

Dark Chest of Wonders

by Trawler

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The End of the Rut

Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione Granger steadily worked her way through a large box of post break-up chocolates. It wasn't the first box she'd eaten since her relationship with Ron Weasley flat-lined, but she was determined it would be the *last* – she'd put on nearly a stone in just six months. Wearing her Muggle clothes was a struggle, and even her Wizarding robes felt tighter.

She felt sick and pushed the box away in disgust. She'd be eating those damned chocolates again in a few hours, when the boredom and monotony of her Ministry job became too much to bear. She'd joined the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures a year ago, fresh out of school, in an attempt to make some sort of difference to enslaved and abused beings.

The only difference she'd made was to herself.

At twenty, she was more weary and cynical than a woman of her age had any right to be. She'd survived six years of schooling (she'd been on the run for the seventh), a three-headed dog, a Basilisk, a werewolf, a weasel of a journalist *and* civil war, all with her sense of optimism and self-confidence intact.

It took one year of soul-destroying bureaucracy, and an unfaithful partner, to shatter all that. She felt depressed, weepy, and was even beginning to question her own worth.

She turned her lethargic attention to the wedge of parchment on her desk. Her latest case involved a Wizarding community near the coast that was having trouble with centaurs. She needed to write a preliminary plan of action, but the drive had deserted her completely. She poked listlessly at the page.

There was a knock at her office door. Her head came slowly up – she had no interest in visitors. Visitors meant extra work. Could she just pretend she wasn't there?

It was a firm, purposeful knock – she doubted whoever it was would just go away.

As if to prove her right, the knock came again, but it was more of a bang this time. The thin wooden door shook in its frame.

"Miss Granger!" a male voice barked.

"Come in," she called, sighing. It would be one more distraction from work she didn't want to do anyway. One more nail in her coffin.

The door flew back and a tall, imposing man barrelled into the office, thrusting the door shut with a slam.

"The name's Jonah Jasuit," he began, without preamble. "Head of the Department of Mysteries. Got something to offer you, Granger."

Her surprised eyes tried to take him in. He had an angular face, with a sharp nose, dark, penetrating eyes and rock-hard chin. His hair was shaped in a Muggle, military-style crew cut; dark steel-grey relieved only by thick bands of paler grey at his temples. His body was lean. Hermione estimated he stood at around six foot two, with square-set shoulders and clearly defined muscles you could crack rocks on.

He wasn't wearing robes. Black trousers clung to his muscled thighs, and a white shirt sat on narrow shoulders. His skin, tanned like a nut, was lined with either age or experience; it was hard to tell. All she could think was, *Merlin, he looks like that guy from the Spiderman comic. Jameson, or whatever his name was. If he whips out a cigar...*

"I'm listening," she replied, dimly. The white of his shirt was dazzling.

The man appeared to be comfortable standing, and regardless, she still felt too dazed to offer him a chair.

"I want you to take a job as an Unspeakable," Jonah stated, voice rumbling like an avalanche.

"*Me?*" Hermione squeaked, sitting up straight. The dazed look was quickly replaced by a panicked one.

"You see anybody else in this office, Granger?" he barked.

"I – I'm not qualified to be an Unspeakable!" she stuttered, one hand creeping up to her throat.

Jonah gave her a scornful look. "You sit there and stuff your face with chocolate," he began derisively. "You've had your heart broken. You hate this job, and your colleagues. The only reason you're still here is to pay your bills."

Hermione opened her mouth to deny it. Humiliated colour flooded her face, but he held up a hand to silence her.

"You've heard it before, and I'll say it again – you're the brightest witch of your age," he said. "But more than that, you're smart and resourceful. You've a curious streak. You don't give up, Granger, but I see you giving up now. Giving up on *yourself*."

Hermione leant back in her chair, eyes narrowing as she regarded the man. Nobody had spoken to her like that in a long, long time, not even Harry (when he'd still been alive) or, Merlin forbid, Ron. Ron was far cruder.

"I've been here for a year," Hermione said eventually. "Why are you asking me to take *this* job now, and not a year ago?"

Jonah favoured her with a humourless smile, all gleaming white teeth. "See, you haven't given up completely."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Truth be told, a position has only just become available," he replied.

"Somebody left?"

"In a manner of speaking." Again, the shark's smile. "He... died. On the job."

Hermione's interest was piqued. It was a curious thing for her to feel – she hadn't felt that spark for a while. Jonah saw it in her eyes.

"May I ask exactly what an Unspeakable does?" Hermione asked, voice cool as she regarded him with steady eyes.

"We investigate the mysteries of the Wizarding world," he replied, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Your file says you've been to our little Department before. You've seen *some* of our mysteries."

She remembered that event all too well, but that wasn't what interested her most right now.

"You have a *file* on me?" she asked sharply.

"You're a person of interest," Jonah remarked mildly. "We've got lots of files."

Hermione said nothing for a moment, thinking, watching. She'd wanted to make a difference in the world, some sort of impact. That desire had been crushed by months of grey drabness... but could it be rekindled now?

What sort of difference could she make in the Department of Mysteries?

I can make a difference to myself, she thought fiercely. I can put Ron behind me. I could... I could come alive again.

"Part- or full-time?" she asked.

The shark's grin was back. "Oh, full-time, Granger, full-time. And over-time. Evenings, weekends, holidays. You'll find we're like bloodhounds – once we get a trail, we follow it to the end."

Hermione grinned, the muscles in her face aching from disuse. She could identify with the bloodhound analogy, and Jonah knew it.

"Salary?" This was turning out to be a pretty strange interview; though she'd come here straight from school, she was reasonably sure (from all the guides she'd studied) that they weren't supposed to go quite like this.

He mentioned a figure that made her eyes open wide with shock. "A year?" she croaked.

"A month," Jonah replied, amused. "Unspeakables get a *lot* of hazard pay."

She offered him a glowing smile. "When would you like me to start?"

"This afternoon?" She raised her eyebrows. "Don't worry, your old boss won't mind," he added with dangerous sincerity.

Hermione's smile remained in place.

"Would you like a chocolate, Mr. Jasuit?"