

Chance Met

by TeaOli

An ultimately prescient encounter from her sixth year catches up with Hermione Granger.

Chance Met

Chapter 1 of 1

An ultimately prescient encounter from her sixth year catches up with Hermione Granger.

Disclaimer: No one and nothing you recognise belongs to me. All Harry Potter characters and concepts belong to JK Rowling.

Present Day

Hermione lay back in her bed after a long stretch, a contented smile on her face. She could hear her husband murmuring in the nursery next door. She grinned at what little she could pick out: His intoxicating voice soothed their son, saying things like "teach Mummy not to let you eat that, shall we?" and "all clean now, Ekkie".

It was all unnecessary, really. The infant had quieted almost the instant his father had left her side for his. Soon enough, she didn't doubt, eleven-month old Echion Wilf Grape would sleep again he'd been making it through most of the night for weeks now then she and her husband could carry on with more interesting activities.

Ages ago, she'd exchanged wondering at the vagaries of Chance and the life it had dealt her for this sense of contentment, acceptance and, well, sheer happiness, to be perfectly honest. It was difficult to remember, at times, how easily things could have been different. So many factors, only slightly altered, could have brought about far different results.

Just like that, she was no longer happily ruminating on her life so far. In an instant, she found herself facing a barrage of what-ifs that couldn't possibly come to pass any longer, but which were no less disturbing for the impossibility.

Then, before she could slip into the kind of unprofitable despair Severus would rightly call absurd, she slipped into a memory no more light than it was dark that suggested, perhaps, there had always been some hope of happiness.

SS~HG

Mid-June, 1997

The loud staccato footsteps sounded without warning. Much closer than they should have been without giving at least some earlier sign. There was barely time to press into a shallow recess in the stone wall. Almost as if someone had been sneaking up...

"If you persist in making things so easy for me, Miss Granger, I might begin to think you wish to make me happy."

The first words spoken in that cold, familiar voice unleashed a river of dread and self-recrimination. A harsh, sallow face suddenly appeared, seeming to hover in the darkness of the corridor and blocking her view from the alcove. Thin, cruel lips curled up in an unsightly semblance of a smile.

Of all the stupid things to have done... Of all the people who could have caught me doing it... She raised her eyes to meet his. *Black*, she mused. *Black as the night that is his natural...*

Pushing away those unworthy thoughts, she concentrated on appearing respectful and contrite. Neither was difficult to achieve. Not under the circumstances.

"Sorry, sir," she managed to mumble, dropping her eyes to his large, boot-clad feet.

"Thirty points from Gryffindor for being out after curfew!" Professor Snape declared triumphantly, and her eyes snapped back up to see an equally victorious grin splitting his face. The dentists' daughter in her wanted to recoil at the sight of the yellowed, crooked teeth now exposed at her expense. The level-headed student suspected to do so would be unwise.

"So... easy," he murmured, stepping back and gesturing for her to come out. "I would not have been surprised," he continued in low, almost companionable tones as they began making their way back down the darkened hall, "to catch one of your dunderheaded friends out and up to no good, but I did not expect to find *you* here tonight. That is not to say I did not believe you reckless enough to make the attempt: your House traits all but ensure that you would." He let out a nasty, self-satisfied chuckle. "I thought, however, you had acquired more... cunning these last years. So, I wonder just why you allowed yourself to be caught tonight."

The admission stunned her. Professor Snape had always been more inclined to assign insulting and usually inaccurate (*mostly* wrong, anyway) reasons for the less than stellar behaviour she and her friends sometimes felt compelled to engage in. That he might express curiosity instead was unsettling.

Without thinking about what she was doing, Hermione stopped walking and looked up at her dark-haired Defence Against Dark Arts teacher.

"I... I needed a quiet place to think, sir," she answered, even though he hadn't really asked. "Alone. I lost track of time."

"A place to blubber, you mean," he corrected, also halting. "A place to cry your little eyes out where no one could tell the brave Gryffindor was truly just a frightened little girl, perhaps? Come now, Miss Granger," he added, "did you think I did not notice your big, sad eyes were so red and swollen?" The words might have sounded kind, sympathetic even, had anyone else said them. In anything but a tone dripping with such contempt and derision.

She tamped down the instinctive indignation ignited by his harsh assessment. She was scared. And she really didn't want anyone else to know. Only, it seemed that Professor Snape knew. There was nothing she could do about that now.

The irony of her situation was by no means lost on Hermione. She was alone in a little-used corridor with a man her best friends believed to be a fraud while drowning in her own lack of belief in herself. He wasn't anywhere near being the person she would choose to unburden herself on, but he already knew and he *was* their Defence teacher.

"I know we're supposed to be brave," she told him stubbornly. She would *not* show how it shamed her to admit the truth. "And that what Harry is going through is so much worse than it is for me; I mean, no one expects *me* to save the world. I've really just got my parents to worry about. About what will happen to them because of me. That probably doesn't matter all that much in the larger scheme of things, but it's got me terrified."

"And I'm afraid... I'm scared of dying, Professor. Or of making a mistake that will get someone else killed, or even just harmed. I think that would probably be even worse."

She remembered the night Harry's insistence on saving his godfather had left Sirius dead and her cursed.

Professor Snape's mellifluous voice drew her out of that dark reverie.

"That you are afraid is a good thing," he told her. "You should not be ashamed of being intelligent enough to recognise current circumstances leave you at risk of harm."

"Having courage is not the same as being too stupid to recognise danger and to fear it. One is courageous when one able to act in spite of one's fear." He scowled at her. "No doubt many of your Gryffindor brethren would hear that as an endorsement for rushing recklessly into the fray without thought. That is not what I meant. Simply put, Miss Granger, when faced with warranted fears for one's own safety or for the safety of others, taking considered action and choosing the course which best mitigates the threat requires courage."

What he said was true; after all, it was something she'd seen being done every day for the entirety of her time at Hogwarts. Even when she hadn't been aware that it was happening.

"Like you do, sir?"

He didn't answer, and she got the feeling he wanted to look away from her. That he didn't only reinforced her belief in what she'd deduced.

"You're not as bad at this as you pretend to be, are you?" she asked before she thought better of it.

His questioning look and lack of visible anger spurred her to explain.

"I mean, you're good at dealing with students. Most people think you *hate* the students that you don't even like the Slytherins much, really but that's not true. You're a born teacher."

"Hardly, Miss Granger. I teach because I have no choice; the headmaster needed a spy and I was the only one to offer. We had to come up with a reason for my presence at the school that the Dark Lord would find least suspicious. I do not like children and I am not, have never been and do not ever expect to *be* 'good at dealing with' the dunderheads enrolled here."

She allowed that to tumble about in her mind for several moments before deciding she might get away with contradicting him if she presented a relevant example.

"You did wonderfully well with me just now, sir," she told him. "I feel much better than I did." A new thought occurred to her and started to spill from her mouth before she'd properly thought it out. "Maybe..." She trailed off, suddenly acutely aware of to whom she was speaking.

He arched an eyebrow. "'Maybe,' Miss Granger?" His smile was faintly mocking, but lacked its usual blistering coldness. "Come now, girl. Usually, you struggle *not* to talk. You shouldn't waste a golden opportunity to speak now, whilst I am disinclined to deduct more points."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. Severus Snape in what passed for a good mood was an unknown entity and something she suspected should be savoured. She wasn't at all sure it would survive what she had been going to say.

Forcing herself to look him in the eye, she bravely pushed on. "I just thought... maybe after this is all over after Vol... after You-Know-Who is gone maybe you can... start over. Maybe, erm, if you wanted..."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake! Spit it out, Miss Granger!"

She swallowed, still feeling uncertain, even though his thundering voice didn't seem to hold any real anger. Just impatience bordering on exasperation.

Well, she had started, so...

"I thought perhaps if you married and had children of your own, it would be different. Maybe you wouldn't think they were such... dunderheads."

The expected explosion of vitriol and remonstrance didn't come. Instead, his eyes widened in apparent shock, or perhaps disbelief, before he started shaking his head. His gaze left hers and then his head fell forward, the dark curtain of oily hair shielding his features.

Hermione felt cold fingers climb up her back as he began to tremble. She'd seen him angry, of course many times in a rage, even, but always before, his fury had appeared so tightly controlled. Precisely calculated to strike the maximum amount of dread in the objects of his displeasure.

A harsh, croaking sound, unlike anything she'd ever heard, burst from him. Alarmed, she started forward, hand outstretched, thinking to... she didn't know what.

"Professor," she asked, her voice timorous, "are you all right?"

Snape's head snapped up, and black eyes met and held hers. Glistening tears streamed down his pale, hollow cheeks and the choked sound only grew worse.

He was... laughing, she realised. And although she didn't see what was so funny about her suggestion, the urge to join him in this moment of levity was so strong, she had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself doing so.

After a long moment, he scrubbed the back of his hand across his eyes and took several deep breaths. The effort proved useless, however, when, after glancing at her, he started all over again.

Shaking her head ruefully, she stopped fighting back the answering smile tugging at her lips.

Several more deep breaths and many eye-scrubs later, he managed to gain some semblance of composure. Hermione was still grinning broadly even as she watched his expression return to its normal stiff mask.

She was still smiling into fathomless black eyes when his silky voice, as cold and forbidding as it had ever been, touched her ears.

"Surely, you can't be stupid enough to believe that, even should I survive this war," he opined, disdain coating every word, "I would be free to live a normal life such as the one you envision for yourself."

Hermione had begun shivering at the suggestion he might not live beyond the war, and each word of his relentlessly stark vision of the future plunged her deeper into the dark, chilling abyss.

"That if I," he continued, seemingly unaware or uncaring of her distress, "by some miracle managed to avoid Azkaban, there would be even a single witch willing to tie herself to an ex-Death Eater. Or that if I should meet such a paragon outside the wards of an insane asylum, that any offspring produced from such an unholy union would worthy of praise!"

He surged forward, sneering, until his large nose was barely centimetres from hers.

"Perhaps, Miss Granger, I was too fulsome in my praise this evening. Your intellect is clearly just as lacking as I always believed your favoured companions' to be."

SS~HG

Present Day

Severus shucked off his dressing gown and tossed it on the end of the bed before crawling in beside his wife.

"From now on," he intoned, sliding a hand up her naked thigh and on to her ribs where he stopped to tickle the sensitive flesh, "either we refrain from religiously following whatever ridiculous advice you've read in *Wizard Whelp Weekly!* there are other methods of ensuring your son receives his daily requirement of iron and protein than feeding him strained spinach and mushy peas at his evening meals or *you* shall be the one to see to his hygienic needs when he wakes after his bedtime."

Severus shuddered in mock disgust at that task he had just completed. He knew that she knew that there was little he believed their son could do wrong at this stage, but Hermione's answering smile was enigmatic enough to dust off his as-of-late-disused suspicious nature.

"Lord, woman! Spit it out!"

Hermione wrinkled her nose at him. He could almost see the gears working in her head. She meant to wind him up, he could tell; she so rarely had an opportunity.

"Spit it out"? Did you just perform Legilimency on me, Severus?" she asked, surely trying for arch allusion, but achieving something which sounded rather more like aggrieved admonition, instead. Severus decided to use her poor acting ability to his advantage.

"Of course not, ridiculous woman!" he snapped. "It is unconscionable! That you would have the effrontery to accuse me of such a thing. I thought by now I'd earned your approbation; clearly, I was in error."

Turning away from her as he uttered the last, his voice suffused with affronted emotion, Severus made sure she didn't catch sight of the lips he couldn't stop curving upwards.

He felt the mattress shift as she clambered closer. He felt her small hand slip around his waist and her heat press against his back as she embraced him from behind.

"You're faking," she pronounced, but hugged him close anyway. "In spite of your ridiculous theatrics, I will remind you that I love you and trust you implicitly. And I'll tell you what I'd been thinking about just as you came back. There was a night, in my sixth year, maybe you'll remember, but I doubt it because it was just before a very difficult time..."

Hermione moved up until her lips rested near his ear and spoke of a time he'd given her a tiny glimpse of the man he might have been if....

"I remember," he murmured, turning in her arms when she was little more than half finished. "Silly girl that you were, you thought I should become ~~father~~ *father*. I meant everything I said that night, Hermione. If I had only known the lengths you were willing to go to prove me wrong."

She laughed softly, pressing her face against the faint scars on his neck.

"Well, you have to admit, I *did* turn out to be right. But not through any advance planning. I wish I could take credit for that."

Severus, shoulders shaking and chest rumbling his quiet mirth, held her tighter.

"Just so you could remind me of the fact daily, no doubt. Holding it over my head that the know-it-all had bested me this time?"

"Exactly."

He covered her smug smile learned from him, though she was ever loath to admit it with a kiss that ensured she wouldn't forget he also was quite knowing in some areas.

A/N: This ficlet is excerpted and adapted from one of three epilogues I wrote for *Metempsychosis* but decided didn't work as such. It will appear in that story in another form.

