

Something Akin to Normalcy

by thebridgeovertheriverkwai

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts unbearably trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 1 - Something to Shout About

Chapter 1 of 10

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Disclaimer: I don't own anything that relates to the Harry Potter series or franchise.

Chapter 1 - Something to Shout About

The war was over, had been for some time, and life in the wizarding world had returned to something akin to normalcy. After the final battle, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger had decided to go back to Hogwarts to finish their seventh and final year. And now with only a month left to graduation, the three best friends found themselves making plans for the future they had spent the larger part of their childhood to enable.

Harry and Hermione had decided to take up Potions for their last year and had just stoppered the last vial in the last Potions class ever. Harry couldn't walk out the door fast enough when Professor Snape had declared that they all could "get lost," and Hermione had to run after him to catch up.

"Finally, Hermione! Do you know how many subjects we have left before we're out of here forever? Two! And they will be a breeze! I mean, Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms, come on!" Harry beamed at her and made a little dance.

When he didn't get any response, he irritably waved a hand in front of her face.

"Hello? Earth to Hermione?"

She blinked at him, returning to the present.

"Sorry, I was just thinking—" Hermione stopped walking and bit her lip. "You know what? Go ahead to dinner. I'll be right behind you," she said and made to double back to the Potions classroom, but before she had put one foot in front of the other, Harry had turned equally as fast and caught her by the elbow.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she shrieked as he pulled her into a deserted part of the corridor, dragging her behind a statue.

"You're not thinking of asking *him*, are you?" he said and let go of her abruptly.

"Well I *have* to, don't I?" she said angrily, rubbing her elbow. "I can't just ignore him. I've asked all my other professors."

"I forbid it," Harry said testily.

"You forbid it?" Hermione snorted in disbelief.

"Yes. You heard me. I don't care what he did for us, for everybody, in the war. I don't care that he saved me, us, numerous times and loved my mother and ... whatever. He's still an extremely arrogant, stuck-up git, and he'll laugh at you and ridicule you and make you feel foolish for even considering ... this." He made a motion with his hand. "He doesn't deserve it, not from you. It's too ... nice, Hermione."

"Wow," Hermione said and arched her eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Wow, what?"

"You are incredible."

"Wait ... what?"

"Incredibly daft, that is. Stop overreacting. I don't know if you've noticed, but ever since I started dating Christopher, you've been overbearingly protective of me."

"He doesn't have anything to do with—"

"I'm not Ginny Weasley, or her mother, or God forbid, Tonks. I'm not a woman in dire need of rescuing or protecting."

"That is really uncalled for. Tonks is more than capable—"

"And also, and let me be perfectly clear regarding this, I'm merely going to extend Professor Snape the same courtesy I've offered to all of the other professors. That's it. I can take care of myself, Harry, as I've proven time and time again."

Harry fell quiet, slightly taken aback. He sighed and ran a hand through his unruly hair.

"It's just ... after all we've been through ... I can't stand the people I love being mistreated. Or made fun of, for that matter. And as long as we're on the topic of Christopher ... You know how I feel about him."

He shrugged.

"There's nothing wrong with him in particular; it's just ... well, he's not ..." He let the issue drop when he saw a sudden flare of anger in Hermione's eyes and attempted a different approach instead.

"As for the overprotecting part, I guess I'm not used to not having the pressure of saving the world on my shoulders anymore. Sometimes I feel like I'm not needed anywhere by anyone."

"I know," Hermione said, anger subsiding. This wasn't the first time they had discussed their difficulties acclimating to life after years of danger and war looming over them. The post-war world was, in some ways, even harder to live in when it was void of the constant threat of Voldemort rising to power.

"But I can't be your pet project until you find something else to do with your time. You need to stop smothering me and start remembering that I fought Voldemort alongside you. I think I'm capable enough to handle anything that life decides to throw in my way. Even snarky Potions professors." She paused. "And I would really like it if you could find it in your heart to believe I possess that capability as well."

Harry gave her a lopsided grin and threw his hands up in a defeated gesture. "I'm sorry. You're right. You always are." He put his arm around her shoulders as they made their way back to the Potions classroom. "I really do need to find something or someone to smother," he said and casually added, "Maybe I should get a cat."

They came to a halt outside the old, wooden door and looked at each other. "We'll be fine," Hermione said and squeezed his hand reassuringly.

"Now leave, and let me make a fool of myself in peace."

Author's note:

Something to Shout About is a song by the Exciters.

Chapter 2 - Hard Way to Go

Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearingly trying. And with just a month left to graduation she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation - even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 2 - Hard Way to Go

Hermione took a deep breath and knocked on the door with all the confidence she could muster.

"Enter!" Severus Snape bellowed from within.

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, nervously eyeing the man in question.

"Professor, do you have a minute?"

"I thought I had seen the last of you, Miss Granger. But it seems fate has decided, rather cruelly I might add, to deprive me of that pleasure," Snape said in a low voice without looking up. He was organizing the vials of purple concoctions they had put on his desk just a few minutes earlier.

"Um, well, I was just wondering—"

"Yes?" he said impatiently as he rose, vials in both hands, and made his way to the storeroom.

"I know this may sound a bit forward, and I should probably apologize in advance if I'm in any way insulting you by asking—"

"Get on with it, Miss Granger. I am quite sure that even a person with your limited ability to recognize a situation where you are neither wanted nor needed will understand that I have more urgent commitments to attend to."

"If I could take you out to dinner."

Snape whipped around, vials slipping from his fingers, clanking as they hit the stone floor. Hogwarts' vials were, due to the nature of clumsy and awkward teenage witches and wizards, made of unbreakable goblin glass. Without this precaution, the cost of vials alone would have ruined the school centuries ago.

Snape swore loudly and with a jerky flick of his wand made the vials zoom back into his hands. He gingerly put them on a nearby desk and turned his attention to the witch, looking at her for the first time since she had entered the classroom.

"Have you completely lost your mind?" he hissed.

Hermione hurriedly began to explain herself.

"No, not really. Maybe you've heard that my parents own a restaurant in Muggle London?"

"Get out," Snape interrupted, leaving no room for elaboration.

"But sir, let me at least tell you—"

The Potions master took two long strides and was upon Hermione within a second, looming over her, black eyes flashing with anger.

"Listen, and listen carefully. Students have been bending over backwards since my first year of teaching in their attempts to play childish pranks on me."

"I can assure you, sir, this is not a—" Hermione desperately tried to cut in.

"Some of them....," Snape growled dangerously, "have never quite recovered from *mysurprised* reactions. I will not tell you again, Miss Granger. Get out of my sight, or I will make sure you never breathe fresh air again."

She stared at the Potions professor for a long moment, trying to control the fury that seemed to have nested in her gut.

Her mind wandered to all the times she herself had been bending over backwards, not with the intention to scare or hurt but to help and contribute. How she had guided Harry, relentlessly, throughout the war and how she had saved her parents when they were, unknowingly, in mortal danger, something they still doubted. All the while trying to keep up with school and homework, carefully fending off Ron's temperamental fits in between irksome sessions of trying to make sense of Professor Dumbledore's blasted riddles and twinkling eyes.

She thought about how little appreciation she had received in return. And maybe she was being petty and self-absorbed, but Snape and this bloody dinner was rapidly becoming the last drop to make her cup run over.

It had been her mother's idea to begin with, inviting all of Hermione's soon to be ex-professors to their Swedish-oriented restaurant in London, as a way of showing gratitude for the seven years her daughter had spent under their tutelage.

The Grangers had opened the Björn and the Sill six months ago, and it had been an overnight success, attracting loads of curious Londonians and even a few celebrities. Seeing her professors awkwardly and yet eagerly trying to fit in, experiencing odd, unfamiliar flavors and showing surprising new sides to their personalities had been an interesting experience to say the least.

Since it had been impossible for all of the teachers to leave the Hogwarts grounds as a uniform group, Hermione had arranged for them to come one or two at a time at different evenings. The most memorable evening of them all, she mused, had been when Professor Flitwick and Professor Dumbledore, in the middle of the second course, had spotted Dame Maggie Smith in a secluded corner of the restaurant. Only when Hermione venomously had suggested that they should all walk over to the actress' table and ask for her autograph did the two awestruck older gentlemen stop staring.

It was, however, blatantly obvious that her Potions professor was uninformed of his colleagues dinner dates with Hermione and was now being less than gracious about her offering him to partake.

Hermione closed her eyes and willed herself calm. *You're being unreasonable*, she added to her train of thought. *He's been biting your head off for seven years, and you knew today would be no different. Now is the time to excuse yourself with what little dignity you have left and head back to your dorm.*

Almost convinced, she made to open her mouth when Snape brusquely broke the silence.

"And they say you are the brightest witch of our age. The look on your face alone right now would suggest that even Crabbe and Goyle, separately mind you, could challenge that overrated statement. And succeed."

And there it was, the treacherous little drop.

Hermione drew her wand lightening fast and pointed it directly at her professor's throat. The former Death Eater, sensing the tension and sudden shift in atmosphere a fraction of a second too late, ended up with his own wand pointing awkwardly at Hermione's chest.

A tiny flicker of uncertainty in Snape's eyes made Hermione realize that his guard had been down simply because he hadn't thought of her as a force worth worrying about.

And that, rather irrational, insight brought her anger level up from barely contained to livid. Being ridiculed was one thing, underestimated a whole other story.

"Go. Ahead," Hermione hissed. "Make sure I never breathe fresh air again. I have seen your worst, *Professor*, so I guess I am in for quite a ride."

"Attacking a teacher, Miss Granger?" Snape growled. "Surely you of all people should know that this kind of behavior can, and probably will, get you expelled. And with only a month left ..." He smirked. "How utterly path—"

CRACK!

The classroom door flew open, slamming into the wall. Minerva McGonagall appeared in the doorway, clearly annoyed and out of breath.

"Severus," she panted and leaned against her cane. "Do you know where Hermione is? She was supposed to come by my ... Oh, Merlin!" Her eyes darted to the hostile

scene, trying to make sense of what was happening before her. All tiredness seemed to evaporate from the older witch as she drew her wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" McGonagall yelled and easily snatched up both wands in her left hand, cane clattering to the floor. She looked from Snape to Hermione and then to Snape again, bewildered. "What in all that is good and holy is going on in here!" she demanded, closing the distance between herself and the now disarmed couple.

Hermione opened her mouth but clamped it shut when she was hit by an icy glare from her Head of House. McGonagall pointed one long, shaky finger at them.

"I take that back. I do not want to hear a word."

"Miner—" Snape started but was cut off abruptly.

"Not. A. Word. You will both join me in the Headmaster's office. Immediately."

Author's note:

Hard Way to Go is another great song by the Exciters.

The Björn and the Sill is a merging of English and Swedish words. Björn – bear, sill – herring.

Chapter 3 - How Do You Feel?

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearingly trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 3 - How Do You Feel?

Albus Dumbledore peered over his half moon spectacles, observing the trio in front of him.

A slightly shocked Deputy Headmistress, a subdued Head Girl and a disgruntled Potions master, with his arms firmly folded across his chest, sat uncomfortably on hard back chairs that had been rapidly conjured when the group barged in. McGonagall had sent her Patronus ahead of them, briefly explaining to Dumbledore what she had accidentally walked in on.

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his desk, and put his fingertips together. "Kindly explain yourselves," he sighed.

"Headmaster, she deliberately attacked me..."

"I just asked him a perfectly nice..."

"A clear case of expulsion..."

Snape and Hermione exploded, both trying their hardest to drown each other out.

McGonagall's head jerked up. "Surely, such drastic measures won't be necessary?" she said, eyeing the Headmaster questioningly.

Dumbledore held up a hand and the room fell silent. "Nobody is being expelled. Not today."

Snape let out a snort of disgust. "She should at the very least be stripped of her Head Girl badge!" he spat.

Dumbledore ignored the younger man's outburst and turned to Hermione.

"I take it Professor Snape declined your dinner invitation, Miss Granger?"

"Yes. And rather rudely," she said, shooting daggers at the Potions master.

"So rudely that you found yourself at a loss for any other solution than to hold him at wandpoint?" Dumbledore said through a thin-lipped smile.

Hermione squirmed slightly in her chair, cursing inwardly as she failed to hold back the red spots appearing on her cheeks under Dumbledore's scrutinizing gaze. She knew, rationally, that she had crossed the line. Her pride, however, couldn't care less so she let the question remain unanswered.

Dumbledore seemed to notice this flicker of emotions on her face, interpreting her silence as quiet regret.

"First of all, Miss Granger, I must stress the severity in drawing your wand at a teacher. It is, as you very well know, unacceptable to resort to violence, regardless of the circumstance, within the walls of this castle...unless you are finding yourself in a life-threatening situation. Which I very much doubt this was. And as Head Girl, exhibiting this kind of behavior is even more distressing since you were carefully chosen for this assignation because of your ability to conduct yourself properly at all times."

Hermione fiddled with the hem of her robe, fighting back the urge to tell him to bloody well take her Head Girl badge and shove it.

Dumbledore gave her a sympathetic look, oblivious to her inner battle.

"However. Am I right to assume that your transition from the trenches of war back to the school bench has been ... difficult, for lack of a better word?"

McGonagall huffed at this. "Everyone we know was in the war, Albus. That doesn't give us the right to behave like buffoons," she said curtly.

"My sentiments exactly," Snape chimed in.

"Eloquently put as always, Minerva." Dumbledore arched a brow at the Deputy Headmistress. "You seem to have forgotten, however, that some of us have had the unfortunate disposition of being exposed to previous wars. I myself have been involved in more battles than I care to remember and, as atrocious as it may sound, have gained valuable experience to fall back on due to this fact. As veterans we have found something to guide us through the inevitable darkness that only war can bring, both during and after. Others ..."

He looked at Hermione.

"Might not have come to terms with the aftermath of this latest tragic piece of history just yet."

Dumbledore reached out for the bowl of lemon drops situated on his desk, carefully choosing one, and popped it into his mouth.

"And I do believe Minerva's comment was directed at you as well, Severus," he added casually.

Snape rolled his eyes, clearly biting back a retort.

"Miss Granger? Am I right in my assumption?" Dumbledore inquired once again, focusing on Hermione.

Dumbledore really was more perceptive, albeit selectively, than he let on a lot of times, Hermione mused. She sighed and crossed her legs. She felt reluctant in sharing her most intimate feelings, feelings she had been harboring ever since she came back for her final year.

"I suppose it has been kind of hard. This used to be my forte, school that is, and I still enjoy the academic challenge." She bit her lip. "But I've found that a lot of things that I used to care about before have lost some of their meaning. Things are different, I *feel* different. Almost like I don't belong here anymore. Like I've outgrown this part of my life." She smiled sadly.

"And so far you have shown an outstanding amount of maturity," Snape drawled.

"Severus. Please be quiet." Dumbledore fixed his piercingly blue eyes on the Potions master. He then turned to Hermione and watched her intently for a while, as if weighing his words before he spoke.

"It is not uncommon for seventh years to feel the way you do, Miss Granger, even under normal circumstances. And maybe this year's graduates are even more prone to share similar feelings to yours. But war heroine or not ..." He paused. "A simple rejection does not automatically give you permission to start hexing left and right."

"In all fairness, Headmaster, there definitely wasn't any hexing left and right going on, and Professor Snape did threaten to bury me deep under ground. Or somewhere bereft of air," Hermione said indignantly, unable to keep quiet.

"And did you believe him, Miss Granger?"

"Well, no, but that is hardly the..."

"Then we will lay this matter to rest. I will regard this little mishap as an unfortunate lapse of judgment on your part, and you will serve detention with Professor Palmer on Saturday."

Hermione nodded her consent. She knew she had been let off easy. Gregory Palmer, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, was one of the nicest men she had ever met. Detention with him would be nothing short of a vacation.

"If that is all, Headmaster?" Snape rose from his chair abruptly, distinctly dissatisfied with the way the meeting had turned out.

"Actually, no. Minerva, Miss Granger. You may leave. I wish to speak to Severus alone, please."

As soon as the women had left, Dumbledore turned to Snape, a stern look on his face.

"Why am I still here, Albus?" Snape asked as he slumped back into one of the chairs.

"You drew your wand at a student, Severus," Dumbledore said exasperatedly. "I have never known you to lose control like this. What in Merlin's name happened?"

"I don't know, I..." He stopped, thinking back on the debacle in the dungeons. "Well, I suppose it was a purely reflexive motion."

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at the younger man. "Surely, you must understand that I find that somewhat preposterous. You have been successfully withstanding your reflexes for over twenty years."

Snape mumbled something under his breath.

"I beg your pardon?"

"She ... caught me by surprise."

"I am not sure I follow."

"She drew her wand faster than me," Snape admitted reluctantly and sighed. "I wish I could explain it better, but I cannot. She was quicker and I acted on impulse. But you should have seen her eyes, she appeared completely fearless and seconds away from hexing me into oblivion. It was ... unnerving."

"She must have been extremely offended by your ... lack of tact." Dumbledore frowned as he leaned back in his chair, lost in thought. "I suppose, well, apart from Harry, Mr. Weasley, yourself and I, she was exposed to Voldemort more times than anyone else. And that kind of exposure is bound to leave some sort of permanent tenseness in a person."

Willing himself back to the present and his office, the Headmaster cleared his throat and turned his attention to Snape.

"Now. You will find a way to apologize to Miss Granger. The latest turn of events aside, she is certainly making an effort to end her school days on a high note. And if I know her like I think I do, she probably feels very badly about the whole situation this very instant."

A non-conceding snort escaped the Potions master's lips as he made to retort.

"Need I remind you that others have found themselves out of a job for less than raising a wand at their students, Severus?" Dumbledore cut off.

"Are you threatening to fire me if I refuse, Albus?"

"Ah, no. Merely describing one scenario amongst others." Dumbledore looked at Snape innocently.

Snape only glared in response, and Dumbledore, satisfied with his employee's quiet consent, reached out for another lemon drop and changed the subject.

"Are you familiar with Swedish cuisine, Severus?" Dumbledore broke out in a wide grin. "No? I do believe Minerva had the pölsa when she was out with Miss Granger. Very much like haggis from what I understand. I had three types of pickled herring. Absolutely marvelous meal."

Author's note:

How Do You Feel? the Clefones.

Chapter 4 - It Isn't Right

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearingly trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 4 - It Isn't Right

Hermione stabbed a piece of Shepherd's Pie and shoved it into her mouth. The Great Hall was bustling with students enjoying their dinner, talking, laughing and clinking their cutlery eagerly with each bite. Hermione, however, was in no mood to join in. She examined her half-empty plate sullenly. If it was at all possible, she felt even worse today than she had last night in Dumbledore's office.

Not because she regretted her rather unorthodox method of handling the Potions professor. No, she felt no remorse whatsoever about that particular part. But the quick, exhilarating feeling of throwing caution to the wind and giving in to her frustration about being belittled had vanished as soon as Dumbledore's disappointed blue eyes had drilled into hers.

And now she was back to a confused state of on the one hand longing to rebel against every single rule Hogwarts had ever adopted and on the other hand quietly blending in with the rest of the student body, being invisible and harmless for the remaining weeks.

So far she had done neither, and she was growing restless of her maudlin state.

It had been obvious to Harry and Ron that something had gone awry the night before when she never turned up for dinner. They had tried their best since then to coax her into giving them details, but she had merely snubbed them off, telling them it was none of their business. And although Harry hadn't said, "I told you so", in so many words, she could tell he was itching to.

She pushed her plate away, dabbed her mouth with a napkin and was about to excuse herself when the doors opened and the mail arrived. Twenty-odd owls swooped in and landed haphazardly around the Hall. All of a sudden a Howler erupted at the far end of the Gryffindor table, immediately attracting everyone's attention.

Hermione could just make out Matilda Tomlin, a second-year girl, blushing feverishly, desperately trying to make the Howler stop wailing about her failing Herbology.

"IF YOU HADN'T BEEN SPENDING EVERY WAKING MINUTE ON THE QUIDDITCH PITCH, YOU WOULDN'T BE IN THIS SITUATION, YOUNG LADY!" A high-pitched female voice, most likely Matilda's mother, echoed through the Hall.

"That's one of our new Beaters," Ron said and nudged Hermione in the side. "And she's brilliant too! Somebody should tell her mum to lay off her."

Satisfied with a job well done, the Howler stuck its tongue out as a final nail in the coffin and began the task of shredding itself, sprinkling the pieces over Matilda Tomlin's head, much to the amusement of her classmates. The laughter elevated to new heights as a flustered Pomona Sprout was seen sprinting down the middle aisle, heading for the now slightly disheveled girl. Sprout came to a sudden halt behind Matilda and awkwardly tried to console her but ended up making it worse as a couple of Slytherins, caught up in the moment, started chanting:

When you pout, hug a Sprout! When in doubt, hug a Sprout!

Hermione tore herself away from the ruckus, debating whether or not she should intervene in some way, when from nowhere, a black sleek-looking bird gracefully landed in front of her. Not recognizing the messenger, she carefully unrolled the scroll tied to its leg and started to read, her eyes growing wide with disbelief as she got to the end.

Miss Granger,

It has been pointed out to me that my behavior as of yesterday was out of line. The inconvenience said behavior has brought upon you is, I admit, unfortunate. However, I fail to see how a detention with Professor Palmer constitutes as suitable punishment in relation to the crime committed. Rest assured, had it been up to me, expulsion would have out-ruled any other alternative.

With that said and without further regressing from the point if your offer still stands regarding dinner, I am, regrettably, obliged beyond my power to accept.

Professor S. Snape

A flash of anger surged through her as she read the last sentence. She jerked her head up towards the Head Table, spotting the Potions professor at the end, hiding behind a curtain of greasy black hair, scowling at his food.

That infernal man! How dare he? she thought and slammed her fist down so hard her goblet of pumpkin juice toppled over, causing the liquid to slosh into Ron's lap.

"Oi!" He rose clumsily and began wiping his pants frantically with a napkin.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! *Evanesco*," Hermione said and started cleaning up the mess. "Honestly, Ron, why you would use a napkin when there are at least five simple spells..."

"Not now, Hermione," he said, annoyed. "Who was that from anyway?"

"Oh, alright," she huffed. "It was from Professor Snape. Dumbledore obviously told him to apologize for behaving like a complete arse..."

"Keep it down!" Harry said nervously, his eyes darting to the Head Table.

"Only this is not an apology, it's another bloody insult!" Hermione said fiercely, waving the parchment in front of them.

"Miss Granger!" Pomona Sprout's voice suddenly rang out above their heads. "Mind your language! Last time I checked you were Head Girl, so do try to act accordingly." She glowered viciously at Hermione and stomped off for the Head Table, leaving Harry and Ron with their mouths hanging wide open and Hermione fuming from her ears to her toes.

"If one more person pesters me about my Head Girl duties..." Hermione hissed.

"Hermione, you need calm down! If you keep this up, you'll be in real trouble," Harry hissed back, cutting her off.

It's a little bit too late for that, Hermione thought darkly. An awkward silence settled between the three Gryffindors until finally Ron cleared his throat.

"Um, Harry, we need to get going or we'll be late for practice, only a couple of 'em left before the big game."

This year's big Quidditch finale was taking place in two weeks between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor, and both Houses had been cramming in last minute practices every day for the last month. While Hermione spent most of her free time at the library, Harry and Ron had basically been sleeping at the pitch, discussing tactics and trying out new moves.

"Yeah, I know, let me just ..." He took a last gulp of his pumpkin juice and rose. "There, let's go."

"Hermione, are you coming down to watch?" Ron asked, already knowing the answer.

"Ehrrm, no, probably not. I have some homework to do ..." "

"Alright. See you later, then," he said over his shoulder as he and Harry made their way out the Hall.

She watched their retreating backs thoughtfully for a second and then suddenly made up her mind, rummaging through her back pack for a spare bit of parchment. Scribbling quickly, she folded up the paper and called for the unfamiliar bird who had perched on a window sill close by. She fastened it to the bored-looking bird's leg and felt a little smirk form on her lips.

The bird looked at her with disgust as she tried to offer him an owl treat, flapped his wings irritably and took off for the Head Table. She watched as it landed next to the Potions professor.

With long, lanky fingers Snape unfastened the scroll of paper and read the answer. Angrily he snatched his head in her direction, and they locked eyes. She just smiled smugly and gave him a small shrug, satisfied with his reaction.

Later that night found Hermione nestled down in one of the leather armchairs in front of a crackling fire in the Gryffindor common room. It really wasn't necessary to use the grates since the heatwave from Hades seemed to have invaded the Scottish highlands, but Hermione didn't mind.

She stroked Crookshanks distractedly, frowning at the parchment in front of her. She was trying to compose a letter for Christopher, her boyfriend for the last eight months, but found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. He had been writing her a letter a week for as long as they had been together, and they were always very heartfelt, telling her how much he missed her and how he longed for her.

She liked him, that much she knew. She just couldn't make up her mind about whether she liked him *enough*. So she had put the decision on hold for some time, but summer was rapidly coming closer, and she was running out of excuses as to why she didn't want to make any holiday plans with him.

Her mind wandered to the Potions professor and the strained relationship that had formed between them. *Well, only a couple of weeks left, and then you'll leave that mess behind. But gaining another ...* She sighed irritably and gazed out the window.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the girl standing next to her.

"Miss Granger?" asked a mud-covered Matilda Tomlin, clutching her broomstick nervously.

Hermione smiled what she hoped was a reassuring smile and put down her quill and blank parchment.

"Yes, Matilda? Do you want to talk about what happened at dinner?" Hermione said sympathetically, "I'm so sorry..."

"Um, no." Matilda blushed at the public humiliation from earlier and shifted her feet. "I just got back from Quidditch practice and well ... Professor Snape wants to talk to you."

"What!" Hermione yelped in alarm. "What do you mean?"

"He's outside the portrait hole, and he told me to get you," Matilda said, growing concerned at the Head Girl's unexpected reaction, and pointed towards the door.

Hermione darted from the armchair, quill and parchment flying everywhere, almost tripping over Crookshanks and narrowly avoiding a collision with the floor. "Thank you, Matilda," she said, flustered, as she tried to remove a strand of hair from her mouth. "I'll just go check, shall I?"

The now definitely frightened second year only nodded in response and all but ran up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Hermione tentatively walked out the portrait hole and peered around. She found Snape leaning against the wall, looking up at the ceiling.

"Professor?" Hermione said as she started walking towards him.

Snape immediately retreated from the wall and resumed his usual looming stance.

"I apologize if I am inconveniencing you at this late hour, Miss Granger," he drawled insincerely.

She stopped a healthy two meters in front of him and frowned. There was no one else in the corridor, so if he wanted to hex her, this would be the perfect opportunity.

You're being silly, Hermione, she thought to herself. *Remember that you're more than capable of handling anything life decides to throw in your way.*

Not if it's a well-aimed Killing Curse from a scorned ex-Death Eater, another small voice whispered. She shook her head, freeing herself from those ridiculous thoughts.

"It's really not a problem. What can I do for you?"

Snape sighed.

"I am here to discuss your ... response to my letter. Or lack thereof." He handed her the parchment containing the single two letters. She glanced at the answer and stifled a snort.

"No."

"I don't think there's anything to discuss. I gave you an offer, you declined. You thought it was a standing invitation, and I corrected this misperception," she said briskly.

"You are forgetting, Miss Granger, that I, unlike yourself, have made an effort to apologize for the lack of character I showed earlier."

"You can hardly call that travesty an apology."

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I can assure you that this "travesty" as you call it is more than anyone has received from me in a good thirty years."

"Well, be that as it may, I'm quite certain Professor Dumbledore put you up to this." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest.

Snape looked at her intently, as if weighing pros and cons in his head, and then finally, it seemed, gave in with another sigh.

"If you must know, the Headmaster threatened to terminate my employment if I failed to find a way to make you re-offer," he said, lips curling.

"Did he really?" Hermione said, feeling quite touched at this odd but still rather sweet gesture.

"Yes. He's got a ... flair for the dramatic, as you might have noticed," Snape said with the tiniest smirk on his lips.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea," she said, daringly giving him a cheeky grin.

"Miss Granger," Snape said warningly.

"Oh, fine." Hermione spread out her arms. "Since you asked so nicely." She paused for dramatic effect and continued in what could only be described as a teasing tone of voice. "I don't know if you've heard this, Professor, but my parents own a restaurant in Muggle London and I was wondering ... "

Author's note:

It Isn't Right the Platters

Chapter 5 - I Can't Say Goodbye

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearingly trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 5 - I Can't Say Goodbye

"Hermione! On time as always." Gregory Palmer smiled at Hermione when she punctually entered his office at two o'clock that Saturday.

Palmer's office was beautifully located on the ground floor, right next to the greenhouses. It once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, who apparently had quite the green thumb and a wish to be close to nature.

It was elegantly decorated, instilling a snug feeling of warmth, bathing in the sunlight that was pouring in through three oversized, arched windows, overseeing the Forbidden Forest.

A large wooden desk cluttered with parchments, quills, newspapers, and a marble ashtray filled to the brim with cigarette butts, was situated in front of the windows, facing the room. On the other side of the desk stood two comfortable-looking leather armchairs.

A liquor cabinet, holding all sorts of whiskey bottles and a collection of crystal glasses, was squeezed in between a couple of large bookshelves, taking up one side of the room. Occupying the opposite wall was a worn couch, littered with pillows in different shapes and sizes. And beneath it all was the largest oriental rug Hermione had ever seen.

"Sit down, please." Palmer conjured a small table out of an umbrella stand and put it in front of one of the armchairs. "I thought you could help me grade some papers. My third years had a surprise test on boggarts yesterday." He frowned. "From what I've seen so far, they were really surprised."

Hermione laughed and plopped down in the chair, digging through her back pack for a quill.

Gregory Palmer was a thinly built, fifty-five-year-old ex-Auror with kind eyes and a contagious laugh. He had been one of the men working from within the Ministry of Magic during the war and had quickly become Kingsley Shacklebolt's right hand in building up the wizarding world after Voldemort's death.

It was hard to imagine anyone disliking Palmer's gentle and thoughtful nature, and when he had announced his retirement from the Ministry after almost thirty years of service, there was no doubt that they were losing one of their best men. The never-ending stream of tearful thank you cards, which had been sent to his office alone, was proof of that.

The only two things that could possibly be held against Palmer was an old smoking habit and the occasional tendency to pour himself a shot of whiskey before breakfast on the weekends.

McGonagall, along with Septima Vector, Hogwarts Arithmancy professor, had taken it upon themselves to teach the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes after the school had been restored. But after nearly six months of working nonstop, they had been forced to admit that other areas demanding their attention were showing signs of neglect.

When the school had put out an advertisement in the *Daily Prophet*, Gregory Palmer had been one out of only two applicants. And when offered the job, he had accepted without hesitation and immediately swapped his apartment in Chichester for the drafty Scottish castle.

Palmer had, however, barely had time to get comfortable in his new teaching role, when an absurd, but unconfirmed, rumor began to spread amongst the students. Hermione had disregarded it as ludicrous when she first had heard it, but her curiosity was involuntarily sparked, and now, with a golden opportunity to actually find out the rumor's level of veracity, that curiosity was burning a hole in her head.

It's none of your business, she thought as she watched Palmer frantically rummaging around his desk, looking for the right pile of papers.

But what's the harm? It's just an innocent question ... Stop it! Who are you? Rita Skeeter, digging for dirt?

She shuddered at the thought and decided to ask Palmer something else to distract her from the real question on her mind.

"Do you know the reason I'm here, Professor?"

"Yes, I am very aware of it, actually," he replied and stopped the rummaging for a second.

"It just doesn't feel like grading papers is ... enough. It feels like I should be scrubbing boogers off the walls in the boys' bathroom, or something similar to it. *Wait a minute! Am I actually agreeing with Professor Snape?*" she thought to herself, bewildered.

"Maybe you should." Palmer chuckled. "But I don't believe in punishment, as much as I believe in reflection and contemplation. Let me ask you this: Should I be afraid that you would do that same to me if I were to be 'rude' in your opinion?"

"What? No! Surely, you don't think that?"

"I don't know you well enough to be able to tell, Hermione. I've heard about you, of course, and your contribution in the war, but I don't know anything about you personally. Let's just hope this was a one time thing."

Palmer finally dug out what seemed to be the correct pile from underneath a golden paperweight and handed them to her.

"You can start with these. I presume you are well versed on the subject?"

"Most definitely, Professor. My own boggart, before the war at least, was Professor McGonagall telling me I had failed all my tests and exams. And I don't mean to boast, but there are few topics I am not well versed in," she said and quirked her lips.

Palmer laughed outright at this.

After an extremely dull half hour, struggling through what had to be a low point in Hogwarts' history when it came to test results, Hermione's thoughts began to wander.

She looked up at Palmer. He had his head in his hand, absently scribbling a comment here and there.

You'd better not do what I think you're about to do, Hermione Jean Granger she thought.

And then she heard her own voice, as if it had a mind of its own.

"Professor Palmer? May I ask you something?"

He turned his attention to her. "Yes?"

"Is it true that you were married to Dolores Umbridge?" Hermione blurted out.

Palmer, completely taken by surprise, stared at her for a couple of seconds before he slowly put his quill down and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes.

"I still am," he said finally.

"So, it's true!" Hermione shrieked, "But she's in Azkaban!" Surprised by her own uncontrolled outburst, she clasped her hands over her mouth, and in a muffled voice added, "Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry."

Palmer chuckled sadly.

"It's fine, Hermione. I know she hasn't got the best ... reputation. And certainly not here at Hogwarts. And yes, she is."

They sat together in silence for a while, Hermione feeling embarrassed by her lack of restraint and Palmer lost in thought.

A quiet knock startled them both. The door opened and Filius Flitwick popped his head in.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Gregory, but a short word if I may?" he inquired.

"Oh, absolutely. I'll be right back, Hermione," he said and walked across the floor to join his colleague in the corridor, closing the door behind him.

A few minutes later the door cracked open, and Palmer seated himself behind his desk once more.

"Professor," Hermione said, having had the time to compose herself. "Again, I'm sorry, it really was none of my business..."

"You know what," Palmer broke off, not unkindly. "Let's take a walk. I'll tell you about Dolores. Who knows? Maybe you will benefit from it in some way."

I seriously doubt it, Hermione thought, but this time managed to keep it to herself.

"Have you by any chance seen a pack of cigarettes? I swear I last saw them on my desk," Palmer said incidentally. "Oh, well, never mind. I have some in my robes."

He walked up to a coat rack where a worn grey robe had been sloppily hung over a pair of pants and a jacket and fished a pack out from an inside pocket as he motioned for her to follow. "We'll take the back door; it takes us right through the greenhouses."

It was a hot day, and students were lazily milling about the grounds. Some had even journeyed down to the Black Lake, daring each other to dip their toes in the water.

Hermione cast a glance at the man next to her, as they slowly left the castle behind, walking in silence down an overgrown trail leading to the lake.

"Did you know that the Giant Squid is female, sir? The only one of its kind in Britain," Hermione said, voicing a stray thought.

"Must be quite lonely for her, then," Palmer said absent-mindedly.

"I don't really think she can grasp the concept of loneliness if I'm honest." Hermione sniggered. "Her brain is supposedly the size of a walnut, which makes her intelligence equivalent to that of an emu."

"And that would be?" Palmer seemed to have his eyes fixed on the now quite narrow and steep path, but Hermione could see a small smile form on his lips.

"Next to naught," she said and gave him a grin.

Suddenly the Black Lake appeared before them, and Palmer stopped briefly to light a cigarette. He sighed and started walking towards the shore.

"She is a pureblood, Dolores, born and raised. She was sorted into Slytherin, and I into Hufflepuff. She had her mind set on proving herself to the wizarding world right from the start, and I guess I was impressed by her conviction and willpower. It got to her head in the end, as you know," he said quietly.

"But she was a really lovely young woman when we met. Kind and vibrant, and I was head over heels for her. We started dating in our seventh year, got engaged right after graduation and married two years after that."

Hermione was at a loss for words. She couldn't even imagine a world where Dolores Umbridge was "lovely" or "kind."

"What do you know about wizarding engagements and marriages?" Palmer said, a shadow crossing his face.

"Not much. I'm Muggle-born." She shrugged. "But from what I understand, the divorce rate is a lot lower in the wizarding world as opposed to the Muggle world."

"Well, it's not so much lower, as it is nonexistent. It's nearly impossible to break off an engagement, let alone get a divorce in the wizarding world. The magically binding vows you make at the ceremony are basically indestructible, much like an Unbreakable Vow in its essence," he said.

"It all seems very medieval, if you don't mind me saying so," Hermione said empathetically.

Palmer looked at her bleakly. "No, I quite agree. There are exceptions of course. Death ... and infidelity. Violence, I reckon. But to lose faith or love ... Apparently that's not enough. And because of this choice I made when I was very young, I am now irrevocably bonded to a person whom I feel nothing but loathing for and whom I can't see or talk to since, well, she's locked up for life, deprived of visitation rights." He frowned. "And even if I could, I wouldn't want to."

Palmer stopped and gazed out the lake.

"Everybody does stupid things. But it shouldn't cost them everything they want in life." He turned to Hermione and smiled sadly.

"I'm really sorry, Professor," she said softly, "I didn't know."

"And how would you?" He shook his head. "Let's walk back. It's already dinner time." He glanced down at his watch and put out his cigarette. "They're serving roast today. It's supposed to be delicious," he said briskly, trying to lighten the dampened mood.

Palmer set a fast pace, and they had almost reached the front doors of the castle, when they heard a familiar voice behind them.

"A little walk in the park, Mr. Palmer? Is that your idea of a detention?" Snape drawled.

"Ah, Professor Snape. Why, yes, if it suits the lesson I'm trying to teach the student given me," Palmer replied, folding his arms across his chest.

"Sunbathing and strolling have joined the school curriculum, have they?" Snape quipped.

"Well, yes, maybe they have," Palmer said curtly, flustered at the Potions master's insolence.

"Then I will immediately alert the Headmaster of these two new additions. I am certain the students will find them as academically stimulating and challenging as Divination."

Hermione let out a loud snort.

"Miss Granger." He quirked his lips and gave her a minuscule bow, then turned to the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. "Mr. Palmer," he said coolly, robes billowing behind him as he walked through the doors.

"That man," Palmer said, angry red spots appearing on his cheeks, "is a challenge."

"Yes. He certainly is," Hermione conceded with the smallest hint of a smile.

Author's note:

I Can't Say Goodbye Bobby Vee

Chapter 6 - Find Another Fool

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearing trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 6 - Find Another Fool

Professor Snape,

Kindly meet me at the Apparition point outside the entrance gates at 7 p.m. on Saturday, as per our agreement. We will then proceed to the Björn and the Sill by Side-Along Apparition.

Dress code is jacket if you don't have any Muggle clothing, I am quite sure Professor Dumbledore can assist in loaning you something suitable.

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger,

Since I am fully capable of Apparating on my own accord, Side-Along Apparition is out of the question. I will ask you to instead provide me with proper directions thus enabling me to meet you outside said restaurant at 7 p.m.

Also, thank you for your concern regarding my potential inability to dress properly for the occasion. I do believe, however, that I will be able to manage without consulting the Headmaster's extensive wardrobe.

Professor S. Snape

Professor Snape,

I strongly recommend that we use Side-Along Apparition since, as you are well aware, secondhand directions when Apparating can cause severe splinching. And since there are no public Apparition points nearby the restaurant (obviously, it's located in central Muggle London), you will have to trust my abilities to get us there.

I will not stress this issue any further, but I will say this: If you're not present at the gates at 7 p.m., I will personally collect you from your quarters.

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger,

As much as I loathe to admit it, you may have stumbled across something similar to a valid point. You should cherish this moment, as it is bound to be a rare occurrence.

Escorting me from my rooms will be completely unnecessary. I am not a third-year girl you are taking to the Yule Ball.

Professor S. Snape

Professor Snape,

I somehow doubt anyone would mistake you for a third-year girl.

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger,

It would do you well to remember with whom you are corresponding. Although there is little doubt in my mind that any knowledge once retained resides infinitely in that know-it-all brain of yours, I feel inclined to remind you of this little fact: I am a professor at the school you are currently attending. As such I demand to be treated with the amount of decorum and respect that position holds.

Professor S. Snape

Professor Snape,

How strange, I thought I was doing exactly that.

Hermione Granger

Knowing that her last reply might have been a tad overboard, Hermione decided it was best to seek refuge in the library for a while, giving herself a little room to breathe and calm down.

The library was, unsurprisingly, empty, with the exception of Madam Pince who was fervently dusting and re-organizing a section of battered eighteenth-century tomes addressing the Goblin Wars of Midwestern Asia.

Hermione had become intimately acquainted with those very shelves a few years back after she, Harry and Ron had had a particularly nasty encounter with Draco Malfoy, which had ended with Malfoy in the hospital wing and a weekend of detention for the three of them. Needless to say that was the only part of the library she felt no need to revisit.

After settling down in her favorite spot in a far away corner, she pulled out a couple of books from her backpack and opened up to the first page in *A Guide to Diagnostics and Healing When Encountering Dark Wounds*. Hermione eagerly devoured the first two chapters and was just about to begin with the third when she felt a hard tap on her shoulder.

She turned around, prepared to give the person behind her a piece of her mind when she found herself face to face with her Head of House. ~~Hefurning~~ Head of House.

"You. My office. *Now*," McGonagall seethed through clenched teeth, nostrils flaring in sync with each word.

"What is..." Hermione began, confounded, but the Deputy Headmistress was already heading for the door, furiously clanking her cane on the hard marble floor.

The noise, echoing and ricocheting off the walls, sent Madam Pince into a full scale rant, and the last Hermione heard, as she clumsily sprinted past her to catch up with McGonagall, books and backpack in her arms, was something quite inappropriate about what *exactly* the Transfiguration professor could turn herself into.

She really doesn't need that cane, Hermione thought distractedly as the two of them walked briskly through the castle. Once in front of an old painting of a sleeping Godric Gryffindor, McGonagall unwarded her office with a complicated combination of incantations and then shooed Hermione inside.

"Sit." She motioned impatiently to a wing-back chair in front of her desk as she walked behind it, bent down and retrieved something from a drawer. She then came to stand in front of Hermione, clutching a heap of parchments in her hand.

"What, pray tell, is *this*?" McGonagall spat as she thrust them into Hermione's lap.

Hermione looked at the pile and immediately recognized her correspondence with Snape.

"I believe this is a private conversation between me and Professor Snape," she said slowly.

"Not particularly private since he chose to share it with me. And with good reason, as I have never seen anything like it!" McGonagall said shrilly.

"You have proven yet again that you are incapable of controlling your temper in a manner befitting the Head Girl. Or any student at Hogwarts for that matter. This..." She furiously snatched one of the missives from Hermione's lap and waved it in front of her. "Is NOT a proper way to address a professor of this school, and if there is one thing I cannot and will not tolerate, it's disrespect."

"But that's just not fair, Professor! Look, I can admit that I might have crossed the line a little bit..."

"A *little* bit?"

"But I'm certainly not the only one." Hermione raked through the parchments. Every single one seemed to be there, except the one where Snape brusquely suggested that she should be expelled without further ado. *How convenient*, she thought angrily.

McGonagall took a deep breath and leaned against her desk, eyeing Hermione.

"What on earth is going on with you?" she said exasperatedly and spread her arms.

Hermione let out a frustrated sound.

"First of all, there is nothing 'going on with me'; it's Snape, he's the one..."

"*Professor* Snape, Miss Granger. Do try to pretend like you care, at the very least."

"Fine. *Professor* Snape," Hermione snapped, "And I do care! But I won't pretend that this discussion is anything but ridiculous since *Professor* Snape is behaving like a complete git, and if anyone, *he's* the one disregarding all forms of civility *and* getting away with it. I won't accept it. Not anymore."

Professor McGonagall's grip on the edge of the desk tightened, turning her knuckles white as she narrowed her eyes at the student before her.

"Very well," she said icily. "Then let's talk about something else. Professor Sprout came by my office this morning and told me something very disturbing. She said she overheard you use foul language in front of both first and second years in the Great Hall during dinner a couple of days ago. Is that true?"

"Yes, unfortunately," Hermione said, deflated, "but that was Professor Snape's fault as well!" Really, when she came to think of it, Snape seemed to be the root of all of her problems at the moment.

"It's just not good enough, Miss Granger," McGonagall said crassly, "I am sorry to say that I am forced to relieve you of your Head Girl duties. You are clearly unsuited to continue until end of term."

Hermione gaped at her Head of House in disbelief. *So that's how it's going to be, is it?*

"Fine. Take it," she said as she unpinned the shining badge from her robes. She flicked it unto McGonagall's desk and rose. "Good luck in finding someone else to do your tedious tasks."

"I fail to see how that would be particularly demanding, considering our last one's pitiful performance," McGonagall quipped.

But almost immediately after the words had escaped her lips, she seemed to regret them. "I am sorry, that was, I mean to say, you have been, up until now, extremely thorough..."

"No, you're right," Hermione cut off, "I have been inattentive and careless, and someone else should be offered this opportunity instead, an opportunity I apparently have been taking for granted." She put an index finger thoughtfully to her mouth and frowned.

"There is someone competent and capable, actually, who has been showing maturity beyond the rest of my year. And this someone, I believe, is almost as intelligent as anyone on the staff." She paused briefly.

"Yes, she is the obvious choice, and it would also send a clear message to the rest of the student body in what to expect quality wise from their school."

McGonagall relaxed her grip on the desk, and her lips, which up until now had been pursed together, turned into a slight smile.

"I'm relieved that you agree. I'm truly sorry that it had to come to this." McGonagall looked expectantly at Hermione. "Would you care to share who this someone might be?"

"The bloody Giant Squid."

Later that evening found Hermione in her four-poster bed, fiercely scribbling on a piece of parchment. Littered around her lay rejected drafts, crumpled up and tossed aside.

A young gray owl, borrowed from the Owlery, was impatiently hooting and hopping on the spot on the window sill next to Lavender Brown's bed. Finally, Hermione decided to go with her latest jumble of thoughts and quickly walked over to the window before she changed her mind. Again. She tied the note to the bird's leg, and as it took off she could have sworn it almost sighed in relief.

Professor Snape,

Unless it somehow wasn't crystal clear before, here is a missive in print, informing you of my total disapproval of you displaying our correspondence, which I thought was private, to my Head of House. As a result I have now lost my Head Girl-badge, and also been made a total fool.

I hope this piece of information brings you great satisfaction, since you undoubtedly had this outcome in mind from the very beginning.

Hermione Granger

It didn't take long before the black sleek-looking bird from before showed up outside her bedroom window.

Miss Granger,

The outcome I had in mind was actually a scenario where you stopped bothering me. Ironically enough, it seems my actions have had the opposite effect.

As to the supposed privacy of this correspondence, I cannot fathom why you would draw such inaccurate conclusions when you seem to be adequately clear-sighted otherwise.

Then again, it would be problematic for me to comprehend anything at all since I, and I have it on good authority, apparently have the intelligence level of a sea creature so marvelously dumb it makes the rocks on the bottom of its home appear as bright as Nicolas Flamel himself.

In hindsight my rather hasty decision to show your crude comments to the Deputy Headmistress only resulted in me being forced to listen to her tear-filled recapitulation of your dramatic rendezvous. It was most disturbing.

You are, therefore, wrong in your assumption. I am definitely not as satisfied as I could have been. Although, I must admit I find some comfort in the fact that someone finally made a sensible decision regarding the Head Girl post.

Professor S. Snape

Professor Snape,

I want it on record, should this note also drift astray, that I believe my exact words were "almost as intelligent as anyone on the staff", "almost" being the keyword here.

Hermione Granger

P.S.: You seem rather confident that I won't turn the tables on you and show this to Professor McGonagall. Is that wise regarding your rather unflattering description of her emotional state?

P.P.S.: What did you do to my owl?

Miss Granger,

Ah. Well, that wouldn't do at all now, would it? You will refrain yourself from engaging in such foolish actions simply because you probably are, for one, rather fond of your life and I might just consider reviving my earlier threat.

Regarding the owl, I have never seen a bird so desperate to leave the premises as the one you sent. Whatever the cause of its distress, a warning regarding your person should be issued to the Owlery. Maybe we should restrict your use of school owls altogether.

Until Saturday, then, unless you suddenly find yourself unable to show up, in which case I will bring someone else. I hear it's quite hard to get reservations.

Professor S. Snape

Professor Snape,

The rudeness of bringing someone else to a dinner I am paying for is, well, beyond disdainful. But the question of whom you might bring instead tickles my imagination to the point of it almost being unbearable.

See, I have a problem picturing anyone, with the exception of perhaps Moaning Myrtle and she is rather dead, I am sorry to say. And now that I come to think of it, since she is confined to that U-bend in the girls' lavatory on the first floor, it would be impossible for even her to come with you.

But don't let me cast a shadow over what is clearly bound to be a fantastic evening. Order take out and your problem is solved.

Hermione Granger

Miss Granger,

You seem to be in the habit of giving me little credit. It might not have crossed your mind but it is actually within my capacity to be both sociable and, at times, perfectly agreeable.

Professor S. Snape

Hermione stared at the little piece of paper. Whatever she had been expecting, that was not it.

Could I really have hurt his feelings? Who knew he even had any beneath that cold, sneering exterior? Hermione shook her head as she reached for a quill, already composing various numbers of apologies in her head.

A peck on the window pane stopped her mid-sentence, and she instantly felt something awfully similar to anticipation spread through her body.

"Hermione! It's after *midnight!* If that effing bird doesn't stop, I swear I will glue owl treats to every single part of your body, shove you off to the Owlery and leave you there," Lavender Brown groaned. Launching herself off the bed, she angrily stalked to the window and flung it open.

"That's disgusting, Lav, even coming from you," Hermione said, now desperately trying to ignore a sudden flutter in her chest.

The black bird didn't even look twice at the sleep-deprived girl by the window as it zoomed in, dropped a neatly folded parchment in Hermione's lap, and flew out again.

With slightly shaky hands Hermione unfolded the note.

Miss Granger,

I almost forgot.

Fifty points from Gryffindor for being plain insufferable.

Professor S. Snape

Author's notes:

Chapter 7 - Make the Night Just a Little Longer

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts unbearably trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 7 Make the Night Just a Little Longer

When Hermione made her way down to the Apparition point on the evening of her dinner date with Snape, she was already running five minutes late.

She had been taking too long scrutinizing outfits and debating with herself whether her first choice, a neat black dress, was good enough. When she finally had concluded it was, the problem of what to wear with it had emerged.

She eventually matched it with a small black purse, moderately high heels and an expensive pair of pearl earrings that had once belonged to her grandmother. After a swift straightening charm aimed at her tousled hair, she was bolting out the door.

All in all she was quite pleased with her appearance. She wouldn't go as far as calling herself beautiful, but on a day like this, when she had put in a little extra effort, she felt it was within her reach to be.

Who says he'll even notice? she thought as she came scurrying down the path, feeling her pulse quicken as she saw Snape's silhouette impatiently pacing just outside the gates.

Hermione was happily surprised to discover that he was wearing a well-fitting gray jacket, a crisp white shirt and a pair of black dress pants. He had obviously made an effort to wash his hair, and as she got closer, she could feel a fresh, earthy fragrance linger about him.

Okay, be normal, say, "Sorry I'm late" and get going she thought nervously as she came to a halt in front of him. Just as his features turned into his trademark sneer and he made to open his mouth, she beat him to it.

And maybe it was because she was indeed late and desperately wanted to divert the attention, or maybe it was because of the loveliness of the warm summer evening, or *maybe* it was because she hadn't been able to shake the fluttery feeling that seemed to appear whenever she thought about him, but during that brief moment of breathlessly (because of the *running* she told herself) standing in front of this extremely complex, yet fascinating, man (who had bothered to put on cologne *foher*), her brain got confused.

And instead she *thought*, "Sorry I'm late" and *said*, "You're looking very handsome tonight, Professor."

Hermione gasped, clapping one hand over her mouth. *WHAT! Sweet mother of Merlin, what's WRONG with me!*

Snape in turn stared at her, a horrified expression on his face. For a second he seemed to be at a loss for words, but then he scowled and said stiffly, "I can't even begin to tell you how remarkably inappropriate that was, Miss Granger, perhaps..."

"It's only inappropriate if you believe that I have other motives behind what was only an honest observation," Hermione cut off, blushing brilliantly. "And in case you're wondering, I don't."

She then quickly grabbed a hold of his arm and with a CRACK! Apparated them from the spot before he could retort.

A second later they were stumbling down a murky alley. Hermione let go of Snape's arm as if it were on fire and started rummaging around her purse, unable to look at him.

Snape put his arms across his chest, inspecting their surroundings. Garbage bins full to the brim were lined up against brick walls, trash spilling out on the concrete underneath. A shabby stray cat appeared from under a cardboard box, throwing them a vicious glare before trotting off down the street.

"Well," Snape said slowly, a smirk materializing on his lips. "I can't say I had high expectations to begin with ... but I presumed there would be a couple of chairs and a table, at the very least."

"Oh, do be quiet." Hermione smiled, relieved that he seemed to have forgotten, or temporarily chosen to ignore, her little slip up. "Did you think I was going to Apparate us right in front of the entrance? This is the back."

"Indeed," he drawled.

"Found them!" she exclaimed triumphantly and pulled out a large set of keys, rattling them in front of him, but gaining only a slightly raised eyebrow in acknowledgment. "We'll go through the kitchen," she informed him as she unlocked a large metal door.

They were immediately hit by the deafening noise and heat that only a hectic kitchen at rush hour can produce.

"This sauce is RUINED! Johan! I told you to watch it and where the hell were you? We'll have to redo the whole bloody dish!" bellowed a bulky red-haired man with a distinct accent while fiercely slamming a pot on the counter.

Waiters and cooks were rushing past Hermione and Snape, throwing discreet sympathetic looks in the scolded man's direction.

The red-haired man's face suddenly lit up as he noticed Hermione in the doorway. "Angel!" he cried out and walked up to her, ladle in one hand and a dishrag on his shoulder, embracing her in a bear hug. "I haven't seen you since you were here with that absurdly bearded man and his short companion!"

Hermione smiled affectionately at the man. "Busy night?"

"It wouldn't be if some people actually did what they were told." He rolled his eyes and jerked his head towards the place where Johan was fervently whipping up a new sauce. "And who is this?" he said, pointing his ladle at Snape.

Hermione cringed inwardly at the chef's bluntness. "This is my professor, Severus Snape. Professor, this is Marius; he's the man in charge of the kitchen."

"You have a strange name." Marius squinted at Snape suspiciously. "Are you from Russia?"

"No," Snape said curtly, cocking an eyebrow warningly at the chef. "And I would advise you not to stick that thing in my face."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Well, we should really ... Who's our waiter for tonight, Marius?"

Still eyeing Snape with a quizzical look, Marius turned to Hermione. "It's Percy, angel, but why don't you take a seat at your usual table, and I'll send him along," he replied.

Hermione ushered Snape through the kitchen and towards a set of swing doors leading to the main restaurant. The restaurant itself was a mix of repurposed vintage furniture and colorful art pieces with huge chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and the occasional bit of kitsch stirred in here and there. The tables were set with white linen, immaculate cutlery and the finest crystal glasses.

Hermione and Snape could spot a line outside the entrance with people queuing up in the hopes of catching a canceled reservation.

"Our table is upstairs," Hermione said over her shoulder as they crisscrossed between waiters, guests and tables to get to the stairs on the other side of the room.

The second floor was equally as packed with people, but it was obvious that it was reserved for special guests. Finally they reached their table, which was beautifully placed in a small alcove with large windows overlooking the Thames.

As soon as they sat down, a flustered Percy Weasley hurriedly approached them, notepad in hand, menus clutched under his arm and a pen firmly fixed behind his right ear.

He stopped short in front of their table and blanched when he realized just whom Hermione had brought with her this Saturday. Hermione couldn't tell who was more surprised, Percy for seeing his old Potions professor at a Muggle restaurant or Snape for seeing his old student, the previously high-ranking Ministry official, working as a waiter.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape drawled, a sudden glint in his eyes. "At the height of your career, I see."

"Professor!" Hermione hissed angrily.

"No, it's alright, Hermione." Percy's eyes darted nervously to Snape. "Actually, there were some... well, trust issues going back to the Ministry, and after a while, I just had enough. Hermione was kind enough to help me out." Percy smiled weakly as he handed them the menus.

"It's only temporary, of course. Until I figure out what to do next," he added hastily. "Why don't I get you something to drink while you browse through the menus. White wine as usual, Hermione?"

"Yes, thank you, Percy," Hermione said softly.

Percy turned to Snape. "And for you, Professor?"

Hermione looked at Snape with a somewhat involuntary curiosity. She had no idea what his drinking preferences were. For all she knew he might enjoy a pint of dragon blood with his entree.

"I'll have the same," he said and opened the menu.

They examined the menus in silence, and although Hermione knew it by heart, had even helped her mother design it, eaten all of the dishes on it and could order from it in her sleep, she pretended to be quite intrigued by it. Every single topic of conversation suddenly sounded ridiculous in her head. *Come on, think! Didn't you read something in Potions Weekly about...*

"Miss Granger."

"Yes, Professor?" She peered over her menu to find Snape staring at her.

"Stop."

"With what?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"You're humming along to the music."

"Oh." She put her menu down. "I apologize. I tend to do that when I like something."

"Spare me. You like 60s doo-wop? How incredibly juvenile," he said with a smirk as he reached for a piece of crisp bread from the breadbasket.

"Pretty well spotted for someone hating the genre," Hermione said *sotto voce*.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. It's just something with the harmonies that makes me ... well, want to hum."

Snape looked at her with an undefinable expression on his face and disappeared behind his menu once again, only to put it down almost immediately.

"Miss Granger," he said, this time a little bit more insistently.

"Yes, Professor?"

"You're doing it again."

They ended up ordering the same main course. Snape had gladly ordered the salmon on her suggestion, seemingly content in not having to venture too far into the unknown. Hermione had a sneaky suspicion that both Dumbledore and McGonagall had tried to persuade him into trying the pölsa and the pickled herring.

"This truly is an odd establishment," he said suddenly, placing his knife and fork at one side of the plate, indicating he had finished.

"How so, Professor?" Hermione said, intrigued.

"You've got the Swedish food, mainly fresh fish and other Scandinavian delicacies. But the chef's definitely not from Sweden."

Hermione gave him an appreciative look. "That's very perceptive. What gave him away?"

"Bear in mind that this is my rather biased opinion, but I have always pictured Swedes to be a bit less ... intrusive."

"You're right," she chuckled. "He's from Kiev, actually." She motioned for him to continue. "What else?"

"The interior looks, and to some extent feels, French, and the music ... is utterly horrendous," Snape concluded.

Ignoring the last sentence, Hermione shrugged and said, "Well, my grandparents on my dad's side are Swedish; he grew up in Gothenburg. But then he met my mum when he was an exchange student in his last year in high school and moved here after he graduated. So that was the obvious choice for the culinary orientation. As for the ... ambiance, if you will, that's all my mum's doing. She claims her inspiration comes from being a romantic at heart."

Snape scoffed. "French interior is as romantically cliché as doo-wop. You should tell your mother that."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you enlighten her yourself?" she replied as she broke out into a wide grin, waving to someone across the room.

Jean Granger, an aristocratic-looking lady in her late forties with well-manicured hands and impeccably groomed chestnut-colored hair, instantly made for their table, her high heels clicking on the floor.

"Mum, this is my Potions professor, Severus Snape," Hermione said after giving her mother a brief hug.

"It's so nice to meet you, Mr. Snape. How do you like our little piece of Sweden?"

"It is..."

"Actually, I think Professor Snape had some minor adjustment propositions," Hermione said, hiding a smirk behind her napkin.

"Really?" Jean Granger said with an irritated click of her tongue, folding her arms across her chest.

"Wait, I just said ..." Snape put his hands up, in a rather pointless attempt to fend off the Granger women.

"Don't be shy, Professor. It was something about the music?" Hermione pushed.

"Well, Mr. Snape, I can assure you that our concept so far has turned out to be quite profitable, but please go ahead. What would you have listened to instead?" Mrs. Granger inquired.

Snape ran a hand through his hair irritably. "I don't know, maybe Frank Sinatra," he replied, shooting daggers at Hermione.

"Frank Si ..." Mrs. Granger pursed her lips. "I wouldn't expect you to know this, but every sloppy little pizzeria in the whole of England plays Frank Sinatra. We're trying to be less ... generic, if you catch my drift. But thank you for your feedback." She smiled at him sweetly and then turned to Hermione.

"Christopher is here as well," she said a bit more cheery and clapped her hands together. "He was just behind me." She threw a glance over her shoulder. "There he is!"

The snigger Hermione desperately had tried to hold back caught in her throat as she watched the lanky, sandy-haired man appear at her mother's side. He bent down to give Hermione a wet kiss on the cheek and then straightened up to greet Snape.

"Christopher Collins. How do you do, sir."

Snape only grunted in response, earning him a glare from Mrs. Granger. But Christopher didn't even seem to notice. He only had eyes for Hermione, a wide, goofy grin plastered on his face.

"Will I see you tonight, Hermione?" he asked hopefully.

"Uhm, I ..."

"But you said you were allowed to come home on the weekends," he insisted, looking thoroughly disappointed.

"Yes, we are, it's just ..."

"Then what's the problem? I haven't seen you in ages..."

Snape cleared his throat. "I believe Miss Granger has promised to assist me in a project I'm working on."

Hermione stared at her Potions professor, bewildered.

"On a Saturday night?" Christopher asked skeptically. "That doesn't even make sense. What kind of project is that?"

Hermione felt her cheeks burn at the unintentional insinuation, but once again, Snape came to her rescue.

"There is no such thing as 'regular office hours' in the field of Potions, Mr. Collins," Snape said pointedly. "We were just discussing the conundrum that is the Hellebore flower, which is also the protagonist of my project, when you came over. Coincidentally, it needs to be plucked every third month, exactly at midnight. And, well ... " He quirked his lips at the younger man.

"Let me guess," Christopher sneered. "That just happens to be tonight."

"We better leave you to it then," Mrs. Granger said firmly, grabbing a disgruntled Christopher by the arm. "I do hope you'll enjoy the rest of your dinner, Mr. Snape, despite our musical differences." And with that she blew her daughter a kiss and forcefully guided the young man away from the table.

"That was some impressive lying, Professor," Hermione said, not without a hint of appreciation in her voice.

"Yes, well. I have had some practice on that front," Snape said and looked at Hermione thoughtfully. "So. Tell me about your beau, Miss Granger. I don't recognize him, which means he didn't go to Hogwarts."

"No, actually, he went to..." Hermione stopped when she noticed how Snape suddenly stiffened, his eyes fixated on a spot just above Hermione's left shoulder. "What?" she said and whipped her head around.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the infamous Severus Snape himself, resurrected from the dead," a familiar voice drawled. Lucius Malfoy, in an incredibly slim-fitting, emerald green jacket with matching pants, came into view.

"Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world..." He paused, a haughty tilt to his chin.

"Yet here you are. The renowned Potions master. War hero. Receiver of an Order of Merlin, First Class." Malfoy bent down, almost touching Snape's ear with his lips. "And lest we forget ... traitor," he whispered.

"Been sprucing up your knowledge on Muggle culture, Lucius?" Snape asked through gritted teeth.

"Ah, you know what they say ... Keep your friends close and so forth." Malfoy stood up and tapped his silver-plated cane against Snape's lapel.

"Look at you, all dressed up." He looked down his nose on Hermione. "And you brought a girlfriend. Things really have changed, haven't they?" he said airily.

Snape remained quiet, a slight color appearing on his otherwise pale cheeks.

"Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said, mimicking the same exact sugary smile her mother had given Snape just moments ago. "Are you enjoying your evening so far?" She dabbed her mouth with a napkin as she eyed the man.

"It has been adequate ... I suppose," Malfoy drawled reluctantly and wrinkled his nose, a remnant of a time when it was socially acceptable for pure-bloods to be openly condescending towards Muggle-borns.

She cast a glance behind him and noticed his wife, Narcissa Malfoy, a few tables away. Hermione was well aware of the fact that the Malfoys were regulars at the Björn and the Sill and that they had made it into a near weekly routine to visit the restaurant.

"So adequate that you choose to bring your wife here practically every Saturday?" Hermione asked innocently.

"How do you..." Malfoy began but trailed off, giving her a bored look. "No matter. Well, you could say I am a creature of habit. Not that it concerns you."

"On the contrary it concerns me more than you could imagine. You should probably get back to your table and finish your meal, seeing as it will be the last time you'll set foot in this building again," she said casually.

Malfoy laughed a harsh, rasping laugh, full of contempt. "Snape, what's your little chihuahua yapping about?"

Snape quirked his lips slightly and looked at him. "Her family owns the restaurant, Lucius. I suppose Miss Granger has some say regarding its clientele."

"You just wait until my father hears about this," Hermione quipped.

Affronted, Lucius let out a small hiss and without another word stalked away to his wife.

"I'm sorry, Professor. He has no right to speak to you like that," Hermione said softly.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Granger," Severus sighed. "Some things never change."

"Well, if you want my opinion, he's an idiot."

Snape snorted. "I couldn't agree more."

She smiled at him. "Do you think I need to worry about this sudden rush of empowerment? It might just go to my head if I'm not careful."

"I would say that there is quite a vast amount of evidence from the past weeks suggesting that you're already on that slippery slope," Snape replied.

"Behave, or you'll meet the same sticky fate as Mr. Malfoy, Professor," she said, giving him a mock glare.

"Indeed," Snape said, folding his napkin absent-mindedly and putting it on the table.

"Do you want to wrap this up or ... ?" Hermione asked, suddenly uncertain.

He looked up at her, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "What, no dessert?"

Hermione relaxed, glad that he didn't seem to be in a rush back to the castle. "You want dessert?"

"You sound surprised?" He put his elbows on the table, leaning in towards her.

"It's just ... " Suddenly the realization of the whole situation struck Hermione. The sun setting on the horizon, candles slowly burning, both of them comfortably intoxicated. Snape had a light in his eyes she hadn't noticed before, and she had seen him almost smile more times that evening than she had during all of her years at Hogwarts.

"You don't seem like a sweet-toothed kind of guy."

"Really? I find that deeply mystifying," he drawled.

"But if that's the case, I would highly recommend you to try the specialty here. It's called 'the Swedish Sin' and by the name of it you'd think it would be some sort of inappropriate, chocolatey concoction." This earned her an amused look from the Potions master, and she immediately blushed. "But it's actually lingonberries with a fudge-like sauce," she hurriedly added.

"Sounds ... endurable," Snape teased.

Hermione huffed indignantly, cheeks still burning. Suddenly Percy rushed by, and she seized the opportunity to shift focus.

"Percy! Can we have two 'sins' and coffee, please?" she called out after him.

"Absolutely, Hermione, coming right up!" Percy yelled back, not skipping a beat.

A couple of minutes later, Percy came balancing what seemed to be desserts for at least ten tables, putting down their "sins" and coffees and then hurrying along.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years, Miss Granger?" Snape asked as he bit into the sweet and sour creation, making an approving noise.

"Well, there are a number of careers I would love to pursue, actually. Equal rights has always been close to my heart, and there are a lot of things to improve on in that area. I'm almost equally as interested in Charms and the things you can create when adding Arithmancy to the mix." She gazed out the window for a moment.

"But I also feel drawn to potion-making, experimenting in particular. Maybe I could be working on a better Wolfsbane brew, for instance, or assist in creating something for the aftereffects from the Cruciatus Curse."

"That's some rather ambitious goals you have set for yourself."

"What, you don't think I can do it?" She gave him a challenging look.

"I am certain you will make an adequate attempt. You have a natural aptitude for Potions, Miss Granger," he said slowly.

"But seeing as I am the inventor of the Wolfsbane Potion, I am also aware of the fact that it took decades of trial and error and experience to even get it to the stage it is

today."

"We will just have to wait and see then," she replied, grinning at his compliment. She had been striving for that kind of academic acknowledgment since her first shivering day in the Potions classroom. "Maybe we'll have to meet here in ten years, and I can lend you my notes."

Snape cocked an eyebrow at her cheek.

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

"I just remembered, it seems I am otherwise engaged. How ... unfortunate."

"This particular date, at 7 p.m., in ten *years*, you have somewhere else to be?" Hermione narrowed her eyes at the man in front of her.

"Yes."

"Alright, fine." She shrugged and took a last bite of her dessert. "But if you change your mind, I will be sitting right here, with all my awards lined up, waiting to be admired."

"Don't hold your breath," he smirked.

They had, quite reluctantly, Apparated back to the school after a long, drawn-out second coffee and were now standing in the entrance hall at the foot of the stairs. It was well after curfew, and the castle was empty, except for the house ghosts and the occasional patrolling prefect.

"You know ...," Hermione said slowly, examining the House point hourglasses. Gryffindor was in third place, almost tied with Ravenclaw, while Hufflepuff had an iron grip on the lead by nearly a hundred points. "Taking those fifty points from me the other day was really unfair."

"You think so?" Snape frowned. "Then you should get them back. Fifty points to Gryffindor for calling Lucius Malfoy an idiot," he said resolutely.

The Gryffindor hourglass sprang to life instantly, adding fifty red rubies to the lower bulb and placing Gryffindor in second place.

Hermione looked at him, awestruck. "But you never give points to Gryffindor," she whispered.

"Ah. When you're right, you're right," he said, casting a mischievous glance at her. "Sixty points from Gryffindor for making me wait at the gates," he said, equally resolute.

The rubies within the hourglass clattered around once more, only this time the gems plus an extra ten retreated back into the upper bulb, putting Gryffindor in third place.

"What, hey! *Sixty* points! Really?" Hermione shrieked.

"This is fun," Snape said smugly.

"I should really get going before I do any more damage to my House's chances of winning the cup," Hermione muttered and made for the stairs.

"Wait." Snape grabbed a hold of her arm. "Miss Gra-Hermione-Miss Granger. Bollocks." He let her go and pinched his nose.

"If you want to call me by my given name, you have my permission. And if you want to continue calling me Miss Granger, that's also fine. What I won't allow for you to do is call me 'bollocks', Professor," Hermione said with a giggle.

Snape quirked his lips. "I really enjoyed myself tonight. Maybe a little too much. Perhaps ... " He quieted down as the Bloody Baron floated by, giving the couple an odd look.

"Perhaps, you'll let me return the favor sometime." He turned towards the corridor leading down to the dungeons. "Although ... I didn't actually see you pay."

She raised an eyebrow. "Did you really think I would at my own parents' restaurant?"

"Well. Nevertheless, thank you for an unforgettable dinner." He gave her a small smile. "Hermione."

Author's notes:

Make the Night Just a Little Longer Chuck Jackson

For an idea of what Jean Granger's playlist looks like, see all the collected author's notes.

Chapter 8 - We Can't Stop

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts unbearably trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 8 - We Can't Stop

"Gather 'round, everyone!" McGonagall clapped her hands together. "I have a couple of announcements."

It was the morning of the big Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, and a sense of excitement and nervous anticipation hung in the air. The sun was already blazing outside the castle walls, making the Gryffindor common room stuffy and the air still and thick.

"Firstly, tonight's game is being moved from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. due to the heat," McGonagall began, addressing the large group of students in front of her. "We need all the manpower we can get down at the pitch, so if you have a free period before lunch, please make yourself useful."

She paused briefly. "Secondly, and this might come as a surprise to some of you, we have a new Head Girl."

The crowd immediately burst into hushed whispers. A couple of younger students even craned their necks to get a better view of Hermione, who was sitting on the armrest of one of the couches, flanked by Ron, Harry and Ginny Weasley.

"What did you do, Hermione, rob the library?" Seamus Finnigan called out from the other side of the room, causing those closest to him to break out in laughter. Ron tried to stifle a loud snort but failed miserably, earning him a well-placed elbow in the side from Harry.

"Sod off, Seamus," Hermione replied hotly, throwing him a dirty look.

"Quiet down!" McGonagall cut off sharply and the room fell silent.

"For reasons I will not discuss, we have deemed our current one unfit, and for the remainder of term, the task will go to ... Pansy Parkinson of Slytherin," McGonagall said, disdain dripping from her voice.

A collective gasp flew through the crowd, and the murmurs intensified.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly, even a Flobberworm would do a better job than her," she whispered to Ginny.

"*And* be easier on the eye," Ginny said and sniggered, making it impossible for Hermione to hold in her own laughter. McGonagall glared in their direction and they immediately pulled themselves together.

"And thirdly," McGonagall emphasized. "Professor Palmer has reported a theft. A pack of cigarettes, a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky and, oddly enough, a tumbler glass has apparently disappeared from his personal stores in his office. If I find out ..., " she eyed the seventh years closest to her, "that any of you have relieved him of these items and are planning on treating yourself to a fine little evening, there's no telling what I will do, mark my words." She pursed her lips. "That's all. Off you go!"

The crowd quickly dissolved as each person either went down to the Great Hall for a spot of tea or walked to the Quidditch pitch, not daring to disobey McGonagall's command.

McGonagall strode up to Ron and Harry, a look of determination on her face. "Boys." She peered at them over her glasses. "This is your last chance to show those self-righteous goody two-shoes which house really deserves the Cup. And I'm afraid my pride might cause me to hex the smugness off Professor Sprout's face if that turns out to be Hufflepuff." She smiled a thin-lipped smile. "Break a leg. Or ten." McGonagall then whirled around and walked out the portrait hole.

Harry and Ron exchanged a terrified glance and then shook their heads in unison. "She really is getting on a bit, isn't she," Ron said with a grimace, turning to Hermione and Ginny. "We're going to get something to eat and then head on down. Are you girls coming?"

"Yeah, in a minute. I just have to talk to Hermione about something," Ginny replied.

Ron raised a questioning eyebrow but knew not to inquire further.

"Why are you in such a bad mood, Hermione? You're snapping at everything and everyone today," Ginny asked with a concerned look on her face as soon as Harry and Ron had left.

"Is it really that obvious?" Hermione sighed. "It's Christopher." *Well. Part of it, anyhow.*

"What's going on? You know you can tell me anything," Ginny said, petting Hermione reassuringly on the arm.

"He sent me a letter this morning, and it's ... He wants to ... " She threw her hands in the air and made a frustrated sound. "Bugger it all to hell, I'll just show you." Hermione grabbed a hold of the red-headed girl and pulled her up the stairs to her bedroom. Once inside she cast a Silencing Charm, pulled out the parchment from her trunk and handed it to Ginny.

My dear Hermione,

First of all, I just want you to know that whatever happens, I've truly cherished the time we've spent together. When I think about you, I get a warm feeling in my heart. When I look into your beautiful eyes, the rest of the world disappears, and it feels like I could stay right there, in that place, forever.

It's those thoughts that keep me afloat when I, in my darkest hours, am unable to shake the nagging feeling that my love might be unreciprocated.

I haven't had a letter from you in quite some time now, and you didn't seem to be particularly happy to see me at your parents' restaurant the other day.

Maybe it's all in my head, Hermione, but it still hurts.

I'm tired of walking around not knowing if there's a future for us or not, to be honest. I desperately want you in my life, but it's time you made up your mind and decided what you want.

I just truly hope it's us.

Get back to me as soon as you can.

Yours,

Christopher

Ginny's eyes widened. "Well, there's certainly no beating around the bush with this guy. It sounds like you have to either commit or get out."

"That's the problem. I just don't *know*," Hermione rubbed her temples furiously. She felt a headache coming on.

"Alright. Let me ask you this. Do you like him?"

"What? Of course I do."

"When you see yourself old and wrinkly, is he there beside you?"

"I ... I don't know," Hermione admitted.

Ginny frowned. "Okay. But do you miss him, think about him, long for him when he's not around?"

"No," Hermione said reluctantly. "Not really. I mean, there's never been any real ... passion between us, no jittery feelings. But he's such a smart, sensible guy. And he likes books and art and ... Well, we're very compatible academically," she said sagely.

"Sometimes love grows over time. It isn't always thunder and lightning, you know," Ginny said, thoughtfully.

"Maybe you're right." Hermione sighed.

"Whatever you're feeling, just be honest with him. He seems like a good enough bloke to me, but if you don't want things to go any further, you really shouldn't be giving him any false hopes."

"I know." Hermione nodded distractedly. "Maybe I'm just making this harder than it actually is. It just feels like I'm about to make the biggest decision of my life, and now, when it *actually* matters, I don't have the bloody answer."

The redhead narrowed her eyes.

"Hermione," she said suspiciously.

"What?" Hermione replied, twirling a quill between her fingers and blowing away a strand of hair from her face.

"Have you met someone else?"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed, dropping the quill on the floor.

"Aha!" Ginny pointed a finger in triumph at Hermione. "You so have, I can tell! Who is he?"

"Gin, I honestly haven't! It's just ... I don't like being pressured like this, that's all," she said, desperately.

"Fine," Ginny said slowly, obviously not convinced. "But you would tell me if you had though, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would." Hermione gave her a weak smile. *When hell freezes over. 'I might have developed a crush on the oh-so-charming bat of the dungeons, Ginny. Would you and Harry fancy going on a double date with us? I can throw together some spaghetti carbonara, and then we can all talk about the good times we've shared over a bottle of wine.'* Not bloody likely.

"Come on," Ginny said and jumped off the bed. "We better get our behinds down to the pitch."

When Hermione and Ginny finally made it to the Quidditch pitch, it was bustling with activity. People were putting up banners, sweeping the bleachers, raking the sand traps beneath the goal posts and trimming the grass.

"I'm just going to say hi to Harry. I'll only be a minute," Ginny said over her shoulder and immediately took off for a group of Quidditch players near the goal posts.

"But you just saw him in the..." Hermione stopped mid-sentence, shaking her head. "Go ahead. I'll see you later."

Hermione put her hand over her eyes, blocking the sun, and scouted the field, wondering absently what on earth she could be helping with. At the far end of the pitch, she suddenly spotted a familiar black-clad figure busy doing something she couldn't quite make out.

"Oi, 'Mione! Over here!"

She turned her gaze towards the voice and saw Ron in the center of the pitch, waving at her.

"Ron!" She waved back and started walking towards him.

"Hiya, 'Mione." The redhead gave her a wide grin and a sideways hug as soon as she came up to him. "Are you finding anything to do?"

"Not yet. But I bet I'll get stuck with removing gum from the bleachers, though. If Professor McGonagall gets her way at least," she said bitterly. "How are you? Nervous?"

"I try not to think about it 'cause when I do, I throw up." Ron gave her a lop-sided grin. "But then I get dizzy thinking about not thinking about it." He cast her a glance. "You looked a little down this morning in the common room," he said, switching the subject. "You shouldn't let Seamus get to you. He's like that with everyone."

Oh, Ron. You really are unbelievably clueless sometimes. I could eat that little prick Seamus Finnigan for breakfast! Hermione thought and looked at her friend fondly.

"I know ...," she replied, buying herself some time. Ron had never approved of her dating Christopher, so she usually just avoided telling him anything about that particular part of her life.

"But Pansy, Ron?" she said finally, feigning exasperation. "How can they choose her out of everyone! That's just demeaning."

"Hey, if it makes you feel any better, I thought what you said to McGonagall was bloody brilliant. Forget the top scores you got on your OWLs and NEWTs; that's a life time achievement, right there," he said with a wink.

"Thank you, Ron. It all feels totally worth it now," Hermione said sarcastically.

"I mean it." He gave her another grin. "It made my day, my week, heck, maybe even my year."

He threw his arm around her shoulders and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, but just as his lips touched her skin, something heavy collided forcefully with the back of his head, making him pitch headlong to the ground.

"OW!" Ron yelled, clutching his head. "What the hell!"

The obvious source of the collision, a large wooden chest containing the Quaffle, the Bludgers and the Golden Snitch, lay on the grass beside Hermione.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape drawled, holding out his wand in front of him, levitating a couple of Beater's clubs and a handful of helmets. "I did not see you there."

"Didn't see me!" Ron yelled shrilly as he rose, swaying slightly on the spot. "I'm in the middle of the bloody pitch! You'd have to be BLIND not to see me!"

"Language, Mr. Weasley." Snape gave him a bored look and pointed his wand at the stray chest, making it join the other items in mid-air. He glanced at Hermione and quirked his lips as he passed.

Shaking her head disbelievingly, she bit her lip to hide the smile that threatened to take over her face.

"Bloody git," Ron said angrily. "That really hurt!"

Hermione turned her attention to her wounded friend, carefully examining the back of his head.

"Ron, you're bleeding!" she gasped. "I think you have to see Madam Pomfrey."

Ron grunted grumpily in response, one hand still glued to his head, turned on his heel and stalked off the field. Jogging half-heartedly in the other direction, Hermione soon caught up with his assaulter.

"Ron got a big gash, you know. I had to send him up to the Infirmary," she said, slightly out of breath.

Snape stopped to put down the levitating Quidditch supplies next to the bleachers.

"Is that it? And here I was aiming for decapitation," he replied dryly.

"That's a horrible thing to say," Hermione said, reluctantly letting out a laugh.

"Can I help you with anything else, Miss Granger? Or are you merely here to watch other people work?"

Hermione looked at him thoughtfully. *This is as good as time as any, just go for it.*

"Well, since you're the one bringing it up ..." She bit her lip. "I want to ask you something, Professor, if that's alright."

"That depends wholly on the question, Miss Granger," Snape said, folding his arms across his chest.

"I've decided to pursue Potions," she began, tentatively.

"Is that right?" Snape replied, clearly amused. "And how, pray tell, are you planning on accomplishing that?"

Hermione felt a familiar crimson color spreading on her face. *Why do I always blush around this man?*

"Well, there are a couple of summer internships at the Ministry I thought I'd apply for, and then I was hoping to get an Apprenticeship in the fall," she said hastily.

"And where, in this grand scheme of yours, do I fit in?" Snape asked.

"I was wondering if you could write me a letter of recommendation," she replied, giving him a hopeful smile. "I'm quite certain your name would add one heck of a competitive edge to my application."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Miss Granger," Snape said, a serious look on his face but the mirth in his eyes telling her something else. "But I'll see what I can do."

A couple of hours later, Hermione decided that there was nothing more for her to do at the pitch and began the walk back to the castle. Her stomach had been rumbling for the last half an hour, and she felt her mouth water at the prospect of a big slice of minced pie. Ginny had been nowhere to be found, and Hermione suspected that if someone would bother to look into it, they would find both Ginny and a certain Harry Potter snogging underneath the bleachers.

"Miss Granger!" A squeaky voice rang out behind her. She turned around and saw Professor Flitwick hurriedly sprinting towards her. "Just the person I was looking for," he panted, slowing down beside her.

Hermione smiled at him curiously. "What can I do for you, Professor?"

"I've actually been wanting to talk to you for a couple of days, my dear. Professor Palmer and I have been discussing various students we would like to ... help along a little, if you will, and we've now come to a conclusion."

"I'm not sure I understand ...," Hermione said, confused.

"Give me a minute and I will try to explain," he chuckled. "I happen to be very well acquainted with L'institut de Charmes in France. Have you by any chance heard of it?"

"Of course, it's one of the most renowned wizarding universities in the world," she replied.

Flitwick nodded at her. "Well, my good friend Gerhard Dupont is the Headmaster there, and seeing as you are incredibly talented, both practically and academically in the subject, I thought I would offer you my good word. If you would like."

Hermione frowned, her thoughts racing. *France?*

"Initially Professor Palmer wanted to try to persuade you into trying for the Aurory, but seeing that he has Potter in his class, and although that young man hardly needs anyone vouching for his abilities, something in print will always be welcomed by the Ministry," Flitwick continued. "They're still very much a bureaucratic organization, I'm afraid."

He gave her a sideways glance. "Miss Granger? You're awfully quiet."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Professor," she said, snapping out of her thoughts. "I really, truly, appreciate the thought, but I'm afraid I have to decline," she said awkwardly. "I've decided to try my luck in the world of Potions."

"Potions?" Flitwick said, unable to mask his disappointment. "Are you quite sure about that? You're such a natural at Charms, and I've never seen anyone with such an instinctive hand movement as yours."

"Thank you, but yes, my mind's made up. I've already asked Professor Snape to write me a letter of recommendation."

"Really? And he agreed?" Flitwick asked.

"Yes," she said firmly, trying hard not to let her annoyance show. "He said he would look into it."

"I wouldn't count on it, my dear. That man hasn't written a single letter of recommendation to anyone outside his own house since he started teaching here," Flitwick said and frowned. "Oh, well. All the best of luck to you, Miss Granger. I am sure you will excel no matter what field of study you choose to pursue."

The rest of the day rushed by in a blur. Hermione found it hard to focus on anything, a thousand thoughts swirling around in her head. The letter from Christopher, the upcoming graduation, Flitwick's generous offer and the sudden possibility of enrolling at the esteemed L'institut de Charmes in Marseille. And then there was Snape.

When it finally was time for the game, Hermione was fast asleep on the couch in the Gryffindor common room, an untouched book on her chest.

She woke up with a start to somebody shouting her name. Confused, she bolted upright, shaking her head groggily *Where am I?*

"Come on, Hermione, let's go! If you don't get a move on we'll get lousy seats," Ginny called out from the portrait hole, one foot on either side of the door. "Hurry up!"

Right, the game. "I'm coming. I'll be right there!" she called back.

"You better make up your mind, young lady," the Fat Lady huffed at Ginny. "This is getting quite drafty."

"Oh, alright, don't get your knickers in a twist," Ginny replied angrily. "I'll see you down there, Hermione!" she yelled as the portrait swung shut.

I can honestly think of at least a dozen other things I'd rather be doing right now Hermione thought tiredly, stifling a yawn. She frowned and turned her head towards the closed door. Making up her mind in a split second, she heaved her back pack up on one shoulder and then headed out.

The top of the Astronomy tower was empty. Hermione's steps echoed across the stone tiles as she walked towards one of the large arched windows, perching herself in one of them.

The heat of the day had settled into a snug warmth, and the air was filled with a soft flowery scent. From her spot in the window, she had a magnificent view over the grounds, and in the distance she could hear shouts, cheers and the occasional whistle blowing.

Hermione had been sitting there for quite some time when she suddenly heard somebody clear a throat behind her.

Who would come up here now? Hermione thought, her heart skipping a beat.

Dressed in a black pair of dress pants and a white shirt with rolled up sleeves, Severus Snape emerged from the shadows.

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Good evening, Mr. Snape," she said slowly.

Snape bowed slightly and then quirked a brow at her.

"Well, you're hardly my professor anymore. I had my last Potions class ages ago."

"Ah." He moved closer, putting his hands in his pockets. "And yet you insist on calling Dumbledore 'professor' despite the fact that he hasn't taught a class in over forty years."

"That's different." She smiled. "He's the most powerful wizard in the world. I wouldn't dare do anything else."

"And what am I?" Snape said inquiringly.

"Slightly above average, I suppose," she smirked. "I would probably place you somewhere in between ... " She paused for a moment, feigning thoughtfulness. "Neville Longbottom and Professor Slughorn."

Snape let out a sound of protest, his expression turning to mock-hurt. "Are you drunk, Miss Granger? There's no other reasonable explanation for that preposterous statement."

"No, I'm actually just getting started," she said, holding up a tumbler glass, half-full with an amber liquid.

Snape frowned as he sat down opposite her in the window. "Is that by any chance Ogden's Old Firewhisky?"

"Is it?" she asked sarcastically, bringing up the glass for a better look. "And here I was wondering why my pumpkin juice tasted off."

He eyed her quizzically. "What are you doing up here, Miss Granger? Everyone else is at the game."

"I could ask you the same thing," she replied.

"A game between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff hardly requires my attendance," he scoffed. "You, however, deemed it more important to sneak off and break at least five school rules regarding alcohol consumption than to be present at the most vital sports event of the year for your house."

Hermione only shrugged in response.

"But in your favor ...," Snape nodded his head towards her crystal glass, "it seems you're doing it with class."

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting there are other ways of consuming this fine vintage liquor?"

"Straight from the bottle?" he said, a sudden teasing note in his voice.

Hermione snorted. "What am I, a farmer?"

"No." He quirked his lips. "You're certainly not a farmer."

Hermione reached into her robes with her free hand and fished up a pack of cigarettes. She flicked the lid open and brought one to her lips, then continued rummaging around.

Snape stared at her disbelievingly. "What exactly do you think you are doing?"

"Isn't it kind of obvious? I'm looking for a lighter," she said in a muffled voice.

He leaned forward and gingerly plucked the unlit cigarette from her mouth. "Don't be ridiculous," he said softly. "You don't smoke." Snape examined the cigarette closely before he tossed it out the window. "You do, however, steal on occasion. I know this for a fact."

This caught Hermione's attention, and she narrowed her eyes at him, challenging him to continue.

"Am I wrong to assume that these items ..." He gestured towards the cigarettes and the whiskey. "Actually belong to Professor Palmer?" he asked, mouth twitching.

Hermione sighed defeatedly. "No. That would be a very accurate deduction, indeed." She looked down on the glass in her hand. "I don't know what I was thinking. The opportunity arose and I just ... well, seized it. I'm not a thief, not really." She gave Snape a small smile. "I'll buy him a new bottle. But he really shouldn't be smoking as much as he does."

"You were doing him a favor, is that what you are saying?"

"No," she replied. "I've just had a lot on my mind lately. I guess I thought this would buy me a brief break from it."

Snape leaned back against the stone arch. "Does, what's his name ... the dreadfully dull Mr. Collins, have anything to do with this?"

Hermione smiled sadly. "I had a letter from him today actually, telling me to decide whether or not I want to continue with ... whatever it is we're doing."

She was surprised to hear Snape inhale sharply.

"And what have you decided?"

She watched him carefully. "I haven't."

He slowly reached out and took the glass from her hand, putting it to his lips and taking a sip. Thoughtfully, he gave her the glass back, touching her hand briefly as he did so.

"Maybe I can help you out."

Suddenly the Quidditch stadium erupted with cheers and applause, causing them to jump apart. The match was obviously over.

"I wonder who won," Hermione muttered, forcing her gaze away from his.

She hardly had time to finish the sentence before the sky lit up with magnificent black and yellow fireworks.

"Hufflepuff, it seems," Snape replied absently as he rose. "I really should get back to my quarters. The whole school will be back shortly, and Merlin knows what would happen if I was found sharing a stolen bottle of whiskey with the Gryffindor maverick at the top of the Astronomy tower," he said, giving her a small smile.

"I suppose so," she said, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

"Unless ..."

Her heart began hammering against her chest. "Unless what?" she asked.

Snape looked at her hesitantly. Then he slowly bent down, placing his lips a mere breath away from hers. Just before he gently closed the gap between them, he whispered, "Unless you would like to join me."

Christopher, the stolen cigarettes and whiskey, the Quidditch game, France, Pansy Parkinson and the lost Head Girl badge, it all disappeared in an instant.

When they broke apart, the loaded question, forbidden and exhilarating, still hung unanswered in the air.

But as Hermione's warm brown eyes met Snape's obsidian ones, she knew she had never been more certain of anything in her entire life.

"Lead the way."

Author's notes:

We Can't Stop Scott Bradlee & Postmodern Jukebox

Chapter 9 - Either Way I Lose

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearing trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 9 - Either Way I Lose

Severus,

Just a little note to tell you that I woke up with a smile on my face this morning... in my own bed, which I reluctantly agreed to as you well know, but, nevertheless, with a smile. It's quite hard to imagine that it was put there by a rather sour Potions professor, who spent the last seven years tormenting me, but there you go.

I'm not a religious person, but it would be quite fitting to say something like, "Merlin works in mysterious ways", don't you think?

Also, this wasn't part of the initial plan when I said I wanted to pursue Potions (honestly!). I am, however, finding this, shall we call it "detour," most welcome.

If I had known it was this much fun breaking the rules, I would've done it ages ago.

Yours,

Hermione

P.S.: Please don't carve your eyes out when reading this.

P.P.S.: In answer to your earlier question, no, absolutely not, no way, not in this lifetime will I ever let you call me "your yapping little chihuahua," no matter how amusing and fitting you may seem to find it.

Severus,

I couldn't help but notice your absence at lunch and dinner today.

Are you alright?

I know of several students that have come down with the flu. If that's the reason keeping you away, you should know that I'm more than capable of whipping up some chicken soup (or at least walk down to the kitchen and ask them to whip it up) and bring it over.

If not, give me some sort of signal if you need me to alert a rescue party.

Yours,

Hermione

Severus,

I know it's only been two days, but since there has been no sign of you anywhere, and you haven't answered any of my letters, I'm getting slightly worried. Just let me know if you're okay, and I'll stop bombarding you like this.

Hermione

Severus,

I sincerely hope I'm not the cause of this sudden and unwanted silence from you, but I'm finding myself swaying on that point.

Hermione

Severus,

I asked Professor Dumbledore about you today, but he merely grunted in response, telling me that, to his knowledge, you've been teaching as usual. I suppose you've been having your meals in your rooms.

At least I know you still exist.

It hurts though, being so close to you, knowing that you've probably read my letters but just decided to ignore them.

Please don't try to protect me from my own feelings or from the potential hurt, if that is indeed what you're doing. It's not the end of the world if you've come to the conclusion that this isn't what you wanted. It would just be, well, the end of us. Or rather, the end of what could've been "us."

I just wish you would talk to me.

You know where to find me. Please do.

Hermione

That had been two days ago, and Hermione still hadn't heard a word from Snape. She cringed at the thought of her last missive. She had sent it to him in a moment of weakness, at three o'clock in the morning.

Hermione hated how it made her sound. Desperate, vulnerable, insecure.

And like a complete stalker, she thought gloomily, staring out the window in the Gryffindor common room. The sky was filled with dark, heavy clouds, raindrops smattering against the window pane.

"Come on, Hermione, we need to get to the rehearsal," Harry said softly, touching her shoulder.

"Rehearsal?" she asked fuzzily, shifting focus from the weather to her friend.

"Yeah, you know." He shrugged. "How to walk, where to sit, when to smile on Friday."

"Oh," she sighed. "I had totally forgotten about that."

"We're actually graduating." Harry smiled. "Who would have thought?"

"Yeah, but you'd think they'd trust us enough to find a couple of seats without setting the castle on fire or something," Ron chipped in grumpily, burying his face in the crook of his arm in a sneeze.

"Considering your history, Ron, I don't even think a rehearsal like this is enough to get you sorted," Hermione said teasingly.

"Oh, come on. When have I ever failed to follow instructions?" he asked, grinning broadly.

Hermione snorted out a laugh. "You wouldn't be able to follow instructions to save your life, you dingbat."

"You know," Ron said as they trotted out the portrait hole, one behind the other. "You're the only one calling me that without actually making me feel like one."

"Really?" she replied, shooting him a cheeky grin. "Then I'm obviously saying it wrong."

They duo continued their friendly banter all the way down to the Entrance Hall, with Harry snickering behind them.

"Hang on," Ron said and stopped short just outside the doors to the Great Hall. Sniveling, he pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose loudly, folded the handkerchief once and blew his nose again before putting it back in his pocket.

"Maybe you should be in bed?" Hermione said with a grimace.

"It's just a cold," he replied thickly, absently touching the back of his head. "I'm fine."

Hermione put a hand on his arm. "How's your head? I don't think I've asked you since ... well, since after the game."

Ron's expression clouded. "I'm not in any physical pain, if that's what you mean," he muttered. "But if that bloody chest hadn't been smashed into my skull, we probably would've won the Cup."

"Come on, mate, you know that's not true," Harry protested. "We did our best, but Hufflepuff was the better team, to be honest."

Ron made to retort but instead lowered his voice, jerking his head upwards. "Speak of the devil."

Hermione turned around and felt her breath hitch as she saw Snape come striding down the stairs, his nose in a book. Her hand instantly flew to her bushy hair in a nervous attempt to flatten it out.

Snape reached the bottom of the stairs and turned swiftly, walking by the trio without even acknowledging their existence.

He can't even look at me anymore, Hermione thought as she watched him disappear down the corridor leading to the dungeons, a dreadful feeling spreading in the pit of her stomach.

"Sodding wanker," Ron grumbled, throwing a dirty look at Snape's retreating form as he opened the doors. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

This feels an awful lot like déjà vu, Hermione thought distractedly as she sized up the wooden door belonging to the Potions classroom.

She had been standing there for the last five minutes, unable to pluck up enough courage to knock.

After rehearsal was over, she had told Ron and Harry that she needed to pop by Madam Pomfrey real quick. "Nothing serious, just women stuff," she had told them, making them both uncomfortable and reluctant to inquire any further.

Instead, she had made her way down to the dungeons. Which was where she found herself at that very moment, her heart beating a tattoo on her ribcage. She couldn't put together a coherent thought, much less shake the impending feeling of an upcoming disaster. Or heartbreak. Or both.

Hermione took a few deep breaths, desperately trying to keep the nausea at bay.

She carefully knocked on the door, waiting for the familiar voice to bellow, "Enter!" But no sound came from within. She knocked again, this time with a little bit more confidence.

Finally, Snape suspiciously opened the door, a frown on his face.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Sev-Professor. But I'm here to discuss your response to my letters. Or your lack thereof," she said, letting out a short, shaky laugh.

"I am not sure I understand what you are referring to, Miss Granger," Snape said stiffly, ignoring her attempt at a joke.

"So we're back to Miss Granger now?" she asked quietly. "I..." She broke off, suddenly unable to find her voice.

He looked at her indifferently. "Are you quite done?"

"Y-yes," she stuttered, staring at him, eyes prickling with tears. "I suppose I am."

"Then I need you to leave, Miss Granger," Snape said coldly.

Hermione stared disbelievingly at the closed door. Choking back a sob, she leaned her forehead against the wood, closing her eyes *Get a grip on yourself.*

She slowly turned around, and when she opened her eyes, she found herself face to face with Dumbledore, a furious look on his face. She stumbled backwards, taken by surprise.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger, I didn't mean to frighten you." Dumbledore's expression softened, changing into one of sympathy and concern. "Are you alright?" he asked kindly as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Y-yes," she said shakily. "No. I don't know." She squirmed away from his grasp. "I've got to go."

Tears streaming down her face, she ran from the dungeons. Out of breath, with her make-up smeared across her face and her hair on end, she barged into the Gryffindor common room.

Harry and Ron, who were sitting in a corner playing wizard's chess, immediately looked up in alarm.

"What's happened?" Harry asked, bolting upright, knocking over a couple of pieces.

"I can't stay here," Hermione choked out, gasping for air. "I need to go, I-I need to go home."

"What?" Harry said, confused. "What do you mean? Graduation is in two days!" he added exasperatedly as Hermione started to climb the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

"Hermione, wait! Talk to me!" He scrambled after her but the steps slid away from under his feet, and he instantly found himself in a heap at the bottom. "Hermione!" he yelled, but to no avail.

Inside, Hermione furiously started throwing things in her trunk. When she got back downstairs, Harry and Ron were anxiously pacing the floor.

"Would you please tell us what's going on?" Harry pleaded. "Is it Christopher?"

She shot him an angry look. "Yes, yes, it is. My love life is a farce. Does that make you happy?" she asked bitterly.

"I would never, that's not what I..." He said, a hurt look on his face.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said ruefully, pinching her nose. "That was uncalled for." She smiled weakly at her two best friends. "I'll be back before Friday; don't worry. I ... I just need to do this, okay?"

With her trunk levitating behind her, Hermione sprinted through the castle. *If I can only make it to the Apparition point without...*

"Not so fast, Granger," a voice called out, making Hermione stop in her tracks. *Oh, for God's sake!*

Millicent Bulstrode and Pansy Parkinson slowly walked up to her, grinning from ear to ear. Hermione instantly felt a vein starting to throb near her temple.

"Why so glum? Lost another privilege?" Parkinson sneered.

Bulstrode cackled at the joke. "Seems like the Gryffindor princess is finally cracking."

"Bugger off," Hermione said angrily, trying to get past the new Head Girl and her toad-like accomplice.

"Ooh, try to behave, Granger, or I might just feel inclined to take away some points," Parkinson replied airily.

"Finite Incantatem," Hermione snarled, making her trunk fall to the floor with a heavy thud.

She turned to Pansy, a mad look in her eyes. "Do you have ANY idea what I'm capable of?" Hermione snatched her wand out. "DO YOU?" she roared.

Alarmed, both Parkinson and Bulstrode quickly backed up, exchanging terrified looks.

"Rita Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus, did you know?" Hermione said shrilly. "She's a beetle. And do you know what I did when I found out? I caught her and kept her in a bloody jar."

Hermione advanced on the two girls, sweat beads forming on their foreheads.

"I deliberately led Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest and let her get taken by centaurs," she hissed. "It took Dumbledore ~~hours~~ to find her.

And I was this close, THIS CLOSE"...she held up her thumb and index finger..."to hexing ~~your~~ Head of House into nothingness."

Hermione breathed raspily. "Now imagine what I would do to a couple of good-for-nothing idiots like yourselves."

Pansy threw her arms up, positively green in the face. "Alright, alright. Take it easy, Granger; you look like you're about to have a seizure."

"Then MOVE or I bloody will!"

Severus Snape hesitantly made his way into the Great Hall. It was packed to the brim with proud parents and siblings, grandparents and cousins, ex-students and friends, expectantly awaiting the graduates.

The four long house tables had been cleared away to make room for hundreds of white folding chairs, meticulously placed in neat rows in front of the podium.

He cast a glance at the Headmaster as he took his usual seat at the Head Table. Dressed in deep purple velvet robes, Dumbledore stood beaming in front of the crowd, ready to commence the ceremony any minute.

Snape let his hair fall in front of his face, creating a familiar curtain around him, shutting out the world.

He had fucked up.

Mere seconds after he had kissed Hermione goodnight and sent her back to the Gryffindor tower, the Headmaster's head had appeared in Snape's fire grate. Dumbledore had known of course. And he had been livid.

Snape shuddered. The scene that had unfolded in Dumbledore's office shortly afterwards had been an undignified affair, to say the least.

"How DARE you defy me and the rules of my OWN school, Severus Snape!" Dumbledore bellowed, slamming his fist down on his desk.

"Forgive me, Albus. I, no, there's no excuse. I am, of course, well aware of Hogwarts' code of conduct and..." Snape stuttered.

"ENOUGH!" Dumbledore closed his eyes, placing both his palms on the desk, seemingly debating with himself for a moment. "I'm putting a trace on you," he said finally, pinning Snape down with a furious look.

"A trace?" Snape asked, shocked. "I'm not sure I understand."

"You are no longer trusted to be alone with any female student of this school. Should you engage in any contact outside the classroom, I will be alerted. Instantly."

Dumbledore paused and observed the man in front of him coldly. "I've never enjoyed being in a situation where my kindness has been mistaken for stupidity."

"Please, Headmaster. I have never, never, in my entire career involved myself with a student," Snape said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "I know we don't see eye to eye on everything, but I promise you, Hermione is..."

"This," Dumbledore cut off brusquely, "is your last chance. If you fail me yet again, I will chase you to the very ends of the world if I have to and see that you regret it."

"Your trust has meant everything to me," Snape said quietly. "And you know that I have always taken great pride in the school's values, as well as my own."

"And this time you decided to, what exactly? Take a break from them momentarily?" Dumbledore sneered.

"No, I..."

"I don't want to hear it, Severus. Just get out of my sight."

Snape shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Everything he had ever touched had turned into ashes and soot, one way or the other. And like everything else in his life, this last unexpected turn of events had also ended in flames.

It was a curse. But a curse he now intended to break.

He hadn't noticed it at first, how Hermione slowly, almost invisibly, had been chipping away at the steel mask he'd put up until just recently had been regarding as a permanent imprint on his very personality.

Yet *somehow* she had been able to penetrate it. And subsequently stirred something to life within him that had been dead for a very long time.

He had read her letters over and over again, desperately wanting to answer them. Her plea for him to talk to her had made him want to storm the castle in search for her, making her understand that he wasn't ending anything, merely pausing it until she no longer was his student.

Instead, he had, once again, succumbed to Dumbledore and his bidding and forced himself to stay away. The only thought comforting him as he found himself confined to the walls of his rooms, was the one of Hermione graduating, making it possible for him to finally explain. To make things right.

Hermione would understand, he told himself. She had been the brains and wits of the Golden Trio after all. Striving for, and relying on, reason. What was she, if not sensible?

When he had found out that she had left the castle in tears after their last encounter, he had been sick with worry. After a couple of gruesome hours, he had swallowed some of his pride and gone to McGonagall. She in turn had given him the oddest look before pursing her lips, curtly saying, "Well, I never thought I'd live to see the day

Severus Snape made a concerned inquiry after a student. But if you must know, Hermione had some family business to attend to. She will be back for the graduation ceremony."

And any second now, he would see her again. Snape felt his pulse quicken at the mere thought.

Dumbledore suddenly cleared his throat loudly, a dense silence filling the room.

Snape gazed out the Hall, feeling his stomach drop as he noticed Christopher Collins sitting next to the Grangers, a couple of rows back*What is that self-righteous birdbrain doing here?*

His thought was abruptly cut short as thunderous applause and cheers broke out, saluting the graduates proudly walking through the doors.

"And the very best of luck to the finest group of students Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry ever had the pleasure of teaching." Dumbledore spread his arms. "And for those of you wondering ... No. I don't say that every year," he concluded, a twinkle in his eye.

The excruciatingly long ceremony had finally come to an end. Snape rose quickly, joining the rest of crowd as they were all filing out the room.

The trace must be lifted by now, he thought impatiently, scanning the room. He had lost sight of Hermione and her family.

She had looked miserable during the whole time, refusing to meet his eyes even once*I will make it up to her. All of it,* he thought as he absently reached into his pocket.

Suddenly, Snape spotted Pansy Parkinson.

"Miss Parkinson," he called out. "A word."

Parkinson whirled around and broke out in a surprised grin. "Professor Snape!"

"I want to ..." Snape racked his brain for something, *anything*, to say. "Thank you for your formidable performance as Head Girl over the past week." He guided her into an empty classroom.

"Oh, it has been an absolute delight. I'm so glad I was given the opportunity," Pansy said, shooting Snape a sugary smile. "I've always thought of myself as a leader. Someone to rely on and look up to. I'm thinking of going into Midwizery, you know, and I believe my nurturing personality combined with my authoritative skills will make me rather successful in the field," she babbled.

Snape glanced at a big clock suspended in mid-air at the far end of the classroom.*That must have been at least five minutes. And no sign of Dumbledore.*

"And I can't even begin to thank *you* ..." "

"Yes, yes," he interrupted. "Again, well done." *I have to find Hermione.*

He hurriedly made for the door, leaving Parkinson mid-sentence, with a confused and disappointed look on her face.

Most of the graduates and their relatives had ventured out into the sunny grounds, happily gulping down butterbeer and eating canapés handed out by a beaming Hagrid.

Snape immediately spotted Hermione in the crowd, chatting with Professor Flitwick, a serious look on her face. As soon as he got within ear-shot, he heard her say, "I'm sorry, Professor, but I think I need to visit the ladies' room." And then she slipped away.

After a second of hesitation, he decided to follow her, stationing himself outside the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, Snape began to worry. Silently praying that Hermione was the only one inside, he grudgingly opened the door and peeked in.

She was standing in front of one of the mirrors, clutching the sink, taking deep breaths.

"Hermione?" he said, concerned.

Hermione snapped her head around and instantly turned a whiter shade of pale when she saw him.

"You," she whispered, eyes growing wide.

"Please," he said softly as he moved closer to her. "Just let me explain."

"No," she shook her head frantically. "You can't do this. Not now." She sloppily raked down her make-up from the sink into her purse and made towards the door, trying to squeeze past him.

Snape grasped her hand, forcing her to look at him. "I never meant to..." He stopped cold.

Confused, he opened up his palm and looked down on her hand. A thin gold band glimmered on her ring finger.

No.

Suddenly, all he could hear was his own blood pounding in his ears. He swallowed and then swallowed again. And again. But the lump in his throat remained.

"What ... is this?" he asked, knowing the answer full well.

Hermione yanked her hand away from his grip. "Christopher asked," she said shakily. "And I said yes."

Snape let his arms fall limply at his sides. "And you said yes," he repeated hollowly.

Hermione stared at him, eyes glistening with tears. Of anger or hurt, or maybe even happiness, he couldn't tell.

"Then I suppose congratulations are in order," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"Thank you, that is ... most kind of you," she said, a few teardrops spilling over, trekking down her cheek. "And I guess I should be thanking you for ... for knocking some sense into me and forcing me to use my head rather than my ..." Hermione choked, unable to finish. She cast him one last glance and then walked out the door.

Leaving him with nothing but an unspoken word, in the midst of a lifetime of ashes.

Author's notes:

Chapter 10 - Until You Came Along

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione Granger has had enough. What with the war over and Voldemort gone, she finds the confining walls of Hogwarts overbearing trying. And with just a month left to graduation, she needs to find a way to make her snarky Potions professor accept her dinner invitation – even though she doesn't want him to.

Chapter 10 - Until You Came Along

Ten years later. A warm Tuesday in June, at exactly 7:00 p.m.

A little bell chimed as Severus Snape hesitantly walked through the doors of the Björn and the Sill.

He instantly recognized Jean Granger standing behind the front desk, head bowed down, scribbling on something in front of her. *Nothing* had changed. The interior, the chandeliers, the kitsch. It all looked exactly as he remembered it. Even Jean Granger herself, with only a couple of white streaks in her hair and some additional lines in her face as sole evidence that time had passed at all since he last saw her.

This was a mistake, he thought, throwing a glance over his shoulder, debating with himself whether he could slip back out unnoticed.

The breakup from Hermione had gone from being a flaming misery every waking second of every minute of every day to a dull but relentless ache. His first instinct had been to run. Run from Hogwarts, Scotland, England. He had wanted, desperately, to flee from the ifs and the buts and the could've beens that lay imbedded in the very walls of the castle. The very walls of his own rooms.

To escape, by any means and costs, the constant reminder of the woman he had loved and lost.

Dumbledore had, ironically enough, been exceptionally persuasive in his endeavors to keep Snape on staff and in the country. He had started off by offering him a rather generous raise. "Do you think my loyalty can be bought, Headmaster?" Snape had retorted bitterly. But Dumbledore had only given him a sad smile and countered with the Defense Against the Dark Arts post. "Say the word and Palmer is out," he had told him.

Needless to say, Snape declined all of Dumbledore's offers, in an attempt to defend the last scrap of dignity he felt he had left. Vowing to never place himself voluntarily in that man's debt again. But since he had nowhere else to go, when hit with the reality of leaving the only real home he had ever had, he decided to stay put. Albeit reluctantly.

So Snape had kept himself busy. Burying himself in work and engaging in research. Whenever he found himself with time on his hands, he would brew potions for the infirm. Or help Madam Pince re-organize the library, something that occurred more often than one might think.

He would do practically anything, short of helping Palmer grade his papers, to minimize the risk of ending up alone somewhere, brooding over the past. Hoping against hope that the initial agony would subside. Eventually. It had with Lily, after all.

But no relief had come. Instead, it had turned out to be nothing like the situation with Lily at all. If anything, the profound, deeply melancholic longing had only grown stronger.

As the years passed by, he learned that when the anniversary of his and Hermione's dinner would come around, he would be wallowing in misery, torturing himself with images of her and *that man*, living happily somewhere in the world, with a couple of bushy-haired know-it-all children and...

It had always ended the same way, with him sprawled on the bed, out cold, with an empty bottle of Firewhisky in his hand.

Every year he had secretly hoped that Hermione would turn up for one of the alumni reunions or balls that Hogwarts organized, despising himself fervently for it. For the weakness of wanting to catch a glimpse of her face. Potter had attended almost every one, the Weasley boy a fair few. But Hermione had always politely declined.

After a couple of years, he had started keeping a journal, inserting thoughts and memories when they came to him, as a way of not forgetting. It was a necessity when working with potions and the familiarity of organizing thoughts and ideas, in this case feelings and conversations, was one of the few things that had a calming effect on him.

But then, one miserable night about six months ago, he had been rifling through his journal, reading a couple of quotes here and there, when he suddenly had stumbled upon one in particular that had made him short of breath. A foolish, desperate wish immediately had surfaced as his breathing slowly returned to normal.

And as the anniversary of their dinner date approached once again, that wish gnawed at his brain, interrupted his sleep, his waking hours and his teaching, making it impossible for him to do anything but to act on it.

But now, as he was standing there in the foyer, clad in a white shirt and black jacket, he felt like an idiot.

"Welcome to the Björn and the Sill, sir. How may I help you?" Jean Granger looked up and gave him a wide, professional smile.

"I..."

"Wait, I'm sorry." She cocked her head to one side. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" She clicked her tongue. "You're one of Hermione's old professors, aren't you?"

Snape felt his chest constrict painfully at the mention of her name.

"Yes."

"Mr ... " She furrowed her brows, seemingly racking her brain. "Snape, isn't it?"

He gave her a terse nod. "The very same."

"How lovely to see you again. Are you staying for dinner?"

"No, actually," he said languidly. "I was ... wondering if Miss Granger was here, by any chance."

Mrs. Granger looked at him, perplexed. "No, I'm sorry. Hermione has been living in France for the last ten years. She's rarely home," she said slowly. "I'm sure she would've told me if she was visiting."

"I see." He felt a pang of disappointment. "Never mind. It was just a ... silly thought."

"She hasn't been Miss Granger for a long time, you know." Mrs. Granger looked at him curiously. "It's Mrs. Collins nowadays."

"Is that right?" Snape replied venomously. "Thank you for that invaluable piece of information," he drawled, then whipped around and stalked out the door.

Out on the sidewalk, Snape snapped his head to the left, scanning the street to see if it was safe to Apparate from the spot. Except for a couple of doves, delicately pecking at the last few crumbs of a discarded hotdog bun, the street was completely deserted. Snape quickly turned his head to the right. *Good, I just want to get the fuck out of...*

And there she was.

Leaning casually against the facade, gazing out at nothing in particular, a cigarette in one slender hand, was indeed Hermione Granger *Collins*, he corrected himself and rolled his eyes. *Such an inane name.*

For a second, he couldn't believe it, his heart hammering furiously as he took in her appearance.

It was a self-assured woman standing in front of him. With shorter hair, expensive, tailored clothes and a posture almost identical to that of her mother. It was blatantly obvious that the frustrated and slightly awkward teenager she once had been was long gone.

"That's really not good for you, you know," he said and pointed towards the cigarette in what he hoped was a nonchalant way.

Hermione slowly turned her head, narrowed her eyes and looked straight at him, giving him a nod and a confident but thin-lipped smile.

"Professor Snape," she said offhandedly while putting out the cigarette with her heel. "Long time, no see."

He cringed inwardly at the use of his formal title, suddenly unsure of how to respond. "It certainly has been. Are you ... coming inside?" he asked tentatively, motioning for the door to the restaurant.

"I haven't decided," she replied, tearing away from his gaze. "I'm not even sure I should be here."

Gripped by a sudden panic at the thought of her leaving already, his brain started fumbling for anything to entice her stay.

"Have you eaten?"

"I have."

He frowned. "How about coffee?"

She folded her arms across her chest, shuffling her feet distractedly. All the while his heart kept beating so loudly he was sure she could hear it.

"Sounds ... endurable," she replied finally, an almost invisible smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Snape exhaled quietly, answering her smirk with one of his own. As she walked past him, he carefully put a hand on the small of her back, guiding her through the doors of the restaurant.

It was such a small gesture and would probably have had little substantial meaning to anyone else. But for *him*, to be able to touch the woman that had occupied his thoughts for a near decade, it was exhilarating. Exhilarating and bittersweet.

"Hermione?" Mrs. Granger shrieked, a bewildered look on her face. *What* are you doing here?" She pulled her daughter into her arms and hugged her tightly, shooting Snape a vicious glare over Hermione's shoulder, letting him know that she hadn't forgotten his rather rude departure only minutes ago.

"I'm only here for a couple of hours, Mum," Hermione replied as she broke away from her mother, casting a sideways glance at Snape.

"Is Christopher with you?" Mrs. Granger inquired, a frown replacing her smile.

Hermione hesitated for a second. "No, he's back in Marseille."

"Hermione ... " Mrs. Granger sighed disapprovingly. "Do you have to..."

"Let's not talk about that now, please," Hermione interrupted briskly. "I think Professor Snape is rather starved for a good cup of coffee."

"Of course," Mrs. Granger replied curtly. "Sit wherever you like, and I'll send someone out in a minute."

Snape and Hermione slowly made their way to a small table next to the windows. The restaurant was echoingly empty, except for an elderly couple at the far end, who were happily chatting away over two bowls of pea soup.

Snape proceeded to pull out Hermione's chair, gesturing for her to sit, pretending not to notice her questioning look.

"So, where are they?" he asked as he sat down in the chair opposite her.

"Where are what?" she replied, confused.

"Your awards." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I thought the premise of this meeting was for you to show off all of your achievements in the Potions field."

"Ah," she said, nodding in remembrance. "I ... I gave up on Potions a long time ago, I'm afraid."

Snape bowed his head slightly, the true meaning of her words not lost on him. He had wanted to tell her, to explain, to make her understand for so long, but now, when he actually had the chance, he didn't even know where to begin. Or if it even mattered.

"Hermione, I ..., " he started, but trailed off.

Something akin to sadness clouded Hermione's expression for a fleeting second. "I don't need to know, Severus. Not anymore."

"I suppose you're right." He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "So ... if not potions, what did you end up doing?"

She shrugged and graced him with a little smile, seemingly happy to change the subject. "Professor Flitwick pulled some strings and got me into L'institute de Charmes. I have ... *we have*," she corrected herself, "been living there for the past ten years."

A young waitress stopped by their table, putting down two large mugs of steaming coffee and a little tray of gingerbread biscuits. Hermione poured some milk in her coffee and stirred it gingerly before taking a sip. "Since I finished my master's degree, I've mostly been doing research," she added.

"Any little know-it-all children making life difficult for their teachers?" Snape asked innocently.

"No," she replied thoughtfully. "There never seemed to be a right time for it. Not yet, anyway." She shrugged. "What about you? Any Snape spawn running around Hogwarts?" She shot him a cheeky grin.

Snape snorted, staring at her in disbelief. "Don't be ridiculous."

"You know," she said, putting her elbows on the table. "I can't get over the fact that you look *exactly* the same. I don't know how you manage."

"Well." He peered at her over his coffee mug. "I actually brew my own beauty potions."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "You *what*?"

"That was a joke, Mrs. Collins," he replied, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Don't look like you've never come across one."

"Well, no, I've heard a couple. My surprise lies in the discovery that you're able to produce one," she retaliated with a smirk. "Severus." Hermione's expression suddenly turned serious. "There's no need to call me, well, *that*. I'm actually..." She stopped mid-sentence.

"What's going on over there?" She jerked her head towards the entrance, making him aware of a heated argument at the front desk. They both craned their necks to see what was causing the ruckus, but the angle made it almost impossible to make anything out.

"Jean, just let me in," a frustrated man's voice called out. "I know she's in there!"

Hermione's face turned ashen. "Oh, for the love of god," she whispered, putting her head in her hands.

Suddenly the man had freed himself from Mrs. Granger and came stomping straight into the restaurant, a wild look on his blotchy face, his eyes darting everywhere.

He instantly caught sight of Hermione and Snape and was upon them in a second. "I KNEW I WOULD FIND YOU HERE!" Christopher Collins bellowed, saliva flying everywhere.

"I wake up ALONE in OUR house and find THIS on the table?" he shouted accusingly as he shook a stack of papers in front of them. "I had to take a fucking last-minute flight over here!" He looked at Hermione with disgust, scoffed and threw them right in her face.

"Signed *and* delivered. Almost like a bloody Stevie Wonder song."

Snape instantly bolted to his feet, a fire awakening in his gut. He loomed over the man in front of him, turned his features into a sneer and hissed, "You need to calm down if you know what's good for you."

"BACK OFF!" Collins roared, poking a finger hard in Snape's chest. "You have NO right to tell me how to speak to my own wife!" He then turned his fury to Hermione.

"You're really choosing this assclown over me? Look at him!"

"I'm not *choosing* anyone, Christopher," Hermione sighed. "But you and I ..." She motioned in the air between them. "~~We're~~ *alone*."

"Are you seriously telling me that you'd rather want this ... this *joke* of a man than me?" Collins spat, ignoring her reply.

"Fine. Yes." Hermione rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter what I tell you, anyway."

"Then you're an idiot," he grumbled.

Snape's wand hand twitched, a twitch he desperately wanted to give in to. *This is not my fight. Hermione can handle herself*, he repeated in his head, not quite convincing himself.

"And a lying, conniving, cheating bitch," Collins added disdainfully.

On second thought.

Ten years of built-up anger and frustration came bubbling up to the surface as Snape furiously lashed out his fist and hit Christopher squarely on the jaw, making his head snap at one side before he stumbled backwards over a table, dragging the tablecloth, cutlery and crystal glasses with him before loudly falling into a heap on the floor.

Such an inane man, Snape thought, rather smugly, as total chaos broke out.

"OH, MY GOD!" A hysterical shriek belonging to Mrs. Granger rang out through the restaurant. Wobbling across the floor as fast as her high heels would take her, she threw herself on the floor next to the unconscious man.

"What on earth is happening?" A croaky ladies voice called out from across the room.

"Nothing, nothing!" Mrs. Granger yelled, sweat beading across her forehead.

Hermione sat frozen in her chair, a hand clasped over her mouth, eyes swiveling between her husband on the floor and her still fuming ex-professor.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God," Mrs. Granger gasped frantically. "PERCY! Where is that insufferable man when you need him? PERCY!"

"I'm right behind you. There's no need to shout," Percy Weasley replied irritably.

"Well, don't just stand there!" Mrs. Granger demanded, getting up from the floor, brushing off invisible lint from her knees. "Check for a pulse!"

"Is that man dead?" the older gentleman barked, now standing up, pointing at Christopher's limp body.

"I hope so," Snape replied casually.

"No, he's very much alive," Percy said after placing two fingers on the inside of Collins' wrist, shooting Snape a glare.

Mrs. Granger exhaled loudly and clapped her hands together. "Thank God!"

"What a shame," Snape snorted.

"But I still think we should call an ambulance," Percy said, looking concerned. "His jaw looks completely dislocated."

Snape had retreated to the bar, a dishrag full of ice pressed to his knuckles.

Over by the front desk, Hermione was talking to one of the ambulance men while Mrs. Granger, Percy and the waitress searched the floor for broken glass, put the table back in order, changed the cutlery and calmed down the elderly couple.

Suddenly the ambulance man broke away from his and Hermione's conversation and walked over to Snape.

"Sir, we're leaving, but Mr. Collins insists on speaking to you before we go. He's out by the car," the young man said.

"I can't imagine I would want to hear anything he has to say," Snape scoffed.

"That's your call, sir," he replied, giving Snape a silent nod and then turned to leave. With an irritable sigh, and a roll of his eyes, Snape slowly got up and reluctantly followed him outside.

Firmly encapsulated in a neck brace, grimacing with pain, Christopher Collins lay on a thin stretcher just outside the doors to the restaurant.

"Come closer," he grunted as Snape stepped out on the sidewalk.

"I'm perfectly fine over here, Mr. Collins," Snape replied coolly, folding his arms across his chest.

"Bloody bastard," Collins wheezed.

"Is that all?" Snape drawled.

"No," Collins seethed through gritted teeth, mumbling something incomprehensible.

"I didn't quite catch that," Snape said, raising an eyebrow. "It seems you're having a bit of a problem with the enunciation."

Collins drew himself up on his elbows, red in the face from the exhaustion. "I said may you endeavor to deserve her, you piece of shit," he sneered before collapsing back on the stretcher.

I must have hit him harder than I thought Snape thought, furrowing his brows in puzzlement.

"What did he say?" Hermione immediately asked as Snape came walking back through the doors.

"Nothing in particular." He shrugged. "He called me a bloody git, a piece of shit, and that was it."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "I need a glass of wine. And two if you insist on rhyming."

Snape snorted out a laugh, a first in a long time.

Once again, they settled down at their table, Hermione quickly ordering a bottle of white wine for them to share. The papers that had been thrown in her face had been gathered from the floor and lay in a neat stack at her side. Snape cast a glance at the pile, a couple of words suddenly catching his attention. *Petition for dissolution of marriage*.

"He's not always like this though," Hermione said conversationally as she poured wine in their glasses. "Not that it matters anymore," she added, frowning.

"Hermione," Snape cut in, his heart racing. "What is that?" He pointed towards the papers.

"Oh, that," she sighed. "We're getting a divorce. Christopher's been refusing to sign the papers for over a year now. But it seems like he's finally caught on."

"You're getting a ... But that's impossible." Snape said, dumbfounded. "Unless ..." A chill spread through his body. "Unless he's hurting you."

She waved a hand at him dismissively. "What? No, no, it's nothing like that."

He narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. "Has he been unfaithful to you?"

"That's really none of your business," she replied. "But, no."

"Or did *you*..."

"Severus."

Snape spread his arms in frustration. "Then I don't see..."

"He's a Muggle," Hermione said pointedly. "And we never bothered with a wizarding ceremony. Christopher never saw the point, nor did I when it came down to it."

"He's ... a Muggle?"

"Yes."

"He's a bloody *Muggle* and you never bothered to tell me?" Snape said, overcome with shock.

"Well, yes, why does it even matter?" she asked angrily, looking at him like he had gone completely mad.

"It *matters* ...," he said through clenched teeth, mimicking her tone of voice, "because it means that the mistake I made a decade ago could have been rectified in an instant. You could have been *mine*, ten years ago."

"Oh." Hermione reached out for her glass and took a gulp of wine. "I'm sorry to deflate your ego, but getting engaged to Christopher wasn't a spur of the moment thing."

She put down her glass and gave him a sympathetic look. "Just because Muggle vows don't shackle you, literally, to someone for the rest of your life doesn't mean they aren't as important or mean any less than wizarding ones."

She paused, searching for the right words. "I'm not going to lie. I might have been ... persuaded into doing something else if things had been different but ... I was so young back then. And confused. We would have never lasted, you and me, Severus. Not as it was, anyway."

She gazed out the window.

"And besides, what would you have done? Been a stay-at-home husband? Hung out with me and my university friends? What if I had decided that I really did want to move to France? Would you have come too?"

"You could have been my apprentice," Snape said quietly.

She stared at him, at a loss for words. "Your what?" she whispered.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a yellowed, worn-looking envelope.

"I wrote you a letter of recommendation." He held it out for her to take. "I was supposed to give it to you on your graduation day."

Hermione reached across the table, gingerly taking the letter from him. "It's still sealed?" she asked as she examined the letter.

"I never saw any reason to open it again," he replied, watching apprehensively as she tore the flap open, carefully pulling out two pieces of parchment and unfolding the first one, a glint of excitement and anticipation in her eyes.

"To Whom It May Concern. It gives me great pleasure to write this letter of recommendation on behalf of Hermione Granger," she read aloud.

"Miss Granger is a diligent and ambitious worker, who has risen to all challenges that have been thrown in her way." She stopped and cast a glance at him. "This doesn't sound like you at all. I must've made quite the impression," she smiled.

"Well ..." He took a sip of his wine. *If you ever knew.*

He watched as she read the rest of the letter, growing quieter with each sentence. When she reached the end of it, her lips were slightly parted, eyes wide. *"Should she ever be interested, I would gladly offer her an apprenticeship myself,"* she read quietly.

"I didn't even know you took on apprentices," Hermione said finally, breaking the silence between them.

"I don't." He ran a finger around the rim of his glass. "You would've been my one and only exception." He chanced a glance at her and saw her carefully folding the parchment and putting it back in the envelope, seemingly lost in thought.

"I almost forgot about this," she suddenly exclaimed and held up the second note. "What is it?" She curiously turned it over.

Spiky little notes and untidy drawings, complicated calculations and peculiar combinations of runes were crammed together in between lengthy and detailed instructions, filling the parchment from top to bottom.

"Monkshood, poppy seeds, smoked adder fangs," she read from somewhere in the middle of it all, frowning her brows. "I know this, it looks like ..." She bit her lip and then inhaled sharply.

"It's the original formula for the Wolfsbane potion." Snape cut in. "I just thought that ... to get you going, but then ..." He cleared his throat, not daring to meet her gaze.

When he finally looked up, he could have sworn he saw her wipe a tear from the corner of her eye.

"Okay, you two! You better start wrapping it up; we're closing in five minutes," Jean Granger called out as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Soon enough, they were saying goodbye to Mrs. Granger, Snape waiting patiently while Hermione took her time promising her that, yes, she would come back to visit properly and, no, she and Christopher would not be getting back together.

"Take care of yourself, dear," Mrs. Granger emphasized as she waved them off. "And Mr. Snape." She pursed her lips. "Although it's always interesting when you come around, I must confess that I've had enough excitement for quite some time," she said, giving them one last smile as she locked the door behind them.

"Severus," Hermione cast a sideways glance at him as they slowly walked down the street.

"I know I said that it doesn't matter anymore, but I think ... I think I need to know." She stopped abruptly and turned to face him. "What happened?"

Snape sighed. "I had every intention of committing myself to you back then, Hermione. But then Dumbledore found out about us, and he wasn't as understanding as one might have hoped."

Hermione regarded him in silence.

"He threatened to fire me, and then he put a trace on me to make it impossible for me to be alone with any female student without letting him know," Snape continued.

"He *what*?" Hermione gasped.

"He had it on me for three years," Snape said, casually adding, "He can be quite resentful when he wants to. On the bright side though, it cut my detentions in half for a long time."

She smiled at him. "Quite the joker nowadays, aren't you? Well. I suppose that explains it," she said quietly.

"Hermione." Snape took a deep breath, no doubt spurred on by the wine. "Before you run off getting engaged to somebody else and disappear on me for another ten years, I was wondering ..." He eyed her intently. "If I could take you out to dinner."

"Severus ...," she said, a pleading note in her voice. "Don't ..."

"No, that's not quite right. You're supposed to turn to me and say something along the lines of 'Are you insane?'" He quirked his lips and folded his arms across his chest, looking at her expectantly.

She in turn raised an unconvinced eyebrow at him. "'Have you completely lost your mind?' was the exact phrasing, I believe," she replied dryly.

"Was it really?" His smirk turned into a full smile. "I do have a way with words."

Hermione let out a laugh, the sound making his heart skip a beat. She shrugged and looked at him apologetically. "But I don't think I can reenact this properly. I don't even have any vials to break."

"It could do with a couple of adjustments anyway." He moved closer, overcome with a sudden need to be near her, to touch her.

She met his gaze uncertainly. "Like what?"

"I've had ten years to think about what could have been done differently, Hermione," he replied softly as he reached out and removed a strand of hair from her face, placing it behind her ear. "I should never have let you go, for one."

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut. "Let's just ... let's take it slowly," she said hesitantly, backing away from him slightly.

"Of course." He put his hands in his pockets and peered at the ground, suddenly unsure of what to say.

"But to answer your question, I'd love to have dinner with you sometime," she added quickly.

Sudden relief came crashing down on him like a tidal wave, and he could hardly contain the flutter of excitement in his chest. "Would it be acceptable if I owed you?" he said, trying not to sound too eager.

"Yes. Most definitely." She gave him a small, trembling smile. "Goodbye for now, then."

And with the turn of a heel, she was gone.

Snape watched the thin air from where she had vanished. He could do slowly. He had been doing slowly for the better part of his life, and even though it had been an unsuccessful kind of slowly, this time was different. This time slowly actually had the potential of a happy outcome. If he played his cards right.

Yesterday, he had been set on finally letting go of what had seemed like a never ending nightmare; today, he had been given a second chance.

But then, with the flick of a switch, his excitement turned into nervousness. He hadn't courted a woman, well, ever. He was painfully unaware of the correct procedures and social guidelines.

Wait, courted? he thought, his features immediately turning into a scowl. *You sound like Dumbledore's contemporary. Never mind. First things first. Dinner. I need to find a nice, little restaurant. Or maybe even cook myself? No.* He shook his head. *Definitely find a...*

A loud CRACK brought him out of his reverie, and a determined-looking Hermione stood before him once again. Only this time, she had a devilish twinkle in her eyes.

He opened his mouth, surprised. "Did you forget..."

"You know what," she cut off, closing the distance between them with three swift steps and pressing herself flush against him. "To hell with slowly."

And then she roughly grabbed a hold of his collar, pulled him down to her face, crushed her lips to his and, with one final CRACK, Disapparated them from the spot.

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Author's notes:

Until You Came Along Visitors

That's it folks! Thank you for reading, for all your wonderful reviews and for sticking with this story until the very end!