

The Heiress

by fuchsiasteerpike

The death of a beloved relative makes Hermione into a very wealthy young woman, and she becomes a target for every gold-digger in the post-war wizarding world. Who will save her from such a fate? Non-HBP compliant; Non-DH compliant.

A Start

Chapter 1 of 5

The death of a beloved relative makes Hermione into a very wealthy young woman, and she becomes a target for every gold-digger in the post-war wizarding world. Who will save her from such a fate? Non-HBP compliant; Non-DH compliant.

Disclaimer: Not mine.

It was raining, and every drop that pelted Hermione Granger's broken body brought her closer to a pain-induced unconsciousness. She struggled futilely to sit up, to look her enemy head on, but her body was useless. She could barely make out the figure of the Death Eater, her vision clouded by a stinging combination of tears and rain.

"Scream if you like... I actually prefer it."

Hermione attempted to choke out a biting reply, but it came out as a humiliatingly kittenish whimper. She was exhausted. It was very likely that the majority of the bones in her body had shattered during her fall from the precipice on which her friends still fought. They would all die, most likely. She did not even know where Harry was, and she doubted a single one of them had noticed her descent.

"Your school is in ruins, and your loved ones are sure to fall. I am certain my Lord has disposed of Potter by now." Bellatrix Lestrange crouched down, and Hermione could see that the eyes through her mask were shining with mock pity as she asked, "Do you really want to live?"

Hermione felt no shame when she shook her head in the negative.

Bellatrix rose to her feet, and somehow Hermione knew that she was smiling. The woman looked down at her victim, poised like a cobra over a mouse.

Hermione shuddered at the woman's chuckled response, "I just want to have a little fun first. It's not every day that one gets a chance to kill someone from Harry Potter's inner-circle. Forgive me if this takes longer than you planned."

As the Cruciatus took hold, Hermione did manage the scream she had been holding inside.

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"Wake up, Her-meany!" Four-year-old Simon Granger was disturbed to find his favorite cousin flailing about in her sleep, mumbling incoherently. He had discovered her in this state after his mother had sent him upstairs to fetch her for breakfast and was now perched on the edge of the bed, shaking her arm as gently as he could.

After some cajoling, Hermione opened her eyes. Relief flooded her when she recognized her young cousin staring inquisitively at her.

"Hello, little Simon," she greeted with false cheer. She sat up and pulled him onto her lap, ruffling his unruly brown hair.

"Were you having a bad dream?" the little boy asked.

Hermione nodded. "It was only a teensy bad dream, poppet. You came just in time though."

Simon beamed at this. "I saved you?"

"Yes, you did."

He clapped his hands, delighted to be a savior. Suddenly, he remembered his purpose. "Auntie Jane says breakfast is ready." He slid off of her lap, landing gracelessly onto the hardwood floor. Being quite resilient, as most four-year-old boys are, he merely shrugged off the tumble and stood back up. He turned to Hermione and held out his hand, which she took.

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Hermione followed Simon downstairs to the dining room, which was filled to the brim at the moment with frizzy-haired, bookish Grangers. Hermione was immediately surrounded by a small army of younger cousins, led by Simon's twin sister Dinah, who fancied herself to be second in command to Hermione.

The reason for the Granger home's ample population was not a very cheerful one. Hermione's great-uncle Ralph had just died, and he had essentially been somewhat of the patriarch of the family.

The reading of his will was to be done at Hermione's parents' home since her father was a particular favorite of Ralph's. More so, Hermione was a favorite, taking time after her final year at Hogwarts to take care of her long-ailing uncle. She had considered it a small task when compared with the horrors she had faced shortly before then. Her parents had been more than happy with her decision to disconnect from the wizarding world, having taken notice of her bruises and her possession of a slight limp.

Breakfast was a very uneventful occurrence. The Grangers, while very obviously in mourning, tried to keep the conversation light with stories of their patriarch from when he was in his prime. Stories of schoolyard mishaps and other cheerful things prevented anyone from falling too deeply into melancholy over their loss. Hermione was grateful for that, although she did not offer any stories herself. The past year had turned her into a quiet, introspective sort of person, and her memory/dream had been troubling her mind greatly. She knew she had been saved that night, or otherwise her presence at the family breakfast table would be impossible. She just wished she could remember who had come to her rescue.

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Hermione had just regained consciousness, finding herself in a very comfortable hospital bed. Harry and Ron were standing vigil, although both of them should have been resting as well. Harry had a great deal more scars to contend with than just his fashionable lightning-bolt, and Ron had a cast around his right arm and a bandage around his head that was more than ready to be changed.

Harry and Ron denied that it had been either of them. All they could offer in regards to her fractured memory was that she had been discovered, broken and unconscious after the battle, with Bellatrix Lestrange's corpse lying just a few feet away. Hermione knew she could not have summoned the strength to do the deed herself. Someone had intervened.

"Someone strong," Ron remarked. "They actually used their bare hands."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "Their bare hands?"

"Whoever saved you must have really hated her. Her neck had been snapped like a twig," said Harry.

Hermione felt slightly ill at the notion. "But you have no idea?" she asked, a tinge of hysteria in her voice.

Both Ron and Harry shook their heads. "Not a clue..."

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When Hermione finally broke from her reverie, breakfast was winding down, and she had barely touched her plate. Her mother glanced at her curiously. "Darling, are you feeling well?" Jane Granger had been horrified to learn of the extent of her only child's exploits at Hogwarts and was now perpetually worried sick that Hermione would drop dead at any given moment.

"I guess I am not as hungry as I thought. Please excuse me." Hermione took leave of her bewildered family and sojourned to her bedroom. While she was still within earshot, she heard her mother's forced apologetic response.

"It always takes Hermione a bit longer to become presentable, and I think she just wanted a head-start in order to be in time for the reading. All that ridiculous hair, you know." A dead silence followed Jane's faux pas, and Hermione could imagine a few Grangers smoothing over their hair defensively. Jane always forgot to mind her manners when her husband's family's unfortunate trait was involved. Had she been in a lighter mood, Hermione might have laughed.

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Once in the safety of her room, Hermione sat in front of the mirror on her vanity table and peered in wearily. Her hair was still indeed as voluminous as ever. Age did not seem to bring it into any state of agreeability. In her opinion, her eye color was a dull sort of brown, and others would call it a pleasing shade of honey. While her nose, and more recently, her teeth were features she could tolerate, she despised her over-voluptuous lips and pasty, freckled complexion. Her figure was a burden to herself; she lamented the small size of her breasts and the substantial size of her bottom. All in all, a very unremarkable looking girl, Hermione thought with a small degree of misery.

It then occurred to Hermione that feeling miserable about her looks at such a time was extremely shallow. She had just lost her dear Uncle Ralph, and she would never see him again. There were others that she would never see again: Dumbledore, Hagrid, Lupin, and that was not to mention a great deal of the students with which she had attended Hogwarts.

"I am a horrid person," she moaned while dragging a brush through her hair. The brush then got stuck in a snag of hair, mid-stroke. "Serves me right," she squeaked painfully as she tried prying her tresses from the bristles.

"Hermione, do hurry up! The lawyer has arrived," Jane Granger called up the stairs to her daughter.

"I will be right there!" she replied, opting to fashion her hair into a plain, but serviceable bun.

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"Pardon me?" Hermione was dumbfounded.

Ralph Granger's lawyer cleared his throat and reiterated, "To my great-niece, Hermione Jane Granger, I bequeath my estate in Lower Luxor, and--" He proceeded to read

off a sum of money that made Hermione's head reel. Ralph Granger had been a very wealthy man, gathering most of his net worth from his first marriage to a woman no one in the family could quite remember. She had died very early into the marriage, and their courtship had been a brief one.

Hermione barely registered the respectful murmurings of 'Congratulations' the announcement garnered from her relatives.

"B-but, what am I to do with all of that?" she whispered to her father.

Denny Granger smiled and squeezed his daughter's shaking hand. "Live quite comfortably, I imagine."

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Hermione was still in a daze after the reading was finished and her relatives had departed. Her mother was quite at a loss as to what to do with her daughter and busied herself with housework while her father brewed tea for Hermione and himself.

They were both sipping tea at the kitchen table when he spoke. "Why don't you spend the summer in your new home and invite a few friends? It's quite a large place, and I imagine it might be very lonely, but some company may cheer it considerably."

Hermione bit her lower lip thoughtfully. "I had not thought of that. I suppose the burden of my inheritance would not be so great if I had people to share it with, right?"

Denny laughed out loud for the first time in a week. He adored his little girl's seriousness and often teased her for it. He rewarded her perplexed look with a kiss on the forehead.

"Only you would consider a beautiful home and an ample income a burden, my dear," he explained, wiping a tear from his eye, mirthfully. Looking at him, Hermione could tell that it felt good to laugh again. If only she could experience the same feeling.

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Ron and Harry were only too happy to join their friend on a journey to her new estate. They had been both been living at the Weasley homestead since the final battle. It was something Molly had insisted upon until they found proper residencies. It was actually more like until she found them proper residencies, as most of the advertisements for homes they'd picked up in the city were deemed 'inappropriate.' Hermione's estate was approved of immediately, even though Hermione tried to explain that it would most likely only be for the summer.

"Oh, I am sure you will fall in love with it the moment you all set eyes on it," Molly prattled on, heedless of Hermione's practical nonsense.

All three of them found themselves agreeing with Molly's prediction once they arrived.

The home itself stood at three stories high and reminded Hermione of what Mr. Darcy's Pemberly might look like. It was quite old and large, but it lacked the forbidding look that most ancient homes tended to have. It rested comfortably atop a hill that overlooked the sprawling grounds, reflecting off of a pond that might have been dazzling had it been kept up a bit.

This was Hermione's first visit to her uncle's estate in Lower Luxor. Ralph had accumulated several estates throughout his life, but 'The Grange' had achieved fairytale status in Hermione's life through the stories he had told about it. Apparently, his first wife had jokingly given the home its name as a play on Ralph's last name and an estate in the book "Wuthering Heights." Although the rest of the Grangers had not known the woman who penned the name very well, the name had stuck throughout the years.

"I fancy Malfoy Manor in all its former glory couldn't hold a candle to this place," Harry remarked breathlessly. Hermione and Ron nodded in agreement.

Hermione then grinned. "Shall we?"

Without another word, the three of them raced to the front entrance of their summer home.

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Severus Snape's peaceful stroll through the forest near his home was disrupted by the sounds of merriment coming from the property beyond the forest's edge.

Impossible, he mused, that place has been deserted for ages. That was what Dumbledore had told him when he had banished Severus from Hogwarts a year ago...

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"You barely escaped with your life, Severus. The Dark Lord and his followers will be relentless, now that they know what you are," Dumbledore explained, trying to assuage Snape's outrage.

"I will not be banished like some contrite boy, Albus! To be cast off like this is an insult to all I have ever done for you--"

"Enough!" Dumbledore bellowed, silencing the angry man's ranting. "I am not doing this for your safety, Severus, not yours. Have you forgotten Justine?"

Severus scoffed at this. "Of course not. But, perhaps if you just sent her into hiding... It is not as if she constantly requires me at her side."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "No, I have noticed the distance between the two of you. But consider what would happen if you were captured. The Dark Lord could certainly find her through you." He paused to allow what he was saying to sink in. He noticed Severus paling ever so slightly. "If you care for her, you must be hidden with her, at all costs. Surely you would not tell me that you do not care for her. I know her mother was a disappointment--"

"I am not a spiteful man!" Even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. He bowed his head in defeat. "I will do as you say."

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He had just started to get used to life in the home Albus had obtained for him. It was quiet and peaceful, save for the times when Justine became unbearable. Even though the war was over and the danger had passed, he was quite content to remain where he was. Dumbledore had provided for him in his will in addition to the comfortable living Severus was making from the pharmacies he sold his potions to. Life had been kind up until these sudden intruders had impeded upon his little part of the world.

He kept a safe distance while he observed the newcomers. The sight of them made his blood run cold. It was Potter, Weasley, and the girl whose face was now seared into his memory, the little know-it-all herself.

"Damn."

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Author's note: Like I said, it's VERY non-HBP compliant. In fact, it was originally written before the release of HBP. I am doing a rewrite because while I enjoy the story, I want to go over it and flesh out the characters while trying to plot it out a bit better. I hope you all like it! Also, many, many thanks to my beta, Distempered, who shows me that she corrects because she cares. Who loves ya? wink

A Scandal

Chapter 2 of 5

Rita Skeeter's poisonous quill strikes again.

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe is sadly, not mine. I also give credit to Jane Austen, as I used the opening lines of her wonderful novel *Pride and Prejudice* in Rita Skeeter's article. It is only slightly altered to suit the story.

"That is horrible." Hermione's face contorted into an expression of pure horror.

"I don't know why things like this get printed," said Harry, furrowing his brow.

"What? This is brilliant! Let's frame it." Ron smirked at her.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were mulling over the fact that Rita Skeeter had caught wind of Hermione's inheritance and had wasted no time at all announcing it to the entire wizarding world in an article that was both insulting and overblown as always.

"Burn it, Ronald, please," Hermione moaned, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"No, no, Hermione, just let me read it aloud. Maybe it will sound better the second time." Clearing his throat, Ron began.

Hermione Granger: The Wizarding World's Most Eligible Bachelorette

By: Rita Skeeter

Well, Gentlemen, Hermione Granger is on the market. The stunning, curly-haired brunette has just amassed an enormous fortune thanks to the unfortunate passing of her uncle.

Miss Granger has three elements that make her desirable in any man's eyes: beauty, brains, and property. Did I mention beauty and property?

Indeed, this unusually beautiful temptress has all the world at her fingertips and more. What man could say no to a woman who's got the total package?

The incomparable Miss Granger was educated at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where she attained immense popularity by earning top marks and enjoyed a very close connexion with The Boy Who Lived. Their teenage affair was said to be brief but passionate. This reporter spent many tear-filled hours comforting the grief-stricken Harry Potter when the exquisite femme fatale jilted him for the talented foreigner, Viktor Krum, whose renowned Quidditch skills obviously were no match for Potter's infamy.

The latter part of Hermione Granger's Hogwarts education was marred by the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. However, the brainy bombshell aided her former lover to triumph and was decorated as a war hero. Do not let this mannish tidbit dissuade you anxious bachelors out there, however; one need only glance upon her countenance to see that she is a shining example of all things feminine.

The past year in Hermione Granger's life has apparently been conducted in the solitude of her family home, but now

she is on the market, for it is a truth universally acknowledged that

a single woman in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a husband. I wish all of you men in pursuit of her elusive hand good luck, and perhaps even a bit of a headstart. My sources tell me that she is currently residing at--

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"Stop!" Hermione shrieked, burying her burning face into her hands. It was too much to bear. Somehow that awful woman had hounded her out, and her precious privacy had been invaded.

"Don't fret, 'Mione. At least she didn't mention your flat chest or your big bum for that matter. I say it's a really flattering portrayal." Ron received a punch in the arm for his troubles. "That hurt!"

"You deserve it, you obnoxious git. I think you are the only person that finds this amusing," Hermione replied, noticing the guilty look on Harry's face.

"I do not find it amusing! I'm just proud that your name is in the papers!" Ron explained lamely.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Of course you are."

"I am!"

She glared at him, and then at Harry, who was studying his own shoes, trying desperately to not be involved in this dispute. "Are you amused by the fact that she gave away my address? Are you amused by the fact that gold-digging opportunists will be pouring into this house at all hours?"

"Oh, come off it, Hermione. No one is going to believe Rita's exaggerations about your stunning good looks--"

"What a thing to say!" Hermione exclaimed, cutting Ron off entirely.

"I was also going to say that you aren't as well off as she says!"

Hermione stood up, upsetting her bowl of cereal in the process. She noted that Harry was trying his best to stay uninvolved, which only made her more upset. Harry was supposed to be Ron's best friend, and therefore responsible for what stupid things came out of Ron's mouth.

"Oh, sod off, both of you!" She then stormed out of the kitchen in a huff.

"I think we set her off mate," Hermione heard Ron comment as she headed off.

"We?"

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Hermione strolled through The Grange's grounds, fuming over the audacity of Rita Skeeter.

"That bint! How dare she?" She emphasized the 'she' by swatting a nearby shrubbery with a twig she had picked up.

She had only been living at The Grange for two weeks! How did that woman obtain information in such a short period of time? The Skeeter-thing must have had spies.

As Hermione hastily paced the grounds, she realized that she hadn't done much exploring aside from the main house, and her reasoning was because the house itself required so many repairs. Hermione suspected that her uncle had kept Bilson the caretaker on out of friendship and not because he was proficient at his job. All that man seemed to do was sit in the wine cellar and drink. Then while surveying the overgrown state the rest of the property was in, she came to the conclusion that the groundskeeper was not any better at his job than the caretaker.

After adding the state of the grounds to her list of frustrations, Hermione decided to take her travels into the forest connected to the property. It was one of the few occasions where Hermione felt safe entering a wooded area.

The only thing I have to worry about here is running into a nasty bunch of nettles she thought, pausing to take in the pleasing scents and the cooling shade. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back with a peaceful smile. Everything around her seemed to soothe her heated temper. There was no Ron to goad her into a fight, no paint fumes or sawdust to assault her senses, and no hired help to cajole into, well, helping. It was just herself and nature, standing in a place that had remained constant for centuries.

"Beautiful," she sighed, holding out her arms and doing a little spin.

"You may have grown into your looks, Miss Granger, but I would not *go that far*."

Hermione's eyes flew open, and her heart nearly stopped as she found herself being observed by Severus Snape.

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Once again, Severus found himself heading down the beaten path of the forest on his way to spy on the residents of The Grange.

Severus didn't know why he persisted in observing the home that the three banes of his existence resided in. He told himself that it was merely to make sure they weren't feeling courageous enough to invade his privacy by crossing the woods adjoining their properties. Although, it also could have been because he was bored.

Since the war had ended, and he had retired from spying, the transition into quiet domesticity had not been an easy one. Before, his isolation had been tolerable, as he'd had Albus to confide in. He was finding it difficult to get used to the fact that the only person who showed an active interest in his thoughts and well-being was gone. All he really had binding him to the world was his eight-year-old daughter, and at her age, Justine was hardly someone he would go to for council. He was also convinced that her decided lack of brilliance in everything was her mother's fault entirely.

"May you burn in hell, Annette," he spat out bitterly at the woman who no longer existed. He found himself constantly cursing the woman, especially when enumerating his daughter's shortcomings to himself.

A curious sight made thoughts of Annette and Justine flee his mind. Just beyond the path, near the edge of the forest, was what appeared to be a young woman. It had been quite some time since he had been able to admire one, and she was an interesting specimen. From what he could discern, her hair was a rich, honeyed brown, and the rays of sunlight breaking through the canopy of the trees made some parts of her curling locks appear golden. The fine material of her white blouse was slightly transparent, and revealed that, while she was not as well-endowed in the chest as he would like, her shape was most pleasing. Severus found himself mentally praising Muggles for inventing blue jeans as he shamelessly admired her shapely bottom.

"Damn!" he swore under his breath as he came closer to the object of his long dormant-lust. He could have kicked himself for not realizing that the only female that would have probable cause to be in the forest so close to The Grange would be Hermione Granger. A fucking student. Well, a former student.

He could see no way to retreat without escaping her notice, even though she appeared to be lost in her own world. He was loath to admit to himself that her rapturous smile was quite beguiling.

"Beautiful," he heard her sigh. He smirked. Now would be the perfect time to reveal himself.

"You may have grown into your looks, Miss Granger, but I would not go that far." He knew that it was a rather low way to announce his presence, but he needed to restore his dignity over the matter of lusting after her.

He resisted the urge to chuckle at the bewildered expression on her face. The beauty he had been admiring certainly waned a bit in distress. Her charmingly fair complexion was now mottled with red splotches, her eyes went as wide as an owl's, and her mouth was fixed into a pale pink 'O.'

"Professor Snape? But you disappeared before the war. You were a deserter."

Hermione's analysis of Severus's departure angered him and made him inwardly lash out at the memory of Dumbledore. Because of the old man's insistence at protecting him, Severus Snape was considered a coward to the wizarding community.

"Yes, you would think that, wouldn't you, Miss Granger?" He sneered at her, proud of himself and the way she winced at the tone of his voice. He still had it.

"Well, w-what was I supposed to think, exactly?" He could tell that she was trying hard to be bold, which surprised Severus a bit. Usually the only person to answer back when he was attempting to be intimidating was Potter. The mere thought of that cheeky brat set his blood to boil, and the only person he had to take it out on didn't deserve--actually, he adored the idea of taking out his anger on the Granger chit.

He bent low to whisper in her ear. "If this were Hogwarts I would strip Gryffindor of every point they possessed on account of your cheek." He then straightened to full height, glaring down at her. "As we are not in school, I suppose I have no power over you. Rejoice in your assessment of my actions; I am sure they are correct as you seem to know everything." He started to stalk away, to leave her speechless and staring after him, but he paused and turned on her again. "Do be careful. This is not the Forbidden Forest, but there are unseen dangers. Wolves would adore a tasty little morsel like you." He smirked at her expression and finally continued on his way.

"Wolves are more afraid of humans than we are of them," he heard her mutter. He looked back to see her retreating out of the woods. Unfortunately, he still maintained his opinion that she had a lovely backside.

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Hermione flung open the front doors of The Grange and stomped into the kitchen. Harry and Ron were busy trying to repair a series of kitchen cabinets, a job that Harry insisted they do without magic. Hermione imagined it had something to do with wanting to feel manly. In spite of herself she did smile for the briefest moment, when she noticed Ron managing to sneak some magic past Harry when he wasn't paying attention.

"Severus Snape," Hermione then stated.

Harry missed the nail he was hammering into and bashed several fingers, and Ron just turned pale and stared at Hermione, forgetting to put away his wand. "Ow! What possessed you to say that name when I had a heavy object in my hand?" Harry asked, before blowing on his injured fingers. Ron merely nodded in agreement.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "I ran into him in the forest next to the grounds. I think he lives near here."

"The coward!" Ron exclaimed.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I don't think so. When I called him out on it, he seemed almost hurt by the accusation. Maybe there was a deeper meaning to his actions back then?"

Harry and Ron shook their heads. "I think the nasty git was just looking out for his own interests as usual," Harry commented before standing up and going to the freezer to search for ice.

Before any of them had a chance to think the matter through any further, a knock at the front door caught their attention.

"Bilson, the door!" Ron cried out. There was no response, and the knocking continued. "Ruddy hired help," he muttered before they all decided to investigate.

Hermione opened the front door and peered out curiously, half expecting to encounter Snape once again. It was not Snape.

"Hello, Herm-own-ninny."

End of Chapter.

Author's other note: For those who remember the earlier draft of this tale; Yes, I am not going to overload you with OC's. I seem to suck at writing them, and I kind of lost track of them last I tried. The line in Skeeter's article about women of fortune being in want of a husband is a line from Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" with a little tweaking to suit the story.

A Skeeter

Chapter 3 of 5

The death of a beloved relative makes Hermione into a very wealthy young woman, and she becomes a target for every gold-digger in the post-war wizarding world. Who will save her from such a fate? Non-HBP compliant; Non-DH compliant.

By: fuchsiasteerpike

"Viktor, what a nice surprise!" Hermione exclaimed, throwing her arms around the tall Bulgarian. Viktor returned the embrace stiffly, giving her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. When Hermione had a chance to get a good look at her old friend, she found his expression to be quite serious.

"I am sorry for your loss, Herm-own-ninny. I haff not come here for condolences though," he explained. His eyes went to the floor nervously, and Hermione saw Ron eye him suspiciously. He still did not get on with Viktor, despite the fact that he was long over the brief crush he had once had on Hermione.

"Did you run out of retirement money, Krum? Need to replenish your Gringotts account?" Ron nastily inquired.

"Ronald, really!" Hermione scolded him under her breath.

Viktor merely glared at Ron, and then turned his attention back to Hermione. "That Skeeter woman is on her vay with a small army of gold-digging fools. I haff come to save you from them." He suddenly took her left hand into his right and dropped to one knee.

The trio gaped at him in astonishment, Hermione blushing furiously. "V-Viktor--," she stammered, but she was cut off when Viktor placed a reverent kiss on her hand.

"Please, do not doubt that I am serious. I haff no need for your money. I haff only need for your happiness and security."

"Oh, my," sighed Hermione.

"Wow," whispered Harry.

"Bloody hell!" swore Ron.

Viktor looked up at her beseechingly.

"But Viktor, we agreed that the two of us are not a match. We came to that decision ages ago," Hermione explained, pulling her hand from Viktor's gentle grasp.

He sighed at this, his eyes large and mournful. "Yes, ve did. But ve are fond of each other, yes?"

"Well, yes -- but with that reasoning, I may as well marry Harry, or even Ron!"

Ron glowered at her. "What do you mean, 'or even Ron'?" Ron asked, defensively.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know how idiotic the notion of me becoming Hermione Weasley would be! We'd kill each other outright."

Harry nodded in agreement. "You know she's right, mate."

Hermione nearly rolled her eyes again when Ron started to sulk, but Viktor took her hand once more in his and started to speak again.

"Vat about it, Herm-own-ninny? Vill you marry me?" he inquired.

Before Hermione could open her mouth to reply, pandemonium erupted on the household.

"The door was open!" a female voice announced. Four heads turned to the entrance in unison, only to have their eyes blinded by a flashing light. Once Hermione's eyes adjusted, she found herself squinting at none other than Rita Skeeter and a young man who was not her usual photographer.

Viktor quickly rose to his feet, throwing an arm around Hermione's shoulder protectively. "Call them off, Skeeter; I haff gotten here first," he informed her in a gruff voice.

"Bollocks!" Ron spat at Viktor.

"What the devil is wrong with everybody?" Hermione asked, throwing Viktor's arm off of her. She glared at Rita. "What are you doing in my home?"

"Hermione darling, I've only come here in hopes that I can help you in your search for true love." She pushed the young man with the camera forward. "This is my nephew, Peter."

Peter Skeeter was the exact male copy of his aunt. He was tall, wiry, and about twenty years of age, with a blond head full of corkscrew curls and bright blue eyes framed by tortoise-shell glasses. He appraised Hermione with a curious ghost of a smile before dropping on one knee. Ron's and Viktor's eyes both widened at this gesture.

"No, Hermione, don't let him propose!" Ron shouted. Hermione looked to Ron and Viktor with a bewildered expression, and they both looked mortified. She then turned and saw that Harry was just as confused as she was. A tug on her left hand brought her attention back to Peter.

"Marry me."

"Better yet, why don't you marry me, Granger?" a voice drawled from the entrance. Hermione's eyes flew to the door, where they beheld Draco Malfoy. Draco was then quickly pushed aside by a young man with a slightly rounded face, brown hair, and kind eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but I got here as fast as I could! Gran told me about this, and I thought if you had to choose someone, best it would be a friend." He ran to her side and awkwardly dropped to one knee. "I think you ought to marry me to be safe."

Hermione felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. "N-Neville?"

But before Neville could respond further, a new suitor entered the room. He was suave and dark, with exotic eyes and designer robes. "You have a choice between a foreigner, a four-eyes, a ponce, and a stuttering moron. Why not choose a real man?"

Hermione furrowed her brow at the new intruder. "Blaise Zabini?"

He nodded and approached her with one of the most charming smiles she had ever seen. Out of thin air, he produced a thornless red rose and handed it to her. "Would you care to become Mrs. Blaise Zabini?"

Hermione took the rose with a trembling hand; it immediately fell from nerveless fingers as she fainted.

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"Hermione, open your eyes," Harry's gentle voice urged.

Hermione's eyelids fluttered open. She was lying on a chaise in the main room, and seven faces were peering down at her curiously. "I feel like Snow White," she groaned.

"You're not very pale at all, actually," Ron informed her.

Harry rolled his eyes at Ron's remark. It was quite obvious that he was the only one who caught the Muggle reference.

"You fainted, Herm-own-ninny. If I had not caught you, you would haff been injured," Viktor explained, his expression dark.

Blaise grinned proudly. "I do have that affect on people. I get it from my mum, I reckon."

Draco scoffed at Blaise's remark. "You're batty if you think your charm made Granger go into a swooning fit. A proposal from a Malfoy is a very tough act to follow."

"Yeah, I think a proposal from a Snape would be about the only thing to top something that disgusting," Harry quipped.

Draco glared daggers at Harry. "And yet she hasn't said 'no', Potter, has she?"

"She hasn't said 'yes' either, Malfoy," Neville pointed out.

"To any of us," Peter added. The others shot him dirty looks.

"Sorry, but she doesn't even know you. I think you are disqualified by default," Draco sneered.

"Herm-own-ninny does not even like you," Viktor spat at Draco.

"Nobody likes you," said Ron, siding with Viktor for once.

"You're not even in the running, Weasel King," Blaise remarked.

The bickering continued for several minutes and would have lasted longer, if Hermione's patience had not chosen to run out completely.

"Stop it! I cannot and will not marry any of you!"

"If it were only that easy," Ron muttered.

Hermione shot him a worried look. "What do you mean?"

Rita Skeeter cleared her throat, drawing all the attention in the room to herself. "It's 'Penelope's Law', dear. You have to choose somebody or else."

"Or else, what?" Harry asked, giving her a dirty look.

Draco sighed impatiently. "Granger has multiple suitors who proposed to her in her own home. We are all magically bound here until she makes a decision. It's old magic."

"That is vat I tried to save you from," Viktor offered sadly.

"The same with me, Hermione. I just wasn't fast enough." Neville refused to even look at her.

Hermione then turned to Rita Skeeter, angrily. "You have not proposed, and therefore you are not bound to this place. I suggest you leave."

Rita smiled and reached out a hand to soothe Hermione's hair, but Hermione swatted it away ruthlessly. "Think of the story, Hermione darling. If I were to stay and record the progress of this little social experiment, we could make millions! 'Penelope's Law' has not been initiated for hundreds of years. Everyone will want to read about this! Think of the money--"

"Get out, or I will throw you out," Hermione growled through clenched teeth, her eyes blazing with hatred. This woman had intruded on her privacy, heedless of the fact that she was weary from the war and mourning the loss of several close friends. Rita was a hateful, stupid creature that had incited thoughtless young men to invoke an ancient marriage trap. Tears burned at Hermione's eyes as she realized she was seeing her life laid out before her, and that she was now left with the unhappy choice of two men she did not love, one she loathed, and two she did not even know.

Rita attempted to soothe her hair once more. "Please consider--"

This time, Hermione pulled out her wand and pointed it at the woman's neck. "Get. Out. You. Cow."

Rita complied, backing away to the door very slowly. "You will regret this, Hermione. Mark my words."

"Are you threatening her?" Harry asked. He too had his wand at the ready, as did Ron, Viktor, and Neville.

"No, not at all. I was referring to the money, of course!" She was at the thresh-hold of the front door and preparing to turn and go. Hermione raised a hand, imploring Rita to stop. "Have you had a change of heart, Hermione dear?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I just wanted to inform you that from here on out, any beetle I find on the premises will be stepped on immediately. Do you understand?" She smirked when Rita fled the house in response.

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Once Rita Skeeter vacated the premises, an awkward silence descended on the household. Hermione looked at her suitors with a blank expression, and they all looked away uncomfortably. The atmosphere was suffocating her, so she stood up and said, "I am going for a walk. This house is quite large, so I expect that all of those here with thoughts of marriage will have found their rooms and will be out of my sight by the time I return."

No one spoke up in protest of her decision. It seemed as if the general consensus was that Hermione Granger was a terrifying force to reckon with.

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Once Hermione reached the path in the woods, she burst into angry tears. "Bugger!" She dropped to her knees and pounded her fists on the ground like a small child who had not gotten its way. "Damn, damn, damn!" She then hissed in pain as pebbles cut the skin on her hands. It was unfair, so completely unfair.

A rustling of leaves and the snapping of a twig alerted her to the fact that she wasn't alone. "I said I wanted you out of my sight," Hermione said coldly.

"Begging your pardon, but you never said anything like that to me." A sweet, childish voice caused Hermione to look up. It was a child; a little girl to be exact.

Hermione stood up immediately, blushing with shame at her display. "I am so sorry! I thought you were -- well, never mind that." She studied the little girl before her, finding her to look oddly familiar. "Do I know your parents?"

The girl appeared to be at least eight years old. She was tall and quite skinny, with long black hair that was clumped with various tangles and snarls; sallow skin that was smeared with dirt, and a nose that was only slightly too big for her small, oval face. Her eyes were large, grey, and framed by long, thick lashes; an oddity, indeed.

The girl wiped her nose on her sleeve and shrugged. "Do you know Severus Snape?"

Hermione smiled at the girl. "He was one of my professors at school. Are you his niece?"

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm his daughter."

If Hermione had not just been proposed to by five different men at once, this news would have been the most shocking thing she had heard all day. However, it was a close second. After gaping at the girl like a fish for several moments, Hermione finally asked, "What is your name?"

The girl narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Justine, and it's not nice to stare."

End of chapter.

Author's note: I would like to thank amsev, who stops me from humiliating myself every time I submit a chapter. I would also like to take this time to address a menace: The comma. We need to stop the comma before it is too late; before it comes after your children, or your children's children! I bet the dreaded comma has reared its ugly head in this A/N, already.

A Switch

Chapter 4 of 5

A brief switch in POV gives us a glimpse into the life of Justine Snape.

Disclaimer: Anything that doesn't belong to me is not mine.

Had Justine Snape not run into Hermione Granger in the woods that day, her day would have been a rather unremarkable one. She woke up early--at the insistence of her personal house-elf Kitty--and was forced into taking a bath, which she hated. After the bath, Kitty helped her get dressed in a robe of a particular shade of yellow that Justine hated, but Kitty thought it made her young missus look very sweet and girlish as all little ladies should. Once her hair had been brushed and pulled back with a yellow ribbon, she was sent downstairs to have breakfast with her father.

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Justine had taken a seat at the table before casting a glance in her father's direction. He sat at the opposite end, a newspaper hiding his face. Kitty put a plate of toast and eggs in front of Justine before clearing her throat. "The young missus is here for breakfast, Master Snape. Isn't she looking quite sweet in yellow?"

"I have told you before, Kitty, yellow makes the young missus look like a duck." He flipped through the pages without so much as looking at Justine.

Justine's face had reddened at her father's careless remark. Although she knew it was true, she did not like to hear it from him.

"Besides, it is pointless to don her in such finery, as she will be caked in mud before the day is out. Why not allow her to wear those play-robos my sister is always sending?"

Kitty gave him a mortified look. "So boyish! Young missus is not a little boy. When old missus was a girl--"

"Tread carefully, Kitty." Severus warned in a soft voice. Kitty was a good house-elf and immediately silenced her protests.

Justine never understood why talking about her mother was such a taboo subject. She did understand, however, that whatever her mother had done, it had to have been quite bad. There was no other explanation as to why her father seemed to dislike his own daughter so much. From all the books she had read, she knew that a father ought not hate his children. Storybook fathers were all loving, kind, and attractive in general. Justine felt that Severus was none of these things.

"I do not like the yellow either, Father," Justine stated timidly. He gave a non-committal grunt and turned the page. Justine sighed sadly at this. She was quite sure that she had to be the loneliest girl in the world.

"Do not sigh, Justine. Sighing is for silly, ignorant girls, and I will be damned if I will allow you to become one."

Justine responded by glaring down at her plate and viciously stabbing the eggs with her fork. Breakfast time was her least favourite time of the day. Sometimes she felt as if the wrong parent had died.

"Miss Temple will be arriving soon; I expect you to be on your best behaviour this time."

Justine looked up from her breakfast with a look of terror on her face. Miss Temple was Justine's newest tutor and--in Justine's humble opinion--an evil harpy. She had been hired on several weeks ago after Justine had overheard her father complaining about what a trial home-educating her had become. He was in the privacy of his study--a place Justine had been forbidden from entering--so she had merely listened at the door. A soft, feminine voice had suggested sending her away, and he had immediately dismissed the idea as being too costly. The woman on the other side of the door then told him of a woman she had used before her son was old enough to attend wizarding school, and that had been the end of that. Miss Temple arrived, and with her she brought harsh words and a ready hand to smack with; whereas Severus had never raised a hand towards his daughter during his teachings, no matter how much she tried his patience.

"But she--" Severus silenced her with a mere gesture of his hand, his eyes never leaving the newspaper.

"I mean it, Justine. She told me how you are prone to run off in the middle of her lessons."

"She makes it easy by falling asleep in the middle of the lesson," Justine muttered under her breath.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said: May I be excused?"

He nodded. "Go wait for Miss Temple in the school-room." Justine started to get up from her chair before he spoke again:

"Straight to the school-room, Justine."

"Yes, Father."

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Justine obeyed her father's request and was sitting primly at her desk when Miss Temple hobbled into the school-room. She was a slight, hunched creature of about a

hundred odd years with a puff of thin, white hair on top of her wrinkled head, shrewd blue eyes, and a hard little mouth. She walked with a cane that she had no reservations about wielding when she felt the situation called for it and scolded in a harsh, shrill voice that resembled a small, angry lapdog.

"You should not wear yellow; it makes you look like you have malaria," Miss Temple said by way of greeting. Justine did not reply, but narrowed her eyes and stared at the floor. She gave a start when Miss Temple brought her cane down on the top of Justine's desk with force that belied her considerable years.

"Don't glare at your betters, girl!"

Justine looked up at her, eyes wide and innocent. "I was glaring at the floor."

"Precisely."

Justine sat through the rest of the lesson with forced patience, waiting for the moment when Miss Temple would inevitably nod off in the middle of a grammar exercise. She smiled triumphantly when that moment came, the old woman's gnarled and hairy chin resting upon her thin bird-like chest. Justine stood up and started to sneak out of the class-room, but stopped when a brilliant thought crossed her mind. She walked over to the rocking-chair where Miss Temple was napping and snatched the cane that rested at the old woman's side.

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Justine managed to sneak out of the house without being noticed. Her father was in his study doing whatever fathers did, and Kitty was busy with tidying up Justine's bedroom. Justine felt a pang of guilt over the fact that Kitty would also soon be preparing to bring up a lunch that Justine would not be around to enjoy. She did not like vexing poor Kitty, but escaping Miss Temple was an absolute necessity.

Before heading towards the path that lead to the woods, Justine decided to visit the duck pond nearby. She waded into the middle of the shallow pond--upsetting the ducks along the way--and dropped the cane into the water. It was quite heavy and sank to the bottom. Justine smiled in self-satisfaction and waded out of the pond, heedless of the fact that the water had ruined her yellow-silk robe.

"Nasty old woman," she muttered, pulling the ribbon from her hair and casting it to the ground. The woods awaited, as did her few hours of freedom before the rest of the house caught on to the fact that she was missing. It did not matter that her father would be very angry, not when it was such a beautiful day.

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As Justine walked, she found herself thinking about her small family's current situation. She had not minded living in the small house in Spinner's End with her father. It had been a very shabby existence, but at least there had been other children to play with. Not that her father actually wanted her associating with the children from Spinner's End. They were Muggles--he had told her--and basically a pretty bad lot. They had been the ones who taught her the subtle art of sneaking off unnoticed.

During the fall, she traveled with her father to Hogwarts, where she was restricted to her own private quarters. It was rare that her father would visit her during the year, but the visits from Albus Dumbledore more than made up for her absent father. Dumbledore would often sit with her in the small library connected to her rooms, and they would take tea together. He was always interested in what she had to say, as if she was an adult and not a bothersome child. He did not find her restless chatter annoying and treated her stories with sweets from Honeydukes. If not for Dumbledore, Justine probably would have retreated into herself long ago, as neglected children often do.

Justine was still quite bereft that her only friend was gone and just a little miffed that he saw fit to send her to the big house before he had died. It was a nice house, and her father had more money now, but it was a lonely, isolated place. Kitty was only a house-elf and only felt affection for Justine because she had to; her father hated her, and he had his research to keep him company; Miss Temple was just plain sadistic and would probably be quitting after this little incident. It was quite fair to say that Justine felt a little cheated.

Justine took a break from her pondering when she reached her favorite part of the woods. It was a little clearing off the beaten path, and in the middle of the clearing was a grand willow tree. Justine fancied that the willow was a fairy castle and would often play underneath its shady branches, pretending that she was queen of the fairies. It did not matter that she was too tall, too gangly, and altogether too homely to be a fairy; she was merely in her human disguise. Her fairy-form was exquisite: silvery blond hair, soft floating robes of gentle blue, and grand translucent wings. Her eye colour she would keep because she had no issue with her eyes. They were the one thing she was vain about, as they were her mother's eyes.

She played pretend for several hours, not taking note of the fact that her robes were now muddied and torn or that her hair was a fright. Once she tired of her game, she decided to stay on the path, as her current rebellion was making her bold. She had never ventured further than the clearing.

She walked for several minutes before she came upon a curious sight. A young woman she had never seen before was kneeling on the ground in the middle of the path, crying and cursing quite pitifully. Justine imagined the woman must be having a very horrible day. To her shock, the woman yelled at her! There must have been a mistake, and Justine endeavoured to correct it.

The day was about to become quite a remarkable one.

End of Chapter.

A/N: I would like to thank my newest beta in the fuchsiasteerpike creative team, Megan. Thank you!

A Snape

Chapter 5 of 5

The death of a beloved relative makes Hermione into a very wealthy young woman, and she becomes a target for every gold-digger in the post-war wizarding world. Who will save her from such a fate? Non-HBP compliant; Non-DH compliant.

"I am sorry, I didn't mean to stare. It's just that... Well, I didn't know Professor Snape had a daughter," Hermione explained to the strange little girl.

Justine looked down at her muddy shoes and shrugged. "It's all right." She glanced up at Hermione, curiosity evident in her shrewd, grey eyes. "What is your name?"

"Hermione Granger. It would appear that we are neighbours."

Justine's pale face lit up. "Really? It's been so long since I've seen other people around here!" She blushed and looked quite shy all of a sudden. "Do you have any children my age living with you?"

Hermione laughed quite suddenly at Justine's inquiry. "Well, no... I'm not old as all that you know."

Justine's face turned a deeper shade of crimson. "Oh, I didn't mean..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked away, seemingly mortified at having been laughed at. Hermione immediately felt guilty; it was obvious that Justine was quite sensitive.

"Don't be embarrassed, Justine. I did not laugh to be cruel. Your question just caught me off guard. That is all." She gave the younger girl a reassuring smile, which Justine reluctantly returned.

"You don't think me silly?" Justine asked suspiciously.

"Not at all. If anything, you are far too serious for your age."

Justine rolled her eyes. "You don't even know how old I am!"

Hermione sighed. "You're right, I don't. If I had to guess, though, I think I would say... Ten?"

Justine appeared to be quite pleased with Hermione's guess, but shook her head. "You would be wrong then. I'm eight."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "That's awfully young to be wandering the woods by yourself. Where are your parents?"

"My mother is dead, and my father is at home," Justine answered plainly.

"You poor dear!" Hermione gasped.

Justine opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a voice in the distance calling out her name.

"My father is coming," she groaned. She looked down at her ruined clothes and dirty hands. "I don't expect he will be very happy with me. I've sort of wandered off without telling him, you see."

Hermione gave her a pitying look. "Oh, dear..." His voice grew louder as he neared his approach. Thinking quickly, Hermione performed a quick *Scourgify* on Justine. The girl gave her a grateful yet nervous smile. The tongue-lashing would be considerably less severe now that she was not caked in mud.

Severus Snape approached the two of them, and Hermione noticed that he looked almost wild with concern. When he spotted his daughter, though, he schooled his features into a stony glare.

"So, you've decided that Miss Temple has nothing to teach you again, I see." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at his prodigal offspring.

"I think *she* decided that when she fell asleep in the middle of my lesson again," Justine replied, averting her eyes from Severus's glare. Hermione suddenly felt very uncomfortable, finding herself in the middle of an argument between father and daughter.

Severus looked as if he was ready to give a scathing reply, but then looked up as if just taking notice of Hermione's presence.

"You again? I might have known it wouldn't be long before you started inciting rebellion in my daughter." He smirked.

Hermione gasped in indignation. "How can you pin this on me? I've only just met her!" She blushed when she realized that he had been joking. "I daresay she wandered off for a reason."

Severus's expression grew dark. "What exactly are you implying?"

"Nothing on your part--I'm sure--but if her teacher keeps nodding off in the middle of a lesson--"

"I hear tell you passed 'History of Magic' with flying colors under the same circumstances," Severus interrupted.

"I wasn't eight years old when I took 'History of Magic', and I think that's a pretty unfair comparison!"

"Of course, no one can hold a candle to your brilliance in the classroom," he retorted sarcastically.

Hermione gave a frustrated groan and threw her hands in the air. "I give up. I was merely trying to help her case--"

"Do not. You've no right to interfere in this matter, Miss Granger." He looked down at Justine, who had been observing this exchange with rapt fascination. "Where is Miss Temple's cane?"

Justine smirked, and Hermione was struck with how much the child resembled her father when she did so. "It might be in the duck pond," she replied. Hermione noticed a muscle in Severus's cheek twitch, but he betrayed no emotion.

"I see. Why would Miss Temple's cane be in the duck pond?"

"Because I put it there... Is she going to quit?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "She is not. I managed to convince her to stay, despite your untoward behavior." He held out his hand. "Come, we will discuss the terms of your punishment on the way home. I expect you to apologize to Miss Temple and Kitty the moment we arrive. Your silly house-elf has been beside herself for hours." He turned to Hermione and bowed his head slightly. "I thank you for apprehending my daughter; I will also thank you not to put your advice where it is not wanted. Good day."

Hermione returned the bow and waved to Justine with a sympathetic smile. The girl looked positively miserable as she waved back. As Severus and Justine walked away, Hermione found herself glaring at Severus's back.

"Insufferable man," she muttered before heading back to her own complicated situation.

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Hermione returned to find her home quite silent. It was apparent that the suitors had followed her orders and were sheltering themselves from her wrath. She spotted Harry and Ron whispering together in one corner of the entrance hall. She cleared her throat, and they turned to her, both faces holding sober expressions.

"Hello, Hermione. We were just discussing the situation at hand," Harry explained as she approached.

"Oh?"

Ron nodded. "We've decided to put wards up on the property. No one but immediate family allowed on the premises, that sort of thing."

Hermione smiled. "Your immediate family? Are you sure that Fred and George wouldn't think it a great joke to propose to me?"

Ron shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I've owed my mum, and I am sure she's threatening dismemberment to any of my brothers who decide that proposing to you would be a good idea." Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at Ron. He gulped and shook his head. "I mean... Well, you know what I mean... Don't look at me like that!"

"How was your walk?" Harry asked, trying to steer the conversation away from Ron's foot-in-mouth remark.

Hermione turned to Harry, looking very much at a loss for words. Would it be prudent to tell the boys about Professor Snape's secret life outside of Hogwarts? She wasn't altogether sure if he would appreciate her divulging that fact that he had a daughter; he was such a private person. Best to let them find out for themselves, if such a thing would happen.

"It was very therapeutic, thank you," was all she said. Harry nodded with a strange expression on his face. It seemed that he sensed that something was wrong, but did not want to pry.

"What do you think about the warding idea?" Ron asked, apparently not sensing that anything was amiss in her statement.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, definitely. I've had enough of suitors for one lifetime."

The three of them spent the next hour protecting the house from intruders. Hermione even discovered a charm that made certain words impossible to utter on the premises. The word 'Marry' would magically become 'Martyr' once uttered, and the word 'Wife' would become 'Wig-maker'.

It was late in the day when the suitors decided to emerge from their respective rooms. Hermione decided that although they were intruding upon her home against her will, it would be bad manners to not offer them a bit of hospitality. The five unwanted guests were therefore treated to sitting at the dinner table with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Draco and Blaise stared down at the hastily prepared food with disdain appropriate to their class; Peter spent his time leering at Hermione's bosom, enjoying his meal with far more enthusiasm than was needed; Neville refused to look anywhere but at his dinner plate, and Viktor gallantly complimented Hermione's novice effort.

"So, how long are you going to keep us on tenderhooks, Granger?" Draco inquired with a sneer.

Hermione glared back at him. "As long as it takes, and you're not doing much to gain my favor, Malfoy. With that attitude, my decision could take months."

"You should be flattered I even proposed in the first place," Draco replied.

"Why did you propose, Malfoy? What need do you have for my modest inheritance? I am a mudblood after all." Ron, Harry and Neville gave a start at her use of the word 'mudblood'.

"Come on, Hermione, you shouldn't use a word like--" Ron pleaded before Hermione cut him off with a scathing glance.

Peter cleared his throat, bringing attention to himself. "Actually, after the war the Ministry decided to freeze the assets of all known Death-Eaters, with the exception of those who decided to oppose Voldemort at the last minute. The Malfoy clan is desolate, as is the Zabini clan."

Hermione shot a look at Blaise, who seemed to wish that he was somewhere else that moment. "Your mother?"

Blaise shook his head. "No, my mum was never a Death-Eater. All of her husbands, however..."

"All of them?" Hermione squeaked.

"Yeah, the Ministry decided the fact that they were dead was no excuse. She told me to regain our former glory or not come home at all." He shrugged. "She also told me that if I *martyr* you, I should kill you whenever I get the chance."

Hermione's eyes widened at this. "Well, I guess that leaves you out."

"I assure you if we *martyr*, I will not kill you."

"A likely story," Ron replied, rolling his eyes.

"Why would I tell you all that if I were really going to kill her?" Blaise quizzed.

"To make us think you wouldn't, perhaps?" Harry offered, popping a bit of baked chicken into his mouth.

Blaise gave another shrug and continued to eat his food in silence.

The meal continued in awkward silence until Bilson entered the dining-room and announced that Hermione had a visitor. Everyone at the table followed her into the entrance hall, curious to see if another suitor had arrived. It wasn't another suitor.

"Justine!" Hermione exclaimed. The little girl smiled at her and then appraised the curious onlookers, giving Ron a shy little smile.

"Who is Justine?" Harry asked.

"And how did she get past our wards?" Ron inquired.

Justine sighed. "I'm Justine." She turned to Ron, greedily taking him in with her eyes. "I'm ten, by the way."

End of Chapter