Summary

Hermione Granger-Weasley, successful minister for magic and mother of two children, is summoned to Minerva McGonagall, Headmaster of Hogwarts, for a parent-teacher-meeting. Afterwards, nothing is the same anymore.

Notes

This story starts 6 months after the ending of book 7. It ignores the events in “Harry Potter and the cursed child“ but includes information from Pottermore.

I've posted this story originally in German and now I'm translating it chapter by chapter. If there's a native speaker out there who would volunteer to beta read my translation I'd be truly overjoyed (the story has 7 chapters and is about 65 pages long).

Many thanks to my amazing beta reader HeySlowpoke!
The last rays of the February sun lightened up the old brick houses in Highfield Road, when the day in the little village Ottery St. Catchpole drew to a close. An icy wind kept people from the roads and silver smoke gushed out of the chimneys.

Inside the house with the high beech hedge in the front yard burned a cozy fire in the fireplace and from time to time a strange green light pierced through one of the windows on the first floor. If somebody had been able to look through the hedge from the street, they would have noticed the slim woman with bushy brown hair who frantically whirled around the kitchen. Cooking for guests wasn’t one of Hermione Granger-Weasley’s favorite things to do because she was quite out of practice by now.

For years, she had successfully struggled against the advice of her husband Ronald Weasley to engage a house elf. But when she had assumed the post of the minister for magic several years ago, she had no choice but to give in to his constant hustle. After all, Ron also was quite busy in the joke shop of his brother George, and taking care of their two children Rose and Hugo was quite time-consuming for the couple as well. So one day, Danny, a proud but eager house elf, had moved into the house and catered for an organized household and a smooth everyday life since then.

Hermione had insisted on paying the elf an excellent salary and praised his work sometimes more than he deserved. For the most part, things couldn’t have been better for Danny and he expressed his thanks with unwavering loyalty and great diligence. This evening, however, Hermione had been determined to cook a delicious meal for her dearest friends herself, especially as she had found a very promising recipe in the *Witch Weekly* just recently.

Harry Potter and his wife Ginny didn’t have the chance to visit them as much as they had in previous years. Like Hermione, Harry’s job kept him quite busy, since he had assumed the leadership of the Auror Headquarters at the ministry. Ginny was a correspondent of the *Daily Prophet* for Quidditch games and therefore had to travel a lot, too. So their regular meetings with Ron and Hermione had declined noticeably, which made it even more important to Hermione to prepare a delicate meal for their guests. The chances that her plan would work out diminished minute by minute, though.

With a sigh, she wiped the sweat from her forehead, cursing quietly when a green flame rose from one of the pots again. Why had it sounded so easy in the *Witch Weekly*?

"Do you need any help, Hermione?" Ron’s red shock of hair appeared in the kitchen door. “It smells kind of weird in here.” He raised his head, sniffing pointedly.

“"You can offer Harry and Ginny a glass of butterbeer,” Hermione grunted, displeased by his implicit critique of her cooking skills. “It won’t take much longer.” She handed Ron salt and pepper and took a deep breath as soon as his head had disappeared from the kitchen. “Danny?” she whispered quietly.

A distinct pop was audible in the kitchen, and then Danny stood in front of her, his small body wrapped in a warm, grey cloak and with one of Hermione’s knitted hats on his head. “What can
Danny do for you, mistress?” Hermione hadn’t been able to break him of this submissive address, as much she had tried to.

“Oh, Danny.” Hermione desperately looked at the bubbling pots on the stove. “I know it’s your free day today, but there must be something wrong with the recipe…”

“Coc au vin?” Danny peeked with his big head over the edges of the pots, damp drops forming on his knitted hat. “Have you used a spell to marinate, mistress?”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione blushed, wiping her damp hands with her apron. “I didn’t have time to go to the groceries yesterday.”

The house elf nodded wordlessly, but the expression on his face indicated unmistakably that he considered Hermione’s cooking skills pitiful. “Danny needs some space,” he said eventually, which apparently meant that Hermione was supposed to leave the kitchen.

So she disappeared into the bathroom, correcting her blurred make-up and changing her wild hair strands into an acceptable hairdo again. When she walked back into the kitchen, she found a steaming gratin dish and four plentifully filled plates next to the stove, filling the air with a spicy smell.

Hermione darted a grateful look at the house elf and flicking her wand, she caught a bouquet of white roses out of the air. “I don’t want you to go to Winky with empty hands,” she said with a wink. “Have a nice evening with her.”

Danny bowed deeply and Hermione could have sworn she saw a hint of pink on his greyish face. A loud crack, then he was gone and Hermione quickly took care of the full plates. “Wingardium Leviosa”, she muttered with a flick of her wand and opened the kitchen door to direct the hovering plates to the dinner table.

As expected, the Coc au Vin tasted deliciously, and even though nobody really thought that Hermione had prepared the meal herself, her friends were polite enough not to mention it.

During dinner Ginny talked about two Quidditch games of the previous week that had eventually turned into a real mudbath because of the bad weather. “The game lasted ten hours and I was so frozen over at the end that I couldn’t use my quill anymore.” Ginny shivered at the memory. “Harry had to leave his office earlier to take care of the kids, which was really difficult that day.” Ginny gave Harry a kiss on the cheek, but her face betrayed that she wasn’t happy about the long hours Harry spent at his office these days.

“We’ve registered an increase of assaults on muggles lately,” Hermione defended his old friend. “Unfortunately, it causes us a lot of extra hours, especially at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Harry nodded worriedly, putting his hand on Ginny’s. “We all hope it’s just a temporary phenomenon. Maybe it’s only a random accumulation, but I’m afraid there’s more behind it.”

“One wonders where all the Death Eaters are these days,” Ron said with a frown. “As soon as Voldemort was defeated, nobody has ever been a Death Eater and nobody ever had had anything against muggles.”

“In many families hostile attitudes against muggles exist for generations,” Harry agreed with him. “These things don’t just change, just because there’s no leader like Voldemort anymore.”

“Of course you must do something against it,” Ginny sighed. “I understand that. But I don’t want to
end up like Mum, who had to take care of her children night and day because her husband constantly worked overtime.”

“Mum definitely enjoyed that,” Ron grinned. “Now that all her kids had left their nest, she’s darting at her grandchildren.”

“Thank God, she is.” Ginny took a sip from her butter beer. “I don’t know what we would do without her – and I guess you don’t either,” she added, glancing over at Ron and Hermione. Indeed, Molly was just babysitting the two youngest kids Hugo and Lily, so that their parents were able to spend an undisturbed evening with each other.

”I’m afraid it will go on like this for a while.” Harry filled his plate a second time before Ron could eat everything himself. “We haven’t caught any of the perpetrators yet.”

”We have to approach the issue from various sides,” Hermione explained. “We don’t only need to fight against the crimes, we also need more public relations work and we have to intensify education at school. In addition to Muggle Studies, there should be projects and courses. There’s no better place than school to reach people – everybody has to go there.”

“Have you talked to McGonagall about this?” Ginny asked, intrigued. “It sounds like a great idea.”

“No, not yet.” Hermione shook her head. “It’s still too half-baked and I want to elaborate a draft first…”

A clicking sound at the window pane interrupted their conversation and Ron stood up to let an excited young owl in that was flapping around in front of the window. “Speaking of the devil,” he muttered when he loosened the parchment from the bird’s foot. “It’s a letter from the Headmistress.” He took a closer look at the role of parchment. “For both of us,” he added, handing Hermione the document.

Hermione bit back her question why Ron couldn’t have read the letter himself and cautiously broke the seal. She instantly recognized McGonagall’s energetic handwriting:

Dear Mrs. Granger-Weasley and Mr. Weasley,

I ask you to meet me in my office next Thursday at 4:30 p.m. for a parent-teacher meeting. Please let me know if you are able to keep the appointment.

Kind Regards

Minerva McGonagall
Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

“She wants us to go to Hogwarts.” Hermione thoughtfully rolled up the parchment. “For a parent-teacher meeting.”

“Is anything wrong with Rose?” Ginny asked worriedly.

”Not that I’m aware of…,” Hermione responded hesitatingly. Her daughter had been sent to Hogwarts the previous summer and Hermione had seen her only during Christmas break since then. Rose had seemed gloomy and sad at Christmas, but when Hermione had asked her about it, she had evaded her. Eventually, Hermione had given up, hoping her daughter’s strange mood would be only temporary. Maybe that was the reason why McGonagall wanted to talk to her parents? Or was it about something entirely else? “Are parent-teacher conferences common practice now at Hogwarts?” Hermione asked to no one in particular.
“She hasn’t written to us yet.” Harry shrugged. “But if there was something seriously wrong with Rose, Albus would have told us about it. They’re in the same class after all.”

Hermione nodded, not really convinced. “Will you be able to make it next Tuesday?” She turned to Ron.

Ron took a long nip of his butter beer. “Can’t you do that by yourself, Hermione? You’ve always been on better terms with McGonagall.”

Hermione’s expression darkened before he had finished. Ron was a wonderful father, but every time a problem occurred, he chickened out and left the issue to Hermione. With a start, she rose from her chair and brought the parchment to her study, in order to declare the matter closed. She didn’t feel like fighting with Ron in front of Harry and Ginny.

However, her guests didn’t consider the matter closed at all. “Do you have an important appointment on Tuesday, Ron?” Ginny prompted when Hermione sat down at the table again. “Surely, your daughter’s well-being means something to you, doesn’t it?” she added in a reproachful voice.

Ron, who felt cornered, reacted grumpily. “It’s a waste of time if we both go,” he defended himself without looking at Hermione. “School has never been my cup of tea, you know that.”

Hermione was angry with herself that she responded to his remark, but she wasn’t able to hold back. “This is not about you, Ron,” she said pointedly. “It’s about our daughter.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Ron shot back. “But this conversation will work out a lot better if you talk to her alone, Hermione. You get along with McGonagall swimmingly. It has always been like that.” He filled the remaining food on his plate with an angry snort. “And I don’t need her to tell me that our daughter doesn’t learn enough or causes problems…”

“Of course, you instantly assume that she did something wrong,” Hermione interrupted him. “If that’s how you approach the meeting, there won’t come anything good of it for sure.”

“Maybe it’s actually better if you do this alone, Hermione,” Harry cautiously stepped in. “There’s no doubt that McGonagall has always liked and appreciated Ron and me, but you have to admit that you and her kind of shared a special bond in our school days.”

“What gives you that idea?” Hermione was annoyed about her blushing. “Just because she gave me that time turner back then?” She looked at Ginny, seeking help, but her friend only smiled knowingly.

“We can talk about everything, as soon as you’re back,” Ron suggested, noticing that he was getting the upper hand.

Hermione started to say something, but she knew that the rest of the evening would be ruined if she didn’t give in. “Well, all right,” she sighed, standing up to get the dessert. “I just wished McGonagall would have given us a hint what this is all about.”

* * *
The following days, Hermione couldn’t think about much else than Professor McGonagall’s strange letter. Why hadn’t the Headmistress mentioned the reason of the meeting? Had it just been her terse way? Or was the issue so trivial that it wasn’t even worth mentioning it? Or was it so terrible that McGonagall didn’t want to worry Rose’s parents in advance?

Something wasn’t right, Hermione could feel it, even if her friends pretended it to be just a bagatelle. At least, it couldn’t be something urgent, for in that case McGonagall would have summoned them right away.

Hermione was relieved her brooding would soon come to an end when she apparated in front of Hogwarts’ gates on Tuesday afternoon. She had made a quick stop at home after work to change because she didn’t want to give the impression that she visited the school as the minister for magic. She had quickly grabbed a night blue, woolen cloak that fell heavily around her shoulders now. At least it was warm.

Hermione felt her heart beating in her chest when she paced through the gates of her old school. The snow was crunching under her boots and a strong wind was blowing over the area which made her shiver involuntarily. With a turned up collar she walked on the trail and the sight of the old castle immediately warmed her up. As minister for magic she had been a guest at Hogwarts several times, but for the first time since she had left school the reason of her visit was private.

The lake in the valley was frozen over and Hermione could recognize a crowd of students, throwing snowballs at each other. How often had she sat at the shore of this lake, mostly with a book in her hand, eagerly memorizing spells. She knew every corner and every blade of grass of this terrain because she had explored the official and unofficial paths of the castle with Ron and Harry so many times.

Hermione would have loved to watch the students a little longer, but she was already late and didn’t want to make McGonagall wait. With a queasy feeling she entered the Great Hall and a new caretaker, whom she hadn’t seen before, led her to the gargoyle and up to the office of the Headmistress.

“Mrs. Granger-Weasley,” Professor McGonagall had risen from her desk when she had heard the quiet scraping of the spiral staircase, moving upwards to her office. “Thank you for accepting my invitation.”

Hermione felt a nervous flutter in her chest when she faced the Headmistress. Looking into the intelligent face with vivid eyes, it felt as if no time had passed since her last day of school. Professor McGonagall wore a long green robe, its velvet-like fabric shimmering in the candle lights, and her black hair was tied in a tight bun as usual. Her square spectacles gave her something puritanical as well, but as strict as her exterior usually was, it was barely able to hide the fiery temperament underneath.

The fact that about 30 percent of the witches and wizards almost didn’t seem to age anymore from the age of 60 was one of the research projects Hermione had commissioned this year. The cause of the different aging processes was still unresolved, although there were several theories about it. Albus Dumbledore had possessed this gene, and Pomona Sprout, Rolanda Hooch and Minerva McGonagall seemed to be blessed with it as well. Other wizards and witches like Arthur and Molly Weasley obviously aged normally like muggles and Hermione had often wondered, whether she would be among the 30 percent or the 70 percent. Nature wouldn’t reveal that secret though before she had passed her 60th birthday.
“Unfortunately, my husband couldn’t make it,” Hermione explained quickly, noticing the Headmistress’s quizzical look. “But we considered it better if I visited you without him than postponing the meeting.”

Professor McGonagall didn’t seem delighted at the news, but she didn’t comment on it. “May I offer you a cup of tea?” she asked instead, pointing at an armchair in front of the fireplace. “Please take a seat, Mrs. Granger-Weasley.”

“Yes, thank you.” Hermione sat down in the armchair and glanced around the big office. The circular room had experienced several changes since the beginning of Hermione’s school years. Severus Snape had already removed Albus Dumbledore’s playful, buzzing instruments and had replaced them with various scary appliances. McGonagall, however, preferred the room plain and clear. Endless rows of bookshelves decorated the walls, only interrupted by the numerous portraits of headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts. In front of the portrait of Albus Dumbledore was a big desk with piles of parchments, probably class essays.

Hermione politely greeted her former headmaster, who nodded kindly at her from his portrait. To her relief, Dumbledore leant back again after a while, closing his eyes like his snoozing colleagues. “Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me about Rose,” Hermione started nervously as Professor McGonagall handed her a cup of tea. “I hope it’s nothing serious?”

The fact that the headmistress didn’t object right away worried Hermione even more. Professor McGonagall’s face didn’t reveal anything, so Hermione had no choice but to wait for the older witch to take a seat next to her.

*Incendio.* With a silent flick of her wand Professor McGonagall made the ambers rise higher and a cozy heat spread through the room. “I think we should come straight to the point, if that’s all right with you,” she started after taking a ginger newt. “I’m worried about your daughter.”

“Worried?” Hermione’s teacup clattered loudly as she put it back onto its saucer. “Why worried?”

“It’s…” Professor McGonagall’s green eyes looked seriously at Hermione. “She doesn’t seem to be well here.”

“Why not?” The professor’s piercing look frightened Hermione. “Isn’t she able to cope with the teaching material?”

At that, the hint of a smile crossed Professor McGonagall’s face. “She’s your daughter, Mrs. Granger-Weasley. Of course, she’s more than able to cope with the subject matter.”

Hermione leaned back in her armchair with relief. She could remember her own fear of failure all too well, though she had been the school’s best student back then. But sometimes good educational achievement and fears didn’t necessarily correlate. It hadn’t been a coincidence that Hermione’s Boggart in third grade had actually put on the shape of Professor McGonagall, who had told her she had failed all her tests. Maybe Rose was tormented with the same worries?

„Does she lack confidence?“ Hermione probed. „Or doesn’t she find friends here?“

Professor McGonagall thoughtfully looked at the cracking wood in the fireplace. „She often hung around with Albus Potter at the beginning, but after a while she secluded herself more and more, even from Albus. He does a lot of things with Scorpius Malfoy now.“

Draco Malfoy’s son??? Hermione frowned. Harry wouldn’t like that. Hadn’t Scorpius been sorted to Slytherin? „But Rose was so happy that the sorting hat sent her to Gryffindor…“
“That’s still the case,” Professor McGonagall clarified before Hermione could finish her thought. “The problem seems to be of different nature. Has your daughter ever mentioned in her letters that she doesn’t want to be at Hogwarts?”

“No.“ Hermione shook her head. It was unimaginable to her that her daughter couldn’t feel well here. She herself had been overjoyed being a student at Hogwarts. “I only noticed that Rose lost some weight and I suspected something was bothering her during Christmas break,” Hermione admitted. “But she avoided my questions, and eventually I stopped thinking about it.” She wrinkled her forehead as remorse overcame her. “Why wasn’t I more persistent?”

Professor McGonagall rose from her armchair and walked towards the window with her teacup. Outside, it had started snowing again, and big white flakes were dancing in the light of the Storches before they fell softly on the ground. “I confronted your daughter with my impression several times,” she said, turning to Hermione again. “She avoided me, too. Last week however, she suddenly burst into tears during detention and begged me to send her back home.”

Hermione stared at Professor McGonagall, aghast. Was it that bad? Why hadn’t she noticed how much her daughter suffered?

“Rose told me only hesitantly what was bothering her and I had to conjecture one or two things,” Professor McGonagall continued. “But from what she said I reasoned that she is worried about her parents.”

“About… us?” Hermione almost dropped her teacup. “But…”

“She’s afraid that you and Mr. Weasley would separate,” Professor McGonagall explained in an unusual empathic voice. “She told me she had always tried to reconcile and mediate when you and your husband had an argument. Now that she’s at Hogwarts she can’t do that anymore, so she’s scared that her parents would get a divorce.”

Hermione sank deeper into the armchair. She felt totally numb. How could she have missed that? How could she have overlooked that her eleven year old daughter felt the responsibility to save her family?

“The relationship between you and your husband is none of my business, of course…“ Professor McGonagall had stepped next to her. “But I suggest you to take the pressure of your daughter, no matter how right or wrong her assumptions are.”

Hermione nodded silently. She felt so ashamed. Not only was she disappointed about herself, she also felt ashamed before Professor McGonagall. Her former Head of House had always been her great role model and Hermione had never stopped trying to impress her and to prove to her, what a gifted witch and courageous person she was. And now she was sitting here, having completely failed – as a mother and as a wife.

Professor McGonagall seemed to guess what was going on in her mind because Hermione suddenly felt a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We can’t always do everything right in our life,” the teacher said sympathetically. “That applies to all of us.” When Hermione looked up, she removed her hand and sat down in her armchair again. “What matters is that we try.”

Hermione felt a sudden urge to explain herself. “Ron and I have been fighting ever since we’ve met,” she said as if this would make anything better. “That’s just how we are, and I’ve never really thought about it. I love Ron anyway.”

Hermione dared a look at Professor McGonagall who seemed to listen to her carefully. There were
things she had never really talked about to anyone because nobody would have understood. “It’s just… if you went through the things we went through…,” she explained hesitantly. “You start to distant yourself from the world. You think that nobody could ever understand what’s going on in your mind… Only Ron and Harry were able to do that. We knew about each other, we’ve been there… And for a long time, especially when we were looking for the horcruxes, we only had each other. “

“Of course.” To Hermione’s surprise she found no judgement in Professor McGonagall’s voice. She seemed to understand completely, maybe because she had survived several wars herself.

"Back then, starting a relationship with Ron was the most natural thing," Hermione continued, encouraged by McGonagall’s reaction. “In our small world there were only the three of us. Harry has been like a brother to me right from the start. Ron, however, teased me, irritated me, fancied me, adored me and supported me.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “He’s a great person,” she added a bit defiantly. “I really love him, but…” She struggled for the right words. “But in the end… we live in separate worlds.”

It was difficult to admit the truth to herself. They had children after all, and Hermione couldn’t just leave or stay at her convenience. “It’s gotten worse since he’s taken over the joke shop with George,” she sighed. “Ron can be so pragmatic and superficial sometimes. He has no idea what I’m talking about when I’m worried about something. He either trivializes things, or we get into a fight.”

“Mrs. Granger-Weasley.” Professor McGonagall put her hands in her lap and cleared her throat before she continued. “You are a brilliant witch. Brilliance often causes loneliness, though. A leadership position causes loneliness, too. And the consequences of the fight against Voldemort and his followers will always affect your life. It will always be difficult for somebody like you to really find yourself in another person.”

Hermione swallowed heavily. It was indeed difficult for her to find people who she felt really close to. Well, it wasn’t that she didn’t have any friends, on the contrary. Because of the Weasley family she was part of a huge circle of friends, and she knew that Ginny and Harry would always be there for her, just as she would always be there for them.

Hermione was aware that she was surrounded by dear people, who she cared for and who cared for her. But there were areas in her heart and in her mind, where nobody could or wanted to follow her. Other people often considered her too complicated or too ivory-towered, and when she started to philosophize about some fascinating question she had read somewhere, hardly anybody would take her seriously.

Hermione didn’t want to seem ungrateful, she knew very well, how lucky she was in her life. She had two wonderful children and she was a successful and popular minister for magic. People appreciated and liked her, at least usually. But the moments in life when somebody actually had inspired or moved her, or when she had found herself in another person had been extremely rare. The world of books, the world of learning, of logic, of reasoning, of exploring… nobody followed her there.

Professor McGonagall sat calmly in her armchair, watching Hermione through her square spectacles. Hermione remembered well how often she had knocked at the office door of her Transfiguration teacher with burning cheeks. Sometimes she had had a question or an idea she had wanted to share, or she had noticed a contradiction between two theories. Professor McGonagall hadn’t rejected her even once. She had always responded to her questions, even if they had been of marginal importance. Because she had understood that Hermione needed a counterpart.

The girls in the dormitory had teased her since she had quoted McGonagall so frequently. Especially
Lavender and Parvati had razzed her she would have a crush on her teacher. Of course, she had firmly denied that. But at night, when she had been lying in her bed in the dark, she had often imagined Professor McGonagall sending for her and telling her in tears that Hermione would be her favorite student, though it was so immensely important to her not to favor anybody.

She had imagined saving Professor McGonagall from a dangerous situation, preferably a life-threatening one, and how the teacher would be grateful to her to the end of her life. She had pictured how Professor McGonagall would confide her most intimate secrets to her, or how she offered Hermione to sleep in her bed after she had told her about a nightmare. And one time, she had even imagined that she had kissed her.

All these phantasies had never really worried Hermione. Almost every girl in her class had a crush on somebody. Sometimes it was a male or female teacher, sometimes it was a rock star of other celebrities. It seemed to be as much a part of school life as the subjects studied and Hermione had been convinced it would vanish after finishing school like all other experiences at Hogwarts.

And indeed, Hermione had drawn a big fat line under her life at Hogwarts. She had wanted to be successful in her career, she had wanted to marry and get children – and she had actually succeeded in all three departments. She had brought about several important changes, she had improved the elves’ rights and abolished the defamation of werewolves. And she had managed to change the corrupt and chaotic ministry into a decent working agency.

“Maybe I do Ron an injustice,” Hermione mused. “You’re right, Professor. It is difficult for me to feel entirely understood by somebody else. So maybe I expect too much of Ron…” Hermione hesitated, then she looked straight at Professor McGonagall. “But you, Professor, you’ve always been a counterpart to me,” she said with great gratitude. “So it’s not impossible, is it?”

It was the first time in the 27 years they had known each other that Hermione saw Professor McGonagall blush. “I’m glad to hear that, Mrs. Granger-Weasley,” she answered, brushing over the armrest with her hand. “As a teacher one wishes to be that for their students.”

Hermione wondered, whether Professor McGonagall had ever found a counterpart to herself, somebody who understood her completely. Rumor said, she had been married once but her husband had died after an accident with a poisoned tentacle plant only a few years after their marriage. Had this man been a counterpart to her? “Professor McGonagall?”

“Yes?” The Headmistress looked up abruptly, surprised by Hermione’s voice.

Hermione felt her face flush. "You're the only teacher at Hogwarts who still addresses me with my surname…”

“Oh…” Professor McGonagall stood up and offered her slender hand to Hermione. “Minerva,” she said with a warm smile.

Hermione gratefully took the offered hand. “Hermione,” she responded, trying to lay into the handshake all the appreciation and affection she felt for the older woman. “With your permission, Minerva, I’d like to see my daughter now.”

“Of course.” Minerva escorted her to the door. “I wish you all the best, Hermione.”

“Thank you again for talking to me.” Hermione shook her hand again. “I really appreciate it.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I know I promised to update this story as quickly as possible but I didn't expect to come down with flu for almost two weeks. I'm better now and will upload the next chapters a lot quicker. By the way, I'm still looking for a native speaker who would volunteer to beta read this story :). Many, many thanks to my beta reader HeySlowpoke. You're the best!

Chapter 2

Hermione sat at her daughter’s bed for almost two hours and spoke with her about her worries and fears. Hermione’s explanation that Rose had neither the responsibility nor the power to influence her parents’ marriage seemed to make the girl even more desperate than her feelings of guilt for not being able to help her parents while staying at Hogwarts.

“The most important thing is,” Hermione emphasized again and again, ”that your Dad and I love you more than anything. Couples fight sometimes. That doesn’t mean they want to separate.” Hermione couldn’t promise her daughter that she would stay with Ron, nor could she grant her a say in that decision. All she could promise, was, that their children would always come first.

Although Rose’s eyes were puffed and red from crying eventually, Hermione was somewhat confident the talk had done her daughter good. Towards the end, Rose had seemed more appeased and had actively sought some physical attention from her mother. At least, she didn’t have to bear her burden all by herself anymore.

On her way back to the gate, Hermione was deep in thought about her conversation with Rose. How strange that her daughter of all people confronted her with questions she hadn’t asked herself for a long time. Was she happy with her life? What had changed in her relationship with Ron? Was it still what she wanted?

As soon as she arrived home, Hermione told Ron about her meeting with McGonagall. Like her, Ron was appalled by Rose’s assumptions, but didn’t understand why his daughter was worrying about them. “We’ve always been fighting,” he said, shrugging. “You’re too complicated sometimes, and you often consider me too simple.” He squeezed his eyes together, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Mum and Dad fight a lot, too, but it had never occurred to me they would get divorced.”

Hermione didn’t respond to that. The longer she thought about McGonagall’s words the more she became aware that her daughter sensed something she hadn’t admitted to herself yet. It wasn’t just about the constant arguing. Basically, she and Ron had been living parallel lives for years, and only when they talked about the past they felt close again. But was a connection by the past still enough for a future together?

That night, Hermione lay awake next to Ron for several hours, pondering what kind of marriage she wanted to have. Ron was her first and last relationship, so she didn’t have anything to compare it to. How did her parents solve their problems? Or Arthur and Molly? Or Harry and Ginny?
Hermione longed for some time alone in order to think about all these things, but in the following weeks the events came thick and fast at the ministry. There were several more assaults on muggles in various cities of Great Britain. Harry, as well as other head officials, reported there were found traces of magic after each assassination. The muggles’ prime minister had already contacted Hermione twice, which never had happened before, for she was concerned with good reason.

“We have a global problem with populism, racism and xenophobia too these days,” she told Hermione during a crisis talk. “But these new assaults don’t fit into the pattern we have here. These are your people and I strongly demand you to stop that.”

Hermione promised her she would establish a special task force from various departments that would focus on solving the crime. “I want you to take charge,” she informed Harry as soon as she was back from the meeting with the prime minister. “Pick the people yourself and I’ll release them for working at the task force. At least 70 percent of the people should be from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the rest from other departments.”

Harry instantly wrote down some names, showing them to Hermione. “We still can’t say whether the assaults are connected or if the perpetrators just stimulate each other,” he reported, putting Hermione’s quill back on her desk. “But there’s no doubt that the underlying motive is hostility to muggles.”

“I need a weekly report from you.” Hermione gathered some papers for Harry and handed them to him. “And I want Katie Bell to start a great public campaign. We need flyers, we need events and we need clear statements against hostility to muggles in the press.” Hermione knew how difficult it was to run a public campaign for a society who lived in hiding. But the ministry had its own strategies and Katie Bell was a well experienced campaign leader.

Harry added more names to the list for his task force, then packed his things and tucked Hermione’s papers under his arm. “Didn’t you plan a special project at Hogwarts, too?” he asked, already grabbing the doorknob.

“Yes, that’s right,” Hermione nodded distractedly. “I’m going to send McGonagall an owl this very day.”

* * *

Minerva McGonagall’s response came by return of post, and Hermione postponed two appointments to meet her the following day. She originally had invited Minerva to her office at the ministry but the Headmistress couldn’t leave the school that day, so Hermione turned up in front of Hogwarts’s gates again at 9 o’clock in the morning.

Heavy fog lay over the damp grass when Hermione strolled through the huge school grounds. The sun hadn’t risen above the tree tops yet and Hermione pulled her coat closer to her shoulders, facing the Scottish climate again. Her coat was warm but the dark grey suit underneath qualified only for a day in the office.

The lessons had already started and everybody was sitting in their classes by now. Hermione looked
up at the towers a bit wistfully, smiling, when she noticed lights in Sybill Trelawney’s class room in the North Tower. She almost envied the poor students who tried to read tea leaves or something, surrounded by an obscure fog of heavy fragrances. If somebody had told her in former times that she would linger after Professor Trelawney’s Divination lessons one day, she surely would have considered casting an unforgivable curse at them.

Hermione could hardly wait to tell Minerva McGonagall about her plans for the school, and she felt a rush of excitement as she passed the long corridor towards the Headmistress’s office. Like last time, Minerva McGonagall waited for Hermione in her office, but to Hermione’s surprise she welcomed her in black robes and her face seemed pale and tired. “Are you all right, Minerva?” Hermione asked, entering the circular office.

“A sudden death of a relative,” Minerva explained tersely, but her face turned even whiter.

“May I ask, who it is?” Hermione glanced at the black travelling coat placed on the desk chair’s backrest. Apparently, Minerva would have to leave Hogwarts in a while.

“A nephew of mine.” Minerva put a tray with tea and biscuits on her desk.

Hermione remembered she had read somewhere that Minerva McGonagall had two younger brothers but the professor had never mentioned them. Judging by her reaction, she must have been quite close to her nephew, though.

Yet again, Hermione realized how little she knew about Hogwarts’ Headmistress. “You have to leave soon?” she asked, pointing at the travelling coat.

“Don’t worry, Hermione. You will get all the time you need.” she asked, pointing at the travelling coat.

“Exactly.” Hermione sat down nervously, wondering how to begin. All of a sudden she didn’t feel like talking about the political situation in England at all. She’d rather given Minerva solace and comfort, but she knew that her former teacher wouldn’t allow that. “The magical community expects the ministry to act, and rightly so,” she started, opening the briefcase on her lap. “We can’t pretend these are negligible, occasional instances. I established a task force that takes care of the assaults and I ordered a public campaign…”

“And you want to implement something at Hogwarts as well?” Minerva’s lips had visibly thinned and she furrowed her brows. “I don’t get it,” she said, her voice quavering and her hands shivered as she poured tea into Hermione’s cup. “Only 20 years ago, we opposed Voldemort and his Death Eaters. And now this!” She pointed at the current edition of the Daily Prophet on her desk. “Didn’t we learn anything from history?” Minerva asked bitterly. “Do we have to fight the same battle again and again?”

Hermione had already read the long article on the front page with the alarming head line The Death Eaters are back!” Underneath was a huge picture of Tom Riddle who looked grimly at the camera. “Who said anything about giving up?” Minerva’s eyes flashed through her glasses. “Tell me about your ideas.” She impatiently pointed at Hermione’s briefcase.
“Oh, yes, of course.” Hermione swiftly pulled out a pile of papers from her briefcase and put it on Minerva’s desk. “I made a first draft – some kind of a ‘project week’ I would like to talk to you about.”

Minerva wrinkled her forehead as she shot a glance at Hermione’s documents. “I was rather thinking of intensifying Muggle Studies. A project week would mean a lot more effort, but of course the knowledge transfer would undoubtedly be more thorough.”

“The changes in Muggle Studies could be an additional component,” Hermione pointed out hopefully. “The broader our approach, the more we will achieve.”

Minerva didn’t respond, for she had already dived into Hermione’s documents. “Your concept looks promising,” she declared, looking up again after several minutes. “We need to change a few things in implementation, but it’s a good approach.”

“Yes, of course.” Hermione handed Minerva her quill so that she could write down some comments next to her text. “It’s just a first draft.”

They leaned over Hermione’s concept together, merging their different approaches and ideas step by step. Hermione was surprised how similar their considerations were, and when she looked up from the papers after an hour her cheeks were burning. Minerva’s face had gotten some of its color back, too, and Hermione was secretly pleased that in a certain way she had actually done something good for her.

“I think the concept for the project week is ready to be introduced to the Heads of Houses.” _Geminio_. Minerva gave her wand a tiny flick and seconds later a duplicate of their document appeared out of thin air, hovering softly next to the original. “You will hear from me next week.”

Hermione realized that the reason of their meeting was undoubtedly resolved but she felt a great reluctance to leave. “How is Rose doing?” she asked after Minerva had sat down at her desk again. “Her last letters sounded more optimistic, but you never really know…”

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation and at a sign from Minerva a young teacher whom Hermione had never seen before, entered the office. “Excuse me, Professor McGonagall, but we have an accident among the third years.”

Minerva rolled her eyes. “Boris Trawley?”

“Yes, Headmistress.” The young teacher nodded awkwardly. “He accidentally cast a chicken pox spell on a classmate. I’ve already brought Mrs. Wilbur to the Hospital Wing.”

“The young man is about to turn this school into a sickbay,” Minerva sighed, waving at her teacher. “I’ll visit Mrs. Wilbur at the Hospital Wing in the afternoon. Summon Mr. Trawley to my office tomorrow morning.”

“Very well, Headmistress.” The young teacher nodded politely at Hermione and hurried to leave the office again.

Minerva poured Hermione another cup of Earl Grey, who realized with relief that it would take a while to drink the hot tea up. “I’m glad to tell you that your daughter is obviously feeling better,” Minerva reported with a genuine smile. “She seems more relaxed and integrates much better.”

“That’s really good to hear.” Hermione took a deep breath in relief. “I have to admit that the situation is still difficult, but what matters is that Rose finds a way to deal with it.”
Minerva looked at her attentively. “Did you talk to your husband?” she asked, offering her a plate with biscuits.

“More or less.” Hermione took a biscuit just to gain some time. She wished she could tell Minerva she had long solved her problems with Ron, but things weren’t that easy. “To be honest, the last meeting with you gave me a lot to think about,” she said vaguely.

“What do you think about?” Minerva prompted so matter-of-factly as if she had asked for a cooking recipe.


“That’s a lot to think about.” Minerva took her glasses off and put them next to her teacup. It was quite amazing how much softer her face appeared immediately. “Did you find any answers?”

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t even know where to start,” she admitted. “I’m asking myself if I made the right decisions in life.” She bit her lip, wondering how she could transform her chaotic thoughts into coherent sentences. “As a child, I always wanted to become a scientist. I wanted to research and explore things, I wanted to bring the magical world forward. And now I find myself at the ministry, I have to make a hundred decisions every day, have to compromise, be diplomatic, lead employees, release others…”

“I’m sure you would have been an excellent scientist,” Minerva smiled. “But you are an excellent minister for magic as well. And now you have the power to decide which research domains should be intensified.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing.” Hermione sent her a grateful glance. “We need to invest more money into research. Our world is faced with enormous challenges like never before, and we have to deal with them sooner or later.” Her voice became more energetic with every word. “I’m convinced that one of the causes of the new hostility to muggles is that their world has caught up a lot,” she continued. “They even outclass us in some domains. Telephones, computer, internet, mobile phones – all these things lead to a significant acceleration that I don’t really agree to, but it makes our world look downright old-fashioned and comfortable.” Hermione rose from her armchair and started to pace the room.

“So your theory is the assassins try to put the muggles back to their ‘rightful place’?” Minerva stood up too, stepping next to Hermione at the window. “We should include that into our project then, shouldn’t we?”

“Well, yes…” Hermione felt strangely confused as Minerva stood next to her so closely but she couldn’t think about that now. “The only way is to ally ourselves with them, instead of fighting them,” she stressed out. “That’s what needs to be our message.”

Minerva frowned disapprovingly, when she saw some students attacking each other on the school grounds. The new caretaker was already there to drive them apart. “It’s a great benefit to have a muggleborn minister for magic,” she said in a casual voice.

Hermione stared at her shoes in an attempt to hide her blushing. It was the second time today Minerva made her a compliment. “Your father was a muggle, wasn’t he?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes.” Minerva nodded. “It broadens the view on certain things, don’t you think?”

Hermione couldn’t agree more. It happened a lot that she thought or felt different from other witches
because she had grown up in the muggle world.

There was a pause in their conversation, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Both women stood next to each other at the window, each of them deep in thoughts. Meanwhile, the sun had chased away the fog and the first crocuses opened their calyxes. They looked like violet and yellow fields and promised Hogwarts its first spring days.

“We need to get a better understanding about what binds people together and what separates them,” Hermione interrupted the silence. “That way we will know how to stop the disapproval of everything that’s different.”

“Are you thinking about the opposing elements love and hate?” Minerva seemed to ponder over Hermione’s words.

“No, I’m thinking of the opponents love and fear,” Hermione explained. “A person, who truly loves, doesn’t fear anything. A person, who is afraid too much, can’t really love. Fear separates us, love connects us. So our own fears can prevent us from loving and appreciating. Hate often is only the result of fear. If we knew how we can love each other more, a lot of problems in the world would be solved.”

“That’s an interesting thought.” Minerva waved her wand, putting more wood on the fire. “But it’s difficult to explore.”

“Maybe it’s easier than you think.” Hermione thought of the day when she and Harry had broken into the Department of Mysteries at the ministry with some D.A. members. They had been looking for the room with the prophecies and had come across a room they couldn’t open, no matter how hard they had tried. Today, she knew what was hidden behind the iron door. “There’s a so called Room of Love in our Department of Mysteries,” Hermione explained. “It contains many different love potions, so we can explore what love is. We can explore what makes it thrive and grow, what love is capable of, what harm it can do, and what it can heal.”

Minerva perked her eyebrows up. “Do you consider this the right approach to get to the bottom of a phenomenon like love?”

“Well, the project explores important questions,” Hermione nodded. “Why was the love of Harry’s mother capable to protect him from Voldemort? Why could Molly Weasley suddenly defeat Bellatrix Lestrange? What’s the difference between true love and obsession? And how can we handle this great power with care?”

Minerva shook her head with little conviction. “You really think we’re are able to figure out these complex coherences?” She snorted quietly. “With all due respect to your love for theories, Hermione, I’m afraid the universe won’t disclosure this secret to us so easily.”

Hermione turned away from her in disappointment. For the first time that day they disagreed with each other. The Room of Love was one of Hermione’s favorite research projects. What could be more fascinating than figuring out the power of love? “Have you experienced love, Minerva?” she asked, regretting her question at the same moment. “I mean…”

“I know what you mean,” Minerva interrupted her brusquely. “Yes, I have.”

Hermione knew she had gone too far and quickly tried to lead the conversation to a less volatile issue. “What I like most about the project is that it’s not only about romantic love. It’s also about parental love, about fraternal love, about love between friends, about the love of the child for their parents, or of the student for their teacher, or of the ward for their protégé…” Hermione shot a quick
glance at her former teacher who still seemed unimpressed.

“Then go on, research it,” Minerva sneered with an almost pitying smile. “I doubt your project will succeed.”

Hermione’s face darkened. She didn’t like it at all when people acted as if they knew things better than she did. How could the world become a better place when promising research projects were nipped in the bud? Why did Minerva devaluate Hermione’s efforts? Love was part of the life of every human being after all – with the exception of Voldemort maybe – and Minerva shouldn’t act as if it hadn’t anything to do with it. Before she could stop herself, Hermione blurted out “Did you know that I loved you?”

“Yes.”

Hermione startled when a knock interrupted their conversation and Neville Longbottom’s tall frame appeared in the door. “Minerva?” It took him a moment to spot his boss in front of the window. “Oh, Hermione, hi,” he awkwardly greeted his former classmate. “I didn’t know… I just wanted to let you know that we’ve got another owl, Minerva.” He turned to his Headmistress. “People are waiting for you to start the preparation for the funeral service with them.”

Minerva seemed to need a quick moment to compose herself, but then she straightened up and walked towards him, her expression stoic. While she was quietly talking to Neville Hermione glanced at her watch and her eyes widened in shock. She had taken up the Headmistress’s time for almost three hours.

“I’m sorry, Hermione, but I really need to leave.” Minerva had turned around to her again. “I wish I wouldn’t have to end our conversation so abruptly, but you’ll hear from me as soon as I’ve talked to the Head of Houses about our concept.”

“Oh course.” Hermione pulled herself together and quickly put her papers back into her briefcase. Why on earth had she started this conversation with Minerva? Why had all these thoughts flooded out of her? She would have loved to secretly cast a memory spell, sweeping the last 30 minutes from Minerva McGonagall’s brain. But Neville stood in the door, preventing every clarifying word.

“I’m sorry for holding you up for such a long time, Minerva,” Hermione said hastily. “And I look forward to hearing from you.” She shook Minerva’s hand. “I’m really sorry about your nephew.”

Minerva’s hand was cold as ice and Hermione was startled to see a tear in the corner of her eye. “It was good to talk to you, Hermione,” she said and shortly afterwards the spiral staircase started to carry Hermione down to the gargoyle.

Hermione hurried through the long corridors towards the school’s exit. Had she completely lost her mind? She had acted like an immature schoolgirl. How could she have actually told Minerva she had loved her? Why had she used these stupid words? Couldn’t she have called it a crush or a childish longing? And Minerva hadn’t even tried to deny it. She had known it. Oh God, she had known it!

Rushing through the entrance hall, Hermione frantically searched for a way to make up for her silly behavior. Maybe she should deliberately take up the issue again at their next meeting, laughing about the immature feelings of the young girl she had been back then. She had to make it undoubtedly clear to Minerva that these times were over once and for all.

But were they over? Were they as much the past as her old school days? If Hermione was honest with herself, her heart was still beating a little faster when she was in the same room with Minerva McGonagall. She still felt drawn to her. And she still felt the urge to go to her when an interesting
idea had occurred to her. Was this just an old reflex, a remnant of her childhood, or was it something different?

Hermione groaned quietly as she prepared for disapparating in front of Hogwarts’ gates. She didn’t want to think about this anymore. There were enough problems waiting for her to be solved after all, not least her relationship with Ron. She needed to give Rose and Hugo a feeling of safety and emotional security again. And then there were all the assaults on muggles whose prevention would take her entire time and energy at the ministry.

When Hermione arrived at the ministry, she had made the firm decision not to meet Minerva McGonagall again, except maybe for completely professional reasons. She just couldn’t have any more question marks in her life, which was challenging enough right now and she didn’t want to have to accuse herself of failure later. Nor as a wife, nor as a mother, and even less as the minister for magic.
Chapter 3

The following months, Hermione had her hands full at the ministry. The task force had actually found a well-organized underground movement that had recruited more and more members over the past several years. To Hermione’s surprise only a part of them were former Death Eaters. The majority were young wizards and witches with narrow-minded views of the world who strove to feel superior to another community.

Some of the assassins had been arrested meanwhile, but it did little to solve the problem. Thus, Hermione had met with the ministers for magic from several other countries in order to hear about their dealing with hostile tendencies towards muggles. Like in Great Britain, wizards and witches joined radical trends in other countries as well, but Hermione considered the other nations’ approaches even less satisfactory.

At least, Katie Bell’s campaign would start at the end of June, and the project week to improve the social coexistence of wizards and muggles was supposed to start at Hogwarts right before the summer holidays.

Minerva McGonagall had asked Hermione to give a little speech at the opening of the project week – a request Hermione could hardly refuse, considering their joint work on the project at the beginning. She wished there was a way to avoid meeting with the Headmistress again and decided she would leave quickly after her speech, pretending to have another meeting at the ministry.

Although Hermione had been so actively engaged in the project at the beginning, she prolonged writing her speech until the last minute. Way after midnight she still worked on her remarks in her study, feeling absolutely whacked the next morning.

“You’ve certainly looked better, my dear,” Ron commented dryly, piling more Corn Flakes on his plate. His enormous appetite was still unabated, and Hermione had never stopped wondering what his body was doing with all the energy. Selling magical jokes seemed to burn a lot of calories.

“Would you pick up Hugo from primary school?” Hermione asked, flipping through the *Daily Prophet*. The article about her meeting with the minister for magic of France had been annoyingly badly researched but she didn’t have the time to be upset about that now. “I won’t be back in time to pick him up.”

“No problem.” Ron punched his son into his ribs. “What do you think, little man? If you behave, we’ll go to the zoo later.”
“Yes!” Hugo beamed. “Can Alfons come with us, Dad?”

“Who’s Alfons?” Ron looked at Hermione quizzically.

“Padma Patil’s son,” Hermione put the Daily Prophet aside, glancing nervously at her watch. “You know they’re friends, don’t you?”

“Well, in that case he can come with us,” Ron promised and Hugo pushed his fist into the air, radiant with joy.

“Don’t forget to finish your porridge, Hugo,” Hermione warned him. “We need to leave in ten minutes.”

“Do you want to impress anybody?” Ron asked, chewing, and looked up and down Hermione’s red dress. “I thought you were visiting the opening of a project, not a ceremonial act?”

“It’s summer, and I felt like it.” Hermione stood up and carried her plate back to the kitchen, before Ron could see her face. “I’ll have another meeting at eight o’clock tonight, by the way.”

“Don’t worry, Hermione.” Ron poured more milk on his Corn Flakes. “Hugo and I will spend a nice evening together with popcorn and chocolate frogs...”

“Are you serious, Dad?” Hugo became more excited by the minute, and it was visible that he wished he could just drop school and spend time with his father right away.

“Of course, I’m serious,” Ron chuckled and Hermione was grateful about his attempt to make it easier for her. After Hermione’s parent-teacher meeting with Minerva McGonagall he had stopped criticizing her all the time and they had argued a lot less lately. With various little gestures, Ron showed her he wanted to be with her, and Hermione wished she could appreciate his attempts more. He really tried to make things better between them, they both tried, but it didn’t make Hermione feel closer to him again. Maybe she just needed more time.

“Five minutes.” Hermione kissed her son on his hairline. “And don’t forget your gym bag.”

The prospect of the visit to the zoo with Alfons seemed to significantly increase Hugo’s usually rather leisurely pace at breakfast, and he dutifully scraped his plate. Hermione only had to request he put on his shoes three times before they could leave the house, which was possibly record-breaking for Hugo.

As soon as she had dropped her son off at school, Hermione sped to the ministry, where she had two meetings with employees before she left for the opening of the project week. Her briefcase firmly tucked under her arm, she apparated to the gates of Hogwarts shortly before 11 o’clock.

It must have rained before because the paths were damp when Hermione headed for the castle in a hurry. Still a bit out of breath, she paced through the iron gates and was welcomed in the Great Hall by polite applause. The Hall was filled to capacity and Hermione’s heart warmed at the sight of all the students in their black robes, half of whom were bored and half expectant.

Hogwarts’ Headmistress sat in the middle of the long teacher table but stood up to meet Hermione. “How nice you could make it, Hermione.” Minerva gently touched Hermione’s elbow, leading her to her seat.

Although nearly imperceptible, the touch made Hermione calm down and she could still feel the echo of Minerva’s warm fingers on her arm as she sat down on her seat of honor. With a friendly nod of her head she greeted Filius Flitwick who already stood in front of his chorus, ready to open
Hermione glanced around the Great Hall, and it almost felt like all these years ago when she had been a student herself. It was no longer visible how much of the school had been destroyed during the war against Voldemort and his followers. The castle’s renovation had been effortful and time-consuming – Hermione, Harry, Ron and many other volunteers had helped with the clearing work in May 1998. The complete renovation, however, had to be done by a professional team of wizards.

While the chorus stroke up its first song, Hermione let her eyes wander around the Great Hall. As usual, there was a sea of candles hovering above the attendants’ heads and the enchanted ceiling indicated that the sun had started to dispel the clouds. At the Gryffindor table Hermione spotted her daughter’s ginger hair. Rose waved at her proudly and Hermione blew a kiss at her direction. Next to Rose sat James and Albus Potter – the latter secretly screwing up a piece of paper in order to smuggle it to Scorpius Malfoy at the Slytherin table. Ted Lupin sat at the far end of the Hufflepuff table, whispering something to a blonde girl from Ravenclaw who seemed to laugh about a joke he had just made.

Looking at the long teachers’ table, Hermione noticed that more than half of the professors had changed over the last 30 years. Neville Longbottom, Hogwarts’ Herbology teacher since Pomona Sprout had retired, beamed at Hermione. Sybill Trelawney however, who was a regular part of the faculty again since Firenze had joined his centaur herd again, seemed to have missed that the event had already started. As always, Hagrid towered over the entire staff, but he didn’t sit among the teachers anymore. He sat on his original seat as gamekeeper of Hogwarts and waved at Hermione excitedly. She suppressed a chuckle as the professor next to him quickly ducked away, avoiding his huge paw.

After the chorus had ended, Minerva McGonagall said a few words of welcome and then turned to Hermione. “We’re very glad our minister has agreed to attend the opening of this project, despite her full schedule,” she announced in a formal voice. “Mrs. Granger-Weasley has personally initiated this project and worked on its further elaboration herself. So please welcome our minister for magic, who will now say a few words to us.”

Appreciative applause filled the hall when Hermione rose to give her speech. While listening to Flitwick’s chorus, she had already realized that the speech she had elaborated last night had turned out inappropriately formal. After all, this was her old school. This place had been her home for so long and had given her life a completely new direction. Besides, this whole event was about a special cause very close to her heart. In fact she had risked her life for it time and again when she had been the same age as the students who were sitting in front of her now.

And so Hermione discarded her original speech without further ado and started to tell the attentively listening students about her own school days at Hogwarts. She talked about the things she had learned here, about the friends she had made here, and about the tough struggle against Voldemort that had cost so many lives at that time. “Hate, rejection, or devaluation can never be the answer,” she shouted to the students. “The only thing that will help our magical community to survive is tolerance, compassion and appreciation for all living beings that inhabit our land and our earth.”

Hermione saw from the corner of her eye how Minerva McGonagall and other teachers occasionally wiped their eyes during her speech. She herself also had trouble continuing several times because her voice threatened to fail her. “It’s important to me that all of you,” Hermione spread her arms wide, “know how many people gave their lives for the peace we have today: two former Headmasters of Hogwarts – Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape – many members of the Order of the Phoenix, numerous witches and wizards who put up resistance - everyone in his or her own way - , and not to mention a huge number of Hogwarts students and teachers who opposed to Voldemort’s idea of a
superior, pure-blooded race of wizards.”

Hermione paused when a murmur went through the hall. “Many of you have parents and relatives who can still tell you about that time,” she continued. “And they will agree with me that we must not tolerate dividing tendencies in our community. We all should be concerned about peace and freedom. No matter if we talk about house elves or werewolves or goblins or humans or animals, no matter if we talk about wizards or muggles, no species has the right to prize itself above others!”

When Hermione ended, it was completely silent for a moment. Then thunderous applause filled the hall. Students and teachers stood up from their seats, giving Hermione a standing ovation. At the end, nobody was seated anymore, even the Slytherin table had risen, and the hall turned into a confusing jumble of clapping hands. Hermione saw her daughter jumping excitedly up and down at the Gryffindor table, and Albus was beaming too, welcoming pats on the back from other students.

“Your words achieved more than any project week ever could,“ Minerva praised when they drank to the beginning of the project later. “It was one of the best speeches this school has ever heard.”

“Thank you, Minerva.” Hermione could hardly hide her pride and would have liked to hug the Headmistress. “It’s a matter close to my heart, as you know.”

“Great speech, Hermione!” Filius Flitwick was thrilled as well. “Each and every sentence was a pleasure.” The little professor had difficulties not to be crushed by the bunch of students pushing their way to Hermione.

“Thank you, Filius.” Hermione bent down towards him, clicking her glass against his one. “To a good start of the project week.”

Before she could turn to Minerva again, students started to assail her with questions, and she had to sit down on the Ravenclaw table to answer all of them. “Are there really pictures of you, Harry Potter and your husband on chocolate frog cards?” a blond second-year student wanted to know. “Are you still having nightmares of You-know-who?” asked an older girl with braids. “Do you have as many vacation days as you want to as minister for magic?” enquired a curly-haired first-grade student with big round eyes.

Hermione made an effort to answer each and every question and agreed to write down her name on numerous Quidditch shirts that were handed to her. Of course she was used to being courted and flattered, and it wasn’t the first time that a speech of her had been very well received. But she had never been celebrated so enthusiastically before, and that it happened at her old school of all places warmed her heart even more.

Hermione craned her neck, beaming to Minerva McGonagall who raised her glass to her from the other end of the hall, a broad smile on her face. Minerva made a gesture that she wanted to speak to her later, and contrary to her original plan, Hermione agreed with a happy nod of her head.

It took Hermione another 30 minutes to finish all her conversations with students and teachers, until she was finally able to look for Minerva who stood with Hagrid at the exit of the entrance hall.

“You were great, Hermione!” Hagrid beamed, patting her shoulder, so that she almost fell against the door. “I always knew you’d turn into something special!”

“I know you’d like to talk to Hermione, Hagrid,” Minerva interrupted him a bit brusquely. “But I’m afraid that has to wait, for we still need to discuss a few things.”

“Oh, of course, Professor.” Hagrid tenderly ruffled Hermione’s hair before he walked back to his
“The weather is so nice that I thought we could walk a little,” Minerva suggested when they had diverged from the loud voices in the hall.

“Very well.” Hermione felt so elated she would have followed Minerva everywhere. She was wondering however, what the Headmistress wanted to talk about. Were there still some unresolved issues concerning the project?

“That’s a pretty dress, Hermione,” Minerva remarked as she started to walk next to her. “It suits you.”

“Th…thank you,” Hermione stuttered, baffled by the compliment. She wished she could have given a kind response but her brain didn’t offer anything useful, so they walked next to each other without saying anything for a while. A mild breeze blew the delicate scent of Minerva’s perfume towards Hermione, penetrating her nostrils and making her pleasantly dizzy.

“I’ve thought about our last conversation,” Minerva eventually said and Hermione’s well-being abruptly turned into horror.

“I was impossible, I know,” she said before Minerva could continue. “I’m really sorry…”

“Not at all.” Minerva shook her head. She tugged at the sleeve of her robe, and Hermione almost got the impression that she was nervous. “I’m aware that your time is quite limited, of course, but I… I’d like to offer you my friendship.”

“Your… friendship?” Hermione wasn’t sure she had heard Minerva correctly.

“Only if you don’t mind, of course;” Minerva added, almost shyly. Hermione opened her mouth to say something but then closed it again. Of course she wanted to have Minerva as a friend. Who would decline such an offer? But what about her plans to keep her distance to her former professor? What about her intention to get her life in order first? Hermione noticed Minerva was waiting and she didn’t want to make her feel rejected. “Your offer really makes me happy, Minerva…” she said hesitatingly.

“But?”

“But…“ Hermione felt her blood rushing into her cheeks. What was she supposed to tell Minerva? “You know so much about me, and I so little about you…” she argued weakly.

“It wouldn’t have to stay that way.” Minerva lifted her long robe when they went down the steep path to the lake. Despite her age, she moved surprisingly gracefully on the rough ground. “I don’t mean to push the idea on you, far from it. I just thought…”

“No, no,” Hermione assured her quickly. “I actually feel very honored and I… I’d like to accept your offer,” she closed before she could change her mind again.

“Good.” Minerva seemed to be pleased by the result of their conversation and hummed quietly while they continued their way down to the lake.

Hermione however felt beads of sweat forming on her forehead. If her heart would just beat a little less fast. “I might ask a lot of questions,” she declared warningly.

“Do that, my dear.” Minerva’s green eyes shone as she turned to Hermione. “As long as I’m not
committed to answer them all."

“And when will we start the experiment?"

“How about a game of chess next Wednesday?"

“Agreed.” Hermione made a mental note of the appointments she would have to reschedule. It would be complicated but she would manage. “I could drop by as soon as Hugo’s gone to bed. That would be about nine o’clock.”

“Do you feel like having dinner at Hogwarts?"

“Oh yes.” Hermione laughed. “Every student of Hogwarts is spoiled for the rest of their lives.”

“So it’s settled then.” Minerva stopped when they had reached the lake. A cool breeze blew across the water, cooling Hermione’s heated body.

“I missed you, Minerva.” A content sigh escaped Hermione’s lips when she sat down next to the Headmistress on the stones.

Instead of a response Minerva waved her wand and two flutes filled with champagne appeared on the stones in front of them. “To friendship,” she said quietly and their glasses clinked in the afternoon sun.
Chapter 4

The euphoric mood from the project week’s opening day still brightened Hermione’s following weeks. She hadn’t felt so elated in a long time – even her job felt easier, and the atmosphere at home was better, too. Ron, who linked Hermione’s good mood to his efforts in their relationship, stated with satisfaction that they obviously had overcome their crisis. Hermione hugged him lovingly but couldn’t make herself confirm his statement. She wasn’t sure how long the peace between them would last, but she was glad about every single day they didn’t have a fight. Especially Rose, who was at home during the summer holidays, seemed to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere.

Hermione had originally planned to take some vacation days so that she could spend more time with her children. But the political situation made it impossible for her to be absent from the ministry for more than a day. So she tried to compromise, decreasing her workload and joining the family’s activities as often as possible.

During their family getaways the atmosphere was playful and frisky, and both children enjoyed their vacation to the fullest. Having a father who was one of the owners of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes had its advantages, and one day the family laughed so much that the children complained of sore muscles the following day.

In spite of their relaxed family days, Hermione felt her inner distance to Ron more strongly than ever before. There were so many things on her mind – the problems with the inflammatory press for instance, or the co-worker who had turned out to be part of the underground movement – but all these things didn’t interest Ron much. And she didn’t really care anymore about his witty anecdotes.

And then there were the evenings with Minerva. Their first meeting had been so inspiring that both women had decided to see each other regularly from now on. Because of the summer vacations Hermione didn’t want to leave her family, and so Minerva had been a guest of the Granger-Weasley family several times.

They had spent nice evenings together but Hermione had realized how much she longed for some time alone with Minerva. Their usually animated discussions weren’t possible with Ron and the children present. When Hermione had to separate from her daughter again at the end of summer it broke her heart, but at least she would be able to be at Hogwarts again on Wednesday evenings.

“I read your article in Tranfiguration Today, Minerva.” Hermione carefully folded her napkin after another delicious dinner in the private rooms of the Headmistress. It was the first Wednesday in September and it rained heavily outside, which was why Hermione’s travelling coat hung out to dry in front of the fireplace. “Since when have you been working on the difficulties to turn complementary colors into each other?”

“For many years.“ Minerva poured more wine into Hermione’s glass. “I’d already noticed the
difficulties when I was a student. At first, you would consider it especially easy turning complementary colors into each other, wouldn’t you? It’s still a little bit of a mystery what the real problem is – obviously a mixture of the object’s property itself, the eye of the beholder, and the information processing in our brain.”

“Have you thought of Bradley’s law in this regard?“ Hermione’s question drowned by a loud crack as Winky appeared out of thin air in order to ask whether the meal had been to their liking. “It’s been delicious, Winky.” Hermione licked her lips to emphasize her point. “As always.“

Winky bowed happily and disappeared with the dishes, except for the two wine glasses that Minerva now carried to her seating area at the fireplace. “A wizard in Norway did some research on Bradley’s law and didn’t find a connection,” she explained, handing Hermione her wine glass.

Hermione frowned skeptically. “Are there follow-up studies?”

“Not yet.” Minerva leant back on her sofa, crossing her legs. She had taken off her robe and now wore a green silk blouse and black trousers. The clothes made her look more feminine and less aloof, but even now Minerva McGonagall was a formidable appearance.

Hermione still remembered the respectful quietness in the classroom as soon as the Transfiguration teacher had entered it. As a professor she had, although strict, never been unfair and had always trusted the abilities of her students. How often had she encouraged students with lack of self-confidence or protected weaker ones from stronger ones. What she didn’t tolerate though, were lack of effort, cowardice, or every way of unsocial behavior.

Minerva McGonagall was considered to be one of the most talented and intelligent witches in Europe but she had never sought power or prestige. For years, she had administrated the school in Albus Dumbledore’s shadow, while he had reaped the glory. And even now that she was the official Headmistress, she remained matter-of-fact, modest, and focused entirely on the welfare of the school and its students.

Even more than the circular office, Minerva’s private quarters reflected her personality. Instead of paintings and portraits, rugs from various countries hung on the walls and a large part of the wall was covered with bookshelves. The plain seating group with a small table, two armchairs and a sofa, all covered by green velour, was located in front of the fireplace. The table was covered by a Scottish tartan tablecloth with bright green and red colors, matching the green sofa and the brown furniture.

Minerva once had told Hermione about the so called Viriditas – the green power –, after Hermione had mentioned her noticeable favor to the color Green. A German witch by the name of Hildegard von Bingen, who Minerva seemed to highly value, had already assumed in the 12th century that Viriditas would be the basic power of nature, inherent in everything inhabiting the earth. Humans, animals, plants, minerals – they all needed Viriditas to exist, and Minerva had been surprised to find that principle in her Transfiguration research, too.

“The wizard from Norway will need to do some more research then,” Hermione stated, still skeptical.

“The man also did some research on love potions, by the way,” Minerva said with a smile. “Maybe that would be of interest for your Department of Mysteries.”

“I thought you considered that project superfluous.” Hermione couldn’t hold back the sharp remark.

“Yes, that’s true.” Minerva’s eyes flashed challengingly. “The word love potion is already wrong. This potion doesn’t cause any love, but an artificial kind of obsession. How do you want to solve the
real mystery with something like that?”

“At least, we’ve already invented more than 20 different kinds of love potion,” Hermione countered, not without pride.

“Obsession potions,” Minerva corrected, unimpressed.

To Hermione’s irritation, she didn’t really have any powerful arguments to contradict her. The Room of Love existed for 50 years by now, and in spite of the development of countless new potions, the employed wizards and witches hadn’t come closer to solving the mystery one bit. “So you’re convinced that true love can’t be evoked artificially?” she asked, not ready to give in yet.

“Exactly.” The wine had brought some color into the Headmistress’s face, and Hermione found it suited her quite well. The luminous fabric of her blouse accentuated her green eyes and her features looked more relaxed and softer than usual. As often the case on private occasions, she had taken off her glasses, and all of a sudden it was easy for Hermione to imagine why Minerva’s animagus was a cat. A proud, elegant creature which appreciated its own independence as much as some leisure hours in front of the fireplace.

“Let’s assume for a moment, you’re right,” Hermione said, determined to know more about the witch who used to occupy her mind so often. “How about your experiences?”

“My experiences are hardly adapted for a discussion like this,” Minerva responded with a smile.


“Neither one nor the other.” Minerva sipped at her wine, apparently thinking of something she didn’t want to share with Hermione. “But they were impressive enough to decide that I don’t wish to repeat this experience again.”

Hermione went silent, involuntarily thinking of the conversation she had had with Pomona Sprout a while ago. Her former professor of Herbology had had an appointment at the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes and Hermione had happened to meet her in the elevator. She had been genuinely happy to see her former teacher and had invited her to her office for a cup of tea. Since Pomona Sprout liked to chat, she had sat in Hermione’s office for almost two hours, which had completely ruined Hermione’s schedule for the rest of the day.

When Pomona had shared some stories from her own school days, Hermione had taken the chance to ask some questions about Minerva McGonagall. After all, the two women had been schoolmates and were still friends. Pomona had told Hermione in strict confidence that at a very young age Minerva had been engaged to a handsome Muggle. “But she left him before they got married, because she had decided to live her life in the magical world,” Pomona had explained. “Minerva was devastated back then, for she had loved Dougal McGregor very much. But she knew how much her own mother had suffered her whole life from hiding her real identity as a witch.”

Pomona had been so touched that she had to conjure up a handkerchief. “Minerva couldn’t even tell Dougal why she had to leave him”, she had continued after blowing her nose. “Only years later, after she had learned about his death, did she agree to marry her former boss at the ministry, who had long since proposed. Unfortunately, the marriage was much too short, because Minerva’s husband died in an accident after only a few years.”

Hermione had been horrified by Pomona’s information, but had promised not to tell anybody about their conversation. “It sounds like a painful experience,” she said, as if she didn’t know what Minerva was talking about. “Love is supposed to be a joyful experience, though, isn’t it?”
“Yes.” Minerva gave her wand a flick, refilling Hermione’s wine glass. “But everything comes at a price,” she added, closing the matter.

But Hermione wasn’t ready to let the issue go. “So you consider it wrong getting involved with a person again?” she probed.

“That’s right.” Minerva leant back on her sofa, apparently unwilling to reveal more of herself. “But from your undertone I infer that you have a different attitude?”

“I think so.” Hermione took a sip of her wine, hoping it would give her some courage. “But I’m not very experienced.”

“Who piqued your interest the very first time, if I may ask?” Minerva folded her hands, looking at Hermione attentively.

Hermione felt her face heating up. “Gilderoy Lockhart,” she muttered indistinctly. “It was a mistake, I know,” she added quickly when Minerva’s eyes widened in disbelief. “I noticed that rather fast.”

Minerva made a chuckling noise. “And then?” she asked, visibly amused.

“Then…” Hermione deliberately skipped her Tranfiguration professor. “Then Viktor Krum kissed me.”

“Oh yeah, the Quidditch player from Durmstrang.” Minerva nodded knowingly. “I remember the Yule Ball during the Triwizard Tournament.”

“I wasn’t in love with him.” Hermione didn’t know why it seemed important to clarify that. “But I felt flattered that he was interested in me of all people. So many girls and boys were after him, but he didn’t seem to care. I’m sure most people underestimate him. He’s a profound person, and we still write every once in a while.”

“Really?” Minerva raised her eyebrows in surprise. “That’s good to hear. Krum was already under a lot of pressure, even at his young age.”

“He’s doing well now, as far as I know.” Minerva opened her handbag and pulled out a letter Viktor had sent her just a few days ago. “That’s him and his wife.” She got up and sat down on the sofa next to Minerva in order to show her the pictures Viktor had added to his letter. “He married a Bulgarian and seems to be very happy with her.”

“It’s always nice to see people growing, don’t you think?” Minerva was obviously happy for Viktor, though she had hardly known him. “He seemed to have freed himself from the high expectations.”

“Yes, I think you’re right.” Hermione put the pictures back into her handbag. “And then came Ron,” she said pensively. “Well, I already liked Ron before I met Viktor Krum, but he was either too stupid or too stubborn to notice it.”

“I’m afraid it was noticeable for everyone except Mr. Weasley,” Minerva said dryly. “How are things with him, by the way?” She moved away a little to have a better view at Hermione’s face. “Rose seemed to be more relaxed in second year, which makes me hope that you’re better as well?”

“Yes, things are indeed better between Ron and me…” Hermione hesitated, unsure how much she wanted to tell Minerva. Over the last months, she had thought so much about her closest relationships with people that it seemed difficult to summarize this in just a few words. She had realized how much energy she usually got from the friendships in her life, with Ginny for instance, or with Harry. The hours with Minerva had also become a source of energy that brightened her days.
Maybe this was more than one could expect from life. Maybe it would be enough when she didn’t fight as much with Ron as before. She still loved him in a way, even though the passion between them had vanished. How someone could see their purpose in life in selling magical jokes would always be beyond her, but it was fruitless wanting to change him all the time. That’s who he was, and she needed to accept it.

“I’m afraid I maybe want too much from life,” Hermione confessed quietly. “I have achieved so much, I should feel rich…” She let the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

“But?”

“But sometimes I wonder where the passion is in my life.” Hermione suppressed a sigh. “The fire. The burning. Isn’t that why we’re alive?”

“There are so many ways to burn,” Minerva said warmly, putting her hand on Hermione’s and squeezing it. “And so many different types of passion and of love. If you were as old as I am, you would be more at peace with life.”

Hermione looked up into her green eyes that, despite the wise remark, looked very young all of a sudden. She looked at the intelligent face with the high cheekbones and pale lips that seemed so much fuller when Minerva was relaxed. And suddenly, with hammering clarity, she realized that Minerva was wrong.

It wasn’t enough at all. She wanted more. But she didn’t want more from Ron, she wanted more from Minerva. She wanted to discuss more, philosophize more, argue more, cry more and laugh more with her. She wanted to give her, whose happy moments in life had been so rare, the feeling of happiness and bliss. She wanted to know how Minerva was when she gave up her restraint and when the fire constantly smoldering under the surface broke free. She wanted to know how it was when Minerva’s body moved tremblingly towards ecstasy with another one. She wanted to be this other body. She wanted to be the soul walking next to her and the person who filled her with joy.

Something in her gaze must have betrayed her, because Minerva averted her face and let go of Hermione’s hand. “It’s getting late,” she said softly. “And we both have to rise early tomorrow morning.”

It took a while, until Hermione’s feet started to obey and she could get up. Without another word, she threw on her travelling coat, which had taken on the biting smell of the fire by now. “Thank you for the nice evening,” she said stiffly and it seemed to her that Minerva hugged her just a little bit too long at the door.

“I’ll see you next Wednesday?” she whispered into Hermione’s ear. “Good night, my dear, and be safe.”
Chapter 5

Hermione had just arrived home, when she got an owl from the ministry that there had been a major attack on guests of a hotel in Oxford. Several people had died and more than forty people had been injured and had been sent to various hospitals. The assassination bore the same hallmarks as the previous attacks, and Hermione immediately summoned critical employees to a crisis meeting at the ministry. She also called a press conference for the following morning.

In a fiery speech, Hermione condemned every kind of violence and called on the public to show civil courage. “Our task force is working night and day by now, in order to stop these devious assaults,” she told the *Daily Prophet* afterwards. “We will tighten the security precautions and send a clear signal against every kind of discrimination and violence.”

The very same day, she met Harry and the other heads of department to discuss the next steps with them. “There’s good news, too,” Harry reported at the meeting. “Lucius Malfoy agreed to work with us.” He showed Hermione a parchment signed by Malfoy. “It’s not easy with him, for he has lost part of his hearing ability, but he could give us useful information. I’m sure we’ll know more by the end of the week.”

Hermione nodded tiredly. She had been up the entire night and longed for a brief moment to close her eyes. “Everything points to the fact that there are several nests but only a few string-pullers,” she said thoughtfully. “What happened to the lead in Eastern Europe?”

“Nothing.” Susan Bones, who had been working at the Department of International Magical Cooperation for several months, shook her reddish shock of hair. “We’re sure by now that there’s no danger there. The principal perpetrators seem to come from Great Britain.”

After Hermione had declared the meeting closed, Harry stayed back at the conference room, putting a worried hand on her shoulder. “You should rest for a while,” he said frowning. “You look like shit.”

Hermione smiled bravely. “I’m going to pick up Hugo from primary school, and then have a lie-down for a moment. As soon as Ron comes home, I’ll come back and talk to Katie Bell.”

It wasn’t easy for Hermione to ignore all the memos that had piled up on her desk, but she knew she needed a moment for herself, otherwise she would lose track. After all, the potion that allowed witches to get along without sleep hadn’t yet been invented.

To Hermione’s relief, Hugo wanted to bring a friend along, which meant that she could lie down on the sofa in the living room, while Hugo and his friend played in his room. Danny brewed a special
potion for Hermione, and when Ron came home she already felt a lot fresher. “It will be late again,” she informed him, kissing his cheek. “I have no idea when I’ll be home.”

He muttered something like, “Can’t you find another job?” but she didn’t hear the rest of his sentence. After her arrival at the ministry she immediately started to work on the memos on her desk and called for Katie Bell. They decided that Hermione would give speeches in four different Quidditch stadiums. Katie Bell was convinced it wouldn’t take her more than four weeks to prepare the events and assured Hermione she could take matters in her hands.

Hermione felt significantly better after the meeting. Even though she knew that her ideas weren’t more than a drop in the bucket, it felt good to set an example. Besides, the task force’s work was excellent and would provide results very soon.

It was after 11 o’clock when Hermione finally locked her office door. At home she went straight to bed, and in her dreams the sight of the hotel wreckage mingled with the arrogant face of Lucius Malfoy, Harry’s comforting hand on her shoulder, and Minerva McGonagall’s green eyes.

* * *

Within a few days, Harry’s task force had a breakthrough: The Auror Headquarters arrested seven people, among others the former Death Eaters Thorfinn Rowle and Walden Macnair. Nevertheless, the central source hadn’t been tracked down yet, and Hermione prepared for a long autumn.

Katie Bell’s optimistic prognosis notwithstanding, she hadn’t been able to coordinate Hermione’s full schedule with the availability of the Quidditch stadiums at such short-term notice so that the four events eventually had to be postponed to November.

Despite the current events, Hermione didn’t stop visiting Hogwarts’s Headmistress every Wednesday. Since their meeting at the beginning of September Minerva had acted more reserved towards her, and sometimes Hermione almost felt as if Minerva feared her in a way. But in the course of time, their usual familiarity came back and the bond between them continued to grow and blossom.

Even though Hermione enjoyed these visits more than anything else in the week, she couldn’t be as open with Minerva as she had been before. She made sure not to tell her everything that was going on in her head anymore since some of these things were simply too confusing. Only at night, when she lay in her bed and couldn’t sleep, she asked herself why she felt so drawn to Minerva. Why wasn’t it enough anymore to have animated discussions with her? Why did she feel the need to touch her? Minerva was a woman, not to mention decades older than she was. What was all this about? And why didn’t it go away?

Hermione tried to tell herself that her ‘moods’, as she called them to herself, had probably to do with her current life crisis. Things weren’t going well with Ron after all, and Hermione was heading to 40. No wonder she was stumbling into a midlife crisis.

To her dismay, the feelings didn’t decrease though, but seemed to grow even stronger. Eventually, they were so difficult to ignore that Hermione seriously considered breaking off contact with
Minerva. Only the fact that the meetings with Minerva were still her strongest source of energy, carrying her through the straining weeks, prevented her from doing so. She just couldn’t break down right now, and she knew she would, if she cancelled her meetings with Minerva.

Unfortunately, Hermione’s displeasure also affected her relationship with Ron, which started to get worse again. Hermione was well aware that it wasn’t Ron’s fault. Of course, he didn’t put up with her nagging, shouted back, and eventually they were tangled up in the same fights as ever.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” Ginny had asked her after they had spent a Saturday together with their families. “Something’s bothering you?”

Hermione had started crying on the spot, but Ginny had just taken her in her arms and they had agreed to spend an evening without their children and husbands as soon as possible to be able to really talk.

First though, Hermione had to complete her planned speeches in the Quidditch stadiums. The year was coming to an end and when she had given her first two speeches in Manchester and Cambridge, it had already been snowing. Nevertheless, both stadiums had been crowded, and Hermione’s speeches were well received by both the audience and the press.

Now only the two events in London and in Leeds were left, then the project would be finished. At least the sun was shining for a change when Hermione apparated in front of London’s Quidditch stadium, accompanied by four aurors. The people in front of the entrance respectfully made way for the aurors who tried to cut their way through the crowd for Hermione. Behind the gates she almost bumped into Luna Lovegood who was waiting for her husband Rolf Scamander. “If I were you, I’d rather spend some time in the Caribbean right now,” she said, firmly hugging Hermione. “You look exhausted.”

Hermione couldn’t agree more, a vacation in the Caribbean sounded like heaven. “You didn’t bring any crumble-horned snorkacks, did you?” she asked skeptically, pointing at the brightly pink handbag at Luna’s arm. “I don’t want them to interrupt my speech.”

“Oh course not.” Luna shook her blond curls. “But there’s something in the air today. So I brought some blibbering anarchmoths, just in case. They’re buzzing in the air, invisible, spreading a peaceful atmosphere.”

“That sounds a lot better.” Hermione nodded distractedly at her aurors who impatiently pointed at the V.I.P. box. So she cut her way through the crowd, shaking hands here and there, and occasionally reacted to cheers from the audience.

When she finally took her seat in the V.I.P. box, the moderator had already started to announce the items on the program. Hermione’s speech would open the event, then London’s local Quidditch team would show some of their stunts, and in the end a popular band would perform, which Katie Bell had hired as a special crowd puller.

When the moderator stepped aside, making room for Hermione, she greeted the already cheerful crowd and brought her wand to her throat. "Sonorus”, she whispered and then addressed her audience. “Dear witches and wizards, I’m happy to see so many people here, braving the cold weather…”

Her voice broke when suddenly a green light flashed out of nowhere, followed by a red one. Cries filled the air, a tearing pain penetrated Hermione’s chest, somebody yanked her aside, and the box’s ceiling crashed down on her. Then everything went black.
When Hermione opened her eyes again she noticed immediately that something was wrong. It was unusually quiet and dark around her, and she could hear whispering voices nearby. Hermione blinked, but no matter how hard she tried, no light reached her eyes.

“She woke up,” an unfamiliar voice whispered, and a second later Hermione felt cool fingers at her wrist.

Hermione wanted to ask what had happened, but her voice produced nothing but a croak.

“Hermione, there has been an attack on you.”

Harry!

Hermione coughed, her chest feeling as if the convulsion tore it apart. The familiar scent of Ginny’s perfume penetrated her nostrils and she felt a slender body denting the mattress. “You’re not supposed to talk, Hermione,” Ginny advised, stroking her arm. “Ron is already on his way and will be here any minute.”

“You’re at St. Mungo’s,” Harry added. “Someone fired an *Avada Kedavra* curse on you, but our auror Steven Shunpike was able to repel the curse with a Shield Charm. Then several curses from various directions crashed against the stage, until the ceiling of the V.I.P. box collapsed.”

“The pain in your chest is probably caused by a Stunner,” Ginny explained softly. “That’s why you’ve been unconscious.” Hermione felt her hands nervously skimming over her blanket. “Twelve people were injured, but none of them severely.”

“W…” Hermione’s question drowned in a coughing attack.

“She wants to know what’s going on with her eyes,” Ginny said, presumably addressing a healer.

“Hello, minister.” The healer cleared her throat. “My name is Astoria Johnson, and I’m responsible for your recovery. Unfortunately, at this point, we can’t say for sure what has injured your eyesight.”

“Could black magic be involved?” asked Ginny who knew that Hermione would want to know that. If she was right, the chances of getting her eyesight back would be virtually zero.

Hermione heard something clink, then the noise of liquid being poured into a glass followed – probably some healing potion she had to drink. “Unfortunately, we actually can’t exclude that right now,” Astoria confirmed. “What we do know for sure is that we can exclude any physical cause, which means no shards of metal or anything similar.” Hermione heard her putting a foul-smelling liquid on the table next to her bed. “Mr. Slinkhard, head of our ward, will drop by later,” Astoria said to Hermione. “He will tell you the details and...”

The healer went silent when the door was torn open and quick steps headed for Hermione’s bed. “Hermione!” Ron’s panic-fuelled voice filled the room. “What happened?”
Ginny stood up, making room for Ron, and Harry explained to him what had happened at the Quidditch stadium. “Are the children with you?” Harry asked as Ron sat down on Hermione’s bed, awkwardly stroking her shoulder.

“I came as fast as possible and only have Hugo with me.” Ron was still catching his breath. “He’s waiting outside on the corridor. Luna’s taking care of him.”

“And Rose?”

“McGonagall promised to bring her here as quickly as possible.”

Hermione tried to turn her head towards Ron but gave up when a raging pain went through her. She had rarely felt so miserable in her entire life. Her chest hurt as if an express train had run over it, and she could neither communicate nor see what was going on around her.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea to let the kids see their mother like this,” Hermione heard Ginny’s soft voice next to her.

“No, it’s important for them,” Harry objected. “But we should let them in only for a few seconds.”

“What do you think Hermione?” Ron stroked her shoulder when Hermione tried to nod.

“We were able to arrest the assassins on-site, by the way,” Harry explained, stepping closer to her bed. “There were five of them, and we believe them to be at the core of the underground movement.”

Hermione nodded gratefully. This was good news after all.

“I need everyone to leave the room now!” Astoria’s strict voice interrupted the silence. “Mrs. Granger-Weasley needs to drink her elixir now and will need absolute rest afterwards. You can grab something to eat in our cafeteria and come back in two hours. The children will also be allowed to see her then.”

Ron gave Hermione a kiss on the forehead, then she heard him leave with Harry and Ginny.

“I need to bring your upper body to an upright position so that you’re able to drink.” Before Hermione could protest, the healer had pulled her shoulders up and Hermione’s curse turned into another coughing attack. “You will feel better when you wake up,” Astoria promised, while pouring a burning liquid into Hermione’s mouth. “The potion will ease your pain.”

* * *

When Hermione woke up again, the first thing she noticed was that the piercing pain in her chest had subsided, and her head didn’t feel like anyone was cutting down trees in it either. Then she realized what had awoken her: there were loud voices on the corridor, arguing vigorously with each other. And one of the voices undoubtedly belonged to a very furious Minerva McGonagall.

“Your behavior is ineffable and irresponsible!” she heard Minerva shouting. “You know very well
there’s only a small time window in a case like this. And you tell me in all seriousness that you haven’t arranged a Prior Incantatem check yet?!”

“The minister was not the only one injured by the attack,” a male voice defended himself, at least as outraged as Minerva. “We have to take care of a lot of patients here, Professor McGonagall.”

“It’s very unfortunate that these poor people have fallen into your incompetent hands,” Minerva hissed back. “I insist I get immediate access to all wands involved in the assault. I’m sure Mr. Potter has provided them for you!”

“I’m not informed about…“

“But then get the information, for heaven’s sake, Mr. Slinkhard!”

Hermione heard hurried steps, quickly departing. Then it was quiet. Only the regular ticking of a clock was audible and Hermione touched her aching head with a sigh. She should have thought about Prior Incantatem herself, but she had felt too dazed when she had woken up the first time.

What would she do if she lost her eyesight forever? How would she adjust to live without her eyesight? How was she supposed to take care of her children? What would happen with her ministerial office? Hermione tried to suppress the rising panic inside of her but the darkness scared the hell out of her. Maybe she should close her eyes and pretend it was nightfall. She couldn’t do anything useful anyway right now.

Hermione had just closed her eyes when the door was torn open and she heard boots walking closer to her bed.

“Hermione…? Are you awake…?”

Hermione had never heard Minerva’s voice like this. It was hoarse and brittle and sounded as if she had cried. “Mrs. Johnson told me you’re not supposed to speak.” Hermione felt Minerva’s hand tremble as she put it on hers. “I’m going to carry out some tests, and I ask you to stay calm.” She squeezed Hermione’s hand. “Don’t move, all right?”

Hermione nodded mutely and sank deeper into her cushion. The presence of the Headmistress calmed her down more than she could say. Minerva would take care of everything, she was sure of it.

Hermione listened as Minerva’s steps moved further from her bed. ”Prior Incantato,” Minerva murmured and Hermione startled as the familiar hissing of the Avada Kedavra curse reached her ear. Shortly afterwards, the loud crack of the Confringo spell occurred, followed by the unpleasant sizzling of the Petrificus Totalus spell.

”Prior Incantato,” Minerva muttered again, and once more Hermione heard the sizzling and whipping of recently performed spells and curses. Minerva must have taken at least nine wands and it took her almost half an hour to examine them all.

“So much for black magic!” she scolded after the noise of the different curses had faded. “What an unreasonable accumulation of full-blown idiocy and incompetence!”

When she sat down on Hermione’s bed again she seemed to have calmed down a bit. “I found a Flagrate spell,” she explained to Hermione in a matter-of-fact voice. “I guess the assassins had intended to make the word ‘Mudblood’ appear on the ceiling of the V.I.P. box. But the spell must have missed the ceiling and penetrated your eyes instead.”
Mudblood...

Hermione felt something causing her to choke up, and suddenly she saw herself lying on the floor of Lucius Malfoy’s manor again. In front of her stood Bellatrix Lestrange – insane and beside herself with rage. “What else did you take?” she shouted. “What else have you got? Tell me the truth!” And with a butcherly satisfaction she burned the letters ‘Mudblood’ into her glowing arm. “What else did you take? What else? Answer me! Crucio! Flagrate!” Hermione convulsed in pain, crying and shaking. “Crucio!” She could hear Ron calling for her from the dungeon, but nobody came. “How did you get into my vault? Flagrate! Crucio! Answer me!”

“Hermione? … Hermione!” As if from afar, Minerva’s voice reached her ear. “What’s the matter with you?” Minerva had lifted her upper body, wrapping her arms around her with all her might. “Oh my God… What did they do to you?” she whispered, constantly caressing Hermione’s shaking, sweaty back.

Hermione’s lower arm glowed as if someone cut a hot knife into her skin. Even though she couldn’t see it, she knew that the old writing had become visible again.

Hermione felt Minerva suddenly stiffen in her arms. Then she sensed a jerky move, and she heard Minerva’s firm voice right next to her ear. ”Specialis revelio!”, she exclaimed in a thundering voice as if she wanted to cast out the devil from Hermione. ”Flagrate finite! Finite incantatem!”

The magic’s force threw Hermione back into her cushion, and for a brief moment she felt as if Bellatrix Lestrange’s Cruciatus curse had hit her again. Then there was silence.

Hermione’s body went limp and the burning of her lower arm faded. Then… suddenly… the veil lifted and something bright penetrated her eyes…

Light…

Hermione was too exhausted to move her limbs but her heart was beating wildly in her chest as the shadows before her eyes gradually started to lighten… contours appeared… and colors emerged…

She heard Minerva breathing heavily next to her, and when she turned her head she looked at Minerva’s shocked face. Her eyes were filled with tears and black strands of hair had loosened from their bun.

Hermione’s head and chest were still hurting, but she hardly noticed it when Minerva closed her arms around her again. All she could feel was Minerva’s hot face at her cheek and the warm, comforting hands on her back. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Minerva asked hoarsely. “The old curse had never been deactivated and had reinforced the new spell.“

“I…” Hermione swallowed when her voice struggled. “I didn’t… know… iiit… hhad to…bbe de…activated…”

“I’m not talking about the spell…” Minerva’s voice trembled alarmingly. “Why did you never tell me that you’ve been tortured?”

“I…” Hermione didn’t know what to say. Who wanted to hear what happened during the war? Everybody was busy with their own wounds and there seemed to be a collective, unspoken agreement in the wizarding world not to talk about these things. That’s how it had been for years, and Hermione had never questioned it.

“Who was it?” Minerva asked quiveringly.
“Bellatrix… Lestrange,” Hermione choked out.

For a brief moment she was afraid Minerva would explode, but the Headmistress remained sitting on the bed and didn’t utter a word. Eventually, she straightened her shoulders and brushed a strand of hair from Hermione’s sweaty face. “You should rest now, Hermione,” she said, trying hard to stay calm. “And your children want to see you. Rose is still in shock.”

Hermione nodded in obedience. She felt so utterly grateful to Minerva. That she had come. That she had taken care of her daughter. And that she had turned the hospital upside down to save her eyesight. But Hermione’s voice didn’t let her say all that. So with a touch of helplessness she kissed Minerva’s hot cheek and then loosened their embrace.

A knock made both women turn around and before Minerva could respond, Harry dashed into the room. “Do you have the wands, Professor?” he shouted out of breath. He stopped abruptly, when he noticed Hermione sitting upright in her bed with Minerva. “Hermione?” he asked confused, looking back and forth between the two women. Then his gaze landed on the wands at the other end of the room.

“Prior Incantatem?“, he asked with an arched eyebrow.

Minerva nodded and a shadow of unconcealed rage flickered over her face. “At least you thought of it, Potter.”

“Of course I did.” Harry nodded, visibly relieved. “And where’s Wilbert Slinkhard?“

“I had a little discussion with him.” Minerva stood up and went to Harry to greet him. “One could get the impression that no one here has ever been at Hogwarts before. I’ve seldom met so much stupidity mixed with so much stubbornness.”

“Which spell was it?” Harry looked at Hermione, scrutinizing her. “Are you really able to see again, or are you just pretending?”

“Aaaaalmmmost gggood,” Hermione coughed. Even though things were still a bit fuzzy around the edges, her sight got better every minute.

Minerva told Harry about her procedure, and he confirmed that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had found remains of the Flagrate spell in the destroyed V.I.P. box. Harry paused, startled, when his gaze fell on Hermione’s reddened wrist. “Is that…“

Minerva nodded and looked quite pale all of a sudden. And then something happened Hermione had never seen before: Harry Potter gathered Minerva McGonagall into his arms.

They still stood that way when Ron entered the room with Rose and Hugo. Like Harry, Ron stopped abruptly when he saw Hermione sitting on her bed, smiling weakly at him. He cast a quizzical look at Harry who still held Minerva in his arms. “Are you able to see again, Hermione?” Ron exclaimed, turning towards her again.

“Yes…“ Hermione promptly got a new coughing attack. Obviously the effect of the healing potion seemed to cease. “I’mmm mmmuch… bbetterr nnow.”

Rose and Hugo looked at their mother with wide eyes and only stepped closer when Hermione waved them nearer. “I nnneed tto sstay here ffor a wwwwhile,” she croaked, interrupted by coughing. “Bbut yyou ddon’t nnneed… tto wwwworry… abbbbout mme…” She gave up eventually and took both children in her arms.
Rose and Hugo seemed to be extremely relieved that their mother was apparently better than they had been told. They weren’t allowed to stay long though, because Astoria Johnson threw out all visitors as soon as she had come back into the room. Hermione had hardly time to thank Minerva again for her help, then everybody had to leave to let Hermione rest. Indeed, she felt so exhausted that she could hardly keep her eyes open when Astoria forced her to drink another glass of the potion, and she immediately dropped off into a long, healing sleep.
Wilbert Slinkhard didn’t dare to show his face in Hermione’s room for two days, but eventually he couldn’t delay his visit any longer. In the afternoon of November 29th the head of ward knocked distinctly on Hermione’s door, entering with casualness as if he had resolved the *Flagrate* spell single-handedly.

He had barely shaken her hand when he started to pattering on with advice about caring for herself; she only endured it out of pure politeness. Hermione had gotten more than enough well-meaning tips from her friends – every single visitor seemed to find it necessary to remind her not to leave St. Mungo’s too soon and to cure her injuries completely. After a few days Hermione had enough of all the well-intended advice and projected magical writing on the door of her hospital room: *Advice prohibited!*

The unmistakable instruction didn’t fail to have the desired effect because Hermione’s visitors were a lot more cautious afterwards. Only the numerous get well cards, whose writers couldn’t see the writing on Hermione’s door, still contained friendly tips which Hermione deliberately skipped. The number of people wanting to pay her a visit was so huge that Ginny had volunteered to coordinate the visit requests. She kept a strict waiting list and even the house elf, Danny, had to add himself to Ginny’s list for a visit.

From the start, Ginny limited work-related courtesy visits to an unavoidable minimum while friends like Luna, Neville, or the entire Weasley family didn’t need to wait long for their visitor’s permit. Molly had come the day of Hermione was admitted with a home-made cake, and Arthur had given her an old muggle alarm clock, repaired by his own hands, which buzzed loudly when it was time for Hermione to take the next healing potion.

Ron dropped by every day with their two children, and Hermione was grateful he had taken some days off without complaining. Minerva also visited her daily, and Ginny arched an eyebrow in surprise when the Headmistress patiently added her name to the list every single evening.

“Is there anything I should know?” she asked, handing Hermione the latest visiting list. “McGonagall usually cancels a lot of appointments because she’s too busy.”

Hermione, who had her normal voice back by now, muttered something about ‘friendship’ but Ginny wasn’t fooled so easily. “The day you were admitted to St. Mungo’s McGonagall seemed to have completely lost it,” she informed Hermione, pushing a chair up to the bed. “I’ve never seen her like that… well, except maybe when… when we all thought Harry was dead…” Ginny shuddered at the memory. “But you know her. She’d barely arrived when she already started barking orders at the staff. I almost felt sorry for them.”
“Thank God she did, otherwise I’d be blind by now.” Hermione hadn’t forgotten that she and Ginny had agreed on a private talk, but all of a sudden it didn’t feel like such a good idea anymore. “An old curse that had still been inside of me seemed to have reinforced the effect of the Flagrate spell. One more hour, and my loss of sight would have been irreversible.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying McGonagall wasn’t amazing, but…“ Ginny leant forward to have a better look at Hermione. “Is she in love with you?”

“What?!“ Hermione’s face turned so red it matched the cherry tomatoes on her table. “What gave you that idea?”

“I don’t know…“ Ginny absent-mindedly rubbed her chin. “The way she looks at you… the way you’re talking to each other…“

“How do we talk to each other?“

“Well… like people who lo…, who feel very close to each other.”

Hermione pointedly shrugged her shoulders, staring at her blanket. ‘Feeling very close to each other…’ Minerva would probably choose these words, too. Only that it wasn’t the whole truth, at least not as far Hermione was concerned.

“Oh my,“ Ginny said, watching Hermione. “That’s what you wanted to talk to me about, right?“

Hermione pulled the blanket over her head in a comical gesture. “Everything is so confusing,“ she said through the blanket. “I don’t understand what’s wrong with me.” She kicked away the blanket so that her face appeared again. “You’re my best friend, Ginny. Do you think I’m having a midlife crisis?”

“No idea.“ Ginny wrinkled her forehead, pondering Hermione’s question. “You’re different somehow. That’s for sure. Sometimes you’re bubbling over with joy, sometimes you’re as gloomy as an old whale.”

“That sounds like a midlife crisis,“ Hermione stated, relieved.

“Or you’re in love,“ Ginny grinned.

Hermione glanced at her, a haunted look on her face. “Maybe I’m just looking for an easy way out of my relationship with Ron? Maybe I’m just avoiding arguing with him?”

“Well, if there’s anything your relationship doesn’t need, it’s more arguing,” Ginny countered dryly.

“But…“ Hermione took a deep breath. “Minerva is a woman.“

“Undoubtedly.“

“And she’s…“

“… old?“

“Yes,“ Hermione couldn’t help laughing. “That’s not normal. Something about me isn’t normal.”

“Honestly, Hermione,” Ginny looked at her sternly. “You’ve never been normal. So that doesn’t mean anything at all.”

“Is that supposed to reassure me?“
“No, it was a compliment.” Ginny patted Hermione’s elbow. “If you ask me, I wouldn’t bother with all these intellectual considerations. Either you feel something, or you don’t.”

“I feel something,” Hermione confessed dejectedly.

“That’s what I thought.” Ginny smiled when Hermione stared at her, dumbfounded. “Like you said, you’re my best friend and I notice when something’s bothering you.”

“What should I do now?” Hermione nervously ran her fingers through her bushy hair. It was even more difficult to brush it now that she had to lie down so much. “I don’t even know what it is exactly…. Maybe I’m just getting obsessed with this and…”

“Then find it out,” Ginny said encouragingly.

Hermione snorted disapprovingly. “Just like that? Maybe you’ve noticed that I’m married. To your brother, to be exact. And then there are the kids and everything…”

“That’s true,” Ginny agreed. “You should take care of that first.”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s completely unnecessary to drive everybody crazy. Minerva doesn’t reciprocate it anyway.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Ginny said calmly.

“Yes, I am sure of that.” Hermione already regretted to have started this conversation. “And apart from that, she made it very clear that she doesn’t want to get involved ever again.”

Hermione looked up in surprise when Ginny laughed out loud. “How sweet,” she said, grinning widely. “That really worked out well.”

“That’s not funny.” Hermione narrowed her eyes. “You can’t deny that a friendship is something very different from a… well… relationship. And that’s what she doesn’t want.”

“You talked about that with her?”

“Well, not exactly.” Hermione averted Ginny’s gaze. “More like… indirectly.”

“You should talk to her about it, Hermione.” Ginny was serious again. “At least then you would know where you stand with her.”

“And Ron? And the kids?”

“You shouldn’t mix that up.” Ginny took two cherry tomatoes, putting them into her mouth. “If you’re unhappy with Ron, divorce him, no matter what else is or is not going on in your life. And if you’re happy with him, stay. But then stop meeting McGonagall.”

Hermione felt sick all of a sudden. She couldn’t imagine not seeing Minerva again. But she couldn’t imagine destroying her family either.

“First, you need to make a decision, Hermione,” Ginny advised her, looking quite a bit like her mother. “And then you can go ahead finding out what McGonagall wants.”

“And the children?”

“Children aren’t happy if their parents aren’t happy.”
Even though the conversation with Ginny had been difficult, Hermione felt better afterwards. None of her problems had been solved yet, but it had been good to say the facts out loud. It had helped to disentangle the knots in Hermione’s head, and she had finally time to figure things out at St. Mungo’s.

Ginny had been right not to mix her marriage with her friendship to Minerva. Hermione didn’t do anyone any good if she delayed her decision even further. What was she waiting for? The relationship with Ron had reached the end of the line, no matter how difficult it was to admit it to herself. She and Ron weren’t good for each other anymore, and it didn’t only affect their souls, but their children’s as well.

The hospital was the worst place to talk to Ron about her decision, and Hermione didn’t want to ruin Christmas for the family either. But she would talk to Ron before New Year’s Eve. The children would still be on vacation then so that Hermione could be there for them.

Two and a half weeks after her admission Hermione was finally released from St. Mungo’s, but she was supposed to stay at home for one more week. The aftereffects of the Stunner had been more persistent than she had assumed; Hermione couldn’t imagine how Minerva had survived four Stunners to her chest during the 2nd wizarding war.

Unfortunately, Hermione bickered so often with Ron during her week home that she wished she could have gone to work instead. At least she was able to pull herself together during the Christmas days, but as soon as the tree was undecorated, she asked Ron for a one-on-one. “We both tried really hard, Ron,” she said after she had told him her decision. “But I can’t do it any longer. I’m done.”

“And the kids?” Ron paced the living room with long strides, while Hermione was sitting rigidly on the sofa. “Do you want our children to have divorced parents?”

“Ron…” Hermione blew her nose into a crumpled-up handkerchief. “I’ve put it off again and again. But I’ve reached a point where I have to take action.”

“You’re making this pretty easy for yourself,” he shouted angrily. “So I don’t have any say in this, do I? I haven’t reached that point yet! I’m still ready to fight for us!”

“I’m tired, Ron.” Hermione shook her head, resigned. “I don’t want to fight anymore. We’ve both fought enough.”

“Just stop talking about ‘us’!” Ron cried furiously. “I’m not the one who refuses to give us another chance!”

Hermione opened her mouth to object, but closed it again. There was no use fighting about that too now. “I will move out as soon as I’ve found something,” she said instead. “If you agree I suggest that we share equal custody of the children. Hugo will go to Hogwarts this year, which will make things easier.”
Ron wasn’t listening to her. “Am I allowed to think about this first?” he asked sharply. “You may have planned this all out ahead of time, but for me it is pretty new.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” Hermione got up and kept standing in the doorway for a while, feeling helpless. She would have liked to give Ron a hug, like she usually had done when he wasn’t well. But those times were over. “Believe me, it’s better for you, too,” she said softly. “Someday you will find somebody else and be happy again and …”

“Have you completely lost your mind?” Ron threw a plate on the floor, which, like a miracle, didn’t shatter. “Stop telling me what’s good for me, okay?!” He walked towards her, planting himself in front of her. “This is your decision and your responsibility, and what I’m doing, is none of your business anymore!”

She looked down, ashamed. It had been stupid to tell him that. She was indeed convinced that their separation would be better for Ron too, and she was sure that he wouldn’t stay alone for long. But it had been inappropriate to share that with him. “I’m going to bed now,” she said quietly. “We’ll continue our talk tomorrow.”
Here’s the last chapter of my little story. Writing is kind of a lonely process; you’re just there by yourself, trying to turn the ideas in your head into reasonable words and sentences. You usually have no idea what readers might think about your story, so I always appreciate comments. Thank you very much for taking the time to read this!

Again, endless thanks to my two wonderful beta readers HeySlowpoke and Ronam! You’re amazing!!!

Chapter 7

Even more than Rose, Hugo was devastated about the separation of his parents. The children’s suffering tore Hermione’s heart apart, but she knew that in the long run, it was the right decision. It would be better for her children to grow up in a peaceful atmosphere, and the only thing she could do right now was be there for them as best she could.

Harry offered Hermione his house at Grimmauld Place, just for the moment, but she declined with thanks. She rather wanted to stay close to her children, and luckily a house in Magnolias Avenue became available, less than 10 minutes by foot from their old house. That way her kids could go back and forth between the two houses if they wanted to.

While organizing her new life and taking care of her children took all her strength, things slowed down noticeably at work. The task force had arrested several more wizards and witches who had been connected to previous assaults. The core of the movement seemed to have been finally destroyed so that Hermione was able to terminate the task force.

Finally, working at the ministry felt normal again; nevertheless, Hermione insisted on continuing the campaign. She also made up for the cancelled events at the Quidditch stadiums in London and Leeds because she wanted to make clear that she wouldn’t let violence intimidate her. At both events, people gave her standing ovations.

“It’s more than just appreciation of your great achievements and speech, Hermione,” beamed Molly, who had come to Leeds with Arthur to hear Hermione’s speech. “Most people seem to support having a muggleborn, female minister for magic.” She gave Hermione a wet kiss on the cheek. “The world’s making progress, even though there will always be some narrow-minded idiots.”

Not only at Hermione’s workplace but also in her personal life, things calmed down bit by bit. Ginny was a great help to Hermione, while Harry was taking good care of Ron. Their friends’ help made the changes a lot easier to deal with, and at the end of April Hermione’s life finally felt kind of normal again. The remaining symptoms of the attack had faded; Hugo looked forward to his first year at Hogwarts; and Rose also seemed to stabilize mentally and emotionally.

It was the perfect time to re-establish her meetings with Minerva that Hermione had suspended since her admission to the hospital. But Hermione avoided contacting the Headmistress, especially after
their accidental meeting at the ministry’s Atrium at the end of February. To her great dismay, Hermione had realized that her feelings for Minerva hadn’t changed at all, and she had no idea what to do about it.

How could she continue her friendship with Minerva without telling her about her feelings? Ginny also had told her that it was more than time to talk to Minerva. But wouldn’t that mean the end of their friendship? Wasn’t it wiser to spare this painful experience and just pretend to be busy? On the other hand, Hermione knew that Minerva waited for a sign from her and it wasn’t fair not to contact her. Since their accidental meeting in February the Headmistress had sent her an owl three times, inviting her to Hogwarts, but Hermione had declined every time, pretending to be swamped with work.

When Hugo received his Hogwarts letter Hermione eventually couldn’t delay the contact any further and sent an owl with two letters to Minerva – in the first one she applied for Hugo’s admission to Hogwarts, and in the second one she invited Minerva to dinner at her new home. The owl came back with a letter immediately, containing a confirmation of both Hugo’s admission to Hogwarts and the dinner invitation at Hermione’s home the following Wednesday.

Before Hermione knew it Wednesday evening was there and Danny was already bustling around in the kitchen to cook a delicious meal that was supposed to match up to the food at Hogwarts. Judging by the delicate smell in the house, he would probably succeed.

While Danny was busy in the kitchen Hermione stood in front of her closet wondering what she should wear. Something classic or something special? Something smart or something feminine? Apart from these really important questions, she racked her brain what she was supposed to talk about with Minerva – except the one thing she didn’t want to talk about.

Hermione felt so petrified that she wasn’t ready when Minerva knocked at the front door. “Danny, would you please let Professor McGonagall in and lead her to the living room?” Hermione called from the bathroom. “I’ll be down in a minute!” With lightning speed, she slipped into a red dress with spaghetti straps. Minerva had said once that Red would suit her, right?

Still a little out of breath but with perfect make-up Hermione appeared in the living room shortly afterwards. Entering the room, she already saw Minerva’s tall figure standing at the window and gazing into the blossoming back garden. Her skin was more tanned than usual – apparently, she had spent some days in the sun. It suited her well, and her dark blouse even emphasized her tanned skin.

Hermione stopped abruptly when Minerva turned around and smiled at her. Every word she had planned to say immediately fell into a big black hole.

“Hermione.” Minerva walked towards her and gave her a warm hug. “You’re looking good,” she stated, smiling. “Much better than the last time I saw you.”

“Thank you,” Hermione cleared her throat, taking a step back. “I’m indeed feeling better.”

Since she couldn’t think of another contribution to their conversation, she led Minerva to the dining room where Danny had already served dinner. Minerva blinked happily when she saw what he had done. A fish soup (Cullen Skink) would be the appetizer, the main meal would be Rumbledethumps, and he had created some Cranachan for dessert – a typical Scottish menu.

At dinner Hermione started to fire questions at Minerva in order to prevent her from asking questions herself. “How did you manage to get rid of Professor Binns?” she asked, serving a large portion of Rumbledethumps to Minerva. Afterwards she placed a significantly smaller portion on her own plate, hoping she would be able to get down a bite at all. “I thought he would still teach History of Magic
in a thousand years.”

“Oh, he’s still teaching.” Minerva appreciatively closed her eyes when she took a first bite of the Rumbledethumps. “Of course, I couldn’t pension the poor man off. He’s teaching at Durmstrang now, where they seemed to be quite pleased with him.”

“Makes me wonder who taught the subject before.” Hermione suppressed a giggle.

Minerva smiled but didn’t comment on Hermione’s remark. “Rose seems to be a bit better, by the way,” she changed the subject. “I was really worried about her after the Christmas holidays. But she seems to have recovered from that.”

“That’s really good to hear.” Hermione hadn’t been sure whether Rose had just pulled herself together in her letters. “I’m glad Ron has agreed to joint custody. And my house isn’t far from our old one either,” she explained. “That makes it easier for the kids, even though it’s still difficult when Ron and I see each other. Fortunately, it’s important to him too that our children still have both of their parents.”

“Have you ever regretted your decision?”

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “There wasn’t any other way.”

After they had finished their dessert Hermione led Minerva into the garden. It was still bright and warm outside so that they didn’t have to pull on anything as they sat down on the old garden swing under the apple tree. Hermione had gotten a hold of it at a junk market a few weeks ago but she hadn’t had the opportunity to inaugurate it yet.

Hermione poured Minerva a glass of butterbeer and leaned back with a sigh when the swing slowly started to move. At this time of the day, the scent of the flowers was most intense, and Hermione inhaled deeply. It was almost completely silent now, only the buzzing of the bees and the rustling of the leaves were audible. “Will all the teachers be staying at Hogwarts next term?” Hermione asked, wondering who would teach Hugo starting in a few weeks.

“Hogwarts is doing really well,” Minerva responded with noticeable satisfaction. “For a while we had a high turnover rate of staff, but now everything looks quite stable. We only need a new Defense against the Dark Arts teacher – much to the chagrin of several Slytherin students who had a huge crush of Adalbert Redford.” She sighed, taking another sip of butterbeer.

“Hopefully Professor Redford didn’t have an accident or become the victim of a memory spell?” Hermione asked, half in earnest, half in jest.

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Hermione raised her wand, and a handful of plums fell from the plum tree near the hedge, landing directly in Hermione’s lap. She gave Minerva a plum and also took one herself. “Has it ever bothered you that students sometimes fall in love with their professors?” The plum tasted sugar-sweet.

Minerva savored her plum, before she responded. “It’s part of this job,” she said, taking another piece of fruit from Hermione’s lap. “Boarding school life isn’t easy for any child. The students are separated from their parents much too early and of course, as professors we offer them a projection surface. We’re as much a target of their rejection and scorn, as we’re a target of their wishes and needs. If one can’t deal with that, they shouldn’t become a teacher.”

Hearing Minerva talking about her students’ feelings so matter-of-factly made Hermione’s stomach
contract painfully. Didn’t it affect her that some people hated her with all their might, while others loved her passionately? “Haven’t you ever…,” she cleared her throat, “haven’t you ever been tempted to… respond to it?”

“No.” Minerva seemed to find the thought absurd. “The students need me to give them knowledge and guidance. That’s my job. An interest extending beyond that is utterly out of the question, which it should be.” Minerva’s eyes were following a butterfly settling down on the apple tree. It fluttered briefly, then folded its wings quickly, as if it didn’t want to reveal its beauty. “The students are still growing up, they depend on us not to abuse our role.”

Hermione threw a plum stone over the hedge to the neighbor’s garden. She knew their children collected them in order to plant a new tree. “But there’s a difference between feeling and acting,” she argued. “Teachers aren’t machines, and it’s only human to react differently to students. Every teacher probably likes some of them more and others less. You can’t stand some of the students, while others grow dear to your heart. Some of them may even disgust you, while you feel attracted to others. That’s just normal, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t deny that.” Minerva took another plum, and Hermione wondered if she deliberately avoided looking at her. “But it would be wrong to act on it.”

Hermione thought of all the professors, Severus Snape in particular, who had never tried to hide which students they liked and which ones they hated. Hermione knew in the bottom of her heart that Minerva had liked her from the start, maybe even more than other students – Ginny had told her that, and Ron had said it several times, too. But of course Minerva would never admit it to her.

It started to dawn eventually and Hermione took her wand again. “Incendio,” she whispered and torches inflamed at several spots in the garden. The bees had stopped flying from blossom to blossom, and instead of their buzzing the crackling of the torches’ flames was audible now. It was a wonderful atmosphere to dwell on one’s own thoughts and Hermione was so glad she could share this moment with Minerva. She wished she could capture it forever because maybe this would be the last evening she would spend with her.

For a long while, neither of them spoke, but Hermione knew she couldn’t delay the moment any longer. “When we started meeting on Wednesday evenings,” she said slowly, putting her butterbeer aside, “it was like a huge gift to me. Every visit gave me energy for the rest of the week and I never could wait for our next meeting…”

“Well, you’ve certainly intermitted them for a long time, considering.” There was a hint of accusation in Minerva’s voice and Hermione cast her eyes down. It was obvious she had hurt Minerva, although the older woman had never complained.

“I know.” Hermione ignored her pounding heart and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Minerva, but I needed time to think.”

“And have you had enough time now?” Minerva continued to look at the glowing torches. A mild breeze had sprung up and blew the flames in their direction.

“I think so.” Hermione swallowed hard. “And I think you know why I needed time…“

Minerva didn’t say anything but continued to stare at the flames. Only the quick rising and falling of her chest indicated that she had heard Hermione.

“I want more than this,” Hermione said quietly. “I want…“
“Hermione, I told you…” Minerva went silent, letting the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

“I know that.” Hermione’s own voice felt foreign to her. “That’s why I retreated.”

Minerva just sat there, not saying anything, and Hermione wondered what was going on in her head. Why didn’t she say anything? Why did she just sit there like a statue of Hogwarts?

“And what now?” Hermione asked when Minerva still didn’t stir.

Minerva shook her head. “What do you want me to say?”

What she wanted her to say? Was that all Minerva had to say on the matter? Didn’t she even care enough to talk to her? Hermione had imagined all kinds of horror scenarios, but she hadn’t thought Minerva wouldn’t react at all. Without looking at her again, Hermione got up and went to the house with quick steps. “That’s that then,” she muttered under her breath, shutting the door behind her. She would have liked to hit something but that had to wait until her guest had left the house.

The patio door opened and closed behind her. “Hermione…” She was pulled around on her shoulder and stared into Minerva’s shocked face.

“What?” Hermione tried to tear away.

Minerva let her go, but the expression in her eyes made Hermione stop. “Don’t walk away like that,” Minerva pleaded softly.

“There’s no other way.” Hermione dropped her gaze when the horror in Minerva’s face shook her to the core. But she had to be reasonable now. After so many years of misery with Ron she needed to take care of herself and couldn’t make herself unhappy again. “I can’t go on like this anymore,” she said in a softer voice. “I’m really sorry, Minerva.”

“Hermione…”

For a brief moment they both stood there like wax figures, then Minerva sank onto a chair and stared at the dining table, looking crestfallen. “I offered you my friendship,” she said without looking up. “Why can’t that be enough?”

Hermione sighed and sat down next to her. “How can we continue this friendship when our feelings are so different?” she asked quietly.

Minerva put her elbows on the table, burying her face in her hands. “That’s not what this is about.”

That wasn’t what this was about? What the hell did that mean?! It was exactly what this was about! Or wasn’t it? It took the words a while to sink into Hermione’s foggy mind. “Minerva…”

When she didn’t react, Hermione cautiously pulled Minerva’s hands from her face, forcing her to look at her. “Please talk to me,” she pleaded softly. “Then what is this about?”

It seemed to take all of Minerva’s will power to look at her and Hermione winced as she saw tears in the green eyes. “I’m not ready for that, Hermione.”

“Why not?”

“I’m old.” Minerva looked at her hands lying tremblingly in Hermione’s. “And I’m not so foolish to believe that…” She made a defensive gesture with her head when Hermione wanted to object. “You’re younger, Hermione. You only think of the stage of happiness, and rightly so. But believe
Hermione bit her lip. Why did Minerva anticipate the end of a relationship before it had even begun? Was this the reason why she never really opened up to people? “Don’t I deserve a chance?” she asked, almost inaudibly.

“You, my dear, deserve the best.” Minerva tenderly brushed Hermione’s cheek. “I’m too old for you. And I’m a woman. One day you’ll have enough of me and turn to somebody else. And that’s the right thing to do.”

Hermione felt anger rising inside her. Why did Minerva treat her like a 17-year-old girl? She wasn’t a child anymore! Yes, she had been a child when she had developed feelings for Minerva, but this was something entirely different, she felt it every day all over again. Nevertheless, the fact that she had never stopped caring for Minerva proved that her feelings weren’t just a fleeting phase. She had questioned them a thousand times and had always come to the same conclusion. “How can you say something like that!” she said, not trying to hide her hurt. “You have no idea what’s going on inside of me!”

“This is not about you, Hermione. I’m saying this because I know the world.” Minerva’s voice was firmer again, but she looked exhausted and worn out.

“You don’t know the world at all,” Hermione objected defiantly, withdrawing her hands from Minerva’s. “You’ve just had some bad experiences, and now you think that’s the way life is.”

Minerva smiled tiredly. “I have enough experience, believe me. It would be foolish of me, wanting to repeat that.”

“And what about what you’re doing to yourself now?” Hermione grabbed Minerva by the shoulders. “What about what you’re doing to me? Doesn’t that count at all?”

“Of course it counts.” Minerva flinched when Hermione came so close to her. “But it will go away.”

“No, it won’t.” Hermione’s brown eyes flashed. “You’re just telling yourself this because you’re afraid.” She took Minerva’s face in both of her hands. “Since when do you let fear dominate you? That’s not like you at all. You’re a Gryffindor…” And before Minerva could do anything, Hermione leant towards her and kissed her.

Hermione closed her eyes as colorful fireworks exploded in her head, not entirely different from a Stunner. She pulled her face away a few millimeters to get back to her senses, and then gently leant her forehead against Minerva’s. “Give me a chance,” she whispered, kissing the soft lips again. “Your fears are probably just ghosts from the past… Don’t let them control you… please Minerva…” And finally, as if awakening from a trance, Minerva kissed her back. Not cautiously and gently, but with the wild power of a Gryffindor lion.

And Hermione felt dizzy from her lips and her scent and her nearness. Nobody had ever kissed her like that. Her whole body was ablaze, but she was a Gryffindor too and before she knew it her left hand was on Minerva’s neck and her right one under Minerva’s blouse.

The intimate touch made Minerva draw back and she leant, shocked by herself, back in her chair. “Wait…” she whispered in a hoarse voice. “I need time… to think about this.”

“Of course.” Hermione nodded, trying to compose herself. She felt as if she had tasted the forbidden fruit and couldn’t help herself now. Everything in her wanted to touch Minerva, wanted to feel the soft lips again, the velvet skin… She knew she had to give Minerva the time she needed, but how
were they supposed to act as if there was only friendship between them now? “Can you tell me about your past experiences?” she asked quietly. “I want to understand.”

“There’s not much to understand.” Minerva smiled weakly, but didn’t protest when Hermione took her hands and kissed them.

“Did you love your husband?” Hermione lowered their hands but didn’t let go of them. “I read somewhere that you were married for three years,” she added quickly in order to keep her conversation with Pomona Sprout private.

“Yes… No… I mean…” Minerva hesitated. “I wouldn’t have married him if I had wanted anything from him.”

Hermione bit her lip to keep herself from making a lecturing comment. This was the weirdest reason to marry somebody she had ever heard in her life. “So you weren’t… attracted to him?”

“Well, it was… comfortable,” Minerva continued slowly. “It was good not to be alone anymore for a change. Doing things together. To belong. And we fit well together.” She absent-mindedly stroked the back of Hermione’s hands with her thumbs. “It didn’t last long, though. Of course it didn’t.”

Hermione gently squeezed her hands but regretted it immediately, when Minerva seemed to notice what she had been doing, withdrawing her hands. “How many times have you been in love?” she asked cautiously.

“Just once.” Minerva sighed, brushing her forehead. “Well, maybe twice now…” she muttered under her breath, averting her gaze quickly before Hermione could say anything. “He was a muggle, and I was really young and very much in love.” She smiled pensively. “We had a wonderful time together and wanted to get married. But I knew that I wouldn’t be able to suppress my magical powers for the rest of my life, like my mother had. So I left him.”

Hermione wiped a tear from her eye. She wished she could do something to make things better, but no time turner in the world could have spared Minerva that pain.

“It’s all right.” Minerva seemed to guess what was going on in Hermione. “It’s all water under the bridge now.”

“No, it’s not all right.” Hermione shook her head. She knew that this wasn’t only about a tragic love affair, but it was about loss and mourning. “You lost so many people in your life, Minerva. You survived three wars. I’m still trying to cope with the losses of one war, and I can’t imagine how it must be losing dear people over and over again.”

“Yes.” Minerva nodded. “Fate has made it difficult for me to love.”

“But you still do.” In fact, Hermione didn’t know many people who were so passionate about things as Minerva McGonagall.

“Yes, I still do.” A sigh escaped Minerva’s lips. “If there’s something I learned in life, it’s that you can’t be sure of anything. Things can change quickly, and a person you care for today can be dead tomorrow.”

“I know, Minerva, I know.” Hermione brushed a strand of hair from Minerva’s tanned face. “But that doesn’t mean you should not get involved again, on the contrary. It means we have to grasp our chances before it’s too late.”

“You’ve always been very convincing, Hermione Granger.” For the first time that evening Minerva
chuckled, and the familiar sound warmed Hermione’s heart. She had missed it so much. “But I’m serious, Hermione. I really do need time to think about this.”

“Yes, I understand.” Hermione nodded, trying not to look too disappointed. “May I see you while you’ll be thinking about it?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Hermione took a deep breath. Minerva was right, of course. Hermione hadn’t wanted to see her either when she had needed time to think. But now she knew there was definitely a part in Minerva that wanted her, that wanted them. And not just a small part for that matter. It would be hard to just wait for Minerva’s decision without any chance to discuss it with her. “May I kiss you once again, before you start thinking about everything?”

“Yes.

Minerva’s consent came reluctantly and before she could change her mind Hermione pulled her back into her arms, determined to make some irrefutable points while she still had the chance. Tomorrow, she would give Minerva all the time she needed. She would wait as long as she had to. One day, Minerva would come to her, Hermione was sure of that. And soon she would prove to her that happiness wasn’t something you needed a potion for and that it could be long-standing, even for Minerva McGonagall.

Trying to respect Minerva’s wish, Hermione had asked for just one kiss, but Minerva also seemed to suddenly realize that they might not see each other again for a long while. So one kiss led to another, and when Minerva left Hermione’s house early in the morning the upper button of her blouse was missing, her black hair was floating softly over her small shoulders, and she had a spring in her step that the portraits in the Headmistress’s office had never seen on her before.

If Minerva had turned around again, she would have seen Severus Snape discreetly, but with a scornful look, handing Albus Dumbledore a handful of galleons. And if the portraits had been able to leave their frames, they would have seen a tabby cat with distinct patterns around her eyes dancing across the towers of Hogwarts in the dawn.

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