

# Worth a Thousand Words

by LaiksMarei

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

## I

Chapter 1 of 6

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

**Disclaimer:** I am not now, nor have I ever been, mistaken as J. K. Rowling. These are her characters entirely. I make no money from their usage, and no copyright infringement is intended.

**Author's Notes:** This story is quasi-DH compliant. It was written for the 2007 Winter LiveJournal sshg\_exchange exchange; the recipient was rayvyn2k. Essentially, I ignored the parts of the novel that I did not feel were unnecessary to the facilitation of this fic.

I would like to take a moment to express my deepest gratitude to DeeMichelle, Jane Average and ubiquire for their extraordinary beta skills and Brit-picking. These ladies are truly amazing, and I would be lost without their guidance. Any mistakes found within are entirely mine.

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Hermione was fairly certain she had slipped into another universe somewhere between the trip from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters to the kitchen of the home she shared with her husband of fifteen years. There was simply no other rational explanation available considering the conversation in which she and Ron were currently engaged. Truth be told, she could not honestly call herself an active participant. From the moment he began to speak to when Ron's words actually penetrated her empty nest haze, all Hermione could do was stare wide-eyed and mentally chant, *This isn't real. He's just having a go at me. This cannot possibly be the same man that was just lecturing first years on house loyalties.*

"Hermione, please say something ... anything," Ron begged, pulling her from her thoughts.

Hermione's tongue was thick and heavy, her mouth a proverbial desert of indecision at just how to proceed. The mental voice of a sure-to-be Woman Scorned raged for her to verbally flay the impostor that stood before her...clearly, *her* Ron would never say such things to her...while the desperate cries of her confused and wounded heart begged to be saved from drowning in the churning tide of her anguish. Gathering the remains of her fractured courage, Hermione did her best to articulate her worst fear.

"Is ... is there someone else?" she whispered with trepidation, her untamed hair curtaining her bowed head.

Ron's beautiful baby blues welled thick with tears at her question. "Kia ..." he choked.

Ron's use of his favourite endearment for her...his surprisingly clever turn *onknow-it-all*...caused a sob of despair to reverberate throughout her already-emotionally-charged body. At the sound, Ron moved immediately to close the physical distance between them.

"Never!" he assured her as his hands reached to cup her face tenderly, raising her head so that their eyes met.

"Let me make this plain: not since that day at Hogwarts, when I kissed you and made you mine, has there ever been even a thought of someone else," he declared, the veracity of his words evidenced by the look on his face.

"Then why?" she pleaded, her voice hitching slightly.

"Because," he paused to press his forehead to hers, "you're too bloody noble and stubborn, and I love you too much to let you keep pretending this is really what you want from life."

Hermione drew back, irritated at his presumptuousness. "Since when did *you* become an expert in what *I* wanted?"

"Honestly? When I stopped being a selfish arse and took a good, long look at you, me, and us," he said seriously, brushing away the lone tear that now travelled down his cheek.

Hermione instinctively reached to comfort him, but he stayed her hand with his own. "Do I make you unhappy, then?" she asked.

"Not in the general sense, no, but lately whenever I look into your eyes, I see a longing for something more ... the yearning for what could have been, and it just breaks my heart. I can't bear knowing that this," Ron motioned between them, "is holding you back, which is why I have to end it."

"Ron, I..."

"Please let me finish, Kia," he interrupted, pain colouring the tone of his voice.

She pressed her lips together tightly to keep from trapping the tender flesh between her teeth and nodded for him to continue.

"I found the letters, Hermione," he blurted in a rush.

Hermione looked at Ron, confusion evident in her expression, as she was not entirely certain as to what letters he was referring.

"The letters, Hermione," he repeated in aggravation. "The ones from Headmistress Vector, Professor McGonagall, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Panic flashed across Hermione's face. *No! He could not possibly have found them unless ...*

"Yes, I was snooping in your lingerie drawer," he said perceptively. "Now before you go and have a kitten, it was the first time I had ever been in there. I was looking for that saucy red number Ginny got you for our anniversary. At the time I was hoping, well ... you know," he finished sheepishly.

Her mouth formed a distinctive 'o' as she put together his reason for rummaging through her things in the first place. While it did not excuse his invasion of her privacy, she couldn't help smiling at the thought of him sorting through her knickers. Her smile quickly faded though and was replaced by a look of shame as Ron pressed further.

"That's when I came across them. At first I thought it was some sort of trick, but the more I read, the worse I felt. All I kept wondering was why you didn't say anything. Was I so terrible a husband that you felt you couldn't come to me?"

Hermione was completely perplexed about how to respond, fearing that whatever she said would be wrong or misinterpreted.

Ron's famous Weasley temper began to flare at her prolonged silence. "Merlin, Hermione! You didn't even give me a fucking chance. You just made all the decisions for me, for us, without as much as a by-your-leave. Did you honestly believe I would stifle your need to succeed or thirst for knowledge? Have I ever held you back?" he finished in fury.

"Not since we were kids," she whispered, unable to return his ire.

Ron dragged his hand through his ginger hair in what appeared to be an effort to calm himself. "What I'm trying to say is that I never expected you to give up anything for me or to become a copy of my mum. That's the last thing I wanted. I knew exactly what I was getting into when I fell in love with the bossy, bookish, kind-hearted brain of Gryffindor."

The depths of his intuitiveness startled Hermione wholly. Ron had made great strides from his days of perpetual immaturity, growing up to become a positively amazing man. How had she missed it?

Realising she could no longer hide the truth from him, she chose her next words carefully. "I guess I just thought after I had Hugo and Rose that everyone would look to me to fall in step with the rest of the Weasley women." Hermione sighed deeply. "We'd spent a majority of our lives always fighting something. The last thing I wanted was another great battle, and I anticipated it would be, especially with your family and their patriarchal view of things. I think I got lost along the way, trying to blend and be normal, keep things on an even keel," she said, her eyes pleading with him to understand.

He sighed. "But you can't do it by lying to yourself, to me, Hermione. I won't let you, not anymore."

Hermione's eyes closed in resignation. "It's all gone pear-shaped, hasn't it?"

"Maybe so, but it's not the end of the world, love," he said, a solemn look in his eyes. "A lot of good came from what we had. Just look at our two amazing kids."

Hermione gave a watery smile and nodded in agreement at the mention of Rose and Hugo. "So what happens now?"

Ron squared his jaw in determination. "First, you're going to do what you should have done months ago: you're going to march in there, Floo McGonagall and accept the position of O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. tutor at Hogwarts," he stated, pointing in the direction of the fireplace.

She could feel her aggravation building as she stared at him incredulously. "Now you wait just a bloody minute, Ronald Wea..."

He cut across her. "Don't go getting your wand in a knot before you hear me out," he said, waving his hands to halt her forthcoming tirade.

"Fine!" she bit out angrily.

"I'm not trying to undermine your feminist sensibilities, love, but it's time I had some say in things," Ron said sternly. "You need to take some time away from all the memories we have here and figure out who you are and what you want out of life. Besides, this will be a great opportunity for you to get your foot back in the door of academia."

Hermione reluctantly conceded his point with a huff, but not before questioning his turns of phrase. "Feminist sensibilities and academia, Ron? Has Minerva been coaching you, or could it be my bookish nature is *finally* having a positive effect?"

"Give me a little credit, Hermione," he teased, trying to lighten the mood. "You're the smartest person I know. Some of it was bound to stick eventually."

"But how do we tell the kids, *my* parents, *your* parents?" she whinged, returning to the subject at hand.

Again, Ron rested his forehead against hers, brushing her nose with his. "We'll do what all responsible couples do when a marriage ends...what we have to: handle it one day at a time."

"They're going to hate me, your family," she said sadly, her shoulders slumping.

"I won't let them, love. We both bugged this to hell. I'll handle my family, don't fret over it another minute. As for your parents, I'll go with you if you want."

The taut worry lines around her eyes and mouth lessened somewhat at his assurance. The last thing Hermione wanted was to lose the near lifetime of closeness she had with her in-laws or become their pariah when they learned of the marriage's demise. "I'd appreciate that," she said with relief.

Ron's voice was wrought with emotion as he stated, "As for the kids, they're smart and well on the road to maturity. I think as long as we're honest with them and show them that we're just as committed to being the best parents tomorrow as we are today, they'll understand. It might hurt for a little while not having their mum and dad together, but in time, they'll see it was for the best."

"What of our friendship? I can't bear the thought of us not being best friends anymore. I don't know how to let you go," she whispered gravely.

Ron kissed her gently, then gathered her into a tight embrace as his tears began to flow freely. "I would be lying if I said there wasn't some fence mending that needed to happen between us, Hermione. You betrayed my trust. But never doubt that you will always be my best friend, now and until the day I die, come what may. Nothing can ever take that away from us."

Hermione began weeping in earnest at his declaration. "I can't believe it's really over," she said aloud as if the words themselves were unbelievable.

"Don't look at this as an end, Hermione," Ron chastised while rocking her tenderly. "If anything, it's just the beginning. We're both marching into the unknown, the next great adventure, armed with knowledge, experience, lessons learned."

Hermione squeezed her husband tightly. After what seemed like a lifetime, she released him and pressed kisses to the corners of his mouth. "For what it's worth, I love you, and I am so sorry."

He bowed his head in acknowledgement of her apology as he reached for a small crock on the kitchen's worktop. "Now if it's all right with you, I'm going to go turn down the bed so we can have one last cuddle," Ron said, pressing the jar of Floo powder into her hands. "Go ahead, love, Minerva's waiting."

As Ron retreated towards their bedroom, Hermione made her way into the sitting room. She set the jar on the fireplace mantle, freeing her hands so they could smooth her face and hair, straightening her appearance. Strengthening her resolve and clearing her throat, Hermione took a pinch of the fine powder, tossed it into the hearth and called, "Minerva McGonagall's quarters."

## II

### *Chapter 2 of 6*

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

**Author's Notes:** For this chapter, I have somewhat altered the time line presented in the epilogue of Deathly Hallows. It was necessary for the flow of the story.

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Her necessities shrunken and safely tucked away within the inner pockets of her robes, Hermione focused on her destination with intense determination. She closed her eyes and waited for the light squeezing that accompanied Apparition. In no time at all, she found herself standing in front of a familiar faded wooden sign with two arrows pointing in opposite directions: to the right, Hogsmeade, and to the left, Hogwarts. Squaring her shoulders, Hermione turned left and briskly began the trek to the place she'd once called home.

She was within a few steps of the school's grounds when she slowed her pace. Gradually Hermione replayed the events of the last few weeks over in her mind. As promised, Ron had indeed gathered the entire Weasley clan to deliver the bombshell of their separation and the forthcoming dissolution of their fifteen-year union. While he did not go into the more intimate details regarding the nature of their split, Ron assured his family that not only was it amicable, but it was his idea entirely. While his parents and a few of his siblings were stunned, Harry and Ginny appeared less than surprised and took the announcement in stride, quickly pronouncing that not only did they fully support the couple's decision, but Hermione would always be a part of the family no matter what her last name. After a few terse words from Ron to the others regarding the mother of his children, the rest of the Weasleys followed the Potters' shining example and agreed with their sentiment with minimal reluctance.

The talks with Hermione's parents and the children went smoothly, though Hugo and Rose would certainly need some time to adjust. Beforehand, on Minerva's advice, Hermione and Ron had penned a letter to each of the children asking how they would feel if their mummy worked at the school. Hugo didn't seem to mind one way or the other, so long as Hermione wasn't waiting in the wings to pounce and fuss over him whenever it struck her fancy. He had his reputation to consider; there would be no coddling in the public eye for him. Rose, on the other hand, was utterly delighted at the thought of having her mummy so close. Days later, Headmistress Vector granted Ron and Hermione permission to bring the kids home for the weekend so they could carefully break the news to them in a more comfortable and familiar environment.

Hermione was abruptly wrenched from her recollections, having reached the school's gates, nearly colliding with them. She extended her hand and touched the unyielding wrought iron to steady herself. Hogwarts was just as she remembered it being from the days of her youth: the castle dominated the evening sky, the titian glow of the setting sun illuminating its towers and battlements.

Removing her wand from the leather sheath covertly tucked up her sleeve, Hermione touched its tip to the gargantuan lock securing the gates and whispered the password Headmistress Vector had provided. After a metallic clank, the entrance gates swung forward with a heavy groan. As she passed between the winged-boar-topped pillars, the sloping lawns that led to the Forbidden Forrest caught her eye. Nearby stood Hagrid's cabin, the familiar crossbow and galoshes still hanging from the half giant's front door.

The gates having closed and locked themselves once more, Hermione continued to follow the path leading to the front entrance of Hogwarts. Her booted feet making contact with the first of the stone steps seemed to summon Minerva McGonagall; the Transfiguration professor greeted her with a swift hug before promptly guiding her through the Entry Hall. The two women exchanged pleasantries as they made their way through the corridors en route to the Headmistress' office.

Professor Vector was warm and welcoming to her formerly-favourite Arithmancy student and wasted no time outlining once more all the ins and outs of the position. With all the proper contracts signed, the Headmistress excused herself to oversee dinner in the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall showed Hermione the office and private chambers she would be using before inviting her to tea later in the week. Soon, she too departed for dinner, and Hermione was left to her own devices.

After unpacking her things and meticulously arranging her office and tutoring area, Hermione decided to clear her head and do some exploring to reacquaint herself with the

school. While most everyone was having their evening meal, her children included, Hermione found she did not possess the desire to dine.

Not much had changed since her time as a student; a great deal of the school was just as she remembered it, though it did not seem as large and looming. The staircases still shifted at random intervals, the ever-present trick stair waiting for an unsuspecting student to forget to jump it. Peeves could be seen swooping from room to room, making trouble whenever it struck his fancy. Painted wizards and witches moved freely between various portraits while ghosts chatted amicably about the fresh crop of firsties.

Hermione was plucked from her trip down memory lane when she looked up to see where her roaming had taken her and came face to face with her close friend, Neville Longbottom.

"Fancy meeting you here," Neville smiled knowingly, eyes sparkling with mirth as he lazily opened the door for her.

"Wha...How did you know it was me?" she questioned in surprise.

"Would you believe me if I said, 'My inner eye'?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "Become a master of Divination in your spare time, have you?" she quipped.

Neville snorted at her impertinence and motioned for her to enter.

Hermione did so with a half-hearted smile and sagging shoulders.

Neville seemed to read her body language perfectly and offered her the perfect universal solution to any problem, handed down from generation to generation. "Fancy a cuppa?"

Hermione nodded gratefully. While Neville summoned a house-elf and ordered tea service, Hermione flittered around the room in a futile attempt to keep her anxiety at bay. She had not visited with Neville in several weeks. The last thing she wanted to do was dump all her emotional baggage on him the moment she sat down.

The tea arrived within minutes. Neville fixed them both up, passed a cup to her and took a seat on his sofa, commenting on the soothing properties of the dandelion-nettle blend. Hermione accepted the offered cup but did not join him, choosing instead to continue to pace the length of the room.

"What's the ginger-haired menace done to muck things up this time?"

Hermione shook her head. "I wish it were that simple."

"All right, come tell Auntie Neville all about your wee problem," he placated soothingly, budging over to make room for her, patting the place beside him.

Hermione sighed in defeat and wondered if she was truly that transparent. "Problem? I don't have a problem; I have bloody *problems*. Plural," she moaned, flouncing onto the settee after placing her tea on the table in front of her.

Neville nodded in empathy and reached for a hip flask hidden within his teaching robes. "Let's warm up that tea a bit, shall we," he said as he leaned forward and poured a liberal amount of something black and viscous into her cup, vaguely resembling tar.

Hermione quirked her eyebrow and said, "I can see you'll be a terrible influence on me, Neville. I've only just arrived, and already I'm in the bottle."

He laughed heartily while adding double the dosage to his own tea. "Hardly! You aren't the first to indulge in a nip every now and then, and you certainly won't be the last. Just wait till you start working with those little blighters on a daily basis. Then you'll understand why Trelawney's always pissed."

Hermione cast a sideways glance at him and took a large gulp of the concoction. Immediately she started to splutter and cough.

Neville gave her a slap on the back to help ease her fit. "Easy there! In the future, I would suggest smaller sips until you become accustomed to the kick."

She heeded his advice and continued to sample the strange brew with caution. "Do I dare ask what in blazes is in this?"

"A true gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," he said with mock severity.

Hermione raised a quizzical brow but did not press the nature of his comment. Instead, she returned to the aforementioned subject. "Apparently I've made a muck-up this time, and Ron is likely to be a candidate for sainthood."

"Ronald Weasley, patron saint of arachnophobes!"

Hermione almost inhaled her tea. Neville always kept her in stitches no matter what the occasion. "Are you certain you weren't sorted incorrectly? You've damn near become my Agony Aunt and comedic relief," she teased, playfully swatting his hand.

Neville rolled his eyes clear to the back of his head. "Right! Because really, everyone knows Gryffindor is the new Hufflepuff. Sentimental, funny, brave and foolish practically go hand in hand these days," he deadpanned.

Hermione waited a fraction of a beat before bountifully breaking into a genuine fit of giggles. She had not been this amused in quite some time. Just as her laughter reached its pinnacle, she heard what sounded plainly to be a derisive snort from the direction of Neville's bedchamber.

Placing her hand on her chest to quell her girlish sniggers, Hermione cocked her head to one side and puzzled aloud, "What in Circe's name was that?"

Neville cleared his throat in a pale imitation of Umbridge, stilling Hermione's attempt to rise from her seat. "Not to worry, sweets. I'm sure it was nothing. You know how this draughty, old castle is ... what with ... the continuous settling over time and all," he said haltingly.

Hermione pinned him with her most suspicious yet piercing look and hummed, "Umm-hmm. Absolutely dreadful, Neville! If you were sitting a N.E.W.T. in cock-and-bull right this very moment, I have no doubt you would be unequivocally marked T for Troll. That was perhaps the most pitiful excuse for a diversionary tactic ever."

Neville appeared slightly put out by her assessment of his abilities in the skilful art of fibbery. Nevertheless, he forged ahead like a trooper preparing for a final confrontation. "Hermione, really, it was nothing."

Hermione managed to wriggle out of his grasp and stood facing the entrance in question, a measure of befuddlement in her sepia-toned eyes. Allowing the cobwebs to clear and the cogs to turn, Hermione postulated the possibilities with well-meant surety.

"You little sneak!" she bubbled excitedly after mentally ticking off the most ridiculous of her notions. "After all these years, you finally replaced the dearly departed Trevor, didn't you?"

Before Neville could open his mouth to confirm or deny her deduction, a muffled, 'Not bloody likely!' issued from within his bedchamber.

Hermione rounded on an owl-eyed Neville, her mouth agape and cheeks stained with mortification as she came to the next logical conclusion in her arsenal of explanations.

"Merlin! I am terribly sorry, Neville. I ... I feel like such a bullish, inconsiderate fool," Hermione stammered in a rush. "Here I am, completely oblivious, barging in on what could have been an intimate moment between you and ... oh, my word, is that Hannah in there?" she finished in a high-pitched squeak.

The reply she received, a distinct, '*Really* not bloody likely,' came not from Neville's lips, but was decidedly male in origin.

The crimson flush of Hermione's cheeks threatened to spread to the whole of her body as she whispered with averted eyes, "Is there something you need to tell me, Neville?"

Neville ran his left hand through his fringe, brushing it from his face, and exhaled in deeply despondent defeat. "It's not what you're thinking; I can guarantee you that."

Hermione reached for Neville's hands, lacing her friend's fingers with hers as she searched his aubergine eyes for an applicable answer for the evening's follies.

"Whatever it is, I won't tell a soul," she assured him lovingly, the promises of time-tested friendship entwined within her words.

Neville nodded and withdrew his hands from Hermione's, opting instead to offer her his arm.

Warmly accepting his proffered appendage, Hermione permitted her childhood friend to guide her toward the mystery that lay just beyond the open door of the room where Neville slept.

Halting in front of the rough mahogany grain of the vertical jambs, Neville turned to her before they crossed over the threshold. "Just so you know, you weren't even close," he intoned with a wink and a beaming smile.

Hermione buried her face in Neville's shoulder in a futile attempt to stave off some of the laughter that threatened to break free.

As they made their way into the room, Neville used his unencumbered hand to pull his wand from the pocket of his robes, whispering a soft *lumos*. Instantly the room flooded with a warm, muted light, and both Hermione and Neville needed a bit so their eyes could adjust to the change.

"Well, have a look-see," Neville invited.

Hermione eased her arm free from Neville's and walked around the room, inspecting the nooks and crannies. He had always been a tidy fellow, and it showed throughout his apartments, right down to the very bed on which he slept...a place for everything, and everything in its place. It was tastefully decorated in lush, earthy tones and had a very homey feel to it. There were Muggle and wizard photographs peppering the room's various surfaces. The windowsill housed several potted plants, a few of which the origin she could not discern on sight alone.

"All right, I'll bite. What exactly am I missing?" she asked, her curiosity further piqued when she could not find anything out of the ordinary.

No sooner than Neville's lips parted to reply to her question, a silken baritone filled with rancour spoke instead.

"Well, well, well ... someone owl the *Prophet*; the know-it-all really doesn't know it all."

Hermione's head instantly snapped in the direction of the venomous voice she'd known since the age of eleven. There on the wall closest to the door, in his Headmaster's portrait, hung none other than Professor Severus Snape.

Hermione opened and promptly closed her mouth several times, addled at having suddenly lost the ability to verbalize her quickly-changing range of emotions.

"Ha!" Professor Snape's portrait exclaimed. "It appears I won our *friendly* wager after all, Longbottom. I've done what no man before me has managed to accomplish: the skillfully-snarky Severus Snape has rendered the garrulous Granger comprehensively speechless."

"Weasley," Neville corrected, hearing a *whump* that sounded vaguely similar to a sack of pixies falling to the ground.

"Speechless and unconscious, apparently," Snape jibed. "Either way, the terms were clear, and don't think I'll be letting you sidestep your obligation to me."

Neville leaned over Hermione's collapsed form and cast a few diagnostic spells, making certain she had not sustained any serious injuries. "You say that as if going back on my word were even a remote possibility," he said, his voice laden with exasperation.

"Yes, well ... it's moments like this when one can only say: Professor Snape. In Longbottom's bedchamber. With the portrait," he announced straight-faced before erupting into uncharacteristically riotous laughter at his own cleverness.

Neville shook his head but smiled at the Professor's clever quip as he bent once again and scooped Hermione's limp form from the stone floor, cradling her in his arms. Firmly securing her against his chest, he turned to Professor Snape.

"I think that's enough Cluedo for you," Neville said light-heartedly and exited his rooms, carrying his fainting fare to her quarters just down the hall.

### III

#### Chapter 3 of 6

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

The first rays of the morning sun began to filter through the partially drawn shades of Hermione's bedchamber. Slowly opening her eyes to greet the day, the events of the previous evening came back to her in a rush. *How in the bloody hell did I get back to my rooms?* With no time for lazing around...no doubt Neville had some serious explaining to do...Hermione bolted upright, only to be met with a searing pain in her temporal region. Groaning aloud, she cradled her head in her hands to rub the length of her forehead and eased back onto the bed, completely oblivious to Neville, who was seated in her bedside chair.

"Good morning, Sweets," he said simply.

Hermione jumped slightly from not only the noise but also his unexpected presence. "Hmmp! What's good about it?" she grumped, her severe pain and discomfort

evidenced by her tone.

"Here, chew on this," Neville encouraged softly, extending his hand to her. Sitting in his palm was a lump of flesh-coloured goo.

"If you don't mind my asking, what is this?" she questioned and accepted what she assumed was a remedy for her current predicament.

"It's my own special concoction of feverfew and anise-hyssop, blended into a gelatine-like substance and used to relieve pain in the head and tooth areas. Just last month, Professor Snape helped me find the proper balances in the formula, effectively creating an alternative to your standard headache treatment," he added with pride.

If Hermione found the collaboration between Neville and Professor Snape to be odd...she'd never known their previous liaisons to be remotely *successful* unless they involved a nasty cauldron explosion and a series of detentions...she made no mention of it. Desperate to silence the cerebral symphony of percussion and its continuing rendition of Kabeláč's *Number One in D*, Hermione popped the portion into her mouth and began to chew. Her eyes involuntarily slid closed as she hummed in a mixture of delight and relief, revelling in the cool mint flavour that tantalised her taste buds, setting them alight.

Neville grinned, pleased that his friend was on the road to a speedy recovery. "All right then?"

"Never better. Thank you, Neville," she said, opening her eyes as she turned to face him.

"Think nothing of it."

"So, last night ... I can only assume I collapsed in complete shock and humiliation, yes?" she asked.

"That about sums it up, yeah," he replied, amusement saturating his tone. "After I checked to make certain you weren't in any immediate physical danger, I brought you back to your rooms so that you might be more comfortable and wake in surroundings you recognised."

As he spoke, Hermione took in his frumpy exterior and deduced that he had spent the night in the bedside chair, keeping vigil over her as she slept.

"Merlin, Neville, have you slept at all?"

"I managed a quick kip. I wanted to be sure you were truly okay," he said, stifling a yawn.

"Please tell me you don't have classes today," she pled in a repentant voice.

"I don't, though I do have a meeting with Headmistress Vector this afternoon."

Hermione expressed her heartfelt gratitude once again. When he assured her it was nothing, and that she would have done the same for him if roles were reversed, Hermione wasted no time before broaching the indubitable hippogriff that loomed in the room. "Do you feel up for talking about it, or are you knackered past reason?"

"Actually, I'm ready to talk about it. It will be a relief to *finally* have someone to share it with."

"You haven't told anyone, not even Hannah?" she inquired, shock creeping into her voice.

"No one," Neville confirmed before continuing. "About six months after I started teaching, I decided to tackle the rather daunting task of reorganising greenhouse three. It was awful, let me tell you. Professor Sprout was a closet hoarder and kept damn near everything, bless her."

Belatedly, Hermione remembered her manners. She interrupted Neville long enough to pat the bed for him to join her, and then promptly summoned a kitchen-elf for tea service and a light breakfast for two. When the friends were suitably fed, caffeinated and comfortable, Neville resumed his tale.

"Late one afternoon, I stupidly attempted to disentangle a juvenile crop of Devil's Snare that was about to overrun the place. In a pinch, I walked out to this run-down work shed I had recently discovered behind the greenhouse, hoping to find a spade. See, I'd just broken mine. So, I used Alohomora on the lock and pushed open the door, which by the way almost fell off the bloody hinges it was so rotten. I'm surprised the unlocking spell alone didn't cause it to crumble into a pile of splinters."

"Odd that a work shed in such terrible shape would even have a lock," she added.

"Right! I thought the exact same thing."

"Then what happened?" she asked.

"Well, I stepped through the doorway; it was terribly dark in there, but I didn't dare use any more magic for fear I would set the place ablaze with me in it."

After the war, situations involving excitement and titillation were rare for her...not that she was complaining...and when they did indeed occur, they typically involved the antics of her mischievous children aided shamelessly by their roguish father. Now, she listened breathlessly as Neville spun his tale, her excitement building with each word he spoke. Her skin tingled from the rush of adrenaline, her palms clammy and slick with perspiration. When Neville paused to sip the remainder of his tea, Hermione motioned impatiently for him to get to the crux of the matter.

"So, I'm tinkering around in this death-trap when I notice a rather grotty, tattered cloth in the far corner. Naturally, I assumed it was protecting gardening equipment, so I whipped off the covering. Hermione, I was gobsmacked and totally unprepared for what I found: wizard portraits of the Carrows, Professor Snape and the Dark Lord," Neville finished in a near-whisper.

"Shite!" Hermione cried. "What did you do?"

"You mean after I convinced myself I wasn't completely mental and remembered to breathe? I snatched the professor's portrait away from that filth, slammed the damn door and practically flew back to my chambers. Thank Merlin the castle and grounds were virtually deserted, it being a Hogsmeade weekend."

"My word!" Hermione proclaimed as she stared at Neville in wonderment. "That poor man would have been in there for an eternity with those maniacs if you hadn't found him. It must have been pure torture."

"I can only imagine. He doesn't talk much about the time he spent locked in that shed with those tossers."

Hermione was finding it difficult to fathom a likely scenario. "Neville, how is it even possible that there were portraits of them painted? Who in their right mind would even consider taking such a commission?"

"That he did tell me. When Professor Snape was appointed Headmaster, the Carrows thought it would be a riot if they all had portraits done up, a testament to their legacy of death and destruction. They went crawling to their master with the idea. Apparently, Voldemort shared in their amusement and gave his blessing, even sitting for one himself."

"Un-bloody-believable!"

"Yeah, but it gets worse; Alecto used Imperio on some poor sod with a deft hand at the craft to do it and then killed him. Snape was just going to Obliviate the man and turn him loose, but Alecto and Amicus weren't having any of that," Neville hissed coldly, his body tensing with each awful word.

Hermione stroked Neville's hand to soothe his discomfort at recounting the grim scene and his own remembered experiences with the Carrows. "Professor Snape always did try to do the right thing, no matter what the situation."

Neville visibly relaxed under her ministrations and nodded in agreement. "That he did. I never understood it all as a kid, but growing up and looking at things with adult eyes changes one's perspective."

Hermione carefully broached her next line of thought. "What happened to the other portraits, Neville?"

A maniacal look of hate-filled glee bloomed across his face. "After I got the professor situated, I went back to greenhouse three. On my walk there, I devised the perfect plan to rid this world of the last of their taint. I gouged the portraits with secateurs and slathered them in undiluted bubotuber pus. When I got tired of listening to their screams of fear and fury, I spit in what was left of their painted faces, Transfigured the work shed into firewood and burned it in my hearth that very night."

"That was simply brilliant, Neville, and I'm sure Professor Snape was most grateful, whether he said so or not."

Neville beamed at his friend's praise. "He did, though not in so many words. You know how cryptic he is...recognition wrapped within invectives."

Hermione readily agreed. "How's life been, having the master of duplicity cloistered within your chambers all these years?"

"At first it was positively atrocious," he said in a put-upon manner. "He's always loathed the very mention of my name, so the idea of us co-existing together was not high on his list of ways to spend the remainder of his semi-sentient existence. Not to mention it put quite a damper on things with Hannah for a while, *if you know what I mean*," he added with an exaggerated wink. "Now, we walk a fine line of dreadful tolerance."

Hermione clutched her mid-section and laughed loudly. "And when you have visitors?" she trilled.

"Normally he's rather well-behaved, so I don't have to resort to trickery to keep him hidden, though there have been times when I've had no recourse but to use Disillusionment and Silencing Charms. I didn't get the chance when you appeared out of nowhere last night."

"Sorry about just showing up like that." Hermione had the decency to look abashed. "I was just wandering, and the next thing I knew, I was standing in front of your door."

"S okay," he mumbled, fatigue edging into his voice.

Little by little, Hermione watched as Neville's chin fell forward until it was, at last, pressed to his chest. He was fast asleep. Hermione took pity on her courageous friend and shifted him so he could lie down. Covering him with a soft duvet, Hermione drew the shades tighter so the morning sun would not disturb him. Quietly, she crept from her bedchamber to allow Neville some much-needed rest before his appointment with the headmistress later in the day.

## IV

### *Chapter 4 of 6*

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

Weeks turned into months as the autumn winds folded into blankets of winter snow; days came and went in a blur of activity. When she wasn't badgering her N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. students to revise until their brains turned to mush and didn't have her own nose pressed within a book, Hermione divided her free time amongst the kids, Ron, family and friends. At least one night a week was spent in Neville's company; thick as thieves they were. Professor Snape surreptitiously observed them with feigned disinterest. Now and again he would make an offhanded comment, though never fully engaging Hermione directly in any particular conversation.

On one such evening, after imbibing a large quantity of spirits to help the two friends unwind from their decidedly disastrous day, Hermione resolved to test the waters and see if the prickly Potions master's stubborn skin had finally begun to wear thin. No longer could she hold her fascination with him in check.

After assailing him with a number of questions ranging from his Machiavellian nature to portrait lore—in particular how the other portraits' inhabitants were blissfully ignorant of his existence, most of which he pointedly ignored—Professor Snape's dam of indifference finally broke.

"Longbottom, will you shut her up! It really gets on my wick when you encourage that harpy to spout any inanity that pops into that overly stimulated brain of hers," he ground out.

Hermione knew she should be furious that he'd insulted her, but instead she found herself captivated by the fact that her buttoned-up and ever-proper professor had been so blatantly crude. "Sir, do my ears deceive me, or did you just swear?"

Neville roared with laughter at Hermione's child-like observation. "That's nothing, Hermione. You should hear him when he's had too much to drink after a visit to the wine bar portrait in the Third Floor Corridor. He has quite a vulgar vernacular, don't you, Professor?"

"Sod the fuck off, Longbottom."

Hermione's eyes and smile were mammoth. "You just did it again! I truly had no idea you used such base language, Professor."

Professor Snape's eyes formed razor-thin slits, and his voice became the very essence of venom. "Why would you, Granger? You know nothing about me beyond your school-age encounters, and most of what you've learned from them wasn't entirely authentic."

Hermione paid no mind to his disdainful disposition, her senses thoroughly dulled thanks to the alcohol currently warming her belly. "You're absolutely correct, Professor, which is why I have been 'spouting inanities,' as you so delicately put it, to try and get to know the real you."

"Oh, well, that changes everything," he announced, his voice dripping with saccharine sweet sarcasm.

Hermione teetered on the edge of her seat as she waited for Professor Snape to *finally* share his confidences.

"Let me ease your curiosity and put an end to the enigma that is Severus Snape: Death Eater, Potions master and former Headmaster of Hogwarts, once and for all," he said in a sardonic snit. "I enjoy reading, solitary walks and swearing and am fascinated with the Dark Arts. I keep lists in tatty notebooks of words I think are interesting. In my spare time, I collect spores, moulds and fungi. Why, I even like my meat cooked medium rare. I can wank with either hand, as I am ambidextrous. And when the

occasion presents itself and I fancy a fuck, I prefer the woman to be on top!" he finished in a crescendo of spittle and snarls.

Hermione and Neville both were unable to contain themselves and toppled over with laughter at the absurdity of the situation that had just occurred.

Professor Snape's tone was acid. "Satisfied? Now get stuffed!" he sneered and marched out of his frame to parts unknown.

Neville sobered somewhat when he realized the professor had stormed from his portrait in a murderous rage. "Wicked! You managed to wind him up and learn more about him tonight than I have in fifteen years. Oh, well done, my friend! Bloody well done!"

Hermione emotions were frenzied. This was not the result for which she was aiming. "Merlin, Neville! Now I'll *never* get on his good side."

"Put it out of your head, Hermione. He'll settle down in a day or two and go right back to pretending you don't exist."

"But that's not what I want!" she whinged.

"It will all shake out soon enough, I promise," Neville said, hoping to mollify her. "Now, I must unfortunately see you out, as I have classes tomorrow. If I don't get to bed soon, I'll have a right foul hangover in the morning, and that will be a bad thing. Tomorrow's breakfast is an old fashioned fry-up, and I have no intention of missing it."

Hermione permitted Neville to escort her to her door. With hug and a buss on the cheek, she sent him on his way. After changing into her nightdress, Hermione sluggishly crawled into bed as sleep threatened to overtake her. Before succumbing to a well-deserved rest, she resolved to get to know the real Severus Snape and befriend him, whether he bloody well liked it or not.

## V

### Chapter 5 of 6

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

January came, though not soon enough in Hermione's opinion. Christmas was over and she could finally have some peace of mind again. Boxing Day at the Burrow proved to be a challenge, and it took all of Hermione's restraint not to slice Molly into perfect portions with the carving knife she'd only just plucked from Arthur's hands and serve her up as a garnish for the holiday goose. Ron didn't fare nearly as well and received a cuff from Bill and a stern look from his father when he told his mum to quit flapping her gums where he and Hermione were concerned.

While reflecting on her *holiday* and other events in the weeks since her return, Hermione was coming from an Arithmancy N.E.W.T. revision session when Neville very nearly crashed into her in the corridor.

"I've been looking all over for you, Hermione. I desperately need your help, and I haven't much time. Come with me, and I'll explain," he insisted urgently and yanked her through the halls, giving her no time to object.

She listened intently while trying to catch her breath, their vigorous pace making it difficult. Neville quickly told her of an accident in greenhouse one with a first-year Hufflepuff as he dragged her along. He needed to attend to his charge straight away and could not predict how long it would take, but that was not the problem at hand. He had promised Professor Snape's portrait long ago that he would take him somewhere today, and if Neville could not make it happen, a tram ride to hell would seem like a picnic. Could Hermione please do him this one tiny favour? When she looked into his desperate eyes, she remembered all he had done for her and could not say no. Relieved and wholly grateful, Neville hastily kissed and thanked her in one fell swoop before rattling off the latest password to his chambers and bolting for the Hospital Wing.

Hermione grudgingly made her way to Neville's quarters, dragging her feet on the stone floor with every dreaded step. She fully expected Professor Snape's portrait to throw a wobbly when he discovered it would be she who ushered him to his destination, but that did not make her any more prepared. Things between the two of them had been perpetually awkward ever since the night they'd quarrelled, which had left her feeling like a right arse.

For the life of her, Hermione could not remember anything significant about January 30th, so it puzzled her as to why this trip absolutely must be made today. It was frigid outside, and the snow was falling steadily, the howling winds ready to cut through warm flesh and shatter bone. She would need her heaviest cloak and a plethora of charms to protect her from the elements. Hermione was not exactly sure what to do for Professor Snape, as she knew so little about portraits, most of her knowledge acquired from *Hogwarts: A History*. Perhaps a strong *Impervius* would do the trick.

Reaching Neville's apartments, Hermione quickly spoke the password to gain entry. Closing the door quietly behind her, she forced herself not to dally any longer and made her way to into his bedchamber. As it was half one, Hermione expected to find the professor drowsing just as many of the portraits did when the students were in class. Luck was, unfortunately, not on her side today.

"Granger," he hissed snidely.

Hermione stiffened her posture and prepared for the eminent war of words, her voice respectful but cool. "Professor."

Severus Snape's ebony eyes were filled with bitter malice. "And to what dubious honour do I owe this visit? Longbottom is in class, as I'm sure you are well aware," he growled, his nostrils flaring.

"Yes, sir, and he sent me to tell you he must beg your pardon as he will not be able to keep his appointment with you. One of his students was seriously injured today."

The professor was rigid with rage—shoulders broad and tightly drawn, teeth clenched together—an angry statue of Romanesque descent. "I see. How very convenient for him."

Hermione pressed forward with caution. "It just so happens, I am free for the rest of the day and am more than willing—"

He didn't give her a chance to complete her sentence. "Absolutely not!"

"Sir, if you'll just allow me to finish—"



"I have no desire to listen to your and Longbottom's schemes to make it possible for you to nose in my affairs. Do you believe me to be so thick? For once in your life, mind your own business."

Hermione's mood was instantly recognisable: she was not to be trifled with. "Listen, you ungrateful tosser, I don't give a bloody fuck whether we make it to wherever it is you think you *need* to be today. I'd be perfectly happy to walk out the door without a backward glance and let you wallow in your own misery."

Professor Snape's face was hard, his jaw set. "I find this situation highly unorthodox, and I strongly object to your being a part of it in any fashion," he snarled.

"Duly noted. I take it we're going then?"

He glared at her for an inordinate amount of time but resignedly nodded in assent.

"Now, are we going to do this the easy way with no more fuss, or are you going to force me to take drastic measures?"

Hermione watched abject horror cross his face. No doubt he was imagining scenarios that involved shrinking and silencing spells gone awry.

"The easy way I suppose," he grumbled before adding *abloody chit* under his breath.

Hermione stepped to where his portrait hung and removed it from the wall as carefully as possible. As she lowered him to the ground, she averted her eyes from his intense scrutiny the second their faces became level. What was it about his gaze that made her feel so naked and utterly unravelled?

"Do you know where we're going?" he questioned in clipped accents.

She cleared her throat to answer but still avoided direct eye contact with him. "Yes, sir. While I am not familiar with the place, having never visited there, Neville was very specific."

"If you've ever wanted to do something right, Granger, and I've never known you to make a cock-up of anything deliberately, just don't Splinch us."

Hermione did not dignify his backhanded compliment with a response, focussing instead on getting him situated. She pulled her fragile-looking bottomless beaded bag from the pocket of her robes and drew it open. "This might be a little awkward, but I'll try to make it as comfortable as possible."

The professor eyed the bag with suspicion and swallowed nervously but wisely kept his mouth closed on the subject.

Hermione picked up his portrait and genially worked it into the bag. In no time at all, Professor Snape vanished within its depths. Closing the bag once more, Hermione returned it to her pocket. Her cloak fastened tightly and hands suitably gloved, Hermione steeled her resolve and made the trek to the school's front gates.

"It won't be long now, sir," she spoke just loud enough for her voice to hopefully penetrate the fabric of the bag.

When she received no reply, Hermione exited the gates, closed her eyes to focus on the location and Apparated to the predetermined destination.

When her feet touched the snow-covered ground, Hermione opened her eyes and came face to face with a deserted playground. The remnants of a battered chimney marred the skyline; the hiss of a train could be heard from the nearby railway head.

As Neville had instructed, she searched for a small thicket of trees with a river that lazily snaked its way through their trunks, finding it easily. Before she felt it safe to remove the bag from her robes, Hermione cast half-a-dozen protective charms to ensure their comfort so that they would not be disturbed.

Plucking the bag from her pocket, she opened it and rummaged around until she felt the lacquered frame of the professor's portrait. With deft fingers, she hefted him from its depths, leaving only the bag's frayed opening nestled at the base of the painting. He said nothing as he surveyed the serene scene, his black eyes greedily drinking in the landscape.

Hermione wondered silently what memories this obvious place of reverence held for him, but didn't dare speak of it. Asking the professor questions was akin to stabbing a snake with a sharp shiv, and she was in no mood to be verbally eviscerated. Instead, she turned away from him to give him some semblance of privacy and used the quiet time to reflect on the downward spiral that her life had become, a fact she had managed to ignore successfully until now.

Yes, there had been many positives, just as Ron had pointed out, but that did not negate the glaringly obvious: Hermione Granger, the pride of Gryffindor and the brightest witch of her age, had actually failed at something. This fact distressed the over-achiever imbedded within her more than no longer being bound for an eternity to her childhood sweetheart did. Knowing she had repeatedly aided in her own sabotage made her feel even worse.

Hermione had not realized she was crying until the professor interrupted her festival of pity and self-recrimination.

"Why are you crying, Granger?" he asked, struggling for an even tone.

"I'm sorry, sir. I did not mean to disturb you."

He gave a long-suffering sigh and pressed further. "You didn't answer my question."

Hermione turned to face him, her nose runny and her eyes wet with sadness. The look he bestowed upon her told her she should make with an explanation quickly before his unusually-obliging mood disappeared without a trace.

"I feel like a big, fat failure," she whispered, realising she most likely sounded very foolish to him.

Professor Snape studied her keenly. "It's not the end of the world."

"Do you even know why I feel this way, sir?" she asked flippantly.

The professor rolled his eyes at her dramatics. "Please! I know very well what you're on about. I've certainly heard you wail to Longbottom enough."

"Now who's the nosey one?"

"As if I could escape your incessant nattering," he griped, irritation infused within his words. "Look, Granger, I am not looking to mince words with you. I'm simply saying that getting divorced is not the worst thing that could happen to you. You're human, and like all creatures blessed with the gift of self-awareness, you will make mistakes. You aren't going to be labelled a failure just because you have one minor blemish on your perfect life's record. Trust me, I know."

Hermione was surprised by his frankness. The last thing she expected from Professor Snape was words of assurance and comfort. She inclined her head to indicate that she would indeed consider his advice and possibly take it to heart. Feeling emboldened by their newfound connection, Hermione took advantage of the chink in his armour. "You can't hide behind a hardened heart forever, Professor."

Professor Snape lapsed into a deep silence when she spoke and focussed intently on a lone leaf that fluttered on the ground in front of him.

"Sir, if I may be so bold, it's time to say goodbye to this dream you seem resolved to keep reliving and stop walking through the world half-asleep. Whatever this is about, I can only imagine you've done everything you could, torn yourself apart so many times to atone for whatever sins you might have committed. It's time for you to let go, too," she murmured.

His voice was a shaky whisper. "How do I do that, Granger, when it's all I've ever known? To no longer hang on the edge of a lie, what must that be like?"

"Believe it or not, I asked someone something very similar not too long ago. You know what he said to me? He said, 'Don't look at this as an end, Hermione. If anything, it's just the beginning. You'll march into the unknown, the next great adventure, armed with knowledge, experience, lessons learned. A second chance, what could be better?'"

Professor Snape guffawed in an attempt to conceal the few tears that had leaked from his traitorous eyes. "What a bunch of New Age nonsense! Wherever did you hear such rubbish?"

Hermione had to restrain herself from reaching to brush away his tears. He was only a portrait after all. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

His thin lips relaxed briefly only to be replaced by his usual stern guise. "I think I would like to go back now, Granger."

"Of course." With a wave of her wand, Hermione issued a "*Finite Incantatem!*", cancelling out her previous spells. She pulled the beaded bag the rest of the way around and over Professor Snape and tied the closure. Instead of placing the bag back in the pocket of her robes, she pressed it gently to her breast in an affectionate clench and quietly Disapparated.

## VI

### Chapter 6 of 6

A failed marriage behind her, Hermione is the newest tutor at Hogwarts. She finds a close companion in, of all people, a portrait.

As January closed in a bluster of snow and wind, February and March ushered in an unusual amount of rain. Day after day, it pissed down relentlessly with no end in sight. However, the nasty weather did not dampen Hermione's spirits in the slightest.

Repeated trips to the library to prepare material for her students reignited her passion for learning. Once this work was done, she found herself lingering ever longer over the latest research journals. She was particularly fascinated by Mortimer's work in combining Arithmancy and Charms and had in her spare time begun to repeat and expand upon his experiments.

Additionally, ever since that fateful day at the playground, she and Professor Snape had lapsed into regular companionable repartee whenever they were in one another's company. However, she had yet to ask him the true significance of the date and location of their journey. She was no dunderhead and knew he would impart that titbit when he was good and ready.

On the Ides of March, Neville dared to tempt the fates and asked Hannah to be his wife. She readily accepted, and many of the castle's occupants were jubilant at the news. Hermione's thoughts immediately turned to the professor's portrait. Now seemed like as good a time as any to approach Neville about an idea that had been stewing in her brain for several weeks. Neville was patently saddened but ultimately relieved by her suggestions, agreeing it would suit everyone involved.

Excited and pleased with herself, Hermione rushed to Neville's apartments and hoped the professor would share in their sentiment. When she burst into the bedchamber, the professor raised a painted hand to forestall her, expecting a soliloquy.

"I am well aware of Longbottom's engagement, Granger. No need to recount the details. I've been forced to listen to him practice his proposal for months now," he said sourly.

Hermione sat down on Neville's bed to catch her ragged breath. "That's not why I've come."

"Well, girl, don't dawdle. Out with it!"

"I ... " she trailed off, feeling odd-footed and unsure of how to proceed. Taking a deep breath, she squared her jaw and began again. "I would like it very much if you came to live with me, Professor. Neville's to be married soon, and it would not do to have you lurking about. I don't think poor Hannah could manage you when you are at your best, let alone your worst," she joked fondly.

Severus' hawkish features were fleetingly transfigured with amazement at her request before his mask of cool detachment returned once again. "You don't know what you're saying, Granger. I don't like you; you don't like me. I merely tolerate you for Longbottom's sake. Again, I'll reiterate what I said once before, since your feeble Gryffindor mind cannot seem to grasp the concept: you don't know me at all."

In a show of sincerity and true camaraderie, Hermione approached him and pressed her ink-stained hand to the seemingly velvety-smooth surface of the canvas, hoping to break through his many layers of practiced indifference honed, no doubt, through years of cruel treatment and disappointment. Quietly she uttered, "Everyone starts out as strangers, Professor. When all is said and done, it's where we end up that counts."

Surprising them both, Severus tentatively returned the gesture, placing his hand palm to palm with Hermione's. While she knew it must have been her brain's attempt to rationalise the situation, Hermione was certain she felt distinct warmth radiate from his hand to hers.

Gazing at him in wondrous awe, Hermione whispered, "I'm beginning to think you might have an affectionate nature, sir."

A rare smile breached his countenance. "I just might, though I am loath to admit it," he said dryly. "Did you really mean it?" His voice was a hoarse whisper, his vulnerability on his sleeve.

"Every word," she confirmed with conviction.

Severus snorted and rolled his eyes. "Very well then, if I must."

Hermione burred with laughter. "One could interpret that as an indication of an inclination toward friendship. Are we friends?" she asked, hope flowing within every ounce of her being.

Severus raised an ambiguous dark eyebrow. "It's a mystery, one which I daresay I shall look forward to sorting out over the course of time."