

Nifflers, Otters and Shrew

by Tickled Pink

What happens when the man Hermione feels far too embarrassed to ever see again (due to events entirely out of her control . . . well, almost . . .) turns up as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher? The War is raging, the N.E.W.T.s are approaching, and the only question circling through Hermione's head (much to her annoyance) is whether or not five years older is *too* old.

It seems to be out of her control once again; avoiding Oliver Heaney for her entire seventh year seems not only difficult, but well near impossible . . .

In Which Hermione Runs Into Someone At Hogwarts Whom She Did Not Expect To Meet

Chapter 1 of 1

What happens when the man Hermione feels far too embarrassed to ever see again (due to events entirely out of her control . . . well, almost . . .) turns up as the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher? The War is raging, the N.E.W.T.s are approaching, and the only question circling through Hermione's head (much to her annoyance) is whether or not five years older is *too* old.

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'Ron, you're going to make yourself sick. That's your third helping of treacle tart!'

'I'm still 'ungry, 'erm-i-nee,' Ron replied through an over-stuffed mouth. He grabbed a goblet of pumpkin juice to help him swallow his enormous mouthful. Harry and Hermione just exchanged a disbelieving glance. You had to hand it to Ron to still be hungry after eating enough for the three of them.

The Start of Term Feast usually held its merits, but tonight Hermione was desperate to get to bed. So much had happened in the past couple days (including, she remembered, blushing ever so slightly despite herself, Bill and Fleur's wedding) that she was physically and emotionally exhausted. It was a welcome relief when Professor McGonagall stood up to give her start of term notices. Despite Hermione being ready to drop fast asleep at any moment, she managed to note in the back of her mind how it all felt so ... so *wrong*, without Dumbledore. The hall fell silent, and it seemed that Hermione's thought had crossed most of the students' and teachers' minds.

McGonagall, however, seemed to have steeled herself, and her words were somehow more brittle than whenever Dumbledore had said them. 'Welcome to Hogwarts to our new students, and to our old ones, welcome back. In light of recent occurrences, I am your new Headmistress. I'd like to stress that Out-Of-Bounds areas, including the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade to those below fifth year ' here the third and fourth years exchanged dirty looks at this change in rules ' *remain* strictly out of bounds. These rules are enforced for your safety in these dangerous times, and any student caught trespassing in these areas will be most severely punished.

'On a lighter note, I should like to introduce two new teachers this year. Professor Tonks ' here Tonks stood, smiling and giving a little wave to those at the Gryffindor table ' will take my place as the Transfiguration Professor. This year's new Defence Against the Dark arts post is taken by a man I'm sure some of our older students will remember from their earlier days ' Professor Heaney.'

An especially loud cheer erupted from the Slytherin table as a man furthest away from the Gryffindor table stood, giving an acknowledging wave. His face turned to scan the length of the hall. His features became apparent to Hermione, and her breath caught, her hands started to shake, her eyes went funny, she had no insides, she was empty, she wasn't even there, she was going to faint

Oh, holy Merlin. This was going to be awkward.

Four days previously ...

Oliver Heaney was slumped on a couch that had definitely seen better days in his Islington flat, clutching a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in one hand and a much needed cup of tea in the other. *The perfect combination for a Sunday morning, he thought to himself*, shaking his slightly too long brown hair out of his similarly brown eyes and doing his best not to upset his steaming cup of tea. However, the *Daily Prophet* did not hold the same pleasure it once did. With Lord Voldemort he shuddered even as he thought the name at large for just over a year, the reports on murders and disappearances, both within the magical community and the Muggle one, were increasing daily. At first, it had been possible to remove any emotion felt from these deaths and think of them in numbers ... 'TWO wizards missing for well over a week,' ... 'FOUR Muggles, the Irving family, found dead in their Manchester home,' and so on. Statistics didn't hold pain. This had all changed just over a month ago.

Miranda Murray, a Muggle-born, had been his girlfriend for nearly eight months. She, like him, was training to become an Auror. *And she would have completed her training with me by now*, Oliver thought bitterly to himself. They had broken up six months ago five months before her death; he for her annoying habits and the tendency to flirt with far too many people than was slightly necessary, and her for his involvement with the Order of the Phoenix and his work for Dumbledore.

Dumbledore ... there was another name that brought pangs to his heart.

Voldemort hadn't murdered Miranda personally. The ministry believed it to be the work of Macnair, but their guess was as good as anybody's. Seeing her name in the little black print on page three of the *Daily Prophet* had caused Oliver's eyes to swim. The reality that these killings, these heinous crimes, were people, not statistics, as he had been telling himself, was brought sharply into focus. For every name, every crime, every person that was dead, they left behind a mourning family and friends. It was these people that made Oliver's heart wrench.

He took a large gulp of tea that burnt the tip of his tongue and scanned the front page. No mass killings. That would have made front page, taking priority over everything else. Instead, Oliver was confronted by a large picture of Rufus Scrimgeour, giving a speech of some kind, his arms gesticulating to emphasize his point. The headline read, '*Aurors: Sinking As Low As Death Eaters?*'

In a recent announcement, Minister for Magic Rufus Scrimgeour has announced that Aurors are now being given the right to perform the Unforgivable Curses on known Death Eaters. 'In these tough times we need to make tough measures,' stated Scrimgeour. 'If that means that Death Eaters, who are known to be responsible for the murders of our families, are to be killed instead of brought in to spend a life sentence in Azkaban, at a great risk to the Aurors, then so be it.' While there are those who wholeheartedly support this decision, the like of which had not been seen since He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was last powerful and Bartimeous Crouch Sr. was alive, there are those who feel that the Aurors would become as bad as the Death Eaters themselves. Says Argie Philpott, 'We shouldn't have exceptions in these laws for use by different people. A murder is a murder, and apart from You-Know-Who, the death of another human should not be encouraged by our Ministry.' Continued on page 6.

Honestly, the Ministry was more of a joke than a strong leader. They just went from one extreme to the other. It made Oliver think twice about going to work there. He supposed he should; seven years at Hogwarts and five years of Auror training should not be wasted, and yet ... there must be something better to turn his resources to. Being a member of the Order of the Phoenix didn't actually earn him any income, and besides, his work was too, for want of a better word, unpredictable, to do full time. Nostalgically, he thought back to Hogwarts. Life had been so simple then; make sure you handed in that Potions essay on time and you were set.

A loud rapping on his front door brought Oliver back to the present day. Setting down both the tea and the newspaper, he heaved himself off the couch and padded his way sleepily towards the front door, wondering if this was a visitor for whom he should have changed out of his track pants and jersey. *Ah well, it couldn't be helped* He undid the latch and immediately regretted his decision not to change.

Professor Minerva McGonagall stood in the hallway, dressed in her trademark green robes and looking far older than Oliver remembered. *I guess Dumbledore's death was hard for her, more than most.*

'Professor McGonagall!' he said, stepping aside. 'Come in.'

'Oliver, you left school five years ago,' she replied with the hint of a smile, stepping into the somewhat cluttered living room. 'You no longer need to call me "Professor."'

'Okay, um, Minerva ... ' he said, feeling distinctly awkward and doing his best to kick a pile of what seemed to be dirty laundry out of sight. He ushered her onto a beaten green armchair, settling himself back onto the couch. 'What brings you here?'

'I actually have a proposition for you. How would you like to be the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts? Our last teacher well, you may have heard ... he, Severus, he ... ' She broke off. Snape's deed was too foul to discuss, and Oliver nodded to show he understood. She straightened and continued. 'I understand, having just completed your Auror training I hear from Kingsley that you did exceptionally well, in fact, congratulations that you may well want to continue to the Ministry immediately, but I thought I would just put the idea past you, to see if you were interested.'

Oliver's face broke into a wide smile. 'I'm honored that you would ask me. I'd love to come back to Hogwarts, at least for a little while. Besides, the Ministry ... ' he broke off, gauging McGon--no, *Minerva's* reaction. She smiled, sharing Oliver's view of the Ministry. 'Anyway, yes, I accept your offer.'

'There is another reason I asked you in particular,' she said. 'Harry Potter. I know about the prophecy, and that last year he and Dumbledore...' here her voiced wavered slightly, 'were involved in something to do with Lord Voldemort, but that is as far as my knowledge goes in that area. I also understand that you helped Dumbledore in some way, and you are probably the only person aside from Harry that knows what took place last year, and the best person to assist Harry, in whatever way.'

Oliver nodded, all of this being true. 'I heard from Tonks that Harry was not planning on returning this year,' he asked in confusion.

'That was his original plan, yes. However, I saw him yesterday and convinced him that he would be better staying at Hogwarts, and conducting whatever it is he needs to do with that as his base.'

'Does Harry know about me?'

'No, I believe he thought himself and Dumbledore the only people with the knowledge of last year.' At Dumbledore's name, Minerva looked slightly shaken again. She straightened herself and said far more briskly, 'Term begins on the first of September, though you may arrive at Hogwarts anytime between now and then.'

Oliver looked around his squashed apartment. 'There's nothing really keeping me here. Give me today to pack, and I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

Minerva smiled. 'I'll send Hagrid to meet you at the gates at nine tomorrow, as I won't be there. I have a meeting with Scrimgeour. Another fruitless one, no doubt.' She

grimaced and turned to go. When she was nearly at the door, Oliver called, 'Minerva?' She turned. 'I'm I'm truly sorry about Dumbledore's death.'

She swallowed and nodded. 'Me too,' she said, her voice sounding somewhat choked. She hurriedly stepped outside the door, turned, and with a crack, Disapparated. Slightly unnerved by the fact that someone as strong as Minerva sounded so shaken, Oliver closed the door and turned to face his apartment, deciding what he would bring with him to the next chapter of his life, and what he would leave behind.

* * *

There Hogwarts stood, in all its glory. A beacon of stability, a stronghold against the horrors of Lord Voldemort. This castle had seen many wars fought and many dark wizards rise and fall. It would stand to see another.

The question was, would the people for whom the castle was home have the same fate?

For Oliver, this was like coming home. He had spent more time in his life within these stone walls than he had at any other place that once might have earned the title 'home.' Standing outside the wrought iron gates now, his two trunks on either side of him, he reflected how similar the place looked, how the lake, sunlight glinting off the ripples made by the giant squid still held the same infinite possibilities, and how the Forbidden Forest in the distance invited mystery.

From off near Hagrid's cabin, what looked like a small boulder was ambling its way towards Oliver. Although becoming an Auror had trained Oliver for the unexpected, his breath still caught in his throat as he realized with a jolt that this boulder was, in fact, a fully-fledged giant. It was several minutes, and only when the giant was nearing the gates, that Oliver noticed Hagrid by the giant's side, looking, for the first time in his life, somewhat small and insignificant.

'Easy there, Grawpy, there yer are,' came Hagrid's voice floating down the slope. 'You're goin' to meet a friend o' mine, he's a new teacher here, alrigh', Grawpy? He's a *friend*, so yer can't hurt him ... Ah, there yer are, Oliver!'

'How're you doing, Hagrid?' Oliver said with a smile, as Hagrid took out a rather unusual pink umbrella and tapped the gates on the catch three times.

'Not not too bad, I suppose ... ' said Hagrid, looking worse than McGon- *no*, it was *Minerva* had. He straightened himself. 'So, Oliver Heaney, an Auror course, we all knew yeh had it in you ... but I haven't seen you in five years!'

'Long time, I know,' Oliver agreed, preferring not to bring up that *he* had seen Hagrid just a couple months ago, at Dumbledore's funeral, as Hagrid had seemed so overcome with grief at the time it would seem too cruel to bring up what was a clearly sensitive subject. Levitating his only trunk in front of him, they set up the winding path leading towards the oak front doors, Oliver feeling ever so slightly dwarfed by his two enormous companions. 'So how have things been going for you, Hagrid? And who's your friend here?'

'This here's Grawp, or Grawpy...me half brother yer know. Bin teachin' him English, an' he's improvin' nicely. So now he's sorter become me assistant NO GRAWPY!!! BAD!!!' Grawp had grabbed a pine near the path and had with unnerving ease, pulled the tree so that half of its roots were now witnessing fresh sunlight for the first time. Hagrid grabbed on to the bottom of Grawp's shirt and tugged him back along the path, panting heavily. 'So how about you? Still playin' any Quidditch?'

Oliver shook his head sadly. 'Nah, there wasn't any time for it, what with Auror training and all. Takes up so much of your time, I'm not even sure where the last five years have gone. Seems like only last year that I was here, struggling to keep the Slytherins under control while kids were getting petrified left, right and centre.' An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Neither chose to mention that Hagrid had been sent to Azkaban, or that Dumbledore was forced to step down from the post of Headmaster. Fortunately this was broken by Grawp returning to a normal, well, somewhat normal walking pace, giving Hagrid the chance to introduce them.

'Grawpy? This here's Oliver. OL-I-VER! Yer understand?'

Grawp seemed to consider it. 'OI ... ver,' he said, almost to himself, letting the word roll around on his tongue.

'So will Minerva keep teaching Transfiguration?' Oliver asked Hagrid.

'Well, I think she was goin' te, but she's got a bit too much on her plate, you know? It's a big job, Headmistress...and she an' Kingsley are both runnin' the Order now, so there's that. I think she was goin' to ask Tonks, but I dunno what's happenin' at the moment.'

Although she had been a couple years above him at school, and in a different house, Oliver could easily remember Tonks. Anyone who had been in her company for longer than five minutes could remember Tonks. Whether it was her flamboyant personality or whatever bright shade she had picked for her today, she stood out in a crowd. It had been Tonks' shoes that in his fourth year, Oliver had jinxed so that they tripped her up every five minutes. Since Tonks was so much of a klutz anyway, it was three whole days before anyone realized what had happened. But, as Oliver tried to explain to Flitwick in detention later, it was only pay back for performing the Full Body Bind curse on him while he was in the process of eating in the library. Madame Pince's shrieks could be heard from two floors above.

He, Hagrid and Grawp reached the magnificent oak front doors. Oliver kept walking, but Hagrid stopped. 'Sorry, Oliver, but Grawpy's not allowed in yet. I have to take him back te the forest anyways. Yer know where yer sleepin', right? Just go to the Defence study, and yer apartment's behind that portrait of Sylvester the Shrewd. Yer can pick the password.'

Oliver waved with his right hand, the one not holding the wand. 'Thanks, Hagrid. I'll see you at dinner tonight.' He looked up at Grawp, who was chewing on his lip. 'It was nice to meet you, Grawp,' he said, in an unplanned patronizing voice. Grawp looked down to see who was talking, surprised there were people.

'OI-ver. Bye, OI-ver.' Hagrid tugged on his shirt, saying, 'Good Grawpy, yer improvin' heaps. That's it, come on now. See yer tonight, Oliver,' he called over his shoulder. 'Oh, almost forgot to ask yeh goin' to Bill's wedding?'

'Yeah,' said Oliver, happy at the thought of seeing his friend again. 'Tomorrow afternoon.'

* * *

'So you're the new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, are you?'

Oliver had barely time to register the rich blue with which his new office was carpeted, or the enormous fireplace to his right that, come the colder months, would be crackling merrily, when his attention was drawn to the large painting of a rather rat-like man with thin brown hair growing in tufts, sitting on an armchair in bottle green robes. It was he who had spoken, in a rather nasal voice.

'Oliver Heaney,' Oliver said as introduction. 'I take it you're Sylvester the Shrewd?'

'Congratulations, you got it. Merlin you're young. Last we had like that was Mr-Bloody-Five-Times-Winner-of-Witch-Weekly's-Most-Disastrous-Use-of-Hair-Curler's-Award-Lockhart, or whatever it was. You don't curl your hair, do you?' he threw at Oliver, giving his scruffy hair a calculating glance.

'No, I find that if I curl my hair, that leaves no time for me to paint my nails,' Oliver said with a straight face.

Sylvester gave a short bark of a laugh. 'I like you ... too bad you're stuffed.'

'Sorry?'

'Listen, I've been in this office for the past 400 years, and in the past what, nearly fifty years there hasn't been a single Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher that's lasted more than a year. We haven't had a death in a fair few years though, not since '

'Quirrel, I know,' Oliver said, not really disturbed by this. 'I was here when that happened.'

'Hold up, I nearly forgot, Barty Crouch junior as good as died, didn't he? Dementor's Kiss and everything. THAT was an interesting year I witness a lot, hanging in here.'

'Well, I'm not planning on dying, so I'll just have to take my chances, won't I? So anyway, how do I choose my password?'

'You pick whatever you like, and then anytime you want to change it, you have to tell me your original password, so I know you're not an imposter or anything.'

Oliver had never had to pick a password before. He searched around for inspiration, and his glance fell on Hagrid's cabin towards the other side of the grounds through the window. 'Umm ... ok, what about "Niffler"?'

Sylvester raised his eyebrows, but swung open. 'You, know,' he said, his voice slightly muffled, 'the password someone picks reveals a lot about their character.'

'So I'm cute and cuddly?' said Oliver, laughing, stepping into his apartment. The rich blue carpet was in here also, along with a smaller fireplace, and large sofas facing the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto what looked like his own private balcony. It was beautifully decorated, with a high ceiling, and doors which lead off, Oliver presumed, to his bedroom and bathroom. A small kitchenette lay to his left.

'You go crazy in order to get the treasure,' came Sylvester's voice as the portrait shut over the doorway with a click .

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Hermione Granger was working hard to stifle a laugh at the pained expression on Ginny Weasley's face. Her friend's face was not so much as a pleasant smile but rather a grimace, and Hermione knew she resented the events taking place. *You had to hand it to Fleur, though*, thought Hermione. Ginny and Gabrielle looked gorgeous in their matching dresses of gold that shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. You couldn't even compare it to the way Fleur looked though. She wore a beautiful, almost gypsy-like white dress that flowed in wispy waves from just under the bust, being blown in the wind along with her hair. She looked almost like an elf princess or something, and Hermione couldn't help but feel the tiniest bit jealous. Still, Hermione wasn't the bucktoothed, bushy-haired bossy young girl that she had been in her first year. Her teeth had been fixed in her fifth year, and her hair was finally growing in long, deep brown semi-ringlets that flowed down her back. She had developed curves in all the right places, and had been talked into wearing a gorgeous turquoise dress by a jealous Ginny ('I wish I had your chest, you're so lucky!') that revealed a little too much cleavage than Hermione felt she was comfortable with. The dress flowed in a similar sort of way to Fleur's, though it ended towards the knee, whereas Fleur's almost brushed the ground (when the wind wasn't blowing, that is).

The Weasleys' garden was bursting with friends and family gathered for Bill and Fleur's wedding. Percy had shown up, even if he wasn't standing with his family. Most of the Order could be seen dotted throughout the people, and there were a fair few young people Hermione guessed either went to Hogwarts with Bill or worked with him at Gringotts. That was without counting the copious amounts of people who had Apparated from France. It was easy to tell who was in Fleur's family; they were easily the most stunning. Fleur's grandmother was even getting approving looks from many of Bill's friends. Apparently Fleur had wanted to host her wedding at the Cinderella castle in Germany, but Mrs Weasley had put her foot down, and besides, weren't *home* weddings much nicer? So instead Fleur was allowed to invite as many people as she wanted. *At least the pair had learnt to compromise* thought Hermione, thinking of this time a year ago.

'I now pronounce you Husband and Wife,' the elderly wizard performing the ceremony announced. 'You may kiss the bride.'

Bill leant in to plant a tender kiss on Fleur's lips, who was not at all fazed by the several scars that now covered Bill's once handsome face. Mrs Weasley was sobbing into Mr Weasley's shoulder, whose face held a somewhat bemused expression as he attempted to calm her down. Fred and George were shaking with silent laughter.

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Several hours later, the party was in full swing. Night had fallen, and live fairies dotted the trees and bushes that surrounded the Weasley garden. Oliver Heaney was getting into his stride.

He and Bill had been good friends since Oliver's fifth year, when he was named the Slytherin male prefect and Bill was Head Boy. Their friendship was rare as a rule, the Gryffindors and Slytherins hated each other, and it was looked upon with amusement and resentment by both sides. Eventually, though, people just got used to it, and it almost became easier when Bill left school.

Oliver's eye roamed the members of the party. Several of Fleur's cousins looked absolutely beautiful, but there was something about the way they held themselves that made it clear they were completely up themselves. Actually, now that he thought about it, most of the girls here looked like that.

An infectious laughter carried out for a moment over the noise of the lively music and tongues loosened by champagne. Oliver turned his head and quickly inhaled.

A gorgeous, twenty-something woman with amazing long brown hair tumbling in ringlets was laughing freely at something Harry Potter just said. Her turquoise dress was revealing without being slutty, and it showed an amazing figure. *Damn, she's with Harry*, Oliver thought, ever so slightly disappointed this woman was taken. He had barely finished this thought, however, when one of the bridesmaids, presumably Bill's sister due to her flaming red hair, kissed Harry on the lips and dragged him to dance. Oliver smiled to himself. He was back in the game.

There was something about that woman, the way she held herself, shy almost. No, shy wasn't the right word. Modest maybe. Uncertain, but happy all the same. She was standing by herself next to an aged oak tree, having been slightly abandoned by Harry and his girlfriend. Well, it was now or never. Oliver grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing house-elf hired for the party and made his way over.

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Hermione watched Harry and Ginny dance, smiling to herself. She was glad they had decided to get back together, a decision that was made approximately three days after they had broken up. Hermione was sick of Harry playing the tragic hero, and so were a lot of people. She and Ron, while close, still weren't exactly, well, *together*. She had started to wonder if in fact they would ever be.

Her wandering eyes glanced on that of a guy, probably early twenties, and they didn't wander any further. He wore his white shirt without a tie, with the first few buttons undone. His sleeves were rolled up just past the elbow, and the shirt was tucked into his black pants.

He was, in other words, completely and utterly sexy.

And he was making a beeline for her.

Immediately Hermione's pulse quickened, as she panicked ever so slightly. *No*, she thought, *I'm not going to run. I'm going to enjoy the company of this absolutely gorgeous young man*

'Excuse me, would you like this glass?' said the stranger, a twinkle in his brown eyes. He spoke with a slightly Irish accent.

'Thanks,' Hermione replied, taking the glass from him and sounding a whole lot calmer than she felt. She sipped it, out of nerves, for something to do.

'I'm Oliver,' he said with a smile. 'And you are?'

'Hermione,' she replied, quickly swallowing her mouthful of champagne and wondering whether a second glass was really a good idea for her, unaccustomed as she was to alcohol and being somewhat of a lightweight.

'So how does a gorgeous girl like you know the bride and groom?' he asked, stepping ever so slightly closer to her.

Hermione felt a shiver of excitement go through her. *I'm being chatted up!* Out of all the girls here, Oliver had chosen her. Maybe it was the alcohol talking, or maybe it was the rebel hidden deep, deep down inside her, that made Hermione decide she was going to go for it. And that meant not revealing her age. 'Oh, I've known the Weasleys for years,' she said evasively. 'They've become my second family. How about you?'

'I was friends with Bill in school, and we stayed in contact after that, though he was off adventuring for Gringotts and I trained to become an Auror.' He was surreptitiously leading her around the oak tree.

'Wow, that's pretty impressive. One of my bes I mean, I know Harry Potter wants to become an Auror. Its supposed to be really hard.' She was so close to accidentally revealing her age.

'I finished my final examinations about a month ago,' Oliver said, leading her further around the enormous oak. 'I reckon that Bill's the lucky one though look who he married!'

Hermione looked at him with an uncharacteristically cheeky smile, her eyebrows raised. Oliver leant in. 'Nothing on you of course.' Hermione couldn't help but smile, even if he was only saying that. They were now on the other side of the oak tree, fairly concealed from the party, the music sounding far away.

Alarm bells were ringing somewhere behind the fog of alcohol in Hermione's head. She took a step backwards. 'I barely know you!'

Oliver shrugged, her resistance not really bothering him. 'Alright then,' he said, sipping his champagne. 'Let's play a game.'

Hermione eyed him shrewdly. 'What *type* of game?'

'A get to know-each-other game,' he said playfully. 'I tell you a secret, and you have to tell me one. If you can't match my secret, you have to drink.'

'Drink?'

He nodded at her glass, his eyebrow's raised. 'A mouthful of your champagne.'

'And what if you can't match my secret?' she asked, once again enjoying his company and still in slight disbelief that this utterly gorgeous man was talking to *her*.

'Then I drink as well,' he replied, doing exactly that. 'Here, I'll go first. When I was little, I was utterly terrified of cats. I honestly thought they were going to eat me.'

Hermione hesitated, then thought, *why not?* 'Alright, I'm still scared of flying. Broomsticks, I mean.'

'You got it,' Oliver said, toasting her. 'Since you matched my secret, I have to drink. Now you set the standard.'

'Why do I have to tell you two secrets in a row?' she replied in mock outrage.

'Cos that's the way the game works, Curly,' he said, smiling, pleased with himself with the touch of a nickname.

'Alright ... umm ... I'm jealous of the way Tonks can change her appearance at will. Especially her hair. It just requires no ... work!'

'I'm jealous of Fred and George Weasley for being so successful in something they love. Ha, now you have to drink.'

Hermione did so, her eyes not leaving Oliver's, whom surreptitiously refilled his and her glasses. And so the game went on.

'... I secretly like Celia Warbeck, and I cry every time I hear 'Shattered' ... '

'... *I actually think the Weird Sisters are dreadful, even though everybody else thinks they're brilliant ...* '

'... I hate not being adequate in something. I actually dropped Divination because I couldn't do it ... '

'... *Until fifth year I was absolutely useless at Potions, Snape took it as a personal insult...* '

'... When I was younger I had the most ridiculous crush on Lockhart, and he was a teacher at the time ... '

'... *I was in love with this girl for two years, and when I finally worked up the courage to ask her out, she laughed at me and asked if I was joking ...* '

'... Patronus is an otter, and I still can't work out why ... '

'... *terrible at languages, and I was expected to learn at least a little bit of Gaelic by everyone back in Ireland ...* '

'... don't mind answering questions, but being asked to perform magic in front of a class is humiliating ... '

'... *found my brother's wand when I was ten, and accidentally turned my hand green for three weeks, wasn't allowed out in case I ran into Muggles ...* '

And then Hermione, made fearless through copious amounts of alcohol and the strange bond of trust shared between her and this practically strange man, began to reveal more about herself than was probably wise, given she wished for her age to remain a secret. Oliver, fairly tipsy himself, ignored the buzzing in his brain that was telling him something was not quite right.

'... so worried that being Head Girl will make people think I'm just some bossy goody-two-shoes, which they probably already do ... '

'... Lavender's hair just *flows* and mine takes hours to make it like this ... '

'... let's face it, my only real asset to guys is my body, and the Hogwarts uniforms are so shapeless ... '

'... didn't know about magic till I got the letter, and I always feel like I missed out on something special ... '

'... gave me this necklace when I was fourteen, and now I wear it whenever I'm feeling particularly miserable ... '

'... don't really like Seamus, but his Irish accent is just so sexy ... '

'... never had many close girl friends, before Hogwarts I didn't really have any friends ... '

'... so sick of Harry playing the tragic hero, I mean, yeah, he's had a lot to deal with, and more he has to do, but it just gets so *tiring*, always worrying about him ... '

'... always get paired with Neville, and it becomes so trying ... '

'... had one sort-of boyfriend, Viktor, but he lives so far away, and I was never overly keen on him anyway ...'

'... none of the guys are interested in me, heaps want Ginny, she's so lucky, or they want stupid girly girls like Pavarti and Lavender, I mean, come on, they haven't got half a brain between them '

Her words were cut short because, at this precise moment, Oliver leant over and met the distressed young woman's lips with his own. He felt her tense at first, as if surprised, but then, slowly, began to kiss him back.

Excitement was coursing through Hermione's veins, causing her to tremble ever so slightly. This was so real and amazing and adult and rebellious and exiting and breathtaking ... Oliver's hands were roaming over her bare skin, his rough fingers causing shivers to run through her body. Then they began to roam ever so slightly further, and suddenly it was too adult and rebellious and exiting. Ginny was calling her name, and Hermione took the chance to break the kiss, regretting it even as she did so, and find her.

'Where have you been?' exclaimed Ginny. 'I've been looking for you for nearly an hour!'

'You must have missed me in the crowds,' Hermione replied, choosing on the spur of the moment not to divulge her secret, something she was already regretting out of pure embarrassment. What had she been thinking? She wasn't some sort of ... Lavender-like girl for Merlin's sake! She had class!

'Ah well, come dance with me,' said Ginny in her bubbly manner, grabbing Hermione's arm.

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Tonks, whose hair was currently a bubblegum pink, approached Oliver. 'Congratulations! Minerva told me about you working at Hogwarts. Guess we'll be colleagues now.'

'Congratulations to you to,' replied Oliver, smiling as he had been since his encounter with Hermione. He guessed from her words that she had also accepted her teaching post. 'Guess I won't be able to enchant your books anymore so that they yell at you every time you open them.' Hermione was dancing with Bill's sister, laughing, and looking even more gorgeous.

'And I won't be able to slip flobberworms in your potions either,' Tonks said, laughing. When they were at Hogwarts, the pranks they played on each other were legendary. Hermione twirled, her dress fluttering out. Tonks followed Oliver's gaze. 'Doesn't Ginny look absolutely gorgeous as a bridesmaid?' she swooned.

'Oh, is that her name?' Oliver said, still watching Hermione. 'I didn't realize you knew her.'

'Yeah, I'm fairly close with her and Hermione the girl she's dancing with,' Tonks replied. At the mention of Hermione's name, Oliver's perked up, but didn't say anything. 'It's brilliant I'll get to see so much of her this year.'

If Oliver had drunk a little bit less, he may have found this comment ever so slightly suspicious. As it was, in his certainty that Hermione was twenty-one, maybe twenty-two, he assumed this comment was directed at Ginny. Merlin, she was gorgeous though Hermione that is. His little game had been going well, until Hermione just seemed to unleash every pent up fear she had lying behind that pretty face. That kiss he would have to find her again at some point later in the party. Surely he stood some chance of her accepting his invitation to dinner the following weekend?

Fate, however, is as mischievous as Oliver, and he and Hermione did not cross paths for the rest of the night. As Hermione sobered up over the course of the night, she began to feel ever so slightly ashamed at her actions, whereas Oliver was doing his best to find her throughout the swarms of people dancing into the night. Neither knew the other's true identity, and this is the way it would be until Hermione arrived at Hogwarts as a student, where Oliver was a teacher.