

Playing it by Ear

by hpwyllie

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts and must not only face her past, but her old Potions Professor as well.

Alleyways and Trashcans

Chapter 1 of 2

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Author's Notes: Much love and hugs to my fabulous Betas Strider, Kat, Lea, Darcy, Brandy, Diane, and Sarah. Thank you!!!!

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Chapter 1: Alleyways and Trashcans

*Why am I so bloody nervous?* Hermione Granger thought to herself as she approached the large oak doors that were the entry into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. *This was my home for nearly seven years.*

But, the simple fact remained, the closer Hermione drew to the castle, the slower her steps became.

Finally, at the base of the castle steps, Hermione stopped and took a deep breath, gathering her infamous Gryffindor courage about her. With a new sense of resolve, she made the final ascent to the castle doors, which opened just as she reached them.

There, waiting to greet her was her former Head of House, Minerva McGonagall. McGonagall's now salt and pepper hair was pulled tightly into the all too familiar bun of Hermione's school days, but instead of the thin-lipped, stern expression she had so often worn, McGonagall's features were softened with a warm smile.

"Hermione!" the Scottish witch called out to her favorite pupil, her arms opening wide to enfold the younger witch in a welcoming hug. "It is so good to see you!"

"It's good to see you as well, Professor," Hermione replied, returning the hug.

"Oh, we'll have none of this 'Professor' nonsense when there are no students about. You're a member of the staff now. Please, call me Minerva," McGonagall chided as she released Hermione from their embrace. "Now, come with me, and I'll show you to your quarters. You should have just enough time to get settled in before dinner, then we have lots of catching up to do."

Hermione followed Professor McGonagall. No, she corrected herself, Minerva up the stairs. She smiled as she noticed the stairs moving in an effort to assist them with their ascent, as opposed to moving the exact opposite direction they needed to go, as they so often had moved when she was a student.

"There are some benefits to being Headmistress," Minerva said with a wink, noticing Hermione's smile.

A few short moments later, Hermione was alone in her new quarters, left to "settle in," with a promise from Minerva to "catch up" at dinner. Her quarters consisted of four rooms. There was a comfortable sitting room with large fireplace, a comfy couch, two squashy armchairs, and an elegantly carved coffee table.

Just off the sitting room, through one door, was her private office. Peeking in, Hermione noticed that currently other than a smaller fireplace and a desk, the room was quite bare. She instantly began to make plans to transfer her extensive library from storage to this room.

*A few expansion charms and it should all fit quite nicely,* she thought.

The third and fourth rooms were her private bed and bath. Hermione entered the bedroom and looked about with a critical eye. The room looked much like her old Gryffindor dorm room, minus a few extra beds and wardrobes. There would definitely need to be some redecorating to be done in here, but not at the moment, as she only had a few more minutes before needing to head back down to the Great Hall for dinner.

Instead, Hermione removed her shrunken travel trunk from her pocket and with a flick of her wand enlarged it to its proper size. Another wand flick and her clothes were neatly placed in her wardrobe. Resisting the urge to begin her redecorating charms right away, Hermione headed off to inspect the bathroom.

It was spacious and clad in cream-toned marble. An oversized claw-footed tub with a single gold faucet at its end beckoned to her to come have a soak. She crossed the room and turned on the tap and watched the tub rapidly fill. The scent of jasmine and vanilla quickly filled the room as Hermione deeply breathed in the soothing scent. It was her favorite, and she wondered for a moment what charm had been used to provide exactly the scent she favored.

*Why are you procrastinating, Granger?!* She scolded herself.

But, she knew exactly why.

Dinner would mean going to the Great Hall. Dinner would mean eating with her now fellow teachers. Dinner would mean seeing **him**. And, seeing him was something she had hoped never to do again.

Hermione perched on the edge of the now full tub and dragged her fingertips lazily across the warm scented water. No, she didn't want to see him at all.

In fact, she was dreading it. The last time Hermione Granger's path had crossed that of one Severus Snape it had been a catastrophe, to put it mildly.

*The war had been over for less than a year, and the Wizarding World was still in full celebration. Arthur Weasley had been newly elected Minister of Magic, after a vote of no confidence sent Scrimgeour packing.*

*Arthur had decided that not only should those that died in the war against Voldemort be memorialized, but those who fought and lived should be honored as well, including the recently exonerated Severus Snape.*

*Dumbledore's portrait had awoken three days before the Final Battle, the morning that Severus had turned up on the castle doorsteps, beaten and bloodied. Hermione had been the one to find him, near unconsciousness.*

*Without a thought she had taken Severus quickly to his chambers, Accio'd his wand from him, Stupified him, and then performed the rudimentary healing spells she had learned. Minerva had almost killed the man before he was revived.*

*Thankfully, she had held off that impulse, and Snape convinced her to go to Dumbledore's sleeping portrait and tell him the time for battle had drawn near.*

*Half of the Order had been called to guard Severus as Moody Apparated to Diagon Alley and retrieved a series of Pensieve memories from Dumbledore's personal vault at Gringotts. In the end, the Order learned that Severus had been under Dumbledore's orders to kill him, after his ill-fated decision to undergo the Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa.*

*Although some were still skeptical, the information Severus had risked his life to bring to the Order proved invaluable, and in the end, the Side of the Light was victorious. Of course, where the Order took only hours to decide Severus' innocence, it took the Ministry of Magic much longer. It wasn't until Scrimgeour had been summarily booted out of office that Severus was given a full and fair trial and eventually released.*

*And that led to the monument gracing the center square of Hogsmeade and the commemoration party when Hermione had embarrassed herself so completely.*

*It seemed as if the entire Wizarding community had gathered for the unveiling of the monument. And Severus had appeared to many people's surprise. Although legally cleared of any guilt in the murder of Dumbledore, there were still whisperings of his treachery in those early months.*

*He looked even worse than his normal self, Hermione had noted. Although recently released, his months spent in Azkaban, which had been placed back under the control of the Dementors, had not served him well. His skin more pallid, his cheekbones more sunken, his hair more lank, his eyes shadowed and hollow. Severus had climbed the stairs to the platform where the other honorees were seated, and slowly sat on the end seat, next to Hermione.*

*She spent the next hour not listening to Arthur and a variety of other ministry officials extolling the heroics of those being honored, but instead focused on the shallow breathing of the man sitting next to her, as if any deeper breath would cause him great pain. Her heart ached as he carefully lifted a hand to brush back an errant lock of hair that the wind had flung cruelly into his eyes, and she noticed the ever-so-slight tremble in the long, strong fingers that she had so often admired as they worked with efficient grace in the Potions classroom.*

*It wasn't the sympathy that she had felt that had surprised Hermione. No, she assumed that much was normal, for here was a man that was obviously still under physical duress, that had risked his life time and time again, knowing that the most likely outcome was that he would die being thought a traitor as opposed to the hero he really was.*

*No, that seemed natural.*

*It was the anger and protectiveness that flashed through her when she noticed two wizards talking behind their hands and glaring at her former Potions Master, during the ceremony, that had caught her completely unawares. At that moment, Hermione wanted nothing more than to whip her wand out and hex the two of them into oblivion. Instinctually, her hand reached into her robes, gripped her wand tightly and was just on the verge of brandishing it. Apparently, this movement had not gone unnoticed.*

*"Miss Granger," the dark man sitting next to her sneered quietly, "I assure you that whatever it is you think you need to do with that wand is neither warranted nor wanted."*

*She had the good courtesy to flush, but could not bring herself to look into his eyes. Instead, she stared fixedly off into the crowd, as the speaker's voice droned wordlessly on.*

*The afternoon had gone from bad to worse. Following the ceremony there was to be a street festival of sorts, another in a long line of celebrations of the fall of Voldemort. Hermione had noticed Severus slip silently through the throngs of people trying to shake the hands of those that were at the battle, and followed him as best she could.*

*She had lost him in the twisting side streets of the small village. Fearing he had Apparated away, she sunk to the ground, her back resting against a nondescript building wall, unsure what to do next or why she wanted to do anything at all.*

*It was then that she heard the crash of a rubbish bin, down an alleyway just down the street. In a thrice, she was on her feet with her wand drawn. A moment later, as she turned down the alley, Hermione saw Severus trying desperately to struggle back to his feet, his pale face now a shade of green with weakness. Hermione ran to him and knelt beside him.*

*"Professor, are you alright?" Hermione asked desperately.*

*"Does it look like I'm alright, you foolish girl?!" he snapped in reply.*

*"I suppose not," she admitted as she reached to assist him. "Here, let me help you."*

*Severus pushed her hand away as he tried once again to stand. "Your assistance is not needed," he snarled.*

*Using the rubbish bin lying on its side for leverage, Severus almost regained footing before the bin moved ever-so-slightly, causing him once again to fall to his knees on the hard concrete. Hermione had to admit that she was impressed; the man did not even show a flicker of a wince as the crack of his knees on the pavement echoed in the deserted alley.*

*"Apparently you do need assistance," Hermione glared at the stubborn man, "and as there's no one else about, it will be mine you'll have to accept."*

*Without giving Severus a chance to protest, she wrapped her arm around his ribcage, positioning her shoulder under his armpit and levered him up.*

*It wasn't graceful or easy, but in a few short moments, he was standing again.*

*"Thank you, Miss Granger," Severus said stiffly.*

*"You're quite welcome, Professor," Hermione replied smiling at him.*

*"I am no longer your professor," he reminded her, "nor anyone else's for that matter."*

*"No, I suppose you're not," she agreed. "I truly hope that you're not planning on Apparating in your condition. I could assist you up to the castle. Madam Pomfrey could..."*

*"I have been Apparating since before you were born!" he interrupted. "I assure you I am perfectly capable..."*

*However, Hermione did not find out what he was perfectly capable of, for at that moment, Severus Snape chose to prove a point and attempted to take a menacing step towards his former student. His legs, on the other hand, had planned otherwise, and once again, they began to crumple beneath him. Hermione lunged forward, catching him around the torso and forcing him against the alley wall, just before he hit the ground, his arms instinctively wrapping around her to save himself.*

*Coal black eyes burned into chocolate brown as Hermione pinned Severus to the wall, frightened that if she let him go he would fall, terrified that if she didn't let him go it would be her that did the falling.*

*Their faces mere inches apart, her body pressed firmly against his too thin frame. She could feel the heat of him through her light summer robes and wondered at how a man she always thought of as being so cold could be so incredibly warm.*

*Hermione never was certain why she did what she did next. Perhaps it was simply the nearness of him, the positioning of their bodies; long nights alone would tell her differently though. One moment, Hermione Granger was simply acting as a good citizen, helping a fellow human being in a time of need, the next she was leaning into her ex-Potions professor.*

*As Hermione's lips touched Severus' she felt his body tense, but continued on in a fit of Gryffindor brashness. She pressed in further, gently caressing his bottom lip with her own. Her heart hesitated, expecting at any moment that he would push her away and hex her into next week. She was emboldened when he did not and sent her tongue teasingly darting out, enticing him, begging him to respond.*

*Hermione not only heard a soft moan escape Severus as his body relaxed and his mouth began to comply with her desires, but felt the vibrations of the deep sound reverberate to her core.*

*Kissing Severus Snape was unlike anything Hermione had ever experienced before. At first his return was gentle. He hadn't granted her access into his mouth, yet he had begun to return her playful nips and licks. Hoping Severus' legs would be able to hold with the added assistance of her pinning him to the wall, Hermione removed one of her hands from around his torso, slowly edging it up the scratchy surface of this summer-weight wool robes. She moved along his broad shoulders and then ever so lightly ran her fingertips up the side of his neck, drawing small circles behind his ear. Another deep moan sent electricity singing through Hermione's body.*

*The man was being so frustratingly gentle. If only he would just open his mouth. She wanted to taste him, to feel his tongue, so sharp in the classroom, spar with her own in a completely different manner. She moved her hand around to the back of his neck and into his long silken hair; grabbing a handful, she tugged gently, eliciting a full out groan from the man. He opened his mouth, as if to protest, but was unable to speak as Hermione took advantage of the situation and thrust her tongue forward, and to her delight, Severus returned the kiss with enthusiasm.*

*It was hot. It was as if his mouth was on fire. Hermione marveled again at the dichotomy of the cold exterior façade of the man and the heat he held inside.*

*Severus Snape tasted of brandy, with a touch of cinnamon. And as his tongue danced against hers, Hermione decided there was absolutely no better taste in the world and there was no better place in the world than pressed up against Severus, against a dirty alleyway wall with a rubbish bin spilled at her feet. No, the world no longer made sense, and for Hermione Granger, Logic Mistress Extraordinaire, that was just fine with her, as long as he didn't stop kissing her.*

*Hermione shifted against Severus and felt the unmistakable evidence of his desire pressed into her. The carnal thoughts that this brought to her mind sent her blood boiling. She felt her head begin to spin with the reduced blood flow to her brain, diverted to areas in need of more immediate attention, and she shifted again.*

*This shift was on purpose. It was slow and it was long, and it had the exact effect she had hoped for... for a moment.*

*For one glorious moment, Severus Snape tightened his grip on her and plundered her mouth as if he were a starving man and she were the last morsel of food on Earth. The passion that flowed from him left her absolutely breathless and amazed, which is why when he shoved her away, she simply couldn't respond.*

*"Stop!" he growled at her as he pushed Hermione away from him. "I have no idea what you're playing at, Miss Granger, but I have no desire to be at the butt of your sordid little joke!"*

*Hermione was only able to goggle at him when, with a soft "pop!" he Apparated away.*

*Several thoughts streamed through Hermione's mind all at once.*

What the hell was that for?

That slimy git!

Merlin, he's an incredible kisser!

Oh, I hope he didn't Splinch himself!

*It was this last thought that guided her next move. Concentrating desperately on the trace of magic she could still feel from Severus' Apparition, Hermione focused and Apparated after him.*

*Instantaneously, Hermione found herself in a rundown neighborhood in what appeared to be an industrial city. At first startled by the fact that she had Apparated, in broad daylight, into the middle of a Muggle street, Hermione realized that the dilapidated neighborhood of brick row houses was quite deserted, except for one stumbling, dark figure several houses down. Hermione ran towards him, not certain what she was going to say or do, but only knowing that she couldn't simply let him stumble away.*

*Severus heard her footsteps pounding on the pavement behind him. Without even looking back, he arced his wand silently over his shoulder, sending a jet of red light that struck Hermione square in the chest. The force of the spell sent Hermione flying backwards, causing her to land unceremoniously on her bum, in a section of privet hedge that looked as if it hadn't been trimmed in decades. Extricating herself from the foliage, Hermione stood up and grabbed her wand, ready to send back a retaliatory curse, but to her dismay, Severus was gone.*

*She was quite certain he hadn't Apparated away again. There was no telltale trace of magic to be sensed, and each of the houses where he had been standing looked more uninhabited than the next. Which, logically, meant that he was still here, but that his home was protected by a Secret Keeper. Hermione could peer into each and every one of these windows, and even if Severus was staring right back out, she would never see him.*

*With a sigh, Hermione Apparated home.*

Yes, that fiasco was the last time she had actually seen Severus Snape. Hermione had attended several other honorary functions the months before she left for Italy to apprentice with Charms master Roberto Perugino, but he was never there. Then there had been the letter she had owled him, on the encouragement of one meddling Minerva McGonagall, requesting consideration as a Potions apprentice. That letter had never been returned, and it was only through McGonagall's suggestion that perhaps France would be a nice change of scenery did Hermione realize that Severus wanted nothing to do with her.

She had learned much from Potions master Pierre Pasteur, as she had from Master Perugino, and now, seven years later, she was back at Hogwarts. No longer the know-it-all, bushy-haired girl she had once been, but still terrified of facing her Potions professor.

*Potions professor! Oh, Merlin's purple undershorts!!*

A quick look at her watch confirmed her fear; she was late for dinner! A flick of her wand sent the tub draining, and a moment later she was out of her quarters and leaping down the stairs towards the Great Hall.

## Chapter 2 - Chocolate Cake and Light Dinner Conversation

*Chapter 2 of 2*

Hermione Granger returns to Hogwarts and must not only face her past, but her old Potions Professor as well.

Author's Notes:

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Chapter 2 - Chocolate Cake and Light Dinner Conversation

Hermione paused a moment before entering the Great Hall. It wouldn't do her any good to not only turn up late, but also out of breath. She smoothed down her hair, straightened her robes and took an extra moment to mentally compose herself. However, the moment she walked through the doors of the Great Hall, all that mental preparation went right down the proverbial toilet.

Gone were the four, long house tables she was so used to seeing in the expansive room. In their place, for the pre-term meals, was a singular, circular table. Seated around the table were a host of teachers Hermione hadn't seen in years.

Diminutive Professor Flitwick was seated next to Professor Sprout. Professor Sinistra, a scar across her cheek proudly displayed as a reminder of the great cost of the war with Voldemort, was chatting with Professor Vector and the ever-irritating Professor Trelawney. There were a few new teachers, interspaced amongst the ones she knew from her schooldays. She noticed that sadly absent was Hagrid's hulking presence. And then she saw **him**.

As soon as Hermione saw Severus sitting at the table, she simply could go no further. He was very much the same as he had been that day long ago on Spinner's End, yet he was also so completely changed. His perpetual scowl was fixed firmly on his face while Professor Sprout spoke animatedly about something or other. His eyes were still as black as a moonless midnight, somehow seeming both cold and passionate at the same time. His hands were still elegantly long-fingered and were currently wrapped around a mug of something steaming. And, his nose was still somewhat beaklike, and Hermione watched it in fascination as his nostrils flared in distaste as a bit of food Sprout had on her fork went flying off, as she gestured dramatically with her fork in hand, to illustrate a point.

No, all of those features so very Severus Snape, were the same features that she had pressed up against in an alleyway wall seven years earlier. It was those same features that had haunted her during many long nights. But, where those features were almost a source of comforting distraction, the changes she noticed had an entirely

different effect.

First, instead of the billowing robes he had worn every moment he was in her presence, during her time at Hogwarts, he was wearing a simple pair of black trousers and crisp, white, linen shirt. The myriad of ebony buttons marching neatly up the front, and securely fastened to his Adam's apple still gave the man an aura of the repressive and overly strict Potions Master that he undoubtedly still was, but, there was something in the loose-fitting sleeves of the shirt that made Hermione think of pirates and cheesy Muggle-romance novels.

Oh, sweet Circe! He'd Avada Kedavra me on the spot if he knew what I was thinking!

His hair was shiny, as if touched by silk. She wondered momentarily if it had always been so, and perhaps she had just assumed, as a young girl, that it had been overly oily. Either way, the length of it was tied back with a simple piece of leather. Hermione was thankful that it wasn't a satin ribbon holding back his hair. She always hated the ponciness of Lucius Malfoy and his hair ribbons. Honestly, it was really difficult to fear a man who obviously spent more time on his hair than she did!

But, it wasn't Severus' neatly tied back hair that shocked her so; it was his appearance of overall health. Oh, certainly his skin was still pale, he obviously still spent far too much time down in the Dungeons, but it had lost its waxy sallowness of her school days. He was still lean, Hermione noticed as she eyed him hungrily through his linen shirt, but his face was not nearly as gaunt as the last time she had seen him, nor his eyes nearly as sunken.

His lips turned up into a sneer at something someone had said. *Those lips*. She remembered those lips clearer than any other part of his anatomy. She remembered nipping at them gently, running the tip of her tongue along them, ever so slightly, coaxing him into responding. And he had. As much as she had tried to fight her desire for Severus over the years, convincing herself that it was only her foolhardiness in throwing herself at him ... literally and figuratively ... that had put him in such a state of shock that he hadn't cursed her into oblivion. But, those lips had reminded her of a completely different scenario. Those lips had responded, hesitantly at first, but then with such a fierce passion she felt certain it would consume her.

No. I can't do this, Hermione thought as she shook her head back and forth. *I can't go in there, sit next to him and pretend like everything's OK. No, no, no...*

"Hermione! There you are! We were beginning to worry!" Minerva's voice startled her as Hermione realized the older witch was standing next to her. "Is everything alright? You were shaking your head oddly."

"Oh, I..." Hermione started awkwardly, before regaining her composure. "Everything's fine. I apologize for being late. I lost track of time while settling in."

"Perfectly understandable. Come now, we all ...well, **mostly** all of us... have been waiting for you to tuck in," Minerva cast a withering glare in Professor Sprout's direction who was sloppily tearing off a piece of chicken from a leg bone, with her teeth.

The two witches crossed the Great Hall and approached the table. The teachers all stood and greeted Hermione, some coming around to shake her hand politely, if not reservedly, except for Severus. Hermione noticed that he stood, out of common courtesy, but only nodded his head slightly in greeting, when she accidentally caught his eye.

Everyone began to reseal themselves, when Hermione realized the only open seat was between Professor Trelawney and Severus. *If there is a God*, Hermione thought, *he is one sick, sadistic bastard.*

She considered turning and bolting out of the Great Hall. *Maybe I could make it to the gates and Apparate far, far away before anyone has time to react*, she thought wistfully. But, instead of entertaining further flights of fancy, she took her seat of doom.

Immediately as Hermione sat down, platters of food appeared on the table. The aroma of roast chicken and rosemary potatoes assaulted her with welcoming comfort. Perhaps she could get through this. Perhaps it wouldn't be a complete disaster. But, as everyone dug in, Professor Sprout spoke up wiping away her last hopes that this would be an uneventful meal. Yet, with Sprout's conversation starter, sitting next to the man that was the source of her increasingly lustful thoughts seemed to be the least of her worries.

"So, Hermione, I hear you apprenticed with Master Roberto Perugino, for your Charms Mistress certificate?" the slightly grubby witch asked, while wagging her eyebrows at Professor Flitwick.

"Well, yes, I did..." Hermione began to reply.

"I saw your research published in *Wizarding Astronomy Today* a few months ago," Professor Flitwick's squeaky voice interjected as he looked pointedly at Professor Sinistra.

"Oh, you did?" Hermione replied. "And, what did you...."

Before Hermione could complete her sentence, Sinistra interrupted while staring directly at Professor Vector.

"Interesting. That research also seemed to rely heavily on Arithmancy and only minutely on Astronomy."

"Well, actually, it..." Hermione tried again.

"Well, obviously Arithmancy is one of the girl's hobbies," Vector broke in vehemently, "but really her true talent has always been Potions. You are now a certified Potions Mistress aren't you, Hermione?"

All eyes were now riveted on Hermione, except for Severus, who instead stabbed savagely at a piece of chicken as if the poor bird had done him some grave injustice. Hermione turned to look at Minerva, only to see her smile knowingly and then become engrossed with her goblet of pumpkin juice. The silence that filled the Great Hall was deafening.

Hermione looked confusedly around the table at her staring peers and wondered, *What in the Wizarding World has gotten into these people?!*

Professor Sprout spoke suddenly, "Oh, come on, Hermione, who's getting sacked?"

"Pardon?" Hermione questioned.

"Don't be coy, child," Professor Sinistra said. "Just tell us which one of us you're replacing."

"Sybil's been predicting it was each of us, in turn," Professor Flitwick said.

"Not me," Professor Sprout smiled.

"Well, it seems my inner eye has always been a bit distorted when it comes to Miss Granger," Professor Trelawney's overly misty voice replied defensively. "The girl has always lacked the vision for Divination, and apparently her aura has affected mine!"

A few of the teachers snickered quietly, but all remained intently focused on Hermione.

"Minerva," Hermione began after swallowing a nervous lump in her throat, "haven't you told them about my position?"

Minerva's eyes twinkled with an intensity befitting her predecessor. "Well, it seemed that everyone believed that Sybil had it all figured out, why should I burst their bubble?"

"Oh, Minerva!" Hermione laughed. Now she understood their reaction. They all thought that she had been hired to replace one of them! "No," she addressed the other teachers, "it is not my intention to replace any of you! Instead, I'll be teaching a new interdisciplinary class to the top sixth and seventh year students."

"And, in her spare time, she'll be working on research that the school is funding," Minerva added proudly.

Hermione could hear the audible sigh of relief from many of the teachers now that the threat of losing their jobs was over. She noticed, however, that the Potions Master sitting next to her seemed to be utterly unaffected, as if Hermione didn't even exist. This disturbed her more than if he had sneered at her, as if he would ever be worried that some young, upstart, slip of a girl like her could ever take his place. And the momentary distraction of the strange behavior from her fellow teachers was gone.

In its place was an acute awareness of the maleness of the man sitting next to her. The conversation continued on around the pair, with Hermione, making short responses when absolutely necessary, but her true attention was on the source of heat she felt radiating towards her from her right. The table was small for such a large group, and Hermione concentrated on not accidentally elbowing the man anytime she went to take a bite. That was the easy part since it seemed her appetite had completely left her. The hard part was not succumbing to the urge to simply shove him and his chair away from the table, pounce on his lap, and snog the daylights out of him.

The smell of him was driving her insane. Every so often the aroma of chicken and rosemary was upstaged by something so masculine that it took all of Hermione's will power to not bury her nose in the nape of his neck. Just as she was about to put label to the scent, it was gone. Elusive, frustrating, but so Merlin-be-damned enticing, she would sit sniffing the air desperately, just hoping to catch a hint of it again.

This is ridiculous! Hermione thought. *I'm a grown woman; he's a grown man. Sure, we're colleagues, but there are no policies against fraternization amongst the staff, if so Dumbledore and McGonagall would've been tossed out of Hogwarts decades ago. I've got to do something.*

You can do this, Granger. You faced down the Dark Lord with Harry and Ron when you were only eighteen, for goodness sake! You're a Gryffindor. Come on!

"So, Professor Snape," *there, nice and polite*, "I'm sure you're glad to hear I wasn't after your job," Hermione joked lightly.

Very slowly, Severus Snape set his fork down, turned, and narrowed his eyes.

In a voice bordering a growl he replied, "And what exactly would make you think that that was ever a concern of mine? You may have been teacher's pet as a student here, *Miss Granger*, but you'll find that my tenure and skill go far beyond burying your nose in books and a scant number of years as someone's apprentice."

"Well... I... you..." Hermione sputtered, unable to think of a coherent reply.

"The ever-eloquent Miss Granger, at a loss for words. Hades must be freezing over as we speak," he mocked. "Why ever didn't I enjoy this rare blessing whilst I had to suffer you as a student?"

Hermione's blood was boiling. How dare he be so rude to her! She was just making conversation! If he thought his intimidation act was going to work on her, he was sorely mistaken! Her face began to purple in anger as she spoke in barely controlled measures, "I was merely making polite dinner conversation, which you seem unable to accomplish, other than the monosyllabic responses you've occasionally uttered this evening!"

Hermione barely recognized the sound of scraping chairs, being pushed away from the table through the ringing in her ears, as a few of her dinner companions decided it was time for their meal to come to an end.

"Perhaps," he snarled, "it is the person initiating the conversation that has me retreating to the most basic of replies, in order to minimize the conversation as much as possible!"

Somewhere in the distance, Hermione heard Professor Flitwick's tiny voice, "Yes, well, I believe I've had enough cake. Watching the figure and all. If you will excuse me...."

"The person initiating the conversation?!" Hermione shrieked.

"Yes, yes. I have to go and polish my crystal balls, they're getting a bit dusty I believe," Professor Trelawney's voice murmured as she stood to leave.

"If you didn't notice, Professor," Hermione continued, "I was the only one who had the decency to engage you in any conversation at all."

"I think I'll help you with those, Sybil," Professor Sinistra chimed in as she too left the table.

"That's because they have more common sense than some know-it-all school girl," Severus mocked.

"My, my, look at the time, come on, Minerva, you were going to show me that new powder room you found up on the third floor," Professor Sprout said as she grabbed Minerva by the sleeve of her robe and pulled her out of the room.

"Oh, I suppose in your twisted world polite dinner conversation is tantamount to torture by Cruciatus!!" Hermione sneered.

"It appears that **your** polite dinner conversation has now sent everyone off to bed!" Severus smirked.

Hermione looked around the Great Hall. It was completely empty other than the two of them.

"This has nothing to do with me! I wasn't the one being so rude! This is all your fault!" And with that Hermione reached over and grabbed a large frosting-coated, chunk of cake off her plate.

"You... wouldn't... dare," Severus said in slow, measured tones. "Even your foolish Gryffindor brashness wouldn't..."

Hermione never found out what her brashness wouldn't do as she threw the cake in Severus' face. For one glorious moment, it hung there, affixed to his over-large nose with frosting, and then with a soft *plop!* it fell down his chest and into his lap.

Immediately Hermione was on her feet and began wiping at Severus' shirt. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I don't know what came over me!" she said as she managed to smear the chocolate into the linen of his shirt, making it a larger mess.

Giving the shirt up as a bad job, Hermione reached down and plucked the chunk of cake off of his lap, and then began to rub the frosting off of his pants with her napkin.

Three things happened almost simultaneously. Hermione saw Severus pull his wand from his sleeve. Hermione's eyes never left the wand Severus pulled out of his sleeve, but her hands grew hot as she felt him grow rigid beneath her touch. She then feared that he was now going to hex her sideways for that Gryffindor brashness he so obviously detested.

"*Evanesco!*" he murmured with a sharp flick of his wand, and all evidence of the cake was gone from his person. In one swift motion he was out of his chair, pushed Hermione aside, and was halfway across the room, with a muttered, "Good night, Miss Granger." Before Hermione even had a chance to respond, he was gone.

Hermione stood, shell-shocked for a moment, while the events of the last few moments soaked in. She had argued with Severus in front of everyone yelled at him, in fact! She had then gone as far as throwing cake in his face! And, of all the strange twists, he had been aroused! There was no denying that!

Hermione headed towards her quarters, with one thought on her mind, I need a plan.

If only there was a book ... 101 Ways to Handle Snarky Men perhaps I could do a bit of research with this particular snarky man and write one!

A laugh escaped her at the thought, just as she turned a corner and came face-to-face with Professor McGonagall.

"Ah, there you are, my dear!" Minerva smiled. "I was just heading back down to the Great Hall to make certain you were all right."

Hermione returned the smile, pleased that she wasn't going to be chastised for making such a scene, "Yes, I'm fine, thank you."

"You know," Minerva twinkled at her *Merlin, do ALL Headmasters/mistresses twinkle?* Hermione thought "I've set your lab up in the Dungeons. I'm sure you'll want to be close to the school cupboards, as well as the stores off limits to the students."

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose that will be handy," Hermione acknowledged.

"And, I thought that perhaps Severus would enjoy learning of your research," Minerva winked.

Oh, subtle, Minerva, subtle, Hermione thought, but only gave Minerva a non-committal, "Perhaps."

With a "Good evening" the two witches parted and Hermione continued her way back to her quarters. Once inside, Hermione did what she did best ... she made a list. She took a seat at the desk in her office and getting out a parchment and quill, Hermione wrote:

Methods for Getting Severus' Attention:

1. Use research as an enticement

a. Method 1 Tell Severus about research and ask for his assistance

i. Pros Direct, may take request for assistance as a compliment, could soothe that obviously fragile ego

ii. Cons Could say no without thinking about it, may take request for assistance as a sign of weakness, may think it's a trick of some sort

b. Method 2 Tell Severus about research and DON'T ask for assistance

i. Pros Again, direct and possible immediate interest

ii. Cons May be too subtle... he is a man after all, and he may think I'm trying to trick him into assisting me, or he may think I'm bragging and feel so superior to him that I don't need assistance

c. Method 3 Do NOT tell Severus about research, let him find out on his own, via his own curiosity

i. Pros So subtle he'd never know what's going to hit him, he won't expect a thing, shows my independence and strength

ii. Cons Will take more time and planning than 1 or 2

Hermione nibbled on the tip of the quill, mulling the three choices over. After a few minutes it became clear, there was only one way to go. She made a large circle around her choice, and headed off to bed.