

I Still Don't Like You

by sunny33

Hermione is Chosen to be an Unspeakable. She's not too happy with their methods or her assigned partner.

Chapter One: Chosen

Chapter 1 of 6

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Chapter One: Chosen

Sensation returned first. Tightness around her wrists and ankles, cool air caressing her bare legs, hard stone beneath her back. Sound followed shortly thereafter, muffled voices somewhere to her left rising in discordance, then the slam of a door and the too close rustle of fabric. A faint scent tickled her memory as her eyes finally focussed.

"Fuck! What did I do to end up here? That bastard deserved to die! He abused innocent children, and he was trying to..."

"Where exactly do you think you are, Miss Granger?" The familiar voice dripped oiled sarcasm onto the flames of her fury.

"Hell, I presume, or some perverted variant of it!" She twisted her head as far as the confines of her bindings allowed and looked up at the man standing above her.

"Hell?"

"Well, you're here, aren't you? It's hardly likely to be heaven."

"Indeed."

Minutes or weeks crawled past as she stared at eyes last seen lifeless and empty.

"Well?" she asked, suddenly weary of waiting.

"Well, what?" He was as impossible in death as he had been in life.

"What next? Fire, brimstone, endless torture? Vile orgies of fornication and debasement? Impossible tasks and an eternity of despair?"

"Don't be so ridiculous, girl. What sort of books have you been reading?"

She shrugged. "My parents were staunch Baptists. Their favourite preacher was somewhat... enthusiastic. So, no torture, fornication, or despair then? I suppose my punishment is to spend forever in your company. I'm not sure that's an improvement."

"Miss Granger, whilst your delight at the prospect of my company is neither sought nor desired, I expect you to utilise that supposedly prodigious brain of yours and think!"

He waited.

"I... But..." She frowned and looked around the small room in which she was lying, seeing four walls, several sconces of candles, and a floor of solid, earthbound stone. No fiery pits, demons, or tortured souls. "You're not dead?"

Severus Snape sighed. "It would appear that way."

Hermione pulled against the ropes holding her captive. "In that case, would you mind releasing these and explaining yourself? Preferably in that order."

"Very well. But on one condition."

"And that is?"

"You must agree to listen to what I have to tell you."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll stay here until you do." He held up her wand, each half in a different hand.

"You bastard! How dare you!" Hermione ceased struggling as the ropes perceptibly tightened. "You can't keep me here like this. Please. I understand you don't want anyone knowing you're alive. Just let me go!"

"You understand nothing, girl! You've been Chosen. Your wand is useless now. Now, will you keep still and listen like the adult you purport to be, or do I leave you here for a few hours to contemplate your understanding?" He stalked off to the furthest corner of the room and scowled into the corner.

"Chosen?" She cursed the meekness in her voice as she watched the tension drain from his shoulders.

"Chosen. Tell me, Miss Granger. What do you know of the Department of Mysteries?"

"The Department of Mysteries? That's where the Unspeakables work."

"Have you ever met an Unspeakable?"

"I saw two of them at the Quidditch World Cup. Bode and Croaker, I think Mr Weasley said their names were."

He nodded. "That was their names then. But not who they were."

"They were working under false names? I supposed they were Glamoured or Polyjuiced as well."

"At last, she's finally engaged her brain."

With no further information forthcoming, Hermione concentrated on the fleeting associations playing tag in her brain. Unspeakables who were not whom they seemed. A spy who was no longer dead. A sudden, bright light rending her unconscious as she duelled a paedophile and would-be rapist.

"You're an Unspeakable too. That's how they recruit. They wait until a witch or wizard is in a life or death situation, and then they intervene."

"Adequate. Barely. What you fail to recognise is the witch or wizard is Chosen long before. Contrary to most people's belief, one does not have to be blessed with extraordinary power or intelligence to become an Unspeakable. Whilst the Department of Mysteries does not recruit those of weak magical power or intelligence, certain psychological and social criteria are the most important means of selection."

Hermione's fists clenched around her simmering anger. "And what exactly would they be?"

"Social isolation. Lack of a close network of friends or family. An obvious disenchantment in their career. Sound familiar, Granger?"

Each word cut into the fragile veneer of contentment Hermione had constructed over the years since that final argument with Harry. Siding with Ron after she had cracked under the strain of the Weasley family expectations and told him she was not prepared to stay at home and breed a multitude of Quidditch playing redheads, Harry's defection still left a gaping hole in her heart. After her parents had been unable to be found in Australia, Hermione had believed her best friends' reassurances that they would never abandon her. Even the thrill of becoming an Auror had palled when she had realised the wizarding world was even more sexist than Muggles when it came to allowing their women into danger. Apparently, Nymphadora Tonks had been an aberration.

A tear slipped unheeded down her cheek as she stared at the unfeeling face of the man before her.

"You arranged for me to meet Perkins this morning. I thought they'd finally decided to give me a real case. How dare you? How dare you arseholes fossick through other peoples' lives and pass judgement?"

"Are you trying to tell me we were wrong about you? You have a dozen close friends, maybe a secret lover or two? You surprise me, Miss Granger. We hadn't suspected a thing."

"No, damn you! But you have no right!"

"Perhaps. But consider what we offer. A potentially fulfilling career. A fresh start. Opportunities."

"Opportunities to what? Spend the rest of my life playing a role? Pretending I'm someone I'm not? Tell me, Professor, are you happy? Because you look about as ecstatic to be here as I am."

"I will admit the prospect of a socially awkward ex-student as a partner is not particularly enticing, but..."

"Partner? I'm to be your *partner*? Why don't you just *Oblivate* me now? No. Way!"

"Miss Granger..."

"Don't Miss Granger me, Severus Snape! First, you people poke your overlong noses into my personal life, then you arrange for me to *die*, then you try and tell me we have to *work* together. What planet have you been living on in the last five years?"

"Enough!" His voice thundered around the small room. "Hysterics will not work with me. You have ten minutes to think about your choice. By all means, choose to continue your pathetic existence." Slamming the door, he left without looking back.

"Bastard!" Lacking anything to throw at the door and the means to do it while still bound, Hermione settled for a loud sniff. Her scowl deepened as she realised she was most put out by the fact that Snape was right. Her job was a fast track to nowhere; her social life was non-existent, and her flat was a dingy bedsit in a nondescript city block, chosen more for its proximity to Diagon Alley than for aesthetic reasons. "Tosser!" she added for good measure. Pride appeased, Hermione pulled her knees up to her chin to conserve some warmth. The cold stone under her nearly bare bum was not improving her mood.

The biggest problem was, devious recruitment procedure notwithstanding, she had always been fascinated by the Department of Mysteries and its inhabitants. The opportunity to discover some of the secrets behind those closed doors was tempting. Very tempting.

And then there was Snape. Her prospective partner. Cold, vitriolic, unfair, ill-tempered, unpleasant, dangerous, Slytherin... the list was endless. Hermione knew he was a hero; his courage and devotion to duty in the face of extreme adversity had been eventually accepted by even his most vociferous detractors, but he was still Snape. No amount of posthumous, or not as it turned out, Orders of Merlin would change his personality.

"Fuck!"

"A quality education under the wing of Minerva McGonagall and your language is no better than a dock worker." Snape appeared before her, lips turned down in his customary sneer.

"Shit, bugger, wank! Fuck off, Snape. You're not my teacher now."

"You have no idea how much that fact delights me. Have you made a decision?"

Hermione sighed. "Much as I hate to admit it, even you're an improvement on my existing prospects. Not much of an improvement, so don't get too bigheaded. More the lesser of two evils. Where do I sign?"

Snape eyes, hard and cold, met her resigned gaze. "Nowhere. There are no written records of personnel. To all intents and purposes, you no longer exist. You will be given a new identity and your appearance altered significantly." He flicked a finger at her hair, now tangled and dirty. "I'm sure there will be some improvement."

"But you still look the same."

"Would it have served for a stranger to have had this conversation with you?"

She shook her head.

"As partners, only we and a handful of our superiors know our previous identity. Even our fellow Unspeakables will only know our assumed persona. Outside of the Department, it is imperative that you are not seen unless you are disguised. Your previous 'friends' must not know you still live. Understood?"

She nodded. There were few people who would notice she had gone, let alone muster any distress over it. "Where will I live?"

"We're currently at a Secret-Kept safe house in a remote area. You do not need to know the location at this stage. Once you have been fully initiated, we will no doubt be assigned to share living quarters. As partners we must know each other's whereabouts at all times, and it has proven easier to extend this to living arrangements." At her outraged gasp, he continued, "Miss Granger, close your mouth. The rooms should be sufficiently generous to allow us each our privacy. We'll share a kitchen, dining area, and sitting room, but our bedchambers, bathrooms, and studies will be separate. I have no wish to find feminine fripperies in my bathroom cabinet or romance novels on my desk."

"Do I look like I own such items, Snape?"

"Looks can be deceiving in my experience."

"Obviously not in your case."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Take it any way you bloody well choose. Are you going to release me, or do you take perverted pleasure in the sight of barely dressed women in bonds?" Perkins' attempted assault had torn her robes from her shoulders, leaving a few ragged shreds hanging from her shoulders.

Snape cast a dispassionate eye over the rather dodgy underwear she had dragged out from the back of the drawer that morning after finding everything else in the heap awaiting washing. With a flick of his wand, her bonds loosened, and he was heading out of the door before she had clambered to her feet.

"Such a gentleman, Snape." Following his footsteps, Hermione looked around the corridor they had entered. It appeared to spiral to the left with a constant slight incline. Sconces spaced at regular intervals provided a minimum of lighting, and the cold stone floor chilled her feet. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere else."

"Thanks. Very helpful."

"You're welcome."

"Do you think you could at least Transfigure me a cloak before I expire from hypothermia? Or would that just fulfil your evil plan? 'So sorry, Mr Head Unspeakable, Granger wasn't dressed adequately and froze to death.' You wouldn't have to share your quarters that way."

"Wishful thinking, Granger. Still, I suppose a cloak would stop the damned racket from your teeth chattering." He stopped, removed his own cloak, and draped it around her shoulders. "Don't take it personally. I expect it back immediately we reach our rooms." His hand traced a shape in the air as he walked away.

Several minutes later, Hermione loosened her death grip on Snape's cloak as the air temperature improved from sub-zero to a little nippy. Windows began appearing at intervals, with the occasional glimpse of stark rocks and choppy water under a bleak sky.

"Not a decadent tropical paradise then."

"You expected floral arbours and lush meadows?"

"Anything's possible. I thought *you* were dead."

"You could try and contain your disappointment, Granger. Dying isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"I wouldn't call it disappointment so much as disenchantment. A dead hero is somewhat more appealing than a live churl. At least with the previous state of affairs I could imagine you as a courageous yet misunderstood victim of circumstance."

"You thought about me?" Startled, he paused and glanced at his companion.

"Hardly ever." The faint colour in her cheeks belied her words. "Your press expounded the theory often and widely. I'm surprised your fan mail didn't reach beyond the 'grave'."

"Perish the thought." Snape continued around the next corner into a wide hall with a grand staircase opposite their entrance and several doors leading off to each side. "This way."

He led her up the stairs to the second landing, then turned into the corridor leading to the left. Several corners later, they reached a nondescript wooden door.

"Is this your quarters?"

"No." He knocked.

A disembodied voice bade them enter as the door opened.

"Miss Granger, sir."

"Ah, finally we meet. I presume she has been told."

"Yes. And agreed."

"Excellent."

Hermione stood in silence, watching the interchange. The elderly wizard behind the large, oak desk was less than imposing at first glance. Wisps of hair barely covered a liver-spotted scalp, bony hands grasped a tatty quill, and his physique made Snape look athletic. However, his eyes, cold and blue, penetrated Hermione's soul and saw everything.

"Well, Miss Granger. Do you have any questions?"

"Just one. Did I really have a choice about this?"

He chuckled. "I think you know the answer to that already. You've always been a bright young lady. I'm sure you will find our arrangements to your satisfaction once you have settled in. Severus, take the young lady back to your quarters for some food and rest. You are now in corridor seventeen. I will meet with you both in the morning."

By the time they had traversed several more staircases and untold corridors, Hermione had no idea where they were in relation to the main hall. Snape stopped before a door at the end of a short corridor.

"Your quarters?"

"*Our* quarters, for my sins." He tapped the door with his wand and pushed through without bothering to ensure she had followed before letting the door close with a slam.

"I can see you're going to make the perfect housemate. Do you cook and clean as well as exude charm and good manners?"

Snape ignored her as he looked around the small but warm sitting room. Opening the leftmost of the three doors on the opposite wall from the entry, he said, "Kitchen and dining are through here."

Hermione opened the central door. The room was a small study with bookshelves filled to capacity and papers on the desk.

"I see they've taken the liberty of moving my possessions." He did not offer to show her the room beyond, escorting her back out into the sitting room and pointing to the third door. "That must be yours."

Opening the door, Hermione found an identical study, shelves filled with a disturbingly familiar array of books. It was no surprise to find in the bedroom a large four-poster bed covered with the quilt her grandmother had made and some of her clothes neatly stowed in the large wardrobe. "Taking a lot for granted, weren't they?" she said to the empty room, then opened the last door to the bathroom. It was not grand, but provided a generous-sized tub, a separate glassed shower enclosure, and a pedestal basin with a large mirror above. There were cupboards on either side of the basin and a toilet discreetly placed behind a half wall in the corner.

Right beside another door.

Curious, Hermione pulled the door open, expecting to find a cupboard for towels, but instead finding a shirtless Snape beginning to unbutton his trousers.

"Oh, sorry! I thought this was a cupboard." Her cheeks flushed, but her eyes were transfixed on the thin line of hair tracking down Snape's lower abdomen to disappear under the loosened waistband of his trousers.

"Do you make a habit of bursting into men's bedrooms, Granger?" Not bothering to adjust his attire, Snape strode over to the door. "This is *my* bathroom. How did you get in here?"

"Through the door into *my* bathroom. This one." She indicated the open door into her bedroom.

"Bloody, cost-cutting buffoons! There should be two bathrooms! I'll..."

"Have to share." Hermione pointed to the keys in each door. "I'm sure we can manage. I'll keep my 'fripperies' in the cupboard on the right, and you can keep your undoubtedly few necessities on the left. Right now, I couldn't care less about the bathroom. I just want a bath, some food, and a good sleep. Now, unless you want to use the facilities before I fill the bath, I would appreciate some privacy!" Slamming the door after he left would have been satisfying, but Hermione had little energy for such empty statements. After turning the key in the lock, she started to fill the bath and leaned back against the wall watching the steam rise in scented clouds to the ceiling.

Hermione tossed her ragged robes into the corner, soon followed by the shabby bra and knickers. Easing into the hot water, she sighed and closed her eyes.

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Chapter Two: Explained

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione finds out more about the Unspeakables.

Chapter Two: Explained

"I don't give a Thestral's fart if you were worried; you had no right to barge in here!" Hermione stood naked in the bath, water streaming off her body as she screamed at Snape.

"You've been in here over an hour, and you weren't answering when I knocked on either door. What did you expect? You could..."

"You were in my bedroom? Whatever happened to that privacy you mentioned earlier? I suppose it only applies to your room!"

"If privacy was such a fucking issue, why didn't you answer?"

"I didn't hear you!"

"You foolish girl! You didn't hear me because you were asleep in a deep tub full of water. You could have drowned!"

"And who would have cared!" Hermione stepped out of the tub and sat on the edge, suddenly limp. "Who would have cared?" She lifted her eyes to meet his gaze and found no comfort or lies.

Snape said nothing. Selecting a towel from the pile stacked on the shelf behind the tub, he wrapped it around Hermione's damp shoulders. When she made no effort to hold onto the towel or dry herself, he quickly rubbed her down and steered her into her bedroom. Drawing back the sheets, Snape cast a silent Warming Charm on the bedding and sat her on the bed. By the time he had her tucked under the covers, she was sound asleep.

The rumbling of her stomach woke Hermione several hours later. Stretching under the crisp cotton sheets, she closed her eyes again and drifted back into a light doze in the warmth and softness of the most comfortable bed she had slept in for years.

Briefly.

The nagging thought penetrated her sleep-fuddled consciousness about the same time as a loud knock resounded on her door.

"The bastard saw me naked!" Sitting up, Hermione realised she was still without a stitch of clothing. Which meant...

"I'm coming in. Consider yourself warned," Snape said as he pushed open the door with one foot, his hands busy carrying a tray laden with a bowl of steaming soup, bread rolls, and fruit.

"I'm not dressed... You can't come in!" Hermione pulled up the sheet to cover herself just in time.

"Nothing I haven't already seen, Granger. Now, do you want food or not?" Snape smirked at her red-faced glare.

"No... Yes. You put me to bed?"

"Yes. You did not appear capable at the time."

Hermione felt the bone-dry sheets under her. "You *dried* me?"

He nodded. "With a towel. The usual way. Would you have preferred to sleep in a wet bed?"

"No, but..."

"Thank you would be appropriate."

"But you... you..."

"Saw you naked. What of it?" Snape did not attempt to hide his amusement.

Hermione sighed. Reaching for the tray, she picked up the butter knife and a bread roll. "I give in. Thank you. There, are you happy now?"

"Much better. You might manage to convince me of your sincerity after a few more tries. Still, the view is worth it."

"The view? What view? Oh, you bastard!" She dragged the sheet back up over her breasts, having forgotten it in her need for food. "Bugger off!"

She could have sworn she heard the unthinkable as Snape left.

"I'm sorry. I realise you were only trying to help." Hermione's honour allowed the words; her pride was still bruised and sulking.

Snape looked up from his book. "You're getting there. Was the food sufficient to enable your brain to function?"

Her lips were tight as she nodded.

"Very well. Sit." He indicated the only other armchair. "We have much to discuss."

She sat and glanced around the room to find no windows or timepieces. "What time is it?"

"Ten."

"In the morning?" Her previous life had ceased to exist a mere twenty-four hours ago.

"In the evening. We arrived here at five."

Twelve hours. No one would have even noticed she was missing. Questions would not be asked until the next morning when she didn't report in for the Department meeting. Head down, she said, "I assume your people have made appropriate arrangements?"

"Our people have ensured a body will be found bearing your likeness. The rest of your effects in the flat will be collected by a suitably tearful relative. I imagine any personal items in your desk at the Ministry will be disposed of. Unless there is something you particularly want to be salvaged?"

She shook her head. "No. I kept nothing there of any importance." Only the tattered shreds of her self-esteem. "I suppose that proves your point." She looked up from her study of the carpet to meet his dispassionate gaze. "Was it the same for you?"

For a split-second his unsettling gaze faltered, then he nodded. "Indeed. After so many years as a spy, there was little for me to return to. The survivors on both sides bayed for my blood, and teaching incompetent brats was never my choice."

"But they exonerated you. You're regarded as a hero."

"Granger, what were your first words when you regained consciousness?"

Hermione blushed. "I was..."

"Brutally honest? Do not concern yourself. I'm aware of the opinion most people hold of me. Cruel, biased, unpleasant, greasy, unattractive. Don't worry; I've heard them all. The truth about my loyalties during the war will never be enough to sweeten the memories of those I taught or associated with."

"Does that not concern you?"

"No. I have no need for society's good will." Snape stood and turned towards the hearth seeming to find great interest in the crackle of the flames and hiss of burning sap.

"Needs and wants are different things, Snape," Hermione said to the tense muscles of his back. "Still, for what it's worth, I still think you're an unpleasant prat. Just not an evil one."

"Perhaps you do show some intelligence, after all." He walked over to the drinks cabinet. "Wine?"

Hermione nodded.

Handing her a glass, Snape returned to his chair and settled himself with legs crossed. "The Department of Mysteries is divided into four sections. The Research and Development section deals with areas such as time, thought, death, love, and other powerful forces. The Archives section collect, collate, and store prophecies."

"We saw all that when we fought Lucius Malfoy and his associates in fifth year."

"Yes. Apparently the Archives team was most displeased with your efforts. They did petition to have you assigned to their section, but it was felt your talents lay elsewhere. Merlin knows what they would have had you doing. They're still trying to replace the prophecy spheres you lot destroyed. However, there are two further sections you have not seen."

Hermione leaned forward in her chair as his voice lowered.

"The Unmentionables are an elite group of witches and wizards who have distinguished themselves by their complete lack of emotional response to others. They perform certain tasks which the Ministry and other officials would prefer not to be associated with."

"Like the *Mission Impossible* team? But I suppose you wouldn't know about that."

"Granger, I grew up in a Muggle neighbourhood. And, no, they're nothing like that. They are, in short, Wizarding assassins. From time to time, a threat appears to the wizarding community that needs an immediate, discreet solution."

Hermione's temper flared. "But why didn't they deal with Voldemort then? Why allow so much death and destruction, leaving a teenager to carry the burden? How could they justify not doing anything sooner?" She stood and paced across the room, unable to stay seated any longer.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Stop being so melodramatic, Granger! The section has only existed since Riddle's death. The wizarding world, in all its naiveté, had never considered such a team necessary. They have only had two targets since but remain prepared at all times to act if needed."

Wrath defused, Hermione returned to her chair. "But who decides someone constitutes such a threat?"

"A group of wizards older and wiser than you or I. The Heads of the Department of Mysteries from all the major wizarding nations meet regularly to discuss such threats. No decision is acted upon unless it is unanimous."

"Was the man we met earlier...?"

"No. Mellowes is merely the Head of Recruiting. Few Unspeakables have met our leader."

"So, what section do we work for, Snape?"

"None of those I have mentioned. There is a fourth section. We are responsible for investigation of any anomalies in magic or magical fields in our country. The Aurory deal with individuals and groups misusing magic, but we deal with magical problems of a more esoteric nature."

"Such as?"

"Remember last year when the Floo Network was malfunctioning?"

"Yes. I thought it was simply a congestion problem. The *Prophet* reported it had been sorted out by redirecting some of the traffic through lesser used systems."

"Correct. That was what was *reported*. However, the truth is somewhat less prosaic. The enchantment maintaining the Floo Network has been in place for many years since it was first developed by Francis Ligurd Oswald Ollivander. Yes, he was a distant relation of the wandmaker. Unfortunately, the spells used to form the Network originally were linked to the caster."

"Ollivander, presumably?"

"Exactly. He died last year, and within days the spells began to unravel. Luckily, one of our older colleagues had studied with Ollivander while he was fine-tuning the Network and remembered where he had stored his notes. The spells have now been modified to need only reinforcement every twenty years or so by anyone suitably trained in their use."

"I don't understand. Why was the public not informed of the truth?"

"Think, Granger. What would have been the reaction if the *Prophet* had announced the entire Floo Network was on the verge of collapse and may not have been recovered?"

Hermione nodded as she realised the implications. "Panic. Individuals can Apparate, but it's tiring and difficult to do with small children. Businesses would have been struggling; the Ministry itself depends heavily on Floo access."

"We needed to deal with the problem quickly and efficiently without interference from politicians or the press. The Investigative Section is sanctioned to act without hindrances such as budget or political expediency."

"So, who is accountable for any errors in judgement?" Hermione remembered the yards of parchment required for any mistake made by the Aurors. Usually, it had been her job to deal with it.

"That has never been an issue, or so I am told." Snape looked up to catch her yawning. "Tomorrow, you will meet the rest of our team."

"Anyone I know?"

"No idea. You will only ever know the true identity of your partner."

"You?"

"Me."

Hermione sighed. "Great. I'm only permitted to know one person, and it's you, Snape. I thought you said my life could only improve?"

Snape shrugged as he walked over to the door to his room. "Consider yourself lucky. You could have been stuck with someone like my partner."

"But I thought / was your..." Hermione glared at the door as it closed behind him.

"Bastard!"

Snape saw it furrowing her brow and tensing the fingers on her cup. Patient, he simply watched and ate his breakfast of toast and marmalade, downing two cups of tea before the question grew too big and escaped from her unwilling lips.

"But what about relationships?"

It hung there, pregnant. He waited.

"How do you know what someone really looks like? They could be old or young, beautiful or ugly, tall or short. If everyone is disguised from each other, *how do you know?*"

"Appearance determines one's worthiness?" he asked.

"No. Not that."

"What then?"

"I mean, how can you get to know someone? Really know them. If we can't share who we are, which is a sum of who we were, how can we understand? And what happens if we meet someone outside of the Department? Someone who thinks we are who we pretend to be. Are we destined to a life without true relationships?" Her fluttering hands tried to fill in the places words skipped over.

"Granger, you're overthinking it as usual. Do you judge a person by their looks or their deeds? By who they were or who they are now? I do not recall you participating in the superficial appearance-driven games of your peers as a student at Hogwarts, or were the bush of a hairstyle and perpetually ink-stained fingers merely a cover?"

Hermione was unsure whether a compliment lurked amongst his words but decided to accept it anyway. "No. I wasn't interested in make-up or hair or fashion. I had more important things to do. But how do I know whether the next friendly face I meet isn't..."

"Someone like me? An unpleasant prat, I believe you said last night."

She nodded.

"You don't. However, you will find the Glamours we use don't change the essence of who we are. I will be no Gilderoy Lockhart dandy, and you won't be tripping around as a gorgeous blonde. We only alter enough of our more obvious features to render us unrecognisable to those who may have known us. Of course, people see what they expect to see. We are dead, therefore no-one expects to see our faces.

"Everyone in the department appears as an age within ten years of their own, so you'll not find an aged pretender with a youthful face. We don't change our gender or our basic body shape. The magical energy involved would be too draining. The Glamour needs to be easily maintained even under duress." He saw the 'but' forming before her lips moved. "No. The spell we use is not reversed by *Finite Incantatem*. Watch."

Without wand or word, Snape's features altered into a face unrecognisable despite each feature having changed only fractionally. His eyes were lighter, less intense, and the dominant beak of a nose had softened and sat innocuously upon his face. His lips had become a little fuller, and his hair short and brown. It was the sort of face one would take and after a moment discard as without import. Neither handsome nor ugly, Snape had become forgettable, and with his new face, the loosening of his posture removed any hint of threat.

Hermione walked around him, studying the new Snape from all angles. "That's amazing! I can still see you, because I *know* it's you, but anyone else wouldn't have a clue."

"Don't get too excited, Granger. I'm still a bastard." The strange face smiled, but the voice was pure Snape.

"You sound the same."

"Only when I speak to you or Mellowes." The sudden change to the lilt of the Irish was flawless.

"That reminds me. We weren't Glamoured yesterday when we arrived. Anyone could have seen us."

"Could they?"

Hermione remembered then. "That strange movement you did with your hand after giving me your cloak. That was some sort of concealment charm."

"I'll show you before we leave the rooms. It maintains our visibility only to each other and Mellowes. He will teach you how to use your Glamour when we meet him in a few minutes, and thereafter you'll be expected to use it whenever you're likely to be seen by anyone but myself. Now, are you ready to go?"

"No. You still haven't answered my question. I accept that no-one in the Department will look substantially different to their own reality, and of course I agree that one's past should not be held against them. You're a prime example. I'm talking about your past deeds, *not* your personality. But, how do we get to know anyone else if we're constantly together?"

"This isn't a matchmaking service, girl. Did I not adequately explain the methods by which we are Chosen?" Patience exhausted, Snape made for the door, not bothering to show her the charm he used to conceal her identity.

"Snape! Wait!" She caught his sleeve before he opened the door. "I'm sorry. I know it sounds like I'm obsessed with finding a partner. I'm not. Merlin knows men have proven to be bloody shallow and fickle. I just need to know it's not beyond the bounds of possibility. Some day. Is that so much to ask?"

He turned and looked at her for long moments as if she had grown another head. With a shrug, he said, "Probably not. I can't say the idea had occurred to me before."

Without further comment, he led the way to Mellowes's office.

A/N: This was written for silverdoo in the 2011 SSHG Exchange on LiveJournal. Many thanks to karelia, who was my beta.

Chapter Three: Assigned

Chapter 3 of 6

Severus and Hermione make a start on their first assignment.

Disclaimer: They don't belong to me. Well, the ones you already know don't. I made the rest of 'em up.

Chapter Three: Assigned

The old man greeted them both with a smile and a pot of tea. "Well, well. Settling in, are we?"

Hermione nodded.

"Marvellous. Has Severus here explained the use of the Glamour?"

"Yes. But not how to apply it."

"No need. I will create your new image, and henceforth you simply need to use a nonverbal trigger to activate it. Now, stand here in the middle of the room while I decide what to do with you."

Snape settled himself into a well-worn leather sofa as Mellowes paced in a circle around Hermione, muttering to himself.

"The hair, the eyes, and the cheekbones should do it." Closing his eyes, he passed his hands over and around Hermione while singing an incantation in a language unfamiliar to her.

After five minutes, she felt a gentle tingle as the skin of her face tightened. Her eyes watered briefly, and her hair tugged and pulled.

"The hair is a definite improvement," was Snape's only comment.

Drawing her over to the side of the room, Mellowes presented a full-length mirror.

Reaching up to the short layers of straight dark hair, Hermione stared at her reflection. Her face looked thinner with more pronounced angles. Eyes hazel instead of rich brown, she looked like any number of young women she had passed on the Muggle High Street only two days earlier.

"My mother wouldn't recognise me."

"That is the point, Granger." Snape leaned back in the couch and addressed Mellowes. "I assume her voice will remain much the same."

"Indeed. Miss Granger's speech patterns have been analysed during our surveillance period, and she demonstrates reasonably standard usage of language and pronunciation for a well-educated lass of her age. Her voice character is not significantly different from most women of her generation, and she has no distinctive accent. I plan to simply alter her pitch a little." He beckoned Hermione to him. Placing his hands either side of her throat, he instructed her to recite the alphabet.

"A, B, C, D, E... now I sound like I have a cold."

"Too much?" Mellowes directed the question at Snape.

"A little. We don't want her enquiries to sound like an attempt at seduction."

"That's rich, coming from you," she said, her voice returning to only a little lower than her normal register.

Snape opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again as her comment registered. Shaking off the notion lingering in the air, he turned at the sudden knock on the door.

Mellowes waved Hermione to the sofa to sit beside Snape as he opened the door. "Ah, Matthews, do come in and meet our latest recruit, Angela Farmer. Angela, this is my assistant, Willoughby Matthews."

Matthews clasped Hermione's hand with his own slightly sweaty palm and glanced at her companion. "I see you've been assigned to work with Soren. Good luck. You'll need it."

"I'm sure Soren will be a pleasure to work with, Mr Matthews." Hermione turned and smiled at a bemused Snape, resting her hand on his knee. "He seems so charming."

"Er... well..." Matthews' pudgy cheeks were even more unattractive when bright red. He turned to his superior. "Anyway, sir, the boss wants to know who's available to look into an urgent matter." He handed a roll of parchment to Mellowes.

Hermione removed her hand as Snape's mocking gaze met hers. She shrugged and turned a polite face to the other two men in the room.

Mellowes looked up and spread his hands to encompass the pair on the couch. "I do believe I have just the team. Soren and Angela need an assignment to get them started. This will do nicely. Take them along to the planning room and give them their instructions, there's a good lad."

Snape shook his head. "Isn't it a little too soon to send Angela out into the field? We haven't had any opportunity to go over security and safety practices yet, and she's barely recovered from yesterday's incident."

Mellowes sent his assistant to wait outside before he spoke. "I have every faith in this young lady. She was a qualified Auror, so safety and security should not be an issue. She scored at or near the top of every practical exercise she did during her training. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement may have underutilised her skills, but we will not be that foolish. Angela, are you ready to tackle your first task as an Unspeakable?"

"I suppose so. I'd assumed there would be a period of training first."

"For the sort of problems you will face, your innate intelligence, creativity, and ability to think on your feet will serve you better than any amount of time in a classroom. Here, you'll be needing this." Mellowes reached into his top drawer and extracted a wand. "I believe it should function adequately."

Hermione took the wand. Eleven inches, a darker wood than her previous vine and more ornate with a spiralling motif of flames on the handle, the wand appeared to have the same dragon heartstring core. She flicked it experimentally at a book lying on the desk and felt her magic respond to the new wand. Sheer physical pleasure danced with her nerve endings as something she had never realised was missing clicked into place. She gasped her surprise.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Snape's voice was as seductive as the wand's response.

"Did you...?"

He nodded.

"How?"

"Unlike your old wand, which was a close approximation to your needs from the selection on Ollivander's shelves, the wand you will use as an Unspeakable has been handcrafted to suit you personally, using all the information gathered over years of observation. You'll find your spells more powerful and less draining than before, so use it wisely."

"So, it's like a bespoke suit. Made to measure." She grinned. "And it even has flames."

Snape scowled then. "Yes. Flames. You're rather renowned for them."

She had the grace to blush as she followed him out of the room.

Matthews led them to an office on the next floor where he handed over to an eager wizard wielding a clipboard and quill. The young man's wide smile faltered as he saw who had followed Matthews through the door.

"Ah... Soren... just the chap we need. And this is...?"

"Angela. First assignment."

"Oh, excellent. Pleased to meet you, Angela. My name is Rupert McWhinney. I'm in charge of assigning operations to each team and collating their reports."

"He's the boss's dogsbody." Hermione almost giggled at Snape's whispered commentary as she thrust out her hand to shake McWhinney's.

"We have a *situation*," McWhinney continued. "A *situation* of *gravest* implications. We need you two to investigate the problem and endeavour to correct it before *serious* consequences occur. This is a *situation* of *utmost urgency*."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Perhaps if you explain exactly what the *situation* is before next year, we might have some chance to deal with it?"

McWhinney spluttered and turned to the comfort of his clipboard. "Yes, well, I was about to get to that."

"Now's a good time." Even through his Glamour, Hermione could identify the expression feared by many a Potions student over the years.

"There seems to be a problem with the Muggle-Repelling spells in some magical areas. The barman at the Leaky Cauldron has had three Muggles wander through the door in the last two weeks, and only yesterday a pair of Swedish hitchhikers was found just outside Hogsmeade, well within the perimeter. Your assignment is to investigate these areas and examine the spellwork. Pay particular attention to Hogwarts. The discovery by Muggles of an intact castle there, even from a distance, would be a disaster. We have sent another team to the smaller wizarding communities to ascertain their security, but we need you to work on discovering the underlying cause."

Twenty minutes later, McWhinney escorted them to the door. Catching Hermione's sleeve as she passed, he pointed to Snape. "Good luck with *that* one, Angela. If you have any problems, feel free to contact me."

Hermione ensured her reply was loud enough for her partner to overhear. "I'm sure Soren will be quite amenable to work with. *He* is an intelligent, powerful wizard. I feel privileged to be partnered with him." Smiling sweetly at the gaping McWhinney, Hermione swung past an equally stunned Snape and proceeded up the corridor in what she hoped was the correct direction.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side." Snape caught up and steered her back the way they had come.

"Too late. You're always on my bad side."

"Then what was all *that* about? And before with the Matthews prat?"

Hermione looked around, ensuring they were alone. "Snape, for whatever reason I've been assigned as your partner. I didn't like you as a teacher, and I don't particularly like you now. You're abrupt, impatient, and sarcastic, but I'm stuck with you. And I'll be damned if I let pillocks like that denigrate you. If anyone is going to cast disparaging comments about Soren Whateveryourlastnameis, it'll be me. Understood?"

Snape's lip twitched. "I never saw you as a Hufflepuff, Granger."

"You never saw me as a person, Severus. I was just another annoying student, a Gryffindor, and a friend of Harry Potter. I doubt you saw *me* at all." She could not stop the bitterness coating the words.

His expression was unreadable as he studied her face. "I saw you, Hermione. I saw the eleven year old with no friends hiding in her books. I saw the thirteen year old desperately trying to learn everything there was to know and prove herself to her peers. I watched you transform at the Yule Ball and brewed potions for your injuries the following year. I saw you become a hardened fighter and use your intellect to assist Potter to victory. Don't tell me I did not see you, girl." He walked off, not waiting for a reply.

Hermione ran to catch up. "But..."

"I had a part to play. And you were still bloody irritating. Hand-waving, know-it-all, constantly whispering to Longbottom... irritating."

Her smile was soft, embarrassed. "I was, wasn't I?"

His smile took her by surprise.

Once they had changed into suitable Muggle attire, Snape lead them back to the central hall they had traversed the previous day. "This is the only Apparation point within this complex. It has wards attuned to all of our magical signatures, including yours, and in the unlikely event of any intruder appearing here, the hall would instantly seal off

until the duty team investigates and declares the area secure."

Hermione looked up at the staircase. "Same charm as the Hogwarts' girls' dormitories?"

"Similar. An unauthorised person will trigger the stairs to disappear when they are about halfway up."

She winced. "Ouch. But what if they bring a broom? Or can fly?" She looked pointedly in his direction.

"All possibilities have been considered and countermeasures put in place. Stop trying to outwit the security team and concentrate on the task in hand, woman."

"You're no fun, Snape."

"Fun is not in the job description. Now, the pub or Hogsmeade?"

"Might as well start with the Leaky Cauldron. It's nearly lunchtime. Hey, do we get a meal allowance?" Her question met empty air. Snape had Disapparated without a sound.

"Smart arse. I'll have to get him to teach me that." With a modest crack, she followed.

"It looks normal to me," Hermione said, studying the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron from across the street. "A somewhat dingy pub, sitting between a bookshop and a record shop, just like it's supposed to be." She watched the people passing by on the busy street, none apparently interested in the wizarding establishment. "But how do we know how it appears to Muggles when we are magical?"

"No idea, Granger. You're the Muggleborn in this partnership. Think Muggle."

"You're admitting you don't know something? I think I should record this for posterity."

"And tell whom?"

Hermione sighed. "No-one, dammit. Still, it was a nice thought." Suddenly, her face brightened, and she opened her ever-present beaded bag. "I'm sure I had one somewhere in here. There it is!" She brandished a small device.

"And what exactly is that?"

"It's a camera. If I take a photo, it should show us exactly what a Muggle would see."

Snape shook his head. "Too slow. We'll waste too much time finding somewhere to get the photos developed."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're a bit out of touch, aren't you? This is a digital camera. See the little screen? It will show me exactly what I've taken straight away. No need for developing. It's all electronic. Now, you stand there and look interesting while I pretend to take a photo of you."

Snape folded his arms and scowled. "Why can't you just take a photograph of the pub?"

"Because I'd look a right idiot taking photos of shops, wouldn't I? People are already starting to look at us."

He glanced around. Several curious Muggles had paused in their bustle to watch the odd couple arguing at the side of the street. "Very well. If I must." He moved to the edge of the footpath where Hermione could frame the Leaky Cauldron behind him and stared at her.

"Oh, smile, for Merlin's sake. Look like you want to have your photo taken!"

Snape huffed and flashed a cheesy grin. "Happy?" he asked between gritted teeth.

Hermione took several shots from different angles. "Ecstatic."

"Come along, dearies, I'm sure you'd like a picture together. On honeymoon, are we? Pass over the camera, and I'll take a few snaps for your album." The plump, middle-aged woman clucked her offer as she shifted her overstuffed handbag to her left arm.

"No, it's okay, we're..."

"Don't be shy, love. I've used one of these before. My Eric bought me one for Christmas last year. I even went to a night class to learn how to use it. Now, just stand over there with your nice gentleman, and it'll just take a jiffy."

Hermione shrugged and handed over the camera, ignoring Snape's glare. "It'll be quicker to agree. She means well," she whispered as she joined him.

"No, no. Put your arm around her, dear. There, that's a nice one. Now give her a wee kiss, just for Thelma. Go on. Lovely." The reddened cheeks of both man and woman went unnoticed as Thelma passed back the camera and made her way on down the street.

"Granger, remind me why we had to do that again."

Hermione's attention was fixed on the tiny camera screen as she flicked back through the images she and Thelma had taken. Her eyes widened as she reached the first few photos, and a laugh exploded from her lips despite her best efforts. "Oh, fuck, I could have made a fortune with this at Hogwarts if you weren't supposed to be dead."

Eyes narrowed, Snape stalked over to his partner. "What have you done?"

Stifling her errant amusement, Hermione showed him the image on the screen. "Did you realise these Glamours don't work for Muggles? I never thought I'd see Severus Snape with that sort of goofy smile on his face. Would you mind if I printed it out and framed it? It'll make me feel better when you're in one of your more charming moods."

In each photograph, Severus and Hermione appeared exactly as they were normally. Hermione thought the last picture with Severus placing a reluctant kiss on her cheek was particularly entertaining.

"We'll need to let Mellowes know of this. We rarely become involved with Muggles during our investigations, so it's not likely to be a major issue, but our colleagues need to be aware of it. More importantly, look at the pub." Snape pointed out the background in the first photograph.

"What about it? It looks normal."

"Exactly. It's not supposed to be noticed by Muggles. What's the matter with you, Granger? This was your idea in the first place."

Unwilling to admit just how distracted she had been by the lean body under his jacket and jeans and the warm lips upon her cheek, Hermione sought the safety of words. "But we don't know whether the Muggle-Repelling Charm on the Leaky Cauldron works for cameras, do we? I mean, maybe the Charm repels Muggles but doesn't actually change the appearance of the pub. How does the magical theory of those sorts of charms work anyway? I don't believe we ever studied them with Professor..."

"Granger."

"...Flitwick in any depth, just enough to learn how to cast..."

"Granger!"

"...them. Do you think we should find some books..."

"Hermione!"

Hermione blinked and stared at Snape. "Er... sorry."

"The enchantment over the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley is more complex than a mere Muggle-Repelling Charm. You were correct in your first assumption. The camera should have recorded the image of a grubby little building between the two shops, just as Muggles are supposed to see it. Now, I suggest we go inside and talk to Tom, and then move to Hogsmeade." He gestured with his hand for her to lead the way.

Once inside the pub, Hermione glanced towards the bar and immediately walked back out onto the street.

"What the hell are you doing? We need to be inside the building to ask questions." His temper barely controlled, Snape followed her outside.

Raising tear-filled eyes, Hermione shook her head. "I can't. It's Hannah Abbott behind the bar. I just spoke to her two days ago. How can I face her, knowing I'm deceiving her?"

"You can, and you will." He lifted a hand almost to her cheek, then dropped it to his side. "You'll get used to it, Hermione. You'll hear them talk about you, about what a decent person you were, and what a pity they hadn't made more of an effort to get to know you, and then they'll move on to the latest Quidditch scores or gossip about the latest scandal. Trust me. You'll manage."

"How long did it take you?" she asked.

"Forever... and no time at all." He turned and pushed the door open again. "Coming?"

A/N: This was written as a gift for silverdoe in the 2011 SSHG Exchange. Thanks to karelia for her beta advice.

Chapter Four: Identified

Chapter 4 of 6

Severus and Hermione follow another lead on their first assignemnt together.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. Blame me for the rest.

Chapter Four: Identified

Hermione followed Snape back into the Leaky Cauldron. "I'm Angela Farmer. I'm Angela Farmer. I'm..."

"About to be committed to St Mungo's if you keep that up."

With a thin-lipped smile and a great deal of willpower, Hermione quelled her anxiety. Deciding to use Thelma's misconception to their advantage, she stepped up beside Snape and wrapped her left arm around his waist. Looking up into his startled face, she smiled. "Soren, darling, we must stop for a drink before we go shopping."

A soft snort disguised as a cough was his only reply. Placing his right arm across her shoulders, Snape steered her towards the bar.

Hannah Abbott's smile welcomed them as she wiped the bar and placed two coasters at the ready. "Good morning, sir, madam. Will you be wanting a bite to eat, or can I get you a drink?" she asked.

"Two butterbeers, please."

"Coming right up." She turned to fetch two glasses and poured the drinks. "There you are. Would you like anything else?"

Snape handed over some coins. "Just one thing. I heard some Muggles were seen in here recently. Does that happen often?"

"How did you know about that?" Hannah's easy-going friendliness froze into suspicion.

"Let's just say I have been asked to make a few enquiries."

"Are you an Auror? I haven't seen you around here before." The barmaid frowned and stepped back a little from the bar.

"Something like that. Now, what can you tell me?" Snape's eyes held the girl transfixed as he took a long drink, then slowly curled his lips into a smile that promised everything and nothing.

Hannah's shoulders lowered, and she offered a small smile in return. "We... we don't know. We've kept the spellwork refreshed, just like we were taught. But they wandered in anyway, looking around and staring at our customers. We could tell they were Muggles by their clothes and the way they jumped when someone arrived through the Floo. Tom had to call in the Aurors while I kept them talking. It's happened three times recently. Very disruptive it was."

"Was it any particular time of the day?"

"No. One was about ten in the morning, one at lunchtime, and the last one was just as we were closing up the bar at night. And they were all different. An older man who looked like an office worker in a shirt and tie. A young woman dressed in leather with hair sticking up all over the place. And the man last night was definitely drunk. He

could barely stay upright." Hannah glanced anxiously at the front door, as if expecting another Muggle to arrive at any moment. "They won't close us down, will they?"

"Not if we can help it, Miss..." Snape's soft Irish lilt soothed and calmed the agitated witch.

"Abbott. Hannah Abbott."

"We'll keep you informed, Miss Abbott. And keep your eyes open for any more uninvited guests. You're doing a fine job getting the Aurors here before any harm has been done."

She beamed. "Thank you, sir. But who did you say you worked for?"

"I didn't." Snape drained his glass and nodded farewell to Hannah. Capturing Hermione's hand in his, he pulled her out of the door and onto the street.

"Hey, what's the rush? I wasn't finished with my drink!" Hermione fought to claim back her hand without success.

"Angela, my sweet, I was merely overcome with the need to be alone with you." He lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles as he flicked a glance behind him at the closing pub door. "And I didn't want her asking too many questions."

Ignoring the faint tingle left by his lips, Hermione dared to tease. "Oh. Pity. I was rather looking forward to finding out what plans you had for me."

"Plans? What are you on about?"

"Once you had me alone..."

"Granger!"

She swallowed her laughter. "Oh, settle down, you tosser. Do you have to take everything so seriously?"

"You were the one who was falling to pieces a few minutes ago. Have you had these mood swings for long?"

"Only since I had the good fortune to run into you yesterday. Do you think there's a connection?" Her flippant words lingered in the air between them for long moments, expanding to fill the silence as Snape bowed his head and dropped the hand he still clasped in his own.

"Hogsmeade," he said, avoiding eye contact as he Disapparated.

"Wait! Dammit, Snape, I didn't mean it!" But empty space was her only companion.

"Snape, listen..." Hermione followed his long strides down the path which led away from Hogsmeade. "I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. Severus!"

"What!" He turned and folded his arms, grey eyes narrowed and cold.

"Would you stop for a moment? I'm trying to apologise, for heaven's sake. I don't know what came over me. The whole thing with Hannah was so surreal; I suppose I was just making jokes to avoid thinking about it all. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." Hermione continued walking until she was only a foot away from the silent man. Grasping her nerve in both hands, she moved even closer and wrapped both arms around his waist. "Thank you," she whispered into his shirt front as she hugged the only connection she had to her previous life.

Slowly, Snape's muscles relaxed, and for a tiny window of time he allowed himself to lean into another's warmth. Had Hermione looked up at that moment, she would have seen an unfamiliar expression on Severus Snape's borrowed face.

"Come on," he said, voice for once gentle. "We need to check the path."

Disengaging himself from her embrace, Snape turned and walked ahead, allowing Hermione time to gather her thoughts. She followed him along an overgrown path she had never used before.

"Where does this go?"

"Hopefully nowhere. This is an old bridle path that no-one ever uses, but it was the path the Muggle hitchhikers were seen on. If I've calculated correctly, it should take us only twenty minutes to find where they stumbled onto it."

Nineteen minutes later, they pushed through a particularly vigorous bush that had almost obscured the path to find themselves at the edge of what looked like a well-used Muggle country lane. Snape looked both ways and frowned for a moment, then set off to the right. Within a few hundred yards, he had led them to a junction with a major road.

"This is where they must have come from. I imagine they were dropped off here, then decided to wander down the lane and explore."

"But what made them choose the bridle path?"

"Follow me." He walked back to where they had exited from the woods. "See? From here the entrance to the path is quite obvious. If they saw what we see..."

Hermione had stopped to fossick around in her bag. "Hold on a minute. I'll just get my camera."

The photo confirmed their suspicions. The path was just as visible in the picture as it was to their wizarding eyes.

"Is this where the boundary of the spellwork should be?" she asked, reaching out with her inner magical sense to feel for any disruptions in the local environment.

"Here or somewhere close by. The wizards who originally set up the spells would not have wanted random Muggles wandering halfway down the path before they changed their minds." He joined Hermione in her seeking. "There. I can feel something, but it's weak."

"I've got it. It doesn't feel right, though. Not just weak, but off somehow. Severus, it's not like the problem with the Floo system, is it? Has the original caster died recently, perhaps?"

"In that case, these enchantments would have failed centuries ago. The village was founded by Hengist Woodcroft over a thousand years ago. The wards were put in place at the same time as those at Hogwarts and designed to be self-sustaining. The spells guarding the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley were created much more recently, only two hundred years or so ago."

As one they looked at each other in horror. "Hogwarts!"

"Fuck! If the wards have failed here..." Snape turned and dashed into the woods.

"... They're likely to have failed at Hogwarts." Hermione ran after him.

Arriving back at the junction of the bridle path and the path to Hogwarts, Hermione ran into Snape's back as he stopped abruptly.

"Oof! Did you have to stop like that?" she asked.

Snape did not reply. Breathing heavily, he simply shook his head.

Realising he'd stopped to get his breath, Hermione giggled despite the seriousness of the situation. "Not as fit as you used to be, old man?"

"Not so much of the old, girl. Some of us have been working while you Aurors ran fitness sessions." He turned and continued down the path.

Hermione's good humour melted away drop by drop as she followed him past increasingly familiar territory. The side path to the Shrieking Shack where she and Ron had laughed helplessly as an invisible Harry had pelted Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle with snowballs. The tree under which they'd sat one spring day and eaten sweets from Honeydukes until they felt sick. The spot where Katie Bell had succumbed to the cursed necklace. She stopped and slowly circled, remembering all the good times back when she had hopes and dreams and friends.

When Snape realised his partner had stopped, he looked back to find her face crumpling and her body sagging. Her grief for her past was emotional and physical and supremely uncomfortable, but he felt something respond deep within him. Walking back to join her, he slung an arm across her shoulders. "Cheer up, Granger, you still have me."

A watery smile was his reward as she replied, "Just what I always dreamed of. Still, you haven't been too much of a git in the last hour or so. I suppose you might be redeemable." She leaned against him a little more than was necessary as they continued to walk towards the castle together.

Gazing at the photograph clearly showing Hogwarts castle, Snape cursed under his breath. "It's worse than I thought. Hogwarts has the strongest concealment wards in the wizarding world. If they're failing here, no-one is safe. We need to report this back to McWhinney immediately, so he can get authorisation for us to act without restriction. This could be the downfall of our society if Muggles manage to gain free access to our communities."

Hermione caught his arm as he was about to Apparate away. "Wait. Maybe there is something else you can do before we go."

"Such as?"

"Well, you were headmaster here for a year."

"Not a time I like to remember, Granger."

"I wouldn't imagine so, but I wonder, would the wards still respond to you?"

He nodded, at first slowly, then with more confidence. "Possibly. The magic here is complex. I might be able to access the wards."

"How? Do you need to be in the headmaster's office? That could be a problem."

"No. Just in contact with the grounds. I'll just..." He gasped as he reached to touch the gates and they swung open. "Well, that worked." He walked through the gates, tugging Hermione with him. "Here should do." Snape closed his eyes and spread his hands out at his sides. Concentration furrowed his brow, tiny droplets of sweat beading on his skin as he communed with the very magic that imbued all of Hogwarts.

Hermione watched as Snape struggled to maintain his connection. Making a sudden decision, she reached out and clasped his hands, yielding her own magic into the equation.

The power swirled around the witch and wizard at the gates, dancing and teasing, losing them in its thrall.

Snape broke off first. Staggering back, he sank to the grass and dropped his head onto his knees. Once his racing heart was under some semblance of control, he lifted his head to find Hermione studying him with a curious expression.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Feed your magic into mine. That should be impossible." He frowned. "No-one can transfer magic to another person. What exactly did you do?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. You looked like you were having difficulty, and I just instinctively knew what to do. It worked, didn't it?"

"But it shouldn't have. Our magic is very personal and individual. It is rarely compatible with another's."

Hermione brushed the conundrum aside. "Never mind that. What did you discover?"

"Nothing much more than we had already surmised. The wards are weakened but still holding. I don't think any Muggles would get past the gates even if they did see a castle there. But there was one odd thing. They seemed... off... almost tainted."

"Tainted? With what?"

"I'm not sure. I need to assess them further." He looked at Hermione. "Will you...?"

"Of course." She moved closer and held out her arms. Snape reached out with his hands. "No. Get closer." She wrapped her arms around his waist and spoke into his chest. "This should make the connection stronger."

More than physical warmth assailed Snape as Hermione embraced him yet again. Few people had ever felt comfortable enough with him to encourage physical contact, and this woman had done so with increasing impunity over the last few hours. Resting his head on her curls, he felt the sweetness and purity of her magic lifting his spirit and heightening the awareness of her body pressed to his. The addition of his own darker power made for a heady mix, and only with the use of all his formidable willpower was he able to concentrate enough to channel a tendril deep into the wards of Hogwarts Castle and explore the changes he had felt on his first attempt.

"As I live and breathe, Severus Snape! And if I'm not mistaken, Hermione Granger. What do you two think you're doing canoodling at the school gates when you're both supposed to be dead?"

A/N: This was written for silverdove for the 2011 SSHG Exchange. Thank you to karelia for her beta advice.

Chapter Five: Researched

Chapter 5 of 6

Hermione and Severus meet an old friend and do some research on their case.

Disclaimer: The characters and settings belong to JKR. I made up the plot bit.

Chapter Five: Researched

As Minerva McGonagall's scolding penetrated his consciousness, Snape stepped back from Hermione and dropped his arms, shaking his head as his magic readjusted to the loss of hers. "Minerva? I... we... How did you know who we were?" He glanced at Hermione, whose glamour was still intact, and felt his own still short hair.

"The wards, Severus. Only a current headmaster of Hogwarts has full and complete access to the wards. When you disappeared, I was appointed headmistress, but my control over the wards has always been limited. You have no idea what problems that caused during the rebuilding, young man!"

"I had assumed the headship had passed to the new incumbent with my apparent demise."

"Obviously the castle knew more than we did. It clearly still believes you to be headmaster. I always suspected something was amiss when your portrait never woke, but assumed you had no desire to return to the scene where you had spent so much of your life under duress. When the wards were activated, there was only one person who could have been responsible. Your Glamour will not fool someone who is specifically looking for you."

"Which does not explain how you recognised Granger."

Minerva McGonagall allowed a most unheadmistresslike snort escape her. "You can thank Albus for that. He revealed long ago how Unspeakables, which I assume you two must be, are Chosen. I admit I have long cherished the hope that you had been Chosen, Severus, but I had often chided myself for being a foolish, delusional old woman. When I heard this morning of Hermione's disappearance, the thought entered my mind she may have been a candidate for the Department of Mysteries, along with a deep feeling of guilt knowing her supposed friends and I had neglected her badly enough for that to occur." She turned to Hermione. "It was an educated guess, but once you turned your face to me I knew it was correct."

Hermione reached out to clasp Minerva's hand. "You shouldn't feel guilty, Professor, my social isolation was mostly my own doing. Once my relationship with Ron and Harry failed, I tried to avoid them, which meant avoiding most of the rest of my friends as well."

"All this is very touching, but may I remind you we have a job to do?" Snape studied Minerva, assessing how much it was safe to reveal.

"She can help us, Snape. The Hogwarts library might contain the information we need to understand the wards," Hermione said in a low whisper.

"Very well." Snape nodded and turned back to his erstwhile colleague. "Minerva, have you noticed any change in the wards lately?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. They have appeared to fluctuate in strength over the last few weeks, but I've been unable to determine why. I did, however, place an alert of my own to warn me if there was any unusual activity around the castle wards, which is how I knew you were here."

"Professor, the same thing has been happening at Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, and Muggles have been found in places they should not have been able to see." Hermione pointed towards the castle. "The school will not remain safe if we can't work out the source of the problem and correct it. There might be some useful information in the Restricted Section of the library, if you will allow us access."

Snape smirked. "You've always wanted an excuse to have free reign in there, Granger."

"She's right, Severus. It's your best source of information about the wards. I may also have some useful books in my office amongst Albus's collection. If you wish to come with me now, I'll let you into the library. The students don't return from their Easter break until next week, and Irma is away as well, so you'll have privacy to work."

Together, the three made their way up to the castle, a journey of both joy and pain reflected in the faces of both Unspeakables. Minerva, walking between them, felt the tension grow as they neared the huge, oak door to the Entrance Hall.

"It's always difficult the first time back," she said, her voice warm with understanding.

Hermione choked on guilt as she replied. "I should have come back sooner, to help with the rebuild at least, but I was trying to find my parents, and after that... I couldn't face it. Seeing the place where so many people had died... Seeing the castle so damaged. I just couldn't."

A strong arm pulled her close as she allowed tears to flow. Snape had his own demons to battle. "That year as headmaster, Minerva, I tried to protect the children as well as I could. I know you and the others didn't understand, but I had to do what I did."

With words insufficient to expiate their perceived sins, Minerva McGonagall enfolded them both into her forgiveness and love, holding them tight for long moments as they came to terms a little with their pasts.

"I think a drop of tea and some lunch would be in order, don't you?" The headmistress led them up to her office and settled them into comfortable armchairs at the fireplace before summoning a house-elf to provide much-needed sustenance.

"Now, you two start eating while I check Albus's private collection for anything pertaining to the castle wards." She smiled as she headed up the spiral stairs to her study.

Silence reigned for a few minutes while tea was poured and sandwiches consumed. As Snape relaxed into the welcome warmth of the room, so different to the atmosphere during his tenure, he felt Hermione's eyes on his face.

"What?"

She didn't bother dissembling. "I was just wondering. Before Professor McGonagall interrupted, had you discerned anything about the state of the wards?"

Snape leaned forward, finishing his last mouthful before he spoke. "Yes."

"And?"

"And what?"

Hermione almost growled in frustration. "You can be infuriatingly obtuse sometimes, Snape. What did you find out?"

"And you can be exceptionally easy to bait."

"Snape!"

His almost-smile widened. "All right. The wards appear to be weak because they are out of balance. I couldn't determine what exactly needs to be balanced, but it seems to have begun around five years ago and has recently escalated to the point where they are failing. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's also affecting the other areas in the same way."

Hermione thought a moment, then met his eyes to find a similar spark of insight.

"The final battle. That started it all. Why do you think it has taken five years to reach a critical point?"

"I have no idea, Granger. I hope the books you hold such store by will help."

At that moment, Minerva returned, carrying several hefty tomes. "These are all I could find. There are two books specifically dealing with the history of the castle wards and three more on warding in general. I suggest you take them all down to the library and check for any similar reference material there."

Snape stood and brushed a few crumbs from his jacket. "Shall we?" he asked.

Many hours later, Snape closed the final book and tossed his quill to one side. "I think we've exhausted the information available here, Granger. I suggest we return to Mute House and continue our research there."

"Mute House?"

"Where we live. Some wit decided it needed a name many years ago."

"He called that wit?"

"*She* was the Head Unspeakable at the time."

"She didn't get to that position by virtue of her creativity then?"

"You could do better?"

"The Lost Cause?"

"Now you're being the snark."

"It's the company I keep." Hermione glanced down as her stomach loudly protested the length of time since lunch.

"It sounds like I'm just in time. You mustn't allow him to work you so hard, Hermione. He was always one for skipping meals when he was elbow deep in research." Minerva brushed aside Hermione's protests and chivvied them both back to her office where a substantial meal awaited.

After a surprisingly pleasant interlude of good food and conversation, Minerva escorted Snape and Hermione to the gate. Turning to Snape, she spread her arms and said, "I know you have to, but before you do, will you answer one question and put an old biddy out of her misery?"

Snape nodded.

"What were you doing when I found you at the gates earlier?"

"Granger was helping me access the wards by feeding me some of her power."

"But that's not possible. No-one has been able to join their powers in that way for hundreds of years. What is going on between you two?"

"Nothing untoward, Minerva; I was only informed Granger was to be my partner three days ago, so you can rest your overprotective Gryffindor sensibilities. I understand our ability to link magic as little as you do. It's something we must also research, but at the moment it's of minor importance. Now, are you ready?"

"No, not yet. I have one more thing to say, Severus."

"Enlighten us then, woman; we have more work to do before the end of the day."

"I merely wanted to tell you both how proud I am to have known you and wish you well for the future. I know the wizarding world will be safer in your hands." She turned to Hermione and embraced her briefly. "Goodbye, dear girl. Watch out for Severus for me; he's rather dreadful at looking after himself." Facing Severus, she added, "And you take care of Hermione. She's not as tough as she thinks she is." With a tear in her eye, Minerva McGonagall kissed Snape on the cheek. "Do it now; I'm ready."

Hermione caught Snape's sleeve as he raised his wand. "No, you can't do this! Surely there's another way?"

"There isn't," he replied, shaking her hand off and completing the spell. "*Oblivate!*"

As Minerva slumped to the ground, Snape took Hermione's hand and Apparated them back to Mute House.

"Oblivate? *Oblivate?* I thought you were going to..."

"Spare me the hysterics, Granger. Do you really think I would do that?"

"I don't know what to think half the time. Did she have to have her memory of us wiped?"

"Standard Unspeakable policy, which you would know if Mellows had allowed you time to learn the procedures. In the event of any recognition, or even suspicion, from anyone we knew previously, memory alteration is to be used. We must *not* be known to be alive. By anyone. Minerva knew; presumably Albus told her that as well."

"Yet another positive aspect of the job. If anyone cares enough to recognise me, they get their minds fried. Oh, joy."

"Get used to it, Granger. The same applies to everyone else here, even the boss." He turned and headed up the stairs. "Come on; we need to report our findings to McWhinney."

Two weeks later, Hermione had discovered many things. She had unearthed Snape's sense of humour, dry as a desert and just as harsh. She had found she didn't mind his company and secretly looked forward to their after dinner conversations. Even their frequent arguments were more satisfying and certainly more exhilarating than her previous dull existence.

The knowledge that her ex-professor was not a naturally tidy person came as a surprise, along with his inability to cook. Food was too imprecise according to her partner. However, despite all the information she was accumulating about Severus Snape, no enlightenment had followed on the wards issue.

"Dammit, Snape! What are we doing wrong? There must be something we're missing." She threw her quill to one side and dropped her head to the desk with a thump.

"Giving yourself concussion is hardly a solution, Granger. You'd be better to employ some of that fancy Arithmancy you were so proud of as a student."

Hermione looked up and frowned. "Say that again."

"You'd have more luck trying Arithmancy than knocking yourself out, woman."

Her sudden laugh and kiss on his forehead stunned Snape into silence for once.

"You brilliant, brilliant man! Why didn't I think of that before?" Hermione immediately took a fresh sheet of parchment and began filling it with figures and symbols.

"What exactly are you doing? Have you completely lost your mind, Granger?"

She shook her head, never lifting her eyes off her work. "Arithmancy, Snape. That's what we were missing. I just need to put all the information we've discovered into the right equation, and I should get an indication of the cause of the ward failure. We already know *when* it started, and we know *where* the effect is occurring and the end result. Hopefully, that's enough to calculate *why*."

Snape leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "I'll leave you to it then. Arithmancy was never my strong suit."

"Bollocks, Snape. You achieved an Outstanding in your N.E.W.T.s for that subject. You just don't want to admit I might be on to something."

"How do you know what my N.E.W.T.s scores were? Taking an undue interest, were you, Granger?" He smirked.

"Hardly. I wanted to see how my own overall grades compared with previous high scores. I beat yours by two points."

"Know-it-all!"

"Git! Now, go and brew a pot of tea, assuming you can boil the water without burning the kettle. Pretend you're in a potions lab and not in a kitchen. That might help." She waved him away as the numbers on her page started dancing and twirling in response to her silent lead.

A/N: This was written for silverdoe for the 2011 SSHG Exchange on LiveJournal. Many thanks to my beta, karelia.

Chapter Six: Connected

Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione and Severus solve the problem, and find out something else in the process.

Disclaimer: They belong to JKR. All of them. Sob, sob!

Chapter Six: Connected

"I've got it!" Hermione jumped up from her desk, brandishing a piece of parchment. "It's so bloody obvious; we should have thought of it before."

Snape roused from his doze on the couch, having long since given up watching her work. "What's obvious?"

"The wards. They're out of balance due to all the Dark Magic used during the war with Voldemort. That's why the problem is so pronounced at Hogwarts. Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were exposed to some Death Eater activity, but nothing like that at Hogwarts. I'd be willing to bet if we checked Malfoy Manor, the same problems will be occurring there."

"But Lucius would never admit to any deficiencies in his wards, so it has never been reported." Snape rolled over the implications in his mind. "If it was the Dark Magic used in the war that caused the problem, why hasn't it become evident until now?"

Hermione pointed to some obscure figures on her parchment. "Because, as you can see here, the damage caused a slow decay of the wards, not an outright failure. They have only now deteriorated enough to cause a breakdown in their function."

Snape leaned over her shoulder and studied her figures. He could not refute her conclusion. "We only need to find a source of pure, light magic, and the problem will be solved. Any ideas?"

Hermione forgot the pleasant, warm sensation of his chest against her back when inspiration struck. "Of course! We need Neville!"

"Tell me you don't mean Longbottom."

Snape's sudden withdrawal left her oddly bereft. "Of course I mean Neville Longbottom. He's started a business developing gardens of magical plants for wealthy customers."

"I thought he was Pomona Sprout's apprentice."

"He was. But I heard he enjoyed teaching even less than you did. He left Hogwarts last year to start his own nursery."

"And how is that of any use?"

"Simple. We advise the Ministry to commission Neville to design gardens for Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, and Hogsmeade. By only using the most magically pure and positive plants and flowers, they should redress the balance of negative energy left by the Dark Magic used in the past."

"I suppose you want unicorns and other creatures imported into the gardens as well." Snape remained unconvinced.

"That's ridiculous. They live in forests, not gardens. But there's no reason not to try and find some more unicorns to populate the Forbidden Forest. The numbers there have been very low since the final battle." Hermione succumbed to the yawn that had been threatening for the last two hours.

Snape reached for the parchment and gently tugged it from her grasp. Placing it back on the desk, he took her shoulders and steered her towards her bedroom. "Forget unicorns, Granger, it's time we were in bed," he said.

Hermione leaned back into the firm length of his body and sighed. "I thought you'd never ask."

With a start, he stepped back, blushing. "I didn't mean... I wasn't... Dammit, Hermione... Why are you laughing?"

"You're so easy to bait, Snape," she replied, using his own words against him as she entered her room. Blowing him a kiss, she closed the door on his scowl, only then allowing the assumed mirth to dissolve. Slumping against the door, Hermione bowed her head and wished away with all her might her fatigue-induced comment. Turning it into a joke had been her only defence from the scorn she had been sure would follow, but the fleeting glimpse of hurt in his eyes as she had closed the door lingered with her for hours until sleep finally claimed her.

Guilt cloaked Hermione's shoulders the next morning as she entered their shared living space. Prepared to apologise for her thoughtless words the previous evening, she found Snape seated at the dining table, enjoying his breakfast with little evidence of bruised feelings.

"Good morning, Granger." He barely looked up from his plate.

"Good morning, Severus." The use of his given name yielded a raised eyebrow. She stumbled on. "About last night. I'm sorry. I was very tired, and I didn't think. Please forgive me."

He waved away her apology. "Nothing to forgive. You don't like me, and I find you annoying. Nothing has changed. Now, eat your breakfast so we can go and visit your friend."

Hermione pushed her disappointment to one side as she filled her plate. "Shouldn't we obtain approval from McWhinney first before we approach Neville?"

"Probably, but I can't stand the overeager fool. Are you going to eat those eggs or just destroy them? I assure you they were brought by a house-elf. I have no intention of poisoning you... today."

Hermione ate her breakfast in silence, stealing glances at her partner's face between mouthfuls. The man who had become almost relaxed in her presence had been replaced by the old, inscrutable spy.

"Do you need me to do this, Granger?" Snape asked as they entered Neville Longbottom's greenhouse.

"No. I can do it. You'll probably scare poor Neville witless even while wearing that face."

Snape scowled. "I doubt it's possible for that young man to become any more witless."

Hermione spun on her heel and faced Snape. "Stop it! There's no need to keep up the greasy git act now. I know damn well you're a better man than that. Do you really have to try so hard to make people dislike you?"

"No, it comes naturally. And there's Longbottom, so get on with it."

Throwing him her 'I'll deal with you later' look, Hermione approached Neville. "Good morning, Nev..." Snape kicked her ankle. "Mr Longbottom. May we speak with you for a moment?"

Neville's warm smile was almost her undoing. "Certainly." He wiped his hands on a cloth tucked into his work robes and thrust one out.

"You obviously know who I am, but I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"Farmer. Angela Farmer. And this is Soren Flynn. We work for the Department of Mysteries, and we have a vital project we need your help with."

"You're Unspeakables? Brilliant! I've always wanted to meet an Unspeakable. But what can I do for you?"

"First, swear a wand oath not to reveal anything we tell you."

Neville had his wand out without further question. After submitting to the oath, he listened as she explained the damage to the wards and its inevitable outcome.

"That's terrible, but how can I help?"

"By creating the most beautiful, pure gardens you've ever made in the affected areas to provide a focus of positive magical energy to offset the Dark Magic accumulated there. We've calculated the size of the gardens we'll need. Of course, the project will be funded by the Ministry."

"Is that all?" Neville beamed. "I can save the wizarding community from detection by Muggles simply by doing what I love? I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not, Longbottom; we don't need your faith, just your expertise." Snape cut Neville short, earning a glare from his partner.

Contrary to Hermione's expectation, Neville didn't miss a beat, ignoring Snape's comment as he fished in his apron for a quill and a piece of parchment on which to take notes. "Where would you like me to start?" he asked. "I have several plots of seedlings almost ready for planting out which I think could be suitable. Come this way, and I'll show you."

Within a short time, they had given Neville the locations and sizes required for the new gardens and discussed possible planting combinations. Snape's knowledge of Herbology should not have surprised Hermione, but his interest in the attributes of various flowers astounded her. Once he had forgotten his previous animosity to the young man, he strolled around the greenhouse pointing out specimens and viewing Neville's suggestions without so much as a pointed remark passing his lips.

Leaving Neville happily planning his gardens, Snape and Hermione Apparated back to Mute House.

"We should report our plans to McWhinney." Snape headed up the stairs, unaware his partner was not following until he turned at the top to find her still standing in the hall with arms folded and expression fierce. "What?"

"I'm just wondering what part of the word 'partnership' you don't understand, Snape." She frowned. "Is it the equality part, or is it the cooperation part?"

He stalked back down the stairs. "What exactly are you blathering on about?"

"Your inability to understand we are a team. You don't get to issue orders anymore, *Professor*."

"You don't think we should report in? Fine. I'd rather open a bottle of Firewhisky and get completely pissed than spend an hour listening to McWhinney prate on."

"No, you great pillock. I mean we should take a little time to write up our findings and plan of action so it can be presented properly. At the moment, we're still working off these scribbled notes and rough drawings." Hermione brandished her sheaf of parchment, which admittedly looked like a bludger had taken to it.

Snape sighed. "Still trying to prove you're the brightest witch of your age, aren't you, Granger? Well, I can put your overeager mind to rest. You are. You know it. I know it. Minerva knows it. Merlin, even Argus Filch was heard to say what a smart young woman you were once. Although he'd probably turn in his broom rather than admit it."

"I'm not trying to..." Hermione's mind suddenly took in the rest of his words. "Really? Mr Filch? *You?*"

"I may have been cynical and a little biased, but I wasn't stupid. You solved that damned logic puzzle of mine at eleven! That was supposed to keep out adult wizards."

"It didn't stop Quirrel."

"He had Voldemort riding around in his head; it was as unnatural as you were."

"Sweet words won't make me like you any better, Snape. I'm going back to our quarters to tidy up these notes. Come and get yourself completely pissed if you so desire or stay here and commune with the stonework until I'm finished. I don't really care either way."

In the end, they compromised. Snape helped her sort out the notes and present their findings to a suitably impressed McWhinney, and Hermione helped him finish the bottle of Old Ogden's to celebrate completing their first assignment.

"You know, you really have to stop thinking you are the leader in this partnership. There's no I in partnership, you know." Hermione tipped the bottle upside-down in vain, but some greedy bastard had drunk all the Firewhisky.

"There issho. And you shaid 'you know' twice." Snape frowned at his empty glass and tossed it into the fireplace.

"Issho what?"

"Dunno." Snape, balance somewhat impaired, had developed a significant lean towards his partner's side of the couch. He turned to find her head under his nose and sniffed her hair.

"Mmm, delicious."

"Stop that! It's creepy!" She struggled to sit up but fell back against a lovely, muscular shoulder.

"No, ish nice." He stroked her hair and lifted up a curl. After a few minutes of serious contemplation, he made an announcement. "S'curly. Like pubic hair."

Hermione giggled. "I bet yoursh ish shtraight. Wouldn't dare to curl."

He frowned. "No... Don't think sho. Wait. I'll check." He fumbled with his trousers. "See. Curly, just like... Grangsher, why are you staring at me like that?"

Hermione lifted a finger to his mouth. It was intended to reach his nose, but after half a bottle of Firewhisky her aim was a little off. In his attempt to prove his assertion, Snape had confirmed another oft-debated theory. Nose size mattered.

A lot.

Hermione woke to the pounding on the door.

"Whassat?" She tried to sit up, only to find herself entangled in a pair of long, naked arms and two equally naked legs. It only took a moment of head-splitting concentration to realise she was in a similar state and the pounding came from inside her head.

Groaning, she turned her head to find her partner awake and far more alert than she felt.

"Fuck. We didn't?" Hermione felt stickiness where it had no right to be. "Fuck, we did. What was I thinking?"

"You weren't. Neither was I. We were intoxicated." Roughened by alcohol and sleep, his voice had never sounded sexier.

"I thought men couldn't do the deed when they were drunk." Hermione noticed neither of them had moved, but decided not to mention it.

"Wizards are not ordinary men, Granger." One of his hands had drifted down her back and was gently caressing her bum while the other teased the side of one breast.

"No need to sound so proud of yourself." She squirmed as a distinct pressure jabbed perilously close to where she'd suddenly decided it needed to be. A not so subtle shift of her pelvis brought an evil smirk to Snape's face.

"Still not thinking, Granger? I thought you didn't like me?" His hips rocked back and forth a fraction, just enough to torment.

"I don't. You're arrogant, domineering, and sarcastic. You like to think you're in charge, and your idea of tidiness leaves a lot to be desired. And if you don't put that where it belongs this minute I'll... I'll..."

"You'll what?" Another rock. A mere half inch separated them.

She could feel the heat of him, poised, twitching, eager to comply with her wishes, too close, yet too far away. "Severus! Fuck me now, and we'll sort out how stupid we were later, dammit!"

"As you wish."

And even in the cold light of day with heads pounding from the after effects of the night before it was noisy and sweaty and slippery and fantastic.

"Hangover Potion?" He stood there, naked and unashamed, holding out a vial.

"Please." Swallowing the bitter liquid, Hermione ran her reddened eyes over the man before her, lingering on the tangle of curls at his groin and his still semi-erect penis. "I suppose there are some parts of you that pass muster. Doesn't mean I like you."

His bark of laughter surprised her. "No, I don't suppose it does. I can live with that."

As his head lowered to claim her lips, Hermione decided that, for the moment, she could too.

Mission complete.

A/N: This was written for silverdoe for the 2011 SSHG Exchange on Livejournal. Karelia kindly did the beta work; she's a real gem!