

Just Business

by museymuse

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Author's Notes: This fic is set in 2003. As such, the technology bits may seem a bit outdated, but I am assured by my tech-beta that this is entirely plausible for 2003.

Thank you to hbart for being a wonderful alpha/cheerleader, to desigr1 for being a fantastic beta, and to voxangelus for providing an amazing prompt to work with!

Original Prompt: Hermione has opened a consulting firm to aid wizarding folk and squibs who want or need to do business in the Muggle world. Snape needs her services for some reason (is he an author? potioneer? manufacturer of magical sex toys? you decide.), but even though he's paying a hefty fee for HER expertise, refuses to take any of her advice until he tries his own ways and they fail. He must admit she's right at some point.

"I'm going to have to shut down," Hermione said in what she felt was a rather matter-of-fact tone. "It's just not working." She was staring into her coffee cup as she said it, not across the table into the concerned green eyes of one of her best friends. "In six months I've had one potential client, who I turned away when I realised all he wanted to do was pass for a Muggle long enough to pull a Muggle girl and Oblivate her afterwards." The words echoed in the empty office, a testament to her words.

"It's not like you to give up," Harry said, evidently worried about her. "What about advertising?"

"I've tried everything. The *Prophet*, the *Quibbler*, the wireless, posters, mail shots. I've poured all my money into this to try and make it work and it hasn't. Let's face it, Harry. No one wants to even *try* and care about the Muggle world. Why would they?" She gloomily picked at one of the muffins he had brought, courtesy of Ginny. "My lease is up in six weeks, and I can't afford to renew it."

"If it's just the money..." Harry began, but a sharp look from Hermione cut him off instantly.

"It's not, Harry James Potter, and you know better than to make such an offer to me," she snapped, then realised she was being unfair and sighed. "There's no point in renewing. All I've done in the past four months is manage to get my time solving the daily crossword down from ten minutes to five. I don't even know why Sandra sticks it out here." Sandra was Hermione's receptionist, well-organised, efficient and underpaid.

Harry reached out and patted Hermione's hand, deftly stealing a muffin as he did so.

"She believes in you. We all do," he added. "Don't go making any rash decisions just yet, Hermione. Something will come up. It has to." Hermione offered him a wan smile,

which was returned by a much warmer one.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Hermione, with the same logic she applied to everything, had reasoned that the Muggle world was ripe with business opportunities for the canny witch or wizard. There was also room for an agency which provided advice to wizards hoping to pass for Muggle. She had prepared information packs on computers, mobile phones, the internet and currency, which were currently gathering dust in her filing cabinet. After months of research and investment and, in the end, a lot of time spent begging the goblins for financial assistance, the Muggle Business Affairs Consultancy had been launched. Since then, despite the adverts, the only attention it had drawn was a snide article by Rita Skeeter about how the oestrogen of the Golden Trio was 'wasting valuable magical office space with a failing business'. Hermione had sent her a can of bug spray as a warning, and no further articles had appeared, either.

"I need a high profile client," Hermione said gloomily. "Someone who I can advertise as having done well with the business. You know how people are, Harry; they'd flock here. If I don't get one in the next few weeks, I'm not renewing the lease." She finally took a big bite of the muffin, and her eyes closed to savour the taste. Ginny Potter had all her mother's culinary skills and then some. "Thank Ginny for these, will you? And keep your hands off!" This last comment was accompanied by a quick smack to the back of Harry's hand. He rubbed it, but didn't complain.

"Look, Ron said he's going to swing by and take you out for dinner. I've got to head down Knockturn Alley. There was a break in at Borgin and Burkes, and you really *don't* want to know what was taken." He looked faintly ill as he thought about it. "Ron's just got paperwork to do, so he said he'd be glad of a break. He'll come by at about half twelve, alright? Go and talk it over with him. He helps George out in his spare time, so he might have some thoughts."

"That sounds like a good idea," Hermione conceded with a smile, rising to escort her friend out. "I'll pop in and see George this afternoon. But why isn't Ron with you?" Usually, the two were inseparable and made an excellent pair of Aurors while they were at it.

"Kingsley thought it would be an *educational experience* to split us up," Harry said, moping. "So instead, I'm with Cho Chang, which has given Ginny a complex. I've told Kings, but he's said I'm stuck with her for this case."

"Poor Harry," Hermione said, giving him a hug. "Ginny'll be fine; just make sure you get time off to go watch her win the next game."

Ginny was currently the star player for the Holyhead Harpies who, even Hermione knew, were doing well this season. Harry nodded and shrugged.

"It'll be alright. I've got to run. Should've been there ten minutes ago. Make sure you go out with Ron. Take a break from this place. Might help." He gave her a hug and a cheerful wave as he departed.

Hermione smiled and waved until he descended the steps and was out of sight. Sandra watched him go with something akin to hero worship in her eyes, then turned and smiled at Hermione.

"Coffee, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked at the clock. It was only twenty to eleven.

"Why not?" She sighed and went back into her office to devour the muffins.

At half twelve exactly, there was a loud clattering up the stairs, a cheerful "Hello gorgeous!" to the receptionist, and her door was flung open to reveal the second of her two best friends. Ron entered like a whirlwind, sweeping her into a hug, and then collapsing into a chair opposite her, grinning.

"Surprised?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head, laughing. "Harry came by earlier and said you'd be coming," she confessed.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Can't keep his mouth shut, that one. Come on, let's go. There's a little cafe opened up by Fortescues. So, how does dinner there sound, and we'll get ice cream after? I haven't seen you in *ages*, Hermione!"

"It's Wednesday, Ron. You saw me on Sunday."

"Feels like longer, doesn't it? Are those muffins?"

"Maybe, yes, and in anticipation of your next question, no, you can't have one." Hermione couldn't help but smile at the energy Ron brought with him. He'd managed to find time to grow up since the rather disastrous end of their relationship and was handling maturity rather well. Since he had settled down with Lavender at last and established a solid career, his temper had cooled dramatically and now it was a pleasure to spend time with him.

"Spoilsport. Alright then, come on. I'm starving."

"You're always starving," Hermione pointed out, receiving another grin from Ron. "Have you actually done any of your paperwork yet?"

His grin faded, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably before offering his arm.

"Dinner?" he suggested.

Hermione rolled her eyes, accepting his arm.

"When you get back, finish it," she ordered, following him out into the waiting area. "Sandra, we're just popping out for some food. Don't be afraid to lock up and go get something for yourself."

"It's okay, Miss Granger. I brought something with me. I'd hate to risk missing a client!"

Hermione bit her tongue to stop from pointing out that there were no clients to miss, and instead smiled.

"Okay. I'll be back in about an hour or so." She waved, allowing herself to be tugged out into Diagon Alley by the self-proclaimed ~~d~~starving Weasley.

When she returned, an hour and a half later and well fed, Sandra was almost bouncing with excitement. She leapt from her desk and clutched at Hermione's arm the minute the door had swung closed.

"There's a *client* here to see you!" she whispered excitedly.

Hermione stared at her, not really absorbing what she was saying.

"What?" she asked, looking around. The waiting area was empty, the magazines and newspapers had gone untouched.

"A client, Miss Granger! He *insisted* on waiting in your office. I told him he wasn't allowed to, but he went in anyway. I asked if he wanted to make an appointment, and he said now was convenient for him, so it would be for you. He's a bit of a bastard, Miss Granger, but he's high profile alright!"

Hermione had one arm out of her coat at this point and used it to shush Sandra.

"Who is it, Sandra?" she asked. The answer left her dumbstruck, and she rushed to her office, flinging open the door. There, with his back to her, in the same imposing black robes that she remembered from her Hogwarts days, was Severus Snape. Her jaw dropped.

"Close your mouth, Miss Granger; it's unsightly." He hadn't even turned around.

Bastard, she thought automatically.

"Professor Snape. Sandra tells me that you believe you have an appointment to see me." She hung up her coat and made her way around to sit at her desk. "I'm sure she would be pleased to book you in."

"You can see me now, Miss Granger. Your diary is empty between *lunch with Ron* and *tea with Harry*."

Hermione flushed and looked down at her desk drawer; the wards had been quite neatly tampered with.

"As much as I'm sure it is important you remember to eat, given your predilection at Hogwarts for immersing yourself in work until midnight, I would have thought that a potential client would be of greater importance in your line of work."

She could see his face now. It was as unpleasant as ever, twisted into a sneer as he looked down at her.

"I believe you overestimate your importance, Professor Snape."

"I have had ample opportunity to peruse your office while you lunched, Miss Granger. I am fully aware of my importance. Had I realised prior to coming that you, in fact, did not have *any* clients, I would have reconsidered my decision to retain your services."

Hermione's cheeks coloured and she leant forward on the desk.

"I do have standards, Professor. The door is behind you."

"Trust a Gryffindor to be incapable of swallowing her pride. Tell me, Miss Granger, are you truly able to turn me away?"

Hermione gritted her teeth, forcing herself not to flare up at the condescending attitude of her former professor *Former professor*, she emphasised silently. He couldn't exactly put her in detention, could he?

Seeing that she was thinking, Snape folded his arms across his chest and waited, impassive.

On the one hand, Hermione knew she would have to put up with his attitude. Being free of the whims of both Voldemort and Dumbledore hadn't done much to improve his temper. She knew, via Harry and Ron, that the *Daily Prophet* was lodging twenty complaints a month about his behaviour towards their reporters and were demanding he be taken to Azkaban. He had left Hogwarts behind, much to the gratitude of every child in Wizarding Britain, and was something of a recluse now. For him to emerge from this solitude and seek her out... He was unlikely to be pleasant, if he needed her help. As much as she felt the world owed him, it was a lot more difficult to feel that way when face to face with the hook-nosed, sallow faced, greasy git.

On the other hand, he was a client. More than just high profile: the mere knowledge that he had been for an appointment with her would attract attention. The world wanted to know all about Severus Snape, and much to their chagrin, he didn't want to tell. It followed that anywhere he went, so did the masses, determined to uncover what Rita Skeeter called 'The Truth' behind the man. And, she knew from her own sources, he was rich. He could afford her services easily. Add in to that the fact that he was intelligent, capable, and unlikely to risk his name and reputation (what little of it he had left) for a failure... It could be the making of her.

"I see you have reached a decision."

Was he using Legilimency? No, she realised, he had probably just seen from her face that she'd made up her mind. She knew that Gryffindors were open books to Slytherins.

"I trust you have a purpose for calling here today, Professor?" she managed to ask politely.

He sneered. "Of course not. I intended simply for idle chit-chat. Use that much vaunted intellect of yours, Miss Granger." He didn't sit when she gestured for him to take the chair opposite her.

"I can hardly be of assistance to you if you keep up this attitude, Professor," she said, glad she hadn't snapped it as intended. "Sit and explain to me why exactly you are here if not to make fun of me. If it is just the latter, then kindly remove yourself from my office before I hex you out of it."

"With such a pleasant demeanour, I understand why your clients keep coming back," Snape said, though he did in fact, finally, sit down.

Hermione was drumming her fingers on the table. *One more comment*, she thought, *and he's getting a Bat Bogey Hex*.

"You are able to assist with setting up a Muggle business, I presume from the countless advertisements you are subjecting Britain to?" He withdrew a sheaf of parchment from a pocket in his robes and set it on the table, deliberately placing it out of her reach.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, counting to ten under her breath.

"Try making it through one sentence without insulting me, Professor. It would probably make things go a little easier." She waved her wand, and Sandra popped her head around the door.

"Tea for two?" she asked, the kettle already starting to boil behind her.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at Snape.

"Milk, no sugar. Please," he stated slowly, as if it pained him to do so. Hermione smiled and nodded at Sandra, crowing to herself about even a minor victory such as that.

"So, Professor. You wish to set up a Muggle business?"

"How astute. Yes, Miss Granger. However, it has been several years since I have had dealings with the Muggle world, and I have little inclination to waste time with their red tape. I wish to retain your services in order to assist me with establishing a business, locating premises, advertising in the Muggle world, and other manner of sundries."

Hermione's mind was in business mode[;] she had already calculated how much of a fee she could charge for such an extensive project. She positively beamed at Snape now.

"I believe that falls within my scope, Professor. Do you have a business plan in mind, or would you require assistance with that, too?"

"I am out of touch with the Muggle world, Miss Granger, not an idiot."

He finally thrust the sheaf of parchments over to her. She almost snatched them up, her greedy eyes devouring every inch of the spiked black ink.

"Pharmaceutical company?" she asked, raising an eyebrow in a manner rather akin to his own.

"Muggles are keen to buy into new fads, Miss Granger. Think of the potential sales for shampoo that actually *does* give you 'glossy hair'." She could *hear* the quotation marks fall into place. "Or lotion that clears up spots instantly. It's not magic to them, simply well-marketed herbal remedies."

Hermione was rather impressed.

"That actually sounds like a good idea, but I must confess I'm amazed you have such a wealth of knowledge of beauty products." As she said it she winced; it sounded like an insult, but he took it in his stride. Probably used to Gryffindors not thinking before speaking.

"I have taught more generations of teenage witches than I care to remember, Miss Granger. One learns a thing or two."

The door opened and Sandra tottered in with the tea, setting the mugs down, and giving Hermione an excited thumbs up as she left.

"You seem to have done some thorough research into this, Professor."

"I am no longer teaching, Miss Granger, and research though infinitely superior does not pay very well. It is only logical to ensure a steady income, so that I can continue to enjoy my freedom from the shackles of the school." This was more information than she had thought him willing to share. "Wizarding folk are, for some reason, reluctant to purchase their goods from myself." The sarcasm wasn't lost on her.

"You think a Muggle business is a more secure form of income," Hermione stated, her suspicions about his presence there clearing in the face of such a simple explanation. After all, even if he *was* a hero, he was also an ex-Death Eater. If he marketed a shampoo, rumours would start instantly as to negative effects of it. Starting a company would no doubt have Snape heralded as the new Dark Lord.

"Precisely. Have I piqued your interest sufficiently, Miss Granger?"

"You have, Professor. If it is okay with you, I would like some time to do some preliminary research and prepare some suggestions on how to proceed. Would you care to arrange an appointment for next week?"

"I severely doubt, given the ample free time you have on your hands, that it would take you a full week to put forward an idea. You will recall that I have seen your essays, Miss Granger. Friday will be most suitable."

It was Wednesday. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"If I suggest a week, Professor Snape, it is because that is the amount of time it will take. I will need to focus my research on those companies that will be your rivals and form strategies for breaking into a rather well-established market. It is not something I can simply spend an hour in the library for. I will warn you now, Professor, that if you want this done properly, you would do well to listen to me. I don't argue Potions with you; I advise you not to try and overrule me on this. I *do* know what I'm doing."

Snape's nostrils flared, a sure sign he was angered by her tone, but Hermione held his gaze firmly.

"Next week, Professor. Same time. Sandra will book you in."

He looked about to argue, so she stood and extended her hand. He glared at it, turned, and in a swirl of robes, was gone from the office, tea untouched. She looked down at her hand and saw it was trembling. From outside, she could hear Snape snarling at Sandra. She went to the window and watched until he strode outside, turned on his heel and Apparated, but not before a camera flashed. Hermione didn't realise she wasn't alone until Sandra touched her elbow.

"He's a piece of work, isn't he? Makes me glad I went to Beauxbatons."

Hermione smiled. "Did he book an appointment?"

"He told me where I could put my reminder letter. Quite succinctly."

Hermione snorted. She continued to stare at the spot he had Apparated from. Now that the adrenaline of seeing him in her office had worn off, she was beginning to realise how many memories were flooding back. He had been alive and well, but in her mind's eye he was lying in the Shack, bleeding out after Nagini's brutal attack; he was in the Hospital Wing, begging to be left to die; he was comatose, while they hoped and prayed the potions would work. She hadn't seen him since he'd been released. Had he booked an appointment, as most polite people would have been inclined to, she'd have had time to steel herself.

"Well," she said with a soft sigh, "we've got work to do, Sandra!" She turned an excited smile to her faithful receptionist. "Let's get started, shall we?"

"Anything you say, Miss Granger."

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

That evening found them clustered around the table at Grimmauld Place. It had become tradition over the past few years that the first Wednesday of the month saw them take tea with Harry and Ginny; second Thursday, and it was Lavender's turn to cook (Ron was more pleased to eat than to cook). Third Friday saw them at Hermione's, which was usually takeaway, and the last weekend in the month was when The Horde, as Molly affectionately termed them, descended on the Burrow. Since leaving school, it had been unsettling not to see each other so frequently. It had been Ginny's idea that brought them together again. Kreacher, still a miserable elf, was usually instructed not to enter the kitchen while they were there.

"He's still around," Harry sighed as Hermione enquired after the elf upon arriving. "Don't start," he added with a finger raised in warning.

Hermione huffed good-naturedly and sat down.

"Harry, you know what I'm going to say," she said reasonably. "Hello, Ginny; thank you for the muffins! They were delicious."

"New recipe," Ginny said as she bustled into the kitchen, followed by several plates. "Picked it up when we played the Kestrels. Thought it was worth a try." She waved her wand, and the plates settled before them, and for a few minutes silence reigned as the five hungry people tucked in.

Hermione kept glancing at Harry curiously. A thought had occurred to her as she was up to her elbows in work. What if he...?

"I had a visitor to the office this afternoon," she announced. "A client, in fact."

"A client? Oh, Hermione, that's wonderful!" Ginny enthused, helping herself to more pumpkin juice. "I told you people would start to come in!"

"Who was it?" asked Ron; although the question was muffled by the food in his mouth, she knew what he meant.

Lavender tutted and smacked his arm lightly.

"Don't talk through your food," she scolded. "Hermione, who was it?" she asked, glaring at Ron in case he tried to interrupt her.

Hermione smiled at what a domestic sight they made. "Professor Snape."

That got their attention. Ron started to choke on the chicken; Lavender thumped him on the back, her own mouth open. Ginny and Harry simply stared at her, amazed.

"Snape?" Ron gasped out once he had enough breath to speak again. "Snape? As in greasy git, bat of the dungeons, ex-Potions professor, sarcastic bastard Snape?"

Hermione thought it best not to encourage him to be polite since Lavender had that look in her eye that meant he was going to get it later.

"The one and only," she settled for saying. "He wants to set up a Muggle business to supplement his research." She fixed her eyes on Harry. "Did you put him up to it, Harry?"

"Me?" he asked, almost in a squeak. "Hermione, don't be daft. You know what Snape said he'd do to me if I ever contacted him again. I want a family one day!" His hands dropped protectively into his lap as he recalled his last encounter with the bad-tempered Potions Master.

"I just thought it was convenient timing that he would show up just after I told you I was shutting down," Hermione admitted, though from Harry's reaction it was evident the thought of interfering hadn't even crossed his mind. "Sorry, Harry. It's just an odd coincidence."

"Maybe it's Fate," supplied Lavender, still a firm believer in Divination. She did write the horoscopes for the Quibbler, so it was probably for the best that she believed in it. "It's a sign that you shouldn't give up, Hermione."

Hermione just about refrained from rolling her eyes.

"It's a good project," she said with a smile.

"Lots of galleons?" Ginny asked. Hermione nodded, and Ginny clapped her hands together, pleased. "Snape's a really big name to attract, too! Give it a few weeks, and they'll be beating down your door to work with you. I'm so glad I made something special for dessert this calls for a celebration! Harry, be a dear and get something a bit stronger to drink. We need a toast, to Hermione's business finally taking off at last!"

Harry soon returned with an armful of butterbeer and wine and set them down with an embarrassed grin.

"I can't afford a hangover tomorrow, so the butterbeer is for whoever needs a clear head in the morning and the wine is for the lucky sods who don't."

Hermione reached for a butterbeer, but found a wine glass pushed into her hand instead.

"*You* are celebrating," Lavender said pointedly. "Have a glass."

Hermione thought about arguing for all of two minutes before giving in and helping herself to the wine. After all, this was the break she was looking for.

"To Severus Snape," Ginny said, lifting her glass. "May the dungeon bat bring good fortune to our Hermione!"

Hermione smiled as the other four cheered and they all clinked glasses. For the moment, she felt as though everything would work out okay after all.

clickclickclick

Hermione clicked her pen rapidly, breathing deeply and trying not to explode as she listened to the ruckus coming from just outside her office. Sandra's high-pitched tones were easy to discern, and it wasn't hard to guess which wizard was behind the deep voice that was making the poor receptionist so irate. She had been trying for the past ten minutes to ignore them. After all, it was only Friday, and he didn't have an appointment. She glanced down at the mess of paper and parchment in front of her...

clickclickclickclick

"Bloody professors!" Hermione growled under her breath, getting up so quickly that her chair was knocked backwards into the wall. She marched across to the door of her office and flung it open, abruptly silencing the argument that had been raging on. Snape stood with his arms folded, watching her silently. Sandra hung her head.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, Miss Granger," she said meekly.

Hermione softened her scowl enough to let Sandra know she didn't blame her for the ruckus, then glared at her ex-professor.

"Is there a reason why you are here, Professor Snape?" she asked sweetly. "I was under the impression your appointment was next week."

"And I, Miss Granger, felt that two days was ample time to *prepare yourself*," he sneered. "It is hardly as though you are swamped with work."

"One more jibe about my clientele, Professor, and I will kick you out myself. I don't know how you managed to establish a working relationship at Hogwarts with an attitude like that, but I will not have you treating me like an idiot, or a child, or insulting me." Hermione held his gaze firmly, refusing to back down.

At last, Snape broke the silence.

"I am merely keen to conclude our business swiftly, Miss Granger." It wasn't an apology, but she wasn't expecting one.

Hermione sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose to fend off a headache. It made sense, really. Snape must hate having to rely on her for help an ex-student, a Gryffindor, and a friend of Harry's. All three strikes in one fell swoop.

"I am willing to double your fees for a swifter service."

She looked up, gobsmacked. Snape was utterly serious: there was, for once, no sneer or smirk on his fallow face. It was odd to see. Hermione took a deep breath. One wasn't going to be enough; she exhaled, took another. He was still serious. With double the fees, she'd not only be able to stay in business, she'd be able to expand her own marketing on the side too.

"If you are willing to sign your contract today," she said slowly, "then I believe we could discuss the preliminaries and begin to set things in motion. However, you would be signing it in the full knowledge that I have not had the time requested to devise the best possible plan of action." Throwing all business jargon out the window, Hermione smiled. "We'd be winging it, Professor."

Much to her surprise, the contract she had given him only two days previously was offered out to her, signed, and with higher fees than she had originally asked for. She took it with hands that trembled slightly.

Snape smirked, then resumed his impassive features so quickly she thought she'd imagined it.

"You are a Gryffindor, Miss Granger. I hardly expected anything else."

"Yes, well." She was momentarily stumped by the sight of the contract her first contract! but recovered her composure quickly enough. "If you would care to step into my office, I can, in fact, show you the list of items I was preparing. I would recommend purchasing all of the above and would be happy to procure them for you..."

"I do not need meddlesome witches to do my shopping for me," Snape said, sneering at Sandra as he passed through into Hermione's office. "I am *not* that out of touch with the Muggle world."

"Excellent. This should make things a great deal simpler, and faster." Hermione gestured for Snape to sit. He glared at her and opened his mouth as if to comment and then shut it abruptly as if remembering that she wasn't a student any more. Hermione decided to ignore this, as tempting as it was to tease him, and instead started scribbling a list on a piece of parchment.

"Now. I would highly recommend getting a computer and getting hooked up to the internet, Professor. You may need to be careful using magic around it; you know what happens to electronics at Hogwarts after all." She glanced up but Snape's face showed nothing of what he was thinking. "A mobile phone would be useful too, since you're going to need to be providing contact details, at the very least to the bank. Let's see..." She skimmed the list once more. "That ought to be enough to get you started. I've written the name of some shops at the bottom. PC World would be the best place to start if you're sure about getting everything yourself."

"I am fully capable of purchasing equipment, Miss Granger." The list was snatched out of her hands and tucked away into a pocket of Snape's robes without him even consulting it.

Hermione sighed.

"I hadn't finished writing it, Professor. Just remember to get a mouse for the computer as well. I've listed everything else. Now, you also need to think about funding and marketing," she continued as if nothing had interrupted her. Thinking of Snape like Ron was helping: every time Ron interrupted her to complain or comment, she simply talked over him until he listened. Hopefully the same approach would stop her from hexing Snape every time he was rude. "I can set up appointments for you if you tell me when is convenient."

"I believe I am paying you to assist me, am I not?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then stop wittering on at me and *do* it, Miss Granger. I would expect you to at least understand the basics of your job; although, perhaps you struggle with something that you can't look up in a library."

"You really are an unpleasant bastard, aren't you?" Hermione's eyes were narrowed, but she didn't realise she had spoken aloud until the prickly professor raised an eyebrow.

"You intend to insult all your clients?"

"I suspect most people have enough sense to listen to what I'm telling them, rather than sniping at everything I say. I am a *consultant*, Professor. I am here to advise you, not make every decision for you. This is your business we are setting up, not mine. *You* have to do some work too."

Snape glared at her, but eventually she was surprised to hear a small sigh from him.

"I am... unused to dealing with you in a professional category, Miss Granger," he said in clipped tones. "You will have to allow me time to become accustomed to... working with you." It sounded unpleasant, the way he said it, as if he would prefer to be ankle deep in sewage whilst slicing rat spleens.

"Try calling me Hermione. I promise it won't hurt." Hermione, much to her surprise, was amused at his discomfort it wasn't like her to take pleasure in other people's misery, but taunting Snape when there wasn't the threat of a detention was rather fun. Snape stared at her as if she'd sprouted another head, and there was a flicker of panic as she extended the invitation. This was quickly replaced by amusement.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for informality," he said drily.

Hermione broke into a grin.

"Why, Professor, I do believe you just made a joke."

"Contrary to popular belief, Miss Granger, I am fully aware of what humour is. I simply do not see the use in wasting it on simpletons."

"Careful. That was *almost* a compliment." Her grin widened as she saw Snape's shoulders relax. He turned his back on her to gaze out the window, but in that moment, she understood why he was being so awkward to her.

"It is hard to break the student-teacher barriers, isn't it?" she asked cheerfully, pulling one of the information packs from her filing cabinet. "Here. Take this and read over it. I'll arrange for BT to come and sort your phone and internet out. I presume you still live at Spinner's End? Once they've been, either call me my number is on the parchment you took or send me an owl, and I can pay you a home visit and help you get started."

"You are not setting foot in my house, Miss Granger!"

"Yes, I am, Professor," she said firmly. "And as you don't make a habit of having students underfoot, it will help you sort out your attitude problem."

He met her eyes and then, much to her surprise, nodded.

"I see. I will contact you further, Miss Granger. Good day."

"Goodbye, Professor Snape." She smiled at his retreating back. It seemed that being pleasant was far more unsettling to her former professor than being rude. She resolved to be as nice as possible. A part of her wondered, as she began to tidy her desk, if it was possible to give Severus Snape a nervous breakdown simply by being nice to him. At least now it was easier to understand why he was so abrasive to her. In fact, Hermione mused, if anyone had said to her five years ago that she would be

working with Snape to set up a Muggle company selling beauty products, she'd have handed them over to St Mungo's immediately.

Ah, well, she thought, shrugging. Treating Snape like a surlier version of Ron was working wonderfully she rather thought she'd come off better in this instance.

"Coffee, Miss Granger, or something stronger?" Sandra slipped into the office and stood before her, wringing her hands anxiously.

Hermione beamed. "I think this is going to work out, Sandra. I really, really do."

That evening, as she was curled up with Crookshanks and a good book, she was startled by a shimmering doe prancing into her living room. It stared at her, and she shivered at the haunting, beautiful sight. Then it spoke, and the moment was ruined.

"Miss Granger. You appear to have misinformed me as to the myriad uses of a computer; the infernal contraption appears to be broken. Put your book down and fix it immediately," Snape's voice snapped at her. The doe vanished, as did Crookshanks, who had let out a startled yowl when the voice began to speak and was now disappearing through the cat flap.

Hermione sighed. Only Snape could ruin a perfectly wonderful evening with such flair.

"Sorry, Crooks," she called out. An affronted meow answered her, and she knew she wouldn't be seeing him again until he could pretend, as all cats did, that nothing had happened. Hermione put her book down it wasn't really surprising that he'd guessed that much; after all, he had taught her for six years and left.

Spinner's End was in a dingy, miserable part of Manchester. Walking from the Apparition point to Snape's house meant she had to endure the bravado and attitude of the kids on the street corners, who were thoroughly deserving of a Stinging Hex or five. After the last jeer about her hair, Hermione turned, raised her middle finger, and stormed the rest of the way. Snape had evidently been awaiting her, for the door opened immediately upon her arrival.

"Why do you live in such a miserable place?" She scowled as she stomped into the house. "With your temper, I'm surprised you haven't just hexed the lot of them, Ministry be damned."

"I seldom find they bother me," Snape admitted, though his lips twitched as though he were amused. "Being a teacher has its uses in both worlds."

Hermione glared at him and then sighed. The man had a point: he radiated authority and promised a miserable life for anyone who interfered with him. It kept everyone away.

"Alright. Where is this *infernal contraption*?" she asked.

Snape's lips thinned, and he turned, leading the way into the back room of his house. Hermione followed, taking in the dark, miserable rooms and old, broken furniture. It wasn't what she had expected at all.

In the back room, however, a new desk had been installed, and on it, in a jumble of wires, were all the parts of the computer. Even to her eyes, which were hardly expert when it came to computers, it was all wrong.

"Professor," she asked gently, as if not wanting to alarm him, "who set this up for you?"

"I set it up myself, Miss Granger. I have no need for every Tom, Dick and Harry to know where I live."

Hermione couldn't resist.

"Harry *does* know where you live, Professor. And technically, I suppose Tom did too."

"Then I just need to worry about Dick."

Again, she thought she saw the glimmer of a smile on his lips, but when she blinked it had gone. Hermione smiled at him, noticing the startled look in his eyes when she did so.

"You didn't know what plugged in where, did you?"

His silence was telling.

Hermione rolled her eyes. He really *was* like a surlier, more anti-social version of Ron. "Alright. Make yourself useful, Professor put the kettle on. I'll sort this mess out."

"I believe that *is* what I'm paying you for."

"Exactly, so let me get on with it." Hermione turned the tower around and began by promptly unplugging everything, praying that he hadn't managed to bend the pins or damage the plugs in his misplaced sense of independence. Luckily everything was still intact, and it was the work of a few minutes to set it to rights. She arranged it neatly on the desk, and then her brow furrowed.

"Is this everything?"

"Indeed, Miss Granger." Snape's voice floated through from where she presumed the kitchen to be.

"Where's the mouse?"

"Behind you, Miss Granger. I assume you are not blind?"

Hermione turned around, extended her hand, and blinked.

The mouse blinked back at her.

Where she had expected to see a computer mouse was, in fact, a cage containing a very real, very alive, very mouse-like brown mouse.

It twitched its nose at her.

"You got an actual mouse?" she asked faintly as Snape came through with two cups.

"You ordered me to, Miss Granger. I obeyed."

"I said a mouse for the computer."

"Which is why I have set its cage down where it is, although I fail to see how Muggles have integrated animals into technology this way."

Hermione counted to ten silently. It wasn't enough.

"This is not the sort of mouse I meant, Professor. Didn't you ask about one in the shop?"

"They did try to sell me one, however I informed them I would prefer to procure my own. I visited Diagon Alley this afternoon." He really didn't see what was wrong, Hermione realised, sitting down and accepting the proffered mug. He hadn't the faintest clue. A thought struck her: a worrying thought.

"Professor, when was the last time you were heavily involved with the Muggle world?"

"The Dark Lord would not have approved of his loyal followers consorting with Muggles, Miss Granger."

Meaning, Hermione interpreted, he hadn't integrated with the Muggle world since the 70s. *Oh, Merlin*. This was going to be much, much harder than she'd originally anticipated. The mouse squeaked. Snape, even when sitting opposite her with a cup of tea, was still an intimidating presence, and it took a lot of nerve for her to begin to speak again.

"That's not the right sort of mouse, Professor." She spoke quickly so that he couldn't interrupt. "A computer mouse is a device that plugs into the computer, not an actual live mouse. Your computer won't work until you buy one and... Look, can I Floo from here?"

He nodded mutely, his face like stone. Hermione leapt up, sensing he needed a moment.

"I'll Floo home and get mine. I can replace it tomorrow."

"That would be appreciated, Miss Granger." His voice was slow and oddly formal, and she knew then that he was embarrassed by his error. Hermione was quick to exit, emerging in her living room with a soft smile on her face.

Severus Snape, the spy, the man who had survived undefeatable odds, was embarrassed. It was oddly endearing. And he was actually making an effort to be nicer, too. Perhaps, she mused, unplugging her own computer's mouse and untangling the cable how they always got so tangled she would never know perhaps he was actually all right. Not the sort of friend you'd go out for a few drinks with or hit the shops with, but maybe he would be the sort you could have an intelligent discussion with. She already knew his loyalty was the stuff of legend, outclassing all Hufflepuffs bar possibly Helga herself. Now all he did was hole up in his dingy house and hide away from the world. Hermione stared at her mouse for a moment and then laughed softly.

"I doubt Snape wants any friends," she murmured. "Maybe, though, he needs one." It was certainly worth being nicer to him, at any rate, and she was more than up to the challenge Hermione Granger, champion of lost causes. Not that she'd given up on S.P.E.W. It was just taking longer than she'd expected.

By the time she Floo'd back to Spinner's End, Snape had suitably recovered from his embarrassment and decided to take it out on her.

"You're late," he sniped.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"No, I'm not." She ignored the way he opened his mouth to snap at her again and instead plugged the mouse in and booted the computer up. Snape's mouth closed instantly, and he came to hover behind her, though his looming was less intimidating when she wasn't trying to brew a potion. She frowned as the computer started up and began demanding installations.

"Where's your floppy, Professor?"

"My *what*?"

"Floppy. I need to insert it to get things going."

He made a strangled noise.

"I beg your pardon?"

Hermione turned in her seat impatiently. "You must have been given one, Professor. Pass it over so I can pop it in."

Snape blanched and two tiny red spots appeared on his cheeks. Was he blushing?

"I fail to see why that would be necessary."

"Well, do you want me to get you started on this or not?" Honestly, the man was impossible.

"I didn't realise you felt that way, Miss Granger."

"What?" Now it was her turn to become confused. "What do you mean?"

"If this is all a ploy so you can sell the sordid details to the *Prophet*, then you may remove yourself from the premises immediately!"

"Professor, I have no idea what you're talk... Oh, Merlin." She replayed the conversation quickly in her head and, once again, pretended Snape was Ron someone utterly ignorant of the latest advances in Muggle technology. Her face turned bright red.

"I didn't mean... It's not like that, I..." she started stuttering. She should have been more specific. "It's *adisk*, Professor, a small black square disk for the computer. It's *called* a floppy. I wasn't interested in *your*... Look, I need it to get your computer working, and..." She had never felt more uneasy in all her life. Snape's face was slowly returning to its usual sallow self, rather than the horror it had just held.

"A disk," he repeated.

Hermione sighed.

"Yes. A small, black, square piece of plastic with a metal clip on it."

"So not..."

"No, sir." She grinned, feeling wicked. "You need the internet before the computer's any good for that."

Snape blanched again and mutely began handing her boxes and bags which had no doubt once contained the computer. The disks were there, thankfully she had been dreading sending Snape back to the shop for them, and after this conversation, she needed to scour her mind before even *thinking* about them again. Snape was now seated on the settee, and she imagined he was feeling pretty sheepish.

"Miss Granger," he began, after five minutes of near-silence punctuated by mouse-clicks from the computer and squeaks from the mouse.

"Sir?"

"I must apologise for misinterpreting you."

Her face started to feel warm again.

"It's quite alright, sir. The Muggle world can be confusing after you've been out of it for a while. I understand."

"Very well." He said nothing further until Hermione sat back, a small smile on her face from satisfaction at a job well done.

"This is all ready to use now, sir, although I doubt you'd get much use out of it until the internet is set up." She turned around in the chair. Snape had been watching her intently, but he looked away now to set his tea cup aside.

"I was going to owl you in the morning, Professor, but I may as well tell you now, since I'm here. You've an appointment with Barclays on Monday afternoon with a business manager. You'll need to dress appropriately. I can get some suits for you if you give me your size."

"I have clothed myself for over forty years, Miss Granger. I suspect I can manage the task." His tone left no room for argument, but she supposed it was unlikely he would mess it up. He had been a spy, after all. He knew to pay attention to the details.

"If you insist, sir. I've organised the appointment for the branch closest to Diagon Alley, as it seemed the most logical place. Your appointment is at two. I would recommend arriving there slightly early so that I can answer any questions you may have. I've prepared all the paperwork you may need, so, well, just bring yourself," she finished with a smile. "Once we've sorted your finance, we can really get this under way."

"Then I shall see you on Monday, at slightly before two," he replied.

Hermione nodded, recognising a polite dismissal when she saw one, even if she hadn't expected to see one from Snape.

"Monday, then," she said with a cheerful wave. She headed towards the front door, but he nodded towards the fireplace instead, and so she Floo'd out quickly. Her last glimpse was of Snape standing in front of the computer, as if it were a deadly adversary rather than a piece of equipment.

Ah well, she thought, emerging back in her kitchen. *Surely he can't break it before Monday.*

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Sunday found her at the Burrow. It seemed to be the place where those without things to do went, as if drawn by an otherworldly force and constant invitations from Molly Weasley of 'a nice bit of dinner, dear; you're far too thin'. Even though it wasn't their day to host, Molly had been overjoyed to see her second daughter and was quick to hug her, scold her for working too hard, and send her out into the garden where the boys were playing Quidditch.

As she left the warm kitchen in a daze, she looked up at the brooms. George, Ron, Bill... She squinted: yes, Harry and Ginny, too, and Percy keeping a respectable distance from proceedings in case George got over-enthusiastic with the lone Bludger. Below them, she could see Fleur, Victoire and Teddy making daisy chains in the long grass.

"Afternoon," she greeted, settling herself down between the two children. Teddy was doing his best with the fiddly flowers, and Victoire didn't quite seem to understand what was going on and was instead busily transferring the flowers from her chubby fist into her mouth. Hermione tickled Victoire, allowed Teddy to give her a hug, and then smiled at Fleur.

"Good afternoon, 'Ermione. I 'ope you are well?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Victoire seems to be teething again."

The little girl was dribbling petals and leaves all down her dress. Fleur smiled fondly at her daughter.

"Yes, she is growing too quickly. Like Teddy. 'E will be quite ze 'andsome man!" They both stared adoringly at Teddy, whose hair changed from ginger to blonde and back again as they watched. Andromeda frequently left Teddy with Harry or Molly, wanting him to grow up surrounded by his family, and he seemed to have inherited his father's gentle nature and his mother's sense of humour, making him utterly charming.

"You'll be up there on a broom soon," Hermione informed Teddy, who stared at her seriously and then, suddenly shy, simply held out one of the daisies. She took it and placed it in her hair, rewarded by a brilliant smile.

"Hermione!" Ron's voice drifted down from the manic game above them. "When'd you get here?" He landed with a soft thud in the grass next to her, ruffling Teddy's hair before he threw himself down. The game seemed to be breaking up; Percy retreated into the kitchen, closely followed by a smirking George who, judging from the hand in his pocket, was up to something.

"Only now," she answered Ron. "It's a quiet day, for once. I didn't know Harry and Ginny would be here too."

"They popped over this morning with Teddy. Andromeda's going to visit her friend, and they offered to look after him. You know how much Mum loves seeing him."

Molly had taken the loss of Fred hard, and it was only the new additions - Teddy, on a part-time basis, and then Victoire - that had brought her back to herself. As much as one ever recovered, anyway; there was still an empty seat at the table at Christmas, and Molly never seemed *quite* as cheerful as she had before.

"Who doesn't love seeing him?" Harry asked, dropping his Firebolt carefully out of the reach of small hands before joining their circle.

"E is charming," Fleur said, catching him around the waist as he lunged across the circle to try and reach the brooms. "Except 'e is no doubt getting tired and will need a

nap now." She gathered Victoire up in her arms, ignoring Teddy's shout of protest, and ushered the children back into the Burrow.

"She's actually learning to be subtle," Ginny said, high praise, from her. "So I hear the bat swooped in on Friday, Hermione."

"You're not being very nice," Hermione chided automatically. "Yes, he did. I had to set him up with a computer, and we're going to the bank tomorrow to get things underway."

"Snape's got a compooper?" asked Ron, interested.

"Computer, Ron," Harry muttered, just as Hermione corrected him.

"*Computer*, Ronald. Yes, he does now." She debated telling them about the mouse, and then thought better of it. Client confidentiality was important, not to mention if Snape found out she'd told them, she'd be spare potions ingredients by the end of the week. "He's not quite as good with the Muggle world as I thought he'd be," she chose to confess this, instead.

Harry had his head on one side and seemed to be counting.

"Well," he said at last, "he's in his forties, isn't he? And he's been a Death Eater since he left school. I doubt Tom would have let him have Muggle stuff in the house." Harry was the only one who called Voldemort *Tom*, although he fully encouraged everyone else to best way to remove the fear of the name, he vowed, though privately Hermione felt it simply meant nobody would call their children *Tom* or *Thomas*, either.

"I know that now, Harry. I just didn't think of it when he first approached me. I'm worried now about overloading him with information."

"Nah, don't worry about that." Ron waved his hand in the air, lazily dismissing her words. "He's Snape. He'll just give you detention for being a know-it-all."

"He's already taken points from me," Hermione admitted sheepishly.

Three pairs of eyes fell on her in shock before being followed by a wave of laughter. Harry, in particular, seemed to be enjoying the idea.

"Even I haven't managed to lose points *after* school." He chuckled.

Hermione kicked his shin and smiled sweetly. "No, but we ought to deduct some for being down Knockturn Alley. How did it go?" A subject change was more than welcome.

Harry shrugged.

"Cho was okay, I suppose. Didn't get much out of Borgin; he wanted us to just find what was stolen and hand it back, no questions asked. Doubt we'll be following this one up." Harry kept stealing glances at Ginny as he spoke, but she seemed perfectly at ease with the mention of Cho.

"Harry, you're an idiot," Hermione said with a sigh. He gave her a puzzled look which grew more concerned when Ginny gave a wicked grin.

A small explosion from the house, followed by Percy's cursing and Molly's shouting not to mention hysterical laughter from Teddy brought an end to further conversation.

Ron groaned. "George is a right git! He was supposed to wait for me. He's been working on a new sweet for the shop. Confess All Candies, they're called; you eat one, and they make you say what you're really thinking, not what you want to say. Percy was going to see his girlfriend this afternoon." Ron leapt to his feet and darted for the Burrow, closely followed by Harry.

Ginny lingered next to Hermione.

"Percy told George the other day that it's a good thing she's equipped from the neck down because there's absolutely nothing between her ears," she said.

Hermione clapped her hand to her mouth.

"And George just made him tell her that?"

"Sounds like, or worse. Come on. Mum'll need help clearing up because it sounds like Percy's gone mental over it."

"I would too. Remind me not to eat *anything* that George might have been near, ever again. The last thing I need is to tell Snape what I really think of him."

"And what exactly is that?" Ginny asked, nudging her. "You've always defended him, Hermione. Now, I would pay good money to see Ron fed one of those and stuck in a room with Snape."

"Snape would kill him," Hermione said.

Ginny grinned.

"Nah. He's not a murderer, just a bastard. We'd pick up a few new hexes off him, though, and Lavender might never get those kids she wants off him."

Hermione grinned despite herself. She'd often dreamt, when they were dating, of doing exactly the same thing to Ron.

An explosion from one of the upstairs bedrooms shook the small house. Hermione and Ginny exchanged looks and sprinted for the house, their worried shouts drowned out by a bellow from Molly Weasley.

"Percy Ignatius Weasley you come down here right now!"

They entered the kitchen just as Arthur was retreating to his shed. He gave both girls a smile.

"Best be careful, Ginny, Hermione," he warned. Ginny shrugged and slipped straight past, but Hermione lingered, always happy to chat to Arthur.

"How're you finding the laptop I gave you?" she asked, falling into step beside him.

Arthur looked sheepish.

"Erm, well, it's..."

"Broken?" Hermione supplied, laughing. "I can get you another, don't worry. You can always ask Professor Snape for lessons he's learning how to use a computer too."

"Severus is? Ron mentioned you were working with him. How are you finding it?" He ushered her into his shed, and Hermione gladly entered, not wanting to risk the wrath of Molly Weasley in the house.

"He's... prickly," she admitted. "He's refusing to follow my advice, he treats me like I'm still a student, and he's very demanding. It's all I could do at first not to hex him, but now I just treat him like a more irritating version of Ron, and it seems to be keeping me sane."

Arthur laughed, rummaging amongst the Muggle paraphernalia on his desk until he found the laptop Hermione had given him. She could already see the problem with it he'd completely dismantled it. The keyboard dangled loosely from a few wires connecting it to the body of the laptop.

"Severus has always been difficult," he reflected, handing the laptop over to Hermione.

She shook her head, impressed as always at how thoroughly he managed to break things.

"Yes," Arthur mused, tapping a kettle with his wand. "You could understand it, of course, during the wars. Man was risking life and limb to bring us the information he saved dozens of lives, maybe even hundreds, and not a one of them ever said so much as a thank you. Now, I think he just doesn't know how to be any different."

Hermione said nothing as she tried to piece the laptop back together. Arthur's insight always amazed her; what he had said made perfect sense.

"Of course," Arthur added, producing a mug from amongst the rubble, "he could just enjoy being awkward." He turned and smiled at her. "Tea, Hermione?"

"No thanks," she answered, returning his smile. "Keep this one to fiddle with, Mr Weasley. I can get you another one to use but this time, try not to take it apart."

He cleared his throat and turned away, embarrassed.

"Well, just persevere with Severus, Hermione. If anyone's got the patience to work with him and the nerve to argue, it's you. You're not a Gryffindor for nothing," he said, waving a teaspoon at her to emphasise his point. "Just keep your chin up and remember: he needs your help, not the other way around."

"I will," Hermione said, feeling much better about herself. When she saw Snape the next day, she'd be ready for him

Ten to two found Hermione at the bank, glancing about her at the seated Muggles for her ex-Professor. There was a little old lady sitting with a small dog at the mortgages desk, a man in an ancient tweed suit reading the paper, a young family arguing at the counter with one of the bank employees, and a smart man in a suit evidently waiting to see someone. She studied him carefully, looking for any indication that it may be Snape wearing a Glamour, but he became unsettled under her gaze, and she knew he was not. Sighing, Hermione let the lady on the desk know she was there for the appointment and then settled into a seat to wait.

"You are late, Miss Granger."

She glanced about, immediately alert, as Snape's voice rang low in her ear. Still, she couldn't see him until, with an elaborate sigh, the man in tweed folded the newspaper to reveal that he was, in fact, Severus Snape. He wore a dull, ill-fitting brown suit with a too-wide collar and a slight flare to his trousers that reminded her instantly that he hadn't 'gone Muggle' since Saturday Night Fever was fashionable. When she reached his face he was scowling.

"Seen everything?" he asked smoothly.

Hermione shook her head.

"Professor, where did you get that suit? I didn't think they made them like that any more."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Minerva may have assisted me in transfiguring something suitable," he admitted haughtily.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Minerva? As in the headmistress? The woman who would rather transform into a cat than try and blend in as a Muggle? A woman who, most likely, wouldn't know current Muggle trends even if they waltzed into her office and danced in front of her?" Her voice was rising with each question until eventually she finished in a sort of squeak.

"That is rather uncalled for," Snape said sternly.

"Uncalled for? Professor, you're about thirty years out of fashion. I could have got suits for you easily: modern ones, well-tailored ones. You won't be taken seriously as a businessman in this! You assured me you could do this!" Hermione took several deep breaths, trying to stop herself from hyperventilating. It was no good; they were firmly in the Muggle world, so a discreet transfiguration was out of the question. She couldn't even do anything about the colour. Even his usual black would be better than the brown which made him look washed out and ill.

"Professor, this is going to make my job a lot harder," she said at last, massaging her temples and wondering if she had a headache potion in her bag. "First impressions make a difference, and right now your appearance says you are completely out of touch and possibly eccentric; neither of which is good for persuading them that you can start a business and do well in the current economic climate. It implies you will be out of touch with the consumers as well; not to mention, it raises questions about what products you intend to supply. We will now have to work twice as hard to convince them. Professor, what *were* you thinking when you asked Professor McGonagall for fashion advice rather than trusting me?" She paused for breath and noticed that Snape's expression was becoming darker and darker.

"It's too late to do anything now," she sighed before he had a chance to answer her tirade. "We'll just have to manage."

"It's alright, dear," the old lady with the dog said, having caught enough of their conversation to get the gist of it. "My granddaughter is always going on at my husband for his clothes. Young people," she said, shaking her head at Hermione and going back to fussing with her dog.

"Granddaughter?" Snape asked through clenched teeth.

"*Don't* hex her," Hermione warned. "We need to be professional." She nodded to where a keen looking banker had emerged from an office.

"Miss Granger? Mr Snape?" he called.

Hermione rose and plastered a smile onto her face. Snape shot her a look that said he wasn't going to forget how she had spoken to him and instead frowned at the banker.

"Professor," he corrected sternly.

The banker was taken aback by this, but quickly rallied. "A professor, how wonderful! And what do you teach?" he asked politely.

Hermione froze and had but one thought in her mind: *please don't mess up, please don't mess up...*

"Chemistry," Snape said after a long pause in which Hermione could hear every beat of her racing heart. She let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

"How lovely. Would you care to step into my office, Professor? Miss Granger?"

He ushered them through the door, offered them tea, introduced himself as Matthew, and then sat smiling at them over the table. It seemed as though being a chemistry professor was enough to excuse Snape's apparent eccentricity. Hermione felt herself calming. *This might just work after all.*

"I understand you're looking to start up a business," he said, focusing his attention more on her than on Snape. "You're looking for an initial business loan to assist with start-up costs, correct?"

"Yes, that's right," she said. "Professor Snape here is looking to, uh, retire from lecturing and try something different. He has pharmaceutical qualifications, and, well, he just fancies a change."

"Lovely. And how much were you looking to borrow?"

"Between fifteen and twenty thousand. We're looking to start small and branch out. I've brought some information with me which should be helpful: business plans, projected figures..." Hermione produced a sheaf of papers from her bag and slid them across the table where Matthew began studying them carefully. Snape leant over, and she could hear a faint buzzing reminiscent of the *Muffliato*.

"I am capable of speaking for myself, Miss Granger," he growled.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I didn't realise you were well-versed with Muggle banking," she snapped back. "And what are you thinking, casting a spell in front of him?"

"Allow me to conduct my own business," he warned, cancelling the spell just as Matthew looked up.

"This all seems very thorough," he said approvingly. "If all goes according to your plan, Professor, you should have no trouble repaying the loan, which, as I'm sure you can appreciate, is very reassuring for us here. In fact, based on your figures, we may be able to stretch to a higher sum than your initial request." Hermione could practically see the pound signs appear in the man's eyes as he re-read her reports.

"My plan?" Snape asked quietly.

Hermione nudged him sharply. "I'm doing my job, Professor," she hissed under her breath, maintaining a friendly smile for the banker's benefit. "Let me."

"I believe I am fully capable of negotiating a simple transaction."

"Like you were capable of dressing suitably, or sorting out your computer?"

Snape was not amused, any fool could see that, but thankfully the oblivious Matthew chose that point to begin typing on his computer.

"Let's see... You don't appear to do any personal banking with us, Professor. Is that something you're also interested in?"

Hermione folded her arms and sat back, waiting for Snape to answer; if he was so competent, he could do it himself.

"Not at present," Snape said when he realised what Hermione was doing. "However, it is something I will consider in the future."

"Excellent. Well, you can always pop in for a chat with one of our advisers. They'll be happy to set up the most suitable account for you. Now, what term were you looking at?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The term of the loan, Professor Snape."

Hermione suppressed a smile as she saw a brief flash of panic in Snape's eyes. He hadn't thought about this any of it just as she'd suspected. Time to teach him a lesson, she decided. That way he might listen to her without arguments in future.

"Will you gentlemen excuse me?" she asked sweetly, rising. "I just need to make a phone call. Professor Snape can handle it from here." She slipped out of the room, bestowing a brilliant smile on Snape as she did so. Once out, she walked the few steps to the entrance and couldn't contain her laughter any more. Unprofessional? Of course, she knew that, but he deserved it. She knew she could fix whatever mess he made in there. Satisfied with her plan, Hermione leant against the wall to wait.

She wasn't waiting long; about five minutes later, there was a tap on her shoulder. When she turned, however, it was to see Harry, not Professor Snape.

"Harry! What're you doing here?" she asked, greeting him with a hug.

Harry grinned.

"Ron and I are paired back up Ginny sent a letter," he started. Hermione winced at the thought of being on the receiving end of Ginny's temper. "Anyway, when we got told about blatant use of magic in front of Muggles, Ron remembered you were here today and managed to get us assigned to deal with it."

Hermione's smile froze and her heart almost stopped.

"What?"

"Ron's gone in ahead. Sounds like Snape lost it and started hexing people. What are you doing out here, anyway?"

Hermione groaned, turned, and started beating her head against the wall.

"It's my fault, Harry. Snape was being just so... so... He's such a bastard, he wouldn't listen to me or let me do my job he's paying me to help him, but he won't take the help! I thought if I left him to try and sort it out, he'd learn his lesson, and things would go a bit easier."

Harry laughed.

"Least you didn't hex *him*, or we'd be in St Mungo's now. Come on, let's see the damage."

Harry led the way in, and Hermione followed reluctantly, afraid to see what she'd unintentionally inflicted on poor Matthew. When they entered, they could see Ron chatting cheerfully with one of the bank employees, turning on his charm.

"It's all okay, luv. Bit of a problem with the lighting, that's what the flashes were we'll just pop in and check it's safe. Why don't you go have a cup of tea? You look like you had a bit of a fright." He smiled, and the flustered woman wrung her hands and then nodded.

"Yes, I think I'm due for my break now. Thank you, Mr... I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

"Call me Ron, luv. Go on now." He watched her go and then winked at Hermione.

"Keeping us busy, aren't you?"

"Ron, I'm impressed. You managed to come up with a plausible excuse." She poked him in the ribs to let him know she was joking and then let herself into the office. Matthew was unconscious against the wall, and Snape was sitting with his arms folded as if nothing was wrong.

"Granger. Potter. Weasley." That was all they got by way of greeting.

Harry burst into laughter. "Hermione, *that's* what you dressed him in? Tweed and flares? He looks like the photos of my Uncle Vernon's father crossed with John Travolta in..."

"Harry, don't you need to go checking on the Muggle?" she interrupted quickly, seeing the scowl reappear on Snape's face. "Professor McGonagall did *lovely job* on the professor's clothes, right?"

"Oh! Um, yeah. Let's have a look at the poor bloke then." Harry sidled around the table, keeping as much distance between himself and Snape as possible, and then crouched down by the unconscious man.

Ron glanced Snape over.

"You really pass for a Muggle well," he said admiringly.

Snape stormed out.

Ron turned to Hermione.

"What did I do?" he asked, confused.

Hermione shook her head.

"Just... Please, Ron, just fix things here," she sighed. "I'll sort out Snape."

By the time she caught up with him, he appeared to have transfigured the suit back into his robes and was glaring at passers-by with such ferocity that no one dared comment.

"Professor, I'm sorry."

"Only that it backfired on you, I have no doubt." His voice was cold. "I should have expected as much."

As guilty as she felt, her hackles rose at his words.

"Well, if you would only listen to me and let me do what you're paying me for..."

"That would require me to believe you have an ounce of common sense, Miss Granger. You do not; indeed, five years of being treated as an adult seems to have pushed you further towards the juvenile behaviour favoured by your peers at Hogwarts. Perhaps I overestimated your capability."

Hermione's hands had curled into fists.

"Then why the hell did you hire me?" she all but screamed at him. "Why bother if you so clearly know better?"

"I'm starting to ask myself the same thing," he sneered, and it was the last straw.

"Fine!" Hermione threw her hands up in the air, partly from exasperation but mostly to stop herself trying to hit her former professor. "I give up! Do it your own way, Professor. You're going to anyway, and believe it or not, I really *do* have better things to do than watch you mess up. I am sick of your condescension, your insults, and your sheer pigheadedness. You're worse than any Gryffindor I have ever met for being stubborn. Damn it, Snape, I have *had* it with you!" She threw the papers from her bag at him, turned on her heel and Disapparated, not even caring that they were surrounded by Muggles.

When she found herself back at her office, staring at Sandra's worried face, she broke down crying.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Thank you to everyone who has reviewed! Things have been up and down for our couple and this chapter will be no exception!

By the time a knock came and Ron let himself in, Hermione had composed herself. She looked up with a smile that felt as false as it looked. Ron raised an eyebrow and she dropped the pretence immediately.

"All sorted?" she asked.

He nodded, sitting down opposite her.

"Yeah. Snape hadn't done much; the bloke had fainted from the shock. We patched him up, Obliviated him, and sent him on his way. He thinks your appointment was cancelled because he had to go to the dentist."

"Thank you." Hermione reached out and patted his hand. "I really appreciate you and Harry coming to sort it out, Ron. I would have been in real trouble if it had been anyone else."

Ron waved her thanks away. "You've saved us enough times. I think we probably still owe you. Oh, Harry Obliviated the six Muggles who saw you leave, too. Snape went home to sulk. He'll probably come storming in once he's had a chance to work himself up."

"I doubt it. I quit."

"You *what*?" Ron gaped at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Close your mouth, Ron. I left because I quit. I don't have the strength or will to fight him at every turn and then to fix up his mess. He just does

not listen to me what am I meant to do? If I let him continue, it'll finish me; I'll be a laughing stock. At least this way I can regroup and try and get new clients."

"Hermione..." For once, Ron didn't have anything to say.

Hermione glanced at her calendar and smiled. "Should I make a note of the date?"

"Oi!" He found his voice quickly to protest. "It's not often you give up, Hermione. I'm allowed to be shocked."

"I can give you fifty good reasons why I should terminate the contract now, and none for why I should carry on," she said promptly.

Ron rolled his eyes.

"Figures you'd make a list."

"Shut up."

"Alright, if your mind is made up then I know better than to try and change it. I've learnt that the hard way. I'll be telling Lav and Harry and Ginny, mind, so no promises about them." Ron pushed himself up and patted her shoulder. "It'll work out in the end."

"I hope so." Hermione gave him a quick smile. "Still on for Thursday?"

"Lav's cooking something spectacular, so she says."

"Ron, if it's food, you think it's spectacular."

"Yeah, I know." He grinned. "Later, Hermione."

"See you later." She waved cheerfully enough to convince him she'd be okay and then closed her eyes as the door shut. She ~~had~~ made a list of reasons to terminate the contract... but she'd been too afraid to make a list of reasons to try and fix things just in case the reasons were good. They would be. She already knew that. Without this contract, her business would be closing down, and she would have failed.

"I just cannot work with him," she whispered, folding her arms on the desk and resting her head on them. "The man is impossible."

A *clink* let her know that Sandra had understood her boss' distress and, in the manner of every British person under the sun, had made a cup of tea. Hermione didn't bother to raise her head.

"Sandra, I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I really did try." She closed her eyes to try and stop the tears that threatened again honestly, since when did she cry so much? "He's impossible. He still sees me as his student, and there is nothing I can do to change that; without changing that, how can I help him?" She let out a sigh. "I was so hopeful... It would have been wonderful, if it had worked."

"I find it hard to believe one such as you would give up so easily, Miss Granger." Hermione sat bolt upright in her chair and found herself face to face with Snape. Sitting between them was a steaming cup of tea.

"Snape... What... Oh no!"

"Have you forgotten how to speak, Miss Granger? Truly, today is an excellent day."

"Get out of my office." Her voice was low and steady once she found it again. "I am terminating our contract. You have no business here."

"On the contrary. You will listen to me, Miss Granger, for once in your life. You are not a child any longer, and you cannot simply throw your toys out of your pram when things don't go your way." She opened her mouth to protest and was hit by a *Silencio*. Snape steepled his fingers and studied her carefully; when she reached for her wand, he snatched it out of her fingers.

"I do not wish for you to terminate our contract," he said simply. Hermione was so gobsmacked by this that she didn't notice the silencing spell being lifted. He set her wand down on the table. "I will speak and you will listen. At the end of it, if you still feel you wish to terminate the contract, I will sign whatever documents are required. I believe this is fair."

Hermione shook her head briefly to try and regain her senses.

"Fine, Professor. I'm listening."

"Good of you." He started to sneer and then it twisted into a grimace. "I have explained to you previously how difficult I find it to distance you from the student you were, Miss Granger. It is the curse of a teacher to always see former students as they were, waving hands or sticking gum to desks or losing points for indecent behaviour atop the Astronomy tower at night. Even now that I no longer teach, I regret that I cannot quite shake my former tendencies." He rose and began to pace her office.

"You, in particular, are unfortunate given the circumstances of your time at Hogwarts. Had you not been associated with Potter, had you simply kept your head down and worked, you would not have stood out so much. As it is, for seven years you, Potter and Weasley dominated the attention of every member of staff. We could not escape you, and as such, it is now extremely difficult to see past that. I appreciate that you are no longer a student. You are an allegedly competent businesswoman who, I am assured, is capable and intelligent. However, you are fighting seven years of prejudice." He was no longer looking at her; instead he was at the window, looking out.

"It is for that reason I have been somewhat difficult in our dealings, Miss Granger. I have been so accustomed to dismissing your every word, to belittling you frequently that breaking the habit is proving harder than I believed it would be. You have made every effort that has not gone unnoticed and I have repaid you with insults. This, I feel I must apologise for." He turned and she saw sincerity in his eyes and on his features. It was so unusual she couldn't speak.

"I do not wish for you to end our contract, Miss Granger. I have been reluctantly impressed with your work so far, particularly given the pressure I have been placing you under, and I would very much like for you to continue. I will make every effort to treat you as an adult and an equal in future."

"Hermione," she said faintly. He looked at her blankly. "I told you at the start to call me Hermione. Maybe if you think of me as Hermione, you can keep Miss Granger separate."

He nodded stiffly. "Perhaps it would be appropriate for you to address me by my given name, Miss..." She lifted a warning finger. "Hermione," he finished.

Hermione nodded. "I can do that, Severus." His spiel had stunned her, but she knew that every word spoken was the truth and was glad of it. Plus, an apology from Snape was so rare that she knew he felt badly about his behaviour.

"I may have been acting a bit childishly myself," she admitted. It wasn't fair for him to shoulder the blame himself when she'd intentionally left him in a situation she knew he couldn't handle. "As you said, it's hard to leave the past behind. I think we can both stand to try a little harder."

"Indeed." He folded his arms and stared down at her, though the malice was missing now. "Am I to assume that you wish to continue our business, Mi... Hermione?"

"Assume away," she smiled. "Harry and Ron smoothed matters over at the bank. I can reschedule our appointment."

"That would be appreciated." She made a note and looked up to see that Snape had begun to shift position as if he wanted to ask something else.

"Yes?"

"I would also appreciate it," the words came out slowly and she could see the effort behind them, "if you could attend Spinner's End at some point and fix the contraption."

"Your computer?"

"Yes. I had a visit from Arthur Weasley this afternoon, and now I find it is not responding in the slightest."

Hermione paled.

"You let Arthur Weasley near your computer?"

"Briefly. However." Snape coughed. "He was accompanied by George Weasley."

Hermione groaned. "What exactly is your computer doing?"

"I believe it is attempting to seduce me, Hermione."

"Seduce?" Snape was starting to blush! She wouldn't have believed it without seeing it, but there were definite spots of pink in his cheeks.

"It insists on displaying several rather disturbing pictures of ladies in... compromising positions."

Hermione restrained the urge to laugh. "George Weasley has filled your computer with pornography?"

"Apparently." He shifted uncomfortably. "I would be grateful for your discretion in this matter."

"I'll be over this evening to fix it," she promised. Snape looked relieved. "Now, I think I had better call the bank and start to set things straight there. And... Severus?" He was halfway to the door, but paused when she said his name, though he didn't turn around. "I really appreciate you coming to explain things," she said. He nodded and left as quietly as he had entered. Hermione gave a contented sigh and started writing owls to Harry and Ron immediately, before Ginny and Lavender broke down her door as Ron had threatened. As an afterthought she wrote one to George, demanding to know what he had done forewarned was forearmed, and if she was going to have to clean god-knows-what off Snape's computer she deserved to know what she was dealing with.

One day, Hermione vowed as she approached Snape's door, she was going to hex George Weasley so badly he'd never play a practical joke again. His return owl had been rather cryptic. Naturally, Hermione had Floo called him and warned him that if he didn't furnish her with a full explanation, she would be explaining to Molly just what he'd done and why he and Arthur had been late home from work. The threat of his mother worked, as always, and George had finally confessed he'd simply loaded some viruses onto Snape's computer from a floppy he'd had lying around. Originally he'd picked it up off Lee Jordan to install onto his father's laptop and embarrass him, but the opportunity had proved too tempting.

"Honestly, Hermione, the man needs to lighten up," he'd said after she'd finished ranting. "Maybe if he had a wank every now and then, he wouldn't be so uptight. I'm just providing inspiration, that's all. It's practically a public service."

"You'll be getting your Order of Merlin any day now," she'd answered sourly. "This is my business you're messing with, George. It's not just a prank."

"I'm sorry." He didn't sound it and she swore to write to Molly anyway. "Think of it this way, Hermione; next time you see him, you'll be wondering if he did have a wank to it. Bet you a Galleon he's well hung, too, with a nose like that just imagine it!"

"George Weasley!"

Hermione severed the call, wrote to Molly and sent a Howler to George, then dashed out the door to fix Snape's computer before he lost his new-found patience with her. It was only now that she stood staring at Spinner's End that she realised George was right, and cursed anew.

"Get it together, Granger," she ordered under her breath before tapping on the door. It was opened quickly, and she faced Severus Snape once more.

"I've spoken to George," she said by way of greeting. "I know what he's done and how to fix it. Feel free to exact revenge on him."

Snape stood aside and allowed her entry. Hermione headed straight for the computer and burst out laughing when she spotted the cage, complete with mouse, still perched opposite it.

"Severus!" she exclaimed, delighted. "You kept the mouse!"

"Of course," he said, sounding bored. "I am a Potions Master, Hermione. I always need test subjects."

She clapped her hands to her mouth. "Test subjects? You can't be using it for experiments! That's inhumane!"

"It's a mouse. It doesn't mind what I put in its water bottle." He stared at her for a moment and then his lips twitched. "I find it extremely satisfying to poison it. At first, I contemplated calling it *Potter*, but then a more suitable name presented itself."

"I don't want to know..."

"Meet Granger." He rattled the cage, startling the mouse so that it ran and hid in a little tunnel that had appeared since last time.

"You named it after me?"

"Ten points to Gryffindor."

"You named a *test subject* after me?" She shook her head. "Severus Snape, I am starting to become convinced that you actually do have a sense of humour. Should I alert the *Prophet*?"

"Only if you are tired of carrying around your limbs and wish me to sever them from your body."

Hermione accepted this threat rather peacefully, knowing his reputation with the paper. She turned instead to the computer where an entirely nude blonde was lounging provocatively. It was replaced by a picture of a brunette with... no, she did *not* want to know what that was then by a video of a redhead and a large... oh dear god she was going to kill George Weasley in the most painful way possible.

"I'll just clean this up, shall I?" she asked, her voice rather high as she sat down and began to rummage for her anti-virus disks.

"Please." Snape had moved away and was perusing his bookcase with feigned indifference. Hermione began by rebooting the computer and imagining George's painful death, so that she could ignore his words from earlier. *Did he...? No, Hermione, you do not want to go there. Treating each other as adults is one thing; asking "So*

Severus, did you at least enjoy yourself while you waited?" is another.

"I ought to have made sure you had an anti-virus installed before," she said quietly. "I do apologise, Severus. I could have avoided this rather embarrassing situation."

"Contrary to what you may believe, Hermione, you do not in fact know everything, nor are you required to. I did not foresee a future where Arthur Weasley invited himself over to inspect the computer."

Hermione sighed. *She* should have seen it coming after mentioning it to the Muggle-mad man.

"I was however extremely curious as to the content being displayed by the computer," he continued. Hermione choked and stared wide-eyed at the screen, her mind fixated on Snape masturbating to the pictures. *I am going to murder George.*

"I was at first concerned that someone had breached the International Statute of Secrecy by providing Muggles with moving photographs," Snape continued, oblivious to her internal chanting of *die, George, die*. Hermione managed to breathe again, though she needed to thump her chest first. "Is everything okay?" he asked, oblivious to the now completely inappropriate thoughts running through her head.

"Er, yes, of course," she said, trying not to panic. "I'm sure you're familiar with films?"

"Indeed. One of my last ventures into the Muggle world was a trip to the cinema to see *Star Wars*."

"*Star Wars*? Right, of course. Late seventies. Good film. Anyway, what you were seeing wasn't an equivalent of magical photos. It was in fact closer to films; computers can play animations as well as displaying normal Muggle photos. I can understand your initial curiosity." There. A perfectly normal answer to a perfectly normal question without thinking of Snape wanking in any way, shape or... *damn it, Hermione!*

"You appear to be a bit flushed, Hermione. May I fetch you a drink?" He really was trying his best to, well, not be a bastard, she admitted. In fact, he was positively cordial.

"A glass of water would be lovely," she said, thankful when he retreated into the kitchen and she could focus on removing the viruses and mentally killing George Weasley. When Snape returned, she gratefully accepted the glass and gulped the water down, the cool liquid calming her more effectively than any amount of imagined murder had been able to.

"Thank you," she said, smiling up at him. He nodded and moved away, poking a small stick of carrot through the bars of Granger's cage before returning to his books. Hermione worked at the computer in silence for a bit and then turned to see Snape sitting with his nose buried in a book.

"This needs time to finish," she said, gesturing to the computer behind her. "What are you reading?" He lifted the book without tearing his eyes from the page so that she could read the cover. *Ashwinder Eggs And You: Ten Lesser-Known Uses*.

"Ashwinder eggs? Aren't they used in love potions?"

"They have many uses, Miss Granger, most of which have been lost to obscurity thanks to the public's demand for love potions." He didn't even look up.

"Hermione," she said, reaching over and pulling his book down. He glanced at her.

"Pardon?"

"You called me Miss Granger again." He was silent as he no doubt replayed the brief conversation in his mind, then he winced.

"I apologise. Old habits." He set the book aside tenderly, rather akin to the reverence with which she treated her reading material. "You appear to be idle."

"That's an odd way of putting it. Yes, I am. The computer needs time to complete the necessary scans and fixes. I can't do anything until it finishes, and I won't leave until I'm certain it's free from viruses." She tilted her head, studying him carefully. "You're doing very well, you know."

"I'm sorry?"

"You said old habits and all that, but you haven't insulted me once tonight."

"I can rectify that if it troubles you."

"I wouldn't want to put you to the trouble." She grinned and was both surprised and pleased to see a brief smile flicker across his lips. It lasted less than a second, but it was there. "So... love potions?"

"They also have Dark uses, as you would know if you had pursued Potions further. Love potions allow one to manipulate the mind and senses. A few alterations and you have an altogether more sinister concoction." He fell into lecture-mode effortlessly, years of being a teacher coming to the fore. Hermione shivered.

"It makes love potions seem rather sinister themselves. I remember Ron being hit by one in our fifth year."

"Ah, yes. One of Romilda Vane's, if memory serves me. Adequately made, but her plan was poorly executed. Had she been a Slytherin, no doubt Mr Potter would be married to her now as opposed to Miss Weasley." There was no hint of jest in his words, not that she could really tell if he was joking or not anyway. She chose to answer without commenting on his opinion of Romilda's grand plan.

"Ginny would have killed her," she said. "And possibly Harry, too, so in the long run it's probably for the best that it backfired."

Snape actually snorted a laugh. "The infamous Weasley temper. I often wondered what would happen if Molly Weasley were to encounter the Dark Lord whilst in a rage. I believe the wars would have been a great deal shorter."

Hermione snickered.

"You heard about what happened to Bellatrix, I take it?"

"Several times. I asked Arthur to try and persuade Molly to give me the memory just for the satisfaction of watching it with a nice glass of Firewhiskey, but I don't think he dared do it."

"He's a sensible man." Hermione curled her feet up as best she could and studied them carefully. "We are sorry, you know."

"For what are you apologising?"

"For leaving you. In the Shack." She had found a thread loose on one of her socks and was toying with it. "We thought you were dead."

Snape sighed.

"Must we discuss this now? It has been five years."

"I know." Hermione shrugged, surprised by how emotional she felt but determined to have her say. "It's haunted me, always. How we left you for dead. If we'd stayed a bit longer if we'd tried a bit harder maybe we could have saved you."

Snape studied her carefully, his black eyes scrutinising her face until she turned it away in shame. When he spoke, it was surprisingly gentle.

"At the time, I was dead. Poppy later informed me that I had been dead for several minutes when she arrived." Hermione's eyes widened but she remained silent. "You are aware of Mrs Weasley's remarkable clock, I believe? Hogwarts has one similar for its staff members. It would be impossible to monitor each student, but as the staff tend to be older and more likely to be alone in dangerous situations brewing complex potions, for example, or performing experimental charms then it is essential for her to be able to monitor our well-being. After the events of the Shack, my hand was pointing to 'Mortal Peril', and under the terms of her contract and job description, Poppy was obliged to come to my assistance, regardless of her personal feelings. Rest assured that at that moment she would have been quite happy to watch me die, but she is a professional, a remarkable woman, and obeyed her oath even then." He hadn't torn his gaze from hers, never blinked. "From what I have pieced together, Poppy arrived mere moments after you left. She was able to heal me enough to move me to the Hospital Wing. I remained there until the Wizengamot granted an unconditional pardon for my crimes, upon which I was transferred to St Mungo's. I assume you are aware of the rest, given that you visited me once."

Hermione nodded, a lump in her throat.

"Poppy informed me, once we had laid the past to rest, that it took every ounce of her skill to bring me back. Faced with that, Miss Granger, do you truly believe a seventh year could have saved me?"

Hermione choked back a sob and gave a watery smile instead.

"You called me Miss Granger again."

"You are acting like a child."

"Maybe." Hermione turned back to the computer to check its progress. "Is the mouse *really* called Granger?"

"Of course." Snape rose and took her glass to refill it. "Had it been black or red, it would have been Potter or Weasley, naturally."

"Naturally." She laughed softly. "And if it was white?"

"Malfoy."

She burst out laughing, her tears fading quickly, and turned her full attention back to the computer. It turned out he *really did* have a sense of humour and it spared no one. Then again, she doubted he was still friends with any of the Malfoys, regardless or perhaps because of their past. Still, she felt better for having actually broached the topic of the war with him, even if he had had to resort to calling her Miss Granger to snap her out of her sudden mood.

"Best leave it lie now," she muttered.

"Exactly." He had appeared from nowhere and she jumped in fright. "I find that peace seldom lasts, Miss Granger or is it Hermione now?"

"Hermione," she confirmed. "I'm over my relapse."

"Hermione. It is best just to be content while it lasts, and to make the most of it."

"You're right. I'm sorry for bringing it up."

He nodded once to acknowledge her apology and then returned to his book; probably for the safest, she conceded, and silence reigned as she finished cleaning up his computer. At last she was satisfied, after implementing every security measure she could think of up to and including warding the chair and desk so that George Weasley couldn't go near it. Snape watched impassively as she finished, then rose as she turned.

"All fixed," she said cheerfully. "The bank has rescheduled for Friday at three and BT are coming to sort out your phone and internet in about ten days."

Snape stared down at her.

"I will require more appropriate Muggle business wear this time. See to it."

Back to orders, she thought, suppressing a sigh. At least he was co-operating.

"If you owl me your sizes, I'll have something delivered before Friday," she promised. "And Severus, do try not to let any of the Weasleys near your computer again." He muttered something uncharitable about the entire family. "And... Severus?" She had been heading for the door, but turned around on an impulse. "Thank you for being willing to give this another go."

"Be off with you," he said with a glare, though she was pretty sure this time he was covering up other, more awkward emotions. She settled for waving goodbye and seeing herself out. Once out in the cool night air she let the tears come, feeling as though she had finally been forgiven for the past.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Hermione was startled the next morning when Sandra burst into the room like a whirlwind, not even bringing the tea she had started making twenty minutes ago. The giddy receptionist grasped Hermione's hand, dislodging several papers, and started pumping it up and down enthusiastically.

"Oh, well done, Miss Granger! Well done indeed!"

"Well done what?" she asked, bewildered, as Sandra had been mostly kept out of her conflict with Snape.

Sandra beamed at her. "The Head of Magical Law Enforcement just requested an urgent appointment with you!"

"Kingsley? Wants an actual appointment?" Hermione prised her hands out of Sandra's grip. "Why?"

"He wants to discuss business with you!"

Hermione felt her stomach drop into her boots. Was he coming to speak to her about the incident at the bank? Sandra didn't know about that...

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," she managed to say, smiling weakly. "Did you book him in?"

"Half one this afternoon. He said he'd be in Diagon Alley anyway so it was no trouble." Sandra's smile faltered. "Is something wrong, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked at her loyal receptionist and her smile brightened.

"Of course not! I'm just trying not to get too excited before we know what Kingsley wants, that's all. Who knows; maybe this is the start of things!"

Sandra cheered up instantly. "That's the spirit, Miss Granger!" She clapped her hands again and tottered out of Hermione's office.

The instant the door shut, Hermione's smile faded, and she wondered if she would be able to get hold of Harry before half past one. Then again, even if he was to tell her off, Kingsley wouldn't be too hard on her. Hermione shook her head and began to tidy her papers. She was getting ahead of herself now. Whatever Kingsley wanted, it could wait until half past one, and she would panic then.

"Kingsley, how wonderful to see you again."

At precisely half past one, the head of Magical Law Enforcement was entering her office, a warm smile on his face. Hermione held out her hand, and he accepted it at once, giving it a brief shake before sitting down. Sandra arrived instantly with tea no doubt she was excited to find out what was going on and had to be reminded by Hermione to shut the door behind her as she left.

"Thank you for seeing me at such short notice," Kingsley said, his deep voice booming in the small office.

Hermione waved a hand dismissively, not wanting to admit that she was hardly busy. "It's never a trouble for you, Kingsley. How can I help today?" He was in a good mood, she could see that already, so it was doubtful that he was about to rake her over the coals for the bank debacle. She started to relax.

"I hear you had an interesting day yesterday," he said with a wink and a grin.

Hermione cringed. Maybe he was going to after all. "Working with Severus has been... enlightening," she said as diplomatically as she could.

Kingsley laughed, seeing right through her.

"You mean you wanted to kill him," he said. "Harry and Ron stopped in to say what had gone on. I don't blame you in the slightest; he's a difficult man to handle."

"Especially if you're an ex-student," she admitted. "He kept trying to take points."

Kingsley laughed again. "He would. Well, I won't keep you for long, Hermione, so I'll get straight down to business. As I said, Harry and Ron told me what had happened yesterday, and after Ron's insights into it more specifically, what Severus was wearing and his excuses for the Muggles I got to thinking." He leant forward, elbows on the table, and Hermione was so intrigued she didn't even think to tell him off for it as was her usual habit.

"Back before the first war with You-Know-Who, there used to be a position in the MLE filled specifically by a Muggle-born. Their job was to liaise with the Aurors who were going out into the Muggle world, either for surveillance or clean-up, and ensure that they would blend in. They also handled press releases for incidents like explosions or duels, to cover up what we couldn't Obliviate. When You-Know-Who rose to prominence, the position was dropped by Ministry officials too afraid of repercussions for associating with the Muggle world." Kingsley paused, and Hermione was afraid to blink or breathe in case he stopped talking altogether.

"Now, however, we have a situation where pureblood Aurors think it is acceptable to wear robes in Muggle towns, or where they cannot tell what passes for Muggle and what makes them stand out. Ron seemed to think Severus was fitting in well, but Harry had other opinions entirely, and it made me realise that a large percentage of our Aurors have no idea of how to behave in front of Muggles. As such, I would like to hire you as a consultant for the Ministry. You wouldn't officially be a Ministry employee, so you won't get tied up by the red tape, but as a consultant for our field agents, I would expect you to help them prepare themselves for the Muggle world, teach them how to behave, how to speak, how to dress in short, help them to pass for Muggles. We would pay you a retainer as well as additional fees on a case by case basis. If you're interested, I have a draft copy of the contract with me for you to read over." Kingsley stopped and studied her, unsure if she was interested.

Hermione sat on her hands to stop herself hugging him.

"That sounds interesting," she said, impressed at how steady her voice was when all she wanted to do was jump up and down. "Why, though, don't you just bring back the position you mentioned?"

Kingsley grimaced. "Believe it or not, it's still 'too soon' for the Ministry to be comfortable creating an internal position solely for Muggle-borns, especially one dedicated to helping integrate wizards into Muggle society. This is the best way the Ministry is happy because you're an external consultant, not an employee, and to be honest I'm happy because it means a competent person taking the job." He studied her again. "If you're interested, that is."

"Very." Hermione squeaked and then looked mortified. She sounded like Snape's mouse. "I mean, yes, I am interested, Kings. I'd like to have a look at the contract first, of course, but I can't see there being a problem." She beamed at him and Kingsley returned the smile.

"I'm glad. Harry and Ron will be happy to have an excuse to work with you again, too. Just... No more Apparating in front of Muggles and we'll be fine, yes?"

Hermione laughed. Right now, she felt so happy that she thought she might just float away. Kingsley offered his hand, and she accepted it gladly, barely registering the rest of their idle chatter as he saw himself out.

Once she was certain he had gone, Hermione cast Silencing Charms on her office and broke out into overjoyed squeals. Another client and not just any client, the Ministry itself! Sandra entered to find Hermione dancing around the office for joy. The business was saved with this contract alone, and it was all thanks to Snape's suit.

"Good news, Miss Granger?" Sandra asked.

Hermione ran to her receptionist and swept her up into a hug. "Brilliant news, Sandra. We're saved! If this contract works out, you're getting a raise," she laughed, almost giddy with delight.

Sandra hugged her back. "I knew you'd do it, Miss Granger," she said, pleased. "I always had faith in you."

"Thank you." Hermione felt tears prick the corners of her eyes as the weight of the business began to lift from her shoulders. "I don't think it was just me, though. Can you bring me an owl, please? I have a really important letter to send."

Sandra squeezed her shoulders, pride evident in her features, and nodded. "Of course," she said, exiting the office.

Hermione sat at her desk and without hesitation began to write.

Severus,

I have just received word from Kingsley that after the events at the bank, he wishes to retain the Muggle Business Affairs Consultancy to assist the Auror department whenever they need to interact heavily with Muggles. Apparently this is all because of your suit. As such, I feel I must thank you by buying you dinner.

Please let me know when will be appropriate for you.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Hermione,

It is about time that someone realised how hopelessly out of touch the Ministry is. However, I must decline your invitation to dinner, as it will hardly seem professional for us to be seen dining together. I do not venture into the public eye often, and so it may cast aspersions on the nature of our business transaction.

I am, however, gratified to know that business continues well.

Sincerely,

S Snape

Severus,

I'm not taking no for an answer. I owe your suit dinner and, by extension, you. If you don't want to eat out, then I will cook. My address is below; I will see you tomorrow night at seven thirty. You may arrive by Floo if you so desire; that way your reputation for being a loner will go unchallenged. Should you not accept, I will come to your house and cook, and who knows what will happen to your kitchen?

Please, let me thank you for this.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Hermione,

I appear to have underestimated the Gryffindor obstinacy. Very well, to save your owl from exhaustion and my own ears from your infernal nagging, I accept.

I only hope that your culinary skills are exceptionally better than your Potions.

Sincerely,

S Snape

"Ginny! Ginny, Ginny, Ginny!"

Hermione Apparated to Grimmauld Place and burst into the house, praying her friend hadn't left for training.

"Ginny!"

"In here, Hermione!" Ginny emerged from the kitchen, a slice of toast in hand. "Were you born in a barn or something?"

Hermione's wand pointed behind her and the doors slammed shut. "Ginny, I need your help." She grabbed her friend's free hand. "I can't cook."

"I know. We *all* know. For this you barge in at seven thirty in the morning?" Ginny evidently hadn't had her coffee.

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry. I only got a response this morning, and I'm desperate."

"I'll say you are; we've been telling you that you need to get laid for months. Response from whom?"

Hermione stared at her friend.

"Coffee?"

"Two sugars, and you'd better make it a good one; then you can start again."

Ginny ambled back into the kitchen and Hermione followed, head hung in remorse. In her panic and excitement, she hadn't checked the time before leaving the house, and she distinctly remembered that these days, Ginny Potter was not a morning person.

One cup of coffee and a quick browse through the sports section of the *Daily Prophet* later, a much brighter Ginny was sitting before Hermione, intrigued by her friend's sudden descent into madness.

"Right," she said firmly. "What's going on?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Harry probably told you how much of a disaster Monday was with Severus at the bank? Well, after that, we worked out a few differences, and now we're working together again, and thanks to the incident at the bank, Kingsley wants to hire me to help teach his Aurors how to be Muggle, and the contract by itself is enough to keep me in business, and I invited Severus to dinner to thank him, but he won't go out, so I said I'd cook, but I can't cook, and he's coming over at half seven tonight, and I don't know what to feed him!"

Ginny stared at her.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Hermione Granger?"

"Ginny!"

"I'm serious. You're babbling, Hermione. You don't even babble when you're *drunk*. I'm glad business is going well, but you're acting like you've got a date and nothing to wear."

"I do *not* fancy Snape!"

"He was Severus to you just now." Ginny winked. "Alright, I'm just teasing. So basically you didn't think before opening your mouth, and now you're stuck. Let me guess: you want me to cook something?"

Hermione didn't bother beat around the bush. "Yes." She took Ginny's hands. "I know it was stupid of me, but I have to thank him somehow, Gin. If not for his hiring me, I wouldn't be getting anywhere. Worse, he *knows* that, so I have to try and repay him."

"Can't you repay him by doing your job well?"

"I intend to do that anyway. Anything less would be completely unprofessional of me. Please, Ginny."

Ginny rolled her eyes and prised her hands from Hermione's pleading grasp. "I wouldn't exactly leave you in the lurch, would I?" she asked.

Hermione gave a relieved sigh. "I love you."

Ginny grinned. "Don't let Harry hear that. Now, what am I cooking? Professional, friendly, or more?"

"More?"

Ginny's grin turned lascivious.

"Do you want to eat dessert or to *be* dessert, is what I mean."

"*I do not fancy Snape!*"

"You are so easy to bait." Ginny held her hands up in mock surrender as Hermione fingered her wand contemplatively. "Fine. How about lasagne with cheesecake for dessert? Nice and neutral, and since he'll probably bring a wine, most things will go nicely." She caught Hermione's glare. "I'm not teasing, Hermione. It's good manners, that's all, and Snape's as proper as they come. He's so straight when it comes to things like that that you could use him as a ruler. I'll send Kreacher over to set everything up just before half seven, so you can pretend it was all you." Ginny was almost knocked out of her chair by the force of Hermione's hug.

"Thanks, Ginny. I'll let you know tomorrow how it all goes. You are the best friend anyone could ask for."

"I know." Ginny, ever modest, managed to untangle herself from Hermione's hug. "Now go to work and be busy," she ordered. "I'll see you at Ron's tomorrow, and I expect to hear how well it went."

"Yes, Miss," teased Hermione.

Ginny flapped a tea towel at Hermione to shoo her out.

"Oh and if I were you, Hermione, I wouldn't dismiss Snape so quickly. He's got a lot of good qualities. These days, quite a lot of people fancy him he came in at number seven on *Witch Weekly's* 'Most Eligible Bachelor' list, and there was a lot of talk about men with big noses who are good with their hands." She winked.

Hermione remembered what George had said and groaned. "Are all Weasleys obsessed with how well hung Severus Snape is? George was telling me the same thing about his nose on Monday."

"You'd best take the plunge and find out, then. Satisfy our curiosity." Ginny nudged her and smirked as Hermione's face turned bright red. "Oh, Hermione. What will we do when you stop being so easy to wind up?"

"Severus and I have a strictly professional relationship. Until George started asking, I had never even considered *or* wanted to consider his... prowess. I would be quite happy if I never had to think about it again." Hermione eyed her friend sternly. "I don't know the spell yet for washing out your mind, but if you keep making me think of him in that way, I'm going to have to either learn or invent one."

"Fine, fine," Ginny said with a laugh, giving up. "Go and be strictly professional with him, then. Kreacher will be over tonight. Oh, Hermione?" Hermione turned in the doorway. Ginny's face softened into a warm smile. "We're all thrilled that things are looking up for you."

Hermione returned the smile. "Thanks." She waved, turned on her heel, and Disapparated, leaving Ginny to stare after her with a contemplative look before closing the door.

The day passed quickly, contrary to what Hermione was used to. She ordered several fine Muggle suits for Severus, mostly black, and requested they be delivered in time for their Friday appointment. She reviewed the contract from Kingsley and did another delighted dance around her office before sending an owl to him requesting a meeting to finalise the paperwork. Before she knew it, five o'clock had arrived, and she was standing in her living room, realising that she had just over two hours to make it presentable. Her gaze took in the piles of books toppling down the sides of chairs, the papers and parchments spread over tables, the abandoned cups, and she groaned.

"What was I *thinking*?" she sighed. Really, she should have just insisted on taking him out somewhere. It wasn't that her flat was *amess* as such; it was organised chaos. And it needed to be somewhat less chaotic, quite quickly. Hermione chewed on her lip as she considered, then rolled up her sleeves.

"Right," she said, brandishing her wand and thanking every god in existence that Molly had thought to buy her a book of household charms when she moved in. A few swift incantations later and the dishes were washing themselves, a duster was moving over the scattered ornaments and photo frames, and the books were piling back onto the bookshelves. She took a satisfied look around and sighed as she saw Crookshanks batting at the duster.

"Crooks, we're having company tonight. You may need to make yourself scarce; I'm not sure how he feels about cats."

Crookshanks gave an offended *mrrowr* and arched his back, clawing her cushions before stalking out of the room.

"Oh, hush," she said, heading for the shower. "You can finish whatever's left of the lasagne." A loud purr came from the direction of the cat flap, and she heard it click shut. Hermione couldn't help but laugh. If only all her friends were so easy to please.

One hurried shower later found Hermione wrapped in a towel in front of her wardrobe, cursing colourfully. Normally she never bothered about what she was wearing when she went out for dinner if it was posh, she wore a suit or nice dress robes; if it was casual, jeans. But how did you define dinner with Severus Snape? Yes, it was work related, but if she wore a suit, he would no doubt mock her mercilessly. On the other hand, jeans were completely inappropriate. He would be no help, no doubt wearing

the same thing he wore every day (she remembered Fred once taking bets on how many black robes Snape owned before trying to break into his rooms; they'd never got an answer). In the end, frustrated, she knelt down by the fire and called, "Grimmauld Place!"

"Hermione?" Harry's head appeared instantly in the fireplace, then disappeared just as quickly.

"Harry?"

"Hermione, why aren't you dressed?" His voice was muffled and she rolled her eyes.

"Harry, now is not the time to be embarrassed! Is Ginny there?"

"She's cooking. What's this that you've got a date with Snape?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes and glared at the fireplace until Harry's head appeared again. He took one look at her expression and winced.

"Go and get Ginny," she ordered.

Harry gulped and left; within seconds, Ginny's head replaced his.

"Let me guess," Ginny said, looking her over. "You don't know what to wear."

"Exactly."

"I'll be through now." She cut the call off, and Hermione sat on her bed, arms folded, perfecting her glare for when Ginny came through. The fireplace flared green, and Ginny stepped through, laughing at her friend's expression.

"That look might work on Harry, but it's useless on me. I'll apologise later." Ginny reached instantly for the piles of clothes in Hermione's wardrobe. "So, suits and jeans are out?" Ginny had been teasing her for years about how predictable her clothing choices were.

"I don't want to make it feel too formal," Hermione said, joining Ginny at the wardrobe, "but I can't just wear jeans and a T-shirt since he's concerned about maintaining professional boundaries. I need it to be casual, but still strictly business."

"You don't know what you want," Ginny grumbled, flicking through hangers. "Look, Hermione. Is this a business dinner?"

"No."

"Right. Is it a friendly dinner?"

Hermione hesitated. "It's a spur-of-the-moment dinner to thank him for helping me save my business," she said frankly. "One that is now making me panic because evidently I did not think this through in the slightest. Call it what you want."

"I don't think they do *oh-shit-now-what* robes in Madam Malkin's," Ginny said with a snicker. "Since when do you not think things through?"

"I was really pleased and I wanted to thank him."

"So he's a friend now?" Ginny was wearing a calculating expression again.

Hermione winced when she saw it. "Don't even think about it, Ginny. I know that look."

Ginny shrugged and went back to the wardrobe. In the end she withdrew Hermione's tidiest pair of jeans and a cream blouse. "Mix and match," she said. "It's all you've got to work with, anyway. If we had more time I'd lend you something of mine, but you're a different shape to me so we'd need to transfigure it."

Ginny sat on the end of the bed as Hermione dressed. When Hermione turned around, she saw she was being carefully scrutinised.

"What?" she asked.

"Are you sure about this?" Ginny asked, blunt as ever.

Hermione looked confused. "About what?"

"Inviting him to dinner. Breaching the professional boundaries. Making friends with him you are, Hermione; I know what you're like when you've got a project. If Snape wanted friends, he would go out and get them. As it is, he probably felt obliged to come over because you're working together."

"It's just dinner, Ginny. I just want to thank him." Hermione sat down next to the redhead. "No project, I promise."

"No *Save Our Snape?*" Ginny teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes and elbowed Ginny in the ribs. "No. No projects, no badges. Just dinner to thank him and probably discuss more business. Besides," here she eyed Ginny shrewdly, "since when do you care about people inflicting themselves on Snape?"

"Since Harry told me what happened to the last *Prophet* reporter who tried to get an exclusive interview," Ginny said frankly. "It took them three days to put him together again. Snape is not a pleasant man."

"I'll be fine, Ginny. Promise."

"Okay." Ginny gave Hermione a brief hug. "For Merlin's sake do something with your hair. I'm going to check on the food. Good luck." She disappeared back through the fireplace, leaving a very subdued Hermione sitting on the bed, wondering why she was putting herself through this after all.

Chapter Six

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

At precisely seven thirty there was a tap on her front door. Hermione gave her flat a quick once-over to check it was still tidy books away, dishes clean, and dinner set out on the table (it had been making her mouth water since Kreacher had arrived) ready for consumption. She opened the door to reveal Snape standing there, with a bottle of red wine in his hand exactly as Ginny had predicted, looking rather awkward. Hermione greeted him with a warm smile and stepped aside to let him in.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she said.

Some of his awkwardness eased, and his lips twitched as if he wanted to smile. He held out the bottle of wine.

"I believe it is customary for one to provide an accompaniment to the meal," he said.

"Thank you. We're having lasagne; I hope that's okay."

"I am sure it will be adequate."

She ushered him into the living room which, thanks to Kreacher, had been transformed into a dining area. The table was laid he had even brought flowers and the food was steaming. Snape raised an eyebrow.

"I am impressed," he commented.

Hermione added the wine to the table and smiled, then sighed.

"I was going to take credit, but I'm afraid I'm far too Gryffindor for that. I may have had some assistance tonight."

"Some?" His other eyebrow rose.

Hermione tucked an errant curl back into its tightly restrained bun.

"Shall we eat?" she asked brightly. He was laughing at her, she was sure. Still, he removed his cloak without further comment and allowed himself to be seated. Hermione uncorked the wine and poured two glasses.

"Help yourself," she said with a gesture to the food. "It won't stay warm for long."

"On the contrary," Snape said with an amused smirk. "You have forgotten to remove the warming charms. Am I to truly believe this is your cooking, Hermione?"

She set down a glass in front of him and shuffled her feet.

"You are about to be treated to one of Ginny Potter's finest," she admitted. "I can't cook to save my life."

"I see." Snape reached out and helped himself to a portion of the lasagne. "I have heard it said that Mrs Potter has inherited her mother's famed culinary skills."

"Out of earshot of Molly, I would say she's better," Hermione said, sitting down and filling her own plate. "Ginny's more willing to experiment. Sometimes it doesn't work out, but most of the time it pays off. She has offered to teach me, but I never get the time." Or the inclination, if the truth be told, but she wasn't going to admit that. She could quite happily leave the cooking to her friends and just provide take-out every fourth Friday.

"Something you haven't learnt? I'm shocked."

"Oh, just eat up, will you?" Hermione said, waving her fork warningly. "Otherwise you'll get firsthand knowledge of what *have* learnt, and you'll be walking funny for weeks."

"I severely doubt you could get the better of me," Snape said with a smirk, but he obediently began eating. Hermione rolled her eyes, but privately agreed. After a lifetime of espionage, she didn't think there was a person left alive who could best Snape not even Harry. Snape simply *oozed* power; every fibre of his being resonated with magic and implied that bothering him would not be a good idea.

They ate in a silence only punctuated by the occasional comment of "more wine?" or a compliment to Ginny's cooking. As they ate, Hermione kept watching Snape carefully. He was polite, but stiff, clearly uncomfortable to be here. Ginny's words echoed, and she began to feel increasingly guilty for forcing him to be here.

"So," she started, "I really wanted to thank you."

"I gathered as much from your incessant owls. Had I known I would in fact be assisting your business, rather than the other way around as was expected, I can assure you the terms of our contract would be much different." He was sort of smirking when he said it, so she assumed he wasn't entirely serious.

"Too late to renegotiate now," she said, teasing. "You'll just have to suffer with the knowledge that you helped a Gryffindor out."

He gave a shudder. "It's not too late for me to poison you."

"Do it, and you'll have no dessert. Ginny promised cheesecake."

"Ah, and it would be a sin to pass up, I take it?" He was definitely teasing, and the tension was easing from his shoulders. Hermione smiled cheerfully and topped up her wine glass, offering it over to Snape.

"You'd better believe it," she said. Ginny was indeed a fantastic cook, but what she really excelled at were desserts. Hermione would quite happily have moved into Grimmauld Place if it meant the chance to sample them on a daily basis. "I even stop reading for Ginny's cheesecake," she said, leaning across the table conspiratorially. Snape quirked an eyebrow again.

"Had I known that was the case, I would have recommended Mrs Potter assist the house-elves at Hogwarts. Perhaps your essays would then have been the requested length rather than four inches over."

"There's nothing wrong with being thorough," Hermione said defensively.

"Thorough is one thing, superfluous, another entirely. I am pleased to see that thus far you do not apply the same approach to business." Well, that wasn't *wholly* an insult, so she ought to be pleased.

"I take my business very seriously," she said, feeling more willing now to admit that it had taken a while to get going. "It has been difficult to show people that the Muggle world is worth something, at least."

"Most purebloods are not used to thinking of the Muggle world as an option, and most half-bloods immerse themselves so thoroughly in the magical world that they forget themselves," Snape pointed out. Hermione grimaced but nodded. This was what she had failed to take into account for many people the Muggle world was lesser in some way; why should they bother with it?

"You thought of it," she said.

Snape raised his glass slightly in a mocking toast.

"I am not most," he answered gravely.

Hermione had to laugh and concede the point. She raised her own glass.

"Indeed you are not, Severus," she said lightly, clinking her glass against his. "But you are the one who matters, here and now."

His eyes glittered with amusement even though his face remained impassive. Hermione was beginning to marvel at how much she could read through his eyes. As a student, she had always been too afraid to maintain eye contact with him and been too immature to bother try and understand the dour man. It was possible that had she tried, back then, she wouldn't have been able to, but now he wasn't a spy, and his life didn't depend on his ability to keep information hidden. *Still, better late than never*, she thought. Snape met her eyes and she broke off contact, embarrassed at being caught staring.

"Dessert?" she asked. He nodded, and she cleared the plates as quickly as she could, beating a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

"Why is it," she asked herself quietly as she retrieved the cheesecake, "that he always makes me feel like a child?" She looked at herself in the distorted reflection of the microwave door. She *looked* like an adult, hair, for once, behaving itself, clothes smart but not too imposing (she thanked Ginny silently), make-up minimal. So why was it that she had felt her cheeks warm under his silent gaze?

"You're not a student any more," she told herself firmly. Feeling better for this little pep talk, she walked back with the plates and stopped in the doorway, aghast at the sight that greeted her. Snape had pushed his chair back slightly and Crookshanks was currently sitting on his lap, paws pressed up against the man's chest, purring loudly as he stared up at Snape's face. Not only was Snape tolerating it but he was stroking the purring cat, a half-smile on his face. Hermione leant against the door frame, a small smile crossing her own lips.

"Looks like you've made a friend," she said softly.

Snape looked up, clearing his throat and gently pushing Crookshanks away.

"Cats like anyone who panders to them," he said. Hermione's smile widened as she realised he hadn't expected her to catch him.

"Not Crookshanks. He's a very discerning character; half-Kneazle, I think. You should have seen what he tried to do to Wormtail."

"No doubt the rat deserved it." Crookshanks was deposited unceremoniously on the floor by a quick shove of Snape's hands. His purr changed to an offended *mrrowr*, and he chose instead to wind himself about the man's ankles before sitting a safe distance away, staring. Hermione set the dishes down.

"I can put him out if he's a bother," she offered.

"Would he stay out?" asked Snape.

Hermione laughed. "Not really, no," she admitted.

"Then it hardly seems worth the bother, particularly given how much you praised Mrs Potter's desserts. I shall simply tolerate the cat."

"His name is Crookshanks," she offered.

Snape looked down at the cat. "What did he do to deserve that?"

"What did your mouse do to deserve Granger?" she challenged. Snape chose to simply stare at her until she remembered that it was an insult ~~to~~ her that she was bringing up in her own defence. She cleared her throat.

"Cheesecake?" she offered primly, holding out a plate with a generous helping. Snape accepted it silently, though once again she noticed his eyes looked as if they were laughing. She scolded herself for paying such close attention. Ginny was right, she shouldn't impose a friendship on the man when he was simply a client. Once their business was concluded, he would retreat into his own world again, and she wouldn't be bothered by him.

Snape took a cautious bite of his dessert. She was shocked to see him close his eyes and savour the delicious taste.

"Mrs Potter could have excelled at Potions, had she the inclination," he commented upon finishing the first bite. "It requires a willingness to experiment beyond the accepted standards for brewing. Having sampled this, I believe it may truly be a loss for the Potions community." This was the highest praise she had ever heard him give, and it rankled that it was aimed at Ginny and not her, even though she would be the first to admit that she was reluctant to deviate from recipes; that was how Harry had won the Felix Felicis over her, of course.

"Ginny prefers more *physical* activities," Hermione said, surprised at how frosty her tone sounded. Did she resent her friend that much?

Snape coughed politely. "I'm sure that was intended as an innocent comment," he said.

She replayed it in her head and groaned.

"Is that all you men ever think about?" she asked. "Given that Ginny plays for the Holyhead Harpies, I would have thought my meaning was clear enough."

"I make a point not to follow the careers of Potters."

"So it would seem." Hermione began to eat her own cheesecake, still annoyed that Ginny had apparently been better than her at Potions; her marks may have been higher, but it was Ginny that had made more of an impression. Snape watched her as they ate, but she refused to lift her head and meet his eyes.

"Am I to assume that you are somewhat aggrieved by my opinion of Mrs Potter's brewing skills?" he asked at last when the silence had dragged on for so long that even Crookshanks had gotten fed up and left.

Hermione sighed. "I'm not upset," she said.

"I find it difficult to believe when you have been stabbing your fork into your food as if it were the Dark Lord himself."

She couldn't help it; a smile burst onto her face at the thought of stabbing Voldemort with a fork.

"I didn't want to seem immature," she sniped, knowing that that was exactly what she was being.

"Then discuss your grievances rather than subjecting me to the silent treatment, Hermione."

She set down her fork. "In school, you were the only teacher who never seemed to acknowledge my efforts," she said. "I didn't want constant praise, just recognition of what I could do."

"I was accurate with my grading. That is recognition enough."

He was right. She'd never felt like he'd graded her below what her work had been worth, but there was a difference between that and open acknowledgement.

"Just once, I would have liked... oh, I don't know," she said, running a hand over her hair and dislodging several curly strands. "*Awell done* on a difficult potion, or something. I worked hardest in Potions, just hoping it would be enough, but it never seemed to be."

Snape had finished his dessert and was now watching her, his arms folded, face giving away nothing. Hermione knew her eyes were filling and she resolutely blinked away the tears.

"I understood all the insults. I was a know-it-all, and you had a role to play for the Slytherins; plus, I was Harry's friend, and you hated Harry." Snape nodded agreement. "I don't really know what it was I expected, but I hoped for something, some sign that you thought I had a brain."

"Hermione. I shall resort to calling you Miss Granger in a moment if you do not cease your wittering." This was said without malice and worked to silence her. She watched as Snape leant forward, holding her gaze steadily.

"You showed a remarkable ability, even from an early age, to strictly adhere to a recipe and produce the desired result. However, you did not display any innate understanding of the art of Potions. You were unwilling to experiment, unwilling to wonder what would happen if you added six newt eyes, instead of the recommended four, for example. I was not looking for students who could do what was expected. Yes, I am aware of your prowess in other areas. Filius often mentioned your natural talent for Charms work outstripped any other student he had ever seen. Minerva and Septima sung your praises for their classes, but my realm was Potions. It was not for me to comment on other disciplines." This was entirely fair and entirely true and did nothing to make her feel better.

"I know," she said quietly.

"Then accept the fact. Do not try to be someone you are not, Hermione. You are not expected to be perfect at everything. Isn't it enough to be heralded as the brightest witch of her age? Isn't it enough to have survived a war, to know that you helped bring about an era of peace and renewed understanding for the wizarding world? How much more do you wish to achieve before you will be satisfied?"

Hearing him say that, she felt selfish. Everything he said was true, which was worse. She didn't exactly have anything left to prove, so why was she being so silly over her school years? She twisted a napkin around in her hands.

"I guess I owe you an apology," she said quietly. "You're not the only one having trouble getting past the Hogwarts barrier. I've... not been fair to you, Severus. I guess it went to my head, feeling like I had any authority over you."

"It is understandable, to an extent." She felt a warm hand on hers and looked up, startled, to see that Snape was now standing next to her, actually providing her with comfort. "Students rarely see their teachers as humans."

"You seem different now to how you were in school," she offered, not sure whether it was an excuse or not.

He allowed himself a brief flicker of a smile. "A near-death experience often causes one to re-evaluate their priorities. In my case, as I am now freed from the shackles of serving two masters and teaching uncouth louts to brew toxic concoctions, I find it beneficial to be more tolerant." As soon as she looked down at his hand, he withdrew it and shoved both into his pockets.

"No more wallowing, Miss Granger," he said sternly.

Hermione smiled. "No," she promised. "And no more acting like a jerk towards you."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," he warned with a hint of humour.

She stood, making sure to elbow him as she began to gather the plates.

"If you're not careful, I'll set Crookshanks on you," she retorted.

"A dire threat indeed." They both laughed and then awkwardness descended. Hermione was busy recalling Ginny's words and began to feel like she was breaching the professional boundaries she was so proud of adhering to. Maybe after their business was complete they would be able to build a correspondence perhaps even a friendship but for now, it was safer not to.

Snape evidently felt the same, for he began to withdraw back into his shell.

"I thank you for the dinner. It was indeed excellent, and I trust you will pass my thanks on to Mrs Potter."

"I will." Hermione shuffled her feet awkwardly. "Did you...I ordered suits for you; have they been delivered yet?"

"Not yet. I shall alert you the instant they arrive."

"Thank you. You remember our appointment on..."

"Friday. I am not entirely incompetent."

"Of course not. Well, thank you for coming." She debated what to do and then extended her hand slowly. Snape eyed it before grasping it for the briefest handshake she'd ever encountered.

"I will see you on Friday," he said, allowing her to escort him to the door. "I will refrain from hexing the Muggles this time."

"I would be grateful if you could." She smiled and waved goodbye as he stepped outside. After she heard the crack of Apparition floating back to her, she shut the door and leant against it. She didn't ever remember feeling this confused. What exactly had happened at the end that made it so awkward? Maybe he was embarrassed at the fact that he had comforted her? She didn't even know if she felt better or worse for it. She sank to the floor, allowing Crookshanks to climb onto her lap and purr in her face.

"Oh,Crooks," she whispered, stroking him. "Is Ginny right? Am I forcing my friendship on him? Is that what's making him uncomfortable?" Crookshanks began to knead her jeans before settling down. She stroked him idly, wondering what exactly had happened that made her feel so confused.

The next night found her arriving almost an hour early at Ron and Lavender's small house, her mind still in turmoil from the day before. She had barely registered Kingsley's owl, requesting her presence at a press conference to announce their new contract, merely answered in the affirmative and left Sandra to sort out the details of when and where. All day she had been second-guessing her own motives for accepting Snape as a client and whether she was being entirely honest. At last she realised that only talking to Ginny and Lavender would help. Harry and Ron were utterly useless where such things were concerned and she finished work early, giving up.

When she arrived, she was greeted by an enthusiastic Lavender, who took one look at her face and sat her down with a box of chocolates. Hermione picked out a caramel and promptly burst into tears.

"What's wrong?" Lavender asked gently, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"Ginny's right. I'm a horrible person, Lavender. I think I must have secretly wanted him to fail. Now he's being nice, and I don't know what to do."

"You're going to eat chocolates, drink the cup of tea I'm going to make and wait while I Floo Ginny and see if she's home from practice yet," Lavender instructed. Hermione obeyed, allowing a steaming cup of tea to be pressed into her hands. Lavender crouched before the fire; her conversation was quiet and hurried, but in mere seconds Ginny was emerging through the Floo, hurrying over to Hermione.

"What the hell happened?" she asked, sitting down.

Hermione shook her head.

"It went brilliantly, Ginny. He loves your cooking, by the way. It just... Oh, I don't know. I'm so confused!"

"That made no sense whatsoever. Calm down and start again," Ginny ordered.

Hermione wrapped her hands around the warm cup, feeling better as the warmth soaked into her fingers.

"He came over and we had dinner. Everything was going well until he made a comment about, well, about you being better at Potions than I am. I overreacted really badly to it and he had to comfort me, and then everything became awkward. After he went, I was so confused, and I didn't understand why. The only thing I can think of is that, subconsciously, I only took him on as a client and let him do his own thing because I wanted to watch him fail. I wanted to be able to say that I was better than him. How petty is that? Now, I *don't* want him to fail. I want him to do well. *do* want to be his friend because he's actually funny, and clever, and even though he doesn't look like it, he does care. What am I going to do?"

Ginny and Lavender shared a look that showed they knew exactly what was going on.

"You're not a bad person, Hermione," Ginny said soothingly. "You took Snape as a client because you needed to; you had to save your business. He needed a consultant and you needed a client. You're reading too much into it, though you have been acting a bit childish."

Lavender produced two more cups of tea, and she passed one to Ginny, who accepted it gratefully.

"Why did he come over for dinner?" asked Lavender. Hermione realised that she hadn't filled her in on what had happened.

"So you got a new contract, and your first thought was to tell Snape?"

Hermione wasn't sure if there was hurt or something else in Lavender's voice.

"I wanted to thank him, so I invited him to dinner."

"Flowers wouldn't have done?"

"Can you see Snape with flowers?" asked Ginny with a grin.

Lavender laughed. "Okay, so no flowers. Why was your first instinct to invite him out?" she asked.

Hermione shrugged. "It seemed the proper thing to do."

"It was," Ginny stepped in, wagging her eyebrows furiously at Lavender.

"I'm not blind," Hermione said, glancing from one girl to the other. "What are you two trying to say?"

"Nothing," Lavender said, apparently having understood Ginny's message. "Just that you're being too hard on yourself. There's bound to be some confusion because of the history between you. You're getting to know Snape as a man, and he's getting to know you as a woman, not as a child or a student. Of course there'll be teething troubles." She stood. "Now, I have to go cook. Ron will be home soon, and he knows to bring Harry straight over. There'll be nothing right if food isn't ready." She bustled off out to the kitchen in a manner so similar to Molly Weasley that Hermione and Ginny couldn't keep the smiles off their faces.

"Ron found someone well suited to him," Ginny commented quietly.

Hermione nodded her agreement, then glared at her friend.

"Ginny, I'm not stupid. You and Lavender have a theory, and I don't think I'm going to like it."

"Then it's a good thing we're not telling you." Ginny patted Hermione's knee. "Think of it as a puzzle, Hermione. Just rest assured that we think you're reaching a bit far with your theory at the moment. It's something much simpler than that."

"A puzzle?"

"Exactly, like that Cubik's thing."

"Rubik's cube, Ginny."

"Whatever. You're not setting Snape up for a fall. You're too good for that. Besides, it's more of a Slytherin thing to do than a Gryffindor. Just go with the flow and see what happens. Now, you'd better cheer up or Harry and Ron will pick up on it, and they're useless when people get upset."

Hermione laughed. *A puzzle*. She could do that; solve the puzzle that was Severus Snape. Thinking of it that way made her feel better. She knew, deep down, that there were no sinister motives when she took him on as a client, only a burning desire to save her business at any cost. Now that she was calmer and had gotten her worries off her chest, she knew that all she wanted to do was help him succeed. That was a relief, given how far she had already pushed things.

"If either of them says anything, I'll owl George for something nasty to give them," she said.

Ginny cackled. "Excellent plan! Oh, by the way, what did he do to you? Mum nearly jumped out of her skin when your Howler went off. George was so sorry he even asked me to pass some chocolates on to you; they're back at Grimmauld Place, though if you know what's good for you, you won't touch them."

"I don't want to know what would happen if I did," Hermione said, shuddering at the thought. "I'd probably turn into a canary in my meeting tomorrow or something worse. I'd rather not have Harry and Ron have to cover for me again."

"They don't work hard enough as it is. Come on, let's set the table and help Lav out. Forget about it for now. The answer will just hit you one day."

Hermione allowed herself to be hauled to her feet and immersed herself in an evening with her friends, though at the back of her mind she was determined to meet Ginny's

challenge and solve the puzzle as soon as possible.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione Granger's business is failing, badly. When Severus Snape turns up and offers her a chance to save it, she can't believe her luck; but working with Snape brings a whole new set of problems. Written for voxangelus in the SSHG Exchange 2012.

Waiting at the bank this time, Hermione found she was far more relaxed. She'd made sure to arrive there a good quarter of an hour early to wait for Snape, not wanting to be caught off guard again. It was busier than before, and she had to stand in a corner rather than sit. At five minutes to the hour, the automatic doors opened, and Snape strode in.

Her second thought was that it was impossible to properly make an entrance in Muggle clothes. It would have been far more impressive had he been wearing robes.

Her first thought was that Muggle suits really, *really* suited him.

She appraised him as he caught sight of her and approached. He had chosen to wear a charcoal grey suit rather than the options of black or black that she had thought most likely to be successful at pleasing him. The colour made him seem less stern, utterly professional, and although not attractive she didn't think anything could make Snape handsome except in his mother's eyes he certainly had presence.

"Hermione," he greeted.

She looked him over, circled him once, and then clasped her hands together. "Much better," she said, pleased. "You look excellent, Severus."

"I trust I am convincingly Muggle this time?" he asked, glaring at her.

"One hundred and ten percent." She beamed up at him. "I think we ought to be a lot more successful this time. Would you like me to handle things?"

"We shall see how it progresses," he said. She nodded, and they waited in silence for Matthew to appear. Hermione kept sneaking sideways glances at him, pleased at how well the suit she had picked out fitted. At last he shifted uncomfortably and then turned on her.

"Must you constantly stare?" he asked in a low hiss.

She started and blushed, embarrassed to have been caught.

"I was pleased with the fit of the suit," she answered quietly. "That's all."

Snape huffed and folded his arms, returning to staring at the bank employees until they scurried away. Eventually, he relaxed his stance a fraction. "The clothing is adequate," he said quietly.

Hermione patted his arm. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" she asked cheerfully, ignoring the death glare that got her. "You have to admit, it's better than last time."

"Do not forget that the last suit got you a Ministry contract."

"Touché, Severus. Still, this one is more likely to get you a loan to start your business up the Muggle way, which is the more pressing issue. Now, don't forget to smile." She had spotted Matthew emerging from an office. Snape scowled briefly, but quickly smoothed his face to its usual impassive expression.

"Miss Granger? Professor Snape?" he asked. Snape raised an eyebrow at Hermione, who shrugged; she had made an effort, when re-booking the appointment, to mention Snape's title to avoid any issues this time. "My name is Matthew. Please, come into my office." He ushered them along and hovered as they seated themselves in the small office. As soon as the door had clicked shut and they were settled, he bestowed a helpful, keen, "please let me take your money" smile on them.

"How may I help you today?" he asked cheerfully.

Hermione waited for Snape to begin, willing this time to take her cues from him rather than forcing him to take a back seat *It's his business, after all*, she had argued with herself.

"I am looking to start up a business and am desirous of financial assistance in getting started." Snape's tone was smooth and utterly convincing. "My assistant, Miss Granger, will be able to provide you with all the relevant information and paperwork in respect of the details."

The suit was her first shock of the day; this was her second. He sat back and motioned for her to begin.

"Right, of course," she said, producing the sheaf of papers from their last appointment, at least those which had emerged unscathed. "Allow me to explain..."

Twenty minutes later a slightly baffled Matthew was bidding them goodbye, wondering just why he had agreed to such generous terms on the loan. Hermione had a spring in her step, and Snape was looking at her with renewed respect.

"That was rather impressive," he said as they exited.

Hermione rubbed her hands together, satisfied. "I think that went rather well, don't you?" she asked. "You'll have plenty of start-up capital now for branding, advertising, and initial overheads like rent, bills, and wages. Rather kind of him, I thought."

"Are you sure you didn't Confund him?" Snape asked drily.

Hermione grinned. "Muggles respond well to confidence and the impression that the other person knows what they're doing."

"And Confundus Charms."

"I didn't hex him, Severus."

"He was certainly acting as if he had been hit by something."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Just because *you* would, doesn't mean we all would. Now, we need to discuss your next steps. Would you care to come back to the office, or shall we get a coffee?" She could see the hesitation in his eyes and sighed. "Somewhere Muggle, Severus. I'm not going to drag you down Diagon Alley. We ought to be safe with a café."

"Very well. I trust you will select somewhere discreet."

Hermione wrapped her fingers about his arm and began guiding him through the Muggles, her mind recalling directions to a small café she had frequented with her parents before she had sent them to Australia. It was only a few streets away, so within ten minutes they were seated at a table in the corner of a small, cosy café. Even though he was dressed the part, Snape looked out of place, and Hermione had to restrain a smile at the sight of him sitting bolt upright in a Muggle café, eyeing the menu as if it were going to explode.

"Relax," she assured him. "It is entirely commonplace for Muggles in suits to discuss business in cafés, tearooms, restaurants, and other such places. It is also entirely unlikely that you will be spotted by any wizards."

"I am fine," he said, looking anything but. Hermione took pity on him and gave him a few minutes to compose himself while she ordered two coffees. When she sat back down, Snape was looking a little more at ease.

"You wish to discuss the next step?" he asked, still sounding a little stiff.

"Yes. I can handle some things for you notifying HMRC, for one thing but you need to decide on a location, staff if you don't want to run the store yourself, things like that. That's the more physical side of setting up. The most important thing you need to focus on now, however, is a company name, product names, and a logo. Without this we can't advertise effectively, and without advertising your business is going to find it more difficult to get off the ground." Their coffees arrived, and she busied herself emptying sachets of sugar into hers. "That part is much the same as if it were a magical business, except with more restrictions as the pictures, obviously, won't move. Have you thought of anything you'd like to use, or would you just like me to hire someone to help?"

"I'm afraid I have not given it much thought," Snape said, tasting his coffee warily as if it were about to explode, too. "I suspect you may have some ideas, however."

"Truth be told, I haven't given it much thought either," Hermione confessed. "I suppose for a name, it would be quite funny to reference magic in some way *Enchantments*, perhaps, or *Practical Magic*, something Muggles would understand. It'd be useful for advertising because you could play off the magic theme. As for a logo I would avoid any overt Slytherin motifs; if it were me, I would choose something that I find important my patronus, for example. In your case you could use a doe, or a lily..."

"A lily?" Snape's voice was quiet. "Why could you possibly believe I would wish to use a lily?"

When she glanced up from her coffee, she noticed that his face was white, his eyes like coal.

"Well," she began uncomfortably, "for such a long time Harry's mum was very important to you..."

"And you truly believe I wish to advertise my past failures in the Muggle world as well as the magical? Or that I would, in tribute to the woman I loved the woman *killed*, Miss Granger demean her memory by using it to sell products?"

"I didn't mean it that way, Severus," she said meekly, half-frightened by the look in his eye. "I was trying to think of examples of symbols that may have meaning for you, and Harry said..."

"I will not discuss this further with you," he said furiously. "Potter may have chosen to gossip with all his little friends about the memories I foolishly imparted to him, but I will not indulge your curiosity by allowing you to pry into my past. This conversation is *over*." With that he rose and stormed out, leaving Hermione to stare after him and wonder what the hell had gone wrong.

It wasn't until Sunday that she heard from Snape again. She had spent the day curled up on the settee, re-reading all her favourite books and sighing every time she thought of the frustrating, complex, irritating Potions master who seemed intent on making her life miserable. Crookshanks, knowing when his mistress needed him, had only left her side once all day. It wasn't entirely altruistic of him; her nimble fingers had untangled any knots in his fur and were now stroking him into a half-asleep state.

"I just don't get it, Crooks," she mused, giving up on her reading. "What did I say? The man is impossible; he flares up at the slightest thing. I know I ought to apologise, but I don't even know what for." Crookshanks arched his back and gave an indignant *mrrowr*. Hermione laughed and pulled him closer.

"You don't care what I do, so long as you get fed," she teased.

Crookshanks wore a haughty look as he leapt from her lap and padded over to the window. As he reached it there was a tapping, and she glanced up to see an owl waiting patiently for her to let it in.

"Who'd be owling me at this time of night?" she murmured, letting the owl in and offering it a treat from the ready supply she kept by the window for the *Prophet* owls. It gratefully accepted the treat and stood still as she relieved it of its letter. The spiky writing was familiar, and she unfurled the parchment with some hesitation.

Hermione,

I wish to apologise for my reaction on Friday to what was, no doubt, a misguided attempt to further assist me in relation to my intended business. It is unfortunate that you hit upon one of the topics of conversation guaranteed to provoke an irrational response from myself, and I did not behave with the decorum expected. For this I sincerely apologise.

As you have no doubt gathered from Mr Potter's inability to respect my privacy even in apparent death, Lily Potter was for many years a guiding force for me, keeping me on the correct path when circumstances made it tempting to deviate. My feelings for her have, however, become somewhat romanticised by the media, and now I find that it is difficult to allow her memory the peace it deserves when I am constantly being pestered for, and I quote, "my side of the story".

My side is rather simple, Hermione. I ignored her wishes. I became a Death Eater. My actions led to the deaths of her and her husband and resulted in her son becoming a Horcrux for the Dark Lord. Thereafter, my time was spent atoning for my sins. It is not romantic; it is not a "fairy tale" as many reporters are inclined to believe. I committed a grievous sin and subsequently sought redemption.

Now that the war is over, now the Dark Lord is gone and Potter is free to live his life as he sees fit, I find that it is easier to lay her memory to rest. Lily, I feel, would simply be thankful that her son is now safe. Whilst I can never be forgiven for my actions, I have made amends to the best of my ability. During my isolation I have learnt that I am no longer living to fulfil her wishes, but to realise my own. However, I cannot escape the shadow of my past, even now. The public, the mindless masses, will not allow me to simply treasure her memory. Even now I must be a tragic hero, mourning the loss of the love I never had.

To hear you mention her name filled me with the fear that you were about to make the same mistakes as they. Now that we have established a cordial working relationship,

I was loath to let it become corrupted by the public image presented by the papers. Yes, Lily was a large part of my life, and yes, she is still important to me. However, I do not wish the rest of my life to be defined by her, now that I feel I will have earned her forgiveness when I pass through the veil.

As such, well meaning as your suggestion was, I will not be using either a doe or a lily as a logo for the products. Indeed an otter would be more apt, given the amount of effort you are exerting to ensure things succeed. I am endeavouring to think of something suitable and will contact you once a decision has been reached regarding hiring a branding firm.

I trust this finds you in good health.

Sincerely,

Severus

Hermione clutched the letter to her and sighed, a few tears coming to her eyes. Now she understood. Snape had defined himself by Lily for so long. Now it seemed he wanted to be just Severus Snape. It had been insensitive of her to suggest it, innocent though her actions had been, and her heart went out to the man. It was a shame that when he was finally able to be himself, the world was refusing to let him. She vowed never to mention Lily Potter again if she could help it. There were millions of possibilities out there for marketing his shampoos, and if they were as good as his paperwork promised, she'd be buying them herself regardless of what picture was on them. She petted the owl, asked it to wait while she formulated a response, and scribbled quickly on a spare bit of parchment:

Severus,

Your apologies aren't necessary. I'm sorry for bringing it up, I realise now how it must have seemed. We'll find something suitable; perhaps we ought to take this week to brainstorm separately and have a meeting once we've come up with some ideas.

I appreciate the explanation, though you really don't owe me one! I promise I will give the topic a wide berth in future.

I am curious, though how do you know the form of my Patronus?

Let me know if there's anything I can do.

Sincerely,

Hermione

She watched it wing its way into the night and hugged Crookshanks tightly to herself, ignoring his protests, wondering if the world would ever be able to let him live in peace.

Hermione,

I feel a time of reflection upon certain issues would be appropriate at this juncture. We have been moving forward rather quickly and thus would now benefit from the opportunity to re-evaluate.

As regards your Patronus it was useful to be aware of the Patronus forms of everyone in the Order, thus allowing me to know who a message was from (whether it was intended for me or not). As such Albus kindly furnished me with as much information in this regard as possible, although by now Potter's stag is rather infamous in its own right. I was curious that an otter should be your form; you seem rather too studious and serious for such a notoriously playful animal. Perhaps it is a sign that you ought to take life less seriously and, for want of a better word, "frolic" more.

Please note that should anyone find out I said that, they will not find your body.

Sincerely,

Severus

Severus,

Never fear I like my body parts quite firmly attached.

I suppose it does make sense. Harry and Ron have been telling me to lighten up for years. If that is the case, however, I have to ask why a doe? Is it truly just a symbol of, you know, or is there another reason? I could suggest a few things but, I fear imminent violence if I do...

Suffice it to say that during our school years, a touch of the doe's gentle nature would not have gone amiss, and judging from the fact it hasn't changed, maybe you ought to try being a bit nicer?

I will of course be checking your response thoroughly for hexes, curses, etc.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Hermione,

For your sake and the sake of any progeny you have hope for, I will ignore your previous missive. Suffice it to say that were I still teaching at Hogwarts, your inevitably bushy-haired, hand-waving offspring would be in detention for the entirety of their schooling. I will freely admit to shuddering at the thought of future Hermione Grangers and implore you to think before unleashing the same on the world.

Sincerely,

Severus

Severus,

What a rude thing to say! I believe any children of mine, if I ever have an aneurysm and decide to have them, would be perfect. In fact I may go out and reproduce for the

sole purpose of annoying you, although it would be better for me to sit back and wait for Harry and Ginny to get there first I'll give you three guesses as to what Harry wants to call his kids, but you really won't need all three.

I suppose it would depend on the father, in my case if I had stayed with Ron, they would most likely have had frizzy red hair and freckles, in which case they would hate me. However, to turn it back on you, yours would be sallow and greasy haired.

Oh god, could you imagine our kids? I do believe their hair alone would cause them to kill themselves before they reach maturity. I'm sorry, but the mental image of that has caused my brain to malfunction, so I will instead imagine hexing you in interesting ways as payback both for your comments and the mental images you have provided me with.

Hermione

Hermione,

Rest assured that I have no interest in having children with you, although I do believe they would at least be of above average intellect which is more than I can say for Potter. If he names his children James and Lily, I warn you now that I will leave my self-imposed solitude for the sole purpose of hexing him. It is up to your discretion as to whether you warn him or not; my preference would be for you to maintain client confidentiality, of course.

As for your so-called "mental images", it is your own fault for having an over-active imagination and for being a Gryffindor.

Severus

Severus,

What exactly does being a Gryffindor have to do with anything? I'll grant I do have an active imagination, but now you're just looking for excuses to bring up house rivalries. Don't make me start on the Slytherin jokes most of them are just crude, anyway. (I can't be the only one to learn of the basilisk and wonder if Salazar Slytherin was severely compensating.)

As sweet as I think Harry's choice of names is, I do believe client confidentiality is important either that, or I want to see him after you're finished. I'll leave it to you to decide which it is.

Hermione

PS: I have been assured that you will have internet within the next few days. The guide I prepared ought to be sufficient to get you started; however, if you have any problems, just let me know. I've also added my email address and phone number to the bottom you did get a mobile, didn't you? If not, let me know and I will sort it out for you.

PPS: DO NOT LET GEORGE WEASLEY NEAR THE INTERNET.

Hermione,

I assure you I am not an idiot. Mr Weasley is well aware that should he approach Spinner's End again, even with the best of intentions, he will leave missing rather more important body parts than an ear.

I did not believe you were the sort of person to make jokes regarding Slytherins and their "snakes". The euphemisms and innuendoes are entirely juvenile; I suggest you stop before you fall even further behind. One of the prevailing problems with Gryffindors is their inability to know when they are losing.

I have indeed procured a mobile phone and have forwarded you my contact details via what I believe is called an SMS. Please inform me should you not have received this.

Severus

Severus,

You are the only person I can think of who would actually type out "insufferable know-it-all" via text. Incidentally, that is the common term for an SMS message a text message should you ever find yourself in a position where you need to know. I have indeed received your number and promise not to abuse it shamelessly.

With regards to your other comments: if Gryffindors stopped fighting when they were losing, we'd all be under Voldemort's rule right now. Also, may I point out that you aren't exactly innocent on that front yourself?

Just saying.

Additionally, I have a house full of Gryffindors tonight for tea. If you insult us more, I swear that not only will I give them your mobile number so that they can bombard you with texts but I will also tell Harry you would be honoured if he called his first born son James Severus Potter. And you know he would do it.

Sweet dreams.

Hermione

Hermione,

You are a truly cruel woman. I did in fact suffer the most horrendous nightmares at the thought of my name being paired with James Potter's, though I believe he may have turned in his grave at the mere mention too. Perish the thought; I shall insult Gryffindors no more. Am I to be left with no pleasures in life?

I truly believe you do not want to get into a discussion about the war and your actions in it, Hermione. That way is fraught with danger; I must insist you turn back, lest I furnish you with a full and frank breakdown of the many times I had to ensure you were not caught through your own stupidity and even my efforts were not enough, as I'm sure you can recall from your time at Malfoy Manor.

It has often been suggested to me that I ought to apologise for not interceding once news of your imprisonment reached me. However, I will not do so. It was a war, and

you were responsible for your own actions; I bear no responsibility for the treatment you received. However, should you see my godson again, I grant you full permission to take him to task for his actions and those of his family.

I would be grateful if you could provide me with your suggestions for the companies you intended to use for the branding and marketing of my products. I feel I am unable to find adequate material myself and would therefore like to pursue this route.

Severus

PS: You have house guests? What do you intend to feed them, cat food?

Severus,

Denying you pleasure is one of my sole pleasures. Leave me to it.

I never expected an apology from you for any of the actions during the war on either side, Severus. At the time we didn't understand but now I believe we do. As you said, it was war; we did what needed to be done to win. It is best left there.

I wasn't actually aware that I needed your permission to hex Draco Malfoy, though any curses you can recommend would be appreciated. Incidentally, did you know he was coming to see me before your previous letter? It turns out that after the press conference, the Malfoys have decided that my services are worth retaining. Dear Draco has designs on Astoria Greengrass, but she is reluctant to let him court her because of the stigma of his name. He believes that by investing in Muggle businesses, it will help convince her of his sincerity it must be love. Anyway, I am now playing the stock markets with a small fortune of Draco's money, and he hopes to propose to Astoria by the end of the year. Will wonders never cease? I'm sure you'll be proud of the fact that I didn't hit him, though I did give him an uncomfortable chair and poured on the guilt.

I have attached a list of companies and their websites. It will do you good to get to grips with the internet to look them up. Let me know if you have any trouble.

Hermione

PS: Unofficially, the third Friday of every month is "Takeaway Day". Stop laughing.

Hermione,

I do not laugh. I may, however, smirk.

I was not aware of Mr Malfoy's intentions towards your business, though his attempted romance with Ms Greengrass is well publicised. I am pleased that business appears to be taking off for you. As with all good ideas, it seems to have taken some time to find its feet, but I trust the future will be rosy for you.

I have attempted to investigate these websites; however, I admit to having difficulty with the email address provided by the Internet service provider. Please attend this evening after work in order to resolve the issue.

Severus