


**Professor Mirabel Garlick**

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Hermione Granger

The Room of Requirement had outdone itself...again.

Hermione noticed this the moment she stepped through the entrance, because the Room had always been responsive to need, but tonight it seemed to have anticipated something specific. The usual multi-level battlefield configuration had flattened into a wide, open arena with reinforced stone walls and a floor that felt slightly springy underfoot, like packed earth over something yielding. Along the far wall, a long stone table had appeared, and on it sat a row of glass terrariums, each one sealed with what looked like wax sigils that pulsed faintly green.

The terrariums were new.

She felt better tonight. Her conversation with Luna in the library had loosened something that had been wound tight inside her chest for weeks, maybe months. A door she'd been pressing shut with all her weight had been allowed to crack open, and the relief of not fighting it was considerable.

Luna sat cross-legged on one of the stone benches near the wall, her wand tucked behind her ear, reading a pamphlet titled "Venomous Tentacula and You: A Survivor's Guide." She looked up when Hermione entered and smiled. Not the dreamy, knowing smile. Just a smile. Hermione felt warmth spread through her ribcage and looked away before she could overthink it.

The room filled steadily. Ron arrived with Harry, both of them carrying what appeared to be field notes. Ginny came in with Dean, though Hermione noticed she positioned herself on the opposite side of the room from where

Daphne Greengrass was standing. Tracey Davis and Theodore Nott flanked Daphne and Theodore.

Susan Bones arrived with Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan. Seamus and Dean took their usual spots. Padma and Michael Corner claimed the Ravenclaw corner. Luna remained where she was, her pamphlet now balanced on her knee.

And then, Hermione noticed her.

A girl she hadn't seen at previous meetings stood slightly behind Daphne, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched. She was shorter than her older sister by several inches, with the same fair complexion and fine bone structure, but where Daphne's beauty had always struck Hermione as cold, like looking at a beautiful sculpture made of ice, this girl was something softer. Warmer. Her hair was a lighter shade of gold than Daphne's, honey-coloured, falling in loose waves past her shoulders. Her eyes, a pale hazel, held none of the ice that usually existed in Daphne's eyes. Instead, there was a kind of openness to her face.

Astoria Greengrass. Fifth year. The younger sister Daphne had been so desperate to protect from a Death Eater three times her age.

She looked, Hermione thought, far too young to be standing in a room where people were learning how to kill.

But then, they all did.

Harry moved to the centre of the room, and conversations died.

"Before we start tonight," Harry said, "Neville has something to show you."

This produced a ripple of surprise. Neville had earned respect in the DA, his growth was undeniable, but the idea of Neville leading a portion of the session was still novel enough to raise eyebrows. Ron looked curious. Seamus looked skeptical. Daphne looked politely attentive.

Neville stepped forward, and Hermione could see the effort it cost him. He seemed like he wanted someone else to do what he was about to do; he looked at Harry, as if hoping for help, but Harry just stepped back, making it clear that Neville had to do this on his own. He stopped beside the stone table with its row of sealed terrariums and turned to face the group.

"Right," he said. "So. Plants."

A few people smiled. Neville did not.

"Professor Garlick and I have been working on something since the start of term. Defensive botanicals. The idea is simple." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a smooth, dark green sphere roughly the size of a Quaffle, though it weighed considerably less based on how easily he balanced it in his palm. "This is a Screaming Sundew. Normally, it's about the size of a small dog and it roots itself in boggy soil. It's carnivorous. When it senses prey, it produces a sonic burst at close range that can rupture eardrums and cause severe disorientation lasting up to ninety seconds."

He held the sphere up so the group could see it. Its surface pulsed faintly, like something breathing inside a shell.

"I've placed it under a Containing Charm. My own modification, actually, based on the standard Reducto Contineo, but adapted so the biological processes continue at a reduced rate. The plant is alive in there." Neville's voice had steadied. "When this is thrown and makes contact with a hard surface, the

Containing Charm shatters. The plant expands to its full size in approximately one and a half seconds and immediately produces its sonic burst."

"How loud are we talking?" Seamus asked, now looking more interested in what Neville was saying.

"Loud enough to incapacitate anyone within a fifteen-foot radius who doesn't have ear protection charms active," Neville said. "Bleeding from the ears. Severe vertigo. Loss of balance and coordination."

The room had gone very quiet.

"That's the gentle one," Neville added, and he didn't smile when he said it.

He set the Screaming Sundew down and picked up a second sphere, this one a mottled brown that Hermione could have sworn was vibrating. "Strangler's Embrace. A variant of Devil's Snare that I've crossbred with an Amazonian constriction vine. Standard Devil's Snare retreats from light and heat. This one doesn't. Once released, it grows at roughly four feet per second, seeks the nearest heat source, and wraps around it." He paused. "Tightly."

"How tightly?" Susan Bones asked.

"It can crack a ribcage in under ten seconds," Neville said. "If left unchecked, it will compress a human torso until the structural integrity of the skeleton fails."

"Until the structural integrity of the skeleton fails," Ron repeated faintly. "Lovely way of saying it crushes you to death, mate."

"Yes," Neville said. "It crushes you to death."

Hermione watched Astoria Greengrass's face during this explanation. The younger girl had gone pale, her lips pressed together, but she hadn't looked away. Her hand had found Daphne's sleeve, fingers curling into the fabric, and Daphne, without looking down, had shifted her weight so their arms pressed together.

The third sphere was pale silver, almost beautiful, and Neville handled it with noticeably more care than the others. "Phantom Bloom. This one doesn't kill, not directly. When the Containing Charm breaks, the flower releases a cloud of pollen that causes severe hallucinations in anyone who inhales it."

"What kind of hallucinations?" Padma asked, sounding a little disturbed.

"The pollen interacts with the individual's own fears and memories. Each person would experience something different. The mice we tried on ran in circles. The gnome tried to dig through a stone floor for about four minutes and then sat down and appeared to weep, which I didn't know gnomes could do."

"A weeping gnome," Luna murmured from her bench. "How wonderfully tragic."

Harry stepped forward. "What Neville's built here is, in Muggle terms, similar to a grenade."

This produced an immediate split in the room that fell almost perfectly along blood-status lines. Dean, Hermione, and Harry all nodded in recognition. The purebloods and most half-bloods wore expressions ranging from blank to mildly confused.

"A what?" Ron asked.

"A grenade," Harry repeated. "It's a Muggle weapon. Small, fits in your hand. You pull a pin, throw it, and it explodes. Shrapnel, fire, concussive force. Kills or injures anyone within the blast radius."

"Muggles have that?" Ernie Macmillan said, looking genuinely alarmed.

"Muggles have weapons that make these plants look like party favours," Dean said. "Trust me."

"The point," Harry continued, cutting off what looked like it might become an extended seminar on Muggle military technology, "is that what Neville has created gives us something Death Eaters won't expect. They're prepared for spells. They're trained to counter hexes and curses and jinxes. They are not trained to deal with a plant that screams so loud it ruptures their eardrums, or a vine that crushes them while they're trying to figure out what hit them."

Neville lined the three spheres up on the table.

"I can produce about a dozen of each per week," Neville said. "More of the Screaming Sundews, fewer of the Strangler's Embrace because the crossbreeding is delicate. The Phantom Blooms take the longest because the pollen needs to mature properly, or the hallucinations are just mildly confusing instead of incapacitating."

"Good work, Neville," Harry said with a smile. The room murmured agreement. Hermione noticed Astoria Greengrass staring at Neville with an expression, something between admiration and the faintest edge of fear.

Harry waited for the murmuring to settle, then drew his wand. "Now. Two new spells tonight. Pay attention, because I won't be repeating the theory. Once you understand what they do and why, we'll practice until your arms fall off."

He raised his wand and pointed it at one of the training dummies, which stood in a cluster near the room's centre. "The first one is something I've been developing since the summer. The incantation is Gravis Mora."

He flicked his wand in a sharp diagonal, and a bolt of deep indigo light struck the dummy square in the chest. The dummy, which had been enchanted to move in randomized combat patterns, didn't stop moving. It slowed. Drastically. Its arm, which had been in the process of swinging upward, continued its arc at perhaps a tenth of its normal speed. Its legs, mid-stride, moved as though the air around it had turned to thick honey. Even the simulated breathing seemed to drag, the chest rising and falling in an exaggerated, dreamlike rhythm.

"Gravis Mora," Harry said. "It doesn't freeze the target. Freezing spells can be countered with a simple Finite. This is different. It slows the target's entire neuromuscular response. Their brain still works at normal speed, they can see you, they know what's happening, but their body can't keep up. Duration depends on the power behind the cast, but a solid hit gives you between five and eight seconds."

"Five to eight seconds," Susan Bones said slowly, "is enough to hit them with anything."

"Exactly. A Stunner. A binding hex. Or," Harry paused, and his face did something that Hermione had seen more often lately, a look that reminded her a little of Mad Eye Moody, "if there is no other choice, something stronger. I'm not going to stand here and pretend that every fight ends with a clean Stupefy. Some of you will face situations where the choice is to kill or to be killed, and I'd rather you were alive and carrying that weight than dead and carrying nothing."

The silence that followed was thick enough to cut.

"Second spell," Harry said, his voice deliberately lighter, though his eyes were not. "This is a variant of Bombarda. Same basic incantation, different wand movement. Instead of a concussive blast, this version produces an incendiary detonation. More heat, tighter radius, deeper damage."

He demonstrated on another dummy. "Bombarda Ignium."

The wand movement was a tight spiral ending in a sharp jab. The blast that struck the dummy was not the broad, pushing explosion of a standard Bombarda. It was concentrated, a fierce bloom of white-gold fire that engulfed the dummy's torso for two full seconds before dissipating. When the smoke cleared, the dummy's midsection was charred black, the simulated flesh melted and fused in patterns that looked agonisingly real.

"The wounds produced by Bombarda Ignium," Harry said, "are not easily healed. Standard Episkey won't touch them. Even Vulnera Sanentur struggles with thermal curse damage of this intensity. You would need someone with advanced healing training, someone who understands the interaction between magical fire and living tissue at a cellular level, to properly treat these injuries."

He let that sink in, then said something that made Hermione's head come up sharply.

"Voldemort doesn't have anyone like that."

Several students flinched at the name. Harry ignored them.

"Think about it. The Death Eaters are powerful duelists. Some of them are brilliant with offensive magic. But their entire philosophy is built on dominance, on being so powerful that they don't need to worry about being hurt. They don't train healers. They don't value healing as a discipline. Bellatrix Lestrange can cast an Unforgivable that would drop most of you where you

stand, but if you put a burn through her arm that went to the bone, she'd have no one in her ranks who could fix it properly."

"They'd go to a Healer," Tracey Davis pointed out. "St Mungo's, or a private practitioner."

"In the middle of a battle?" Harry countered. "While we're still fighting? The point isn't to land one wound and win. The point is that every injury we inflict costs them more than every injury they inflict on us, because we have people who can heal." His eyes found Hermione briefly. "They don't. That's an asymmetric advantage, and we'd be idiots not to use it."

Hermione stared at him. Harry wasn't just teaching them to fight. He was teaching them to wage a war of attrition against an enemy that had never been forced to think about logistics. Voldemort's Death Eaters were shock troops. They hit hard, hit fast, and expected their targets to break. Nobody had ever made them bleed slowly.

"That's actually brilliant," Hermione said aloud, and then felt her cheeks warm because she hadn't meant to say it quite that emphatically.

Harry's mouth twitched. "Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm not surprised. I'm impressed."

"Right," Harry called to the group. "Pair up. Gravis Mora first. We'll do thirty minutes on the slowing spell before we move to Bombarda Ignium, and for the love of Merlin, if you accidentally set someone on fire with the second one, point them toward Hermione. She's our best healer, and if she looks annoyed, it's because she is. Don't let that stop you."

"Charming introduction," Hermione muttered, but she was already rolling up her sleeves.

The practice session that followed was controlled chaos. Gravis Mora proved tricky. The diagonal wand movement required precise acceleration, too slow and the spell merely produced a brief heaviness in the target's limbs, too fast and it dissipated entirely. Ron's first attempt made his target dummy's left arm droop slightly while the rest of it continued at normal speed, which looked deeply unsettling and was technically a failure but showed he'd grasped the directional component.

Hermione mastered the slowing spell within six attempts, which was respectable given its complexity, though she noted with mild irritation that Luna managed it in four while humming what sounded like a lullaby. Ginny's version was characteristically aggressive, her target dummy slowing so dramatically it appeared almost frozen, though the effect lasted barely two seconds before snapping back. Susan Bones produced a clean, consistent cast that slowed her dummy for a reliable five seconds each time, which Harry praised as the benchmark they should all be aiming for.

She found herself watching Astoria during a lull in practice. The younger Greengrass was partnered with Hannah Abbott, who was demonstrating the wand movement with patient repetition. Astoria's first three attempts produced nothing visible. Her fourth created a faint ripple of indigo light that dissipated before reaching its target.

But on her fifth attempt, Astoria was starting to get annoyed. Then she calmed herself and tried again. The indigo bolt that left her wand was clean, bright, and precise. Hannah's practice dummy slowed to a crawl.

Hannah clapped. Astoria's face broke into a grin so genuinely delighted that it made her look even younger than she was.

Daphne, four stations away, watched her sister's success with a look of pride.

The session ran two hours. By the end of it, most students could produce a functional Gravis Mora, though duration and consistency varied wildly. Bombarda Ignium proved predictably harder to control, and Harry restricted live practice to the most advanced members after Seamus nearly set the ceiling on fire within his first three minutes.

"Standard Seamus Tuesday," Dean remarked, helping extinguish a smouldering training dummy.

"It's Thursday," Seamus protested.

"Standard Seamus any-day-of-the-week, then."

Two Hours Later

The last students filed out of Greenhouse Four. Hermione took her time packing her things. She reorganised her notes into their proper colour-coded sections, wiped down her workstation with a cleaning charm, and aligned her pruning shears parallel to the edge of the table, because there was no reason to leave a workspace in disarray simply because the lesson was finished.

She was stalling, and she knew it, but it was a different kind of stalling than before.

Before Luna's talk, she would have been stalling out of dread. That had been the pattern. Want, panic, flee, repeat.

Today, Hermione was stalling because she wanted to be the last one in the greenhouse. She wanted the door to close. She wanted the room to empty

until it was just her and Mirabel Garlick and whatever happened next, and for the first time in months, she was not afraid of that wanting.

She was, if anything, curious about it.

"Miss Granger? Would you mind staying a moment?"

Mirabel's voice carried from the far end of the greenhouse, where she was coaxing a Venomous Tentacula back into its pot. The plant curled one tendril around her wrist in what appeared to be reluctant affection before retracting into the soil.

She was wearing the fitted brown trousers again, the ones from the first lesson, paired with a deep green blouse that was doing things to Hermione's concentration that should have been classified as a form of academic sabotage. The blouse's top button was unfastened, and the fabric shifted when Mirabel moved in ways that suggested the woman either did not own or did not believe in undershirts.

Hermione set her bag down beside her workstation and walked over.

"How are the lessons going?" Mirabel asked, leaning back against the potting bench and crossing her arms right under her full breasts. "And I don't mean my lessons, I think I'd notice if those were going badly. I mean the other ones." She had a bright smile on her face, and for a moment, Hermione felt like she was speaking to a fellow student, not a professor.

"They're going well," Hermione said. "Better than well, actually. Neville's plants have been extraordinary. The Containing Charm modifications he developed are genuinely innovative, I don't think anyone's adapted Reducto Contineo for sustained biological stasis before. At least not in any literature I've found."

"He told me about the Screaming Sundew results." Mirabel spoke with pride, the only professor who ever used that tone when talking about Neville. "That boy has more talent in his little finger than half the Herbologists I studied with at the Academy. He just needed someone to stop telling him he was useless long enough for him to believe it himself."

"Thank you," Hermione said. "For the plants, for giving Neville the access and the trust, for all of it. I know you're taking a risk."

"I know what it's like to feel powerless, Hermione. To know that something terrible is coming and to sit in a room full of people who either can't see it or won't admit they can. I spent two years after the Academy applying for positions and being told I was too young, too inexperienced, too enthusiastic." She laughed. "Too enthusiastic. As if caring too much about your subject was a professional failing."

"How did you end up here?" Hermione asked. She knew the broad outlines, McGonagall had recruited her after Sprout's abrupt departure, but the details had always been vague, offered in fragments during their research sessions and never pressed.

"Honestly? I think I was the only qualified candidate willing to take the position on three weeks' notice." Mirabel pushed off from the potting bench and moved to a shelf of seedlings, checking their soil moisture with absent, practiced touches. "Professor Sprout's retirement was not, let us say, planned with the usual lead time. I was working on a research grant in Edinburgh, studying adaptive root systems in magically saturated soil, which is exactly as exciting as it sounds, and McGonagall sent me an owl. I was here within the week."

"And the other professors?"

Mirabel brightened. "Oh, they've been wonderful. McGonagall has been an absolute pillar, she checks in every week to see how I'm managing, and her advice on classroom discipline has saved me from at least three minor catastrophes. Flitwick is endlessly generous with his time. He helped me redesign the irrigation charms for Greenhouse Four, which, honestly, were held together with duck tape and prayers after thirty years of Sprout doing them her own way. And Slughorn, well." She paused, her expression turning amused. "Slughorn has invited me to four separate dinner parties and attempted to add me to his collection of promising young talents. I've declined politely each time, but I suspect he'll wear me down eventually. The man is remarkably persistent."

Hermione listened and said nothing about the things she knew.

She said nothing about the staff meeting last month where Snape had referred to Mirabel's curriculum revisions as "the enthusiasms of youth" in a tone that could have wilted one of her own specimens. She said nothing about the overheard corridor conversation between two senior professors who had wondered aloud whether "the Garlick girl" was really equipped to handle N.E.W.T. level instruction, as though a woman with a Mastery in Herbological Sciences and two published papers was a particularly precocious child playing dress-up in a teacher's robes. She said nothing about the fact that Mirabel was, at twenty-seven, the youngest professor Hogwarts had appointed in over a century, and that this fact followed her through every staff interaction like a footnote that nobody could stop reading.

Mirabel knew. Hermione was certain of that. The slight pause before she said, "Wonderful. Mirabel knew exactly how she was perceived by some of the older staff, and she had chosen to respond with relentless competence and warmth rather than bitterness.

Hermione respected that. She also thought it was deeply unfair that someone this talented had to work twice as hard to be taken half as seriously.

"You're being diplomatic," Hermione said.

Mirabel glanced up from the seedlings, caught, and her mouth curved. "I'm being professional."

"There's a difference?"

"A slim one, but yes. Professional means I acknowledge the challenges without dwelling on them. Diplomatic means I pretend they don't exist." She set down the watering can and turned to face Hermione fully. "I won't pretend, not with you. Some of my colleagues are very set in their ways, and a young woman arriving to replace a professor who'd been here for thirty years is, shall we say, an adjustment for everyone. But I'm here. I'm staying. And my students are learning, which is the only metric that actually matters."

"Your students are doing more than learning," Hermione said. "You've changed the way Neville sees himself. That's worth more than any approval from the senior staff."

"That's very kind of you to say."

"It's what you deserve."

Mirabel held her gaze for a beat longer, and then she laughed.

"You know," Mirabel said, still smiling, "when we're alone like this, when it's not a classroom and you're not technically my student for the next thirty minutes, you don't have to call me Professor."

"What should I call you, then?"

"Mirabel." She said it simply. "I think we've earned that, haven't we? Given everything."

"Mirabel," Hermione said with a smile, liking saying it.

"There," Mirabel said. "That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

"Not at all." Hermione tilted her head. "Though I have to say, it suits you better than Professor Garlick. Professor Garlick sounds like someone who teaches Potions and smells of mothballs. Mirabel sounds like someone who makes plants lean toward her when she laughs."

Mirabel blinked. Colour rose in her cheeks.

"They do not lean toward me when I laugh," she said, but she was smiling, and the colour in her cheeks was spreading down her neck toward the open collar of her blouse.

Hermione glanced pointedly at the shelf of seedlings beside them, several of which had, in fact, tilted perceptibly in Mirabel's direction during her earlier laugh. "I'm a very good observer, Mirabel. It's one of my more useful qualities."

"You are," Mirabel managed, "a very unusual student, Hermione."

"So I've been told."

Their eyes held. The greenhouse was very quiet. Water dripped. A Fanged Geranium clicked its jaws softly in its pot.

Mirabel broke eye contact first. She looked down, tucked a strand of auburn hair behind her ear, and cleared her throat.

"Well," she said. "I believe you have Arithmancy next. You should probably go before you're late, and I should probably repot the Mandrakes before they start screaming at me about their living conditions."

"Probably," Hermione agreed, and she let the word carry just enough warmth to ensure that Mirabel would hear the reluctance in it.

She returned to her workstation, collected her bag, and walked toward the greenhouse door. She could feel Mirabel's gaze on her back, mainly at her impressive ass. Hermione had to admit that besides her cock, her ass was quite an asset.

At the door, she paused and looked over her shoulder.

Mirabel was still standing by the potting bench, one hand on its edge, watching her leave. The flush had not entirely faded from her cheeks.

"Thank you for the conversation, Mirabel," Hermione said. "I always enjoy our talks."

"So do I," Mirabel said quietly, and then seemed to realise how that sounded, because the colour in her cheeks flared again and she added, quickly, "I mean, academic discourse is always stimulating when the student is, that is to say, when the intellectual engagement is, yes. Good. Off you go."

Hermione smiled. "Goodbye, Mirabel."

She stepped through the greenhouse door and into the corridor, where the October air was cool against her face.

Hermione walked. Her bag sat comfortably on her shoulder. Her notes were organised, her assignments complete, her schedule accounted for down to the quarter hour.

And she was smiling.

She had watched a beautiful woman blush because of something she'd said, and she had not panicked. She had not fled to a bathroom. She had not mentally flagellated herself for the audacity of finding her professor attractive.

She had simply enjoyed it.

Luna had been right. Luna was right about a great many things, it turned out, and Hermione made a mental note to stop being surprised by that.

**(Image Below)**


Mandragora
caulis
folium
radix
aqua vitalis
Remember:
Respect what
teaches you.
HUFFLEPUFF
ADVANCED
DEFENSIVE
BOTANICALS