

On Veelas, Light and Dark

by linlawless

A heart-broken Hermione seeks solace in the library, where she learns more than she ever expected about things – and people – she couldn't have predicted.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

A heart-broken Hermione seeks solace in the library, where she learns more than she ever expected about things – and people – she couldn't have predicted.

A/N: This story is a long (and I do mean looooooong it's from the Autumn 2011 SSHG Gift Exchange, not the Winter 2012 one) overdue Exchange Bingo Prize for kerravonsen. I have a complete draft of the story (eleven chapters plus an epilogue), and I plan to post one chapter per week for the next 12 weeks. I'll post the prompt at the end. Thanks for your patience, kerravonsen, and I hope you like the result!

Chapter 1

"How could he have left me for that *thatgirl*?" Hermione sobbed. "I mean, I know she's *beautiful and graceful and sweet*, but what about our *history*? He's supposed to be my *best friend*! Would you leave your best friend for some stupid *bimbo*?"

"No, of course not, Hermione," Ginny said. It was, after all, the only possible response in the circumstances. "If you ask me, *he's* the bimbo and you're well rid of him. Look, Hermione, the ice cream is melting. Have some more."

"But what's wrong with *me*?" Hermione asked around a spoonful of Haagen Dazs strawberry. "Why doesn't he love *me*?"

"His defences against the Wrackspurts must have been particularly low this year, Hermione," Luna said softly. "There's nothing wrong with *you* at all."

Hermione didn't respond to that; instead, she raised another important point. "And why are all these Veela women marrying regular wizards, anyway? You'd think their men would put a stop to that somehow! Don't they want to marry their own women?"

"I see your point, Hermione, but it's hardly Gabrielle's fault that Ron was so easily led astray. She can't help being a quarter Veela," Ginny said pragmatically. "And wouldn't you rather know now than after the wedding? Or, Merlin forbid, a few years down the road, after children and joint Gringotts vaults and... and everything?"

Hermione wasn't having any of that. "I'd rather it didn't happen at all! We went through all this before, you know, when he was off snogging Lavender in sixth year. He swore he loved only me! He begged me to get married! I wanted to go slow, but he was so sure it was right! How could he do this after all that?" She swiped at the tears on her cheeks, ignoring the handkerchief Luna held out in favour of more of the ice cream Ginny was offering. Another awful thought occurred to her. "And if I keep eating this, I'm going to be fat! And then no one will want me and I'll be alone forever!" She collapsed against Luna's shoulder.

"Shhhhh," Luna said softly, stroking her hair. "It will be all right, Hermione. You'll see. You'll find someone who's truly perfect for you, I promise."

"Perfect," Hermione snorted between bites of ice cream. "I don't want perfect. 'Perfect' is apparently how Ron sees Gabrielle. Did you *see* the note he sent me?" She Summoned the crumpled, tearstained parchment from the rubbish bin and yanked it smooth, even though she had it memorised and had read or paraphrased it three times already. "'Sorry, Hermione, I just fell head over heels for Gabrielle. She's so *sodding* perfect, I just couldn't resist. It's *meant to be* Fate!' He actually capitalised 'fate'! 'You'll realise it's all for the best, eventually. Love, Ron.'" How dare he sign it 'Love, Ron' when he's breaking my heart?"

"He's a prat, Hermione," Ginny said. "He really is, and he always has been. He was always the worst of all my brothers, if you ask me. Honestly, I don't know what you saw in him in the first place. You'll be happier without him, I promise. The one thing he's right about is you'll eventually be glad he did this."

"But what did I do wrong?" Hermione asked again as she finished the last of the strawberry. She opened a tub of pralines and cream as she asked, "Why wasn't I enough?"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Hermione," Luna said. "Either it was Fate, in which case nothing you could have done or not done would have made any difference, or it wasn't, in which case he's a fickle, unreliable fool whose head can be turned by the first Veela quarter Veela who comes along, and you're better off without him. Either way, it's better to know."

"That's another thing! Where *are* the Veela men? Why should Gabrielle or Fleur, for that matter be in England in the first place? And why don't we hear of witches marrying *male* Veelas? Are they too good for regular witches or something?"

Luna smiled. "Most witches aren't interested in male Veelas."

"Oh, of course. Women are much less susceptible to pretty faces than men. I should have known."

Luna giggled. "Don't be silly, Hermione. It's not that. Male Veelas are hardly ever described as 'pretty'."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, confused. "Handsome, then?"

"No, it's not the choice of word, Hermione, it's the meaning. Male Veelas aren't pretty or handsome or gorgeous or anything like that. Because they're men," Ginny said, as though it were perfectly obvious. "Don't tell me you don't know about Veela men?"

"What about them?" Hermione asked, her interest caught. "Aren't they just like Veela women?"

"No, of course not," Luna said. "There wouldn't be any balance if they were."

"Balance?"

"Yes, of course, Hermione. The universe requires balance light and dark, positive and negative, yin and yang, beauty and ugliness. In humans, the balance is generally achieved, one way or another, within individuals you don't often meet someone who's *really* got it all exceptionally good-looking *and* smart *and* talented *and* nice all at once, do you? Most people either have a little bit of everything, or a lot of one and less of something else. In Veelas, and in lots of other species, it's achieved across genders. Veela women, as you've seen, are blonde, beautiful, and graceful. Men are generally considered to be the opposite."

"Veela men are dark-haired, ugly, and awkward?" Hermione asked sceptically. "Then how do they manage to... er... perpetuate the species? Don't all the Veela women go looking for good-looking men who aren't Veelas, then?"

"No need. They know each other."

"What does that matter?" Hermione was well and truly intrigued now.

"Legend has it that as one gets to know a Veela well man or woman one begins to see past the surface beauty or ugliness; it's almost like seeing a physical manifestation of the inner person. So, to close friends or loved ones, Veelas look just like regular witches or wizards. It's almost like seeing through a Glamour, or so I'm told."

"Haven't you ever heard of 'Beauty and the Beast'?" Ginny asked.

"That wasn't about Veelas," Hermione objected. "It was a Muggle fairy tale that involved a curse or something."

"It evolved into that over generations of oral history," Luna said. "It was actually based on a true story of the first known witch and Veela love story."

"How did I not learn this at Hogwarts?" Hermione demanded. "It seems like the sort of thing someone should have taught us!"

"Who knows?" Ginny shrugged. "With thousands of years of history to choose from, it's not all that surprising that they skipped over something most people already know."

"Most *purebloods* might know it," Hermione replied, "but I'd wager none of the Muggle-borns do."

"Probably true," Luna agreed easily. "Perhaps you should point that out to the Board of Governors sometime."

"Perhaps I will. What else can you tell me?"

"Not much," Luna said. "It's been years since I even thought of it, really. If you want to know more, you'll probably have to do some research."

"Yes, I suppose I will," Hermione said, Haagen Dazs forgotten. "I wonder if..."

Without conscious thought, she Summoned some parchment and a quill and began to write. Caught up in planning her research, she never noticed when Luna and Ginny exchanged a wry glance before letting themselves out.

Another A/N: Many thanks to my alpha/beta/Britpicking team, who at various times over the past eighteen months have included Atuliel, Brenamarie, karelia, Meladara, Proulxes, and TeaOli. I love and appreciate all of them more than I can say. And as always, any remaining mistakes are mine alone.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 7

Hermione reads a press report and has some difficult conversations while waiting for a response to a request.

Chapter 2

The next morning, Hermione paced as she waited to hear back from Headmistress McGonagall. After a near-sleepless night, spent alternately crying about Ron's perfidy and looking through most of her books to discover what she could about Veelas, she had finally concluded she needed access to more books than she had. She could have got them at the Ministry library, she supposed; as an Unspeakable, she had access.

But she wasn't yet ready to face the rumours and innuendo that were inevitable when a war hero left his war heroine fiancée mere days before their wedding. It was possible but unlikely, she thought, that the news hadn't got out yet at least it wasn't in yesterday's *Prophet*. She wasn't so naïve to think it wouldn't be there today, though.

Even as she had the thought, the Owl Post arrived. After giving the bird the usual payment and a treat, she took a deep breath and steelled herself to see what the headlines might say.

War Hero Dumps Fiancée for Veela Witch!

By Rita Skeeter

Damn. She should have known that insect wouldn't miss this chance to humiliate her. Taking another deep breath, she read on.

Ronald Weasley, one of the heroes of the recent Voldemort War and best friend of Harry Potter, was spotted yesterday at Gretna Green in the company of Gabrielle Delacour, a quarter-Veela who is the younger sister of Mr Weasley's sister-in-law, Fleur Delacour-Weasley. Readers may recall that Mr Weasley was to have been married this Saturday at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to the Muggle-born witch, Hermione Granger.

Further investigation revealed that a bonding ceremony was performed at three p.m. yesterday for Mr Weasley and the former Miss Delacour (see photos on page six). It thus appears safe to conclude that what had been billed as the 'Wedding of the Decade' has been cancelled. Attempts by this writer to reach Ms Granger were unsuccessful apparently, she was already on her scheduled month-long leave from her job with the Ministry of Magic as of three days ago but sources say she's believed to be out of the country nursing her broken heart and hiding from the humiliation of being left at the altar.

Attempts to reach Ms Granger? Hermione knew perfectly well Skeeter hadn't made any attempt to reach her she certainly would have noticed if she'd ignored communications from her long-time nemesis. On the plus side, though, she was too annoyed by the article to cry about it.

What if the headmistress said no? Maybe she really *should* consider a trip abroad as an alternative ...

Hermione was about to turn to page six, even though she didn't*really* want to see pictures of Ron with Gabrielle, when a knock sounded at her door.

Great, the press is already descending on me, she thought, until she heard an unwelcome voice calling her name. "Ermione? Are you all right? I need to talk to you!"

Hermione was tempted to pretend not to be home, but she was too curious for her own good. What could Fleur possibly want with her?

There probably isn't a better source of first-hand information about Veelas... The stray thought had Hermione getting up to answer the door.

"You must understand how very sorry my family is for Gabrielle's actions, 'Ermione!"

Hermione was getting tired of this conversation already. This was the third apology she'd had in the ten minutes since she had let Fleur in. "It's not your fault, Fleur. It's not your job to apologise on her behalf."

"But she should have known better! She was raised to be more considerate of other people's feelings than that. You were engaged to be married! She should have respected that!"

"Perhaps she should, but she didn't. And Ron didn't, either and he was the one who promised me..." Hermione didn't know how to finish without crying, which she certainly wasn't about to do in front of Fleur. Abruptly, she changed the subject. "Fleur, can I ask you something?"

"*Certainement*, 'Ermione."

"What can you tell me about Veelas? Veela men, specifically."

Fleur frowned. "What do you want to know?"

"Anything, I suppose. Everything," she amended when Fleur remained silent.

After a long moment, Fleur asked, "*Why* do you want to know?"

"Because apparently the people who developed the Hogwarts curriculum didn't think to include it. They forgot, as usual, that Muggle-borns don't just know this stuff from birth like purebloods and even half-bloods do."

"There's not much to tell," Fleur said. "The men all have dark hair, just as the women are all fair. Other than that, they're just... people, like any others."

"But..." Hermione allowed her voice to trail off there really was no tactful way to ask whether the men were all ugly, or whether they really got better looking if you loved them. "Are there any books about Veela history you could recommend? I assume the culture has rich traditions of its own, distinct from either Muggle or Wizard culture?"

Fleur looked uncomfortable. "I'm not sure any of our own works have been translated from the Veelish."

"Oh." Hermione wondered whether her trip to Hogwarts was a waste of time, but quickly decided that if nothing else, it gave her a place to stay for a little while that was safe from the press. "Can you find out?"

"All right, 'Ermione. I will see what I can do." Hermione had the distinct impression that Fleur was only agreeing because she felt bad about Gabrielle and Ron, but Hermione would take it. She needed the distraction.

Fleur left a short time later, and Hermione spent the next few hours trying not to worry about what the headmistress would say to her request to use the library. She spent some of that time using her charm-protected computer to surf the web, looking for information about the Beauty and the Beast legend. She didn't find much that she hadn't already known, unfortunately, though she did pause to watch part of the Disney movie, which had been one of her favourites since she had first seen it the summer after she started at Hogwarts.

At lunchtime, she realised that she had never informed her parents that the wedding was off, so she Apparated to their house in hopes of catching them at home. They might not have heard yet she wasn't sure whether they still maintained a subscription to the *Prophet* these days or not. She suspected not, or they'd have most likely been

beating down her door already, wanting to console her.

Unfortunately, her parents weren't there when she arrived, and when she telephoned their offices, she was told they had taken a holiday to prepare for their daughter's wedding. She decided to leave a note, since she had no idea where to find them. It took several attempts before she got it right she didn't want them to get tearstained parchment or to worry too much how she was handling everything. Just as she was finishing, they arrived home.

Banishing the letter and wishing she had gone with an earlier draft, she returned her father's hug as her mother asked, "Sweetheart, I'm surprised to see you! Don't you have a million last-minute details for the wedding?"

Whereupon Hermione burst into tears yet again.

She arrived back home around teatime despite her parents' repeated entreaties that she should stay with them for a few days. Her mother's fussing and her father's outrage had helped a bit. She smiled wryly as she enlarged the assorted foodstuffs Mum had pressed on her in the apparent belief that a good meal could cure anything that ailed anyone.

Busying herself putting everything under stasis charms and then storing it all in the pantry or fridge, she tried to decide what to do next. If only Professor McGonagall would reply...

Even as she had the thought, an owl tapped at her window. Hoping it was from Hogwarts, she let the bird in and offered it a treat in exchange for the parchment.

Seeing the seal with its familiar crest, she took a deep breath to quell her pounding heart before opening it.

A/N: Thanks so much to all who have reviewed. I hope to catch up on personal responses soon. And ongoing thanks to my alpha/beta/Britpick team. Love you all!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 7

Hermione is welcomed at Hogwarts – for good or ill.

Chapter 3

My dear Hermione,

I am so sorry to hear of everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours! Of course you must come to Hogwarts and stay as long as you like. I'm quite certain the library will have something useful to assist you in your research. The guest quarters are being prepared for you as I write, so there's no reason to delay your arrival – just Apparate to the gate and send a Patronus when you get here. If you hurry, you can be here in time for dinner. The staff will be delighted to see you, I'm sure.

I can't imagine what Mr Weasley was thinking to do this to you—

Hermione couldn't force herself to read that part of the letter, she decided – she really didn't want to think about Ron at all just now – so she skipped to the last couple of paragraphs even as she felt some of the tension drain from her body at the warmth of Professor McGonagall's welcome.

Don't forget to pack some warm clothing – you remember how draughty the castle gets in the evenings at this time of year, don't you? The days are still warm, though, so you probably ought to bring a few summer things, too.

Hermione's lips quirked up at the maternal-sounding instructions – Professor McGonagall seemed to want to look after her the way she had when she was twelve, but with more obvious warmth now that she wasn't trying to maintain discipline, too.

Look at me, going on about what you should bring when you're probably on tenterhooks! Don't worry, Hermione, you'll come through this just fine in the end, and anything we can do to help you is yours for the asking. See you soon, dear girl!

Fondly,

Minerva McGonagall

Hermione thought wryly that Professor McGonagall must be really worried about her if she was resorting to expressing such warm sentiments so forthrightly. Squaring her shoulders, she decided to take the suggestion that she should try to arrive in time for dinner. Summoning some parchment and a Dicta-quill and hurrying into the bedroom to pack, she began a list of what needed to be done before she could leave.

An hour later, Hermione had arranged for Ginny to look after Crookshanks for the duration and had cast self-watering charms on all her houseplants. She had set the necessary spells to ensure that the blinds opened in the mornings to let the light in and to keep the temperature optimised – after all, she had some rare magical plants that she didn't want to lose for lack of a few simple spells.

The packing had gone smoothly – everything fit into the beaded bag she had never got rid of after the year on the run with Harry and R—

She deliberately cut off the thought. She wasn't going to think of *him* – not now, not ever. Not if she could help it, anyway.

And besides, she had *research* to do. There just wasn't time to think about the past.

Glancing once more around the flat, she decided she could always pop back in if she had missed anything important.

Arriving at the Hogwarts gate with almost half an hour to spare, she watched her Patronus gambol off across the lawn and waited for someone to come and admit her. She

tried to quell her anxiety, but she had enough memories of danger here that she still felt a bit more exposed than was strictly comfortable.

She was rather expecting Hagrid to appear from the direction of his hut, so she was surprised when Professor McGonagall herself called a greeting as she hurried along the path from the castle. "Hermione, my dear! I'm so pleased you're here, though I wasn't sure you'd arrive so quickly! Come in, come in!" The gate swung open with a flick of the Headmistress's wand, and Hermione slipped through. She was surprised to find herself enveloped in a tight hug.

Since when did Professor McGonagall hug her?

"You poor, poor dear – you must be so upset by all that's happened!" She pulled back to look Hermione directly in the eye. "Don't worry, dear, Mr Weasley was never worthy of you, anyway – we're all agreed on that." She gave Hermione another squeeze, then left her arm around the younger witch's shoulders as she began shepherding her toward the castle.

Hermione was nonplussed by this effusive expression of sympathy – and not entirely pleased, as she was starting to feel weepy again – but she didn't know how to make the Headmistress stop. Still, she tried. "I'm fine, really, Headmistress—"

But she didn't get to finish the thought. "None of that 'Headmistress' nonsense now, dear. You're an adult now, not a student, and you'll call me Minerva, just as all my colleagues do."

"But—" Hermione started to protest she wasn't a colleague, but a guest. Again, the Headmistress would have none of it.

"Don't argue, Hermione. We were all just horrified at the insulting way Mr Weasley treated you. I can't believe he just ran off and married someone else mere days before your wedding! How could he do that to you? To think one of my Gryffindors could be so lacking in honour that he'd—"

On the verge of tears, Hermione broke in. "I'm fine, really. It's better he did it before the wedding, don't you think? And anyway, this way I have a whole month to work on my new research project."

Hermione managed to keep the topic innocuous for the rest of their walk to the guest quarters, and she breathed a sigh of relief when Minerva left her to freshen up before dinner. Fortunately, the guest quarters were conveniently situated near the library, so Hermione had no trouble finding her way back to the Great Hall.

Unfortunately, as she made her way to dinner, she was forcibly reminded that school was in session, and that Hogwarts wasn't so far cut off from the 'real world' as to make the students unaware of her aborted wedding. She caught snippets of conversation that, by the time she actually reached her destination, had her barely restraining the urge to hex them.

"Did you hear—?"

"*She's* the one who—"

"—not like anyone's *surprised*—"

"—article in the *Prophet*—"

They all seemed to be watching her, she thought, perhaps trying to see if she was distraught or hoping to see some sign of weakness. She vowed not to give them the satisfaction.

Only the habits of six years spent *not* doing magic in the corridors protected the students from her increasing ire.

By the time she arrived at the Great Hall, she needed several calming breaths before she was able to smile neutrally and approach the High Table. Minerva gestured toward a chair to her right; unfortunately, she immediately picked up her attempts at consolation – which was, of course, the last thing Hermione wanted. "Hermione, dear, how are you doing?"

Even more unfortunately, several other staff members picked up the refrain.

"Oh, Hermione, it's just awful! And you so calm and cool about it all!"

"How are you coping, Hermione?"

"What *could* he have been thinking?"

"You know we're all here for you, don't you?"

"If there's anything I can do ..."

The cacophony of concerned voices was beginning to rattle Hermione, so it was with some relief that she heard a familiar voice say in a biting tone, "All this fawning is giving me indigestion. Had I known we were all expected to play agony aunts, I'd have skipped dinner. Shall I plan to skip breakfast, as well, or do you think we'll have moved on by then?"

It seemed the staff held its collective breath as they watched Hermione – perhaps they thought she'd be offended, but instead, she was grateful. Her laugh came naturally, therefore. "Professor Snape, it's good to see you, too." She thought she caught a tiny twitch of his lips, but it was gone so quickly she couldn't be sure. Shifting her gaze to sweep everyone else at the table, she continued, "And while I appreciate all the concern and sympathy, I'm fine." Seeing some doubt on a few faces, she added, "Really. I'm *fine*. I'd love to hear how all of you are doing, though."

A/N: Thanks, as always, to my wonderful Team of Geniuses and to all who read and review! Love you all!

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione settles in to her research, and Minerva's attempt to ease her way leads to a surprising conversation with

Snape.

The following morning, after a breakfast that was mercifully low on attempts at consolation and condolence, Minerva insisted on personally walking Hermione to the library. Hermione protested to no avail. "I'm sure you have better things to do than walk me to a library that I'm probably more familiar with than my own flat!"

"Of course you are, dear, but that's not the issue, is it? We all know Irma can be a bit... possessive... of her library. I thought it might be helpful if I smoothed things over with her at the outset."

"Smooth things over? Surely she wouldn't be so upset at my presence that things would need smoothing over..."

Minerva chuckled. "You might think that, but she'd be happiest if even the current students weren't permitted to access her precious books. No, a clear request from me now will avoid all sorts of unpleasantness in future, I'm quite sure. Besides, she's never quite forgiven you for sneaking into the Restricted Section in your second year."

Given how much time she'd spent in the library after that incident, Hermione found that surprising, but she realised Minerva would not be deterred, so she said no more about it.

As they entered the library, Madam Pince looked up with a frown. Minerva said, "Good morning, Irma. You remember Hermione Granger, I'm sure?" The librarian looked at Hermione suspiciously before nodding curtly. "Excellent! I've given Hermione permission to use whatever resources Hogwarts might have that she may find useful for a research project she's working on. I'd be very appreciative if you'd give her whatever help you can."

Though it was phrased as a request, Minerva's firm tone made it an order; Madam Pince seemed to recognise it as such, because despite looking as though she had swallowed something sour, she said only, "Of course, Headmistress."

Hermione was surprised at the formality of the address, but Minerva distracted her by saying, "There, now, that's all settled. Off you go, Hermione, and mind you don't work through lunch."

"Thanks, Minerva, I'll see you later, then." She took herself off to find her favourite table in the back corner. As she headed away, she heard a whispered conversation begin between the two women, but decided she really didn't need to know what was being said between them. She had a library full of books and a research project to occupy her time nothing else mattered, did it?

By lunchtime (which Hermione remembered only because she had set her wand to vibrate and flash a light at the appropriate time), she had organised all her notes from her conversations with Luna, Ginny, and Fleur, and she had reviewed what she had learnt from her foray into internet sources on the tale of 'Beauty and the Beast.' She had further begun formulating a research plan consulting the library's rather formidable catalogue to determine what she might need and where she might find it and then prioritising the list she generated from there.

On the few occasions she interacted with Madam Pince, she found the older woman's behaviour rather odd a bizarre cross between her usual abrupt manner and a sort of tacked-on courtesy. She said as much to Minerva over chicken salad sandwiches at lunchtime. "Have you noticed anything... strange... about Madam Pince's behaviour lately?"

"Strange?" Minerva frowned. "Not especially, no. Why? Has she been rude?"

"Not exactly it's more like she starts to be her usual self, but then changes her mind and goes out of her way to be polite."

"How do you mean?"

Mimicking the librarian, Hermione said, "'Be careful with that...! I mean, *please* be careful with that book, Miss Granger.' And she says it with that pinched look that you just know means she would prefer her original approach."

Before Minerva could reply, Professor Snape cut in, "Isn't it obvious, Miss Granger?"

"Isn't what obvious, Professor Snape?"

"The headmistress has instructed Madam Pince to be nice to you, of course." He shook his head, adding under his breath, "Brightest witch of her age... What could Lupin have been thinking?"

Hermione felt herself flush in embarrassment. Looking at Minerva, who was glaring at Snape, she said, "I'm *fine*. Really I am and I don't need to be coddled not by anyone. In fact, I'd rather everyone just behave normally, please."

Minerva said, "After what you've been through..."

Snape interrupted with a snort. "She got jilted, Minerva. She wasn't tortured or imprisoned. She hasn't been hexed, jinxed, or cursed. Her life wasn't threatened. She wasn't even the victim of a tragic Polyjuice mishap *this* time! She had probably no, *certainly* been through worse before she was a teenager. Leave the woman be, Minerva. Let her do her research in peace."

"Really, Severus, have you no compassion at all?" Minerva huffed.

"No, he's right," Hermione said with only a hint of a tremor in her voice. "It's not such a tragedy as all that. I'll be fine. I just want things to get back to normal, you know?" Finishing her sandwich, she took an apple and stood to leave. "I'd really prefer to forget the whole thing, if you don't mind." Nodding to the table at large, she added, "See you all at dinner."

Two and a half hours later, Hermione looked up when a shadow fell across her book. "Oh, hello, Professor Snape. Did you need something?"

Avoiding her gaze, he said, "The headmistress insists I was rude earlier. I am instructed to apologise."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Apologise? Really?" Huffing in annoyance, she continued, "I don't see why. It wasn't rude; it was the truth. It's not even the most unpleasant thing you've ever said to me, so I don't see why it should merit an apology when I've never had one before."

He frowned as the question seemed almost pulled from him by force. "What *is* the most unpleasant thing I've ever said to you?"

"The comment about my teeth in my fourth year springs immediately to mind."

His frown deepened. "Are you still on about that? It was fifteen years ago!"

"What do you mean 'still on about that'? We've never discussed it before! And it was *twelve* years ago, not fifteen."

"Twelve, fifteen, twenty-three, fifty," Snape replied, shrugging. "One would think you'd be over it by now regardless."

"Well, maybe I'd get over it faster if you'd actually apologise for it."

"Why should I apologise? It was necessary to maintain my cover at the time."

"You had to pick one of my deepest insecurities to prey on? You couldn't pick something less painful for me?"

"What was I supposed to do, Granger? Comment on your hair when the hex hit your teeth?"

"My *hair*? That was my *other* major insecurity!"

A loud *shush* came from the direction of Madam Pince's office, and after a glance in that direction, Snape's voice was noticeably lower when he replied. "And it wouldn't have made sense in context!" Huffing, he said, "Why are we arguing about this? I did what I had to do, and there's the end of it. And why are you bringing this up now, anyway? Every time I've seen you in the last couple of years, you've insisted the past was past said you wanted to be *friends* or some such nonsense."

Hermione whispered furiously, "Why is that nonsense? Why can't we be friends?"

"Because you're apparently holding a grudge for something that happened more than a decade ago."

"I'm not holding a grudge," Hermione grumbled. "I just think it would be nice if you would apologise, that's all."

"Have *you* ever apologised to *me*?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have."

"When?" he demanded. "I would think I'd have remembered that, you know, and I don't."

"Well..." Hermione began; after a pause, she admitted sheepishly, "Okay, it was when you were in a coma, but that doesn't change the sentiment."

He stared at her for a long moment before a tiny smile appeared and somehow made him almost look a little bit attractive. "In that case, I believe I'll save any apologies I might want to make until the next time *you're* in a coma."

Hermione was stunned. Was Severus Snape... *teasing* her?

And if so, what could *that* mean?

As always, thanks to the Team of Geniuses, and thanks to all who read and/or review!

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 7

Uh oh... Severus discovers the topic of Hermione's research just as she begins to make progress.

Chapter 5

Two days later, Hermione stretched as she closed *La jeune américaine, et les contes marins*, the 1740 book that was widely credited in the Muggle world as containing the earliest known version of *La Belle et la Bête*— the one penned by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. It was a longer, more detailed story than any of the others she had found, and the story was somewhat different from the others, as well.

It was also unrecognisable as any sort of adaptation of the story Hermione had been told by her friends; it involved good and evil fairies, seduction and manipulation, and selfishness and greed. She wondered where she might find older sources... Perhaps there were older children's books that referenced it.

And isn't that ironic – once again trying to find truth in the pages of children's literature... She let her thoughts drift for just a moment, back to times that now seemed so much simpler, when she had looked in a children's book to find the key to defeating Voldemort.

Realising that this line of thought would inevitably lead to thoughts of he-who-must-never-be-thought-of-again, she ruthlessly pushed the memories aside and re-focused on the task at hand.

"*Accio* children's books about Veelas."

As the books began flying from the stacks, Hermione caught another glare from Madam Pince. Just as she was about to cast the standard charm for gentle landings, she heard a familiar voice behind her say sharply, "Veelas? Why would you want information about Veelas?"

Startled, she whirled to face him, then remembered herself and whirled back to say, "*Finire molliter!*" As the books landed on the table, neatly stacking themselves with another wave of her wand, she turned back to Professor Snape. "I'm researching Veelas."

His face darkened. "You shouldn't be wasting time on trivial topics. If you're that bored, go back to work."

Hermione was irritated by his attitude. "Who says this is trivial? It's another example of how the wizarding world discriminates against Muggle-borns."

"No one cares about Veelas." He paused. "Oh, but I forgot. Your personal little melodrama is driving this ridiculous obsession. You don't actually *want* to get over this ridiculous break-up. You just want to figure out the best way to strike back at your former paramour for embarrassing you."

"For your information, I'm looking for information about *male* Veelas. Which has nothing whatsoever to do with Ron or Gabrielle." Hermione was proud of her even tone.

Snape snorted. "I didn't realise you were so enamoured of self-deception. You don't care anything about male Veelas – except if you can figure out how to get one of them

to help you steal Weasley back from his wife."

"Why would I even want him back? This is the second time he's done this to me. Do you honestly think I'm going to give him a third chance?" Hermione snapped. "I just think it's ridiculous that no one ever talks about male Veelas. Everyone is so focussed on the women that the men get ignored. That's not fair!"

"Since when is life fair? And what makes you think male Veelas have any interest in being the focus of attention? They want to be left alone, and you digging into this is going to cause nothing but trouble for them. You should put these books away and leave. Stop hiding out here and get on with your life! You can't put it off forever, you know."

"*Forever?*" Hermione couldn't believe how unfair that was. "It's been two days! The wedding wasn't even supposed to be until tomorrow! Anyway, I'm not hiding. I'm *trying* to learn something useful."

"It's not useful; it's self-indulgent. I had begun to think you were better than that, but I see I was wrong." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Apparently, you're the same little swot who thinks all the answers are in books that you always were. Grow up, Granger." Without giving her a chance to respond, he swept out of the room, looking fiercer than she had seen him in her entire adult life.

Hermione stared after him. What had just happened?

He wasn't at lunch, nor did she see him at dinner. She considered asking Minerva what had him so upset, but it felt strangely as though she would be betraying a confidence. Logically, it made no sense – it wasn't as if Madam Pince and whoever else had been in the library this morning hadn't heard them shouting at each other.

She didn't even know why he had been in the library in the first place. Had he been looking for her? They had been getting along so well for the past few days; she had begun to think a friendship between them might be possible. And now he was angry with her and she had no idea why.

Since she didn't know what else to do, she continued her research. But she found it difficult to concentrate. She had thought she had begun to earn Professor Snape's respect. He had begun to seem like – not a friend exactly, not yet – more like a friendly acquaintance, but one with the possibility for a true friendship somewhere down the road. But he had been so angry, so dismissive, that now she could only wonder if he was still merely tolerating her presence because he wasn't in a position to make her leave.

She gamely continued her research, pushing aside the urge to hide away in her quarters and cry. Did *no one* like her anymore? She almost felt as alone and lonely as she had when she was eleven, a newly arrived Hogwarts first-year with no sense that she belonged and no idea how to form a friendship.

No, Hermione, you have friends, she assured herself. *Ginny and Luna and Harry love you...* She forced her attention back to the book lying open on the table. It didn't say anything new, so her attention drifted again. *Why is he so upset about a little research? Why should it even matter to him if I'm wasting my time on trivia or pining away for* — She cut off the thought. *Back to work, Hermione. That way lies madness – or worse, tears.*

Returning her attention to the large piles of books surrounding her, she sighed. If only there were a way to find what she needed without having to dig through *everything*...

That's it! she thought, excited to have a plan that might work. Gathering her things, she risked Madam Pince's displeasure by leaving the books where they were with a hastily scribbled note that she would be back to use them again later.

As she hurried through the corridors, she wondered that this plan hadn't occurred to her earlier. Was she so upset about — Well, was she so upset that she couldn't even see the obvious?

When she arrived at her destination, she thought about how to phrase her request, then quickly paced back and forth, repeating, "I *needsable* information about Veelas."

When the door appeared, she hurried in to the Room of Requirement. It had thoughtfully provided a comfortable chair and some brightly lit wall sconces, along with a small table complete with tea service. Most importantly, it had provided four books – the newest of which looked positively ancient – eight manuscripts, and two scrolls.

The only question left was: where to start?

A/N: Thanks, as always, to my alpha/beta/Britpick team (see chapter 1 for the long list). Special thanks to Proulxes, who not only Britpicks, but also Latin-picks.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 7

Poor Madam Pince can't seem to get peace and quiet in her library...

Chapter 6

Hermione spent hours in the Room of Requirement. She discovered it was easy and comfortable to stay there rather than to go to the Great Hall for dinner, or even to go to bed at a reasonable hour. When she was hungry, the Room provided food. When she was tired, a cosy divan appeared, complete with blanket and pillow.

Best of all, she needn't worry about *reminders*. There was no one here to give her pitying looks and no risk of running across a discarded copy of the *Daily Prophet*. She wouldn't hear anyone gossiping about her aborted wedding. She wouldn't even have to worry about overhearing discussion of something more tenuously connected in her mind to her former fiancée or his new wife—like Quidditch or plans for another TriWizard tournament or Beauxbatons.

So she stayed in the Room of Requirement, poring over manuscripts and books and scrolls to her swotty heart's content.

And as she read, she thought back to that first discussion: what was it she had asked Luna and Ginny? "Male Veelas are dark-haired, ugly, and awkward?" If these books and manuscripts were to be believed, her sarcastic question had actually hit on the truth. So far, these ancient sources were all in agreement: male Veelas really were the opposite of female Veelas. They *always* had dark hair. The kindest descriptions used words like "ill-favoured" and "unattractive"; the rest described them with adjectives such as "ugly", "hideous", "unsightly", and even—in one particularly critical tome—as "repulsive". And, as one book put it, "If the female Veela is the epitome of alluring grace, the male Veela repels most who come into contact with him with his awkward cruelty."

The last scroll—which looked to be the oldest item in the lot—had drawings in coloured ink. The female Veelas bred remarkably true, Hermione discovered, as she found one picture of a woman who could easily have been Fleur's twin. Carefully unrolling the scroll further, Hermione caught her breath and barely managed to keep from dropping the delicate antique.

Professor Snape's dark, angry visage stared back at her.

The next morning, Hermione skipped breakfast in favour of returning to the library. Assuming the glower Madam Pince sent her way was due to the stack of books Hermione had left on the table, she smiled and waved in response and went on with her research—but with a new focus and a new goal.

She was going to find out everything she could about Snape's ancestry. His overreaction to her research topic would make sense if he had Veela ancestry, but she needed proof. When the question of why she felt she needed proof popped into her mind, she dismissed it. Knowledge was never a bad thing, in her opinion, and if she wanted to know more about Snape, there was nothing wrong with that.

But where to start...? Perhaps a wedding announcement had been published when Eileen Prince had married Tobias Snape...

Some time later, she was startled when a low voice over her shoulder said, "Ms Granger, I sincerely hope you've changed to a more relevant topic of research than *Veelas*."

Feeling her face grow hot, Hermione said, "Oh, hello, Professor. I thought you were avoiding me."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"It's hardly flattering myself considering how angry you were the last time we met."

"If I avoided everyone who irritated me, I would never leave my chambers."

"You're claiming you were merely irritated? You were shouting at me."

"Things got a bit heated," he allowed.

"You shouted at me *in the library*." When he merely raised an eyebrow, Hermione added, "With Madam Pince glaring at us both."

She thought he almost smiled. His eyes gleamed a little, at least. "I got over my fear of Madam Pince twenty-five years ago."

"She's glowering at you right now."

He started slightly and began to turn around before stopping himself. "No, she's not. And you won't trick me into revealing fear I don't have."

"Riiiiiiiiight." Changing the subject, Hermione said briskly, "In any event, what brings you to the library today?"

"Our esteemed headmistress was concerned when you weren't at breakfast this morning after missing dinner last night. She ordered me to see if you had died of a broken heart. I imagine she wouldn't want a dead body cluttering the castle."

Until that moment, Hermione had been so caught up in the puzzle of Snape's ancestry that it hadn't occurred to her that today was meant to be her wedding day. "Oh," she said in a voice she wished hadn't sounded so small, so sad.

"Come now, Ms Granger, that wasn't even one of my better efforts. Buck up."

"It's not that. It's... It's my wedding day."

"No," Snape said bluntly. "It's not. And instead of moping about, you should be thanking every deity you can think of, including the minor ones, for granting you a narrow escape from a life in ginger hell."

"I'm not allowed to be sad I'm not getting married to the man I love?"

"I refuse to believe you have such bad taste as to love someone so far beneath you in every way imaginable." Shaking his head, he said, "Everyone expected you to pair up with him, so you did. And once you did, you were stuck. The best thing that boy ever did for you was to get you out of marrying him when you couldn't manage to extricate yourself."

"You don't believe that."

"Do not presume to tell me what I do or do not believe."

"If you believed that... That would mean your opinion of me is much higher than I thought. I've never seen any evidence that you thought I was any better than Ron or Harry—and you hate both of them." Even as she realised that she had said the unnameable name without the stab of pain that usually accompanied it, she added, "Don't bother denying it."

"Why should I deny it? Though 'hate' is perhaps too strong a word. Hate takes a lot of energy to sustain, you know. But I acknowledge that I dislike them both. You, on the other hand, merely irritate me. Particularly when you waste time and energy worrying about or pining over either one of them. Or when you research something ridiculous."

"Like Veelas," she guessed aloud.

"Like Veelas," he confirmed.

As she considered his comments, Hermione suddenly felt rather good. Smiling, she said, "So, if I merely irritate you, I suppose I must be one of your favourite people."

He frowned. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Of course I am. Even Minerva, who I know you like, irritates you. In fact, most people downright *anger* you. So if I *merely* irritate you like Minerva does, you must like me, too."

"Well, if I do—and I'm not conceding that—I shall clearly have to re-think it now that I realise you're insane."

Hermione grinned. "You like me. You know you do. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

"I believe I'll just tell Minerva that rumours of your broken-hearted demise have been greatly exaggerated. And that she ought to be more concerned about whether you've lost your mind." Turning with a dramatic billowing of robes, he started toward the door.

"I'll see you at lunch, *Severus*. We can sit together and share secrets."

Other than a slight hitch in his step, he didn't respond, so she decided she would henceforth address him as 'Severus'. After all, a hitch in his step hardly qualified as a protest.

A/N: The beta and Britpick Team from heaven is hereby showered with gratitude and love.

(Any remaining errors are, of course, mine alone.)

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione finds some answers, though some questions remain unanswered...

By lunchtime, Hermione had realised that searching for information about Tobias Snape at the Hogwarts library was an exercise in futility. If she had been thinking more clearly, she'd have realised immediately that information about Muggles would have to be sought in the Muggle world. Perhaps later she would try the Room of Requirement again, though she was rather sceptical about its ability to tap Muggle resources. In the meantime, since the very thought of leaving the sanctuary she had found at Hogwarts sent a feeling of nausea to her stomach, she decided to resume her research on Veelas and stay right where she was for a while longer.

But first, she thought with more pleasure than she might have expected, *it's time to irritate Snape some more.*

When she arrived at the Great Hall, Snape wasn't there. Ignoring a curl of disappointment, she joined Minerva instead. "I'm sorry if I worried you," she said by way of greeting.

"Worried me?" Minerva chuckled. "My dear, I think I know you well enough by now to understand that burying yourself in research is your preferred cure for disappointments great and small."

"Oh, but—" Hermione began, but stopped. If Minerva hadn't been worried, then she hadn't sent Snape, had she? Which meant *he* was worried and had used Minerva as an excuse to check on her.

"But?" Minerva prompted.

"Oh, nothing. I had the impression from something someone said that you were concerned I was pining away over Ron."

"Nonsense," Minerva said. "The house-elves or the castle itself would have informed me if you were doing any such thing. One of the perks—or burdens, depending—of being Headmistress."

Hermione smiled. "That just makes me wonder how Harry, Ron, and I got into as much mischief as we did back in the day."

"I can answer that," Snape said, taking the chair next to her. "You were the most determined lot of miscreants Hogwarts had ever seen. Neither the house-elves nor the castle could be expected to keep up with the three of you."

Turning to smile at him, she said, "Really? I rather thought it was because Dumbledore actually *wanted* us to get away with things—for the greater good, I think he would say."

Minerva said, "Sad to say, you're probably right about that. Albus was in many ways a great wizard. But in others..." Her eyes slid to Severus, then away. "Well, let's just say there was considerable room for improvement in many other ways."

"Yes, let's say that," Severus said, his voice dry as pixie dust.

Deciding a change of topic was in order, Hermione said, "Has the *Prophet* got over its obsession with my little drama yet?"

"Welllll..." Minerva said, which told Hermione the answer even before Snape confirmed it.

"Of course it hasn't. And that abrupt change of topic was yet another fine example of Gryffindor lack of subtlety. Though at least you blundered into your own melodrama this time."

Hermione couldn't help it: she laughed. "I wasn't particularly trying to be subtle, Severus. I *was*, however, trying to change the topic to something more comfortable for you."

"Your misery? Yes, I suppose you would think that a comfortable topic for me."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not nearly as upset as I expected, and anyway, I'm one of your favourite people, remember?"

"Oh, Merlin," Severus said. "I'll never be rid of you now, will I?"

"Of course not. You don't really want to be, if you're honest with yourself."

He smiled—just a small smile, but a genuine one that skittered over his lips before reaching his eyes.

"Perhaps not," he conceded in a low tone meant for her ears alone.

As they smiled at one another, Hermione had the odd thought that perhaps *he didn't* look exactly like the drawing of the Veela in that ancient scroll, after all. Not when he smiled, at any rate...

After lunch, Hermione returned to the library. Looking at the pile of books, she realised she needed to review what she had in order to determine where the gaps were. She returned the books to their proper places with a Reshelling Charm, then gathered her notes and took them back to her temporary quarters.

Once there, she spread her notes out all over the table so she could see everything as she organised them. She spent the next hour putting them in order, and when she was finished, she sipped some tea as she contemplated what she now knew.

Summoning a Dictaquill, she began organising her thoughts aloud. "So, male Veelas are generally held by strangers and acquaintances to be unattractive and awkward at best. They always have dark hair and eyes, and they sort of repel people... Meanwhile, female Veelas are always blonde with light eyes, and they are generally held by strangers and acquaintances to be... perfect. In either case, if you get to know a Veela to the point of forming a friendship, the perceived perfection or its opposite just... melts away. The Veela is then perceived by the friend as someone of a reasonable, but rather ordinary, degree of attractiveness. Not irresistible, not repulsive, just somewhere in the middle like the rest of us.

"If the friendship deepens into true love, however, the Veela is seen differently to the way both strangers and friends see him or her... Almost like you see them in their best light—like you see the perfection in their imperfection... At least, that's what the books say, and that seems similar to what Luna and Ginny said... And the legend of Beauty and the Beast had its origins in this reality," she concluded. "But like most folklore, it evolved and changed over time, eventually bearing little resemblance to the history—the reality—it was meant to preserve. And of course, Muggles don't even know Veelas exist, so they understood the story as relating to things they were familiar with: curses and seduction and manipulation and love."

As she finished, Hermione felt the satisfaction she always got when research provided an answer to whatever question she had. It made sense—it fit with what she knew of people and it fit together nicely within its own legend, as well.

Of course, she was long past the days when she would believe something solely because someone had written it down and proclaimed it to be fact, which meant that she had to find a way to test it. But how? It seemed to her that attempting to form a friendship with a Veela solely to test a hypothesis would yield flawed results. Could a true friendship be formed from that sort of non-organic motivation? She discarded the idea of trying to fall in love with a Veela. She wasn't attracted to women—Veela or otherwise—and she didn't know any Veela men, with the possible but not-yet-proven exception of Snape. She couldn't imagine ever falling in love with him. Though perhaps that was simply because they weren't even friends yet, and if he really was part-Veela, she would be expected to find him unattractive, even repulsive.

Sighing, she put the problem aside to allow it to percolate. She was sure something would occur to her eventually; it always did. Realising that she had just enough time to wash up before dinner, she gathered her notes into a neat stack on the corner of her desk with a wave of her wand.

As she did so, a thought that she found simultaneously satisfying and unbecoming occurred to her: *Ron thinks Gabrielle is perfect.*

A/N: So sorry for the delay in posting this. Stupid RL! Thanks, as always, to my betas.