

Above All Things

by Nom de Plume

Sometimes life doesn't go the way we planned.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

Sometimes life doesn't go the way we planned.

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Her chest was aching and yet it felt hollow at the same time. *How can a hollow chest ache?* she wondered, idly spinning the glass on the bar napkin in front of her.

The whisky she was drinking would probably only add to the ache, and to the heavy twisted feeling in her stomach. She snorted. As if a hollow chest and twisty stomach were anything to worry about now.

The booth she sat in was dark and smelled of old leather that had been stained by spilt alcohol, or worse, over the years. She sat in practically full shadow, tucked into a corner of the bench, relieved to be out of sight. The feeling was odd to her; she wasn't the kind of person to hide in the dark.

As she dragged her tired gaze across the bar, she surveyed the motley mix of patrons, the words from her Healer echoing, again, inside her head. The words seemed so loud to her that she could hardly believe that the pair of old men in the corner couldn't hear them. Or the suspicious looking woman at the end of the bar. Every time the woman looked up, hopefully Hermione imagined she'd heard the words screaming inside her head.

"I'm so, so sorry, Hermione." The wizard in medical robes sat in front of her, hands holding hers in sympathy. He looked as if he was waiting for her to break down at any moment. "I'm going to try my hardest to help you. It isn't that it can't be cured, it's just... there isn't a cure yet."

Hermione sat as if one frozen in time. Did she hear him correctly? What did he just say in that soft voice of his?

"Do you understand me?" He seemed to know that look on her face. The look of confused shock. "The poison's progress hasn't been slowed. I'm not sure that with what we know about this particular type that we can slow it." He paused and he lowered his eyes. "I can give you something for pain...."

"I'm dying," she stated flatly. The strength of her voice as it filled the room surprised her. Do people usually say those words so loudly?

She blinked again. She was still in the bar, not at the Specialty Unit in St Mungo's. The sound of raucous laughter assailed her from somewhere near the right side of the smoky room from yet another shadowed alcove. Hermione longed to be part of that laughter, it didn't matter whose. Her fingers were cold.

She lifted the glass to her lips and swallowed a mouthful of stinging, amber liquid. She'd never really been a fan of whisky, but it made a twisted sort of sense to her that it should be the kind of drink a person chooses when they find out they are dying. *Why can't a strawberry daiquiri be the drink of choice for sombre news?* she thought wryly.

She swilled the amber liquid around in the glass again. If it were a bit darker it might be the colour of her eyes. She'd never noticed that. She had whisky-coloured eyes. The drink really was appropriate. Sighing, she brought the glass back to her lips. The sound of metal clinking against glass caught her off guard. She bent her wrist and turned her hand up to expose the gleaming silver band on her ring finger. Hermione stared at it. Frozen.

She would have to tell Evan.

She would have to tell her fiancé that she might not live to their wedding date.

She dropped the glass with a heavy thud. Poor Evan, she thought. *Will this devastate him?* she worried as she fingered her engagement ring. Surely it would. He wasn't an overly romantic type, but they were engaged. That meant love. What would this do to him? To his chances for running the political gambit next season?

She snorted. "It'll probably help him win the election." She winced when she realised that she wasn't kidding, actually. Now a tear fell. Then another. She bit her lip. She'd survived the war for this?

The tinkly brass bell that hung above the door to Salamandar's Spirits chimed merrily behind her, indicating more patrons had arrived. She'd barely heard it, but the happy, tinkly sound was agitating, nonetheless.

A couple passed beside her, oblivious to her presence. Hermione eyed them, only half seeing. The woman, very curvy, of a daringly clad sort, clutched flirtatiously at a tall, lean man dressed in black as they made their way to the bar. The man began to pull her towards a darkened booth on his right but the woman, clasping the front of his dark robes, pulled him instead to the bar at the front. He shrugged, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. He positively exuded sensuality. Hermione couldn't help but leap at the distraction these two afforded.

When they sat, she noticed the woman, a fiery redhead, twining her shapely legs through her companion's. His right foot rubbed slowly up and down the length of her calf, while a pale, elegant hand rubbed lazy circles up and down her bare arm. She seemed completely enthralled by his attentions. He ordered two drinks and downed the first in one go, while the woman slowly sipped at hers. Hermione watched, transfixed at these sexual beings and felt her throat tighten with envy.

The man with dark, shoulder length locks leaned forward and whispered something in her ear that prompted his date to squeal in delight and return the favour. As she whispered something back, his lips found her neck and nipped along her jaw.

Hermione absently raised a hand and rubbed at the tingles she felt along her own neck. She blinked and looked away. Evan had certainly never acted that way with her before... *Because he is a very busy wizard*, she told herself. He was always so tired when he'd come home after a long day at the office. It wasn't his fault; he had more important thoughts on his mind other than trying to seduce his betrothed nightly. He was a good provider; that should be enough.

When the second drink arrived at the bar, the man swallowed it just as quickly as the first and went back to petting the wiggling creature beside him. Hermione wished she could see their faces. She could see the woman's only a little in the weak light, but the man was facing away from her, giving her only the occasional view of his chin and a nose as he leaned forward to kiss and... lick!... the woman's neck. Hermione suddenly felt warmer. She twisted in her seat. Surely decent people wouldn't act this way in public. Would they?

She wondered what Evan would say were he here. He would probably scoff and abuse their upbringing or parentage, and Hermione would rebuke him and tell him not to be so judgemental. But honestly, the way the woman arched her back, exposing her neck to the eager attentions of her companion as his mouth went lower and lower until he was practically nuzzling her breasts, made Hermione positively blush.

The woman grabbed the man's face and quickly whispered something in his ear. This was apparently exciting because he yelled something triumphantly...that voice... she knew that voice...slammed some Galleons down onto the bar top and hauled the squirming witch up off her stool. She practically leapt into his arms and began pulling him back towards the entrance.

Hermione's eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

She was delusional, that's all. She was delusional and in shock and seeing things as a result of the stress of receiving her death sentence earlier that day.

This man, this very sensual, smouldering apparent god of pleasure she'd been watching... could *not* be her former Potions master, Severus Snape. She blinked again and sagged into the back of her leather booth. *The world has gone mad*, she mused.

His black clad arms wrapped around the goddess glued to his side while he purposefully strode to the door. Hermione swallowed, embarrassed to be seen in her current state. It also wouldn't do for him to know that she'd just been voyeuristically watching him and the witch.

She hunched further into the shadows. He wouldn't see her, she thought. *Besides, he's too busy fondling his companion to notice anyone else.* Even still, her breath caught in her throat when she saw the thinly veiled look of pure lust glazing his eyes as they swept closer. He wouldn't see her staring at that.

But she was wrong, for he did see her. And when he did, he stopped mid-step and nearly gawked. He blinked and Hermione imagined his lust-addled brain slowly working to recognise the person whose eyes he'd inadvertently met. She could tell when her name hit his passion-enflamed mind by his frown. His gaze swept up and down the parts of Hermione that were visible behind the large wooden table she was hidden behind, and he cocked his head slightly to the side. The redhead's serpentine arms slid over his chest, drawing him near as if impatient to continue on their way.

Hermione nodded shakily at him in recognition, hoping he would move on and stop looking at her as if she were a ghost. He blinked again, glanced at the nearly finished glass of whisky in front of her, and met her gaze before nodding once, slowly, and continuing on his way out the door with the giggling woman at his side.

Hermione exhaled the breath she'd been holding. What a strange moment. His piercing gaze had nearly knocked her off her seat, making her feel prone and exposed.

She shivered as she thought about where the unlikely couple were headed and shook her head. How could that be her old Potions master? It was almost unreal, absurd even. The world had certainly been better to Severus Snape post-Voldemort. At least *someone* was enjoying his hard earned freedom.

Knocking back the rest of her liquor, Hermione wiped her lips on her sleeve and stood up. She was feeling the need for her own distraction after having watched the raunchy debacle at the bar and decided it was time she left to go home to her fiancé. She couldn't keep putting it off. No doubt he was worried at her absence. How unfair of her to keep him wondering where she was all this time. He didn't yet know the reason for her recent illness and had made her promise to see a Healer this week. How would she tell him? Outright? Be more subtle? Tell him her odds immediately or hint that there might still be a chance?

She wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and fastened the clasp at her throat. She slowly made her way to the entrance, really hoping her old professor and his... well, the word 'concubine' came to mind, were not out there snogging as if it were the last day of their liv...she shook her head sharply.

When the cool night air rushed against her flushed, tear-stained cheeks, she stopped to inhale a cleansing, smoke-free breath and looked up at the shimmering stars dotted in the night sky. She kept her gaze fixed on them, taking in their otherworldly beauty. Here again was something she'd miss. Taking one last breath of cool night air, she whirled on the spot and Apparated back to the house she and her fiancé shared in West London.

Hanging her cloak on the stand near the doorway, she slipped out of her shoes, mindful of the fact that all the lights were off and it was quiet in the house. He must have fallen asleep waiting for her. Her chest tightened again.

When she entered the living room, she looked immediately to his favourite chair, expecting to find him sleeping in his clothes. When she did not, she glanced around the room. Everything seemed to be in perfect order. She entered the bathroom up the stairs and took in her haggard appearance reflected in the mirror and moaned quietly.

No wonder Professor Snape stared...look at me! I look exactly like a person who's just found out they are going to die. She splashed cold water against her face and ran her fingers through her unkempt brown hair. She was trembling. She wanted to be at Evan's side, feeling him kiss her neck like Snape had done to that woman tonight. She wanted to feel his warm hands on her, comforting her, telling her everything would be all right.

She wanted him to look at her, make love to her, one more time without that knowing look he would surely have after she told him. Just one more time.

When she crept into their darkened bedroom, she found him sleeping, covers pulled tight, and lightly snoring in their bed. She told herself...forced herself to think that she was thankful he was able to find enough peace to sleep soundly rather than be up pacing, worrying over her disappearance.

She slid under the covers, clad only in her knickers, and slowly ran her cold fingers up her fiancé's side and across his stomach. Rolling onto her side, she scooted next to him, kissing his shoulder through his nightshirt up to his warm neck.

"Evan," she whispered hoping it sounded seductive. "Evan, wake up," she crooned. He grunted in his sleep. She slid her hands further up his chest until they found his face and she lightly stroked his cheeks. "Wake up," she whispered again, trembling against the sudden tears that threatened to spill out of her lashes. "Make love to me," she pleaded against his ear.

He grumpily swatted her hands from his face and rolled over onto his side. "For god's sake, Hermione, it's," he glanced at the clock on the nightstand, "one a.m. I don't know where the devil you've been, but go to sleep! I've got an early meeting in the morning, and I don't need you keeping me up at all hours of the night," he chided, his voice hoarse with sleep.

Hermione held her position on her side staring at him quietly in the dark. When she finally lay back on her pillow, tears were flowing freely down her cheeks and streaming into her hair. She trembled even more and wrapped her arms around her bare chest as if she could force the pain and hurt and fear inside as it was threatening to burst forth at any moment, surely ripping her chest wide open. She rolled onto her other side, facing away from him, and pulled her pillow to her face, hoping the tears she cried and the shuddering breaths she drew weren't so loud that they disturbed the sleep of the man sharing her bed. She told herself that he didn't know, or else he'd have accepted her advances this time. He simply didn't *know* that the woman he loved only had a limited amount of time in which to offer herself to him. He was just tired. Again.

When darkness finally took her, she blinked away the last tear, wondering why on earth she'd been allowed to survive the war *fothis*.

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## Chapter Two

### Chapter 2 of 2

Two months after her diagnosis, Hermione is coping as best she can.

Two Months Later

Hermione feigned a smile as she shook the hand of one of several Senior Undersecretaries to the Minister for the ninth time that night. Evan stood beside her in all his finery, profusely shaking Gilbert Brownfoot's rather pudgy, splotched hand. Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes; she had to put on a lovely show in front of everyone. Tonight, Evan and a few of his contemporaries were getting yet another award for civil services, and she needed to exude the air of a woman proud of her partner's achievement, a woman who enjoyed the splendid trappings that came with her partner's success.

It was unfortunate that she'd lost the ability to enjoy these superficial delights, given her situation. She seemed to find so little comfort these days in the things she used to enjoy. Even the normally soothing notes emanating from the classical quartet filling the air did little to lift her spirits.

Despite this, her smile, forcibly plastered to her face, did not waver as she greeted each of the guests who made their way through the crowd. They congratulated Evan and Hermione on not only his award, but for their impending nuptials. She nodded, bowed her head coquettishly where appropriate, and voiced any number of automatic responses as needed. The assembly line of reactions held steadily until a surprisingly firm hand and an impossibly velvety voice startled her out of autopilot.

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

Severus Snape stood before Hermione and bowed slightly in greeting. He was clothed in a heavy, formal set of black dress robes that were cut to near perfection. Even the white gloves he wore lined his hands as perfectly as his own skin, and Hermione felt it was just a bit harder to breathe now than it had been only a few moments before. How silly.

She shifted her gaze to his face and blinked at the expression she found there. His liquid black eyes were not quite glittering, but definitely held a mixture of boredom, intrigue, and possibly something akin to mischief. He arched an elegant eyebrow when she hadn't replied during the customary pause between recognition and vocalisation.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but before anything came out, her gaze shifted to the serenely beautiful woman at his side. It wasn't the redhead she'd seen clutching at him in the pub the day she'd Found Out; it was a willowy blonde with sparkly pale blue eyes who stood proudly beside him this time. Hermione took in her appearance and struggled to stand straight rather than shrink in on herself, as she now felt like a muddled wretch in comparison. This man could definitely keep impressive company.

"I truly stand in amazement, Miss Granger," the Potions master said, snapping Hermione back to attention. "This is the second time I have seen you in as many months, and I've heard nary a single word fall from your lips. Perhaps time does improve all things," he quipped, a smirk playing about the corners of his mouth. His eyes raked over her figure once, so quickly Hermione barely had time to register the fact that he'd just appraised her; she cleared her throat.

"My apologies, Professor Snape." She involuntarily stepped closer to her fiancé. "How lovely to see you. I hope you're well," she said, nodding cordially to him and the woman at his side.

Snape blinked slowly and settled his gaze back into one of passive indifference as he acknowledged the woman with him.

"This is Lydia Beaumon." He placed his finely tailored arm around the woman's waist, settling his be-gloved hand at the small of her back; the woman inclined her magnificent blonde head in response. "Lydia, this is a former student of mine and one of many former banes of my existence, Hermione Granger." He flicked his gaze harmlessly back at Hermione, indicating his words were in jest. So she supposed.

The woman focused her gaze more attentively on Hermione. "Granger? That name sounds familiar," she mused, letting her eyes travel over Hermione's form much more slowly than Snape had previously done. Now, Hermione fought the urge to squirm.

"Cohort of *the Saviour of the Magical World*," he said in a low, sarcastic voice directed at his date.

Her pale eyes widened in recognition, and she lightly smirked. "Ah, yes. I'm sure I've read your name a hundred times in the *Daily Prophet* following the war." Her voice sounded like tinkling bells wrapped in silk. Damn her.

Evan, no longer wishing to be on the sideline, stepped forward and thrust a hand out at Snape in greeting. "Professor Snape, it's been too long." His voice was playful with an edge of arrogance. Hermione cringed.

This time, Snape's eyebrow expressed light disdain rather than amusement when he reluctantly shook the hand of the overly eager young man beside Hermione.

"Witherly," he almost sneered. "Another former student," he murmured to the stunning blonde.

Evan swung his grip to the mystery woman and bent a kiss to her hand. "Charmed, Miss Beaumon." Snape narrowed his eyes then looked away. "Thank you both for coming tonight. I'm happy to celebrate with all who put in the effort to express their gratitude," he continued pompously. Hermione cringed again, only this time it was followed with a groan.

"Honestly, Evan," she hissed, turning her face away from their guests. Her fiancé frowned momentarily at her reprimand and stepped away from the dazzling couple in front of him. Hermione cast an apologetic look to Snape, before staring determinedly at a spot on the floor.

"At any rate, thank you for coming. We all appreciate it." Evan placed his own arm around Hermione's waist, drawing her closer.

Snape rolled his eyes. He nodded again and guided his companion away, while she cast a withering glance back at Hermione. "Miss Granger," he muttered quietly and disappeared into the teeming swarm around them.

Hermione swallowed, relieved that he'd left. For some reason, he made her unnervingly uncomfortable. This new Snape was someone she had a hard time reconciling with the old Snape of her classroom days. It was very unsettling. And he was far too adept at wielding that voice! Had it always sounded like that? Hermione blindly gazed about the room, considering her old professor. Well, not old. She nibbled briefly on her bottom lip. What the hell happened to him to make him change so abruptly from the quiet, discreet loner he'd once been?

"Hermione?" Ginny Weasley asked again, brows furrowed in annoyance, and clicked her fingers. "Earth to Hermione!" The redhead shook her long locks and tucked an arm around her friend, startling her. Hermione blinked, wondering how long the young woman had been standing there.

"I think you need some punch. I'm going to borrow her, Evan." The impatient younger witch drew a thankful Hermione away and sat her down at an empty table halfway across the room. Evan remained stationed near the entrance, greeting various dignitaries and sycophants.

"Gods, I don't know how you stand him." Ginny tutted. "If Harry ever acted that way..." She snapped her fingers again. "...I'd have left him in a heartbeat," she teased. Ginny stopped a passing waiter, plucked two glasses of pink champagne from the tray, and handed one to Hermione.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "He means well," she said, taking a sip of the crisp, bubbly drink. "But he is rather more full of himself at these functions than normal, I agree. I'm sorry you have to put up with him."

Ginny shrugged and swept her gaze around the crowd. "I don't have to put up with anything. If he's going to act like a preening prat, then I'll go somewhere else." She spotted Harry chatting amiably with an elderly witch and wizard several feet away and grinned before turning her attention back to her friend. "Is your speech all ready? As if I have to ask."

"Yes. I went over it again just before we arrived. I still get a bit nervous speaking in front of such large crowds, but I'm sure it'll be fine." Hermione took another reassuring sip of champagne and smoothed the folds of her softly shimmering gold dress. The cool fabric felt good against her warm skin.

She sat in her chair, determinedly not looking at anyone, when she felt the first stirrings of unrest tightening her abdomen. Inhaling a shaky breath, she urged her body to calm itself against what threatened to become an imminent convulsion. She looked around carefully for a place she could stand in case she needed to get away for one of her episodes. Spotting a set of open doors at the back of the room that led to an outdoor balcony, Hermione decided the darkness and a breeze might help calm her and resolved to slip away as soon as she could without worrying Ginny. Looking back to Ginny, she caught her friend staring at her anxiously, and she straightened up in her seat.

"Are you ever going to tell me what's wrong with you? Lately, you seem distracted. Is everything okay?" Her younger friend placed a supportive hand on her arm.

Hermione patted it and smiled. "Ginny, honestly, you're just like your mother."

Ginny immediately withdrew her hand and tossed a fierce glare at her. Hermione grinned, settled back into her chair, and tried to relax as her perceptive friend looked away back into the crowd. She watched the fiery redhead out of the corner of her eye. When Ginny's calm expression suddenly turned into a glare, Hermione followed her gaze and saw Evan standing in a semi-circle of other ostentatiously dressed wizards, smoking a cigar. He was touching the fabric of Pansy Parkinson's dress robes near her hip. Hermione blinked.

"What's that cow doing here?" Ginny hissed. "I think she tries to flirt with anything on two legs that can climb a ladder." Her scowl deepened when Pansy blushed demurely and pretended to bat Evan's hand away. "If Harry ever..."

"Ginny," Hermione cut her off. "It's not a big deal. He's just trying to show off in front of 'the boys.'" She sounded calm, but on the inside, she was cracking a little bit more. *Best not to make a scene*, she thought and swallowed another sip of champagne. Besides, that meant nothing. Evan had his faults, but he wouldn't cheat on her. Surely.

"How can you say that?! She's practically hanging all over him!" Ginny shouted indignantly. "I'll hex her. Right here. Just say the word," she bit out, drawing her wand.

"Ginny, stop. It's fine." Hermione pulled a handkerchief out of the beaded bag hanging from her wrist and dabbed at her forehead. "It's so warm in here." She sighed, looking anywhere but in her fiancé's direction. Her gaze landed unintentionally on Snape, who had just appeared behind a wizard who had been standing in front of him. Hermione grew even warmer and licked her lips.

He was leaning casually against a wall. One sleek hand was running under the fabric of Lydia Beaumon's shoulder strap, and he snapped it against her skin. The witch laughed and flicked him on his arm. He faked a childish pout and narrowed his eyes playfully in response.

"Merlin's. Fucking. Balls," Ginny breathed, having followed Hermione's surprised gaze. "That *cannot* be Professor Snape?" Ginny's eyes had popped wide, and she inhaled deeply. Hermione watched as her friend's coppery head clearly moved up and down slowly, as she appreciatively took in their formerly dreaded professor's attire. She spun around, mouth hanging open in shock. "Did you see that?!" she squeaked.

Hermione smiled in spite of herself and nodded. "Yeah. Complete shocker, isn't it?" Ginny nodded and flipped around in her chair again to continue ogling him.

"Gods, who would have thought he... I mean, he was always so... but... *look* at him!" Her tone was incredulous and quite breathy. She shook her head. "No one will believe me when I tell them."

"Then don't tell anyone. I'm sure he enjoys his privacy," Hermione stated, suddenly a bit defensive and dragging her own gaze back to the titillating wizard across the room. "Clearly, he enjoys his new life." She cast her eyes dejectedly to the willowy blonde. The witch was pulling him forward, dragging him through the throng, and Ginny and Hermione followed their movement until losing sight of them completely. They shared a fiendishly exasperated look and giggled.

"Severus Snape...ladies' man. Huh." Ginny finished her champagne in a trice and looked around the room for Harry. "I have to tell him. He'll go nuts."

Hermione started to reply but quickly inhaled against a stab of pain that shot up through her abdomen. She wrapped an arm around her stomach and struggled to school her expression. She looked around for Evan; he'd disappeared as well. Seeing Ginny still searching for her boyfriend, Hermione rose carefully and stepped away from the table.

"Sorry, Ginny, I'm just going to pop into the ladies' room." Her voice was strained, but she forced a smile and quickly turned and pushed her way through the mass of people around her, leaving Ginny to stare after her with concern.

Hermione wended her way through the numerous guests, dimly aware that behind her, her soon-to-be father-in-law was quieting the quartet from the raised stage at the front of the vast ballroom and began welcoming everyone, introducing the night's honourees. Hermione would need to be back in time for her speech, assuming her treacherous body got a better grip on itself.

She paused in the doorway, blessed air flowed over her warm face, and she closed her eyes, ordering her lungs to slow down. Someone slipped past her, entering the ballroom, and Hermione pushed off the doorway and stepped out further onto the darkened balcony. Fortunately, there was almost no one out there, and the few stragglers left were gathering inside for the start of the awards ceremony.

She found a darkened niche beside a small Cypress tree in a large terra cotta pot and leaned against the stucco wall behind it. Inhaling deeply, she held her breath before releasing it in a whoosh. She'd only brought one phial of potion with her. If she could just breathe through this comparatively small episode, she could save it in case she really needed it later in the evening. Her clammy hands rubbed along her thighs in an attempt to soothe her nerves while she stared up at the night sky.

After only a moment of peace, a woman's laughter rang out near where Hermione had entered, and she winced against the sound. Looking out, she groaned when she saw who it belonged to. Snape and Lydia had stumbled out of the ballroom and onto the balcony. Apparently, they weren't much for this crowd, either.

The next light jab of pain lanced up through her abdomen, and Hermione bit back another groan. She huddled into the wall when her legs trembled slightly at the force of keeping her upright and pressed her lips together, trying to keep quiet. She would be mortified if anyone saw her in this state.

Meanwhile, Lydia Beaumon had her perfectly manicured nails dug into the front of Snape's robes and was purposefully pushing him across the terrace to the balustrade. When he'd been backed into it as far as he could go, she pressed her lips against his and melted into his body. His arms slid up over her hips and wrapped around her waist. Hermione blushed, feeling a bit like a voyeur, but didn't want to risk getting caught by them during their sudden moment of intimacy by attempting to sneak back inside. She opted to stay in place, taking care to move as little as possible behind the Cypress.

*How embarrassing*, she groaned to herself. Rubbing her sore abdomen, she tried to look anywhere but the sight of her former professor snogging the blonde in his arms. She really tried not to. But when the woman moaned into his mouth, she couldn't help but turn her face to eye them discreetly. Something in her chest ached while she watched his hands smoothly stroke along the other woman's low-cut back-line. The witch's right leg was bent at the knee as if literally being tugged upward in contented female bliss, and Hermione's head sagged a bit to her shoulder in envy. How wonderful to be romanced by that dark, brooding figure at a Ministry ball, seduced out onto a balcony, and kissed into oblivion under the stars.

Evan would never, ever do that with her.

Snape suddenly broke away from the heated kiss and caught his breath. He glanced up at the sky and then back down to the woman in his arms. Hermione imagined his intense gaze directed at her for a moment before she shook her head, chastising herself as she stood behind her hidden, vantage point.

"So, what were you so adamant to tell me?" His voice was slightly ragged but amused and carried clearly through the still night air. Hermione shuddered. His hand slid from Lydia's shoulder down across her hip sensuously.

The blonde swatted it away and took a step back. Snape cocked his head and watched her.

"Something very important," she said, taking a calming breath. "I wanted you to know first," she said kindly.

He folded his arms across his chest, naturally defensive. "How sentimental." His voice was calm if not a bit annoyed.

The woman clasped her hands in front of her. "I think Henri is going to propose," she said, fairly glowing with pleasure.

Hermione blinked in surprise at what she heard and then went back to desperately trying to focus on anything but the conversation happening in front of her. The thin leaves of the Cypress tree suddenly became intensely fascinating.

Snape fixed his gaze on the woman before him and stared. "Really," he stated rather than asked.

"Yes," she said forcefully. "I'm going to give myself to him fully; be a good wife," she said proudly. "This must be our last night, Severus." She laid an apologetic hand on his still-crossed arms.

Severus looked down at her hand and rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you're giving in to boring domestication," he groaned, sounding irritated. "You're too lively for that." This time, the blonde cocked her head in amusement. He went on. "Besides, you'll make a dreadful wife."

She huffed in mock indignation. "I will not! I'll be a fabulous wife!" He sighed and maintained his stance of defiance. "Just because some of us choose to stay single and miserable..."

"I resent that."

"...doesn't mean the rest of us can't move on and start thinking about families."

He snorted. "Families? I've been surrounded by adolescent carrion for half of my life; why in Merlin's name would I willingly choose to surround myself by them away from school? It's overrated," he snipped.

When she didn't say anything but looked to the ground instead, he softened his stance and dropped his arms to his sides. "Oh, fine." He sighed. "Congratulations, then." He sounded rather more like a petulant child than a mature adult.

The woman laughed then and leaned in for a hug. "I'm sure Henri will be happy to hear you gave your blessing," she murmured against his chest. Snape smirked and returned her embrace. When she didn't pull away, he stood tensely against her.

Hermione, trying to recite Agrippa's Third Law of Arithmancy, felt her stomach tighten again and cursed her body. *Now is not the time to rebel*, she mentally hissed.

"You know, this is our last night together," Lydia purred and slid her hands suggestively up the Potion master's chest, across his shoulders. He looked down into her pale blue eyes. "Perhaps we could, just one last time...."

Snape leaned back and gently clasped her arms, pulling them off of him.

"No. You're now officially off the market, Lydia. I don't much like *Henri*, but I'm not going to be the reason you cuckold him." His voice was level and sarcastic, and Hermione nearly gaped in surprise. Even this new man-whorish Snape still maintained a sense of honour. She smiled to herself before the dull throb in her abdomen exploded with renewed force inside of her. She bent double and jammed her lips tightly together, determined not to cry out.

She vaguely registered the fact that Snape and Lydia were saying goodbye through the haze of pain enveloping her. Her internal organs felt as if they were on fire and writhing around each other. Her skin broke out into a cold sweat while she fought to draw in piercing breaths. This had to be the worst kind of slow torture imaginable, *Cruciatius* aside.

Hermione's knees buckled, and she slid against the scratchy façade of the building, snagging the delicate fabric of her gown. She didn't care. She just wanted to stop standing and collapse onto any surface to writhe unabashedly. A particularly sharp stab of pain shot up through her chest, and this time, she did cry out. Her vision went white as the pain crept up from her chest to her spinal column and into her head. Tears slipped from her eyes, and she squeezed them closed, hugging her arms around her chest in an attempt to hold herself together, feeling she might just burst apart. She gave in and sank down onto the ground, letting the bubbling pain take over.

She didn't know how long she'd been down when strong hands gripped her upper arms, pushing her up against the scratchy wall behind her. Through the pain-induced fog, she was dimly aware of someone calling her name. Everything sounded muffled, as if she were underwater. In this heightened state, she was acutely aware of the scent of Cypress, sandalwood and cedar, and she inhaled, relishing the excuse of the small distraction it provided. Anything to stop thinking about the pain.... She quietly moaned when the torture finally began to subside and, exhausted, fell limply against the hands and arms that were gripping her, keeping her upright.

Panting, Hermione leaned into the solid warmth of the person assisting her and blinked against the tears she had unintentionally shed. She felt incredibly disoriented. If she could just hold this position for a moment to regroup....

Drawing in ragged breaths, she held completely still and forced her mind to crash back down to reality, cataloguing her present situation *Focus*. She was still on the balcony. Someone was speaking inside the ballroom. What had she been doing? Snape had been.... Oh, right. He and that blonde witch were parting when she'd collapsed, which meant....

"Miss Granger? Can you hear me?" Snape's voice was slightly elevated, but the deep, buttery tones soothed her frazzled nerves nonetheless.

She winced, and when she finally dragged her horrified gaze up to his eyes, she saw his brows furrowed together in concentration, his lips pursed as he stared intently back at her.

She inhaled to reply, but all she could think to say was an awkwardly whispered, "I'm sorry."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?" he asked in surprise.

Her ever-present blush deepened as she realised he'd found her lurking behind the Cypress tree, listening to his conversation. Just great.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude," she explained quickly, averting her gaze and struggling to get her breathing under control. "I was already out here, you see, and I didn't realise what you were doing until... you were already... doing it, er, *kissing*. I mean." She tried not to roll her eyes and to not see the amused expression on the Potion master's face. "And then I..." She just stopped herself from finishing the rest of that line. He was already bound to think she was some sort of pathetic voyeur; no need to add 'weak and dying' to the list by explaining why she had collapsed.

He waited for her to go on, but she didn't.

"What exactly was that?" Snape asked cautiously, indicating their current postures. He was still gripping her arms, less roughly now, and she was now leaning heavily against the wall, sitting in a heap on the ground. When he briefly glanced at the exposed flesh of her calves, she hastily drew her knees together, forcing herself into a more prim sitting position, and lifted her chin defiantly.

"I must have taken ill," she said dully. When she tried to stand, he pulled her back down.

"Please, Miss Granger," he drawled. "I am not as simple-minded as that," he sneered.

"Very well, you are allowed to think whatever you like, but it doesn't change the fact that I am fine now and need to return to the ceremony, as I have to give a speech." She blanched. "Oh, God, I have to give a speech! What if I've missed it?" she shrieked in alarm.

She pulled out of his grip and quickly rose to her feet. Despite her best intentions, vertigo hit and she wobbled where she stood, flailing her arms out to catch herself. In an instant, her hands were fisted around the same folds in his robes that his former paramour had gripped earlier. His hands were gripping her elbows, steadying her.

"I hardly think you're in any condition to give a speech, Miss Granger." He eyed her warily and pursed his lips again. Hermione couldn't look away. They had the most delightful shape, she thought, and then shook her head to clear yet another inappropriate thought. Had her brain been too deprived of oxygen when she'd nearly blacked out?

She stiffened. "It's for my fiancé, Professor. I really can't miss it. Thank you very much for your assistance, I'm sorry to have been an inconvenience."

Snape cut in blocking her exit. "Fiancé?" he asked with disgust. "You're willingly agreeing to marry that?" He scowled incredulously and shook his head. Under his breath, he muttered a sour, "Why is everyone in such a rush to marry these days?"

Hermione puffed up, still aware that he was supporting her with his arms. "Evan Witherly is a very noble..." Snape snorted. "...intelligent, ambitious..." She struggled for some reason to find another polite adjective. "... *decent* person. I will not have you besmirch my betrothed's name, thank you." She stopped herself from crossing her arms for emphasis, realising it would cause her to fall ungracefully into his chest.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger, if we differ vastly in opinion." His voice matched the darkness surrounding them, and this time, Hermione did squirm under the glare directed at her.

"Clearly, we shall disagree more than once this evening." She sniffed.

He smirked again and eyed her curiously. The raised, boisterous voice of her future father-in-law floated out over the still night air, reminding Hermione of the initial reason why she had struggled to leave.

"Thank you again for your help, Professor Snape." She nodded curtly and again removed herself from his hold. Reaching an arm out to steady her weakened body against the stucco wall, she made her way slowly back to the ballroom. Shame burned her cheeks, and she inhaled one more cleansing breath as she drew herself up to her full

height, preparing to face the masses again.

She would not look back to him. She'd apologised and thanked him. There was nothing more to be said.

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Snape sighed as Lydia Disappeared from the balcony and stared once more up into the night sky. What a shame, he thought as his eyes traced Ursa Major, that he would not get to taste those heavenly delights again. He grinned wryly and amended that thought with a 'perhaps'. Lydia really would make an awful wife. But considering he'd make just as terrible a spouse as she, he let the thought go and turned his attention back to the ceremony inside.

He rolled his eyes and groaned. He would make one more quick appearance, glare at the simpering fools playing dress up all around him, and leave as quietly as possible.

His iron expression in place, Snape took a step away from the balcony when the sound of a muffled shriek stopped him in his tracks. He automatically reached for his wand and pointed it in the direction of the sound. His eyes strained in the darkness; looking just to the side of the image he could barely make out so as to see it more clearly. It looked like someone huddled over on the ground.

He crept forward, illuminating his wand, and called out, "Who's there?" Only when he was standing over the person writhing on the ground did he recognise her.

"Miss Granger?" he asked and quickly bent down to offer assistance.

The girl was clearly either seizing or having intense muscle spasms. Her entire body was trembling in a balled up, rigid mass. Her eyes were squeezed tight, and she was gasping for air, clutching at her torso. He leaned down and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up against his chest as he struggled to keep her body from flailing about too much.

He frowned at her obvious pain as he watched tears stream out of her eyelids.

"Miss Granger?" he asked again more forcefully. He wondered if she were epileptic. He couldn't recall her being on the health risks list when she was a student.

Just as he was considering casting Petrificus Totalus, she cried out again in pain and suddenly stopped moving. He gripped her upper arms and craned his neck around to peer at her face. Her mouth was slack, but she was still gulping in great lungfuls of air. Her chest was heaving, and Snape determinedly prevented his eyes from looking down into her rather appealing neckline.

He shook her lightly and twisted her around to face him and then pressed her sagging form against the wall behind her. "Miss Granger? Can you hear me?"

When she'd focused enough to gain her bearings minutes later, he had attempted to ask what had caused her to go into such a fit, but she'd stubbornly refused to give him any information. But honestly, what difference did it make? If he'd been in the same position, he wouldn't want his medical history aired out before all and creation, either. She was no longer his student, so her well-being was no longer his concern. He would do with offering his assistance in her vulnerable state and leave her to do whatever she chose.

As he watched her walk away on shaky legs, he silently approved of the determined expression she'd fixed upon her flushed face as she marched back into the sycophantic horde in the ballroom.

Dusting off his trousers, Snape followed her inside and considered his former student. He would be lying if he said he wasn't at least a bit disappointed in the life Hermione Granger was leading, at least professionally. As he was still teaching at Hogwarts, news of former students regularly reached his ears. And news of her, Potter and Weasley was always discussed around the staff lounge, much to his consistent chagrin. He, like everyone else, had assumed that Miss Granger in particular would go on to a brilliant career in whatever field she chose (though he would never admit that to anyone), as she really had been a bright student and was an impressively powerful witch. He hadn't exactly followed her career, but he listened whenever she was mentioned.

He'd heard from McGonagall repeatedly that she was heading for a very promising career in the Ministry the year after the final battle and assumed he would just have to get used to Minerva's gushing rants. But over time, he'd stopped hearing much of anything about her professional goings-on and honestly had stopped thinking about her until he'd seen her in Salamander's nearly two months previous.

With a slight grin, he remembered that night, oh yes. He'd been with Veronica, or was it Vanessa? One of the two. That witch could twist her body in ways that defied convention...what? He shook his head and remembered where he was. Scanning the sea of people before him, he located Miss Granger several feet away and cleared his throat.

When a waiter passed by with a tray of champagne, Snape plucked a glass from the eager young man and cast him an icy glare. He then leant casually against the wall near the cloak room and watched the Gryffindor while he sipped his beverage.

She was frantically whispering to the Weasley girl, who appeared to be trying to calm her down. Whatever they spoke of, no doubt the supposed speech Miss Granger had alluded to, calmed the excited young witch, for she exhaled and seemed to sag in relief. The moment didn't last long, however, because Hermione had no sooner relaxed before she turned her eyes back to the stage where Witherly Sr. stood blathering on about honour, etc., etc. Snape rolled his eyes. He took another sip of champagne and watched as the girl patted down her now considerably less bushy hair and thought back to the night at Salamander's.

He had just been escorting his rather feisty little redhead away to a night of carnal pleasure when he'd inadvertently caught the gaze of a waifish-looking girl tucked into a booth in the dark. He remembered thinking that he could almost physically see the despair rolling out of the darkness from where she'd sat and was in the process of ignoring the startled face when something triggered recognition. He'd looked again and noticed with no small surprise that he knew that girl. When he'd realised it had been the insufferable Miss Granger, he'd been slightly taken aback. She looked like less than half the ghost of the young woman he'd remembered.

He had quickly taken in her drawn facial features, the dark smudges under her eyes, the empty whiskey glasses clumped before her, and most disconcertedly, the way she'd huddled forlornly into the booth. Alone. He'd felt a moment of unaccustomed pity for the Gryffindor Golden Girl and wondered for a moment what on earth could have happened to reduce the great Miss Granger to such a state before his alluring temptress had called his attention back to the matter that was about to be literally in hand.

Looking at her now, she appeared to be in a better state, at least superficially. He heaved an irritated sigh and pushed off the wall. He'd just been pointlessly theorizing over a former pupil; the night had clearly drawn to an end.

With a final look at the now calm Granger girl, well, young woman, Severus turned and stood at the door to the cloak room and waited for the attendant. The sooner he could escape this suffocating soiree, the better.

A minute later, though, Snape had had enough of waiting. He crumpled the number written on his storage receipt and, with a growl, thrust open the door to the cloakroom and looked angrily about the darkened space. He flipped through furs and cloaks and capes of every colour and size, muttering all the while about irresponsible attendants. He'd just hastily dropped something that looked suspiciously like the hide of a dead badger and froze when he heard the unmistakable sound of passionate snogging somewhere to his left. His teaching instincts kicking into gear, he deftly wielded his wand and raised his arms to dramatically thrust open the curtain of cloaks before him. He grinned at the thought of exposing whatever inconsiderate pair dare potentially sully his formal garments when the voices he heard made him pause.

"Don't you think this is a bit risky?" a husky female voice panted. "What if we're caught? *Your fiancée* could be right outside, Evan," the familiarly voiced female pouted. Snape's ears pricked up. Did she say Evan?

"Come on, my flower. Where's your sense of daring? You said you couldn't wait to get your lovely petals on me. I'm merely obliging you."

Snape grimaced as the unmistakable sound of face sucking resumed its assault on his auditory canals.

The woman sighed. "I wish you'd just leave her already." She paused before whispering sadly, "I wanted to be your fiancée."

Having put two-and-two together, Snape thought he'd heard enough and decided to ditch his plan and escape...his cloak be damned. He was not about to listen to the rest of this conversation and, on second thought, wanted absolutely no part in whatever was going on behind those cloaks. He had just turned around and was in the process of quietly sneaking back out of that accursed closet, when the next words stopped his retreat and rooted him firmly to the floor.

The younger man muttered complacently, "Don't fret, Pansy. You may, yet. I know you're upset, and if the circumstances were different, you *would* be all mine." She tutted. "I mean it. I was in the process of leaving her but... I'm only staying with her out of pity."

"Pity!" she hissed indignantly.

The man sighed. "She's dying." The woman gasped. Snape closed his eyes.

"What?" the woman breathed after a moment. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"She wants it kept quiet. She was poisoned a few months ago. Remember when that rogue Death Eater, Dolohov it was, broke into her department at the Ministry?" There was a quiet pause.

"But, I thought everything was fine. They got him, and no one was seriously hurt."

"That's what we thought. Then she started getting sick shortly after the attack. I thought she was pregnant..." Pansy huffed at his words. "...and so I forced her to go to a Healer."

There was another moment of silence during which Snape gripped his wand harshly...restraining himself from turning around and doing something he would regret about a situation he really had no business minding.

"But," Pansy started.

"It's slowly killing her. She only has a few more months. I can't very well abandon a dying woman, Pansy. Last wish and whatnot."

Snape was disgusted, and he'd reached his limit. He turned around and, plunging his hands into the wall of cloaks before him, ripped open a hole in the fabrics to find a very startled Evan Witherly and Pansy Parkinson cowering before him, very much *in flagrante delicto*.

Pansy grabbed the nearest cloak and made to cover her partially exposed upper body. "Sir!" she shrieked in alarm. Evan began hastily fastening his trousers.

Snape's black eyes bore into his former students', and he glared at them murderously. "How very cliché. The cloakroom? Really?" He cast a contemptuous glance at each of them. "Mr. Witherly. Miss Parkinson."

"Sir, what, that is, I..." Pansy stammered as she fixed her dress robes and looked down in shame.

"No need," the Potions master cut her off. "I highly suggest that the both of you abandon your distasteful display before you cause a scene," he hissed. He glared once more at them and looked at his former Slytherin. "Even I thought you'd have a bit more class, Miss Parkinson."

He spun on his heel and made for the door of the cloakroom with half a mind to magically seal it behind him. What a mess. He knew he shouldn't have come tonight. But oh, no, Lydia just had to come to one more Ministry function with him. He carefully poked his head around the doorjamb and quickly looked around the room to see where Granger had got to. It really was none of his business. If Evan Witherly wanted to fool around on his dying wife, that was his prerogative.

But Severus wasn't completely without emotion. This was no way for the brightest witch of her age, a war hero, and lamentably kind-natured person that was Hermione Granger to be treated. He looked around him and still hadn't spotted her.

So, she was dying. That certainly explained some things. Snape frowned again; how unfortunate. He clenched his jaw and was just about to leave the cloakroom when, Merlin be cursed, the ill-fated Gryffindor all but materialised before him.

"Professor." She sighed. "I'm sorry if I was rude to you earlier."

"Miss Granger," Snape replied, startled. He stood up, not-coincidentally blocking the entrance to the room behind him. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I hope I'm not the reason why you're leaving. You assisted me, and I was cold and tactless," she explained. "I'm sorry, you were just trying to help, and I was a bit disoriented." She paused as her fiancé suddenly appeared behind Snape.

"Evan?" she asked in surprise. "What are you doing in the cloakroom...?" Parkinson appeared beside him with very disheveled-looking hair. The Slytherin's jaw dropped, and her eyes popped open wide. Evan thinned his lips and looked cautiously at his betrothed, then to Snape and back. Snape, for his part, stood awkwardly between them and held his breath.

Hermione glanced between Evan and Pansy; her look of surprised confusion very quickly melting into one of painful understanding. She inhaled and took a step back. Snape looked at her furrowed brow and trembling lip and felt a momentary stab of sympathy on her behalf.

He stepped away from the adulterous pair behind him and towards the distraught witch in front of him.

"Now, Hermione," Evan chastised and straightened his cuffs, "don't let your imagination get ahead of yourself."

Snape cut a harsh glare at the Ravenclaw, effectively quieting him. Pansy raised her chin defiantly.

"Evan," Hermione whispered, still backing away. A tear slipped down her cheek. "How... how could you?" She shook her head and looked at him piteously.

The younger man took a cautious step towards her, palms up in submission. "Hermione," he struggled for the right words, but only came up with, "it isn't what you think." Even Snape rolled his eyes.

Hermione let out a short bark of laughter. "Really? And what would I be thinking, *Evan*?"

Snape looked between them and then at a pathway through the crowd that had just made itself visible. He desperately wanted to be anywhere but right there, but an ingrained sense of duty to his former comrade made him stay put. He'd stay just long enough to make sure that the little prick beside him didn't do anything else foolish, he thought to himself. He'd wait until someone closer to the couple could get there.

Hermione looked from Evan to Snape, heartbreak clearly evident in her eyes. Snape met her gaze briefly before looking away. Where was that Weasley girl when you needed her...?

Overhead, Witherly Sr.'s officious voice was calling for the first speech of the evening. "Please, everyone; give a warm welcome to a witch who is particularly close to me; my son's future wife and Order of Merlin, Second Class recipient, Hermione Granger!"

All around them, the audience applauded and cheered, looking about for the clever war heroine to emerge. Hermione's jaw worked silently as she looked about her,



paralysed. Snape watched as Evan stepped next to her and placed his hands on her arms.

"Go on, dear." He gently prodded her forward. "No need to make a scene now. We can discuss this later."

Snape clenched his jaw in annoyance, but forced himself to walk away. This was out of his hands, and he'd been privy to this ridiculousness for far longer than he cared to be. He was going back to his dungeons and a nice glass of Firewhisky. Or five.

Severus saw a flash of red hair and relaxed as he realised that the Weasley girl had finally found her friend. He carefully slipped through the gaps of people, dodging yet another overly helpful server, and nearly ran for the exit ahead. As he reached the sanctity of the entrance hall, he glanced back at the platform at the front of the room. He winced at what he saw. Hermione had been jostled to the stage and was staring out ahead of her with an expression of shock, hurt, and bewilderment. The crowd began murmuring in confusion.

"Hermione? Go on, now." Witherly Sr. laughed nervously beside her.

She opened her mouth to speak, but caught sight of someone, presumably her wretched "fiancé", and with one final piteous look, released the painful sob she'd been withholding before turning to rush off the stage, Ginny Weasley following closely after.

Severus frowned. Turning on his heel, he Disapparated away. Surely, someone else would help her now.

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A/N: **Thank you again** to my infinitely lovely beta, machshefa, and for everyone's kind words of encouragement and thoughts. They are very much appreciated and welcomed. :) The reviews have been so nice! I'm still not at a level I'd like to be, but practise makes perfect. Right...?