid you goodnight."

"No!"

Snape's head whipped around in Harry's direction. "No, Mister Potter? I don't recall asking your permission," he stated icily.

"I mean, no, you're not the butt of any joke, Sir! I was... am very nervous, and Hermione was trying to help calm me down. Welcome to my home," Harry said while holding out his hand. "Please, stay for dinner. Kreacher made bread pudding especially for you."

Hermione held her breath and watched while Snape's dark eyes studied the hand and the man it was attached to for a few moments before slowly extending his own.

"Your invitation, although gracious, is somewhat out of date," Snape said after reclaiming his hand. "It appears Hermione hasn't informed Kreacher what dessert I now favor."

Harry looked at Hermione and then back at Snape. "I could ask him to whip up something else, if you like?" he asked hesitantly.

"Never mind, Harry," Hermione said, and she could feel the blood rush to her face. She turned and headed down the steps to the kitchen calling over her shoulder, "Kreacher said dinner is ready *now*, and you know how he frets if we don't sit down and eat right away."

"It's not necessary, Mister Potter," Snape advised with a small smirk on his face as he moved to follow. "Bread pudding is more than adequate."

"Sir?"

Snape stopped on the stairs and turned to look at his host. One of his eyebrows rose when Harry didn't immediately say anything.

"Do you think it's possible... Could you... call me Harry instead of Mister Potter?" he asked quietly.

Harry shifted slightly under the steady gaze of the other man. "Albus led me to understand that all things are possible... in time," was the response he got as Snape continued on down the stairs.

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"Mum?" Hermione hollered from her room on the second floor a week later.

"Yes, dear?"

"If I shrink all the Mug... books I don't want to take and pack them up in a carton, would it be all right if I put them in the attic?"

"What? I can't hear you," her mother said while climbing the stairs. When she reached the door of Hermione's room her eyes widened. "You can't possibly want to take all those books. Why don't you do that shrinking thing and store them in the attic for now?"

Hermione laughed before giving her mother a smile. "Thanks, Mum. I think I'll do just that."

Monica sat down on Hermione's bed, picked up a blouse and started folding it. "Your father and I came to a decision while you were gone this last time."

"Oh, what's that?" Hermione asked while shrinking the mountain of books and levitating them into a carton.

"When we visit, over the holidays, we're going to try and find a house. Would you mind terribly if we moved back?" her mother asked with a worried look on her face.

"Mind? Why would I mind?" Hermione asked in astonishment. "I think it would be wonderful, but what about your life here?"

Her mother smiled sadly and put one hand out to touch her daughter's hair. "It wouldn't be much of a life without you and Andrew. It's nice here, don't misunderstand, but... It's not *home*. We're at the point where we're missing our old friends, having a reason other than golf to get out of bed in the mornings, and of all things we miss being the *Grangers*. Silly isn't it?"

"Not at all, Mum," Hermione said while sitting down on the bed beside her mother. "It's not silly at all."

Later that same week, Hermione stood in the empty room that had been her bedroom and smiled. She and Andrew, who was currently riding on her hip, were leaving in a few minutes via Portkey to start their life in England. She still didn't know what vocation she would eventually be seeking an apprenticeship in, but it would happen. For the first time in a very long while, Hermione was as eager for the next step as she'd been the day she'd first seen Hogwarts. She gave her son a quick kiss, closed the door behind her and said, "As your daddy would say, 'All things are possible... in time.'"

**The End**

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