

outside. She'd always felt at ease with Neville since that first day in the Hogwarts Express. He had been her first friend, and he had accepted her since the beginning, never complaining about her being too bossy or a know-it-all. During those first days, they had been a little bit like outcasts at Hogwarts...him too insecure and ungifted and her too bossy and annoying. They had spent some time together in the common room talking late in the nights, and it comforted her to know she wasn't alone. Over the years, he had always been sweet to her, offering his friendship and support unconditionally because that's the way he is. Hermione had always been grateful for the way he had welcomed her in his world, and since the beginning, she had vowed to help him even when others thought he was a lost cause or a weak wizard.

Neville... he could be so gentle, and in the eyes of those who didn't know him, he was too meek, but they didn't see him and know him the way that she did. He was far from that misconception. One just had to see him in battle to know it. His gentle demeanour changed, and his features hardened. He grabbed all his Gryffindor courage and fought with something that could be described as passion, perhaps determination. He was a powerful wizard, and few people had realised that fact. She was glad she was one of those that had.

Some of those who had thought him to be weak had learned their lesson, like Rodolphus Lestrange. Hermione remembered that day during the battle when Rodolphus mocked him saying he was nothing but a weak boy pretending to be man and that he'd Crucio him the same way he did with his parents. He shouldn't have said that because Neville's eyes had burned with fury, and he'd hexed him showing a power she had only seen in Harry. Neville had Rodolphus at his feet, his eyes watching him coldly, and his jaw tightened firmly with disdain. Hermione knew that he could have killed his parents' torturer right there, and no one could have blamed him, but he didn't do it. Instead, he gave everyone a lesson of compassion and strength by taking Rodolphus Lestrange to the Aurors. She was sure the man was already condemned to die, but it wouldn't be at Neville's hands.

Hermione was brought from her reverie when Neville spoke softly to her again.

"Harry wanted someone to stay with you in case something happened and that person would be able to protect you. Ron would never leave his side, and the Aurors have a duty to fulfil, so he asked me. He said I was the only one capable of protecting you because he reckons I'm powerful and because he knows I..." Neville stopped talking abruptly and blushed furiously, suddenly finding his shoes fascinating.

Hermione knew something was amiss; his demeanour was odd. She had noticed that when she was around he handled himself differently, as if he felt more confident in her presence. She had assumed it was because they were close friends and the fact that she was the first one to befriend him unconditionally that made him feel better with her around. But something was obviously wrong. He barely looked at her, and he seemed to want to avoid talking with her.

"What's going on, Neville? You're acting odd. It's as if something is bothering you. Is there something you haven't told me?"

Maybe that was it. They were there for a special reason, and he hadn't told her yet. What if Harry was planning to do something rash? She had to get out of that room immediately. She had to go and fight with her best friends. Her musings were interrupted by Neville's soft voice...he still hadn't lifted his face to look at her.

"I have to confess something to you. Locking you away was my idea. When Harry told me that he was worried about you, I came up with this plan. I know you, Hermione. You're stubborn, and nothing would have convinced you to stay in a safe place. You know the risks. Every time you have had a run in with Death Eaters, you have always been the principal target, the one to beat. Harry had to be spared for You-Know-Who, and they have always underestimated Ron, so they didn't worry about him. But you're a strong and brilliant witch and the fact that you're also a Muggle-born irks them in such a way that they want to vanquish you, no matter what."

Hermione looked at him perplexed. She would have never expected him to be behind their current situation. Feeling her gaze, he lifted his head to meet her eyes...his full of worry, of fear...

"Neville, you're trembling. Why are you scared?"

"I thought of this plan because I'm scared. It frightens me to see you hurt or to lose you." His eyes dropped again, his voice lower and deeper. "You mean too much to me, Hermione. It's the first time that I've felt so many things at once. It's all because of you. I had to keep you safe as much as Harry did, despite the fact that our reasons are different. When I told Harry my plan, he agreed, but he asked me to be the one to stay with you. Besides, the nature of the spell demands it."

Neville's confession left Hermione speechless. Did he mean what she thought? She suppressed that thought for a moment and let her curiosity get the best of her. Although she was almost speechless after his confession, she had to ask him. "Which spell? What is keeping us here?"

"It's very old magic. It took me days to find it, but at the end, my Gran had the answer in my parents' old books. My grandpa was an Auror, too, and he passed many of his old books to my parents. In one of those books, I found this protective spell. There's no way of breaking the spell unless the threat is over or if strong dark magic is used. It's powerful in its protection, and its advantage is that it also works as a strong Disillusionment Charm, almost making the protected person untraceable."

Hermione's mind analysed all the information he was giving her, but there was still a part of the puzzle missing. "You said the nature of the spell demanded you to stay with me. Why?"

Neville blushed even more and turned to gaze at the fire in the grate. "Hermione, please don't ask me more about it. What I have already told you is enough. You don't need to know more."

Nobody could ever tell Hermione that she didn't need to know something or that she already knew enough. Those affirmations only triggered her curiosity impulse. She stood up and walked towards him, kneeling in front of the chair that he was occupying and tilting her head to the side, searching his face.

"Tell me, Neville. Please..."

Their eyes met, and the emotions Hermione saw in his made her gasp. She had never known, never suspected, his feelings because she regarded him only as a friend. But the emotion in his eyes was undeniable, and something stirred inside her heart. There was a moment of understanding, and Neville slid from the chair, kneeling beside her and embracing her as if his life depended on it.

"I know you have already seen it, Hermione. I had to keep you safe, and this was the only option: a spell that is powerful because only the love that the caster feels can make it work. I had to stay with you because what I feel for you makes this spell work..."

He embraced her tightly, his fears subsiding as he held her close and knew she was real and that she wasn't retreating from his embrace. How much he had dreamed about that moment when he could finally tell Hermione that he loved her and that he had fallen hopelessly for his best girlfriend. Everything that was her had lured him to love her...her easy smile, her loyalty, her patience with him along their years in Hogwarts, her gentleness... But above all, what made him love her most was that she had always believed in him like no one ever had before.

Neville broke their embrace to look into her eyes, and he found acceptance and something else he couldn't place at that moment. He ran his fingers over her cheek. When she leaned closer to his touch, he lowered his face, and their lips met. His first kiss was everything a kiss was meant to be. Her lips were so soft and tasted so sweet. Her tongue delineating his lips whilst he stepped closer to her, resting his hands on her back, moving soothingly along her spine. Hermione's right hand entangled in his hair, bringing him closer to her, and her other hand rested on his shoulder. When he opened his mouth to touch her lips with his tongue, the kiss deepened, and for a blissful moment, they forgot about the place they were and the war outside in their world.

There was a loud noise, and the strong wave of magic that was suddenly unleashed in the room made them break their kiss. The sound of the locks of the door opening was the last sound they heard before an absolute silence. Either Harry had won, or someone using dark magic had opened the door. It was impossible that they'd been found, though, because Hermione was untraceable due to the spell. There was no way they...realisation suddenly hit him. The prophecy. Harry was the Boy Who Lived, the one that all thought would end Voldemort's life. But when it came to Divination, there were always multiple answers, so maybe they had been wrong for more than seventeen years. Voldemort wasn't a fool, and he wouldn't leave loose ends this way. Therefore, he'd likely ordered that all the threats needed to be destroyed. Neville was the other path of the prophecy, so it was possible that they were there for him, not for her. Damn, they hadn't thought about that.

The magic sealing the room broke, and mustering all his courage, he stepped in front of her, grabbing his wand tightly in his hand, a determined look in his eyes.

"Neville," she whispered in his ear, "when this is over, promise me you'll come back to me, and we'll take a chance."

He nodded, and with his free hand, he squeezed hers tightly in assurance. She was trembling slightly, so he was sure she understood the danger. When the door started opening, he knew the time had come. Whatever waited for them on the other side, he would try to keep her safe.

Lorraine's Notes: I would have never thought about writing this pairing, but I guess that's the point of a challenge: to do what you have never done before. I'm pleased with the outcome, and I really hope I did it right. Neville is such a sweetie, and I think that he's more than meets the eye, but I just don't see him with Hermione. So, I'm not sure what happened after this story... Well, if they even managed to leave the room safe, that is.

Many thanks for lovely Southern Witch, who beta read this story. Also, thanks go to CocoaChristy for giving it a read through!

Southern's Notes: I've never read a Hermione and Neville story before. Very sweet, and after some thoughtful consideration, it could be plausible. Nice work.

Christy's Notes: I could definitely see Neville loving Hermione. She has always stood up for him and helped him when needed. Emotional and sweet!