

Professor Granger's Puzzle

by Meladara

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

The characters and canon situations in the following story belong solely to J.K. Rowling, Scholastic and WB. I am not making any money from the publishing or writing of this story.

A/N: This is a five parter; each chapter will be rather short. But if you're looking for a fluffy HEA that is predictably cheesy, then you've come to the right place. Thank you to karelia for the beta. You're the best and give the greatest gifts of commas ever. :P ~Meladara~

Professor Hermione Granger's Arithmancy puzzle is the stuff of legend at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Well, recent legend, at least. As the resident Arithmancy professor for the last five years, Professor Granger allows all her students the opportunity to decode the huge equation that encircles the entire perimeter of her classroom, and though many have tried, none have succeeded. Such is the complexity of the computation, it has even been rumoured that several master-level Arithmancy colleagues of the professor made an effort to solve it but failed. And this is exactly how Professor Granger wants things.

~oOOOo~

Originally, the puzzle had been an incentive to get her students involved and keep them engaged in her class. It was her first year of teaching, and as an inexperienced teacher, she was having a particularly difficult time keeping her seventh-year students engaged. It was a desperate attempt, she knew, but unable to come up with another tool to motivate them and frustrated beyond belief at her students' inability to focus, she promised them that over the spring holiday she would encode a secret into an Arithmantic riddle. The first to solve the puzzle would win a prize. However, when the professor had made this promise, she had failed to consider the potential for trouble in doing so.

Over that spring break holiday five years ago, Hermione Granger had thought long and hard on which secret to include in the algorithm for the puzzle. What should it be? She had many secrets, belonging both to her and to others. Knowing that she could not impart upon her students a secret belonging to another, she had to face the reality that it would have to be a secret of her own. Furthermore, as she began the project, she quickly discovered that in her frantic and earnest attempt to engage her students, she had magically bound herself into including a tried-and-true deep secret. Something so powerful that no other person knew. Immediately, she had known what knowledge she would have to impart; there was only one secret that was strong enough to satisfy the magic of her promise.

Aghast at this realisation, Professor Granger finally decided that if she had to share her secret with the world, then the least she could do was protect it in the most complex magical equation ever created. Carefully, she had worked late into the nights that holiday, magically encoding her secret. Into the equation she also built in a series of fail-safes that ensured just before anyone solved the riddle, she would be notified and they would be bound to silence on the topic. Of course, the professor justified the use of the master-level secrecy clause under the premise that it would spoil it for others if the secret were told, but truly, she knew better.

As far as the prize, she decided that any student capable of solving the equation would be rewarded with a letter of recommendation and a dinner in Hogsmeade with a friend upervised, of course; the *first* person who solved it would also receive 100 galleons.

~oOOOo~

For five years now the puzzle has sat unsolved. Professor Granger lives in relative contentment that the security surrounding her secret is sufficient, and although it does sometimes prick her nerves that her secret is there for anyone to find, she sleeps at night with relative ease.

However, there is one major factor that Professor Granger has not considered, and that is Professor Severus Snape. Hermione Granger is aware, of course, that Professor Snape is a brilliant man who is extremely knowledgeable in many subjects. Indeed, she even knows that he is a rather good Arithmancer, but she never counted on him having any active interest in solving her puzzle. After all, he has never paid her any mind otherwise; why should he care about the puzzle encircling her classroom?

~oOOOo~

When Professor Severus Snape had first heard of her puzzle and reward, he'd scoffed. It was a rookie move and would not truly encourage the students to learn in the long term. No doubt, he'd thought initially, it was a purposefully easy problem applied to the situation in order to falsely boost self-esteem and morale among her bored students. However, as the years passed and the stories of Professor Granger's Arithmancy puzzle grew, Professor Snape, against all odds, found himself intrigued.

Then, this summer, Professor Granger had invited two Arithmancy colleagues round for a few days, and they too had tried to solve her riddle much to her chagrin, he had noted. But they failed just as all others before them. Indeed, he'd overheard them talking about it as they had dined.

'The utter beauty and complexity of such a problem,' one had raved. Then they had gone on to hypothesize that the magical calculation had somehow taken on the characteristics of the encoded secret itself and, indeed, was so magically complex that it was solvable only by the creator and perhaps only a few others in the entire world.

After that he knew that he had to see it.

There was simply something utterly enticing about an unsolvable puzzle. It was a true challenge, and Severus Snape loved a challenge. Surely he would be able to work through it. He knew he wasn't technically an Arithmancy master, but he was exceptionally skilled in the subject and certainly better than any seventh-year in this school.

And that is exactly how Severus Snape had found his way to her abandoned classroom one afternoon just days before the new school year was to begin.

~oOOOo~

He entered the room and immediately began to study the writing that encircled her room. It was stunning and clearly the most complicated piece of Arithmancy he'd ever seen. It was clear why this was the fifth year the puzzle would be unsolved. Truly, he doubted that this year there would be anyone smart enough among the student body to crack even the first few sequences. Amazed at the intricate beauty of the problem, he thought, *If Arithmancy is an art, then this equation is a masterpiece.*

After an hour of painstakingly copying it all, he quickly ran a spell of his own devising to make sure that he'd made no mistakes, and then he returned to his dungeon chambers, thankful that Professor Granger had continued her yearly tradition of leaving the castle to visit her dunderheaded friends in the days before the start of the school year. As he settled in for the evening with a brandy close at hand, he began his work, intent on solving her puzzle, if at all possible, before the start of the new school year.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

A/N: Here you are, dears. I hope you enjoy. I did warn you before; the chapters for this fic will be really short. ;) Just stick with me; the fluff and nonsense will come. I promise. Thanks a million for reading and reviewing!! ~Mel~

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It was traditional for Hermione to spend the last week of her summer holiday with Harry and Ron and their large, overly loud families. She enjoyed the wholesome week full of delicious food, sweet children, and old friends. Ginny and Luna were always thrilled to have her around, and the children all adored their Annie Minnie. She'd earned that moniker from little Jamie a year prior, after he had tried his hardest to call her Auntie Hermione as the adults had prompted. But alas, his little tongue could not do it, and instead, she'd been Annie Minnie ever since.

Thankful for the respite her friends provided before she took on the craziness that was Hogwarts during the school year, Hermione relished the time she was able to spend with her friends. She loved watching the happy couples interact...Ginny with Harry, Luna with Ron...and she held a special place for each member of their families in her heart. Her only regret was that she couldn't visit them more often. This single week of noisy happiness gave her something that she cherished throughout the rest of the year. It didn't even bother Hermione when she received her annual ribbing about becoming an old maid. It was easy to simply laugh it off and tell them that she was happy with her life as it was and that she would change it only when she found a love as true and as happy as the ones they enjoyed. Why would she settle for anything less?

Deep in her heart she knew there was more to it than that. It was no secret to her why she didn't date, why she did not go out and seek love in the world. Love had already found her; her heart had been irrevocably enraptured years before. However, it was simply something that could not be. He was not the type of man one simply approached and asked out for a drink, and she respected him too much for that anyhow. He'd made it clear long ago he did not desire anyone's affections, and her regard for him was so high she would never want to offend him by offering him something he did not want, especially since he had never shown any interest in her whatsoever, on

any level. Until he did, she would never show him anything other than polite friendship, no matter how her heart ached.

If there were two things that war had taught Hermione Granger they were: first, you can't always get what you want; and second, be content with what you have, even if means you must live a life without love. She could, at the very least, find comfort in the fact that she was near him and able to share with him a distant but scholarly life. Enjoying the rare moments when their paths crossed, she was even able to occasionally indulge, when no others were around, in a quick sit in his chair in the teachers' lounge. Where, in those rare, stolen moments, she would allow his scent to envelope her and take her away into a land of fantasy where all her wildest dreams came true. It was silly, she knew, but one does what one must when faced with an impossible situation.

And so she did. He would never know, and she would never tell.

~oOOOo~

Hermione returned from her visit on the Monday afternoon just before the start of the new school year. With her mind on the many students who would be arriving in mere hours, she hurriedly unpacked and then rushed to her classroom, anxious to spend those last few hours of her holiday making a few last-minute preparations. There wasn't much to do: simple organization mostly. As she worked, she thought about the year ahead of her. After five years of teaching, she genuinely enjoyed her job, even if she had only initially taken it to be closer to him. The students were a joy to be around, and her work colleagues had grown into close companions. Well, all of them had except for him.

As her mind filled with the image of the dark man who held her heart, her eyes flitted up to land on the equation surrounding her classroom. It was funny... She'd been terrified when she had first made the mistake of magically promising a secret within her Arithmantic Puzzle, but now, after five years of it remaining unsolved, she found a perverse amount of comfort in the presence of her greatest secret. Its place on her walls and in her life gave her the strength to go on when the days and night turned long and lonely, as they often did late in the school year.

As her attention moved back to the task at hand, Hermione quickly got lost in her work, and by the time she noted the hour, it was time to head down to the Great Hall. The students would arrive soon, and it wouldn't do to be late for the Sorting.

~oOOOo~

Professor Severus Snape had spent the last two days locked in his rooms working on the puzzle. He was truly amazed at the brilliant mind of the creator. The witch was a bloody genius; there was no other way to put it. Why she was teaching foundational magic to adolescents, he couldn't understand. With her brain, she could be working as a consultant and making millions of galleons a year, if she so desired. But no, she had tied herself to this school, much like he had. He couldn't help but wonder what exactly about Hogwarts had drawn her into its halls.

His mind so full of the days and hours he'd devoted to her puzzle, he didn't even notice that his eyes had locked on her as she entered the hall. Immediately, he was struck by how much she had changed over the years. She was no longer the bushy-haired member of the golden trio that he recalled from so long ago. The creature before him was a lovely woman who had to be nearly thirty.

He quickly calculated. Yes, she would be turning thirty this year, by his estimation.

How had he missed her growing up?

Severus realised suddenly that over the years she'd spent teaching, he'd really never considered her at all; they rarely exchanged words or crossed paths. In his typical standoffish manner, he had dealt with her as he did all his colleagues, paying her absolutely no mind. Looking at her now, he couldn't help but feel that he had made an egregious error in doing so.

As she walked toward the High Table, he studied her petite frame and signature wild curls, which fell down to her waist in beautiful waves. He recalled that in her school days, despite her small stature, she had held a fierce temper and a magical strength to rival any other. He greatly doubted that had changed.

Suddenly, a memory from several years ago sprang into his mind. He had been sitting at an Order of the Phoenix meeting, bored out of his mind, when he heard Potter and Weasley start to joke that as far as they were concerned, Hermione was taller, stronger, and far scarier than anyone else they knew. At the time he hadn't understood their reasoning and honestly was not surprised that the pair would make such a seemingly stupid declaration. However, now that he had seen the brilliance of her mind, he understood.

Severus thought back to the puzzle sitting in that high, castle classroom and the pages of parchment filled with his work in his dungeon. He had managed to work about two-thirds of the way through it but had hit a part he just couldn't get past. As he reflected on the equation and the witch who had created it, he felt the desire to break through her code evolve and shift within him. This was no longer about the thrill of solving a difficult puzzle. No. He wanted to measure up to her, to this witch with the fascinating mind. He now knew that even if it took him all year, he would see it unravelled.

Severus glanced down the table to where Hermione sat quietly speaking with Hagrid. Her eyes were fixed on the doors of the Great Hall in anticipation of the students' arrival. As Severus turned to watch the doors, they swung open, and the peaceful summer silence of the Great Hall broke. It was official; the school year had begun.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

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This was officially the oddest start to a school year Professor Granger had experienced since her days as a student.

His odd behaviour had started the evening of the Welcoming Feast. She had felt his eyes on her throughout the evening and had immediately worried that he was upset with her over some perceived, unintended slight. However, to her utter astonishment, he had accused her of nothing. Instead, over the next few days, she found him acknowledging her in the halls instead of simply acting as if she didn't exist. It seemed that suddenly, five years after Hermione had begun teaching at Hogwarts, Professor

Snape had recalled the fact that Hermione Granger was his colleague and not a student playing dress-up.

Hermione at first had been stunned and pleased, but as the days had passed the pleasure had dissolved into complete confusion. She couldn't fathom why he had so drastically changed his behaviour toward her. There was no accounting for it. Why would he suddenly regard her as a person worth noting after five years of indifference? What had she done to deserve his sudden respect?

Then there had been the incident about two weeks into the school year, which had served to further confuse her.

Hermione had nearly stumbled over her own feet at the sight of him holding the door to the Great Hall open for her, an amused smirk stretching across his face. What had shocked her the most, however, had been what followed that particular act. It was so shocking that her brain had actually rebelled as it had happened. The idea that he was truly asking her if she was interested in sitting next to him at dinner was simply too incongruous with what she knew of him. But as she had heard him drawl casually, *In order to more easily converse*, she couldn't deny that he had indeed extended such an offer. Though, it had taken her a full thirty second to realise it. Seconds that had stretch before her, each an eternity, as she stood with her feet frozen to a spot on the floor that was just steps from the doors while the strange dark man proceeded to the High Table and pulled out a chair for her. It wasn't until he looked down at her with a look of amused exasperation on his face that she had managed to shake herself out of the stupor and make her way to the table, all the while trying to hide to her surprise and failing miserably. That evening they had managed to pass the meal with amiable, if slightly stiff, conversation, and Hermione had left the Great Hall hovering somewhere between completely thrilled and completely baffled.

Despite her lack of understanding as to the source of his change in behaviour, Hermione could only guess that he had enjoyed their conversation well enough, as he had ensured that she sat next to him for the meals that followed. Over the next days and weeks it had become clear that, no matter what had brought it about, the change in him was here to stay.

It had been a wonder-filled time for Hermione, those weeks of conversing with the intelligent man. Though, Hermione couldn't help but feel at times as if she were simply waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to reveal what it was he really wanted. Her brain continually reminded her that he couldn't genuinely be interested in getting to know her, especially after so many years of cold indifference. After all, she was the know-it-all Gryffindor princess, and it went against the grain of everything she knew about the man for him to take any interest in her.

So, then, why would he change so suddenly?

Not that Hermione didn't enjoying talking to him; she did, but she couldn't allow herself to get attached to his company only to have him withdraw at a later date. Her life was built on a carefully balanced set of parameters, each one delicately weighed and tended by Hermione in order to maintain her sanity. As he gradually intruded upon her life, first with acknowledgement and then with conversation and blossoming friendship, she felt the key parameters that were the constants within the equation of her life beginning to shift, dangerously so.

Suspicious and wary, she realised that if she embraced the changes his presence brought and he turned out to abandon her in the end, she would be left with nothing but a house of fallen cards. In the end, however, she decided that it was probably wisest to enjoy the little blessings life brought while waiting and watching for him to reveal his motive. She would deal with the aftermath when the time came, whatever it might be.

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It was five weeks into the confused but growing friendship between Hermione Granger and Severus Snape, as her world was slowly losing balance, that she felt it: Her first fail-safe had been activated. Someone was close to solving the puzzle. They hadn't progressed past her fail-safe yet. Indeed, each time they reworked the section she would be alerted, but she knew now that it would only a matter of time.

While the level-headed part of her merely questioned how one of her students could be so close to solving it, especially so early in the year, the other, more emotional part of her was desperate to discover who it was. Her secret was in danger. Someone would know, and although they would be magically bound to keep it a secret, they could still ruin everything.

She couldn't help but reflect on the absolute irony of the situation. Just when she had started making progress toward finding some real happiness in life, finding a friend who valued her as a thinking human being, it was all being threatened. After so long living a lonely existence, this year's changes had made for a refreshing change. She was finally making progress on achieving one of her deepest desires, and this could ruin everything. Still, she knew there was nothing to be done, and she would simply have to wait until whoever it was finished their work. Her final fail-safe would ensure that she would be magically Summoned to the side of the person just before the last sequence was completed.

Now it was only a matter of time and patient waiting.

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He'd almost solved it. There were only two sequences left, but he had grown tired and decided to try again when his mind was fresh and the day was new. However, he had not missed the alert that had been incorporated into the equation. No. He knew she was now aware that someone was close to solving it, and it was with interest he watched the next morning as she entered the Great Hall for breakfast.

As Hermione sat down next to him, he couldn't miss that she looked an absolute mess. Sipping his coffee while coolly masking his surprise, he took in her appearance. Her hair was uncombed; her eyes were tinged with red, dark circles shadowing them. Her state thoroughly shocked him; he had not expected her to be so deeply affected by someone getting close to solving her equation. For a moment he wondered why this was; it was simply a puzzle, something for the students. Was it not?

It was only then that he remembered... It was not simply an encoded puzzle or a game for her students; it was an encoded secret. He'd completely forgotten the parameters of the original challenge she had set five years earlier. It was clear to him now as he observed the haggard woman sitting next to him that, whatever the secret was, she was obviously not looking forward to it being shared.

He was appalled to find that the first course of action to come to him was the complete abandonment of the task right then and there. Cringing at the Hufflepuffian sentiment, he couldn't help but remember how over the past few weeks their conversations had shown to him what a rare and beautiful person Hermione was. He had truly started to hope that in her he could have a true friend.

Perhaps it would be best to talk to her, he considered silently, the familiar feeling of worry pricking at his conscience. He reasoned that speaking to her would enable him to assure her of the safety of her secret, should he discover it. Then again, such an admission would force him to acknowledge his interest in her puzzle in the first place, and he'd have to explain how he'd taken the time to break into her classroom. *Perhaps not*, he finally decided, resolving that he would simply have to decode it as quickly as possible. It would be like pulling off a plaster. When the unpleasantness was over and she was assured of her secret's safety, she could go back to being happy.

It wasn't until the half-hour preceding that evening's dinner that he had managed to crack through the next to last sequence...

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The quiet of the Great Hall enveloped Severus as he sat with his head drawn down over a pile of parchments, his reading glasses perched precariously on his face. He had opted to work in the quiet of the Great Hall so as to maximize the time he had before the start of the final meal of the day.

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Twenty minutes before the evening meal, Hermione stood in surprise as the magic activated and the Summons began. Resigned to her fate, she walked through the halls of Hogwarts, allowing the pull of then Summons to guide her way.

The door to the Great Hall slammed open, and a breathless Hermione Granger stumbled through. Immediately, her eyes scanned the house tables for the student.

Who is it? Who is it? she chanted silently, her eyes darting up and down the tables with frantic haste.

She could see no one, but refused to believe it. But no matter how she strained her eyes, the tables remained completely void of students. The Great Hall was empty.

Confused and irrational relief coursed through her. Perhaps there was a mistake; perhaps this had been a false alarm.

Hermione propelled herself forward with hurried steps, bringing herself further into the hall as she shook the foolish notion from her head. There was no such thing as a false alarm when it came to her Arithmancy puzzle.

Desperate, she knew that she needed to find who it was, and quickly. With only ten minutes until students began trickling into the hall, she couldn't afford to delay. She didn't want anyone else aware of the events just yet. After five years of the puzzle remaining unsolved, there was no doubt in her mind that when word got out that a student had solved the puzzle, interest in the content of secret would grow exponentially.

Hermione jumped as the sound of someone clearing a throat echoed behind her. She froze as her mind reeled, the implications of the person's location striking in a single blast. The sound was coming from the table on the dais reserved for the Professors.

The High Table? It is a teacher. Holy Merlin!

This was the worst case scenario. A student she could take, but not a colleague. Never a colleague. She hadn't even ever considered it; there were too many ways that they could meddle.

Then her mind was filled with a single frantic plea as this new reality took shape. *Please, don't be him. Please!*

Slowly, she turned to find the familiar black eyes of Severus Snape peering back at her.

Hermione's heart sank to her feet as the carefully crafted balance of her life tumbled around her.

Severus watched as the witch turned around to face him, her hands shaking and wild locks framing her face. As her eyes met his they flooded with something, a realisation of horror, or fear, or disappointment, or perhaps some combination of the three. Whatever it was, Hermione Granger was not happy, and more than that, she was extremely distressed.

"Good evening, Professor Granger," he greeted calmly as he silently thanked the fates that he could mask the feelings her broken expression was stirring within him.

Hermione took a deep breath as her hands clenched against their shaking. Pulling herself together as best she could, she straightened her shoulders and nodded to him. Then in as calm and cordial a voice as possible, she said, "And to you, Professor Snape." Taking a step toward him, her feet faltered as her mind tried to unravel everything. Even the simple task of walking seemed beyond her at the moment.

After standing in silence she suddenly blurted out, "It's you?" The sound of the words seemed to un-stick her mind and horrified understanding began to click into place. This was why he had been so interested in her. This was the reason for his friendship, why he had spent time with her! All for the solving of that stupid bloody puzzle!

"As you see." Severus tilted his head to the side in acknowledgement, motioning to the papers he had strewn before him.

Hurt flooded Hermione as she felt the last of her hope crumble to dust. She couldn't bear to look at him, couldn't bear to see him now that she understood what he was doing. Her eyes fell to the ground in defeat, and she took in a deep breath, grasping for whatever emotional control she could find, some anchor in this swirl of chaos.

"Well," she said, her words coming out in a hurt, quavering whisper, "you've got this far. You might as well finish it. Just.. *Please, Severus*. Don't hate me in the end. I never meant..." Her voice cracked before falling silent; no more words would come.

She looked upon him one last time, her eyes full of unshed tears, the presence of which caused an intense and foreign pain to twinge into life within his heart. Then, before the sob building within her could break, Hermione fled the hall.

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The deafening quiet of the Great Hall enveloped him as he sat, rigid with shock, his heart beating out of his chest.

That was unexpected.

He couldn't help but wonder what secret could warrant such a reaction, and if knowing her secret and solving her puzzle was worth causing her such pain. Before another second could pass, he was on his feet, gathering his things and stowing them away in the deep recesses of his robes. Then he too fled the Great Hall. As his hurried step echoed through the halls of Hogwarts, Severus knew only one thought: One way or another, he was going to finish the matter tonight. Whether Hermione liked it or not!

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

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Lost to the empty solitude that comes in aftermath of a good cry, Hermione sat staring with cold eyes at the flames dancing in her hearth before a quick rapping at her door cause her to startle. Her eyes flew to the door, glinting hard at the ancient wood from which the offending noise had come. Knowing she was neither fit to be seen nor able to converse with any amount of civility, she turned back toward the fire and ignored the door and the person on the other side of it.

Again, a knock sounded.

Hermione shifted but did not turn to look at the door. Instead, she straightened herself with a small grimace and kept her eyes locked on the flames. They flickered before her, mimicking the raw emotions still simmering and churning within her. Waiting in quiet agony for the intruding person to give up and leave her in peace, she sat in silence. She knew that eventually they would get the message that she had no desire for company.

The sound came again, this time louder than before, and it succeeded in breaking through her stupor, causing her to let out a small yelp.

"Hermione," called a deep voice in the hall. "I know you're in there!"

Immediately, her eyes widened, and her face paled.

It's him. Oh, Circes!

Quickly, what do I do? Answer it? No. No. No.

Hermione winced as the sound, which was now more a pounding than polite knock, echoed off the walls of her rooms. This time it did not cease after a few repetitions but continued on for some time.

Hermione sighed and for once was thankful that her rooms weren't in a well-travelled area of the castle, for it seemed he was intent on making a scene. Slowly, she rose from the settee on shaking legs. Hermione straightened her clothes to the best of her ability, and then with as much strength as she could muster, she made her way to the door and flung it open.

"What?" she demanded feebly. "Come to mock me?"

Severus was stunned speechless. Just as he had moved his fist to pound on the door yet another time, it had been flung open and before him stood Hermione, her wild beauty striking him in a single blow.

She looked up to him with fierce, sad eyes that were swollen and red. Her hair, which had in the last few days reminded him much of her school days, was now in complete disarray, and her clothes, which were normally impeccable, were now crumpled and creased. But the most prominent feature he could see upon her was the tear tracks staining her cheeks. She stood before him like a fallen and wild angel ready for a final battle, and he couldn't help but feel inadequate to the task set before him. His eyes locked on her as he stared intensely.

Hermione stood stubbornly before him, his gaze heavy upon her, stirring things in her that she had long repressed, things she had taught herself to live without. Gradually, she felt her cheeks begin to grow hot, her heart to twinge, and her breath to catch. Tightening her eyes against the onslaught, she gasped out a harsh but breathy, "Well?"

Severus startled out of his scrutiny of her. "Well, what?" he muttered with exasperation in his voice.

"What do you mean? You are the one who was banging on my door, demanding I open it," she said, frustrated. "Obviously you've finished it, and you've come to mock me."

Severus took a deep breath, his eyes darting away from her and to the empty corridor behind him. He ground out in a voice that was little more than a hushed growl, "Can we not do this in the hall?"

Hermione, though upset, realised the wisdom of his words, and with a small nod, she stepped back, allowing him entrance into her rooms. His eyes quickly scanned the domain of the fascinating witch as he walked passed her. In his typical quiet and dignified manner, he did not stand upon ceremony or wait for an invitation to sit. Instead, he planted himself firmly on her settee and then fixed his expectant eyes upon Hermione as she stood by the door struggling with what to do with herself. Finally, she too walked to the settee and sat, silent and waiting for whatever words he felt he needed to express.

As he watched her walk across the room and then sit, he was surprised by her utterly defeated air. Where was the confident woman from the past weeks? She seemed completely resigned to whatever fate held for her. It was all very unlike what he knew of her.

Moments ticked by as they sat, both unsure of what to say or do. Then he spoke, his voice a quiet wave from his lips, breaking the thick silence that had settled between them.

"Hermione, when I started working through the puzzle it was simply because I enjoy a challenge. However, when I actually studied the equation itself, I was stunned. It is..." He paused, trying to grasp at an adequate way to show her what he thought of her puzzle. "Well, for lack of a better term, it is bloody brilliant. I have never seen such an intricately wrought piece of Arithmantic magic. It did not cross my mind until I saw your reaction after I hit the first fail-safe that there was a secret involved. A secret you are clearly not comfortable sharing."

His eyes closed for a moment as his hand found the bridge of his nose, and he took in a deep breath. "It was never my intent to hurt you or seek out your secret. I respect you too much to do that. In the last few weeks, I thought that we'd become something close to friends, and as such, I would never invade your privacy."

"I don't understand," Hermione said, the confusion clear in her voice.

Severus looked up from the spot he'd been unconsciously studying on the floor. Her voice sounded too broken and timid. It hurt that he'd inadvertently caused her so much distress. Reaching across the sofa and taking her hand in his, he noted that it was soft and small and fit perfectly in his. As his thumb began drawing small, comforting circles on the back of her hand, his eyes looked into hers.

Hermione quaked as intense agitation pulsed through her.

What is happening here?

Only moments ago she'd been lost in despair, and then, suddenly, he was here with her, holding her hand.

"I didn't finish it, Hermione," he told her, squeezing her hand softly. "The secret is yours, and obviously it is one that you are not ready to share. It is not my place to take it from you, and certainly not for the pleasure of solving a puzzle."

As relief flooded her she felt her eyes once again began to well up with tears. It was safe. He did not know.

"I don't understand," she said. Seeing the puzzled look growing on his face, she realised he need further clarification. "You did that for me? Why would you do that?"

"Well," he said before taking a deep breath, "when I eventually remembered that there was a secret involved, I thought to lessen your pain by solving it as quickly as possible. I reasoned that no matter what the secret was, I would safeguard it as my own. However, when you came in to the Great Hall, the look in your eyes was enough to stay my hand. It sickened me to know that something I was doing had caused that, had caused you such distress. Honestly, I could not bear it. No puzzle is worth that, Hermione. You are worth more than that."

Hermione gasped and her face immediately grew pale. His words processed through her stress-addled mind, echoing within her and forever changing her understanding of the man sitting next to her.

Struck by this flash of insight, Hermione watched as her vision momentarily grew dark and the world around her started to swim. Swaying slightly, she took a deep breath

and was relieved when the room again steadied and her rooms again appeared before her. And in that moment, with her head light, world spinning, and heart aching, she finally knew that it was time. The time that she had never thought would come was here.

"Severus," she said, her voice a mere whisper, "where are your papers?"

Solemnly, he reached into his robe and withdrew a bundle of parchment, offering it to her.

Shaking her head, she sent him a weak smile. "I didn't understand before, but now I do. You need to finish it. I want you to finish it," she said as she sniffled. Sensing his reluctance, she continued, her voice and demeanor growing stronger and more peaceful by the second. "I need you to, Severus. I don't want my secret anymore."

Severus studied her for a moment, searching her face for any hesitation, and when he found none, he asked with grave sincerity, "Are you sure?"

Hermione simply gave him a small, confident nod and then allowed her eyes to fall to the crumpled parchment in his hands, waiting for him to take action.

Placing the bundle of parchment on the table and drawing out the self-inking quill he'd been using earlier, he turned and began his work. For many minutes he wrote, placing number after number, value after value, and rune after rune. When he finally he reached the end, he carefully drew the closing symbol and activated the magic that would unlock the secret message. As his quill left the parchment, his eyes looked to Hermione.

She was fixedly watching the magical numbers on the paper swirl and twist. "It still amazes me," she whispered, "the magic of numbers." As if she could feel his eyes on her, she looked up and smiled before gesturing to the paper.

Severus looked down and could see that it was coming to the end of the magic. The decoding would be complete in seconds. The numbers swirled in the middle of the page until they were a maelstrom of ink, and then, as the blur of ink slowly separated into swirling letters, four words floated into the centre of the page.

I love Severus Snape.

Severus felt the world drop out from underneath him and his brain completely shut down. The entirety of his awareness instantly shrunk down to the four little words on the paper before him.

She loves me?!he cried in his mind.Surely, she is mistaken. What could she possibly love about me?

His eyes darted up in confusion. Again, searching her face as he thought about the woman in question, the woman nervously sitting next to him.

Is she serious? Could this be a mistake of some sort? A prank? No, that couldn't be right, not after her reaction in the Great Hall.

He shook his head, trying to understand the input he was receiving and failing utterly. There was no doubt that she was sincere. He checked the parchment again. Perhaps he had read it wrong. But no, the four words stood unchanged before him.

I love Severus Snape.

His chest tightened, reminding him that he'd not taken in a breath recently. Gasping, he looked up from the paper, his wide eyes meeting hers.

"Severus?" she whispered.

His face was growing flush, and the furrowing of his brow was growing deeper with each passing second.

"Truly?" he asked, his voice cracking.

Hermione nodded as her eyes filled with tears. Biting her lip, she sat for a moment, not sure where to look, what to say, or how to say it. She knew she could not leave things as they were. Finally, taking a deep breath, she steeled herself internally and said, "Don't worry. I'm not looking for a declaration in return. I know you don't return the sentiments, and honestly, I have never really held much hope for it anyway. But after these last five weeks... And then today... I thought maybe it was time for me to stop hiding. You deserve that much, and perhaps, someday..."

For a time, thick silence once again stretched between them, the air standing heavy around them, keeping them in place.

Inside, she could feel the weight and creep of dread start to tingle in the depths of her stomach. She knew that this wouldn't last, this quiet moment of uncertainty, and she resolved that when he finally spoke, when he finally broke what was left of her heart, she would willingly take whatever words he gave her. It was the least she could do.

He said nothing as his eyes studied her. They were filled with innumerable questions that he couldn't begin to understand how to voice. This was a completely new situation for him. What was he to do?

When he finally did speak, the inadequacy of his words left him feeling like a dunderheaded adolescent. "Hermione. I don't know what to say," he heard his lips utter before he stop them. Then, as he had before, he acted without thinking, his hand reach forward and grasped hers as words continued to tumble from his lips, clarifying things that he'd felt but never truly understood.

"I have to confess that I did not see you as anything more than a former student until I started working on your equation. I had kept away from you for the same reasons that I have pushed everyone away in my life. I was under the impression that my life was good enough as it was and that I didn't need anyone else in it to be happy. But then, once I started working on the puzzle, I found myself unaccountably fascinated by your mind, by you. Your Arithmancy truly is a work of art, and the fact that its entire purpose is to protect such a message..." His voice trailed off, not quite sure if he could voice exactly how he felt about that particular aspect of the turn of events, not sure if he even understood how he felt about the events anyway. After a few breaths he picked up the account of his actions and intent these past weeks.

"We've worked together for five years, and I never saw you for who you were. However, from the moment you walked in the Great Hall all those weeks ago, I must confess that you were all I could see. It was as if the curtains had been thrown back, and I could not help but see the light that you brought into the world. After that I was flooded with the absurd need to speak to you. I wanted to know how your brain worked, to understand your opinions and motivations, to better know you. And so, I asked you to sit with me, only to be drawn in further. There were times when I would find myself wondering what you would think about the essay or journal article that I had just read. I don't do that; I do not seek the opinions of others. I should not care, but for some reason that I do not fully understand, I do. It was as if the equation was telling me the message long before I ever finished it, driving and feeding this obsession. And tonight... The knowledge that I was doing something which caused you to hurt... That is why I didn't finish it. It wasn't worth it."

The tears which had been slowly filling her eyes finally reached their limit, and her tears began to drop, falling to wet her cheeks. Gently, he reached up with his free hand and wiped them away, "Do you not see, Hermione? My heart is already yours."

His words echoed around her, slamming into her with such force and veracity that her vision started to swim and a guttural sob instantly leapt forward in her chest. With a sharp and jarring jerk, Hermione wrenched herself from the settee and turned away from him, hiding the intensity of her reaction as best she could. Collapsing to her knees, she began to shake as she wept loudly into her hands.

Severus lowered himself to the floor beside her as his heart pounded in his chest. Desperately he pleaded, "Hermione, I am sorry. I didn't know before. I was fool not to see, to waste years being blind to you. But I see you now. You are a beautiful, brilliant woman, who is kind and generous and a fabulous teacher. Would you be willing to accept the favour of my attentions, as a friend, as a suitor, as a lover? Hell, I would happily take you as my wife if you deemed it acceptable, but please don't hide from me."

Her sobbing shook with renewed vigour as he fell silent, and he could not tell if it was from relief or distress. Reaching for her shoulders, he gently turned her toward him, and when she looked up, it was with a watery, shaky smile. Words were lost to her as she nodded and allowed him to pull her into his arms. Neither of them could describe the feelings they currently were experiencing. Joy, happiness, contentment, and relief were all there, but there was something more. Completeness.

Reverently, Severus pressed a kiss into her hair before moving on to her ear where he whispered, "You are a mess, my dear." His hand stroked her wild hair in a futile effort to tame it.

Hermione snorted and gently hit him in the arm. "Not my fault. I've had no sleep and more than a few cries."

"Indeed. And still you are as beautiful as ever," he teased.

Hermione let out a wet snort and then quickly grabbed a tissue. Between blows she said, "I'm not sure if that is a compliment or not, snarky Potions Master."

"Now that is true. I cannot deny it," he sighed dramatically with an eyebrow raised.

"Oh, Merlin! Can you imagine Harry and Ron's reactions?" Hermione asked before collapsing against Severus in a fit of heady giggles.

"Your friends will get over it eventually, I'm sure. You, however..."

Hermione's fit ended suddenly as she felt his lips press into her neck. As she snuggled up against him, she whispered, "I have no desire to ever get over this, Severus."

Slowly, he gathered her in his arms and moved them both back onto the settee. "And for that, I am profoundly grateful."

As she sat in his lap with her face inches from his, she could feel the warmth of their mingling breath stirring between them. Carefully bringing her hand up to stroke his cheek, Hermione touched him with reverent wonder, relishing the fact that she could finally take the liberties she had always longed for.

Then his lips were upon hers, soft, warm, and gentle. With eyes fluttering closed, she savoured the feeling and taste of the man she loved. As they kissed each other with light touches that burned with inner heat, they both knew that nothing would ever be the same for them again. After a lifetime of being lost, they had finally come home.

Epilogue

Chapter 5 of 5

Hermione finds a certain amount of comfort that her deepest, darkest secret is securely hidden in the Arithmantic puzzle encircling her classroom. However, when our favorite dark wizard decides to break her code, she must face the fact that the tenuous balance on which she has built her life could come crashing down at any moment.

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"What do you mean you're bringing someone?" Harry and Ron exclaimed simultaneously.

Hermione laughed. "What you do mean, what do I mean?! I'm bringing someone to Christmas dinner. Someone. A person. A warm body. A man. What's not to understand?"

Ginny shrieked and flew at Hermione, enveloping her in a hug. "You met someone? Who? When? Tell me!" she crowed as she jumped up and down before unceremoniously grabbing Hermione and dragging her over to Luna, who was in the kitchen.

Hermione watched Harry and Ron with amusement as she was dragged from the room; they were completely stunned. For all their years of teasing, it seemed that they still had a hard time believing that their little Hermione was a grown woman. She would always be a little sister to them.

Just wait until they meet my date, she mused, her eyes alight at the thought of it.

"So, who is it?" Ginny asked when they finally got her alone.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, but you'll just have to wait and see," Hermione teased.

"Oh, come on! You know you can tell us. We don't care who you date, just that you're happy."

"Thanks, I'm glad that you all care so much about me, but I still think I will keep this to myself." Her eyes sparkled impishly at them as she stifled a giggle.

Ginny huffed, her arms crossing and hip jutting out just so, while Luna merely nodded with sage understanding.

"Well, can't you at least tell us where you met?" Ginny whinged. "Have you slept with him yet? Was it good? What does he do? Do we know him?"

A bright blush spread across Hermione's face. She had forgotten how blunt Ginny could be when excited.

"Ginevra," Luna chided, "I'm sure Hermione will tell us everything when she is ready."

"Thank you, Luna. And as for you, Miss Nosey Pants, your answers are: no, no comment, no comment, definitely no comment, and yes."

Luna simply watched Hermione with quiet consideration as Ginny reviewed the answers to her aforementioned questions.

After a moment Ginny gasped. "We know him and you slept with him."

"I said no such thing," Hermione said with a laugh.

"You said no comment, and that means yes, because if you hadn't, you wouldn't have a problem telling me. So, was it good?"

Once again, Hermione blushed, and then, in a hushed whisper, she said, "All right, fine. You win. Yes and yes. Of course it was good! He's not the kind of man to do that poorly. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go. He's expecting me for dinner, and I don't want to be late."

Ginny laughed and sent her friend a victorious smile. "You better say bye to the boys. They still seem a bit flustered," Ginny said as she peeked through the door into the sitting room where the boys still sat.

"For Merlin's sake! What are they going to do when I actually bring him?" Hermione said with a sigh.

"Don't worry, Hermione. We'll make sure they are fully prepared and on their best behaviour. Perhaps you can have Professor Snape send over a Calming Draught before you arrive. We can slip some in their drinks beforehand," Luna suggested with a small smile.

At the mention of Professor Snape, Hermione's eyes jumped up to Luna's, like a stag caught in the wandlight. Luna smirked knowingly, her blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Bye, Hermione. We'll see you in two weeks," Ginny said as she hugged Hermione.

"Bye, Ginny, Luna," Hermione said before popping her head through the sitting room door and calling to her boys, "Bye, my boys. You'll behave at Christmas or else. I'll have your promises."

Harry and Ron jumped up and rushed to embrace Hermione, the pair of them smirking as they squeezed her tight.

Rolling her eyes and huffing at their typical boisterous and juvenile behaviour, she smacked them each on the chest until they released her.

"We promise," Harry said.

"We'll behave," Ron added.

"Good boys," she said with relief. "Now, I'll see you soon." Grabbing her bag, Hermione waved to Ginny, who was on her way upstairs to check on her napping children. Then she walked to the door and opened it.

Luna smiled and pulled Hermione into a hug before she could slip out. "Take care, Hermione," Luna said. "I'm glad you finally have found happiness. You both have more than earned it."

Hermione pulled back and looked at Luna in alarm. "Um... Thanks, Luna."

"Your secret is safe with me," Luna whispered.

"Sometimes, I think I'll never understand you, Luna. But I couldn't ask for a better friend."

As a smiling Hermione Apparated away, it was with genuine hope for a happy future growing in her heart.

The End

A special thanks to Laralee, who betaed this fluff of a story for me even though she prefers angst over my fluffy silliness! :)

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