

Healer, Healer

by Losille

Written for the Summer 2007 SSHG_Exchange. As newly-appointed superintendent of St. Mungo's, Healer Hermione Granger's first task is to staff a new department—the Department for Research of Innovative Potions. Insanity ensues. Written for the Summer 2007 SSHG_Exchange.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Written in response to the Summer 2007 SSHG Exchange

For: Ourglasslake

Prompt: Severus and Hermione are attracted to each other, and painfully so. They flirt, their conversations are full of double-entendres, etc, but there is an unspoken boundary between them, so nothing ever comes of it. I would prefer that they did not have a relationship previous to the time this story takes place, but the setting/canon-compliance/reason it can never happen is up to you. Happy/hopeful endings are fine, but I'd prefer a non-whiny Severus, please. :)

Many thanks to my betas, Keladry and Subversa, for a wonderfully quick turn around at the last minute and for just being wonderful people.

This story was written with the television show, House MD, in mind. I do not own House. This is my homage to the show and a character who is deliciously Snape-like.

Part I

There came a time in every Hogwarts professor's life in which molding the minds of the future...whether those minds be receptive to knowledge or not...grew overly taxing. This was especially true if said professor had never wished to teach dunderheads in the first place. After the Second War, after the prolonged trial by Wizengamot, after everything was said and done, Severus Snape had thought his only route in life was to accept Minerva's offer to return to Hogwarts.

Before, he had been at Hogwarts out of necessity; Dumbledore had made sure he was close by in the event of emergency. At least, that was what the old wizard had said, although Severus knew it had been to keep an eye on his associations. Not that he could completely blame Dumbledore... Severus had argued with himself continually about his allegiances, right up until the last battle had been set in motion. He was an opportunist, after all...Slytherin to the core. He was not one to count his chickens before they hatched, so to speak. For him to have chosen a side without first seeing beyond a reasonable doubt who would prevail would have been supremely foolish.

Being at Hogwarts allowed him to serve two masters rather well while never really publicly committing to either. Yes, he had killed Dumbledore, but only because of Dumbledore's planning and at his request. Yes, he had also helped Draco according to his Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa, therefore aiding the Dark Lord in other various aspects that year. He had done numerous other things for either side of the war in the interest of self-preservation. The school was a good spot for him to be, whether he

enjoyed the teaching dunderheads ruse or not.

When Minerva had come to him, asking him to return, though, he had been surprised... even a little flattered. Because most of the decisions in his life were obviously undertaken with the utmost care, this seemed like the next logical step, now that he was "on the straight and narrow." Really, it seemed as if it was the only thing he *could* do at that point. Spending sixteen years in one place and never thinking beyond the confines of those sixteen years seemed to do that to a person. He had never thought he would have a life after the war, anyway. Why would he plan for the future?

Needless to say, he had returned to Hogwarts as sour and as discontent as ever. Years passed slowly; Severus saw his fortieth birthday pass with little change and was now quickly nearing his fiftieth, feeling as though he was missing something vital in his life.

That was until *she* showed up in his classroom... again.

"I must say, Hermione, I was quite surprised when I got your owl the other day. I don't imagine that the director of St. Mungo's can get much time away from her busy schedule for tea with her old professor."

Hermione laughed lightly, lifting the delicate china cup to her lips and taking a sip of the hot liquid. Minerva McGonagall, for all her shrewdness and tough love, had little skill at masking when she was gloating. As a matter of fact, the old witch seemed to glow and swell with pride each time the hospital was brought up that afternoon. That a former student...one of Minerva's most prized in all her years of teaching...had reached such a level so quickly in her career made Minerva extremely proud. To this day, she was still a mother lioness to her cubs, even when they were out of the school.

"Nonsense, Minerva," Hermione said. "I can make time to have tea with you."

Minerva smiled and looked over the rim of her cup, sage eyes speculating. "And for other things."

"Well, yes." Hermione blushed. "But you are a dear friend, no matter what."

"I am just pleased that I get an update on wedding plans from you for a change, rather than having to listen to Augusta Longbottom gloat at the Daughters of Circe knitting group every week."

Hermione raised a curious brow. "Augusta gloating?"

Minerva chuckled. "She's over the moon that her grandson snagged *the* Hermione Granger."

"Funny; to me, she always has something to say about me being Muggle-born," she replied.

"It's not that she believes what she says; it is only years of conditioning. She sees a Muggle-born and the first thing her mind goes to is the years of prejudice within her family." Minerva nodded absently. "Trust me when I say it has nothing to do with you."

"She'll hate me if I break it off, though," Hermione mused. The look of shock on Minerva's face told Hermione that the comment had been said aloud and not merely thought.

The venerable headmistress schooled her features to be impassive. "What do you mean, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged. "I love Neville, but it's not the romantic type of love. At least, I don't think so. I don't think it ever has been... It was just my need to fix and help him that got me embroiled in his life."

"Is there someone else?"

"No," Hermione said.

And even if there was, I wouldn't tell you.

Hermione glanced carefully at the old witch she confided in and from whom she continually received some of the wisest advice.

Right now, she amended and took another sip of tea.

Hermione sighed and set her cup and saucer on the table in front of her. "I think we both realize it's not ever going to go anywhere that it hasn't been before, but we have nothing better to do. Why not spend our time with a person we enjoy to spend time with?"

The stern headmistress gave her a quiet, thoughtful look.

"But who knows..." Hermione said with a small smile, letting the comment hang heavily in the air. "I should probably be on my way and get this over with."

"He'll be in his classroom," Minerva said. "He hardly comes out any more."

"Am I to be surprised by that?"

The elder shook her head. "I suppose not, but you won't run into him as you had planned. You'll have to go to him."

Hermione nodded. "He's going to be nasty either way, so I don't think it will matter."

"He's not as nasty as he was before everything, Hermione," Minerva said. "Certainly, he's as surly as ever, but without worries he's far less...how should I say?...uptight."

"Joy," Hermione smiled. "Well, I'm off. We really should do this again sometime, Professor."

Minerva nodded. "Sooner, rather than later."

Hermione stood and placed her long, dark robes over her arms. It was a warm spring day for Scotland, and she had ended up not needing them. She picked up the leather briefcase that leaned against the chair's legs and let out another long sigh.

"You're sure he wants this?"

"He hasn't said so, but it is quite obvious."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "You have someone to take his place?"

The headmistress stood and walked with Hermione to the door of the large office. She placed a comforting hand on her former student's shoulder. "As I said, by some perversity, he's got himself an apprentice teacher this year. Apprentice Weatherby is promising."

"Thank you, Minerva," Hermione said quietly, "for giving him up."

"He hasn't said 'yes' yet, Hermione," Minerva smiled warmly, reaching for the door and pushing it open. "Besides, whether you ever believe me or not, I do look upon him as a son, at times. And sometimes, when children are grown, you just want them out of your hair. He's overstayed his welcome by about twelve years... It is akin to how I feel about the graduating seventh-years."

Hermione had a good laugh at that and gave a final wave before the stairwell rotated to life.

"Stopper and label your potion samples," Severus stated, but did not look up from his work marking characteristically abysmal fourth-year homework scrolls on antidotes. "If I find any evidence that the properly brewed potions have left this room and have been used, you *will* be expelled."

Soon, acne-covered children were warily making their way to his desk and placing their flasks of supposed-Amortentia potions in a neat row. Some were a horrible, mucky grey color. One was a bright red. A few came close to the pearlescent sheen, but only one had mastered the mother-of-pearl color perfectly. He could tell without further tests who had failed, who had barely scraped by and who had passed, but he would make his sycophant of an apprentice do the testing for punishment.

After all, it was Weatherby's fault to begin with he had to be subjected to giggling girls and any potion having to do with "love." Actually, Severus thought, frowning, he could not really blame Weatherby. The only person he could blame was himself; he had been the one to allow his apprentice to plan lessons for a week of N.E.W.T.-level Potions.

One would think that anyone who broached the difficult subject of Amortentia around someone like Severus Snape was a glutton for punishment. It was a vile potion with vile connotations and vile uses. A certain Dark Lord and his idiot mother, Merope, came to mind when the potion was mentioned.

However, because he was the mentor and not the mentee, he had every right to plague the existence of his students of any level, especially his apprentice. At least he could say Weatherby was a gifted potion maker, if intensely thick about appropriate potions to teach these miscreant dunderheads.

Weatherby appeared suddenly out of the back store cupboard, supervised the cleaning of the room after class, and promptly disappeared again when the last two students dawdled out the door.

Finally, he thought. Nothing but blissful silence and no classes until the following day. That was, of course, until he heard a commotion outside the classroom door. He thought for a moment that he should get up and see from whom he could deduct House points...hopefully there would be a hapless Gryffindor or Hufflepuff in the midst of the noise...but thought better of getting up from his seat. Funny what years of hard living could do to a man, even a wizard who was by nature longer-lived and less prone to ailment. It could have been those years of spying and war, too. Only he knew how many times he had suffered under Cruciatus and other inventive curses sent his way.

There was a knock at the door then, and he mused silently for a moment whether or not to ward it so an annoying student could not come in and ~~make~~ make him get involved in whatever was going on outside his classroom. What came through the door, though, without being bidden, was far worse than any current Hogwarts student.

It was *her*.

Hermione Granger carefully shut the door behind her before looking in his direction, but when she did, he saw determination in her eyes. Anyone who knew the girl...nay, woman, he should think...knew that determination in Miss Granger's eyes spelled disaster for those around her.

"What an... unwelcome... surprise," he said lowly, hoping above all hopes she would disappear. The absolute last thing he needed right now, with the aroma of Amortentia still hanging heavy in the room, was this woman bothering him. The smells evoked by the potion could all too easily be associated with this woman.

"It's a pleasure to see you as well, Professor," she muttered and let a small, amused smirk cross her lips, resuming her path to his desk. It would seem the mature female voice that was not Minerva's screechy tone drew his apprentice back out of the store room.

He knew what was about to happen...he'd seen it happen too many times to count when one of the Golden Trio was around. Even now, twelve years later and much to Severus' dismay, the novelty had not worn off, and he was none too pleased that he still must be vexed by people who forgot that there were others who had suffered during the war.

Granger had the audacity to be surprised by it; Severus tried his best to block out the conversation and bent his head to look at the essays in front of him. Amidst placing spiky grades in red ink on these essays, he could catch snippets of the conversation.

"... it is so amazing to finally be meeting you, Miss Granger."

"Hermione, please."

"I've heard so much about you, and to finally meet the person who helped Harry Potter... it is astounding."

"Well, I don't..."

"The pictures they've had in the *Prophet* don't do you justice."

"Er, thank you?"

"What was it like? Facing him? Are you free this evening? Would you care to have dinner this evening and talk then?"

He heard what sounded like she was releasing a held breath. She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry... Weatherby, was it?"

"Sam."

"Sam," she repeated. "While I appreciate your interest, I unfortunately cannot talk about it. It's best left in the past."

Snape nodded to himself, though he hoped it was not noticeable.

"And I really must decline your invitation for dinner," she said. "I'm meeting my fiancé this evening."

Snape could hear his apprentice audibly deflate. Fiancé? How had he not had this shoved in his face by Minerva or any of the other female professors who were so fond of gloating about what their child prodigy was up to?

He looked up at her briefly, searching for a sign she just wasn't letting Weatherby down easily. Perhaps the fiancé was a Muggle, and that was why no one had heard about it. Indeed, there on her left ring finger, in the style of Muggles, lay an engagement ring with a rather obscene diamond solitaire.

Weatherby made some excuse or another to leave the room and disappeared out the door, leaving them alone and free from distraction.

"He's... eager," Hermione remarked and took the last few steps to his desk. "Is he related to the Creeveys?"

Snape grunted and set his quill down on the desk, deciding that he would have to face whatever doom this woman brought with her.

"You're obviously not here for small talk, Miss Granger."

She nodded. "Is there some place we can sit? So I don't feel like I'm being reprimanded?"

He made sure to give her the most withering look possible. First off, she had not been asked to visit him. And now, she was trying to tell him how to receive a guest.

Her expression did not change. "Or we could stay here if you like."

She placed her briefcase on one of the low work tables, opened the top and bent over at her waist, rummaging through her things. Snape sat back in his seat and squeezed his eyes shut.

"This better be worth this agony, Miss Granger," he replied, opening his eyes again. She turned her head to him and smiled brightly.

It was something he had definitely not expected, but he found it oddly nice to be the receiver of such a look from a woman...whether she be witch, Muggle or a former student. Still, if her intention was to throw him off guard and make him easy to get along with, she was sorely mistaken.

Granger stood up and squared her shoulders, as though preparing for battle. In her left hand was a packet of parchment. In her right, was a highly recognizable book that made him cringe.

"The Ministry has decided that St. Mungo's needs equal share in the advancements of Wizarding medicine. Germany has their spell damage researchers. France has opened a center for new healing spells. I want the premier Potions program in Europe, if not the world. Certainly, Potions has the widest application to different problems and therefore will be the thing to put us on the map. That is, if we have the right staff."

He looked at her squarely, trying not to show any reaction to her words. This was extremely difficult because he did not know whether he should be thankful for a ticket out of this dark old castle or ungrateful that a former student was propositioning him about it.

"You have my attention, Miss Granger," he said lowly.

She set the book on his desk. "I have no doubt you have other books in your collection with similar changes. Publishing revised editions of these alone will bring notoriety. Of course, there won't be a place for the more unsavory spells in the book."

Granger paused and then placed the stack of parchments on top of the book. The cover page read "Department of Research for Innovative Potions."

"You must think I am in need of your charity," he said, his tone like acid.

"Hardly. Even if I felt charitable, I would not be charitable to *you*. I'm still not entirely sure you deserve it."

He raised one brow.

"DRIP?" he asked. "I see your nomenclature is still as astounding as your SPEW days."

She frowned and placed her hands sternly on her hips as though she was reprimanding a small child. "I define being the best by having the best. You, sir, are clearly the foremost expert in Potions, even though your efforts have not been properly lauded."

"Most of my efforts have been for the Dark Lord," he said.

"But that doesn't supersede the complexity and brilliance of the potions," she replied.

If he did not know any better, he would say she was an admirer of his work... and perhaps even of him. But he was not one to get his hopes up. Or down. However you chose to look at it.

"You will be the head of the department, qualified to hire your own staff. We have a budget for one other Potions master or three laboratory assistants," she said. "You, on the other hand, will receive a Ministry pay grade of five, same as the other Healers in the hospital. Quite a bit better than the Galleons you earn *not* doing what you like. In addition, you will receive a large portion of the proceeds once your books have been published."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I will be my own boss?"

"I will be the only person above you." Her neck turned a violent shade of red and she cleared her throat.

She had found a double entendre in her words, and he was not going to let the opportunity pass. After all, it was his duty to make those around him uncomfortable. "A former student on top?"

"A female on top," she replied, recovering with surprising speed and bravado. "Don't like the woman on top, Professor?"

In this instant, Snape fully realized the change in Hermione Granger. Before, she could have been easily cowed by such a play of words and obvious innuendo. That is, if he had ever dared such innuendo with a dunderhead student. But then again, it was becoming increasingly clear that this witch was not like the former student he remembered. She was still exceptionally intelligent, but with her maturity came a different kind of confidence than the annoying courageousness of Gryffindor schoolchildren. He could see in her a worthy verbal sparring partner.

The highly desirable air of confidence only a woman could possess, and one that Severus often found most alluring, was what Hermione Granger demonstrated now.

Not that it mattered. She was engaged.

"I enjoy a woman in many positions, Miss Granger," he remarked and sat up in his chair, peering down at the stack of parchments. "I will consider it."

She nodded and produced what looked to be two tickets from her briefcase. "No doubt you've heard that the Ministry is throwing a charity ball in my honor in a few weeks. I would like it if you could come and meet some of the staff, mainly our Healers-in-charge."

"You did not say anything about having to speak to other people."

She rolled her eyes and turned around to gather her things. She stopped and looked back at him. "You will be required to have regular liaisons with others in the hospital. It will be beneficial, depending on which ailment a certain potion is to be tested on, or with dealing with other Healers in the hospital. And I should warn you that I expect you...if you take this position...to be on your best behavior when it comes to interpersonal relations."

Now he felt like he was being scolded by Minerva.

"When shall I let you know my decision?"

"Your attendance at the charity ball will be sufficient," she said and moved toward the door, her rather high-heeled shoes clicking rhythmically on the stone floor. Since when did sensible Granger wear those, and why did he find the insane torture devices so enticing?

Hermione would say that Snape had been a most effective Potions researcher thus far, had he not, in no particular order: berated the hospital staff for their incompetence repeatedly, nearly killed Gilderoy Lockhart for no apparent reason other than for old annoyances, nearly killed *another* patient by experimenting on him without consent, and making one of his interviewees for the laboratory assistant position nearly wet himself.

It had been six *long* weeks since Severus Snape had shown up at the Ministry charity ball, thus accepting the position as lead Potions researcher. From her own dealings with him, he was magnanimous to Hermione and even slightly polite to everyone else for the whole of the evening despite his penchant for hiding in dark corners and glowering at former students. He had danced with her for one dance, although she was sure it had only been because he felt he was obligated to do it.

What their dance had ultimately...and admittedly unwarrantedly...served to do, however, was bring up her past sentiments for the man, which she had stuffed down and pushed far into the recesses of her mind.

Hermione would be lying if she said she had not found herself in quite a quagmire when Snape had returned, not at all triumphantly, to aide the Order of the Phoenix in their final attempts to take down Voldemort. Harry never really forgave the man, despite all the evidence that the murder of Albus Dumbledore had been a planned homicide; it was hard to choose between who should hold her loyalty more...Harry, who needed all the help he could get, or Snape, who needed nothing but a "thank you." After intense personal debate, she had sided with Harry and kept far away from their former professor as much as possible, for fear that Harry would see her as siding with the Greasy Git.

She had still watched him, though, from afar and in some infirm part of her mind she had developed an infatuation for the crusty, sadistic man. He had been valiant and courageous, despite the fact that his playing both sides of the line had been done in a solely selfish, Slytherin way.

She had seen everything in the Pensieve memories. She could not necessarily fault him; it could be deemed self-preservation, and any animal in the world lived on that basic instinct. Snape was still inherently a noble wizard who had suffered through and survived atrocities at the hands of Dark wizards that she could not imagine a lesser person surviving. He did, however, believe in good, and this was the only reason why Dumbledore had trusted him.

It really had not been an issue to Hermione when she was debating whether or not to ask Snape to take the position at St. Mungo's. She could say, though a tad untruthfully, her old feelings never really crossed her mind. That was, of course, until those final parting shots with him at Hogwarts.

Woman on top, indeed.

Maybe it had all been unconscious yearning that made her go straight to him to ask for his help. And yet, why had she even thought he would be willing to "help" her? It was ludicrous. Knowing Snape, he would not leave Hogwarts just because he could not be asked to deal with her on a daily basis. Really, she had not expected him to accept so easily, much less show up at the ball, and *certainly* not dance. Snape had never danced, not in all the times there had been appropriate occasions at Hogwarts or at Ministry functions.

It was stupid, really, for her to think like this. Yet, she could not quite forget the way he suddenly seemed to seek her to talk. Actually, it was not really talking. It was more a battle of wits than anything. It would seem he enjoyed their constant confrontations with each other; she loved them as well, relishing in all their outrageous remarks. Snape had quite an acerbic intelligence when you got to know him and she found it quite an appealing quality.

Did he finally consider her an intellectual equal, that he let her see this side of him? Was he making a conscious effort to forget that she was a formerly insufferable know-it-all?

Whatever it was, Severus Snape had changed. At least, changed around her. Not really with anyone else in the world, but that did not matter much...not to Hermione.

There was nothing really romantic about it, though.

Not that it should be; gods forbid he found out now that Neville was her fiancé, especially after forging a sturdy, if dysfunctional, partnership with her. If Snape found out, she was sure she would never hear the end of it and that she would lose some respect.

It was just as well that Neville was touring Asia for three months, studying a new hybrid plant.

Had Severus been able to speak to Healer Granger without their conversations continually turning to the dangerous grey area of a work-personal relationship, he would have told her that he quite liked the new path his life was taking. But luckily for Severus Snape, he had never been gifted with the ability to speak freely with others about his true feelings...especially with those who were engaging former students.

Not to mention that if she knew of his pleasure, he could not get away with his surly, antisocial attitude in regards to the rest of the hospital. There would be no excuse for it, not that he had a decent excuse anyway except for his superior intelligence compared to the rest of the world.

Let it be said *not* having to deal with dunderhead students had eased his unsociability minutely, even if his new laboratory assistants could be quite dense at times. Had he not been happier, he actually *would* have killed Lockhart when he had the chance.

He had always enjoyed working with potions, though...it was a solitary trade and something that had suited him from his first Potions class at Hogwarts. This research position was clearly the best place for him. Except for his assistants, he could be in relative peace in the quiet, cool and dark basement of the hospital for most of the day, only to go sleep. And on many occasions, his rest had been taken in an empty hospital bed.

Hermione Granger, funnily enough, was what he liked the most about his new career. It was an odd turn for him, but he was surprisingly finding himself open to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Working for the Insufferable Know-It-All was not nearly as bad as he had thought it might be, especially now that she could handle herself with delectable aplomb. And he would be lying if he had not admitted that having her to look at, now a twenty-nine-year old, and certainly a fully mature witch, was added bonus.

Even if he had to deal with other repulsive things throughout his day.

Normally, he would not think about her like this, or allow the barbs they threw at each other to become so heavy with innuendo, but he felt free enough to think about it, knowing that she was engaged to be married. He did not know who this man was, and while he tried desperately to figure this mystery out, he felt safe...that he could not fall in love with her and get hurt.

Severus had let that happen one too many times before. He was contented knowing he was safe with her; their idle comments would lead nowhere.

And so it was with that knowledge, Severus went to work every day, knowing he could have a particular satisfaction from his life. It was what he had needed for so long.

It was just such a day, two months into his tenure, when he entered the lobby of St. Mungo's, ready for a new day of challenges. That was, of course, until he saw the madhouse inside. On any normal day, the waiting area could be filled to capacity, or there would only be one or two unfortunate souls. Today, the lobby, waiting area, and all surrounding halls were filled to overflowing. Children were crying, and the body heat from hundreds of people with fevers...on top of the closeness of the bodies...was stifling. There was a general sour smell in the air, as though people had gotten sick, and no one had been around to clean it up. The Welcome Witch looked as though she wanted to crawl into a dark corner with a bottle of Firewhisky and never come out again.

When a fever-dazed wizard stumbled past him with nasty looking raised papules, Severus decided it was best for him to turn around and disappear for a day, consequences be damned. It didn't take a genius to know what was going on.

It had been nearly twenty years since the last large outbreak of Dragon Pox.

"And where do you think you're going?" He heard her call over the hum of voices.

"Leaving," he replied and turned to find a witch dressed in lime green with her hands on her hips. "I might catch it."

She pushed her way through the crowd to stand in front of him, trying her best to look imposing. It was difficult for him to see her as imposing, though, as he was nearly a head taller.

"We need you here, Snape," she said.

"I'm not a Healer," he said. "I wouldn't be of any use to you."

"Au contraire. We need more anti-Pox potion. You, my dear employee, are a Potions master. You won the lottery today," she said with a sugary smile that was not unlike the one a certain toad named Umbridge could conjure.

He heaved a sigh.

"I need you now," she said. "Don't be like... like yourself."

Severus nodded, and Hermione seemed surprised at his easy acquiescence.

"What, no 'Yes, Mistress?'" She raised a curious brow. "You disappoint me."

"You know where I will be," he replied, pushing through the crowd toward the lift down to the basement and quiet.

"And Snape?!"

He turned.

"Would it kill you to wear your uniform robes?" she asked.

"They're so..." he began, trying to find a decent description of the color.

Hermione pushed her way through the crowd to stand before him yet again. "They're green, Snape. Dark green; I ordered them specifically with you in mind... I have half a mind to make you wear the lime green ones. Wear your robes."

"You could have ordered black."

"If you don't wear the robes, I will order Gryffindor crimson and make you wear them, not wearing them being punishable by making your life hell."

"My life would be a living hell if I *wore* them," he said, but smirked. "Oh, you are so deceitful."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Do your job and wear your robes. That's all I ask."

Severus watched her disappear down the long hall and in the direction of her office, muttering under his breath, "Yes, Mistress."

When the hospital had quieted down to the normal flow of cases, and with a handful of Dragon Pox victims in the second floor ward who had not received the anti-Pox potion soon enough, Hermione decided that she needed to clear her mind from the taxing day. This was the sort of day that was hard for the most seasoned of hospital employees. For a still-new administrator in charge of the chaos, it was overwhelming.

That she sought Snape out to unwind was a mystery she knew she would be pondering for a long time to come.

She found him hunched over a book, scribbling in spiky letters. A few potions were brewing in the room. To say that the rest of the room looked as though it had been hit by a hurricane would have been an understatement.

"Where are your assistants?"

"Gone," he remarked, neither jumping at her sudden intrusion as he might have in the past, nor looking up from his work to acknowledge her properly.

"They didn't clean the mess?"

He shrugged. "It could have had something to do with me calling them dunderheads and them storming out."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Why must you do that? You intentionally alienate people."

"I've been alienating people since I was three."

She grunted a laugh. "At least you admit it."

"Why are you here?"

"Thought I might see how you made it through the day," she said.

"I'm still breathing." At this, he turned his head to the side to look at her. "Where are your robes?"

She looked down at herself, noticing the wrinkled silk of her blouse and linen of her skirt. No doubt she looked the sight after a day like this. When she glanced back up at him, he looked devious.

"What's your problem?"

"I'm trying not to think of the produce department at..." he began.

"I was working. I got hot, the robes got dirty beyond spell fixing."

He raised a curious brow. "I'm quite sorry, Miss Granger. You just normally don't see breasts like that on hospital administrators."

"Oh, women can't be heads of hospitals?" she accused, growing defensive for some reason. Here he was, essentially complimenting her, and she wanted nothing more than to button the top button she had left undone this morning. "Or just the ugly ones?"

"No, they can be attractive. You just don't usually see their breasts."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Are you just trying to annoy me because of the argument about your robes earlier? I'll go put my robes on if that would make you feel better."

He turned back to his work, shaking his head.

She went about the room, muttering spells here and there to clean up some of the mess, trying to help him. She owed it to him, with the work he had put in today to get all those potions brewed.

"What are you working on?" she asked, standing over one of the boiling cauldrons.

"A potion I had experimented on before at Hogwarts to wipe out Dragon Pox, even in the worst patient," he said. "Now's the first time I've had a chance to test."

Hermione nodded. "And is it working? I know that a few of the male patients upstairs have gotten better. Not the witches, though."

With a completely straight face, he asked, "Hmm, sex?"

"Well, it might get complicated," she said without losing a beat. "We work together. I'm younger, certainly, but maybe you like that..."

He shot her a silencing glare.

"You deserve it," she said. "And the ingredients in the potion could be gender sensitive, but I doubt it. I just think the witches we've seen are further along with the illness."

Silence fell between them as he continued to scribble, and she cleaned. That was, of course, until she found some courage somewhere...only time would tell if it was really stupidity...and broached something that had been on her mind for awhile now.

"Snape?"

He grunted.

"Do you like me?" She paused. "I have to know."

"No."

Surprisingly unhurt, Hermione nodded her head and smiled quietly. "Okay."

It was another few minutes before he stopped again and decided to stare at her. She tried to ignore him, but that brooding gaze had always been too intense to dismiss whether you were being yelled at or for other reasons.

"What?"

"Why did you need to know?"

She shrugged. "Just curious."

"You're engaged."

"So I can't know if you like me?"

He raised a brow. "I obviously like you enough as a person, or I would not be here having this conversation with you."

"That's all I needed to know."

"No, it's not," he said. "You asked for another purpose, whether you will admit it or not."

Hermione turned to face him, and found him right beside her.

"Do you 'like' me?" he asked pointedly.

"Isn't that obvious enough?" Hermione moved her eyes up from his chest to his eyes. It seemed he had stepped closer, but she knew she must be imagining things.

"Why? I'm twice your age, I'm not great-looking, I'm not charming. I'm not even nice. I'm what you need, not what you like. I'm damaged. You need a charity case."

Hermione pursed her lips together. "I hardly think of you as a charity case."

"Isn't that what all this is? The job, everything?"

There was no denying that he stepped closer to her this time, now barely a hair's width between them.

"You live under the delusion that you can fix everything. I suspect whomever you are engaged to is fixed and doesn't need you, so you need a new case."

"Neville isn't damaged!" she exclaimed before she could stop herself.

He looked as though he had been slapped in the face. "You couldn't possibly be engaged to Longbottom."

She was quiet and diverted her eyes from his.

"No wonder you like me," he said. *Anyone* would be better than Longbottom."

"You're cruel."

"Am I?"

It was her duty to stand up for her fiancé, she supposed, even if it was halfhearted: "I love him."

"You certainly like *saying* it."

Before she knew was happening, Severus Snape had closed the distance between their lips and hovered. He did not do anything but stay in one place and let the moment become unbearable. Was he testing her? Testing her to see if she would pull away or if she would give in? Did he know what she really, truly thought about him?

In an instant lacking his trademark self-restraint, he made the decision for her. It was barely what she would call a kiss, but it was enough to make her dizzy.

"I should go," she said. "I can't do this to Neville."

Without another word between them, she moved quickly for the door and stepped out. She nearly ran up to her office and warded the door from anyone coming in. She

needed to be alone.

It would seem that Severus Snape was still dangerous, even after all these years.

Hermione did not know what she should expect, but by the time she was preparing to leave the hospital for the night, she found herself feeling quite unsettled on the matter presented to her.

How was she supposed to know that an instant like that could be so disconcerting? Part of her had wanted him to follow shortly after her, barge into her office and officially sweep her off her feet. But that would never happen; he was Severus Snape, after all. Oddly, though, Hermione found she liked that he was not there to rectify the situation. Had it been Neville in a similar situation, he would have been at her door within seconds, on his hands and knees begging.

It was unusual, certainly. Before, all the men in her life had seemingly been helpless without her, but Snape had proved quite certainly he could stand on his own two feet.

And then some.

But why was she thinking about this anyway? She was supposed to *be forgetting* about what had happened in the laboratory, not dissecting it and ultimately qualifying it as different, yet thrilling.

Not to mention that she was still engaged to Neville. It would destroy his fragile ego if she broke it off and attempted anything with Severus. Certainly, it would have been different if it were any other man that had caught her fancy, but to have it be his childhood nemesis would be devastating, and Hermione Granger could not be that heartless.

Then there was always the chance that all this was just an intimidation tactic on Snape's part. He knew exactly how to undercut her.

Hermione gathered her things, slinging her purse and briefcase over one arm, heading out of her office deep in her own thoughts.

Nothing could happen. Severus knew that. She knew that. Maybe that was why he had done it in the first place. There was no chance for real entanglement, knowing that she was a woman of her word, especially to people like fiancés and friends, and he a slippery snake who delighted in being, well, Slytherin-like. He could get little jabs in here and there until she finally cracked under the pressure. Perhaps it was all a game.

"Have you had dinner?"

Hermione jumped a foot into the air at the sound of the voice, and turned shakily toward the dark man now falling into step beside her. It appeared that nothing could shake Severus Snape. Not even that want-to-be kiss. It was like nothing had happened.

Or perhaps that was a cat that got the cream look on his face.

Either way, she found it very frustrating that he could just go on with his life like nothing had happened.

"You're asking me to dinner?" she stated accusingly.

"No, I believe all I asked was whether or not you had dinner," he clarified, "not whether you would like to go with me to have dinner."

She stopped in her tracks, glaring at him. "The gall after what happened...! I can't believe you."

He looked at her levelly. "Did you have dinner?"

"No," she said, continuing toward the entrance at a swift, staccato pace. She needed to be rid of him. She needed to find some semblance of her sanity.

Didn't she?

"Would you care to have dinner with me?" he asked, this time with a devilish glint in his eyes.

Hermione stopped again, the entrance out onto the street opening up before them. "No."

He nodded solemnly, his gaze traveling to the floor. Dare she say he looked hurt? Did he want to talk to her about what had happened?

"Coffee?" Snape lifted his eyes in a show of hope.

She smiled impulsively at this child-like gesture. Perhaps he was not so immune to things like she thought. Coffee suddenly did not feel as serious or large step that an actual three or more course dinner date might. She could do coffee.

Even if she knew better.

"Fine."

"Good," he said, turning toward the entrance again and stepping through.

Hermione watched him fade into nothingness on the other side of the glass store window used as St. Mungo's entrance. She let out a long, heavy sigh.

But, conceivably, it wouldn't be so horrible. Maybe this coffee would be good for their fledging friendship, if nothing else. It did not seem like he had any agenda asking her out. It was a casual request. With one final breath and a nervous flop of her stomach, Hermione Granger stepped through the entrance and into the world of the unknown for her date with the devil.

Literally.

Sequel to come!