

Scent of a Crime

by imhilien

Postwar. Snape has no idea why Hermione often visits the potions shop he now runs,
but when something goes wrong, he may be glad she does.

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Chapter 1 of 1

Postwar. Snape has no idea why Hermione often visits the potions shop he now runs, but when something goes wrong,
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This story was written for the Winter Round of the SSHG Exchange and was a gift for bethbethbeth.

The prompt was: Post-war. Severus has been jinxed with something that could potentially be very embarrassing. Hermione (an adult, and possibly in contact with Severus for some reason) helps him with his problem. Romance preferred, but friendship is okay.

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When Hermione took the time in her lunch hour to visit Potent Potions, the shop that Snape called his own these days, it was only to see his 'Closed' sign attached to the front door and all of the shades pulled down. Hermione couldn't help but feel dismayed for a moment, for she was after a particular potion that the professor made. Or rather, the ex-professor.

Snape had made it clear that he wished to be known as only Mr Snape these days and years after the war, thank you very much. Although the portrait of the late Albus Dumbledore had cleared Snape's name by saying that the Slytherin had been a true Order member, and had only been carrying out Albus's wishes in killing him on that fateful day, Snape had not resumed his place at Hogwarts afterwards.

Few had realised he had been a spy for the Order in deep cover within Voldemort's circle. Snape had played a part in ensuring that the side of Light won in the end, but there had been lingering whispers afterwards that surely he had always been a true Death Eater, one who had switched sides at the end when he saw that the Light had a real chance of winning...

Hermione had not believed the whispers and had found herself sympathising with what could have gone through Snape's mind afterwards ... your name was cleared, but in returning to Hogwarts there would always be stares and gossip behind your back.

Snape had then left the Wizarding world for three years, and Hermione knew many people, such as Harry, had been happier with him gone. But Hermione had found herself thinking that the Wizarding world had in fact become duller with Snape's absence. Even though he had been a feared teacher, he had nevertheless in Hermione's eyes been a distinctive one, with his dry and often biting wit. The thin wizard had not been handsome by any means, with a sallow face and lank, black hair, but there had been a dark elegance about the way he moved that set him out from others.

Life had progressed in the following three years... though not always the way Hermione had initially planned. Ron had become Hermione's boyfriend, but after the war and Hogwarts, he had wanted to be a major Quidditch star with a determination that had almost bordered upon obsession. Hermione had thought it was almost as if in focusing

upon Quidditch, he could forget what it had been like during the war.

It hadn't taken much persuasion on Ron's part to convince Harry, now known as the Boy-Who-Triumphed, to seek further Quidditch glory as well. However, it then hadn't taken Hermione too long to see that she was supposed to be Ron's faithful supporter at all times from now on, at the neglect of her interests and wants. Eventually there had been an argument with nasty things said on both sides that could never be unsaid afterwards. Any romantic feelings that remained had crumbled and blown away like dust... If there was any chance in mending matters, it would not be happening anytime soon, Hermione had thought with fleeting regret.

Hermione had then gone to Hogsmeade to treat herself, even if it turned out to be nothing more glamorous than window-shopping. When she had visited the recently opened bookshop Words of Wisdom and seen their discreet sign in the window asking for an assistant, on impulse Hermione had applied for and eventually received the job.

It wasn't the path she had originally chosen for herself, but Hermione had found herself dragging her heels at the thought of pursuing a career with one of the branches of the Ministry of Magic or going to a Muggle university, even though her parents had offered to help her with the fees ... and perhaps coax her away from the Wizarding world altogether. Hermione had thought sadly. She had only told her parents a few things about the war, but what little she had told them had scared them. She had seen it in their eyes...

No, she hadn't wanted to leave the Wizarding world like Snape had, but she had wanted to reclaim a sense of self again, to find out what it could be like to be an ordinary witch, not one who had been part of a war. Working in the shop where she had been ever since was not glamorous, but it was rewarding in its own way, and the quirky colleagues she worked with ensured there was never a dull moment. The pay was not the highest, but it was enough for her needs, and Hermione had found rooms for rent in Hogsmeade that suited her. Other friends had come into her life, and she had even dated a few times, though nothing special had come of them.

Then about six months ago, Snape had returned to the Wizarding world about as abruptly as he had left and set up a potions shop at the farthest end of Diagon Alley. There were some mutters at first, but with Snape keeping mostly to himself and not seeking to enter any of the main circles of Wizarding society, some of them had died down.

To actually set foot in Snape's shop though, you had to be sincere in your desire to buy his potions or have a valid reason for being there, not to come only to gawk. Hermione had soon discovered this for herself when she had first visited his shop during one of her lunch times and noted the wards placed there.

She had privately wondered if the spell had included a bar against 'Former Gryffindor Students' as well, for at that first visit it had seemed quite hard for her to actually put her hand upon the handle of the front door. But having discovered for herself the sometimes poor quality of potions from other shops, she had been willing to risk being the brunt of any of Snape's sneers and glowers to buy the potions she knew from her time at Hogwarts would always be made to his exacting standards. She hadn't wanted to admit that, deep down, she had been curious about how he was after his years away...

Snape had certainly glowered at her for a moment the first time she had walked into his shop, with a quick, irritated glance at the door she had come through as if the wards upon it had been derelict in their duty to let her through. The Slytherin had not come outright and demanded what she wanted, but he might as well have.

It had looked as if he had a small, yet steady business operating, for there had been other wizards in the shop as well, mainly older ones with the abstracted look of scholars after that certain potion, who would not have cared much about any past scandal attributed to the proprietor of the shop.

Hermione had merely smiled politely at Snape before she had started exploring the shop, even though she had known this would make him even more suspicious of her motives. After all, students at Hogwarts had rarely smiled at Snape, unless they were Slytherins, and then at times only to stay on his good side. The walls of the shop were painted a dark green, and while this did not create the most welcoming of atmospheres, there was the sense that an effort was being made not to repel customers, either.

Hermione had seen that Snape was still thin and dressed in his black robes, but his lank black hair now had strands of silver present, and his gaze looked colder. Hermione had found herself wondering whether Snape had used his time away as a holiday or just as a retreat, to wait and plot and gather his resources before returning...

On that first visit, Hermione had quickly found the potion she was after, and although Snape's black eyes had narrowed when she came up to the counter to pay for the potion, he had been silent until she had paid him and thanked him politely.

With a faint twist of his thin lips, he had said, "You are welcome, Miss Granger," with an expression on his sallow face that was just short of sarcastic after glancing at her ringless left hand. His voice, though, had been the same as always: deep and mesmerising, yet with an ever-present edge. For some reason, hearing his voice after these years had sent an odd tingling through her blood that she couldn't quite explain...

After leaving the shop, Hermione had quickly pushed any thoughts relating to Snape's voice out of her mind. She told herself firmly that she could feel a bit of sympathy towards Snape for some of what he had been through, but when it came down to it, he was still her ex-teacher and had been a far from pleasant one at times.

The next time Hermione had come to Snape's shop to purchase a potion, there had been no other customers. Perhaps this was why Snape had said out loud to her in a waspish voice, "I am surprised, Miss Granger, that you still persist in buying goods made by one you no doubt considered a cold-blooded murderer at one time."

Hanging unsaid were his words, 'like most people'.

At that, Hermione had looked squarely into Snape's icy gaze. Was it her imagination, or had there been a hint of bleakness in his eyes?

"Professor Snape, after what happened on the day I believe you refer to, many people, including most of my friends, called you evil," Hermione had said steadily.

"You will call me Mr Snape, thank you. And you had agreed with your friends?" Snape had said acidly.

"No," she had countered. "I said evil was too strong a word. For you, especially. I was glad to find out that I had been right."

Snape had stared at her for a long moment, and Hermione had held her ground... and unexpectedly, Snape had been the first to almost stiffly look away.

"Mr Snape, if my presence truly bothers you, then I'll leave," Hermione had then said quietly. "Though I'm sure I won't find potions as good as the ones you make elsewhere," she had added.

At that, Snape had looked back at her. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Miss Granger," he had said tartly, though Hermione sensed he was secretly gratified at her praise. "It is of no concern to me what you do in your spare time."

After that, some of the air had become clear between them, though it was not as if Snape started treating her as an equal. But there was a guarded thawing of his manner when she was present in his shop, with Hermione feeling relieved that he had perhaps stopped regarding her as just an annoying know-it-all.

Hermione couldn't help wonder, though, at the way she had started thinking more about Snape ... her friends had often scoffed at her habit of championing 'useless causes', and they would laugh at the thought of her, well, trying in her own small way to make Snape feel like a useful member of society again by going to buy his potions. Needless to say, she could imagine the depth of Snape's scorn if he knew these thoughts.

As she stood now in front of the closed door of Snape's shop, Hermione wondered if he was all right with more concern that she knew was necessary. She could barely remember the times he had been absent from classes because of illness ... as the Potions master he would have had a ready supply of tonics to take at the slightest cough.

He's a grown man, Hermione told herself sternly. If his shop was closed today, then the reasons were his own business, not hers. However, she stood there for a few more moments, gazing soberly at the shop before leaving.

When the weekend arrived, Hermione went back to Snape's shop, telling herself that she really needed the potion she was after from Snape. No, just admit that you're

concerned about him, she thought to herself with an inward sigh. You want to see that the shop is open again and that Snape is fine, even if he senses you are concerned for him and sneers in response.

But on returning to the shop, Hermione saw that it was still closed.

What was going on? If there was an explanatory sign put out as well, such as 'closed for stocktaking', then that would have been fine.

A small detail caught her eye, a spider had had the time to spin its small, fragile web, undisturbed, over the doorframe. Obviously the wards on the shop didn't exclude spiders, Hermione thought.

But a feeling of disquiet rose up within her. Biting her lip, Hermione went right up to the door, and after listening hard for a short time, she heard a distinct tinkle inside the shop of something that had dropped to the floor. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she thought she heard a low curse from within accompanying the sound.

Her mind made up, Hermione knocked firmly upon the door, wishing she could just Apparate inside. Not surprisingly, out of wariness or of paranoia, she had soon found out that Snape had put a ward upon the shop against anyone doing just that, of course.

There was no answer.

"Mr Snape, are you in there?" Hermione called out cautiously.

There was no answer and she tried again.

"Professor Snape, are you all right?"

Still no answer. There was a small eyehole set into the door, but when she looked through, there was only darkness. Mind you, this was probably because Snape wished to be the one who would look at you, not the other way around, Hermione sighed to herself.

After a while, Hermione distinctly heard the sound of quick, almost irritated footsteps from within the shop approaching the door. She had the feeling of being scrutinised through the eyehole before faintly hearing what sounded like Snape muttering a spell. Hermione backed up a step in alarm before she suddenly heard his voice as clear as if there was no door between them.

"Miss Granger, I assumed you knew what a sign saying 'closed' meant," she heard Snape say tartly. "Apparently, I was wrong."

Despite his words, Hermione thought she heard a weary note to his voice as well.

"Mr Snape, I only wanted to see that everything was all right," she said carefully, assuming he would hear her as clearly as she was hearing him.

"Miss Granger, I am sure that you are motivated more by curiosity than concern for my wellbeing," was the acid response.

"No, I'm not," Hermione found herself saying with unexpected firmness.

There was a long silence, and then Snape said grimly, "No doubt you still believe you know everything under the sun."

At that, Hermione said cautiously, "I never did, but I like to think I can solve any problem if I put my mind to it."

She heard a very male snort.

There was another long silence, and then he said repressively, "Miss Granger, if I decide to open this door, and if I decide to let you in to assist me with a... situation, then you will not breathe a word of this to anyone afterwards. Especially your little friends. Is that clear?"

Hermione blinked at that. He was actually asking for her help? She remembered countless times at Hogwarts of how she had tried to get Snape's approval in class, even the slightest acknowledgement from the professor when she knew she had done well in making a potion. It had been to no avail, of course. The only times that she had been cautiously sure she had done well was when the Potions master had swept imperiously over to her cauldron but saying nothing after glancing at the contents. After all, if she had been making a mistake in her potion preparation, Snape would have been the first to scathingly say so.

But here and now, Snape was asking for her assistance.

Or perhaps he was just desperate, part of her mind whispered.

But in the end, Hermione could not resist a challenge.

"Yes, if you think I can help, then yes, I swear," she said steadily.

"Very well... I trust I will not regret this," she then heard Snape mutter.

After a moment, Hermione heard a variety of odd sounding clicks before the door opened just enough to let her in. When Hermione walked into the shop, she saw a Snape who was looking visibly tired with dark circles underneath his black eyes and his lips a grim line. He raised a dark eyebrow after he swiftly shut the door behind her, obviously waiting for her to realise what the 'situation' was.

As well as the spicy scent of potions and their ingredients in the shop, Hermione was aware of smelling an unusually strong scent of jasmine. She wrinkled her nose because while the scent of jasmine was something she could tolerate in small doses, if it was too strong, as it was now, then she found it sickly sweet.

Out of curiosity, she turned her head to the side to establish where the scent was coming from... realising after an unreal moment that it was coming from Snape himself.

"You're wearing jasmine perfume!" Hermione blurted, too surprised to be polite. "Why?"

She was aware of how absurd those words sounded as soon as she said them, but she knew she spoke the truth...

At that, Snape glared at her.

"Let me rephrase your ignorant words, Miss Granger," he hissed as he loomed over her, waves of jasmine scent radiating from him. "Through no deliberate reason of my own, I have found myself continuously smelling this way. Until your arrival, I was working on yet another way to counteract this, I assure you."

There was a look in his black eyes that dared her to laugh or to make a derogatory comment.

On the surface, the situation was funny to Hermione. She knew Harry and Ron would be in hysterics if they knew that, thanks to a jinx or a hex, Snape currently smelt of jasmine perfume. Very strong jasmine perfume. Hermione could see that a skylight (warded, of course) was open in the ceiling. At least that would keep fresh air circulating, she thought.

But, she could easily see how this was not funny at all to Snape ... no doubt he felt embarrassed and effectively trapped in his shop until he found a cure. He couldn't go outside, for he would soon be the focus of sniggers and outright laughter. It would be abhorrent for most men to find themselves smelling of perfume, doubly so to a prickly personality like that of Snape's.

She wondered if anyone else had knocked on his front door to find out what was wrong, but then thought that perhaps no one else would dare... or be bothered to.

If it was absolutely necessary for him to go outside, he could always put the glamour of a woman upon himself... but Hermione knew of course that such a suggestion would not be appreciated at all. As she looked again at the dark circles underneath Snape's eyes, Hermione didn't want to think of how much (or how little) restful sleep he had had.

"How did this happen?" Hermione in the end said simply.

Snape looked narrowly at Hermione, and then when he was obviously satisfied that she was taking the matter seriously, he said in a clipped voice, "The other day I was sent a Howler by an unknown person."

Hermione inwardly winced at that ... she had always felt sorry for people who had got the publicly humiliating Howlers at Hogwarts, even if they had rightly deserved it. Then a look of puzzlement appeared on her face.

"But surely you would have known who had sent you the Howler when you listened to it," she queried.

A scornful look appeared on Snape's face at that.

"Miss Granger, I have neither the patience nor the time to listen to the idiotic rantings of imbeciles, so I blasted it instead," he said tartly. There was, though, the suggestion of a smirk on his face that indicated he had enjoyed said blasting.

Then his face soured before he reluctantly continued.

"However, it seemed such a move had been... anticipated, for somehow a cloud of perfume was released from the wretched thing onto my body just before the Howler was reduced to shreds."

How devious, Hermione thought. While Snape had put wards on his shop against harm or attack, it was near impossible to ward against Howlers being sent to you, especially if they had been created and sent with a force of righteous indignation or anger behind them.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask whether Snape knew who could be responsible, but then she hesitated. If Snape had not been the most well liked wizard before the death of Dumbledore... well, there would be a long list of those who still hated him for wielding the wand that killed him, orders-and-cleared-name or not.

However, it would seem that the perpetrator had a dark sense of humour ... the purpose of this jinx was to humiliate, not to incapacitate.

It was evident that some of her thoughts had shown upon her face, for Snape favoured her with a grim smile.

"I have not been able to trace who it was who sent such an... abomination to me, but rest assured when I find out, they will be very sorry," he said in a dangerously soft voice.

Hermione couldn't help but feel as if the hair on her neck rose at that.

Nevertheless, in a firm voice she said, "Well, I think it is a nasty trick to play on anyone. What have you been doing to remove, ah, the smell?"

Snape's black eyes narrowed, and he folded his arms across his chest.

"I see you wisely refuse to describe it as perfume," he growled. "Miss Granger, I have used every method I can think of to remove it from my person. I have cast spells and charms. I have brewed potions for myself in an effort to neutralise it from within. I have even scrubbed myself raw with various 'special soaps' and other treatments guaranteed to remove 'all unwanted odours' whose details I shall spare you. All methods so far have failed, and so I am inclined at this point to listen to any idea, even those from Gryffindors."

Hermione ignored those last few words, but although she didn't show it on her face, she thought it was alarming that nothing an accomplished Potions master such as Snape had tried so far had worked. But no doubt even the cleverest wizard would find it difficult to concentrate with such a smell constantly threatening to overwhelm his senses, as well as nearly drive him up the wall.

Hermione then thought of the last time she had been to a supermarket and the aisle that had been filled with various odour removal products of all kinds.

But she knew that like most wizards, Snape took a dim view of Muggle shops and their products, unless you were like Arthur Weasley and had to be practically restrained from eagerly exploring them and loudly wondering what the various products were for. But still, Snape's father was a Muggle, and as a result, Snape must have had some exposure to Muggle ways and lifestyles when he was growing up, she thought.

In a cautious voice, Hermione said, "Have you thought that there might be some items in a Muggle supermarket that could help you?"

She knew it was a long shot, but perhaps there would be something in one of them that could help.

Snape glowered at her in response.

"That is not the kind of idea I was wanting... if you think I would waste time in acquiring something from one of your unnatural and overloud supermarkets," he retorted, practically spitting out the word 'supermarket' as he would something venomous, "with the poisons passing for chemicals in their products, then you clearly have little sense and no brain after all."

Stung and hurt by his words, Hermione glared back at him. If she was her younger self, she might have flinched from his spiteful words, but she was older now and could hold her ground against the Slytherin. She noticed that he had viewed supermarkets as something being only from her world, regardless of the fact that he had a Muggle parent...

"Look, I'm only trying to help as you've asked me to. Not everything in a supermarket is full of dangerous chemicals, you know," Hermione retorted as she put her hands on her hips. "Besides, how do you know whether something from a supermarket will be good or not until you try it?"

"I do not need to try it, as you put it, since I know nothing from such a place will have any effect!" Snape snapped.

"But you don't know that," Hermione said doggedly, part of her surprised that she was persisting in talking back to Snape, something he had always been quick to punish in class. "A different approach to the problem might be the breakthrough you need."

Snape's black eyes bored into hers as if he was trying to subdue her will... then he threw his hands up in irritation.

"You were one of the most stubborn, know-it-all Gryffindors I had ever taught, and I see nothing has changed much," he said tartly. "Very well then, Miss Granger, go to one of your precious supermarkets and find something that you think will help. Though I doubt you will."

Knowing, though, that she had won this round, Hermione found herself smiling back at Snape.

At that, Snape then looked at her oddly, his lips set in a peculiar line, and Hermione's smile quickly faded.

This was a serious situation, she thought soberly, not a way in which she could score points.

"All right then, I'll go straight away," she said briskly as she turned and headed towards the door.

"Try not to dawdle on your way back," Snape said sarcastically from behind her.

"I don't dawdle," Hermione said firmly, and she heard Snape snort.

When her hand was on the handle of the door, Hermione then thought about how much the trip to the supermarket would cost, and she turned to look back at Snape.

"Since I'm effectively working for you at the moment, will you be paying me for anything I buy on your behalf?" she asked daringly.

"Only if there is the desired result," he said tartly.

Snape heard her grumble, "I knew he would say that," as she left his shop.

If Snape had been someone who smiled easily, he would have done so. As it was, he was finding it difficult not to replay the way she had smiled at him earlier...

He shook his head irritably and went back to his workroom, pinching his nose shut when a wave of jasmine wafted unbearably around his face. It was as if his very pores were pouring out the damned reek now, and as he had said to Miss Granger before, nothing he had tried had worked to eradicate it. He didn't know how many times he had changed his clothes. It was only the strongest of sleep potions that enabled him to get any sleep at all at nights, only the strongest of stimulants to get him through the days.

Snape was grimly determined not to give up, though ... there was a cure, and he would find it. He doubted that it would be found at a Muggle supermarket, despite Miss Granger's stubborn insistence on going there. He trusted little that came from the world of the Muggle father he had hated.

He should have never opened his door to Miss Granger before, but at the sound of her earnest voice calling him 'Professor Snape', there had been an odd feeling in his heart that had induced him to open the door to her.

The trouble was, he was experiencing too many of these odd feelings when she was around. He hadn't believed his eyes the first time she had the audacity to come to his shop ... only a few of his ex-students came to his shop, and they were Slytherins. How the wards had let her in was beyond his knowing-hadn't he made it clear when casting them that he wasn't to be pestered? What did she want, and why on earth had she smiled at him in that first visit, even though he had glowered at her for coming here?

Not for the first time, Snape wondered why he had felt compelled to return to the Wizarding world here. After the war, he had been more than willing to leave and had closed up his house. Thanks to various favours owed to him by potion colleagues in Spain, he had gone over there and found a small place for himself, selling potions to the magical community there. He had gained a reputation for what he produced, not for what he had done... or what he looked like.

But then, after a while, he had started experiencing a compulsion to return here, a feeling that there was something he had to return for. He had ignored it of course after deducing that there was no magical compulsion placed upon him. After all, what was there worth returning for?

But the feelings grew stronger until they gave him no peace and he found himself packing and returning to his home to set up a shop here. Only to be pestered by Miss Granger...

He had seen that she had unmistakably grown into a young woman from the student she had been ... though not into a raving beauty, part of his mind had snidely pointed out. But there had been a sense of energy and purpose radiating from her plain features, even in her bushy hair that had been temporarily tamed into a dark plait down her back.

Miss Granger had bought a potion, and Snape had not rejected the opportunity to take money from her ... after all of the aggravation she had caused him at Hogwarts, the least she could do was start paying in some way for it. But on meeting her gaze, he had experienced an odd feeling in his heart because for the first time he was finding it absurdly easy to drown in her warm, brown eyes...

But she was only an ex-student, and one of his most annoying, he had growled to himself. A feeling of pleasure had coursed through him when he had noticed that she wasn't wearing any wedding or engagement rings. He had told himself that it served her right if she was still as outspoken and impertinent these days as she had been in his classes. At least there was no chance of seeing her gaze looking back at him from a brat of hers fathered by Weasley, or worse, Potter.

Snape shook his head irritably again. He was wasting his time thinking of Miss Granger when he should be working on his current way to find a cure. Surely this time his efforts would work... though a grim certainty was growing in his heart that the real reason he had been compelled to return here was that the Fates were far from finished with him. He was so tired...

Hermione returned to the shop later that day with a variety of items she thought would help from the supermarket ... if they didn't work, then she had some other ideas. She had sought products that would neutralise the jasmine smell, or failing that, have an overriding yet unobtrusive smell of their own (she had certainly steered clear of products described as smelling of 'Hibiscus and Honeysuckle', or 'Lavender Garden'). She hoped that it was possible for Snape to safely isolate certain ingredients ... if he couldn't, then no one could.

When she knocked firmly upon the door, which still bore its 'Closed' sign, she heard footsteps soon after and then sensed Snape looking at her through the eyehole.

When the door was opened, Snape looked out at her with a sour expression on his face, though Hermione felt that this was not directed personally at her. His gaze dropped to the garish plastic bag she was carrying, and there was a faint twist to his lips before he said, "Come in before you let in a draught."

When Hermione walked into the shop, she asked Snape, "Have you had any luck in finding a cure while I was out?"

She sensed that he hadn't, but it was only polite to ask, she thought.

"Since I am still smelling like a flower garden gone wild, the answer must then be 'no', Miss Granger," Snape said curtly as he took the bag from her. His hand quickly dipped into the bag and the first thing that he brought out was the can of air freshener she had bought.

"What is this?" he questioned with distaste in his voice.

Hermione counted to five and told herself not to hex him into next week.

"It's a can of air freshener... You spray it in a room to get rid of smells," she told him. "I thought there might be something in this and the other things I brought that you could use."

Snape snorted and then frowned at the description on the can. "Mountain Breeze? What, may I ask, is a mountain supposed to smell of?" he said acerbically. "Snow? Rocks?"

Suddenly there was loud, brisk knocking at the front door and Snape grimaced.

"Another dunderhead who cannot read the sign on my door," he said tartly, eyeing Hermione for a moment as if daring her to react. Hermione huffed back at him in response.

Snape was unwilling to go and open the door, but then he looked down at the can of air freshener again. He had no wish to replace the jasmine reek on his person with another reek, but at this stage he would try anything.

"If the description of 'Mountain Breeze' on this... thing ends up making me smell of lavender or some other insipid flower instead, then I shall pickle you in a jar as most Gryffindors should be," Snape grumbled as he warily noted the way of using the can before giving his body a vigorous spray with it.

Snape then coughed and spluttered as some of the spray rose up to his face. Quickly moving away from where he had been standing, he put the can and the bag down nearby before waving his hands irritably in front of his face for a few moments. After glowering at Hermione ... who had a carefully blank face ... he sniffed cautiously at his person. Already the jasmine reek was receding, and although the smell of the spray was... odd, in its own Muggle way, perhaps there was something he could draw from Miss Granger's products to cure him.

He knew the dangers of being too hopeful, though ... many of the other methods had shown promise of being the cure before they had abruptly failed. As if nothing was meant to work for him...

There was another even louder knock at the door.

"Yes, yes, I am coming!" Snape snapped. Before going to the door, he couldn't resist from saying acerbically to Hermione, "While this spray is effective ... in the short term, no doubt ... I fail to detect any actual mountain breezes within it. You may not have your money back for this."

Hermione glowered at his back as he swept towards the door. He was one of the most impossible wizards she had ever known, she fumed. She thought that Snape must have cast the spell to hear whoever was outside, for when he sharply asked who the person was the reply was loud and clear.

Perhaps too loud and clear.

"Barry Biggsley, Magical Law Enforcement Squad," the voice was heard to say. "Open this door, please."

Snape visibly froze where he stood, and Hermione felt a cold sensation in the pit of her stomach. Her immediate thought was that Snape was going to be arrested by the Ministry of Magic for one reason or another, and a feeling of angry defensiveness rose up within her in response. Her hand crept instinctively towards her wand in her pocket...

Snape then opened the door to the wizard who was standing on the threshold. At first glance, he seemed quite ordinary; he was of average height with hair and eyes of an unremarkable shade of brown. His demeanour was mild, his robes a dull olive colour, and he seemed to be the type of person that you would forget within minutes of seeing him. But Hermione found herself thinking that if you did something to break the law, then not long afterwards you would turn around and he would be standing there with perhaps the same, mild smile he was wearing now.

"Mr Snape, I presume?" the wizard said calmly.

"Yes," Snape replied flatly.

Barry then sniffed strongly at the air once, and then twice. Hermione saw Snape visibly stiffen at that but before he lost his temper, the wizard from the Ministry said in the same calm voice, "I detect the smell of jasmine. Our source has indeed told the truth; you have been jinxed to smell this way through a Howler specifically created and sent to you."

"How do you know of this?" Snape said in a low, controlled voice, but Hermione could almost feel the anger underneath in his voice, as if Snape suspected the wizard was silently laughing at him at the same time.

"If you would let me in so I don't have to stand on your threshold ... in public view, I might add ... then I can enlighten you," Barry said reasonably.

Already Hermione felt like hexing his nose with purple boils or something equally humiliating.

With a face that was already starting to look like thunder, Snape stood aside and let Barry in, shutting the door afterwards in a way that was just this short of a slam.

When Barry's gaze fell upon Hermione, he paused for a moment before smiling and inclining his head to her. His gaze was bland, but she nevertheless had the feeling of being minutely scanned, and in response Hermione tilted her chin at him. His smile widened for a moment, revealing teeth that were slightly pointed.

"Good day, ma'am. Have I interrupted a visit from a lady friend of yours?" he inquired as he looked at Snape.

To Hermione's surprise she saw spots of colour suddenly appear on Snape's sallow cheeks. She noted too with unease that the spray Snape had used had only had a temporary effect, as he smelt strongly of jasmine again. It was as if the perpetrator had maliciously intended that nothing would work at all ... nothing from the Wizarding world, and nothing from its Muggle counterpart, either.

Through gritted teeth, Snape said, "Miss Granger is ... assisting me. Now would you please explain the reason for your visit and whether you know of a cure?"

"Your assistant? Of course," Barry said blandly.

The Ministry wizard then went on. "A rogue wizard has recently come to our attention, one by the name of Oliver Waterbrook." He paused and looked enquiringly at Snape.

Snape became still. "He is a former student of mine... a Ravenclaw," he said curtly.

Barry looked sympathetic. "Yes, he did say that when we caught up with him; he remembered you far too well, it seemed. Dear me, students should always hold their teachers in the highest respect, shouldn't they, Mr Snape? When we brought him back for questioning about other crimes, one other thing he confessed to having done was sending the Howler to you. Fortunately, we were able to persuade him to make an antidote before sending him to Azkaban. Now where is it... Ah, here it is."

Barry put a hand into his pocket and brought out a little glass bottle containing a bright pink liquid, offering it to Snape with a smile.

"This comes with compliments of the Ministry, of course," Barry said cheerfully.

Snape stared at the wizard with narrowed eyes before carefully reaching out to take the bottle. There had to be a catch, he thought suspiciously. It was just as well that Waterbrook, a student that Snape remembered as always having an unnerving stare, was in Azkaban. After what he would have done to him, Waterbrook was better off in that place...

"Thank you," Snape nevertheless said stiffly.

Hermione found herself thinking that this was happening all too easily ... she knew that although Snape's name had been cleared, his name had nevertheless been on the 'Most Wanted' list of the Ministry at one stage. She doubted that they would be helping him now without some strings attached...

Barry gave Snape a smile that revealed his teeth. "When Rita Skeeter from the *Daily Prophet* arrives later this afternoon to interview you, I am sure you will be eager to thank the Ministry for the help that we provided you."

"What?" Snape snapped.

The Ministry wizard regarded him with what seemed genuine surprise. "Mr Snape, with a crime this heinous, surely you would expect us to inform the newspaper of the distress it has caused the Wizarding community and upstanding wizards such as yourself."

"I will not be giving an interview," Snape growled, his eyes glittering dangerously and his hands clenched at his sides.

Barry's smile became steely. "Mr Snape, there are those within the Ministry who would have preferred that you remained smelling of jasmine indefinitely. We may have not always seen eye to eye with the late Albus Dumbledore, and you may have been acting under his orders the day that he died, but you were nevertheless the instrument of his death, a death that could have been avoided. You have been given a cure now, and as I have already said, you will express your gratitude when you are interviewed."

Snape's face was truly like thunder now, and Hermione thought that he was almost going to burst a blood vessel. But then, ever so slowly, his hands unclenched.

"Very well," Snape said softly. There was a look, though, in his black eyes that said he wanted to do nothing more but turn Barry into a bug and squash him. Repeatedly.

"There, I knew you were a reasonable wizard," Barry said cheerily. "Once you take the antidote, it will be fast acting, and you will soon, ah, smell the way you usually do, or so we have been told. Good day to you, and to you, Miss Granger."

Barry nodded at them both before going to the door and leaving the shop, shutting the door gently behind him. But with the way Snape was holding the bottle in his hand, it looked to Hermione as if he wanted to throw it against the door after him. But then with a savage curse, Snape pulled the lid out of the bottle and drank down the contents in a single go. The hapless bottle was then practically thrown down on to a nearby table.

"I'm glad you got the cure, but I'm sorry for the way he treated you," Hermione said quietly to Snape. The antidote had indeed come with unwelcome strings attached after all, and the Ministry had gleefully grabbed the opportunity to have Snape beholden to them in this way.

"I do not want your pity!" Snape whirled and said harshly to her, his eyes glittering.

Hermione flinched despite herself, and then said levelly, "All right. This is probably a good time for me to go, then."

With that, she went to gather up the things she had bought for Snape at the supermarket, since she doubted that he would wish to see any of them again. But while she was pleased that Snape had been given the cure, a selfish part of her wished that she had been blessed with more time to see if she could have been the one to provide a cure. When it came down to it, she thought quietly, she was still that schoolgirl hoping for a word of approval from Snape...

"Miss Granger, wait," Snape then said swiftly as he went to bar her from leaving, his robes swirling about him as he did so. Hermione looked warily at him and saw that the anger had drained away from her former teacher, leaving him with his tiredness. His black gaze, though, was fixed unerringly upon Hermione's eyes.

"I will not forget that you tried to help me," he said stiffly. "Even though you brought me something that did not have real mountain breezes in it," he grumbled.

Hermione blinked at hearing Snape attempting to lighten the situation, and then she found a tentative smile coming to her face. To her surprise, Snape's face softened for a moment in response, which made him unexpectedly look... more human, she thought.

"That's all right," Hermione said awkwardly. The important thing was that she had tried to help him.

"It's only what a friend would do," she found herself adding.

Snape then became very still, and then said quietly, "You would wish to be thought of as a friend of mine... after everything?"

For the first time, Hermione saw him only as an all too human wizard instead of her ex-professor, someone who perhaps needed her friendship more than he would admit. Besides, hadn't she been one of the few people to believe that he was not truly evil?

"Yes," she said firmly. "I am sure you have room in your life for a friend, even if she is a Gryffindor."

"And what would your friends say?" Snape said with a faint twist to his lips. "Such as Weasley... or Potter."

"I don't have to ask their permission," Hermione pointed out.

Hermione then realised that while they had been talking, the smell of jasmine that had been emanating from him had ceased. She leaned forward and cautiously sniffed at him.

"Stop that behaviour at once!" Snape said in irritation. Surely it was bad enough that she talked back to him and looked at him with those brown eyes of hers...

To his further vexation, she looked cheerfully at him.

"I was just checking to see if the antidote has worked ... I think it has!" Hermione said, and Snape was oddly touched to hear the genuine relief in her voice.

Snape then stared sharply at her before swiftly lifting up a hand of his to give it several quick sniffs. He then gave her a nod.

"As it should," he said grimly. "If I ever come across jasmine again, I will blast the damned flowers. I will be happy, though, if you ask permission before sniffing me again in the future," he added tartly.

"All right," Hermione agreed with a trace of laughter in her eyes.

Snape decided not to reply to that.

Snape then looked at the bag containing the spray and the other things she had bought from the supermarket.

"I believe I will pay you for the things you bought to help me; I am aware of the conversion rate from Muggle money to ours," he said abruptly.

Before Hermione could thank him, he raised a hand.

"On one condition," he said smoothly.

Hermione looked suspiciously at him.

"What condition would that be?" she asked.

"Why, that you participate in the interview as well when the reporter from the *Daily Prophet* arrives. Of course, as a Gryffindor, you would want a chance to see your name in the newspaper, anyway," Snape said sleekly.

"I would not!" Hermione was quick to grumble before shaking her head ruefully. She knew there had to have been more than one reason for Snape stopping her from leaving.

"All right, then," she sighed.

She knew the last thing she wanted to do was tangle with the likes of Rita Skeeter again, and people would be quick to say all sorts of things after their names appeared in the paper together. But to be honest, Snape looked as if he was about to go and sleep for a week ... the least she could do was help out with the interview before he did so. But at least she would make it clear to Rita that she had only sought to help Snape as any other concerned witch or wizard would. Or should have, period. Then Hermione

smiled to herself at the thought of Rita interviewing someone like Severus Snape... She would have no idea of what she was in for.

There was one more thing that she wanted to say though.

"You know, I can understand why you left after the war was over," Hermione said quietly. "But you never said why you came back."

At that, Snape gave her a long, unfathomable look. "I had gone away to work far from here. But I felt there was something waiting for me here, unlikely as it seemed... so I returned," he said simply.

"I'm glad," Hermione said quietly.

FINIS