

Bound to Happen Again

by Battle of Lissa

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'ed by **Madbrilliant, luvsev and Southernwitch!**

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'ed by **Madbrilliant, luvsev and Southernwitch!**

Author's Notes: Thank you to Madbrilliant and luvsev for the beta!

-This story is a **sequel** to **Bound to Happen**, which can be found here>> <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=12582>

Memories:

Third-year Hogwarts student Hermione Granger respected, feared, and begrudged her Potions master in equal measure. However, each distinct impression of him had developed separately and over time.

Always ready to give praise when due, the very first Potions class had Hermione marveling at the extent of Professor Snape's knowledge and his palpable zeal regarding such a complicated subject.

From the moment she'd heard his infamous introduction speech, Hermione knew that her respect for the wizard would never waver. And like every other student who possessed an ounce of sense, at the completion of this very first class, Hermione had also developed a healthy dose of fear.

But Professor Snape hadn't transitioned from an idealized authority figure to an actual member of the human race until she'd seen his attitude towards Professor Lupin and Sirius Black. And acknowledging this aspect of Professor Snape's nature *had not* improved Hermione's opinion of him. She feared the wizard even more. At fourteen, Hermione was beginning to notice the complexities of life...that a well-intentioned, respectable individual could also harbor such unimaginable hatred in their soul.

Less than two years after Sirius had escaped from Azkaban, Hermione had become aware of Professor Snape's double life, and her opinion of him suffered another turnaround.

His willingness to spy for Dumbledore at the expense of his own safety was a marking of his valor, indeed. But sequentially to Professor Snape turning spy, this meant he'd once been a loyal follower of Voldemort to receive the mark in the first place.

He had once possessed more hatred than she could even begin to imagine.

At the end of the day, the only thing Hermione could admit without a doubt was that her unwavering respect for his station greatly warred with her bitterness against Professor Snape's overall person. After all, despite his intelligence and abilities, he reveled in being disgustingly unfair wherever an opportunity presented itself.

Now, a sixteen-year-old fifth-year, Hermione couldn't conquer an infuriating neurosis. She had never done anything other than continually validate her capacity at grasping his subject, and yet Professor Snape had always made it a point to favor the Slytherin students.

Hermione knew that this had always been a pointed snub at Harry, but she couldn't shake the hunch that his favoritism had always been a calculated insult to her as well.

Immediately after these suspicions had crossed her mind, Hermione would censure herself for such narcissistic arrogance. What reason would a man like Professor Snape have in giving two seconds out of his time to think of her?

He'd always been cruel, he'd even made her cry; however, Hermione had no reason to consider herself an intentional target.

And yet, when her friends whined and moaned over the injustices inflicted upon them by 'the greasy git of the dungeons,' Hermione concealed the ever-present inkling that she was picked on as much as Harry and Neville.

But the criticisms inflicted upon her by the man in question were of no importance compared with those of the famous Potter and the pitiful, orphaned Longbottom... right?

He's had histories with their families... and resentment... but not me. What am I to him other than an overachieving Muggle-born?

Such reasoning had made sense, objectively, but as much as Hermione wanted to banish the fearsome wizard from her subconscious-day-to-day analysis, she couldn't.

She couldn't because there was one thing that Professor Snape continuously said that made Hermione believe she wasn't *nothing* to the man.

"Put your hand down, Miss Granger!"

Hermione had never received one ounce of praise and that was all she'd ever wanted.

"Parkinson! Finnegan! Seeing as your noses are not pathetically buried in your text... like Miss Granger's... perhaps you'd like to assist in a NEWT-level research project...."

But she wasn't *nothing*...

"If I'd wanted a word for word recitation from the text, Miss Granger, I'd read the blasted thing myself! Brown! Explain the uses of...."

Hermione didn't know if anyone else had ever picked up on it, but Professor Snape seemed determined to maintain an excessively... formal... association with the Muggle-born Gryffindor.

"KRUM! Remove your hands from Miss Granger's person this instant!"

It was his address to her that singled her out...set Hermione apart from the rest of her peers. This realization was the catalyst to Hermione's growing fixation, analyzing Professor Snape's every sneer and insult. She would ponder about his past and floundered back and forth between those three main opinions of him, unsure of which was strongest.

WEASLEY! Avert your eyes from Miss Granger's cauldron and think for yourself for a change. In fact, remove yourself from her worktable... NOW!

There had to be a reason for his affected formality... but Hermione just couldn't grasp it.

Those conflicting, torturous weeks spent at Snape House in his early twenties...and the memories and emotions surrounding them...were besieging Severus more and more with each passing school year.

It had been easy to forget that alluring woman when presented with her awkward, eleven-year-old self.

Very, very easy.

But that had been years ago.

To Snape's absolute horror, his licentious reminisces about Mrs. Snape were resurfacing all over again in Grimmauld Place. He convinced himself that blasted chair was to blame.

It was Hermione's fifth year. The war with Voldemort was on the brink of exploding all around the Order. Unbeknownst to the wary Potions master and fifth-year Gryffindor, in less than three years, Dumbledore, Tonks, Remus, Fred, and Moody would all be dead.

But in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, their twisted little family cohabitated under the paternal eye of Dumbledore. This was also the time Severus' formal association with Miss Granger changed dramatically.

Despite his previous treatment of her...which had stemmed from a number of paradoxical years engulfed in resentment and anger...Snape grudgingly admitted to himself that Hermione had never failed to address him with respect.

The gawky, overachieving eleven-year-old was fading before his eyes.

Hermione was maturing, and Severus was *very* reluctant to take notice.

His reluctance was challenged to a colossal degree when he'd arrived to number twelve very late one night and had found the sixteen-year-old chit asleep in the library and in *his* chair.

Her body was twisted uncomfortably. Bare legs dangling over the arm rest, Snape noted the thinness of her nightgown...which had ridden to just above her knee.*

Snape scowled. He desired the woman she would become, and for the last five years, he had begrudged the little girl he'd been forced to teach and protect.

This... young lady... was skirting the edge of both worlds, and it made him uncomfortable to be in her presence. Especially when he remembered the liberties he had taken with the future Mrs. Snape.

Seeing her as an innocent, watching her from childhood... he regretted his behavior more than ever. And he was disgusted for unintentionally thinking of Mrs. Snape *that* way whenever he found himself thrown into the same room with this student.

Snape reached for the blanket draped over the back of the chair with the intention of covering her. Hesitating, he noticed a good portion of the cloth was wadded under her

bum. He couldn't remove the fabric and not wake the girl.

Knowing what he was about to do was probably a mistake, Severus couldn't bear the idea of leaving her exposed like this. He quickly slipped his cloak off his shoulders and covered the young woman as best he could.

He left the library, knowing that his whim was exactly that...a silly, careless whim. Things were about to change, but he wasn't certain if it would be in his favor...or to his liking.

A few nights after that incident found Severus in the library late at night once again. The chair he'd sought out was purely a coincidence.

At least that was what he told himself.

This room was the only privacy he could find. With number twelve as headquarters, Order members sporadically came and went, most times converging in the kitchen over late night snacks.

He sighed, ignoring the dreaded anticipation that his arm would burn at any moment. Despite the sumptuous superiority Severus enjoyed inflicting upon Black, his role as a spy was catching up with him.

How naïve he'd been to believe that all this had truly ended back in '81.

She'd known. Mrs. Snape could have prepared me for so much, and yet she chose not to tell me. Bitch.

He clenched his eyes, dropping his forehead into the palm of his hand.*

Just when he'd managed a few moments of sacred silence, the sound of the door creaking open ripped Snape from his brief reprieve.

Before he knew it, the words were spitting out of his mouth. "Can't I have a measly ten minutes to myself without blasted interruptions!"

A feminine squeak finally forced him to glance towards the door.

"I didn't mean..." Hermione faltered, nearly dropping the brown paper package cradled in her arms. She carelessly shoved the bundle onto an end table by the door. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

Severus rose to interrupt her. Misinterpreting the movement, she fled, slamming the door in fear of another tongue-lashing.

Standing in place for a few moments, Severus sighed before reluctantly retrieving the package. Feeling its softness, he instantly frowned. The tag was addressed to him.

Chest tightening uncontrollably, he willed away the memories of Snape House. As much as he truly wanted to... as much as he'd tried... he seemed wholly unable of keeping the past where it belonged.

Ripping the brown paper away, Snape instantly recognized his own cloak. He'd forgotten he had left it in her care. And care she'd given it, indeed. Hermione had sent it to a tailor for cleaning. A receipt was pinned to the inside collar. Written diagonally across the yellow paper, he recognized her handwriting.

'Thank you.'

It was the first time Severus wished she had *not* written something short and to the point.

Even if Snape wanted to, he hadn't the time or energy to spend his waking hours pondering the complexities of his relationship with the married Mrs. Snape and the young woman he was forced to encounter on a daily basis. The Dark Lord and Dumbledore were exhausting his every waking moment, which left little time for analysis.

Despite her frightened flee from the library a few days ago, Hermione hadn't shown any further evidence of the discomfited encounter. She didn't cower from his presence at dinner. She didn't scowl or startle when their eyes accidentally met.

She'd actually smiled, rather shyly... and asked him to pass the butter.

Severus' conflicted emotions would have eaten him alive if he didn't have the war to distract him so thoroughly.

It had been so simple when she was pre-pubescent. He didn't need to force his mask of impassivity or strain himself to appear cruel. He'd genuinely felt such things for the irritating, brown-nosing swot.

Hell, he still didn't like her.

Severus punched the armrest of his chair, splashing the contents of his forgotten tumbler. *You morose drunk... she's only sixteen and your student. It's far too soon to think of her... in any way.*

Too soon? he argued with himself. *You only have about five years to make the girl marry you.*

Did he want to marry her? Snape's immediate and unhesitant answer was an undeniable, *"HELL NO!"*

Regardless, who's to say that I even survive the war this time around...

... and she might not as well.

Snape froze. He had never thought of that possibility before.

She's the best friend of the Dark Lord's arch-nemesis. Given her future, yes, the odds are in her favor, but she won't be the same at the end of it. Remember the scene in the bathroom?

How could he forget? In a fit of licentiousness, he had snuck into Mrs. Snape's bedroom and witnessed more than he'd intended. Mrs. Snape wouldn't tell him the specifics, but given her scars, Snape knew his Hermione was destined to fall into the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Sputtering, Severus chastised his careless mistake. *His* Hermione?

No, she didn't belong to him. But, in a way, the sixteen-year-old girl was more his than Mrs. Snape ever was.

Professor Snape still maintained his previous assessment regarding the girl. Even now, he was determined to hate her with every fiber of his being. He didn't want to marry the chit, and he failed to see why he ever should.

He tossed his head back, gulping his tenth bout of whiskey

Before Snape knew it, the early morning sun was streaking through the grubby windows.

Brightness trailing across his eyes, Severus unwillingly awoke under the weight of a mighty hangover.

How tasteful. He'd passed out in the library for all to see.*

Taking in his surroundings, Snape stilled at the sight before him. The blanket he'd been using as cushion for his head was now draped across his waist.

That in and of itself was unusual. Someone had obviously entered the library last night and covered him. Then Snape noticed the odd way in which it was draped.*

Knees open, the blanket was tucked under his inner thighs, almost as if a sizeable weight had pressed into his lap...

He immediately forgot that train of thought as something sharp made him jump. Retrieving the object digging into his thigh, he dangled it before his eyes and recognized it to be an earring. Muggle-made, the metal subtly changed colors as it turned in the sunlight.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Snape vaguely remembered a similar dance of colors followed by a tentative smile preceding a request for butter.

Nothing Severus Snape had seen or heard for the last twenty years of his life would have prepared him for this day...this moment.

The untroubled older version of himself whom he'd encountered back in 1983 must have been a joke. A colossal cheat of the mind, orchestrated by the gods as punishment for his past sins.

Somewhere along the way, he must have done something wrong. A very small part of Snape had always...anticipated...the idea that by the time he reached 42, he'd finally achieve some semblance of an ordinary life void of war and secrecy.

But now, still in his late thirties, Snape was going to die.

For so long, he had taken a great deal for granted...an immense number of things he could have done differently. These were some of Severus' last thoughts in the Shrieking Shack as he clutched Potter to him, gagging on his own blood.

This had also been the location of that final endeavor to rid himself of the blasted Miss Granger. The gods may have punished Snape by means of his own consequences, but perhaps they'd have pity on his soul.

Every inch of his body pulsing in pain, he ineffectively attempted to staunch wound upon his neck. Severus had sensed the girl's presence behind Potter. He was tempted...awfully tempted...to speak to her.

So he'd snatched at Potter instead.

"Look... at... me..." *Or I'll look at her. If I am to die, I'd rather regret a woman who is dead as well.*

In those final moments, Severus had sincerely wished his obsession with Lily Evans had never tapered. In those final moments, he at long last understood that despite his efforts, he'd failed in preventing Hermione Granger from taking the woman's place.

He'd never loathed anyone so avidly.

He wished he could have held her at least once.

September, 1998:

"WE'RE ALMOST THERE!"

"Oh, *honestly*, Dennis. Are you going to scream like that for the remainder of the trip?"

Hermione finally yanked her text away from her nose to glare at the fifth-year seated across from her. Up until this point, she'd refrained from giving Dennis Creevey the attention he evidently craved.

"Sorry! Sorry... I'm just so excited! Who would have thought that Hogwarts had the power to rebuild itself? And in such a short amount of time! Only a few months ago we were still hiding in the Room of Requirement while Voldemort and the Death Eaters..."

"I'm fully aware of what has happened in the last few months, *thank you*," Hermione interrupted loudly, hoping he'd get the point. Rolling her eyes to herself, she returned to studying.

She *could* understand the young man's excitement. A few months ago, Hermione would have never thought she'd be returning to Hogwarts as a student. That entire year she'd spent on the run with Harry, Hermione had thoroughly convinced herself that the life she'd known would forever remain in the past. But her presence on this train again, a stack of books on her lap, and dressed in Hogwarts robes seemed... surreal... to say the least.

A quiet mutter broke through her consciousness. "Colin would've celebrated with me..."

Her eyes went wide. "Oh, heavens... I didn't think...I'm sorry, Dennis! I don't mean to seem so... grim. But coming back to school so soon..."

"You don't want finish your final year at Hogwarts?"

Hermione grimaced. "I do. I just hadn't anticipated it would be so soon."

"Neville says the sooner the better! Everyone's going on with their lives as if Voldemort had been a minor spot of inconvenience. What could be a greater revenge?"

His enthusiasm was *almost* infectious. Chastised by her insensitivity, Hermione smiled wanly and nodded.

"You're right. Of course, you're right."

Dennis beamed at her. He struggled to allow Hermione a few moments of silence before forgetting the effort and returned to his random questioning and conversation. "You know, I haven't seen Harry or Ron since the platform..."

Hermione pursed her lips, eager to interrupt once again. "Harry's probably wrapped in his cloak somewhere, hoping his fan club won't find him. And Ron's... well..."

"Had a row again, eh?"

"No matter what I say or do, somehow it's offensive!" Frustrated at the very memory of their arguments, she slammed her book closed. "I miss Fred too... but I don't know how to...help...Ron."

"He'll heal in time," Dennis offered slowly. He swallowed thickly between each word.

Humming in acknowledgement, Hermione neither agreed nor disagreed.

"Thanks for helping me with Colin's camera, by the way! Who would have thought so many spells went into such a common thing?" Dennis unzipped his sack and produced the object in question.

"*Wizarding* cameras are a common thing in the wizarding world and don't need spells," Hermione instructed matter-of-factly. "Colin's was Muggle made; therefore, extensive charms are needed to create wizarding photos."

"Ah... While we're on the subject, how about...?"

"No."

"PLEASE!"

"No, Dennis! I told you once before... I'm not touching *that* after everything you've done to it. I want no part. In fact, you should turn it in to the Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. *Those* pictures cannot be legal."

"*Fine.*"

A flash of bright, blinding light erupted in their compartment.

"AND I TOLD YOU TO STOP TAKING PHOTOS OF ME!"

"Sorry!" Dennis' wide grin and bright eyes revealed his lack of sincerity. "I just want to be sure it still works..." After a few brief spells, Dennis developed the photo he had just taken, smiling as Hermione's image grew clearer by the second. "It seemed to have worked... See! You're moving exactly like all the rest."

Hermione snatched the photo out of his hand. She didn't bother masking her frown. Dennis must have taken at least ten photos of her, and in every one she displayed *this exact* same expression, regardless of what she was saying or doing while it was taken. In the photograph, Hermione shook her head disapprovingly with one hand covering her face in that characteristic display of exasperation. After a few seconds, she opened her fingers and smiled reluctantly. It repeated all over again.

"What does this mean?" Dennis asked. He may have been the one to charm the camera, but it had been by accident when he'd mispronounced the proper spells.

"I... think... you've put the Sentio Ostendo charm on the camera instead of the..."

"The sento os-what'a?"

Hermione closed her eyes and bit her lip. After counting to five, she continued with forced patience. "It's a sentiment revealing charm. Wizards and witches used to cast them on their family and friends to discover each other's true emotions. It's very difficult to cast this on someone without them noticing, though. But if done correctly... their face and expressions would reveal their true opinion of whomever they were looking at, regardless of what was being said."

"Like if your boyfriend said he loved you when all he wants is to get under your knickers?"

"Yes, Dennis," she agreed monotonously, blankly gazing at him. "That is an... adequate... example."

"Excellent!"

"No, it is not. As I've been saying, I'm fairly certain that casting such a spell on a Muggle camera is illegal."

"Take one photo of me!"

"For the hundredth time... NO!"

"Don't you want to see what I truly think of you?"

"You're my friend, aren't you?"

"Well, yes. But..."

"Unless you're lying about our friendship and truly hate me, I don't need to see a photo to know your true feelings." Hermione quickly returned her nose back to her text.

"Right," Dennis agreed in a subdued voice. Disappointed, he gazed at Hermione for a moment before putting away his camera and turning sourly to the window.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Parvati gasped out loud to no one in particular. She wasn't the only one who had entered the Great Hall with growing astonishment etched upon her face.

The castle looked... perfect. More so than before the Battle of Hogwarts.

Hogwarts was to be filled to the brim with students this year. What with the war and total Death Eater control over last school year's curriculum, a vast majority of students had returned to complete their education. The first students to enter were the seventh-years, all of whom should have been seventh-years last year, including Hermione, Harry, and Ron. Behind them, all the surviving sixth-years returned to repeat the same year a second time... and so on.

Everyone was eager to return; even the first years who doubled in size due to the new group of students also being admitted.

Hermione finally released a non-committal hum in response to Parvati's opinion of the castle.

"Oh, how can we forget?" Lavender nudged between Parvati and Hermione, voice ripe with ridicule. "Returning to school must seem like such ~~more~~ after sacrificing your time and expertise to save us all from You-Know-Who."

"Here we go." Hermione didn't have the energy to acknowledge Lavender's immature comment. She'd heard such criticisms all summer. Many students still believed that the three of them had run away from the war and only showed up at the last minute to claim the credit.

Dean returned Lavender's aggressive jostle, locking arms with Hermione. "Still wasting money on the *Prophet*? Considering all the crap they've pulled, I didn't know people were thick enough to keep reading such rubbish."

Hermione smiled. Dean knew what the war had been like outside the castle walls. Like those who'd fought side by side with her, they possessed a bond that not many could understand.

Finding their places at the Gryffindor table, Dean whispered good naturedly, "I would have thought *you'd* be excited to come back to school."

"*Why* does everyone keep telling me that?"

"Whoa! I was only trying..."

"No, no... I'm sorry, Dean. I'm just on edge, I imagine. All this is happening too easy..."

"Waiting for the other shoe to drop, eh?"

"*Exactly.*"

The noise in the Great Hall escalated to a deafening roar as everyone waited for the new batch of first years to enter and add to the returning ones. Ron and Harry had been the very last students to arrive, each wanting to avoid unnecessary chitchat as much as possible. They quickly located Hermione, Ginny, and Dean.

Dennis scowled as he watched them approach. Knowing exactly where *one* of them was headed, he scooted as close as he could to Hermione, forcing Ron to sit next to Dean instead.

Everyone uncomfortably gazed at one another, except Hermione, who simply rolled her eyes.

Just when everyone expected Professor McGonagall to exit the Great Hall and fetch the first years, she headed straight for the Head Table and sat in the Headmaster's...Headmistresses chair.

The doors flew open. The last wizard the students expected to see returning now led the first years into the Great Hall

"No way!" Similar to those around him and at other house tables, Dean stood up from his seat, eyes glued to the formidable presence of Professor Snape.

"Sit down." Hermione frowned. She'd heard that the man was still recuperating from his injuries and was discouraged at the idea of him exerting himself prematurely.

Someone down the table snorted cynically, "Guess that makes him McGonagall's Deputy."

"Sit down," Hermione repeated louder and through clenched teeth. Everyone within earshot immediately complied, bums slamming into seats.

Once the sorting began, Hermione wasn't the least bit surprised to hear more criticism.

"McGonagall must be bonkers..."

Hermione clenched her teeth and ignored her friends' topic of conversation, focusing all of her attention on the sorting.

"I don't give a flying fuck," Ron responded to someone's shush. "I'm not an idiot. *I know* he's been working for Dumbledore, but he played the part so well. Too well. No one wants to see Death Eaters at Hogwarts again."

Hermione tried. She really did... but she couldn't remain silent any longer. Not trusting the volume of her voice, Hermione pounded her fist upon the table once and with great force.

Professor Snape turned towards the ruckus, eyes blazing with threat. Identifying the culprit, his features turned impassive with one eyebrow raised in reprimand.

Hermione flushed. Biting her lower lip, she tilted her face towards the floor in apology.

"How did he survive?" Dennis whispered in her ear.

Flinching from the expected nearness of his breath, Hermione answered, "I don't... know exactly."

There had been an endless array of rumors, but ultimately she was unaware of the particulars. It was difficult for Hermione to casually look at the wizard as she would her other professors. She'd watched this man die...or so she had thought at the time...lying prone on his back, gagging on his own blood. It was a sight she'd never forget.

"All right?"

"Yeah," Hermione answered Dennis a bit too quickly. Startled, she didn't realize her eyes had been clenched tight, willing those horrid images away.

Turning her attention back towards the sorting, Hermione caught Professor Snape's jerk of his head. She wondered what he'd been looking at.

After the first years were sorted and Headmistress McGonagall gave a predictable but heartfelt speech, everyone eagerly tucked into his or her supper.

Hermione, however, had completely lost her appetite, having grown even more anxious. "Too, too easy..."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Oh!" Dennis started, reaching for his sack. "Hey, guys, *you have* to see this..."

"NO, DENNIS!" Hermione scolded, yanking his camera away.

Before Dennis could protest, an owl screeched above them. Students turned their faces up, watching to see where it landed.

Headmistress McGonagall visibly panicked.

The owl flew straight towards the Ravenclaw's table and landed directly on Luna Lovegood's plate. Without blinking once in surprise, Luna quickly unrolled what appeared to be a copy of *The Quibbler*. She blankly read the first page, folded it, and rose from her seat.

Hermione's stomach dropped. Paper in hand, Luna headed straight for them.

"Miss Lovegood," McGonagall interrupted.

Luna ignored the witch. Shoving her way to sit between Harry and Ginny, Luna unrolled the paper across their plates.

"Is this?"

"Tomorrow's copy," Luna finished.

"MISS LOVEGOOD!"

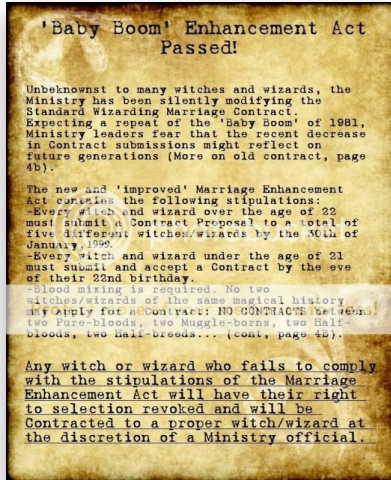
Hermione paled. The other shoe had finally dropped. She read quickly, not breathing or blinking because from the corner of her eye she could see the Headmistress approaching their table.

"They... they can't do this," Ron spoke very slowly and with fear, "can they?"

"Hand it over, NOW!"

But just as the Headmistress reached for *The Quibbler*, it jumped up and flew towards the Head Table.

Wand still in hand, Professor Snape snatched the paper midair and read the front page.



"FUCKING HELL!" Snape bellowed ferociously, face twisted into total disgust and loathing.

Every student flinched in fear and astonishment, but none so violently as Hermione.

Professor Snape's rage might have scared everyone, but for reason's unknown, he looked directly at her.

A flash of bright, white light erupted in the hall. Glancing down, Hermione was appalled to realize that she was holding Dennis' camera.

Prompt: 1. Something Old. The Marriage Law Challenge.

*Scenes entirely based on Cruel-Crush's *Memoirs of a Grimmauld Chair*, <http://cruel-crush.deviantart.com/art/Memoirs-of-a-Grimmauld-Chair-70486405>

-Parchment template taken from Rapid Share, <http://www.rapidsharegfx.com/uploads/posts/2008-10/>

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 7

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'ed by **Madbrilliant, Iuvsev and Southernwitch!**

"FUCKING HELL!" Snape bellowed ferociously, face twisted into total disgust and loathing.

Every student flinched in fear and astonishment, but none so violently as Hermione.

Professor Snape's rage might have scared everyone, but for reasons unknown, he looked directly at her.

A flash of bright, white light erupted in the hall. Glancing down, Hermione was appalled to realize that she was holding Dennis' camera.

Face pale, Hermione threw the camera back into Dennis' hands and demanded, "Develop it now!"

"I don't...if you're that worried, forget about it. I'll destroy it."

"Just develop it and give it to me!"

Dennis flinched back slightly.

"NOW!"

As soon as the photograph appeared, Hermione snatched it out of his hand and stuffed it into her sack. She was about to walk away before she realized how horrid she was acting.

"I... I'm sorry, Dennis. I took this photo completely by accident." Coming up to stand beside him, Hermione reached up to squeeze his shoulder in apology. "As I said before, I want nothing to do with your camera. So any evidence concerning me is terrifying."

He smiled softly. Glancing at her sack, he asked, "Aren't you even going to look at it?"

"Of course not!" she replied a bit too quickly.

Dennis frowned. But due to the total havoc that had erupted in the Great Hall, all thoughts of the photo were soon forgotten.

The intimate group of friends were practically running back to their common room. As soon as the mild hysteria had shown no signs of tapering, and directly after Professor Snape had stormed out of the Great Hall, McGonagall demanded all the students to turn in for the night.

Only a handful of the students had read that horrid article. Of course, this meant that the rumors were already extreme, with every student begging Hermione and company for details.

None of them felt like elaborating. Especially since everyone could just read it for themselves tomorrow morning regardless.

Matching her brisk pace, Harry quickly caught up to Hermione. "It just couldn't be that easy, could it?" he snorted.

Hermione turned to look at him expectantly.

"Life after Voldemort," he clarified.

"I never expected it to be, quite honestly."

Not very long after the Gryffindor students reached their common room, the Floo erupted in green flames. Headmistress McGonagall's face appeared and immediately called for Harry.

"What now?" he responded abruptly, entirely unconcerned for niceties.

"We're having a meeting in my office this instant. I need you to gather--for heaven's sake, Severus! If you scream at me one more time, I swear to Merlin I'll..."

"Gather whom?" Harry demanded loudly.

"Whom do you think?" she barked back. "If you can't manage it, have Hermione remind you how to use the coins."

As soon as the green flames vanished, Hermione sighed in defeat. "I'm on it."

Retrieving a coin from her pocket, Hermione notified all of the student Order members that they were to meet in the Headmistress' office immediately.

Standing beside the portrait hole, Dennis had grown wary while he'd observed Hermione, Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville huddled together, intentionally speaking under their breath and only to each other.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

Impatiently yanking the strap of her book sack off her shoulder, Hermione replied, "To speak with the Headmistress. Don't look at me like that, you know you can't come. She specifically requested us."

Hermione caught Dennis shiftily eye her sack on the floor. A corner of the photo she had taken was sticking out of the pocket. She wasn't the least bit eager to look at it, but all the same she couldn't bear the idea of anyone else seeing it either.

Snatching the photo, Hermione carelessly shoved it into her pocket and followed her friends out of the common room.

"There were only vague rumors!" McGonagall shrieked before catching herself and continuing with forced discipline. "How many more times am I to repeat myself?"

"*You should have warned us*," Professor Snape repeated as well, voice ringing with thinly controlled anger.

The arguments continued like this for nearly an hour, both in excessive volume and irrationality, and solely between the veteran Order members. After longer than they were willing to admit, the shouting had finally died down once they all realized that the younger adults...the students under 21...had remained dazedly silent since entering the office.

As if snapping out of some trance, the students finally returned the expectant stares sent at them with fiercely uncomfortable expressions of their own. Defeated and tired, each one of them secretly hoped that at any moment someone would say that everything was going to be all right...that what they had read in *The Quibbler* had been a mistake.

"Is it really as bad as before, Minerva?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Before?"

Minerva turned towards Harry, gently answering his question and elaborating on Hermione's comment. "Such laws have been passed every few hundred years or so at times of population declines or civil unrest."

"So that's it then?" Ron challenged, the first of the students to display any measure of anger. "We're all on a time limit to ~~get~~*married*? And what's this rubbish about blood-mixing?"

"In the hopes of preventing the number of Squib..."

"You cannot tell me that people still believe such outdated tripe?"

The Headmistress glared in response to the young woman's interruption. "*Idid not* make the law, Hermione, so mind your tone!"

Hermione casually glanced at Professor Snape standing against the wall and stressed a comment he had made earlier. "You could have warned us."

"And what purpose would that have served? It wouldn't have changed*any* of our circumstances."

"You mean *our* circumstances," Hermione hissed, her face flushing at the uncharacteristic display of aggression to an authority figure, "seeing as how this won't affect you."

The office silenced for a few awkward seconds. Hermione refused to divert her glare until Minerva glanced away in obvious discomfort.

"*What?*"

Hermione quickly turned in the direction of Professor Snape's impatient voice. Overwhelmed by his unwavering and penetrating eye contact, she glanced at the floor. "Identical to the laws of years past, this... Marriage Enhancement Act... won't apply to Minerva or any other witch over 70 years-old. Same goes for men over 100. After all, the whole point of these forced marriages is to increase reproductive rates..."

Professor Snape pinched the bridge between his brow and groaned at the same time Minerva yelled, "Thank you for the history lesson, Hermione. We can always count on you to give answers to questions no one has asked!"

"Do not scream at her," an eerily cold, silent voice commanded.

Stunned, Hermione turned to Professor Snape again and muttered, "T-thank you, Professor..."

He eyed her callously and interrupted, "And I don't believe I was speaking to you, Miss Granger."

"Enough!"

Once Headmistress McGonagall had finally managed to return order to the meeting, she suggested everyone to retire for the evening. It was decided that they'd continue this discussion once the news publicly broke to the wizarding world tomorrow morning in the papers.

Hermione had stayed rooted in her seat until a specific wizard had exited the office before her.

Swallowing repeatedly, Hermione nervously descended the spiral staircase, working up her courage.

"Professor?" Her cautious voice echoed across the corridor.

Professor Snape froze mid-stride, his back straightening with ominous precision. Turning around very slowly, he pierced Hermione with a silent glare before ultimately cocking one brow. When she'd failed to speak straight away, he closed the few steps needed to loom over her.

"What do you want?" he asked with exaggerated patience.

Hermione snapped to attention. She hadn't meant to stare, but after everything she had witnessed in the Shrieking Shack, she couldn't help taking advantage of their close proximity to compare his current appearance to before the incident. His greasy hair hung lifelessly on both sides of his face, hiding the majority of his features. Tall, thin, and terrifying, he looked almost exactly the same.

Hermione struggled to return to her previous train of thought before she'd called out to him. "Want? Oh! I just wanted to tell you... well..."

"*What?*"

Hermione jerked at his bark. Frowning to herself and dismayed at her unexplainable melancholy, she finally muttered, "Welcome back, sir."

His eyes narrowed sharply.

Similar to a situation they had shared a few years back, when it seemed Professor Snape was about to open his mouth, Hermione turned on her heel and fled, not wanting to risk the chance of his words containing more venom.

Hermione sighed as she slowly began to undress.

Lavender and Parvati's four posters were noiseless, bed-curtains completely drawn. Charmed into impregnable silence, Hermione gathered she'd do the same as well. It was the only privacy one could attain in sharing a room.

Shaking out her cloak, she froze when the photo flew out of her pocket and landed on her bed face down.

She dreaded, hoped, and feared the idea of finding out who was in the picture. Hermione had a terribly anxious hunch...

Encased in her own bubble of privacy, Hermione settled herself beneath the bedclothes and took two deep breaths before placing both hands on the picture.

She didn't exactly know why she was so nervous to find out what it revealed. Perhaps, a very rational part of her brain acknowledged, that not only had it been illegal to take and keep such a picture, but it also might contain the image of the last wizard in the world who'd want his emotions revealed to a mere acquaintance.

Hermione knew the right thing to do would be to destroy it this instant... but she couldn't.

Taking a few more calming breaths, she flipped the photo over and brought it up to her nose.

Her heart plummeted.

There Professor Snape was, seated at the Head Table and dead center in the photograph. He gazed back at Hermione, his expression saturated in infuriated horror. He maintained that expression for a few seconds, as if he were challenging Hermione to look away. Finally, his face altered. Teeth bared, eyes clenched, Snape looked away in defeated disappointment.

Hermione dropped the photo when it began all over again.

Like every other experience, emotion, and thought she had suffered due to this wizard, Hermione was left with the familiar feeling that no matter how much she learned of Professor Snape, sense and logic continued to hover just outside her grasp.

Chapter 3

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'd by **Madbrilliant, Iuvsev and Southernwitch!**

Hermione awoke the next morning in a fog. She knew it was late by the glare through her window and the pressure in her bladder.

Forty-five minutes passed while she intentionally tossed about in bed, refusing to acknowledge the loud commotion Lavender and Parvati intentionally created with the banging of their trunks and laughter at last week's *Prophet* exposé on "The Fools Golden Trio."

Eyes staring into the scarlet nothingness of her bed curtains, Hermione had more troubling things on her mind than confronting her idiotic dormitory mates.

Professor Snape...

Hermione had hoped, for the very briefest of moments before she'd looked at the photo, that she might possibly gain some amount of insight as to this man's... sentiments.

She refused to look at it again while contemplating all this. Logic had begged her to destroy the photo last night, and even now, she knew she shouldn't keep it. However, Hermione couldn't bring herself to dispose of it. Never mind the fact that owning such a photo, let alone taking it, had been an act of defiance, but such a photo of such a man was too rare a thing to destroy. Hermione had paid particular attention in hiding it, even making it difficult for herself to retrieve it should she be tempted to gaze at the wizard's disconcerting stare.

Her abdomen tensed uncomfortably as she remembered what she had witnessed in the photo.

Other than apparent disapproval against her person, Hermione didn't understand one molecule of his expression. Nothing other than indifference directed at her would have made sense. Despite the six tumultuous years of having this man as an instructor, and later an ally in the war, the two of them were near strangers. Barely acquaintances. The man didn't know enough about her to either feel like or dislike... right?

What she had witnessed in the photo was beyond the indifference she expected. This left Hermione entirely lost as to a proper reaction. Instead, she returned to old habits and analyzed every one of their past interactions.

Her actions back in fifth year, the...liberties...she had taken, now brought shame she couldn't describe.

Ridiculous, irresponsible crushes...

Never mind, it didn't matter. There were certainly more pressing issues on her plate now.

Sod the Ministry.

Hermione had intentionally missed breakfast in the Great Hall. The primary reason was her complete reluctance to relive the emotional turmoil forced upon her last night at the feast. Once *The Quibbler* was publicly distributed, total havoc was due to erupt again.

The dismayed and shocked faces of her friends were more than enough, thank you very much.

A silent common room and deserted corridor greeted Hermione on her trek to the Great Hall.

Turning a sharp corner, she nearly screeched when a tall body collided with her.

"Hermione!" Dennis acknowledged wildly before grasping her upon the shoulders.

"You scared the..."

"Didn't see you at breakfast, so I thought I'd check on you."

Hermione smiled warmly at his concern. "I'm sure you can imagine why I didn't want to... be there."

His arms limply fell to his sides. "So... it's true."

"Well, of course... Why are you looking at me like that? You were with us last night when we read the new law in *The Quibbler*!"

"Yes, but when the lot if you left last night to discuss... I had hoped..."

"Dennis, no..." Hermione had yet to shed a tear of self-pity for the damage this Marriage Enhancement Act might inflict upon her life. The reality of sadness hadn't occurred to her until now, as she gazed up at Dennis' dismayed expression and bright eyes. "No..." She clutched at his arm before continuing. "As much as I would like to wish it true, the Order has no power over the Ministry." Steering the subject away, she asked, "Have the class schedules been passed out yet?"

"Yes... No! I don't know, perhaps."

Hermione made a move to descend the stairs. Dennis placed his palm over hers, halting her movements.

"No one else will notice if you're late."

"I doubt that..."

"Listen to me, Hermione! I doubt any of the professors will care about absences today. The Great Hall is empty... majority of the students went to the owlery."

"You're not *actually* telling your parents are you?"

"Perhaps... aren't you?"

"NO! I've always tried to keep as much from them as I was able to. *They're Muggles*. There's only so much they could under...think about it, Dennis! I have, what... over two years to abide by the Marriage Enhancement Act? Where as you have four! For my own piece of mind and theirs, I'd rather my parents think my engagement happened naturally. I mean, who knows what could happen in such an amount of time... We may form genuine attachments after all..."

Hermione cut herself off. In her ramblings, she'd failed to notice how tense Dennis had grown by the second.

"Dennis?"

"I thought such things as well. I do have a fair number of years to find..." Eyes trained on the floor, Dennis spoke in an odd, monotone voice not characteristic of his energetic nature. "It's not the time limit that troubles me so much as...the idea of being so completely restricted in my choices. While I never had my heart set on marrying a fellow Muggle-born..."

Hermione started. She had completely forgotten about the blood-mixing requirement that was imposed by the law.

"... But the idea of having the option completely taken from me..."

"Dennis," Hermione made a move to comfort him, mouth ready for expressions of sympathy, but Dennis deflected her touch.

Without a word, he brushed passed her and fled to the Gryffindor common room.

No more, Hermione told herself.

She began to realize, that after everything, she had nothing to fear anymore.

After all, what was the worst that could happen?

She had literally run from hell itself while in flight with Harry and Ron. She had been... captured... by Greyback.

She'd been tortured to the point of death by Bellatrix. Nothing other than death itself was left...

She could weather this law like every other obstacle that had been placed in her path.

A twisted part of Hermione's psyche now finally eased into some sense of normalcy with her returning to Hogwarts. A school year devoid of life-changing turmoil was too strange a thing to consider.

With that thought in mind, Hermione nearly smiled to herself. She was determined to shift this attitude in her dealings with Professor Snape.

She didn't understand the wizard, nor his odd fluctuations in mood with her, but she had no reason to fear the wizard any longer.

After all, in the very least, she was certain the man wouldn't *kill* her.

Hermione snorted to herself after that thought.

Lost in these contemplations, Hermione dared to allow herself to grow distracted in class. Chin braced into the palm of her hand, ribcage pressed into the edge of the desk, Hermione frowned as her eyes gazed at nothing... thinking about Professor Snape's picture.

Regardless of the fact that she didn't understand a single thing about the man's expressions, anything resembling pain in relation to her was upsetting.

Anger, horror, disappointment... but underneath it all, it pained the man to look at her.

Was she that ghastly a person? Was her character that intolerable? Was she really that... ugly?

"Miss Granger!" Face red, Professor Snape slammed his lesson planner against the corner of Hermione's worktable.

"Yes, sir!"

For the briefest of moments, one eyebrow raised in uncertainty before it was replaced with his usual irritation.

"Were you intending on following the lecture today? Yes? Well, *thank you* for gifting us with your presence!"

Later that evening, all of the Order members returned to the Headmistress' office for their scheduled meeting.

Out of breath from running up seven flights of stairs, Hermione was one of the last students to arrive. Smiling and nodding politely in greeting to those assembled, she edged herself towards the only available space she could find. It was no coincidence that it happened to be directly beside Professor Snape's seated form. Many would rather suffer claustrophobia than stand anywhere beside this man.

Hermione reddened. An apathetic stare had been directed at her from the moment she had entered the office. Finally daring to meet the wizard's gaze, Hermione started when Snape rolled his eyes dramatically and rose from his seat with a suffering groan.

Without a word, he waved his hand towards the now empty chair.

"No, it's all right, Professor! I don't mind standing."

"Sit. Down."

Shaking her head at the man's brutish courtesy, Hermione accepted the offered seat.

The meeting was long, boring, and entirely pointless. As far as Hermione was concerned, if there was no alternative or course of action that could be used to overturn this law, then there was no point in the endless whining she'd been hearing for the past hour.

"... and that brings us to our next topic," McGonagall said loudly, intentionally cutting off the last person who'd been ranting. "I believe we should expect a bit more news from the Ministry in tomorrow's paper."

Stifling her urge to moan petulantly, Hermione rolled her eyes and leaned back into her seat. Unfortunately, she had forgotten who was standing directly behind her chair. Hermione's left shoulder blade squashed the tips of Professor Snape's fingers. Her first reaction was to whirl around in mortification and apologize, but the wizard deflected Hermione's attempts by screaming at the Headmistress.

"*What in Merlin's name is it, now?*"

Thin lipped and face stern, the Headmistress replied, "An increase in extracurricular activities. More trips to Hogsmeade, dances for every holiday..."

The difference in reactions to this information was wide and extreme. Some students were pert at the idea of spending more time in Hogsmeade, and others groaned at the social horror that was the typical result of... ugh... a ball while many of the adults bemoaned Minerva's complacency in allowing the Ministry to gain a foot in Hogwarts' door.

Hermione was one of the few who remained silent as Minerva tried to explain the Ministry's reasoning. Apparently, an increase in social functions meant an increase in marriage proposals.

The only thing that shocked Hermione during all this was Professor Snape's continued silence behind her. It was unnerving. Anxious, she wanted to see the expression on

his face... and why, after the awkward blunder with his hand, the man still maintained his grip on the back of her chair? She couldn't move even if she wanted to, not with a few strands of her hair crushed under his palm...

A knock on the office door finally brought the silence the Headmistress had been deficient in obtaining.

"Enter!"

A young man filled the doorway, tall and imposing. Like many others, Hermione was lost as to a proper reaction.

Draco Malfoy had returned to Hogwarts.

The Slytherin's appearance shouldn't have been such a surprise, Hermione told herself. After all, many others had returned, including those whose parents were prominent Death Eaters.

It was Draco's mannerisms that were startling to her. Upon closing the door behind him, Draco then returned Minerva's greeting with a polite, albeit apathetic, one of his own.

Draco had then moved against the wall, arms crossed, and directed all of his brooding attention to the Headmistress. None of the events Hermione anticipated came to pass. The Slytherin didn't leer or smirk at Harry and Ron, in the hopes of instigating a fight. He didn't snort or roll his eyes at Minerva's instructions.

The only time he diverted his attention was to meet Hermione's eyes in acknowledgement of her very rude staring. She quickly turned her eyes to the floor.

"Meeting adjourned," Minerva said warily. "Hermione, Draco, can you come here a minute?"

Swallowing once before she stood, Hermione noted that Professor Snape was absent from his stance behind her chair. She wondered how'd he managed to slip away without her noticing?

"Yes, Professor?" Hermione stood straight in attention, determined to prove that Malfoy's presence didn't trouble her in the least.

"I need you to explain to Draco everything he missed before he showed up today; today's meeting and last night's."

Hermione furrowed her brow.

"I'd do it myself, but I fear I must..."

"Oh, no, of course!" Hermione responded quickly, catching herself.

"Thank you. Good to have you back, Draco."

"Thank you, Professor."

The moment the two of them descended the spiral staircase and reached the seventh floor corridor, Hermione spun on her heel to address Draco. She flinched back when he suddenly spoke first.

"If you are so terrified to be in my presence, you simply could have told her." Eyes narrowed, teeth clenched, barely controlled disgust... ah, it appeared this body still belonged to Draco Malfoy after all.

Crossing her arms, Hermione leaned all her weight onto one hip and asked with a smirk, "Who said I was afraid of you? I'm merely surprised she asked ~~me~~ to do it. Do you want to know about last night's meeting or not?"

"Fine."

Hermione relaxed out of her defensive stance with a sigh. "Come on, then. I'll walk you to your common room, and we can talk along the way."

"Absolutely not," came a revolted reply.

"Now who's afraid to be seen with whom?"

Draco shook his head. "Stop playing games, Granger. *A female* will not escort me to my door. You will speak to me here, and then I will walk you to your common room."

Hermione was suspicious. "Why?"

"Because I refuse to be seen doing any less! Now are you done?"

Hermione proceeded to inform him of everything she could remember. Draco listened, evidently paying very close attention, but not once did he ask a question.

"So when did you join?" Hermione inquired, the two of them standing right in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

Draco's irritation at her questioning was evident. "Join what?"

"The Order. I fail to see why Professor McGonagall would want me to explain so much if you weren't a member."

"Well, I *fail* to comprehend how that is any your business."

And with that, Draco turned on his heel, shaking his head to himself the entire way down the corridor.

Later that evening...much, much later...Hermione found herself idly walking the corridors, waiting for the tranquil darkness to ease her clouded mind.

She was hurt. More hurt than she was willing to admit to herself or any of her friends. Ron was being more cruel than usual, and Hermione was just about ready to give up on him.

It had taken years for the redhead to finally acknowledge his feelings for Hermione while she had suffered in perpetual insensitive boy hell. And on the very same night Ron had worked up the courage to finally kiss her, his brother had died, throwing him into a cavernous depression.

Since the Marriage Enhancement Act had been passed, Ron had been completely avoiding her. What did he honestly expect her to do? Demand a proposal? Anticipate that she'd immediately begin planning their wedding?

How completely and utterly preposterous...

Romantic feelings aside, Hermione deserved better treatment from someone who called himself her best friend.

Hermione loved Ron unconditionally, but she wouldn't settle in marriage. She couldn't imagine the idea of marrying someone she wasn't breathtakingly in love with. She blamed those sappy, Muggle romances for her idealism, but Hermione knew what she wanted. Someone who could curl her toes with a deep kiss, someone whose gaze told her she was the most exquisite creature in the world, someone whose touch unsteadied her breathing and elevated her heartbeat...

Someone tall and dark bore down on Hermione from a blind corner, forcing her to scream.

She quickly clamped both hands over her mouth at the same time Professor Snape shined his wand light directly above the crown of her head.

"For the love of... *Miss Granger*..."

"Oh, thank God," she said, breathless. Bracing her back against the wall, Hermione placed a hand over her chest to steady her breathing.

"Most students do not have such a reaction when they happen upon me after curfew," he sneered, voice full of sarcasm.

"To be honest, sir, they're scarier things in this world than *you*."

"How dare you speak to me with such...GET OFF THAT WALL!"

Hermione jumped to attention with a squeak, initially frightened. Soon, anger quickly set in at the way he was speaking to her.

Snape loomed over her, shinning the light in her face, his eyes narrowed harshly. "Did you know that I had actually dared to hope that for one measly school year I'd be free from chasing you three around this bloody castle? Potter, Weasley! Come out this instant or else Miss Granger will receive the brunt of punishment!"

He pointed his wand over Hermione's shoulder, illuminating the corridor at her back.

"P-Professor," Hermione whispered.

"What?" he snarled, turning his chin down to look directly into her face.

In his anger, he had dared to stand uncommonly close.

"They're not there. I'm alone."

That last word rang in the air while silence continued to pass between them. Hermione waited for him to say something, yell at her some more, even punish her. Only a few seconds had passed, but with this perplexing wizard nearly pressed against her, it felt so much longer.

Finally, Snape lowered his wand, pulling away to quickly eye the darkness surrounding them. His expression seemed almost... distrustful. Of what or whom, Hermione could not say.

Unexpectedly remembering his photo, Hermione called to retrieve his attention, "Professor Snape?"

"What?" And just like that, his voice was angry once again.

"I promise you, the three of us won't be running around in search of mischief this year."

He crossed his arms, pulling his robes over both shoulders before arching one brow and asking, "What reason could you possibly give to make me believe you?"

Hermione snorted through her nose. "I'm giving you my word as an Order member, Professor. Besides, I'm not a child anymore... Haven't you noticed?"

Hermione had hoped to gain his trust through light banter, perhaps even make him smirk... but the following reaction she had not anticipated. His wand returned, pointing directly into her face as he gazed at her with that now familiar expression of disappointment.

"I am your instructor, Miss Granger. I'd like you to keep that in mind when you speak to me. Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione wanted to cry from frustration. What the hell was wrong with him? His voice was filled with contempt, he held his wand in her face like he was ready to hex her... but that disappointment in his eyes didn't make sense. And if he truly wanted her to think of him as merely an instructor, his looming stance over her person...pressing her into the wall...almost made it seem like...

"I said is that clear?"

"Yes."

"Yes... *what?*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

With a growl of repugnance, Professor Snape pushed himself away from the wall he'd been pinning her to and billowed down the corridor.

Long after his form had disappeared into the darkness, Hermione remained frozen in place. She listened to sharp snap of his robes flying behind him and the echo of his boots scraping against the flagstone. When her ears finally received complete silence, she managed to return to her common room.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 7

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'ed by **Madbrilliant, luvsev and Southernwitch!**

Of course...

Cross and despondent, Severus managed to pry his drunken face away from the surface of his desk to pay the owl snipping at his fingertips.

Of course... it couldn't be that easy...

Every night for the past week, he'd been succumbing to the temptation of drowning his pathetic, self-pitying woes. The very idea of a grown wizard, pining for the loss of a... ugh... love, especially one he had never known, turned his stomach.

Nevertheless, here he was, acting the part of said pathetic creature.

... Couldn't be that easy...

He blamed his near death for his current predicament. No, the Dark Lord... the Dark Lord was definitely responsible... or maybe, this began with Lily?

Hell, might as well throw Dumbledore and Potter in with the lot of them.

If Severus Snape had never looked Death himself directly in the eye while lying prone in his own filth, all the while pleading mercy to whichever entity that might take note of him... he would never have sold his soul to Hermione Granger.

In death, that was when he had completely and unreservedly admitted to himself that he *wanted* her.

But 'want' was a very open-ended word.

The very sight of the chit stirred something inside him. Something bewildering and ignored for many years. Snape wasn't daft, however. Given where exactly he amassed these unwelcomed stirrings, Severus wasn't stupid enough to call this ridiculous infatuation "love."

Ultimately, he truly did not know the girl.

No, not love, he'd just been *wanting* the witch for the past fifteen bloody years... Severus clenched his eyes with a groan after that last thought, lowering his forehead upon the desk.

No matter how much he desired the girl, Snape refused to act on it. He hadn't spoiled a Muggle-born student since returning in 1983. True, back in those years he had been very close to the young women's ages, but not since meeting Mrs. Snape had Severus desired another Muggle-born ardently enough to replace her.

This Marriage Enhancement Act seemed like fate, Severus Snape style. After everything he had been put through since...hell, since he was born...what else could be more inevitable when absolute tranquility seemed to be his due at long last?

Only one month ago, Severus had worked up the energy to walk out of Mungo's on his own two feet and had at last mustered the fortitude to enter this school year receptive, albeit wary. However, this attitude hadn't lasted even one blasted night before reality whacked him upside the head like it always did.

Mr. and Mrs. Snape had almost convinced him...

Bollocks.

The worst thing that could happen now was for the witch to discover how many Galleons he was worth. Somehow, he knew from the very beginning not to trust her...

Another impatient snip at his fingers forced Severus to finally untie the morning paper from owl's leg.

He tossed his head back, greedily gulping a Hangover potion while scanning the front page.

His own image scowled back at him.

A slow, sadistic laugh gathered in the base of his diaphragm before erupting against the stone walls of his chambers.

There was no other reaction to be had for a caption that read:

"SNAPE, THE MOST ELIGIBLE BASTARD!"

"I don't want to read it," Hermione hissed, fists clenched around her knife and fork.

"I suppose it shouldn't be *that* much of a surprise," Dennis continued, oblivious to Hermione's mood. Spreading open the *Prophet* across his plate, he gasped and moaned in the hopes that Hermione would pay attention. "It says here that he received a full year's Headmaster salary for his 'piss-poor job dictating over a Death Eater recruit school...'ah, well..."

"Rubbish," Ginny added.

"No, he really did get the salary..."

"No, Dennis! I meant rubbish to Professor Snape being a dictator... Never mind!"

Frowning, Dennis watched Ginny rise from the Gryffindor table before shaking his head dismissively and continuing with the article. "Merlin's balls! It says half of Dumbledore's legacy went to Snape in the event of the Headmaster's death. Wow, I wonder how the bat was able to claim it considering he was the one who killed...?"

"I said I don't want to hear it! Why can't you ever listen for once?"

Hermione rose from the Gryffindor table in a flurry of revulsion. She felt no guilt whatsoever for exploding at Dennis. Hopefully, the dozens of other likeminded students grasped the reprimand in her and Ginny's outbursts.

Throwing on the grey jumper her mum had knitted for her, Hermione practically ran out of the castle. It was the first Saturday of the school year, and for once, a day off from anything school related was sorely needed.

Walking along the edge of the lake, dirty trainers and socks dangling from each hand, Hermione unwillingly caught snippets of gossip from the younger students she passed.

"Can you *imagine* such a fortune?" a fifth-year squealed wildly, squashing the *Prophet* to her chest.

Her friend ripped at the paper. "Some poor soul will actually have to marry Snape.*Imagine* that!"

For the briefest of moments, Hermione did. Professor Snape's typically impassive face flashed across her mind... gazing down upon her, uncharacteristically flushed with the euphoria of release.

Hermione inhaled sharply, coughing on her own saliva.

Denim... Always, blasted Denim!

Muggle fashions would be the death of him...

Severus was angry. Extraordinarily angry. This morning's article was already horrific enough, but now this!

Snape was of the mind to believe the chit was tormenting him on purpose.

He was attracted to Miss Granger against his insufferable will, and it pissed him off. Snape didn't want his face to flame when he gazed at her half-covered form, but regardless of his wants, his desires took precedence.

It was the frayed fabric of her shorts that tormented him. Never mind the fact that if she bent over, he'd probably gain a good eyeful of the base of her rump. And never mind the obvious...tightness...of this evil Muggle material. But the frays... around her thighs, along her pockets... Once or twice when Hermione had raised her arms in the air, revealing a sliver of skin along her abdomen, Severus immediately noted the frayed material that ran the total expanse of her waist.

Loose threading and tears could easily have been fixed with a bit of magic, but Muggle-born witches never thought of such trivialities.

With a cool breeze and almost non-existent sun, the damnable girl had thought to don an old, raggedy grey jumper atop those ludicrous shorts. The image before him was the exact definition of obscene.

The blasted chit sensed his sour mood and dared to wave before obnoxiously shouting, "Good afternoon, Professor Snape!"

Muddy bum braced upon a wet rock, her long, smooth limbs extended towards the bank. Severus closed his mouth to hide his clenched teeth as he eyed her bare feet kicking about in the water.

Snape edged towards her under the pretense of intending to walk right past the young woman, oblivious to her presence. But by the time he stood nearly behind her, he hated himself for succumbing to his temptations... such as speaking to her.

"I'd rather you refrain from greeting me at all if you must resort to screaming for attention, Miss Granger."

Pressing the palm of her left hand into the mud, Hermione leaned her body weight towards him while squinting against the sun at his back.

"Granger," the chit said simply.

"I beg your pardon?"

There it was again! That same insolence she flaunted the other night in the corridor. Insolence in the form of her mouth, corner rising slightly in mocking joviality as she spoke, "I prefer not to be singled out any longer... *sir*. Our situations *are* different this year, wouldn't you agree?"

Never, not ever in his interactions with Miss Granger had Snape been stirred to snap the following words, "What do you mean?"

"I'm nearly nineteen, Professor... Not only am I one of, if not the oldest student here... I am well past the age of apprenticing candidates... Well, that's neither here nor there. I've tolerated your idiosyncrasy long enough. While I'll never presume to be called by my first name, can you at least call me 'Granger,' like you do the other students?"

Severus' blank stare was not lost on her.

"You have been, and always do, add a 'Miss' before my surname... eh... Have you not noticed?"

"NO." He'd replied immediately and without thought.

Severus had *never* thought about it before now. Mrs. Snape herself had forced such formalities upon him, and somehow it must have carried over..*Fucking hell...*

"Ah... Well..." She was fidgeting again. That confident hand no longer braced her body in the mud. Instead, Hermione busied herself with picking at her dirty fingernails, bottom lip ravished between her teeth. "It's just that... *sir*. I don't like the..."

"Attention?" Snape snorted. "I strongly doubt that."

Hermione shot up from the ground. Fire flashed in her eyes, only to soften seconds later when Snape stepped back with one hasty step.

It wasn't her eyes that alarmed him... or her proximity.

Her height...not until now did he notice its equivalence to the future Mrs. Snape..*Stop calling her that!*

He vividly remembered this exact angle of her eyes when he used to intentionally lean into the married woman to raise her heartbeat and flush her cheeks...

"Professor..." the red-faced vixen before him dared to whisper.

Her breath, hot and lingering, faltered his footing once again. Jaw tensing painfully, Severus turned his back to her and muttered, "Good day*Miss Granger*."

"Hmm... that was interesting," a cocky voice drawled at Hermione's back. The knowing insinuation behind his words was entirely intentional.

All the fight in her had left with a billow of black robes.

"What was?" Voice strangely subdued, Hermione didn't bother to glance at Draco as she spoke. She easily imagined the challenging smirk behind his upbeat remark. Lowering her body back to her perch upon the rock, Hermione reclined all of her weight onto her elbows.

When the unwanted presence behind her still did not reply, Hermione tilted her chin back to questionably gaze at Draco, her vision upside down.

The arrogance implied in his tone of voice was nowhere to be found on his face or stance.

"You were saying?" Hermione probed calmly.

"Forget it."

"Who's playing games, now?"

"Shut it, Granger."

"Gladly, once you stop talking to me. I didn't initiate this conversation."

"Swot."

"Ferret."

By the end of this ridiculousness, the both of them had been speaking in monotone sighs.

Draco lowered himself beside her, knees bent, bracing his body weight upon the balls of his feet. After a bit of digging in the dirt he located a proper-sized rock to skip across the lake's surface.

Hermione squinted into the distance, watching Draco's stone jump upon the water.

"I was insinuating as to Snape's eligibility," he said without looking at her. "Within the last few hours, I'd never seen so many girls undergo a complete change of attitude in relation to him." Draco didn't need to explain a damn thing to her, but it was clear he felt the obligation. He had expected Hermione to childishly respond in kind, but was pleasantly taken aback by her lack of response.

"I know." Hermione laughed quietly to herself, recalling the snippets of conversation she'd been overhearing all day.

At length, he spoke again. "I haven't decided yet if coming back was worth it... You?"

"I'll let you know when I get my N.E.W.T.s."

Draco snorted something under his breath that almost sounded like, "Typical."

"Can I ask why you..."

"Not a chance."

"Hermione?" a third voice demanded with a bite, standing directly behind her and Draco.

She did not know it, but the one time Draco actually bothered to pull his eyes away from the lake to glance at her face, he caught Hermione's exasperation in response to Dennis' childish intrusion.

Jerking her neck at Draco's presence beside her, she said, "Everything's all right, Dennis."

Dennis eyed Draco suspiciously. "Can I speak to you a moment? I wanted to ask you..."

"Too late." Draco smirked condescendingly, rising himself to his full height.

"What's too...?" Dennis asked.

"Hermione has already agreed to be my date for the Hogsmeade trip."

"WHAT?"

"Draco!"

Hermione was clearly angry at whatever game he was pulling. Her sudden confrontational jump and narrowed eyes told him as much. But Draco couldn't stop smiling. It wasn't lost on him that this was the only time the Muggle-born had called him by his first name.

He shrugged his shoulders at her infuriated expression. "Do whatever you wish. You can take back your promise if you really want to go with Denny-boy here."

At the sound of Draco's mocking snort, Dennis blanched. He opened his mouth, probably to say something heated in response, but obviously lacked the courage to do so. Face flaming in mortification, Dennis turned away, refusing to meet Hermione's face.

Helplessly watching him walk away, Hermione spoke once she was certain no one could overhear them.

"That was unbelievably cruel."

"I saved you from a headache and you know it."

"I simply could have..."

"Said 'yes' reluctantly to mollycoddle his feelings? Yes... I'm sure you would. Did you see his face?"

If Draco hadn't released a pitiless laugh after those words, this conversation might not have been so terrible.

"Everyone around you has grown up!" Hermione' shriek surprised Draco and herself even by the force and passion behind her words. "And none of us had a choice in the matter, either... I don't know if I despise or envy you, since you're so obviously exempt?" After hissing that last part over her shoulder, Hermione had no intention in waiting for a response. She chased after Dennis like she should have done initially.

That following Monday, Hermione's nerves had finally settled into welcoming the routine of her classes. Meticulously measuring the potion ingredients before her, Hermione had to admit, she'd missed this.

A warm smile spread across her face at that last thought.

"Thinking of your date with Malfoy," a sickened voice jeered behind her.

Hermione clenched her jaw with a scowl, refusing to acknowledge Ron's childishness. The fact that these were the first words he had said to her in nearly two weeks hurt Hermione more than she willing to own up.

"Looks like rich-husband-chasing is contagious."

"Leave her alone." Harry's icy tone made it clear he'd had more than enough of Ron's attitude.

Hermione turned around slightly, about to silently thank Harry with her eyes when Ron started to verbally abuse her some more. Averting her vision back to her cauldron, Hermione noticed Draco on the other side of the room. His tall, trim frame leaned lazily over the corner of a worktable while hissing "Weaslebe!" under his breath.

The Slytherin must have finally received Ron's attention because his face broke out in a mocking, triumphant smile at the same time his middle finger rose in the air.

When Draco unexpectedly blanched and turned around, Hermione gathered that Professor Snape's turn had reached their side of the room.

If Ron had been aware of this, he probably wouldn't have viciously sneered, "Gold-digger," at her back.

Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek. Sorrow had long been replaced with fury at this point, but in her frustrated effort to keep silent, hot tears unwillingly trailed down her face.

A thunderous, hallow 'WHACK!' made her and half the class jump. She spun in her seat to locate the origin of the ruckus.

Ron was completely keeled over the surface of his worktable, furiously rubbing the back of his head.

Standing behind the redhead, dreaded lesson planner in hand, Professor Snape smirked nastily and drawled, "It is not polite to make young ladies cry, Weasley."

"What are you playing at?" Ron managed to raise his scarlet face to scream, "You've made her and many others cry hundreds of times!"

"Ah, but in this classroom, I get paid to do so. As her peer, you owe her and every other female a little thing called respect." Professor Snape took a few steps up the center aisle before whirling around elegantly. "Oh, and you are to write me a fifteen foot essay on the importance of not acting like an ill-bred fool in class."

Hermione sat there gaping for longer than she would have liked. She didn't know what to think about... well, everything that had just happened! But one thing was for certain, this was the first occasion where the derisive guffaws issuing from the Slytherin table actually warmed her heart.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 7

Sequel to Bound to Happen. Jealous. Possessive. Endlessly devoted. Such words could easily describe a man like Severus Snape, especially in regards to his wife. Unfortunately, Snape finds himself in the position of shielding Hermione from the temptation of a hot-blooded and disturbingly older man—himself. Story beta'ed by **Madbrilliant, Iuvsev and Southernwitch!**

"What is this?"

Hermione's tetchy demand failed to wipe the smirk off Draco's face. It was the morning of the Hogsmeade trip, and somehow, she knew the Slytherin's presence outside the Gryffindor common room had something to do with her.

Overhearing many whispering comments of her fellow Gryffindors, Hermione's face burned red. She fled past Draco without a word, but he merely laughed behind her and easily matched her pace.

"Trying to give me the slip, Granger?"

"You're delusional."

"*You're* my date for the day. Or did you forget our agreement out by the lake?"

"Agreement!" Hands balled at her sides, Hermione turned in her tracks. Noticing they were attracting even more attention, she continued in a forced whisper. "You used me to tease Dennis. I never agreed to anything!"

"I told you you were free to back out if you wanted to go with Denny-boy so badly... but you remained silent instead."

She could not find words, her incredulity was so strong.

"So in not refusing, you in fact agreed. Admit it, Granger. You want to be stuck with me all day..."

Releasing a growl of irritation, Hermione fled again, determined to exit through the Entrance Hall doors.

Arrogant smirk finally fading, Draco rushed in front of her path and said, "Look... just have a drink with me at the *Three Broomsticks* to keep appearances. If my presence still pisses you off, I'll leave you alone for the rest of the day."

Hermione crossed her arms. "What 'appearances'?"

"I don't want to disappoint the rumor mill we've instigated...all right, I've instigated...this whole week. Besides, don't you think we both could use a bit of positive PR?"

"Ugh, FINE. But you are going to tell me more about your joining the Order... and I don't see how this will improve *my* reputation."

"Every witch wants a bit of arm-candy now and again..."

Hermione slowly turned to look up at him. She didn't say a word, or snort, or laugh in his face. She merely looked at him with both eyebrows lazily raised, and somehow it made him feel like the idiot he knew he'd been acting.

"I'm done," Draco said simply.

"Bout time."

A dark figure remained completely still and silent, hidden behind a pillar in the Entrance Hall.

This figure had overheard a few teasing snippets of conversation, but he had witnessed so much more... and didn't enjoy one moment of it.

Wheels were turning, connections had been made, and with each passing day, Severus Snape was beginning to think less and less of Miss Granger.

As he watched the young woman accept Malfoy's offered arm, Snape realized that for the first time in a great number of years, the remembrances of his judgmental accusations to Mrs. Snape back in 1983 did not bring him pain.

He felt validated.

"You can let go now," Hermione's voice droned while she blankly looked straight ahead.

The two of them had suffered a painfully long walk from the castle to the streets of Hogsmeade. Neither Hermione nor Draco flinched at the varied reactions their combined presence had instigated. Some laughed, many gasped, and a few idiotic girls appeared on the verge of tears.

The more radical these reactions grew, the wider Draco's smirk stretched.

Hermione feared that if she rolled her eyes one more time she'd go cross-eyed.

Pretending he hadn't heard her demand, Draco turned his head this way and that, as if the sight of High Street's shops and pubs were the most exquisite thing to be seen.

Hermione yanked her elbow out of his hold. "I'm fully aware of what you're doing, you know? I won't fault you for trying to make an impression *of them*, but please don't insult my intelligence."

Draco smirked innocently, clasping his hands behind his back.

"Who, exactly, is this 'them'?"

"Hmm... every witch and wizard with a brain who remembers your family's malevolent and never ending support for Voldemort."

Hermione kept walking, fully aware that her comment had stopped Draco dead in his tracks. After she had put a full shop's length between them, she turned around to gaze at him impassively.

The scowl directed at her was expected.

"We're even," she announced loudly. Pointing at the *Three Broomsticks* across from her, Hermione challenged, "You owe me a drink for this stunt."

Hermione had entered the *Three Broomsticks* alone, much to the detriment of the present students who had hoped to witness something intriguing.

Aware of the eyes on her, Hermione had marched to the back of the pub with her chin up, carefully removing her cloak to drape it over the back of her chair. When Madam Rosmerta's smiling face caught her attention, Hermione pressed her lips together, covertly waving two fingers in dismissal.

Rosmerta winked once and passed her table by.

Draco eventually entered, not surprising Hermione in the least. He sneered at the nearby students who dared to look at him too long. One sixth year actually jumped from his stool, apparently under the impression Draco meant to have his seat.

Once the Slytherin had located Hermione, he effortlessly edged his lean body between the crowds and kicked out a chair from her table.

Draco eyed the bare surface of their table with one eyebrow raised. Hermione smirked in response. As if on cue, Rosmerta appeared at Draco side, asking him if he wanted to open a tab.

"Two glasses of wine... er.... please."

"Ah... Well, I think we have..."

"*Red. Merlot.*"

Rosmerta clicked her tongue, snorted, and then went to fetch their order.

After a few seconds of unsettling silence, Draco met Hermione's critical stare and demanded, "*What?*"

"You don't drink here very often."

"Here?" he scoffed. "I can barely remember the last time I visited this..." His scathing opinion on this 'low-class' pub died on Draco's tongue. He hadn't immediately recollected his last visit because it hadn't been one of a customer. Unfortunately, this memory came much later than it should have. Sitting up straight, Draco eyed the various occupants, as if he'd discern a vigilante among them.

"Katie never came back by the way."

Draco grimaced, dropping his chin. Both hands clenched into fists as he sullenly looked at her through his lashes and whispered, "Her medical expenses are taken care of..."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak.

"Indefinitely." The apples of his cheeks reddened.

Hermione nodded with a shrug. After tapping a rhythmic tune with her index finger, she looked off to the side and said, "*And don't care for red wine.*"

"Then buy your own damn drink."

Something within her warmed. Maybe it was his sour face, a sight she hadn't seen in such a long time. Or perhaps the grumpy crossing of the arms. Draco suddenly looked like first year all over again, and Hermione couldn't help the unexpected laughter that erupted from her chest, loud and void of mockery.

Draco regarded her with surprise, mouth opening to say something, but Rosmerta interrupted them with their drinks. Clearing his throat, he reigned in some of his affected composure. Raising his glass in the air, Draco said, "Cheers."

"What are we cheering?"

"To your newfound celebrity... as if such a thing could rise any farther. I suppose a team-effort was needed?"

The deep voice and sarcasm issuing from behind Hermione's chair was unmistakable. She gulped her mouthful of wine too quickly and paid for it with the hysterical coughs

that racked her lungs.

"Care to join us, Professor?" Draco drawled, waving at an empty chair.

"I don't imbibe on patrols, Malfoy."

Hermione couldn't tolerate sitting silent any longer. His presence at her back was too close for comfort.

Carefully rotating in her seat, face flushed from her near choking, Hermione braced her body weight by clutching the back of her chair. There her hand found itself directly beside Professor Snape's. Cheeks burning when their knuckles touched, Hermione spoke as if she hadn't noticed. "Forgive me, Professor, but what was your comment referring to?"

Professor Snape tilted his head to one side very slightly, his hair falling forward as he looked down at her. Face indifferent, he held her gaze for three long seconds before answering, "It appears, Miss Granger, that your personal life has elevated from the trash of the *Prophet* to the gossip columns of *Witch Weekly*.

Snape moved to the side, presenting Hermione with a view of the window facing the main street.

Pressed completely against the glass was a well-known reporter from said magazine, busy camera attached to her face.

"DRACO!"

"What are you yelling at me for?"

"You arranged this circus, didn't you?"

"I arranged our... date... but I *did not* call the rags. What do you take me for?"

"This. Is. Not. A. Date!"

If Hermione needed any other reason to leave right this minute, said reason sauntered up to their table, drink in hand.

"Hermione! Draco, Professor Snape," Lavender Brown squealed with forced good humor. "Is this seat taken?"

Clearly not expecting an invitation, Lavender pulled up a chair.

Caught off guard, but not adverse to a bit of entertainment, Draco leaned back comfortably with a sardonic grin. He charmingly teased the girl, forever smirking, while she laughed with revolting exaggeration.

Hermione felt ill and said so, blaming the wine.

Professor Snape was still patrolling by the time she left. He had fled from their table the moment Lavender had directed an overtly flirtatious smile his way, but remained in the pub to torment the remainder of the students with his fearsome presence.

Hermione welcomed the opportunity to be alone. She contemplated finding her friends, but dreaded hearing their opinions about her dat...outing with Malfoy. Other than Ron, none of them had taken the rumors sincerely. She doubted they'd react as strongly as the redhead, but they would be reproving nonetheless.

It's not as if any of them had asked to spend the day with her!

Hermione tsked at the thought.

She and Ron weren't speaking to each other, so Hermione certainly *did not* want to spend the day with him. And Ginny and Harry were perpetually glued to the hip, one of the few couples at Hogwarts whom the Marriage Enhancement Act did not negatively affect. In fact, the two of them were foolishly engaged scant hours after Voldemort had been destroyed. Hermione knew it had been coming, but she couldn't help thinking that Harry's proposal had been a tad bit impulsive.

Neville and Luna weren't taking the new law well at all, however. Socially inept and naive, the two of them had enough trouble making friends, never mind dating. The idea of being required to find a spouse within the next couple of years was traumatizing, to say the least.

And then there was Dennis...

Hermione's face flamed red. Whenever she thought about the younger Gryffindor, her thoughts unwillingly traveled to the photo of Professor Snape. Hermione didn't enjoy these remembrances because thinking of the photo forced her to contemplate the wizard in a less than platonic manner.

Hermione didn't know if she should be angry with herself, with Dennis' cursed camera, or his careless spell casting.

A sudden realization struck her. Who knew what Dennis had been up to with that horrid camera of his! Its existence was already appalling enough, but now with the new law... Hermione needed to advise him quickly before Dennis found himself in serious trouble.

After a bit of uneventful window shopping, Hermione smiled at the friendly face she met. Standing upon a dais in front of mirror, Ginny waved at Hermione excitedly, beckoning her inside *Gladrag's Wizardwear*.

A tailor simpered and fluttered about Ginny's ankles. Taking in the sight of Ginny's dress, Hermione stated, "This one's beautiful."

"But?"

"Er... How many dresses do you need in green?"

"Harry likes green; it matches..."

"His eyes. I'm aware." Hermione fingered a seam at Ginny's back, evaluating the quality of the material. She inhaled when her hand was unceremoniously slapped away by the tailor.

"It also matches his mother's, does it not?"

Ginny focused all of her attention on her reflection. "Go on. Try with all your might, but I won't let you ruin my happy mood."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not trying to do anything of the sort. Just concerned. I'm your best friend..."

"Then act like it."

"*I am*. I'm worried."

"About how many green dresses I'm buying? Have you been reading the papers lately? I would think you have more pressing issues on your plate."

Crossing her arms, Hermione chose to ignore Ginny's defensiveness. She could understand from where it stemmed. Hermione politely asked the tailor for a bit of privacy, but at pointedly being ignored, she rudely cleared her throat in a superior manner that finally sent the woman on her way.

Voice soft, Hermione continued, "I'm worried about how much money you spend... Harry's money."

"That's a spiteful thing to say."

"For the last time, I am not trying to hurt you ... or judge you. Harry's always been extremely giving; lord knows how it drove your brother mad. But this is..."

Ginny whirled around and looked down her nose at Hermione. "Not that it's any of your business, but once we get married, it will be my money, too!"

"All the more reason for you to spend wisely," Hermione replied calmly.

"Just because your parents lost their dentistry practice in hiding, it gives you no right to lecture me on money management!"

A sharp ache tore through her. Hermione gave herself a moment to control herself and nodded once in departure. "Now~~that~~ was spiteful."

Alone once again, and this time determined to remain that way, Hermione made her way to the deserted end of Hogsmeade.

She needed a *real* drink.

If any of the students had witnessed Hermione Granger's solitary entrance into the *Hog's Head* in search of a knock back, and had come away from the image with surprise, said student must have been reading the *Prophet* and not *The Quibbler*.

Hermione had seen, done, and experienced so much worse during her year on the run.

There was no bell above the door to signal her entrance. The aged, rusted hinges creaked loudly in her wake. Catching Aberforth's eye, Hermione smiled warmly and was gifted with uncharacteristic attention and a clean glass.

One... two... three large gulps sailed down her throat. She spun on her stool, covertly taking in the clientele over her shoulder.

A brooding, black-robed wizard seated alone in a corner caught her attention.

"*I don't imbibe during patrol's, indeed!*"

Delicately wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Hermione grasped her pint and headed straight towards Professor Snape's table.

She wasn't pissed in the least. If she had been, paranoia would have taken precedence, not bravery. Hermione simply recollected the wizard's uncharacteristic actions that night in the corridor. It also wasn't lost on her that many of his odd... reactions...had occurred whenever the two of them were alone.

Not looking at him directly, soft smile upon her eyes, Hermione pulled a chair out from under his table and eased into it. In her peripheral vision, she caught the wizard's instinctive jerk. She also sensed his apprehension.

Bringing the mug to her lips, Hermione swallowed languidly, a faint click on her jaw was audible. At length, she finally dared to meet his eye.

Professor Snape didn't say a word. Instead, he leaned all of his body weight to his one elbow braced upon the armrest and cocked an eyebrow in silent question.

Hermione kept the mug against her lips, hoping he didn't detect her smile.

"Is there something I can help you with, Miss Granger?"

Clearing her throat, Hermione calmly placed her drink upon the table and completely tucked in. "Yes, in fact there is."

"You have my *undivided* attention, to be sure."

His sarcasm brought about the desired effect. Hermione's confidence significantly lowered. Aware that her face fell, Hermione followed the movement, looking down into her lap while speaking softly, "Honestly, Professor. May I ask a few... questions... about the new law?"

What in Merlin's name was wrong with her? Hermione had spoken about the Marriage Enhancement Act to a good number of students by now, but for the first time her eyes burned and throat tightened. Maybe this reaction was the result of the wizard she was speaking to? Either way, this emotional display unwillingly spilling out of her was downright embarrassing.

She doubted her face could blush any redder.

In her visual attempt to compose herself, Hermione had never noticed the tight clenching of Professor Snape's jaw.

"Very well," he conceded.

Hermione threw herself into her chaotic thoughts. "From what I can gather, I'm required to accept a proposal by my 22nd birthday. *Accept*, not submit. Does this apply to all who await their 22nd or are just the *females*?" There was no mistaking her degree of disgust.

Looking off to the side, Professor Snape appeared to contemplate something before he answered. It crossed Hermione's mind that he truly did not want to have a conversation with her.

His baritone voice broke the silence, easing her worries.

Cool and straightforward, he said, "Unfortunately, that part only applies to witches. While men your age may submit proposals, young witches cannot. Strangely enough, all witches and wizards *my age* must submit proposals to five witches or wizards within thirty days of the New Year."

"You speak of yourself with such criticism, as if you're ancient."

"Age regardless, I feel it."

"Well, you certainly don't *look* it."

That distinctive eyebrow of his was quick to reprimand her.

"Forgive me, I meant it as a compli..." She interrupted herself with a cough, swigging from her mug. "As much as I love being a witch, I'm continuously astounded as to how barbaric the wizarding world can be."

"Indeed."

"And what if none of the witches accept your proposal, for one legal reason or another, what then?"

Momentarily caught off guard by her question, Professor Snape regarded her with pursed lips. Drumming his fingers upon the table, he said, "I would then be required to submit another five the next month, and each month after until I am accepted."

"And what if multiple witches accept your proposal within the same month?"

Snape growled suddenly. "Patrolling aside, Hogsmeade trips are intended as an indulgence for instructors as well as students. I cannot recall the last time I allowed you such an obscene amount of questions!"

Hermione didn't react to this scolding like she would have in class, and for this reason it unknowingly caused the man a measure of disconcertion. Her very being, from the way she sank into her seat to the clutch of her mug, showed that this comment cut her...deeply. Face gathering itself into forced indifference, she muttered, "Forgive me. I truly did not mean to disturb you... on end."

"Sit down."

His words...his demand...was unmistakable.

She'd fled a fair number of steps towards the exit without comprehending he had spoken. Expression widening, Hermione slowly rotated on the spot.

Professor Snape leaned across the table, bracing his weight upon his elbows and held her gaze through strands of limp hair. He then cocked his head to the side, waving at her empty seat. "... *please*."

Her disbelief had her legs moving on their own accord.

"To answer your previous question, Miss Granger... In the unlikely event multiple witches vie for my hand in marriage, I will gain the option of choosing among them." Finishing the contents of his tumbler, Snape looked at her critically. Harshly.

His top lip practically curled in distrust.

"Professor...?"

"I must admit, I can't help but wonder why you're not only wandering about your own... but also choosing to sit across from a less-than-favorite instructor on your nineteenth."

He'd remembered the date of her birthday. Just when Hermione thought her level of astonishment could not rise any further...

"I refuse to explain away my knowledge. After all these years, I cannot deny how much I know about you students... as much as I would like to." He nastily sneered that last part.

"May I be blunt, sir?"

Snape merely raised an eyebrow.

Flushing, Hermione clarified, "May I be *forward*, sir?"

Professor Snape readjusted himself in his seat and nodded once, feigning boredom.

"I've... enjoyed speaking to you...like this. And thank you."

"For?"

"Answering my inquiries and remembering...acknowledging my birthday. You are the first."

"Your friends have forgotten?"

"I'm fairly certain they haven't. If history repeats itself, I'll have another 'surprise' party awaiting me in the common room."

Snape didn't say a word. Instead, he raised his glass in the air, tilting it as if in silent cheer. The effect was ruined by his empty glass and Aberforth's hasty approach to their table.

"Another whiskey?"

Snape nodded. "And this young lady will have another... Butterbeer?"

Snape's repugnant expression was met with one of her own.

"Mead."

Just when Hermione had thought her day could not grow any more...interesting...her assurance was challenged to an unknown degree. A witch approached their table, her stance close to Professor Snape's seated form. It took him a moment to notice the woman's presence and another awkward second to recognize her.

He paled, glancing quickly at Hermione from the corner of his eye.

While the woman was a fair number of years older than Hermione, it could also be argued that she was still a good number of years younger than the Potions master himself.

Finely tailored robes around her womanly figure, Hermione took all this in, wishing she was anywhere else but here. But realizing she couldn't just get up and leave without appearing rude, she decided to focus on the singsong voice that had been fluttering about.

"... yes, far too long, Mr. Snape!" the witch squealed. "Three years, if I'm not mistaken? I know you'd been *very* busy at the time, but your sudden departure was heartless! Well...never mind that now, hmm? The war is over and I hope our friendship can begin anew..."

Hermione did not know this woman, but she would never judge someone unfairly simply because her own insecurities emerged in the face of the witch's beauty and confidence. In fact, Hermione had been so determined not to appear spiteful that she tolerated the witch's deliberate disrespect much longer than she would have otherwise.

So lost was she in these thoughts that Hermione never noticed the growing distress of the man across from her.

"May I buy you a drink?" the witch dared to ask.

Gathering himself, brow furrowed, Professor Snape responded, "No, thank you. Perhaps another time. *As you can clearly see*, I am busy."

"Oh! I do apologize. I must've been distracted by your presence."

"Yes...well..."

"Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Finally perceiving the disgusting amount of insincerity in this woman's manner, Hermione found herself returned to solid ground. Sitting very calmly, hands upon her mug, Hermione already had a knowing smirk prepared.

Snape cleared his throat in discomfort, fully turning his eyes to the seated woman and said, "Miss Hermione Granger... I'd like you to meet Miss Madeline Greengrass."

Neither woman knew if it had been intentional or an accident, but Miss Greengrass' countenance flamed while Hermione's smile became one of pleasure. This witch had approached their table with the anticipation of being greeted as a valued friend, seeming to expect Professor Snape to direct the introduction towards her attention, not the other way around.

"Miss Granger," the witch repeated archly, following the man's unblinking gaze. "Ah, yes... I believe I see your face every time I sit at my morning paper... whether I want to or not."

Hermione was unmoved at the woman's veiled insult. "I have no say in the matter."

"Miss Granger," she repeated again. "I cannot say I know any Grangers... my loss, to be sure. Your family...?"

"... are Muggles, yes."

The witch smiled widely, directing it towards Snape.

"Muggles! How adorable. Of course, I should have known that, shouldn't I?"

"Indeed," Snape interrupted. "Unless you ignore the very paper you sit at each morning."

"Oh, Mr. Snape!" Miss Greengrass giggled, touching the backs of her fingers to her lips. "You're so severe. But I'll agree with you there. As I said, reading articles of the same three individuals day after day has grown... exhausting."

"And speaking of names," Hermione said, "shall I assume you're related to...?"

"Daphne Greengrass is my niece."

"Ah."

There was nothing else Hermione could say. The atmosphere stifled them. Miss Greengrass refused to leave while Professor Snape either deliberately ignored her expectation for an invite or simply wasn't aware he should offer one.

On the verge of laughter, but mindful not show it, Hermione met the woman's stony face. "Well... it was very nice meeting you, Miss Greengrass."

"Indeed, good to see you again," Professor Snape added, sincere but quiet.

Miss Greengrass almost jerked, hiding her reaction by squaring her shoulders. Throwing her thick, black hair over her shoulder, she was able to send a vicious look at Hermione without Snape noticing.

"I cannot begin to explain how pleasurable it was to see you again, Mr. Snape. My address is the same. There! You have no excuse not to keep in touch."

"Good day." Gruff and uncomfortable, Snape would say no more.

Once the witch had left the pub, Hermione felt responsible to fill the silence and said, "She's very beautiful."

"I don't recall asking for your opinion on the matter."

Ugh! Why was she still sitting here, tolerating such behavior? Merlin knows she had given this an honest effort. Why Hermione had bothered...or wanted...to sit with the wizard wasn't completely clear to her, but if he wasn't going to make an attempt at polite conversation, then there was no point.

Hermione downed her second pint of mead. The wooden legs of her chair protested against the floor as she stood up from the table.

"And where do you think you are going?"

"Oh, honestly, Professor! It couldn't be any more clear I'm leaving...*sir*. Unless, I'm required to attain your permission first?"

"Watch your tongue, girl."

"No."

"What...?"

"This isn't the classroom! You're not getting *paid* to make me cry. Thank you, again, for answering my questions...and for the drink...but I'm not grateful enough to tolerate your bad manners in exchange."

She stood painfully straight, calming her breathing while looking the man directly in the face. Expecting her words and defiant manner to inspire rage, Hermione nearly lost her footing when it never came.

Professor Snape crossed his arms, his entire being once again awkward and said, "You're welcome."

Her courage was thoroughly depleted. Hermione fled, at a loss for any other reaction.

"Miss me?"

Halfway through her trek back to the castle, a cocky voice descended on Hermione, catching her unawares.

Impatience reaching its peak, Hermione cursed under her breath.

Draco heard it and laughed. Walking backwards beside her, hands in his pockets, he said, "I should be angry with you, you know?"

"I doubt that."

"You never told me it was your birthday."

"I didn't want you to know."

Her arm was seized around the bicep. Draco forced her to turn around and face him, his grip firm but not violent.

"Hey!"

"I *have* been trying, Granger. I don't expect you to suddenly like me...I'm not even certain yet if I like *you*...but the war *is* over. Or haven't you noticed? We're not kids anymore and the bullshit has grown old."

Hermione stopped struggling against the arm restraining her, heeding the sense in his words.

"Besides," he continued, "I think Order members are required to get along."

"Why did you join the Order?" The way she asked this question told him she wouldn't consider a truce until he answered.

Draco clenched his teeth. A petulant scowl was very close to forming.

After a few seconds of expectant silence, Hermione made a disgusted sound.

"Fine, Granger!" Unwilling to allow her to turn away, Draco tightened his hold once again before she'd managed to completely pull her arm free. Fingers tight upon her wrist, he tugged lightly, tangling her legs.

This time they both cursed, tumbling to the ground.

Aware of how ridiculous this must have looked to anyone who'd witnessed it, Hermione covered her face with her hands, suddenly driven to uncontrollable laughter.

"Alright," Draco said, quick to push himself back up and straighten his robes.

"*Alright.*"

But Hermione was still lying in the grass, laughing freely.

Unable to hide his grin, but still conscious of preying eyes, Draco hissed, "Knock it off, already!" He helped her rise from the ground.

Hermione gradually settled, wiping at her eyes and patting dirt from her robes. Draco took advantage of her distraction and blurted, "I'm spying."

Nothing else would have sobered her so quickly. She looked up at him, processing this information as shock, horror, and then denial crossed her features.

Draco nodded, unsuccessfully forcing a cocky grin. "For the Order. Alongside Snape, of course. Don't look so surprised! How else do you expect the missing Death Eaters will be caught?"

Hermione wildly shook her head. "You shouldn't be telling me this!"

"You asked."

"If Minerva didn't release this information, there's a reason it isn't common knowledge to the Order. You shouldn't be speaking of it!"

"You. Asked."

Hermione resumed her trek, pace quick as if she could flee from this unwanted truth. A little worried, Draco followed her.

"How could she do this?" Hermione questioned, speaking more to herself than him. "Just when the worst seemed to be over for good..."

"You know the Aurors are sacks of shite. They couldn't find their own fingers up their arses..."

"I don't want to hear any more."

"Get a grip, Granger. So far it's not that bad... and Snape's been doing this long enough. It's instinctual for him."

Anger flared in her, hot and suffocating. "*It shouldn't* be."

Later that evening, Snape absconded himself in his office, drowning his senses in tedious grading.

Her face... her words... He could not get Hermione's image out of his head. How she'd scolded him, from the way she'd carried herself to her sharp tones, it reminded Severus so much of Mrs. Snape. Just when he had convinced himself that it would never happen, the separate images of these women were beginning to meld. If he hadn't been sitting in the chair, voluminous robes draped about, the witch might have noticed his unceremonious arousal.

Why had she approached him in the *Hog's Head*? Did she really want to have a conversation with him? Or was she acting a part?

As much as Snape wanted otherwise... he couldn't allow himself to trust her. The young woman's sudden...interest...was painfully suspect. Each witch now seemed to flutter and bat their lashes at every eligible wizard who came their way...why not her?

Snape covered his face with a groan, recalling Miss Greengrass' attempts. The woman's intentions were abysmally clear. Already one to flirt, Severus was still taken aback by how daring she'd acted in front of a stranger.

And rude.

It didn't surprise him though. When he had been celebrated among pure-blooded society as the Dark Lord's right hand man, he'd suffered her fawning attention.

Now, Snape could only assume the article detailing his fortune ignited Miss Greengrass' ardor once again.

Issuing a snort of disgust, Snape glanced at his clock and scowled. He and Draco had a meeting this evening, and the little shit was late.

Draco...

The young man's very name drove Snape mad. What was the boy up to with Miss Granger? More importantly, whenever he espied the two of them together, why did it seem like the young woman enjoyed the idiot's company?

Her uncontainable laughter still rang in his ears, tormenting him.

Determined to locate the arrogant bugger, Severus threw open his office door with a snarl. A presence on the other side, hand raised as if to knock, forced him to step back in alarm.

She gasped at the same time Snape yelled, "Miss Granger!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You did no such thing."

His top lip curled as he was forced to watch that familiar corner of her mouth rise into a smirk.

Snape hated that smirk.

It angered him so because whenever he saw it, he envisioned dozens of inappropriate, filthy things he could do in removing it.

"What do you want?"

Unperturbed by his irritation, Hermione held a note out for him to accept. "The Headmistress asked me to give this to you."

Schooling his features, Severus took the folded parchment. More and more her presence disturbed him. He stared down at her, not blinking, hoping to regain control.

As if she suddenly remembered something, her good humor drained away. Meeting his intense glare, but unaware of the reasons behind it, she said, "Professor?

"Miss Granger?"

"I don't think I ever...thanked you...for the sacrifices you made...*continue* to make."

Before he could respond, she interrupted.

"I know, I know! It's none of my business. You don't want to hear it..." She waved her arm through to the air, insinuating the endless reproaches he could have given her. "But I-I had to let you know."

At a loss for words, Severus opened and closed his mouth. White-blond hair flashed in the corner of his eye. Taking advantage of the distraction, he brushed passed her, bellowing down the corridor, "MALFOY!"

The Slytherin jerked. Turning around guardedly, he looked at Hermione with suspicion and said, "Yes, sir?"

"Did you forget we had a meeting?"

"I...no, sir. You looked... busy."

Relieved, Draco approached the two of them.

Snape turned to Miss Granger, tempted to direct his ire at her. Something in the way she looked at him killed the reprimand on his tongue. Swallowing, he remembered their earlier interaction and said, "*Thank you* for bringing me the Headmistress' note, Miss Granger."

Clearly dismissed, she turned away.

Due to Malfoy's unpunctual stupidity, Snape was forced to drag the young wizard on his rounds. The Dungeons may have been empty, but the Potions master refused to discuss Order business where someone might overhear them.

The topic Snape chose to discuss instead was careless, but he truly couldn't help himself.

"Honestly, Draco... a Muggle-born?"

"You sound surprised?"

Recalling the boy's longstanding prejudicial attitudes, which Draco had never refrained from vocalizing in abandon, Severus challenged, "I would have thought you'd never stoop so low..."

"They tend to be very pleasing on the eye, wouldn't you agree? Forbidden fruit and all."

Snape released a groan of disgust in response to hearing the young woman spoken about with such vulgarity.

"Even you have to admit, Professor, Granger is very easy on the eyes. Not beautiful, but..."

"I refuse to admit anything to *you*, especially regarding a Muggle-born," Snape spat. This boy's attitude reminded him so much of what his own had been at that age, inspiring total repugnance in every one of Snape's word.

Draco laughed dismissively at the same time a loud crash issued from a nearby classroom. Snape spun around, immediately noticing a door ajar. He flung open the door, intending to find a student out past curfew. After a thorough...albeit brief...search, Severus judged the classroom empty.

Pulling the door closed behind him, Snape returned his attention to Draco and this wretched conversation. "I doubt you'll find Miss Granger receptive to the idea of becoming one of your conquests."

Draco tsked insultingly. "Look, I'm not out to ruin the girl. She amuses me. And as far as the rest..." Draco let the thought trail off with a sumptuous wave of his hand. "Hard to find fresh meat at her age."

Severus stared hard at Draco, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Oh, come on! You can't honestly tell me it surprises you that *she's* still a virgin?"

"How the hell would you know something like that...never mind. Don't you dare say another word to me on the subject. I've already been a part of this vulgar conversation longer than I feel comfortable with."

Before turning away, Severus gave the young man a few needed words of advice. "Before you go around tarnishing young ladies' reputations, remember the damage the last few years have inflicted upon *yours*. Miss Granger is far too intelligent a creature to trifle with you; you'll see that in time. But until then, keep in mind that the name 'Malfoy' is no longer a favorite at Hogwarts nor at the Ministry."

"Did you just threaten me?"

"I'm trying to help you, you idiot child! But you've never recognized encouragement, even when it was staring you in the face, have you?"

Too afraid...too crushed to move, Hermione remained still and silent in the abandoned classroom.

Why... why had she followed them?

For many reasons, she had almost allowed herself to believe that Professor Snape was actually interested in her. His actions and mannerism had told her as much.

All the same, she couldn't understand that disappointment in his eyes whenever the wizard looked at her...until now.

Hermione knew she shouldn't have fled, but she couldn't bear to listen to any more of Professor Snape and Draco's conversation. The repulsion behind the wizard's words... She couldn't remember the last time she had felt such pain, such hurt.

He's disappointed that I'm a Muggle-born...

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 7

The aftermath of eavesdropping.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Chapter beta'ed by the brilliant **Southernwitch_69**.

Hermione knew she shouldn't have fled, but she couldn't bear to listen to any more of Professor Snape and Draco's conversation. The repulsion behind the wizard's words... She couldn't remember the last time she had felt such pain, such hurt.

"He's disappointed that I'm a Muggle-born..."

"SURPRISE!"

For the first time since...well, the first time...Hermione had finally reacted in accordance to the screams that greeted her. The common room and its inhabitants were gaudily decorated, as if the Gryffindor Tower itself had been dipped in confectionary.

Mouth hanging open, Hermione allowed Harry to christen her head with a paper crown as he kissed her upon the cheek.

"Happy Birthday!"

Struggling to abandon her previous thoughts, Hermione gracelessly gaped at the scene before her.

"What's wrong? You look as if you'd forgotten?"

"I-I did!"

Well, not exactly. After fleeing the dungeons, Hermione had ran the entire trek to the seventh floor, determined to hold back her tears until she'd reached the privacy of her four-poster.

All day, she'd possessed an inkling that her classmates would have thrown a party. But due to events which had occurred not ten minutes ago, Hermione'd found herself painfully distracted. Considering the conversation she had just overheard...

"No need to be embarrassed," Harry laughed, tightening his arm around her shoulder.

"It's great... though. Thanks for this."

Harry held her against his side as he moved the two of them across the common room. His smile grew tense as he patiently waited for her friends and schoolmates to complete their well wishes.

"Um, Hermione..." he began when it seemed they'd be alone for a spell.

She immediately recognized his tentative tone. "It's not a big deal."

Harry sighed, dropping his arm and chin simultaneously. "Ginny regrets it."

"I knew she would eat those words the moment they came out of her mouth."

"How are your parents doing, by the way? It's been awhile since you mentioned them. Still living with your grandparents?"

Hermione's face broke out in that nervous smile she habitually displayed whenever emotional conversations became too intense. "They're struggling to build their business from the ground up, but essentially they're all... right, I assume. My mum is never one to complain, so..." Hermione finished that thought with a shrug of her shoulders. Suddenly growing serious, she returned the conversation back to Ginny. "You know I didn't yell at her, right? She's...?"

"In her room... er... crying."

"Hmm."

Hermione meant to pull away inconspicuously by accepting the side-ways hug of a lower classman.

Nevertheless, Harry knowingly tensed. "What?"

"What? I didn't say anything."

"You don't need to! Ginny's behavior...especially her words...were uncalled for and disrespectful. Why would you even think of defending her... *again?*"

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she looked up at him. When Harry didn't catch on to her implied warning, Hermione poked him in the chest with her index finger, silently instructing him to move back a step or two.

"Excuse me," Hermione hissed through gritted teeth, "you must be mistaking me for your compliant girlfriend. If you desire to scream at someone who'll stand around and take it, I suggest for you to find her."

Harry inhaled sharply. "Hermione!"

"We've been over this before. Ginny and I have also...ugh! I promised myself I wouldn't get involved anymore. Forget it."

The finality in Hermione's voice was clear to all, even though she wasn't aware of the number of students eavesdropping on their conversation.

Emotions prepared, her anger silently flared when Harry carelessly snatched her about the forearm.

Hermione yanked herself away from him with equal force and violence. And yet, Harry dared to look at her with astonishment.

"WHAT THE H...?"

Hermione cut him off. "I don't care how much 'in love' the two of you are, that crap is uncalled for, and you should know *me* better than that. *And* if I want Ginny to know my family's troubles, I'll tell her myself. Got it?"

"*He understands,*" a third voice added.

Dennis Creevy stepped in front of Hermione. Despite his age, which happened to be a solid two years younger than 'the great Harry Potter,' Creevy had managed to surpass many a Gryffindor in height. He towered over both Hermione and Harry, his face far from challenging, but aware of their relationship nonetheless.

Harry readjusted his glasses. Glancing once at Hermione, he turned away without comment.

Hermione sighed. "As much as I don't want to..."

"...Don't want to thank me?"

"Yes."

"But, you do."

"Of course. Um... Can we talk...privately?"

Dennis' breath caught in chest.

"Of-of course!"

"Where is it?" Hermione blurted without ceremony.

As silly as it may seem, Hermione had dragged Dennis out into the corridor for their conversation. The Gryffindor common room was far too loud and over-occupied for them to discuss such things anywhere else.

"... it?"

"Your camera!"

"Oh... Oh! In my room, why? Are you finally going to take my picture?"

"Of course not! But something finally occurred to me... Listen carefully, Dennis. Considering the Marriage Enhancement Act that just passed, many are going to be submitting and accepting proposals to witches and wizards they hardly even know. Your camera will be a godsend... or a curse... in such situations. I don't know whether to warn or congratulate you, but I will ask you to please, please be careful."

Dennis tilted his head to the side. "You sound worried."

"Of course, I'm worried! I have yet to see one bit of caution from you regarding this!"

Dennis leaned forward, his expression suddenly intense. Placing one hand upon Hermione's shoulder, he said, "So you went... with Malfoy, after all?"

Hermione visually deflated. "Dammit, Dennis."

He wasn't listening to her.

"Did you like it? Spending time with him?"

Irritated, Hermione's face flushed as a variety of emotions warred for her attention. Dennis reminded her of a young wizard she did not want to think about because thinking of Draco only reminded her of an awful conversation she didn't enjoy overhearing. Exasperated, Hermione said, "I don't know. It wasn't as awful as I'd anticipated, but Malfoy possesses his own particular charm, as I'm sure he's well aware."

"Indeed I am, but somehow it sounds so much more enticing coming out of your mouth."

Fucking hell in a hand basket! Hermione almost never cursed, but she certainly thought such things from time to time.

She did NOT want to see any Slytherins at the moment. Straightening her back, Hermione turned towards him, her look cold. "The seventh floor is a very far detour from the dungeons, Malfoy."

"So it's 'Malfoy' again, *Hermione?*"

Draco's cool expression turned to petulant disgust when he glanced at the stubborn presence at her back.

"I would like to speak to you privately. Shoo him away."

"Fuck off, Death Eater!"

"Dennis!"

"What? Y-you dare to defend him over me?"

"I'm not defending anyone! But I won't be a part of such a disgusting argument either."

Dennis couldn't bear to look at the smug blond one second longer. But he dreaded Hermione's resignation even more. "*Soyou are* sending me away."

"UGH! What is it about this stupid law that is making the male population so barmy? I'm not doing anything of the sort! I'm asking you *politely*, to leave so the two of us could talk. Please, Dennis."

"If you need me..."

"Of course, I know I can send for you. But I doubt it would come to that."

Once the portrait of the Fat Lady closed behind Dennis, Hermione was disturbingly aware of the... quiet and silence... that she and Draco solely occupied.

"No," was all she said, arms crossed. Her gaze focused on nothing in particular, but she was adamant at keeping her vision trained to this imaginary spot above his left shoulder.

Draco started. "What do you mean...?"

"*Even you have to admit, Professor, Granger is very easy on the eyes. Not beautiful, but...*"

Hermione had heard these very words emit from this young wizard's mouth not one hour ago. Dare she believe him? Or was he up to something? Even worse, Hermione was dismayed to recognize she was both flattered and insulted, baffled as to which of these reactions was worse.

"Just the idea that you'd even think of asking me makes me suspicious... but no, I won't go with you."

"Go where?" Draco demanded with impatience.

"The Halloween ball."

"That's pretty cocky of you to automatically assume I'd..."

"Good, the matter's settled then."

Hermione was not playing the ridiculous games girls her age referred to as "hard-to-get." Her main goal for the new school year had been to insure her independence while suffering the least amount of social gossip as possible. But more than anything, Hermione despised leaving anything unresolved and uncompleted. It was ridiculous to group her social life with that of her studies, but it was all she knew. Even if it wasn't said directly to her, Draco's words were practically a confession. Hermione refused to wait for him to make his intentions known, forcing the issue now, on her terms and with little thought to tact.

Besides, she *really* did not want to attend the Halloween ball. Due to the law, she was forced to, of course. But they couldn't make her take an escort. Unlike ninety percent of Hogwarts' female population, the strange creature called Hermione Granger did not *want* to participate in the ghastly social practice known as *dating*. Draco's sarcasm was music to her ears.

Yet, her reaction rendered him bewildered. If she had flirted back, he would have been the one acting coldly dismissive.

Hermione had already voiced the password before Draco was aware that her determined departure was exactly that and not a ruse.

Steadying her balance, Hermione's fingertips barely touched upon the portrait of the Fat Lady when her free wrist was grabbed.

And tugged back.

She wasn't stupid. Draco's sudden bravery surprised Hermione half as much as the wand pressed against his jaw scared him.

Glancing once at Hermione's wand arm, Draco whispered, "I can punish a fellow Prefect for disobedience."

"And I can hex a fellow Order member for harassment."

"Go... with me."

"Why?" her response was quick.

"It sounds... *fun*."

Hermione snorted, "*Fun?*"

Draco released her, arms raised submissively, palms up. "Ah, such a term is foreign to you as well."

Hermione frowned.

Neither comprehended the actions that took place after that.

Cold fingertips. That was all Hermione's senses could have a handle on as her back was forcibly pressed against the door to her own common room. The portrait slammed closed violently, as evident by the echo that followed. Cold, long-boned fingertips held her on either side of her face. One leg, which felt three times the length of her own, pressed between her knees. All these things Hermione thought of before acknowledging Draco's eager tongue moving incessantly in her mouth.

Her eyes flew open.

When had they closed?

Hermione pushed him away, childishly wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Oh, *for Merlin's sake*, Draco!"

He had kissed her brazenly with the expectation that many an opportunity would have opened up after the fact. Perhaps a shocked expression, maybe a blush accompanied by awkward silence...or if he was lucky, heated words that could be smothered with an even better snog.

But these remained the only words exchanged while Hermione wiped at her mouth once more and fled into the security of her common room.

The next couple of weeks rolled on uneventfully, managing to quickly pass by and bore her simultaneously. It reminded Hermione of her use of the Time-Turner back in third year...standing immobile in the same spot while she impassively watched everyone around her whiz by.

Entering into October, Hermione was revolted by the consensus of excitement her fellow students seemed to exude for the upcoming Halloween ball.

She didn't understand it. Everyone was so eager to focus on such frivolous distractions while naively or intentionally ignoring the dictating forces behind them.

"Don't be so stuck up," Ginny said in response to this, voice weary.

The two of them had been reclining on Hogwarts' lawn, taking advantage of the somewhat mild weather before the anticipated first snow.

"I am not stuck up!"

"Fine. Don't be so *miserable*, then."

Expelling a disgusted sound, Hermione sat up. "We all can't be *asblessed in love* as you, Ginny."

Ginny mirrored Hermione's insulted movement.

"I'm very aware of your endless criticisms of mine and Harry's relationship, so spare me another lecture!"

What were they doing? This was absurd... Hermione sighed in defeat. Busying herself by readjusting her scarf, Hermione said, voice subdued, "Do I really come across as a... as a...?"

"Shrew?"

"Humph!"

Ginny had been trying hard to maintain her disgruntled expression, but Hermione's uncharacteristic petulance was too funny to ignore.

"So long as you're not speaking, your company is just grand!"

Snape had been watching the Gryffindor with such excessive attention as of late that he'd been making himself nauseous with his own self-disgust.

What irked him to no end was that she seemed unable to catch his never-ending sta...glare.

He could recall the many instances over the last few years where their eyes would accidentally meet...passing by in the corridors, in the Great Hall over breakfast, and especially in class. And in every instance, it seemed unmistakable that one of them had been looking for longer than was typically polite before he or she was caught.

Severus Snape hadn't seen the muddy-over-confident-and-irritating-brown of her eyes in weeks.

In fact, she appeared virtually morose.

This change in Miss Granger's demeanor didn't catch Severus' attention until he espied her this afternoon, gossiping with the Weasley tart on the lawn. They seemed to have a pleasant time, driving each other to fits of giggles even. Miss Granger laughed and smiled when Potter and the Weasley idiot joined them as well...although she pointedly ignored the latter.

But it wasn't *his* smile.

That infuriating and sexually frustrating smirk Miss Granger seemed to continuously display was not a display at all. A knowing smirk, full of secrets and desires... The more Snape thought about it, the more he realized he had never seen that smile from afar.

Only when she was standing scant footsteps away from him and within private conversation had he noticed it.

Now, no one was receiving it.

Snape didn't lik...understand this one bit.

Hermione tapped her foot upon the flagstone. Irritation practically bled from her pores. She would have been in an even worse mood if she hadn't released a bit of her frustration upon two unlucky fourth years giggling themselves across her path.

"BED!"

Terrified, the two girls fled back up the staircase without protesting that curfew was still a half-hour away.

Hermione'd been patrolling the corridors for hours, and her relief was late.

Perhaps, if she had been waiting for any Prefect other than Draco, she wouldn't be so miserable. Hermione had been very adept at avoiding the Slytherin since his revolting attack.

Tucking her chin into the collar of her robes, Hermione's cheeks flamed as she thought about his kiss...every minute detail.*again*.

What was wrong with her?

Stomping her foot, she grumbled to herself while governing in her jumbled emotions. If the arrogant git wasn't going to make an effort to be on time, then Hermione would find him and force him to complete his duties.

Hands stuffed into her robes, Hermione marched through the dungeons towards the Slytherin common room.

"No idiotic attempts at a greeting, Miss Granger?"

"Evidently not."

Hermione took no notice of who had just spoken to her, and was equally unaware of her terse response.

"MISS GRANGER!"

Until now.

She inhaled, chest heavy with disbelief. Just as she'd been avoiding Draco, Hermione hadn't encountered Professor Snape like this in weeks...alone and in the dark. Carefully turning around, Hermione responded politely, "Yes, sir?"

"Get. Into. My. Office."

Hermione sighed, dread slowly pooling into her belly until she remembered something especially important.

"*Honestly, Draco... a Muggle-born?*"

His disgust... the disgust exaggerated in every minute syllable was what had hurt most of all. Insulted anger pulsing in her veins, Hermione quietly followed her Potions master into his office.

"CLOSE THE DOOR!" Snape didn't trouble himself to face her as he barked this command.

So Hermione kicked it closed with her heel.

Severus spun around at the uncalled for SLAM.

"Sit. Down," he hissed through clenched teeth, pointing at one of the student chairs in front of his desk.

She quietly complied, folding her hands in her lap.

Pulling his teaching robes tighter over his shoulders, Severus took his time walking around his desk. His boots scraped against the floor, loud and slow, until he arrived on the other side of Hermione's chair.

Face apathetic, Professor Snape loomed over her and snapped, "Well?"

"Sir?"

"I did not call you in here for a cup of tea."

"Then what *did* you call me in here for?"

Snape darted at her like a snake, forcing Hermione to flinch, briefly unraveling her cool expression. One finger pointed at her as he said, voice quiet, *That* is what I called you in here for. If it's not inappropriate...*friendliness*...then it's blatant impertinence. Why does it seem so... difficult... for you to remember that I am your instructor?"

"I could ask you the very same question... sir."

The movement was miniscule, but any crack in Professor Snape's controlled expression was noticeable to her.

Lip curling, Professor Snape opened his mouth, most likely to verbally abuse her a bit more when a small door in the ceiling opened and an owl swooped in.

Hermione snapped to attention. She recognized that owl instantly. She prepared herself to accept the letter it carried...until the creature dropped it directly in front of Professor Snape's seated form.

When had he moved away?

"Ah, it seems your mother is asking the Order's permission to grant you an escorted trip home to discuss... important... family business."

"But why would she...?"

Hermione cut herself off with a slap to her forehead. How could she forget? While Professor McGonagall was Headmistress, that meant her deputy...Professor Snape...handled the responsibility of acting head of the Order.

She tensed at his slow and mocking laugh.

"Well now, it seems I have *much* to consider before I decide to allow this... or not."

"Professor!"

"You are dismissed."

His office door flung open, doorknob banging against the adjacent wall.

Hermione probably should have been making an effort to get on Professor Snape's good side if she wanted him to grant permission for the trip home. But she couldn't resist the temptation to slam his door closed just as violently.

A presence in the dungeon corridor flinched, grabbing her attention.

Draco stood immobile, stunned as to what he had just witnessed. Hermione maliciously eyed the piece of fruit in his hand. He must have been raiding the kitchen this whole time.

Face red with frustration, Hermione marched right up to him, invading his personal space.

Bewildered, Draco stepped back until he met with the stone wall behind him.

Hermione snatched the fruit out of his hand and barked, "You're late!"

And walked away.

Hermione wasn't one to unnecessarily complain, but the next day Harry couldn't help inquiring as to what was bothering her. Sprawled out on the floor in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione repeatedly arranged her books and parchments, huffing as if they'd offended her.

She told him of her mother's request to Professor Snape. Yet, Hermione didn't feel right detailing the wizard's threatening response. Somehow, it felt... private.

Hermione frowned.

"Why don't you just ask McGonagall?" Harry asked.

"*Professor* McGonagall," Hermione corrected.

"Uh... yeah, her."

"That'd be disrespecting Professor Snape's authority."

Harry snorted.

She wanted to argue, to scold Harry, but what else could she say? Why was she even defending a man who refused to pursue a woman he obviously liked due to repulsion over blood-status? Not trusting her emotions, Hermione kept her mouth closed.

A screech above signaled the arrival of an owl.

They both looked up and instantly recognized it to be one of Hogwarts'. The creature never bothered landing, instead dropping the folded parchment upon Hermione's head, flying out as quickly as it came.

Severus stared down at his empty desk, dumbfounded at his grave mistake.

What had he done?

When he had received the letter from Miss Granger's mother, Snape's belly practically danced in glee.

Now the impertinent witch would feel his wrath for mocking him every chance she got!

Of course, he would have eventually granted the girl permission for a visit home. He had no desire or reason to deny the request. And even if he did, McGonagall would probably override the decision, and then how would he look?

For the briefest of moments, he reveled at the idea of lording something so important over the Gryffindor's head. Her happiness was in his hands, and he was going to make her aware of it every chance he got over the next four days.

But after seeing her face in Potions, Snape couldn't even hold out for one full day.

It was humiliating.

Dropping his head upon the desk, Severus groaned miserably. That wasn't even the worst of it.

He had told the girl that he'd personally escort her.

Still not the worst...

Since they'd be visiting her *Muggle* parents in *Muggle* London, Snape knew it was essential to remind the witch:

"Do be certain you are dressed Muggle."

He panicked at the idea of doubting his own intentions. It was vital that they did not stand out or attract attention. They needed to blend in. He would have written the same directive to any other student.

Then why did he feel so... perverse?

What have I done?

Author's Notes: The delay was long and I humbly apologize. With morbid darkfic as my first love, this story is honestly a bit difficult and foreign to write. But I do believe I have gotten over my writing funk, so updates should be regular again. If you're still with me, then I thank you!

Proposed

Chapter 7 of 7

Professor Snape personally escorts Miss Granger for her visit home. Outside Hogwarts' walls, the two of them suddenly feel awkward in each other's presence.

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize belongs to JKR. I do not profit from writing this story.

Author's Notes: Chapter beta'ed by the brilliant **Southernwitch_69**.

The high-pitched clang of cutlery resisting against metal dinnerware inundated Severus' senses. Idiotic laughs, loud chewing, coughs and screams... He closed his eyes and counted to ten...again.

He'd been clutching his knife and fork so tightly, he knew they'd left a deep impression upon his palms. Just the idea of putting a forkful of food into his mouth made his stomach turn.

What was he doing? What was he thinking? What in Merlin's name had gotten into him?

Snape had been asking himself these questions all bloody day.

This very evening, after dinner, he and Miss Granger were scheduled to depart for Muggle London.

The impulsive Headmistress had given the girl a full weekend's leave. Severus Snape would be staying in that woman's home for the next two nights.

Since learning this, a fearsome sneer had been permanently etched upon his face all week. The students automatically assumed he was as miserable as ever, but Snape knew he'd been rendering Miss Granger increasingly nervous.

Since he'd sent the letter, she'd been making small attempts to shamelessly look at him again.

Severus did not know what to make of that.

Glaring at his plate, he swallowed hard, willing his saliva to stay down. But like every other fully functioning male, the more he tried not to imagine his student in compromising positions, the clearer said images became.

Severus' lip curled nastily because his sneer was so intense. Glancing up through his lashes, he caught Miss Granger's cautious stare. Eyes narrowed with threat, he dared her to continue looking.

She broke contact first, face flaming red.

"Don't go..." Ginny whispered. She ignored the swat upon her arm, tugging at Hermione's robes under the table.

"Stop it."

"Don't go! He's planning on murdering your family in their beds!"

"I said stop it! You're being ridiculous."

Harry grabbed Ginny's wrist, disentangling her fingers from Hermione's robes, and pulled her hand into his lap. "The bat does look an awful fright, Hermione."

"I'm aware. Leave him alone."

"Aren't you...?"

"Of course I'm not scared! I actually feel for the poor man."

Ginny choked on her pumpkin juice. "How'd you manage that?"

Hermione sent a quelling look at her uneaten meal. Was she really obliged to explain anything to them? But bit by bit, she sensed her body slowly turning in the direction of the High Table, so tempted was she to glance at Professor Snape once more. Aware of the numerous eyes on her, curious as to why she and a professor were leaving the castle together, Hermione chose the path threatening the least embarrassment.

Hermione straightened her back, forcing out a matter-of-fact tone. "Well, it's more than obvious Professor Snape doesn't want to escort me home. But I can't very well go alone. As head of the Order...no doubt Professor McGonagall is forcing him to go. So I can't expect Professor Snape to be happy about it, can I?"

"Have you told your mum?" Harry asked.

"Of course...good lord, he's coming."

"Now?"

"Shh!"

Everyone within earshot followed Hermione's vision in the direction of the High Table. Indeed, Professor Snape was walking towards the Gryffindors. Those who weren't brave enough to continue ogling whirled around in their seats, feigning their best behavior. The only disturbance came in the form of Ron shoving his plate away with as much noise as possible before he rose from the table and left the Great Hall.

"Miss Granger?"

That deep voice vibrated against every bone in her spine. Removing her napkin from her lap, Hermione turned to look up at him.

"Yes, sir?"

He dispassionately gazed down at her for a few seconds, his expression expectant. Sighing dramatically, he then said, "What other reason would I be speaking to you than to remind you of our scheduled departure? Get. Up."

Hermione slammed her palms against the table, rising in a huff. Too angry to say goodbye to her friends, she marched ahead of Professor Snape and out the Great Hall.

The evening was cold, but not unbearably so. Moisture saturated the air, stinging their lungs as the two of them walked in uncomfortable silence across Hogwarts' grounds towards Hogsmeade station.

Snape had always been aware of his purposeful stride, so he'd intentionally slowed his pacing to accommodate her. Not that she noticed. He scowled when she walked right past him and increased her speed.

"There's no need to hurry, Miss Granger. I assure you, we shall catch the last train in time."

"Perhaps, sir, I am not hurrying towards the train as much as I'm far too irritated to walk beside you."

"Mind your mouth, girl!" Snape barked at her back. He smirked spitefully to himself, satisfied that his words had stopped the witch in her tracks.

What had surprised him, however, was that she continued waiting until he came up to her side and then silently stepped into the beat of his casual stroll. She maintained her stiff and quiet air while he unlocked Hogwarts' gates and reset the wards behind them.

Once finished, he turned back towards the main road and nearly jumped out of his skin. Miss Granger was standing precisely in front of him, her expression a mixture of emotions that she was obviously struggling to suppress.

"I am going to say this once and only once..."

"Impertinen...!"

"I had not finished, Professor! And if you hadn't noticed, we are outside Hogwarts' grounds, so I will speak to you however I please."

Straightening himself to his full height, Severus crossed his arms over his chest, glaring down at her long and hard. She reddened...severely...under his unwavering eye contact, just as he'd intended her to. His fractured pride now thoroughly repaired, he instructed her to continue with the cocking of one brow.

"N-now, while I've always been fully aware of how much you...enjoy...tormenting others with the use of your station, I simply ask you to treat my family with the same respect Hogwarts' students are obligated to give you."

"I am not an unsophisticated idiot, Miss Granger. I'm perfectly capable...and intending...of acting the role of a civil guest within your home."

"You cannot blame me for fearing otherwise."

"Indeed, I do not. Now if you're quite finished, I think we may have to run for the train after all..."

Once boarded upon the train, Hermione reluctantly followed her professor, allowing him the decision on their compartment. She couldn't help wondering if she should find one on her own. The idea of sharing such a confined space with her Potions master, without the company of others to alleviate possible awkward silences...

Finally making his selection, Snape opened their compartment door...and stood to the side...allowing her to enter first.

And once again, her face was red.

What is wrong with me? Can I survive two whole days of this? I should have asked Professor McGonagall for a different escort...

Now seated, the exact atmosphere she had feared engulfed them: the wizard's silent and stoic presence across from her unsettled Hermione's nerves. Despite her anger at those appalling comments she'd overheard weeks ago, it didn't change the fact that Hermione was still physically attracted to the man. More importantly, his prejudicial attitudes against Muggle-borns didn't appear to change the actuality that he was...drawn...to her against his will.

Hermione pulled up the collar of her cloak and braced her temple against the window. Not in the mood to instigate a conversation, Hermione decided to feign sleep instead.

Time passed somewhat peacefully, the train rocking thoughts of her professor out of her mind. But just when she'd nearly succumbed to genuine slumber, a violent whack against the window had her alert.

"What the hell?" she muttered groggily. An owl was flying beside the train, struggling greatly to do so.

"Poor thing!"

Flinging the window open to allow the owl inside, Hermione busied herself with tending to the creature until an annoyed clearing-of-the-throat-sound brought her attention to Professor Snape.

With one look and an impatient lift of his eyebrows, he directed her attention to the owl's leg.

It carried a small note...addressed to her.

Opening the letter, Hermione read:

What, no goodbye?

-D

Before she knew it, the note was snatched from her hands.

... And read without her permission.

"I cannot believe you just...how rude!"

"You appeared flustered. I am merely ensuring the student entrusted in my care was not receiving threatening letters."

Face now forever flustered, Hermione shot him a knowing look and said, "Right. I bet."

"Would you like to have your...*love letter*... returned to you?"

"... Keep it."

Before the words had completely left her mouth, Professor Snape tapped the parchment with his wand, and it erupted into flames.

Unsurprisingly, the two of them passed the remainder of the trip in silence, both mutely fuming while wallowing in their own obsessive thoughts.

Resigned to many, many interactions like that at the Gryffindor table... and outside Hogwarts' gate... and just now in the compartment... Hermione sighed, pushing herself off the seat and stood up with a stretch.

"And where do you think you are going?" Professor Snape asked.

Hermione paused right before she'd reached the compartment door.

Professor Snape spoke again, as if aware of the terse response dancing on the tip of her tongue. "While I may not be your instructor at the moment, Miss Granger, I am your head within the Order. And as a lower-ranking member entrusted in my care, you will not only inform me of your departures but also your reasons and destinations. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal," she answered through gritted teeth.

Snape laughed throatily and said, "Now... *where do you think you are going?*"

Movements lazy, Hermione turned to face her professor before she spoke. Imitating his patronizing manner, one eyebrow rose as she drawled, "To the toilet*sir*. I must relieve my very full bladder and change into my *Muggle* clothes. May I have your permission to do so?"

"GO!" he snarled suddenly.

One hand pressing hard into his lap, Snape shrugged away the image of Miss Granger, bewildered in her awkward flee from his ire. He had more important worries at the

moment. Leaning forward against his thighs, Snape prayed the miserable chit would take her time.

He didn't know the reasons behind it, but she had meticulously said the word *Muggle*...slow and full of meaning. Her lips pursed as the word danced out of her mouth, pink tongue flicking at her two front teeth.

Palm pressing down even harder, Severus clenched his eyes and hoped that a painful strangle of his very hard arousal would quiet it down.

He was almost forty-bloody-years old, for fuck's sake!

What the hell was the matter with him?

Hermione's smile had grown wider and wider the closer they'd come to their destination. Now, walking along the streets of a neighborhood she'd missed terribly, Hermione was practically giddy with excitement at finally visiting her parents again.

She'd only seen them once since the Battle of Hogwarts. And that had been when she'd retrieved the two of them from hiding in Australia. In a delirious fog from modified memories and unaware for the reasons behind it, their reunion had been a somber one, so afraid was she of scaring them with too much information at once.

Eventually, they had slowly come to understand the danger they would have been in if Hermione hadn't taken matters into her own hands. More importantly, despite the many consequences that had arisen due to their long absence, her parents were grateful.

Everything would have been perfect...if it wasn't for the dour presence at her side.

Since the moment Hermione had reentered their compartment, Professor Snape was as unbearable as ever, demanding she wear a cloak over her jumper and denim slacks until he gave her permission to take it off.

... What?

Shaking away memories of their abysmal journey, Hermione lunged herself forward. Skipping towards the gated walkway, she paused, suddenly conscious of the lack of Professor Snape's presence.

Standing a few steps behind her, Professor Snape remained on the pavement, concentration engrossed by the house. Face grey and mouth uncharacteristically slack, Hermione feared the man was about to have a fit.

"Professor?" she called softly.

He snapped to attention. "What?"

"Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Get a move on."

Whipping away, Hermione plowed through the gate, unconcerned if it smacked her professor on the swing back.

Hermione knocked upon the front door impatiently, resolute to consign all thoughts of this wizard to the very back of her consciousness.

But then, a surprisingly subdued voice behind her asked, "Have you always lived here?"

"I...no. We used to let it...well, it's my grandmother's now."

Snape didn't supply more than an acknowledging grunt before the door was pulled open and Hermione's mum yanked her into the house.

Severus swallowed repeatedly, willing his tongue to regain moisture. He was far too disturbed with his own thoughts to act embarrassed by the emotional display Miss Granger was currently having with her parents.

Focusing hard on steadying his breathing, Severus couldn't believe... after all these years... he had returned to the very house that had fueled his nightmares...his dreams...for nearly two decades.

He didn't want to be here. Not now. Not when every day was a never-ending struggle to rid his mind of this girl...this anvil that hung around his neck.

"Professor?" said anvil called to him, her expression curious.

"Miss Granger?"

It was evident that she wanted to ask how he was *feeling* again, but one look sent that thought scurrying from her mind. Clearing her throat, the girl turned towards her parents and began the necessary introductions.

It had all gone much smoother than Snape had anticipated, house-of-doom considering.

"Well, dinner's still hot," Mrs. Granger said. One hand trailed up the back of her head, as if ensuring all her hair was still perfectly encased within her bun. It immediately reminded Severus of Minerva's staunch mannerisms.

"Thanks, Mum. I'm showing Professor Snape to his room, and after I change, we'll..."

"Grandmother Granger is here," the woman said meaningfully. As if given a cue, Mr. Granger turned and hurried back into the kitchen.

"Oh... oh."

The atmosphere had grown uncomfortable, and Severus had no idea why. What he did know was that if he hadn't been in their company, Miss Granger would probably have been ushered into the kitchen without having been asked if she minded or not.

Deciding to put those 'civilities' to use, Severus said, "Personally, I am famished. Perhaps we could postpone the necessary tour until after the meal?"

Snape forced himself to allow the two women to lead the way down the corridor. He already knew the way to the kitchen. He knew every nook and cranny of this house, but he couldn't let that slip. Entering the kitchen, he was taken aback by the appetizing...and familiar...aromas that greeted him.

"Well... there's the witch now."

"Mum!"

An old woman sat at the head of the long dinner table. Back slightly humped, she leaned most of her weight upon a cane positioned between her knees. Turning towards

her son, face full of exaggerated hurt, she continued, "Did I say something wrong? I don't believe I did... That is the correct term they use for one another. Isn't that right... *witch*?"

"Tis, Grandmother."

Snape suddenly decided he hated the woman.

Smile strained, Miss Granger waved at the table, encouraging Professor Snape to make himself comfortable wherever he pleased.

Seeing as the seat was left open, he made himself very comfortable opposite the old woman, at the other end of the table. Pulling his chair a good distance away, Severus crossed one ankle over his knee and leaned back with his arms crossed.

One pointed look told him that the old woman didn't like this one bit. And seeing as these were the only eyes trained on him, he allowed the corner of his mouth to rise into a smirk.

"Who is that?" the woman demanded importantly, her vision still trained on him.

"I told you, Grandmother," Mrs. Granger said, her voice tired.

Snape immediately thought it strange that she referred to her own mother-in-law as 'Grandmother.'

Mrs. Granger continued her business by the stove and elaborated, "*Professor Snape* escorted Hermione on an unorthodox trip home to discuss matters you are very well aware."

Whatever 'matters' these were, the idea of them seemed to please the old woman greatly. Just the mention of them had her content and grinning.

"Shall I assume we're going to begin now?" Miss Granger asked.

"Would that please the witch?" the woman nastily asked, "Or does she have other pressing matters to attend to? Like kidnapping my son and marooning him on another continent!"

"Mum!" Mr. Granger scolded again.

A thin, wrinkled palm slammed upon the table.

"Yes! Yes, we are doing this now!" Directing her words to Miss Granger, she hissed, "I cannot understand why your parents thought it necessary to inform you personally...it's not as if you have a say in the matter...but I am selling this house."

"... What?"

"It is my house now and will do what I want with it!"

"But you bought it for them!"

"They needed the money and I gave it in exchange for this lump of rubbish. Nothing more!"

"Spiteful..."

"Hermione," her father scolded, speaking for the first time.

"Spiteful! This house's been in Mum's family for...you promised you'd give them time to buy it back."

The old woman looked up at the ceiling and shrugged. "I cannot remember saying anything of the sort."

Hermione spun in her chair to ask her mother, "Where will you live?"

"They can move into my home," her grandmother answered with triumph.

Inhaling a deep, shaky breath, Miss Granger meticulously pushed her chair away from the table, stood up, and tucked it back in. It was evident to Professor Snape that she struggled against her desire to flee from the kitchen as fast as she could.

He'd listened to this exchange, remaining silent in his seat, while diverting his attention to the opposite side of the room. Severus was initially resentful that the family dared to indulge themselves in his presence. They could have...should have...waited until he'd left them to their privacy.

However, Snape was aware the family as a whole wasn't responsible.

After a beat of uneasy silence, Mrs. Granger asked, "May I serve you a bit of supper, Severus?"

"Indeed you may," he answered calmly.

"I apologize for the..."

"There's no need," both Professor Snape and the old woman answered at the same time, but with entirely different meanings.

Exchanging long, threatening looks, Severus maintained eye contact with the old woman and repeated, "Indeed, there is no need for apologies. Under the circumstances, high levels of emotions are perfectly understandable."

"I suppose you have something to say of the matter?" asked the old shrew.

"Seeing as it's none of my business, Muggle...no, I do not."

"Wha...WHAT DID HE CALL ME?"

Hermione didn't cry.

Thinking of it now, she couldn't remember the last time she had. Her chest ached as this realization struck her. So much...negativity...was congregating within her mind, suffocating her emotions. Hermione feared the idea of it all exploding against her will...

The argument with her grandmother had indeed rendered her distraught, but it had taken every ounce of her energy to abstain from screaming at the woman or hexing something into oblivion.

Now, hours later, Hermione knew she couldn't continue hiding in her room seething for much longer.

She had left her professor to fend for himself.

Accepting the inescapable possibility of a violent tongue-lashing, Hermione sluggishly made her way downstairs in search of Professor Snape.

A short, slouched woman screamed at her from the bottom step.

"YOU!"

"Grandmother?"

One hand clutching the banister, the woman wildly waved her cane in the air as she spoke.

"He locked it! A door to my own house... that... that *creature* locked me out of my own study!"

And just like that, for reasons unknown, Hermione found her spirits lifted.

"He...what?"

"There isn't even a bolt on the door!"

"Where's Mum and Da...?"

"Nevermind that! Who knows what he's doing in there?"

"I'll take care of it," Hermione said, voice tired.

"See that you do! And maybe you can remind that...*man*... how one is supposed to act among normal company."

Standing outside said locked door, Hermione whirled around to face her grandmother, wand in hand.

The woman eyed the dreaded twig clutched between her granddaughter's index finger and thumb, and fled without further comment.

"*Alohomora!*"

Devoid of hesitation or warning, Hermione opened the door to the study, entered, and closed it with her body weight.

There across from her sat Professor Snape. Book in hand, he pulled the tome away from his nose and pressed it against his chest, his expression mildly curious as to her presence.

Hermione snorted, loud and graceless. Recalling everything that had just taken place, a sudden unlucky fit of giggles steadily consumed her.

"I do not enjoy being laughed at."

"Fo...forgive me!" Calming herself, Hermione added, "You should have seen her..."

"I've *seen* her for the last hour," he reminded her.

Hermione cleared her throat and nodded once. Making her way to a chair opposite her professor, she acknowledged, "I thought you'd resent me for abandoning you to my relatives."

"I'm not a child. I am more than capable of taking care of myself...so long as I am thus accompanied." Severus waved the book in his hand.

"Shall I give you an escorted tour of the house now?"

Hermione smiled as she asked this question, pleased at the idea of sharing something precious with another individual. She watched her professor, momentarily perplexed as he took his time pondering her request.

He looked at the rug, at the door, and somewhere off her shoulder before ultimately making eye contact and answered, "No, thank you."

"All right," she said, ignorant of her crest-fallen expression.

He scowled.

"One... tiny... tour, sir? You won't have to leave the room!"

Professor Snape slammed his book closed, growling under his breath. Standing up to his imposing height, he said, "For Merlin's...get on with it, then! The sooner you release this rambunctiousness, the sooner I'll be able to return to..."

With a flip of her wand, a door in the corner banged open. From his position, Snape couldn't see this elusive room, but his nerves pulsed nonetheless at such a memorably foreboding sound. Thoughts thrown back to the past... for the tenth time this evening... Severus hesitated in turning around.

Laughing under her breath, Hermione dragged the man to the hidden door.

Not until they were half-way through their decent, down the stone steps into the darkness below the house, were the two conscious of the momentary contact that had just taken place.

Hermione had grabbed his elbow...just barely, her grip more determined upon the cloth of his robes.

If Snape hadn't been concentrating on this so intensely, his legs wouldn't have willingly carried him into this dreaded room.

"*Lumos!*"

The few candles lining the walls illuminated, casting a dim orange glow upon the basement. Other than a small number of scattered boxes and haphazard stacks of school texts, the room was virtually empty.

"Grandmother has no idea this is here," Hermione said to him over her shoulder.

Hands behind his back, Snape remained silent as he descended the final step that put him at her side.

Unperturbed by his silence, Hermione spoke again, "This would make an excellent lab."

Severus whirled to face her, his breath catching.

"Indeed...Why did you want to show me this?"

"I've never had...company...here, until you."

"I am the first?"

Hermione turned to look up at him. His choice of words, or perhaps his diction, had caught her off guard.

"... Yes."

The following morning, Severus shot up in bed at the sound of two feminine voices warring with one another down stairs.

For the briefest of moments, he thought he was twenty-four years old again, absconded in some forbidden reality while his future wife argued with the family house-elf.

Hazed mind gathering itself into consciousness, Snape was aware of a strange heaviness in his chest at the recognition of such a thing being furthest from the truth.

"Don't you dare ignore me!"

Entering the kitchen for breakfast, Severus could feel his features schooling themselves of their own accord. It wasn't a glare he displayed when he greeted the Granger family upon his entrance...more a look of forced indifference, an air of inflated patience.

The chit briefly made eye contact, then smiled towards her plate.

At least someone appreciated his efforts.

The old shrew slammed her palm upon the table to regain her granddaughter's attention.

"I would never ignore you, Grandmother," the young witch answered impassively.

"Then answer when I'm speaking to you."

Hermione gave the woman her full, exaggerated attention.

"I demand to know why this... this Voldywart... would've had a vendetta against my son?"

By an unfortunate chance, Severus had been sipping his coffee when he'd heard this. Inhaling the hot liquid into his windpipe, he coughed gracelessly for the next few moments.

Miss Granger made great efforts to refrain from showing concern. Pity. His embarrassment was so severe that only a rude comment would properly alleviate it.

"That wizard had nothing against father, specifically, but I had many...reasons... to believe Mum and Dad would've been targeted if I'd gone on the run and left them exposed," Hermione said.

"So sending them to Australia was the most logical choice?"

"Nothing you can say would make me regret it, Grandmother. Nothing."

"You disrespectful...!"

"If I may?"

His voice, thick and raspy from choking, made all four Grangers pause to listen.

"While I do not know the particulars, any efforts Miss Granger had made to protect her family from the war were not an over-reaction in the least. Death Eaters were *constantly* surveying your old residence not very long after the three of you had fled. Orders were to capture Miss Granger and kill anyone else on sight. An unfortunate group of vandals noticed the abandoned state of your home and broke in with the intention of squatting. They are still missing to this..."

Severus had spoke, his voice disturbingly emotionless. The sudden, loud scrapping of wooden chair legs caught him off guard, forcing him to look at the other individuals in the room with full consciousness.

Mrs. Granger was on the floor, leaning against a chair she had evidently missed in her collapse.

Miss Granger and the woman's husband were instantly at her side. Recalling everything he had just said, Severus did not fault them for the emotional display that followed suit.

One cold glower from his pupil made him question if he probably wasn't in the position to be excusing the faults of others.

Eventually, the three women left the kitchen simultaneously, either a mere coincidence or intentionally to discuss matters not involving the men. Snape assumed he'd finally be able to pass the remainder of his meal in silence. After all, he had yet to hear Hermione's father utter more than two-word sentences.

Snape should have realized by now that his expectations had always been proven false in matters involving that witch.

"You're very protective of her."

Something within Snape jolted at hearing the girl's father speak so frankly.

"Am I?" Severus asked, feigning apathy.

"So you don't deny it. From what little Hermione has mentioned of your teaching methods, you either completely ignore your students or verbally abuse them. "

He couldn't help smirking as he said, "She's entirely correct."

"I've yet to see it."

"Perhaps, I am merely threatened at a bit of competition. I don't enjoy the thought of *my pupils* fearing anyone more than they fear me."

The rest of that day had passed in complete silence. Severus had managed to wander from his room, to the study, to the kitchen, and back to the study without ever once

encountering another inhabitant of this house. He tried to convince himself that his irritability wasn't the result of disappoint. He also had tried to convince himself that he hadn't intentionally wandered about on the off chance of stumbling upon Miss Granger.

Now, sitting in silence with the morose members of the Granger family, Severus couldn't locate his appetite.

Eventually, before the stillness grew more unbearable than it already was, Mrs. Granger cleared her throat and turned to her daughter.

Hesitant, she spoke with forced good humor and said, "I would like for you to meet the son of a business associate."

Severus' eyes went wide.

Chin braced in the palm of her hand, Hermione mindlessly prodded her uneaten food with her fork. Her grandmother issued a loud hiss of disapproval and smacked her elbow off the table.

"Your Mum is speaking to you, witch!"

Jerking upright, Hermione gazed around until meeting the eyes of her expectant mother.

"What was that?"

"I said I would like for you to meet the son of a business associate."

"Meet...are they coming for tea?" Hermione asked slowly, disapproval already evident.

Looking once at her husband, her mum continued, "No. Just the two of you..."

"You cannot be serious? What is this? A blind date?"

"It's a marriage interview."

Hermione leaned across the table towards her mother. Did she just say...? No, impossible...

"*What?*" Hermione demanded. She would never have shown her mother such disrespect if the woman hadn't been fidgeting so uncharacteristically.

Rolling her eyes with a huff, Mrs. Granger threw her hands into the air and clarified, "He's Japanese! They call such arranged dates 'marriage interviews'."

Hermione could believe what she was hearing. Her mouth opened and closed in her struggle to find words. "You want to put me in an arranged marriage!"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, dear! There's no need to become hysterical. His father's a business associate...at least he will be if you agree to go on this date with their son! Even they don't have expectations beyond the meeting. It's a traditional practice for professionals to arrange such things for their children, but neither of us will force anything if the two of you don't like each other."

Something else was going on here; Hermione could sense it.

"How did this come up?"

"We inadvertently discovered Satoshi attended Durmstrang."

Perfect! Just bloody perfect!

Now Hermione *really* knew how this topic came up. She'd been able to keep her parents blissfully ignorant as to the Marriage Enhancement Act, not wanting to overwhelm them with more unneeded stress. Thankfully, Professor Snape had yet to discuss the law. More than anything, Hermione feared his careless manner...like the discussion this morning.

The law affected everyone in the Wizarding World, including this... Satoshi... but thankfully his parents had not discussed the new law either.

"Hermione..."

"Fine," she answered immediately.

"Honey, you don't have to answer now."

"I said fine! And I know just where to take him, too."

Hermione had still been speaking when a loud clang at the end of the table had caught her attention.

Without one word or look to those around him, Professor Snape had carelessly dropped his fork as he rose from the table and left the kitchen.

Things could be worse, she told herself. Things could be so, very much worse.

It was only a blind date...of sorts. A Japanese marriage interview disguised as a blind date, under the pressure of the Marriage Enhancement Act.

A knot in her stomach sucked the air straight from her lungs. The glands at the back of her jaw salivated. When a cold sweat hit her without warning, Hermione knew she was seconds away from a vicious retch.

Hand upon her mouth, Hermione ran down the corridor and flung herself into the bathroom. As her body tensed and convulsed against her will, Hermione released her dinner, vaguely aware of a presence behind her near the washbasin. Bracing her forehead against the porcelain rim of the toilet, Hermione gasped great gulps of air and muttered apologies for intruding.

"I...there's no need," answered a very male voice.

She cringed. Why... of all people? Hermione wanted to crawl into the toilet and disappear down the drain. She'd rather anyone other than this wizard witness her in such a state. Malfoy was even preferable. A faint whimper, filled with dread and loathing, escaped from the back of her throat at the realization that she was going to retch again.

Why didn't he leave? Why was he still standing behind her, watching this? Hermione would have screamed at the hateful man if only she could catch her breath.

A variety of movements were taking place behind her. Bare footed steps upon the tiles. The tap being turned on and off.

And then, without warning, her unruly curls were lifted off her sticky neck. A cool, damp cloth was then placed there. As well as the unmistakable pressure of his palm pressing down.

That explosion of emotion she'd been fearing tore out of her. Throat tight and raw, Hermione inhaled large breaths of air, her chest growing more and more unsteady by the second, willing that loathsome emotion away. But it was pointless. She cried, miserable humiliating tears, all the while hating herself for relishing the sympathy Professor Snape applied to the back of her neck.

It was the second time he'd forced such a reaction out of her. She'd never forgive him for it.

Hermione couldn't bring herself to speak. After a bit more silence passed, right when Hermione thought she was well enough to stand, Professor Snape removed the rag as if sensing her wants. She stood up, facing away from him, her pride too wounded to give him the thanks he deserved.

"Are you... all... right?"

Taken aback, Hermione whirled around to finally face the man. His voice had been so...sincere. Now, looking up into his features, Hermione was suddenly taken aback by his calm expression. Anger, ridicule, mockery, indifference...all these emotions Hermione had seen time and time again. Professor Snape wasn't trying to appear as anything, and this was more overwhelming than any other encounter she'd had with him.

Aware that they'd been standing like this, air hot with moisture and privacy, Hermione forced herself to look at the floor.

But her eyes never made it that far.

He was standing before her in nothing more than a towel tied around his waist. This entire time...

Hermione barely registered his pale, thin features until her vision stopped at his navel...and the line of hair just below it. Hair that thickened as it traveled further down, underneath the towel...

She threw herself against the door, fumbling for the knob. What was she doing in here? And for so long? And what had she just been thinking?

"For-forgive me!"

Eyes clenched, she fled, slamming the door closed behind her.

Somehow, the train ride home had managed to be more unbearable than the first.

Hermione sighed, leaning against the window.

Professor Snape had ignored her at breakfast. He ignored her during their walk to the station. And now, sitting across from her, he blatantly ignored her by hiding himself behind an old copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

He had yet to turn the page even once.

What was wrong with him? What had Hermione done *now*? Was he angry at her for some reason?

True, she had never thanked him for his attentions in the bathroom last night, but he couldn't possibly be angry over something like that!

Perhaps he was... embarrassed.

Merlin knows Hermione still was! Face growing hot, she had to force herself *not* to close her eyes. Because whenever she did, that image of him wrapped only in a towel became even clearer.

She was sick of this.

"Hermione!" Ginny squealed. Jumping up from the settee, she pushed herself out of Harry's lap to greet Hermione at the portrait.

Hermione smiled, waving and accepting various chants of "welcome back!"

"It was only two days," she said by means of brushing off the unwanted attention.

"That's not the point! How's your family? Why did you have to go home? Is everything okay?" Ginny asked, stepping closer and closer with each question.

Harry grabbed Ginny around the arm and pulled her back with one firm yank. "Enough, she just got back. Let her unpack at least."

"Everything's fine," Hermione insisted. "Nothing to be alarmed about."

"Hey, Hermione!" a student called by the fire. He waved a parchment in the air just as an owl jumped from the table and flew out the window.

Confused, Hermione walked over to the younger group of students, recognizing them to be in Dennis' year. Accepting the letter, Hermione immediately recognized Hogwarts' seal.

"Professor Snape wants you to go to his office?"

Hermione jumped at Dennis' sudden appearance at her side.

"Don't read my letters over my shoulder!"

Frowning, he eyed her strangely and said, "But you just got back."

Hermione didn't possess any answers to his questions. Heart racing, she dropped her things and fled back out the portrait.

Hermione had been standing outside Professor Snape's office for at least a full minute. She couldn't find the courage to knock.

The walk from Hogsmeade's train station to the castle had been fairly long, and all the while Snape had intentionally walked ten paces ahead of her. Never once did he turn around.

By the time she had reached the Entrance Hall, he was nowhere to be seen.

That was only moments ago. If he'd made such great efforts to avoid her, why would he summon her the second he got back?

Hermione feared the answer to that question.

The sounds of animated voices echoed from the opposite end of the corridor, forcing Hermione to finally knock.

She had expected the wizard to scream "ENTER!" in his typical manner. Instead, the lock merely clicked and the door opened.

She inhaled once, and stepped inside. Hermione could see her professor from the corner of her eye, standing by his desk with an expectant air. She turned around to shut the door behind her when he spoke.

"Don't close it."

Hermione froze. Turning to glance at him over her shoulder, she said, "Professor?"

"Considering the reason I called you in here, it would be...improper...if the door was closed."

Her heart drummed offbeat. Nodding silently, Hermione made certain the door was open a crack.

Turning around, Hermione folded her hands behind her back and asked, "Why did you want to see me?"

"Come here."

Confused and a bit irritated, Hermione slowly made her way to his desk. Professor Snape wasn't looking at her as she approached him. Standing up, he leaned over his desk while he signed various sheets of parchment.

When she was close enough to place her hands on the edge of his desk, he removed a parchment from the bottom of the pile and handed it to her.

"This is the reason I requested your attendance," he said, still not looking at her.

It took Hermione some time for her to comprehend what she was looking at. But when she did... She couldn't think. What... what was this?

"Professor... why would you hand me this?"

"I should think it obvious."

"It's an application for marriage."

"Indeed."

"Both our names are on it..."

He finally stopped writing, his vision still trained on anything but her. Hermione eyed the parchment for another moment before asking, voice incredulous, "Why?"

Slowly rising to his full height, the wizard finally looked at her. His expression made it very clear that this was not the response Severus had expected.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why should I marry you? Why in God's name would you want to marry me?"

"The law requires us to."

She threw the parchment upon the desk. "You have got to be joking! Did you honestly just utter those words to me?"

"Why are you speaking so irrationally, Miss Granger?"

"I'm irrational! Can you hear yourself? Do you think I'd want to marry a man who I barely know, don't love, and has the audacity to propose in such a heartless manner!"

His eyes narrowed sharply. Crossing his arms, he took a few steps closer and said, "I had expected someone of your intelligence to recognize exactly what it is I am giving. Your family situation should be proof enough that there are greater worries in this world than *how* one is offered to better their chances in life."

"Do you love me?" she asked in almost a whisper.

Standing rod straight, Professor Snape looked off to the side as he said, "I am certain in time we would become compatible."

"Lucky for you to feel so certain about your future. I'm sorry, sir, but I have no such guarantee!" Unable to bear any more of this, Hermione turned to flee. She couldn't stand the idea of allowing this man to see how much this truly affected her.

Snape quickly followed behind her and spoke just as she reached the door. "You're not thinking clearly, Miss Granger! Surely you're aware there's also *no* guarantee that you'll get a better offer."

Did he... Did he really just say that?

Hermione reacted before thinking clearly. One hand reached for her wand as the other whipped through the air, palm up.

Snape reacted twice as fast.

Oddly emotionless, he held her wrist up in the air, exactly where he had caught it. Snape leaned even closer, his free arm extending over Hermione's shoulder to press his palm against the door.

Hermione lost their silent standoff first, inhaling sharply at the sound of the door closing behind her.

She was too angry to feel fear. But when she analyzed this later, she would realize she had no reason to. Professor Snape didn't yell or sneer. His grip upon her wrist wasn't even violent. More importantly, she was the one with her wand out.

He could have disarmed her, but obviously chose not to...

Swallowing, Hermione pulled against his resistance. "Let go" was all she said, voice calm.

"*Do not* hit me." He tilted his chin down, aligning his eyes with hers. Hermione would have been unhinged by his unnerving stare if she hadn't detected a bizarre inquisitiveness he was trying to hide.

Almost as if he was waiting for something...

Without moving, he opened his palm. She clenched her hand into a fist, coolly lowering her hand while putting her wand away.

The sneer she had expected long before now slowly etched across his face.

Throwing his shoulders back, Snape crossed his arms and asked, "So you are refusing me, then?"

"I am."

He glared at her, long and fierce before demanding, "If the idea of marrying me is so appalling, then why the bloody hell are you crying?"

"Because you're an unfeeling idiot!"

She had slammed the door right against his face. If he hadn't felt the wind rushing towards him, Snape wouldn't have flinched back in time.

That single flinch, saving his nose from another unneeded fracture, was the only movement Snape made for the next painful minutes that followed. He stood against the door, hand clenched into the doorframe. His mind was in a frenzy while his heart pounded erratically in his throat.

He couldn't move so long as the same phrase kept repeating in his head.

"This wasn't how it was supposed to happen..."

Author's Notes: Once again, I would like to humbly thank those of you who have nominated and voted for this fic in this round of the OWL awards. Winning Second place for Best Challenge Response and Third place for Best Drama has been unbelievably exciting!

Next Up: To the detriment of many a male, Hermione has finally decided who shall escort her to the Halloween Ball.