

# An Unlikely Prince

*by lady\_rhian*

"If I'm Snow White, does that make you Prince Charming?" Written for averygoodun, SS/HG Exchange Summer 2010.

## I

*Chapter 1 of 4*

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Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR. I'm just borrowing her toys and playing with them.

A/N: Many, many thanks to Shug (sshg316), DeeMichelle, and Camillo for their encouragement, humor, and badass beta/Brit-pick skills.

This story would not be here were it not for averygoodun, who asked for Snape as Snow White. Thanks to the mods who saw fit to give me such a marvelous prompt, and an added thank you to talesofsnape for the story banner.



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"When I was a little girl, I just wanted the fairy tale, you know?"

Hermione rubbed Ginny's back and gazed out at the city from her perch on a bench on Primrose Hill. The view of the London skyline was beautiful.

"Things will turn out all right," Hermione repeated. "So what if he's not Prince Charming? No one is. You've got to take these guys off their white horses, Gin. They're human beings. Bound to fail. That's not necessarily a bad thing. No one can live up to fairy tale expectations."

Ginny sniffled and blew her nose into her handkerchief. "I thought Dean could."

Hermione put her arm around Ginny. "The view is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Not exactly subtle, but thanks for the distraction," Ginny said. "This park is great! Thanks for bringing me here. And lunch was good."

"Marks and Sparks is always good for comfort food."

Ginny sighed and wiped her nose. "It's nice to be able to cry in public."

"Nobody knows Weasley hair in Muggle London," Hermione said. "Here, they just think you're a foxy ginger."

Ginny giggled. "Oh, I needed that," she said, calming down. "I suppose we'd better get back to work."

"I don't have to get back to work right away..." Hermione started.

"But you will. Even as a consultant you can't help keeping to an eight-to-four schedule. I would not do that if I were in your shoes." A breeze gusted in, and Ginny bent forward and slid her arms into her jacket.

Hermione wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. "I like the freedom in consulting. I keep regular hours, but I choose my own projects."

"If not your research partner." Ginny grinned and winked.

Hermione was less than amused. She let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't know why they put us together. We drive each other mad."

"But the results are spectacular," Ginny said. "We hear about them in the Wizengamot. Once people got past the shock that Snape was actually willing to work with a former student, they were able to concentrate on the amazing work you were doing. It's been ... what, a year now?"

"A year since they started putting us together on every project? Yes. To be fair, we always wanted the same assignments. Except right now...we're working on solo projects. But I still ask him for his opinion. I'm so used to working with him every day that I can't help but ask." Hermione noted Ginny's expression. "It's not like that. You know it's not like that. He's an incredible researcher. *Wickedly* smart. I have to remember that when he's being his infuriating self."

Ginny snorted. "So long as his personality doesn't start rubbing off on you. Or his fashion sense."

Hermione looked down at her black-and-white outfit. "This is professional."

"You haven't worn color in I can't remember how long..." Ginny started.

"This conversation is over." Hermione reached for her purse, a smile on her face. "Shall we?"

Ginny took Hermione's arm as they started to walk down the hill. "Diagon Alley, here we come. Maybe we can grab a drink before..."

"I am not drinking during my lunch break," Hermione said firmly. Ginny laughed.

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Two hours later, Hermione was power-walking down a Ministry hallway, her heels clicking furiously against the marble floor. She rushed past other employees only to stop suddenly in front of a mahogany office door.

"Snape!" She banged on the door, ignoring the frightened look of employees passing by. "I know you're in there. Let me in!"

She shoved the door open so hard it banged into the wall. She immediately looked at the sullen man behind the desk. His hair fell in jetty, oily strands against his shoulders, standing in stark contrast to the crisp white shirt. She knew he was wearing black trousers, and she immediately regretted their matching wardrobes. *Ginny was right.*

Severus hadn't flinched, but he did look rather annoyed. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "It's early, Granger."

"It's two o'clock in the afternoon." She paused. "Late night?"

He waved her forward.

Hermione smiled at him ruefully. "What...no flask to tide you over?"

He folded his arms across his chest and glared. She met his stare straight on.

"Right, well." Hermione dropped the inch-thick folder on his desk and dragged the heavy chair around so that she could sit next to him.

Severus pulled the file toward him and flipped it open. "What exactly should I be seeing?"

"Grids," she gritted through her teeth as she moved the chair. "What is this chair made of? Adamantium?"

Snape ignored her. "What should these grids be telling me?"

Hermione grunted as she sank into the chair. "There's text," she said.

"I need bi-focals."

"You had a corrective..."

"Simplify it for me," he said, tapping his fingers impatiently. "Now."

She breathed in through her nose.

"Subtlety, Granger. Subtlety if at all possible."

Ignoring the fact that it was the second time she had been told that in one afternoon, she sat down in the chair, reached for the files, and pulled them closer to her, ignoring his sullen posture.

"These maps show the geographic locations that have high concentrations of magic. Basically, magical communities. London, Paris, Moscow, and Athens have the highest concentration of magical activity in all of Europe. There are a few other clusters around cities or sites of historical importance." She turned the page. "And this grid attempts to identify the locations that influence the public attitude of magical communities."

She studied his face as he drew the map side-by-side. His brow furrowed. "They don't match."

"Exactly," she said. "What I hoped to find was that the sites of influence would match the magical communities, but there are a few influential locations which do not

register...at all...on the magical communities map."

Severus turned to Hermione. "Have you ever seen X-Men? You're rather like Dr. Xavier."

"Pardon?" she asked, eyes widening in surprise.

He looked back at the grid. "Never mind."

"Were ... were you offering personal information just now?" she asked, attempting to suppress a grin.

Severus gave her what she had come to call his professor glare. "So the sites that don't match, Granger...what's your diagnosis?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Well, I'm worried!"

He gave her a chastising smile. "Why?"

"You don't see the dangers?" she asked, gesturing towards the grids.

He waved his hand. "Your influence grid, if I may call it that, does not register whether the sites of influence are inducing negative or positive emotions in the magical communities. For example, those sites could be considered holy to certain faiths..."

"Are you honestly going down that road?"

"I'm just saying to take a step back and think about the various types of influence that are exerted on witches and wizards every day, and the way in which they differ in the type of activity they inspire. For example, a romantic advertisement may inspire a husband to buy flowers for his wife, whereas the latest song by the Weird Sisters may inspire a wife to hire a private investigator. There are very, very different types of influence, Granger. I suggest you get a better map before showing it to anyone."

"I already showed it to an Unspeakable, and he thought it should be given critical attention right away."

"Not..."

Hermione glanced at him sharply. "Don't. He's a good man."

"I still can't believe they recruited him as an Unspeakable." Severus swore under his breath. "Was my generation the last to learn common sense at Hogwarts?"

Hermione ignored him. "Look, I can try to quantify the types of influence, if you like," she offered. "It'll be damned near impossible, but I'll try. For you, I'll try."

He snorted. "How generous."

"It's just that I'm worried about one spot in particular," she continued.

Severus lifted his chin, interested. "Which one?"

"Well, more than one. These." She pointed to several dots. "They're emanating from France, and they hold a powerful influence on citizens in every single magical community in Europe. In some cases, they have more influence than the ministries."

Severus leaned back in his chair, unperturbed. "And you're worried because..."

She sighed. "I don't trust anything that holds that kind of power. Whatever it is, it can't be good."

He paused and licked his lips. "What if it is?"

Hermione did a double take. "Come again?" she asked.

"What if those spots are exerting a positive influence?"

She folded her arms across her chest. "Who are you and what have you done with my consulting partner?"

"I'm not your partner on this project," he clarified. "No matter. I'll be sure the appropriate people are on my side."

She chuffed. "So now you're claiming that you're better with people than I am?"

"Just better at scaring them. On the whole, you're far more pleasant to interact with."

Hermione threw her pen at him, grabbed the file, and started toward the door.

"Aggravated assault?" she heard him say behind her. She whipped around to see him grinning behind his desk.

"I'd be doing wizarding Britain a favor," she said.

She slammed his door shut and let out a loud groan just as Arthur Weasley was walking past. He approached her with a wide smile.

"Trouble in paradise?" he asked.

"I don't know why I ask his advice, Arthur. That man makes me hopping mad!" she exclaimed.

Arthur patted her shoulder. "I don't know that I've ever seen you so flustered in public. Might want to tone it down a little," he said.

"You're retiring and yet still giving advice," she said with a chuckle.

"What kind of ministerial advisor would I be if I didn't?" he asked, nodding to other employees as they passed by. "I'll see you tonight?"

"I wouldn't miss your party for the world." Hermione grinned.

The grandfather clock in the hall started to chime, and Arthur checked his watch. "I'm late," he announced. "See you this evening, dear."

"Goodbye, Arthur," Hermione said. She walked down the hallway, already counting down the hours to the private retirement party. And, of course, the deliciously spiked punch that George would be sure to supply.

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Hermione Apparated onto the lawn around five o'clock. She smiled as she walked toward the house; the lights illuminated it against the setting sun, and the raucous noise coming from within told her that the whole family must have arrived by now. There would only be a few non-familial guests; the retirement party at the Ministry had satisfied that need.

She knocked on the door and was met by Headmistress McGonagall.

"Hermione," the older woman said warmly, beckoning her into the kitchen. "It's good to see you."

"You, too, Minerva." Hermione embraced her mentor. "Looks like I'm a little bit late."

"Fashionably, as it were," Minerva said, smiling as Ginny threw her arms around Hermione's neck.

"Ginny, where did you put the cinnamon?" Molly's voice boomed through the kitchen.

"Hi, Molly," Hermione called.

"Oh, Hermione," Molly said, sticking her head out from the cupboard. "So good to see you, dear. Would you be a love and lend Ginny to me for a second?"

"Coming, Mum," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"So who is here and where is George's punch?" Hermione asked her mentor.

"Difficult day?" Minerva arched an eyebrow.

"Snape," Hermione said, her lips pulled into a thin smile.

"Speak of the devil," a low voice came up behind them. Hermione turned around, whipping her hair in Snape's face.

"You," she said.

"Punch?" he asked, holding out two glasses.

"You're a gentleman when it suits you," Minerva said. "Thank you, dear boy."

Hermione snorted. Snape glared.

"You can't intimidate me anymore, Snape. I've worked with you." Hermione took such a large gulp of punch she almost choked.

"I thought you might need a drink before sitting down to dinner with ... the clan." Snape paused. "If you'll excuse me."

"How dare he walk away?" Hermione asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"He marches to his own drum." Minerva waved her hand. "Never mind his antics. This is exceptional, though." She admired the glass. "Ah, I know where I've had this before."

"The last Weasley celebration?" Hermione asked.

"Hogwarts staff party. Snape brought his own brew tonight. And thank Circe, because George's punch has been lacking since the twins were born." Minerva smiled. "Cheers to you, darling."

"Cheers to Arthur." They clinked glasses.

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Dinner was a smooth affair, if a loud one. Kingsley gave a moving toast that was punctured by the squalling cries of Fred and Roxanne Weasley. Snape's grimaces were entertaining to watch. Hermione had situated herself between Minerva and Ginny at the children's table, where they listened to Molly and Angelina swap tales of motherhood. Every once in a while, Hermione glanced over to the other table, where Arthur, Kingsley, Snape, and the Weasley brothers were sharing laughs over something that was sure to be more interesting than nappies. They all were smiling, Snape included. Even Ron's presence at the table didn't seem to bother him.

"Stop staring," Ginny whispered at one point. "Mum will notice."

Hermione turned her attention back to the table and ignored the flush creeping up her chest. "Where's Fleur this evening?" she asked.

"Away on business," Bill said. They all looked up as he strode into the kitchen to put his plates in the sink, an action that earned him a glowing smile from his mother. "She'll be here in an hour or two. In the meantime, would Victoire like to read a story?"

"Yes!" the four-year-old said, waving her hands in the air.

"She can read?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"For six months now. She's smart as a whip, my baby." Bill kissed her forehead. "Uncle Ron wants to read you a story."

Victoire clapped her hands together. "Uncle Ron, Uncle Ron!" she said, perfectly articulating his name.

"Bless that child," Minerva said as they left the kitchen. "She's going to give some poor boy hell one day."

The women laughed.

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A half hour later, Hermione stood in the doorway between the dining room and sitting room, watching Ron read a story to Victoire. *He really is good with kids*, she thought. She was still surprised that he didn't have a family of his own by now. They'd decided to call things off five years ago or so, after she'd taken the consulting job with the Ministry. Simply put, Ron wanted a family. She didn't.

*Not yet, anyway.* She glanced around the room. Kingsley had been called away on Ministry business, and George and Angelina had packed up the twins and headed out for the night. Minerva was having a cup of tea with Molly and Ginny, and Arthur was with his older sons on the back porch enjoying a pipe. And Snape ...

"Enjoying yourself?"

She jumped. "Snape." She put her hand over her heart. "Why are you always creeping up on people?"

He chuckled and leaned against the other side of the doorframe.

"You're not going to answer, are you?" she asked. He smiled. "Well, at least you seem to be in a jovial mood."

"Jovial, no. Pleasant ... perhaps."

"Arthur seems happy," Hermione said, keeping her eyes on Ron and Victoire. "Some people, when they retire...it's like they're being forced out. They don't have anything

else to go to."

"Arthur doesn't have that problem," Snape said. "He's got more grandchildren than he knows what to do with."

Hermione laughed. "He only has..."

"See? You have to count."

"Three were here tonight ... Fleur is pregnant ... who am I missing? Percy! Percy and his wife weren't here," Hermione said. "And they have two little ones."

"I didn't figure you for the mothering type."

She shrugged. "Not really. I like kids, but it's more the idea of ..." She cut herself off and stared at the floor.

"Hermione..." Severus started, but he paused. She looked up at him, surprised.

"You said my name," she said. He didn't respond; he just looked at her. In the background, she heard Victoire's high-pitched voice reading, "Once upon a time ..."

They stood there, barely a foot apart, looking at each other. Hermione jumped when she heard Minerva call for her from the kitchen.

She swallowed and met his gaze. "I..."

"Go," he said softly.

Their arms brushed as she walked past him. She shivered and willed herself not to turn around. When she walked into the kitchen, the conversation stopped. "What?" she asked.

Ginny's eyes were wide. "You're flushed. Blushing like crazy."

"What?" Hermione whipped around and looked at herself in the hallway mirror. "Oh, shit."

"Who were you talking to?" Minerva asked, though Hermione knew that Minerva knew exactly who she had been with.

She noticed Molly's curious glance, and she tried to silently communicate *not here* to Ginny when they heard Ron scream.

Hermione's eyes widened, and the four women bolted into the sitting room, where they found Ron sitting with Victoire on his lap, her face buried in his chest...and a very dead Snape lying on the floor.

## II

### Chapter 2 of 4

In which Hermione goes on a quest.

Disclaimer: Just playing with some of my favorite toys is all. I promise to put them back in JKR's toybox when I'm done with them.

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"Circe!"

"Merlin!"

"What happened?"

"Oh, *God*." Hermione knelt down next to Snape and checked his pulse, trying to ignore her quivering hands. There was no intensity in his eyes, just a slack dullness indicative of... "There's a pulse," she said. "It's faint, but it's there." She turned to Ron, who was still staring, wide-eyed, at Snape's body. "Ron, what happened?" she asked with as much gentleness as she could muster.

"Ginny, get your father," Molly said. "Hermione dear, a few inches please." Hermione scooted over, and Molly began to wave her arm, expertly casting diagnostics.

"He doesn't have a concussion or any brain damage. No internal bleeding. No broken bones, either," she pronounced. "We can move him off the floor."

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked, and Minerva laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Molly was the best Healer at St. Mungo's before she had Charlie. And she had seven children." Minerva helped Hermione to her feet as Molly gently levitated Snape to the sofa.

"Now, Ron..." Molly was saying just as Arthur, Bill, and Fleur came through the door. "Oh, you're here."

"Severus is catatonic..." Minerva started.

Fleur let out a string of French words and put her hands on her hips. Activity in the room halted.

"Fleur?" Molly asked.

Fleur took off her suit jacket with a resigned look on her face. "Who let Victoire read a fairy tale?"

Hermione crinkled her brow and looked at Ginny, who shrugged her shoulders.

"What do you mean, dear?" Minerva asked. "What does Victoire reading a fairy tale have to do with Severus being ill?"

"Professor Snape is embodying the essence of Snow White, by the look of it," Fleur said matter-of-factly. Hermione looked at Ginny, completely confused.

Molly sucked in her breath. "You told us about that..."

"*Oui*, which is why I'm assuming it's not you or Arthur who read her the story. Charlie? Ron?" Fleur asked.

Ron waved his hand meekly. "I read her Cinderella and then let her read Snow White..."

Fleur nodded. "Just as I thought. I'll need some help," she said.

"Hold on," Hermione said, walking over to Fleur. "The rest of us have no idea what's going on. What's happened to Snape?" she paused. "Why are you saying he's ... Snow White?"

Bill picked up Victoire. "Say goodnight to everyone, honey," Bill said.

"Good night, everybody," Victoire said. Bill brought her over to Fleur, and Fleur kissed the top of her forehead. "Good night, *ma chérie*. Maman loves you." Victoire waved to everyone as Bill took her upstairs.

Fleur took a deep breath. "The Veela are the Keepers of Fairy Tales. It's part of what gives us our ... allure?" She winked at her husband as he left the room with sleepy four-year-old in his arms. "When one of us reads a fairy tale aloud, we speak it into existence. The essence of the fairy tale goes into the body of the individual who is not only close by but who also is ... similar to the essence being spoken."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm confused. You're saying that fairy tales are real things?"

"They are a rich part of our magical history, dear," Molly said. "It's not often taught at Hogwarts."

"*This*," Minerva said, gesturing to Severus, "is exactly why we don't teach them. We don't want students going off looking for them and getting themselves into who knows what kind of trouble."

Fleur nodded. "It's best if it is not known that the tales literally exist. They were part of our history once, and the essences...the souls of the stories...were captured within literal forms by powerful witches and wizards hundreds and hundreds of years ago," she said. "The Veela were charged with keeping the forms safe. With that duty comes the power to speak them into existence, if need be, to save the tales."

"Why would someone want the stories?" Hermione asked. The room was silent.

"The person who best knows the answer to that question is currently unconscious," Arthur said quietly. "The tales are sources of hope for millions worldwide, wizard and non-wizard alike. If they were to be destroyed ..."

"The power of the tales would be diluted," Minerva finished, taking a seat next to Severus' body.

"So there are people...dark wizards, I presume...who have tried to steal the tales before?" Hermione asked Fleur.

Fleur nodded. "Thus, the Veela could speak the essences into being to keep the literal forms from the hands of *goux*," she said, looking to Charlie for the translation.

"Villains," Charlie offered.

"Exactly." She took a deep breath and stared at Severus. "But eventually the essences have to be extracted from the humans they've gone into. First, if the person is killed with the essence in them, the essence is destroyed."

"Not to mention the person!" Hermione interjected. Ginny put a gentle hand on Hermione's arm.

"Second, the essence overrides the person's conscious mind. Every body reacts to an essence differently. If the essence is in the body for too long, the person may not be the same ... after," Fleur said.

"So we need to get it out of Snape as quickly as possible," Hermione said. "Or else it'll damage him."

"Not we," Fleur said with a smile. "*Tu*."

"Why me?" Hermione looked around, confused.

"The ingredients for the antidote must be gathered by either a human being or a Muggle-born wizard or witch," Fleur said.

"That's ridiculous!" Hermione said. Ginny put her hand on Hermione's arm.

Fleur looked at her apologetically. "I don't make the rules. And now, if Hermione and I could have the room to ourselves, I need to explain some things."

"I have a question," Hermione said loudly. "How is it that almost everyone in this room knew about the tales' existence..." she looked pointedly at Arthur, Molly, Bill, and Minerva..."but none of you guessed that this was ... that?"

"I've never seen it happen before," Molly said. "Fleur told us about this years ago but we never expected ..."

"I thought we had locked up all of the fairy tales," Arthur said.

"It's my fault," Ron said, speaking up for the first time.

"No," Fleur said, moving over to put her arm around Ron. "No, it's not. We should have told the entire family. You had no way of knowing what would happen." She kissed him on the cheek.

Everyone cleared out of the room. Minerva gave Hermione a tight hug. "You'll bring him back. You can do this," she said.

"Thank you," Hermione said. She turned to Ginny, who was standing there with a goofy grin on her face.

"Guess who gets to be the knight in shining armour?" she asked.

"Ginevra Weasley..." Hermione started.

"Out, out!" Fleur told Ginny, shooing her from the room.

"Has anyone ever told you how scary you can be, Fleur?" Hermione asked.

Fleur smiled. "*Oui*. Many times. Now, as to why I made everyone leave." She shut the door and turned to Hermione. "You are the only one who can discover the

ingredients and the location of the Keeper."

Hermione crinkled her brow. "I thought the Veela were the Keepers?"

"Generally speaking, yes. We protect the secret. But there is one who is charged with literally protecting the essences. You must gather the ingredients for the antidote and send them to her. After gathering the ingredients, she will find you."

"How will she reach me? Through summoning?" Hermione asked. She shivered. "Can't you only do that if you have a mark?" She glanced at Snape's scarred forearm.

"You care for him, don't you?" Fleur asked.

Hermione looked at the floor, feeling herself flush for the second time that evening. "He's my research partner."

Fleur made a noise that let Hermione know she thought otherwise. "You are uniquely qualified to help him, Hermione. You're smart, quick-thinking. You can go into unknown territory and obtain the unobtainable." She smiled. "*Sans peur*. No fear."

Hermione chuckled. "I wish I had that same confidence. Are these ingredients hard to get?"

"They shouldn't be. I don't anticipate that there will be dark wizards itching to get in your way, let alone track you through the French countryside," Fleur said. "Not right now."

"I'm going to France?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Yes. Now, about that mark. Give me your palm."

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Half an hour later, Hermione arrived on the coast of western France, a bit unnerved but desperate to get this quest over and done with. How had she been roped into this? Ah, yes. Muggle-born witch who had the right disposition. Or so Fleur had said.

She zipped up her jacket, cooled by the breeze billowing off the Atlantic, and walked toward the forest ahead of her. Her right palm was still itching. Fleur had emblazoned it with ... something. She wasn't quite sure what. Well, no, she knew what the image was on her palm; she just wasn't sure what it meant.

*A blooming rose. They could have come up with something better.*

She tried to ignore the anger at having been chosen, at having been sent out of Britain at a moment's notice, but she was also trying to ignore the excitement at having made a new discovery. Fairy tales. Honestly, who would have thought?

... *Severus. Snape. Severus. Snape. Shit.* She shook her head. She didn't know what to call him anymore. If Hermione could paint a picture that looked like today, she would paint one of those messy murals where the artist just threw paint at the wall to see where it would land. Blue, her conversation with Ginny. Red, her argument with Snape... Severus...whatever. Yellow, her arrival at the Weasley's. Fear...

What color was fear? Black? Black...her feeling when she walked into the sitting room and saw Severus lying on the ground.

She swallowed. Why him? There had been plenty of other people in the Weasley home. From what Fleur had explained, the essence wouldn't just go into the person nearest to the speaker; it also took into consideration temperament.

*How the hell is Snape like Snow White?*

Images of the Disney film came, unbidden, to her mind. She almost laughed at the thought of Snape whistling while he worked. Not to mention the thought of him in an apron ...

She walked deeper and deeper into the forest. There was no moon and the darkness was absolute. She whispered a spell to heighten her eyesight and another to eliminate the noise her trainers made. And another for warmth. Why on earth had she agreed to go on this quest immediately?

Because bodies react differently to essences.

She didn't think Snape was the type to react well to something trying to take over his soul.

*Best get a move on.* Fleur had said there would be a grove somewhere.... She pulled her wand out of her jacket pocket. "Point me," she whispered.

East.

She walked for several minutes before being hit on the head with...

A falling apple.

"*Seriously? That's the first clue?*" had been her words to Fleur, who had looked at her sternly and reminded her that each antidote had to contain an ingredient particular to the essence that had been released.

Hermione still thought it was ridiculous. With a sigh, she muttered, *Lumos*. "

She sucked in her breath as light illuminated the black space. Before her spread an apple orchard with no end in sight...lush, plump red apples ripe for the picking, shining almost eerily. And she only needed one.

Hermione strode toward the tree furthest to the left; it was positively enormous and seemed to have the best apples, and quality had to count for something. She took a moment to savor the scent of ripe fruit, the feel of the dewy grass beneath her feet. Taking an apple from the enormously engorged tree, she sniffed it, buffed its skin on her trouser leg as if it were a cricket ball, and, with determination, pressed the apple to the blooming rose emblazoned on her hand.

It disappeared.

Hermione jumped about a foot. "Holy..." Her heart started racing. Fleur was right. Oh, goodness. She took a deep breath. "Breathe," she told herself. "Breathe."

So the ingredients would travel through the symbol on her palm to the Master Keeper to brew ...

Shaking her hands, she started to walk deeper into the orchard, trying to calm herself down. Reaching up randomly, she plucked an apple and started eating it. Delicious. She walked and ate, trying to ignore the terror of the black night sky and the rising fear that she wouldn't find the clue as to where to go next, when she glanced up and halted.

Standing before her, in the middle of the orchard, was a cottage.



### Chapter 3 of 4

In which the past and present come together.

Disclaimer: As always, it all belongs to JKR.

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Hermione stood staring at the cottage. She counted seven windows. She walked toward it, with trepidation at first, and then excitement. Was it...could it be?

She ducked her head to go through the door. *Lumos.* The cottage lit up...it was dusty from neglect but the wood was well preserved. Hermione looked around the open space, noting a wood stove and a small table with seven...no, eight...chairs. Eight place settings.

"Oh, gosh," she whispered. She smiled. *She's real.*

*Severus...*

Hermione sneezed and shook her head. She could come back here later. Couldn't she? She looked around the cottage once more, soaking in the sight, before heading back out of the door. She had to get the next ingredient. She reached for the next Portkey in her pocket.

"I'll be back," she said to the cottage. She closed her eyes, whispered the passcode into the Portkey, and flew into the night sky.

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Moments later, Hermione was standing on a cliff overlooking what she was fairly certain was the Mediterranean. *The stars are gorgeous.* Everything about this place was beautiful, even in the dead of night. Goodness, at three in the morning, the breeze was warm. Then again, it was the height of summer.

*But then again, it could be a mirage.* Hermione took in the landscape. To her left, there was the cliff, and to her right, a forest. One of them was not real; one was concealing the second ingredient.

She walked around for a few moments and pulled out her wand, casting a variety of spells to reveal, to unveil, to break. Nothing. She ran her hand across the bark of the trees and walked back over to the cliff, going as close to the edge as she dared. She even threw a rock over to see if it would drop. It did.

*Damn it.* Everything felt real. *Fleur was right.*

This intuition, this trusting...nothing about this process was logical. Fleur had told her not to "check" her reality, just to remember. Hermione still had no idea what that was supposed to accomplish.

*"Remember a memory that links you directly to Severus, one that is fraught with emotion...soak in the memory...think of as many details as you can. Nature will know what to do."*

Hermione sat down on the edge of the cliff. Remember. There were so many memories to choose from ... and then, she thought of the perfect memory. The first one. The first time they met...again.

---

Hermione walked down the corridor attempting to hide her nerves. It was her first assignment as a consultant for the Department of Mysteries, and she was about to meet her new research partner. She silently prayed that it wasn't the last dunderhead she had worked with in the Department of Justice; that would be most unfortunate.

She glanced at her reflection in a mirror as she strode past the portraits of past Ministers. She looked smart, at least. No-nonsense. Business professional. A gray, tailored Muggle pantsuit with a smart navy blouse and sensible heels. Hair pulled back in a bun with a few loose tendrils in front. Apparently, that showed personality, or so Ginny said.

*Here we go.* She knocked on Ms. Lee's door and heard the DoM liaison call, "Come in."

Hermione strode to the desk and extended her hand to the petite Asian woman sitting opposite her. "Ms. Lee." She smiled. "A pleasure to see you again."

Ms. Lee nodded, looking a bit peaky, and gestured to the corner behind Hermione. "Your research partner."

Hermione turned around. She didn't know what dropped faster, her jaw or her briefcase. Lounging comfortably in one of Ms. Lee's lounge chairs was a very alive...and very dashing...Severus Snape. Black trousers, white shirt, leather jacket, feral grin.

"Professor..." Hermione started before she could stop herself.

"Snape," he corrected her. He was sipping a drink...whiskey? She blinked. It wasn't even 10 in the morning.

"Whiskey, Ms. Granger? Or is it not quite your style?" he asked.

Hermione bristled, her indignance overriding the shock of seeing him. *You want to play? Let's play.* She put her hands on her hips and met his glare straight on. "It's Granger."

"Is this the sort of attitude I'm to be met with throughout the course of the assignment, Ms. Lee?" Snape asked.

Hermione held her hand up before Ms. Lee could answer.

"It's not every day one sees a ghost resurrected," she said. She let her arms fall to her sides. "And if you don't mind, I will have a whiskey, thank you."

Snape arched an eyebrow in surprise, but he poured her a glass and levitated it to her. She sipped it and tried not to choke.

"Bold," Snape said, keeping his eyes on her the whole time. "Or stupid."



"Is civility going to be a problem?" Hermione asked.

Snape rose from his seat and came to take one of the chairs opposite Ms. Lee. "As long as you don't challenge me. And try not to interfere."

"Why would I interfere?" Hermione asked, taking the seat next to him. "Incompetence?"

"Quite the contrary," he said, unbuttoning the cuffs of his crisp white shirt and rucking them up to his elbows. "You're a ministry workhorse, and I don't tend to follow their rules."

Hermione cut off Ms. Lee's attempted interjection. She leaned over the arm of her chair toward Snape. "And what exactly makes you think I'm one of them?" she asked, making every effort to keep her tone level.

His mouth twitched. "Are you correcting my assumption?" He looked almost amused.

"I don't work for the ministry...I consult. Like you, I have never acquired the taste for government oversight." She leaned back in her chair.

"Well then." Snape looked rather pleased with himself. "Ms. Lee, I don't think Granger here is going to be a problem."

"Wonderful. If we can continue..." Ms. Lee started.

"One more thing," Hermione interrupted, turning to face Snape again. "I will challenge you whenever I damn well please."

Snape snorted.

After they received their assignment, Hermione walked out of the door without another word to Snape, ran to the bathroom, and promptly threw up.

---

Suddenly, Hermione felt her palm burning. The rose was coming alive...no, not alive. It was glowing a silver color. "Pointing the way, are you?" Hermione asked to no one in particular. She got to her feet and held her palm up toward the cliff. Nothing. She walked toward the forest and held her palm up and...

It dissipated into a mist, a fog that hung in the air for a few moments before it sank into the ground. Hermione shielded her eyes as a silver light flashed. When the light dimmed, Hermione found herself standing before an acre of land, bare but for the coffin standing in the middle of it. The light was emanating from within the coffin.

*Freaky.*

She approached the coffin and put her hand over her heart. "Oh, my goodness." The coffin was glass but each pane was edged with gold filigree, inset with rubies and diamonds. It was empty, save for a stunning silver tiara that rested on a purple pillow.

The tiara was lighting the entire field.

"Wow," she said, leaning in to examine the coffin. She found what looked to be an inscription in the gold, so she knelt down, feeling the dew of the grass soaking her trousers. She crawled along the edge of the coffin as she read the inscription aloud:

Here lay a princess,

Fairest of them all.

Felled by direst cruelty,

Raised by true love's call.

Well, that's anti-climactic, she thought, and sat back on her bum before she remembered that the ground was wet. Oh, well.

"True love's call," she mused, plopping her hands on her lap. She supposed that Snow White...if the Grimm's tale was to be believed...had been raised by true love, in a way; it was only because a prince desired her body that the coffin was lifted, and then dropped, in the first place. Hermione much preferred resuscitation through accidental dislodging of the poisoned apple to Disney's "true love's kiss" remedy.

She rose to her feet. Her eyes widened when she saw that words had appeared above the coffin, written in the same silvery mist as she had seen when the forest had disappeared.

Though long departed from this world,

Her essence still lives on.

If ye be here upon a quest,

Fear not the fair one's song.

"Do you know what saving the essence means?"

Hermione turned around and saw what she was sure was a Veela walking toward her. The woman was tall and graceful and moved slowly, her hair floating gently in the breeze. She approached Hermione, eyes not kind but not cruel either, and extended her hand.

"Give me your palm."

Hermione offered her hand. The Veela traced her finger along the lines of the rose. She closed her eyes and began to sing words unintelligible to Hermione, but that must have meant something because Hermione's palm started glowing silver again.

At this, the Veela smiled and folded Hermione's fingers into the palm, letting her hand go. "You were sent here by Fleur."

"Yes." Hermione found that she had no more words. Logic did not apply in this place.

She watched as the Veela twirled a hair around her finger and pulled. She offered the golden strand to Hermione. "A Veela hair, freely given," she said. "The second ingredient."

"All right." Hermione took the hair and started to press it to her palm when the Veela stopped her.

"I asked you a question when I approached you. Have you considered what you are saving?" Her eyes were kind this time.

"I'm saving my research partner," Hermione said.

The Veela smiled. "Yes, you are saving him. A very brave man, Severus Snape."

"You know him?" Hermione asked, taking a step forward.

The Veela continued. "You are saving him, to be sure, and you are also saving your future together. But so too are you saving a story for millions of children, magical and Muggle, human and non-human...children in whom these stories have instilled dreams, desires, and hopes."

Hermione looked at the empty coffin. "Because the stories are real?"

"It is more than that. Myth, legend, fairy tale...you know as well as I that there are aspects of magic, powerful and unseen, that cannot be explained, parts that are incomprehensible, the importance of which is only written on our hearts."

"This entire scenario," Hermione started. "It's unreal. I feel like I'm in a dream, like I'm not even myself..."

"I imagine that to a fine logical mind, this would be disconcerting. Open your eyes, Hermione. See beyond this...beyond the symbols, beyond this night. There is a story and a history, and it is one that you and your lover have already become a part of."

"He's not my..."

"Send the ingredient," the Veela said. She turned and started to walk away.

"Wait!" Hermione called. "How did you know my name? I don't know yours."

"You're not meant to." The Veela smiled once more and, with a graceful wave of her hand, disappeared into the night air.

Hermione did the only thing that made sense. She pressed the hair to her palm, and just as with the apple, it disappeared.

Suddenly, she felt a pressure bearing down on her. She had difficulty catching her breath and she sank to her knees *Fight it, fight it*. She resisted the pressure with every ounce of her being, gritting her teeth, digging her fingers into the wet earth, fighting, fighting. The pressure began to lift. *Thank Circe*, she thought, but then she felt the inexorable tug in her gut...the feeling of being transported, only it wasn't a Portkey, it was...

Everything went black.

## IV

### Chapter 4 of 4

In which there is an ending and a beginning.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to JKR.

A/N: It was such a joy to play with fairy tales again. I hope you enjoy the last chapter.

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When Hermione came to, she was sitting in the middle of a forest once more. Her hands grasped at the earth; they were covered in mud. She felt for her wand and sighed in relief when she found it still strapped to her forearm.

It was only then that she realized it wasn't entirely dark. She looked up to see a fire pit and, in the flickering light and shadow, a female figure moving toward her. Another Veela. The woman was very tall with skin so pale it was almost blue. She was even more majestic than the one Hermione had encountered at the coffin...she moved slowly, deliberately, and it seemed as if the wind moved with her. Her hair floated in the air, strands of silver and blue shining in the firelight. She was both the most beautiful and the most terrifying Veela Hermione had ever laid eyes on, in her admittedly limited experience.

"You're a hard one to forcibly Apparate, *Mademoiselle* Granger," the Veela said, extending a hand to Hermione to help her stand. She whispered a charm that cleaned Hermione from head to toe.

"*Merci*," Hermione said, wiping her trousers. "I take it you're the Master Keeper?"

"Celeste," the older woman extended her hand. Up close, Hermione could see...not wrinkles, as Veela rarely showed human signs of aging...that she looked older. Wiser. As if she'd been here a while. Hermione followed Celeste as she walked back toward the fire pit, and it was then that Hermione saw the apple and Veela hair on a wooden slab next to a stunning cauldron. It was almost transparent, but it had a density and a spectacular sheen that were out of place in the dark forest.

"That's not glass, is it?" she asked, folding her arms over her chest to fight the chill. *I'm not in the Mediterranean anymore.*

Celeste laughed as she waved her wand over the cauldron, setting the water to a boil. "Of all the questions I have ever been asked, that is perhaps the most original. And it's not glass...it's diamond."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh, my Circe. That is..."

"Are you ready?" Celeste asked.

"Yes, of course," Hermione said, a bit embarrassed. She could hardly take her eyes off the cauldron. *I wonder if Snape has ever seen one ...*

Snape. Right.

"What order do I add them in?" Hermione asked.

Celeste nodded approvingly. "*Bon*." She walked over to Hermione, grasped the hand marked by the rose, and drew her wand from her sleeve in one elegant motion. "The last ingredient of the antidote." Before Hermione could react, Celeste had sliced her wand across Hermione's palm, leaving a shallow cut. Blood immediately began to pool.

"Let the blood drip," Celeste instructed. Hermione watched as it slowly flowed down her palm, off her hand, and into the clear water in the diamond cauldron. The blood

immediately swirled in the water, creating a rather gruesome pattern.

Celeste murmured a charm and Hermione felt her palm heal. She looked down at it and found that the rose was gone.

"The hair," Celeste instructed. "Now."

Hermione added the hair.

"Stir three times counter-clockwise."

Hermione did as she was told.

"And last but certainly not least, *la pomme*."

Hermione dropped the apple into the cauldron and watched as the liquid suddenly swirled in streaks of red, black, and white. She looked up at Celeste. "That's it?"

"Gathering the ingredients is the hardest part. That's my job," Celeste said, twisting her wand in elegant figures. She drew the liquid out of the cauldron, and it arced in the air before spiraling into the vial she held in her other hand. She sealed it with a cork. "All yours." She smiled. "Well done."

"I didn't do much," Hermione said.

"Severus is lucky to have you," Celeste said. "And do tell Fleur hello for me."

"You know Fleur?" Hermione asked, feeling rather silly.

"Of course. She's my great-granddaughter." Celeste smiled for the first time, a full smile. "The women in our family are the Master Keepers. You look surprised. Trust me when I tell you that a typical four-year-old with only one-eighth Veela blood would *not* be able to speak an essence into existence. And now, you must return. Time is of the essence, as it were."

"How am I getting back?" Hermione asked. "The mark is gone."

"Your blood is in the vial, and the vial can be forcibly Apparated. And you with it," Celeste said.

Hermione shook her head. "I still don't entirely understand why my blood is necessary. Blood magic is usually only used when there is a link between the individuals involved, but Fleur said that the Quester just had to be of Muggle origin. I don't understand why blood is a necessary part of the process," she repeated with a sigh. "Not that anything has been logical tonight."

Celeste folded her hands. "A clever girl, my Fleur. I would send you back now, but...I imagine you deserve at least one answer after all you've done tonight."

Hermione didn't say anything. She was not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Celeste sat down on a wooden bench and invited Hermione to sit next to her. "Just as the essence chooses the body it inhabits," she began, "so too does it choose the Quester, the person who will gather ingredients for the antidote. The Quester is typically a relative, sometimes a friend, and may not have been present for the incident. However, sometimes luck is on our side, and there is a...deeper, more *intense* connection available. Clearly, Fleur sensed that. After all, you only had to find three ingredients."

Hermione crinkled her brow. "Versus ...?"

"If the Quester does not have that intense a level of connection to the person embodying the essence, it takes five ingredients. You will also note that you only collected two ingredients; your blood sufficed as the third."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"I think you know the answer to that question," Celeste said, her voice soft.

Hermione shook her head. "That's nonsense. We work together, and he's infuriating. There is no deeper connection between us. I care about him, of course, but to imply that there's anything else going on is..." Her breath caught as she remembered standing in the doorway just before ...

"Unreasonable?" Celeste smiled.

"Besides, how on earth could Fleur sense that?" Hermione felt herself flushing again.

"I know that it does not make sense to you, but for your own sake, don't fight this. Accept it. Accept him." Celeste paused. "And now, you really must be going."

"But..." Hermione interjected.

"Give my best to Severus." And with a wink, Celeste waved her wand, and Hermione felt the pressure of forced Apparition.

This time, she accepted it.

---

Hermione expected to land on the shore of France in order to catch a Portkey, but instead, she found herself on the lawn just outside the Burrow. She was rather impressed that Celeste had Apparated her across the Channel, and she squinted as she realized dawn was breaking.

And Severus was still inside the house.

*Time is of the essence.*

Hermione ran to the Burrow and barged in through the back door. She didn't hear any movement and she rushed through to the sitting room where Bill was sitting, asleep in an armchair across the room from Snape.

*Some watch dog*, Hermione thought, shaking her head. She stared at Severus, sleeping so peacefully on the sofa where she'd left him. She approached him quietly on tip-toe before kneeling down on the ground next to him. She couldn't help but admire him...he looked so peaceful and yet dignified, hands resting on his stomach. The lines of his body were long and lean; he didn't look like he'd lost strength. The lines on his face were smooth. His hair was still oily, though.

It was only then, in the calm after the fury of activity, that the first wave of exhaustion hit Hermione. She fought it *Not now*, she thought as she pulled the antidote from her pocket. She'd made it this far. What was another hour or so?

"We're going to have a *serious* talk when you wake up," she muttered to Snape. She carefully pulled the cork out, and there was a *soft pop* as it dislodged from the glass vial. She tilted Snape's chin up, not quite ignoring the raspy stubble on his chin and how good it felt, and she tipped a good amount of the antidote into his mouth, adjusting his neck to try and ease it down his throat. Then, without realizing it, she dabbed a little of the antidote on her fingers and traced them along his lips.

*Soft lips.*

She waited a moment for the antidote to kick in.

Nothing happened.

"Severus," she said gently. "Wake up." Nothing. She pushed on his chest a little. "Wake up." He was breathing; she felt the rise and fall of his chest, the gentle pulse as he exhaled. "Wake up," she said, feeling the hysteria rise. "Please," she whispered. She felt hot tears fill her eyes.

*I did something wrong.*

She checked the vial, but she had used all of the antidote. *What's wrong?* "Severus, please." Nothing. She laid her head on his chest and took one of his hands in hers. The tears kept coming. She didn't fight them.

It was only then that she realized that someone was stroking her hair...

She looked up, eyes tearful and puffy, to find Snape grinning down at her.

"So you do care," he said.

She slapped his chest before she could think. "You were awake? How dare you..."

"And miss the feel of your fingers on my lips? I couldn't possibly ruin the moment," he said.

She pushed herself off of him. "I can't believe..."

"No, Hermione." He reached for her and grasped her hand. "I didn't know you cared." He swallowed hard.

He was being honest. She knew he was. And in that moment, she felt utter relief. Her shoulders sagged, and she managed to grin. "Well just this once, I'll forgive you for being mean," she said.

"You call that mean? After everything we've been through?"

She sniffled. "I'm sorry."

"For crying? And, given the aftertaste of antidote, I take it you saved me, as well. You shouldn't be sorry for either thing," he murmured. "Thank you." He sat up and tugged on her hand gently. "Come here."

"You mean, sit on your lap?"

"Do I have to spell everything out for you, Granger?" he asked. She shook her head and climbed up onto his lap, resting her head on his shoulder as he stroked her back. "I had the strangest dreams while you were gone," he said. "There were dwarves. Do you fancy explaining what happened to me?"

---

When Bill woke up an hour later, he found himself witnessing something he never thought he'd see...Hermione Granger, cosily slumbering on Severus Snape's lap.

He grinned and rose from the chair, debating who to wake up first, Charlie and Ginny (to tell them he'd won the bet) or his wife (to tell her that all was well).

His wife won out.

He walked up the stairs, trying not to wake his mum and dad who were sleeping just above, and he slipped into his family's room. He leaned over Victoire's small bed to check on her and then crawled into bed next to his wife. He kissed her cheek, murmuring that Snape was himself again and that the essence had been saved.

"Bon," Fleur whispered. "Go to sleep, Bill."

He pulled the covers up and curled next to her, still smiling. He wasn't going to mention the other part.

---

"Hermione, wake up."

"What?" Hermione opened her eyes, and whatever was shaking her stopped. She looked up into Severus's eyes and bolted upright, smacking him square in the jaw with her forehead.

"Merlin, woman. That's a genuine weapon," Snape said, rubbing his jaw.

"Sorry," she whispered. "You startled me."

"Did you forget where you fell asleep?" he asked, eyes downcast.

She put her hand over his. "No! No." She tilted his chin up and looked into his eyes. "I'm glad to be here." It was then that she noticed the empty chair. "Oh, goodness. Bill's gone. He must have seen ..."

"Us sleeping together?" Severus chuckled. "We were sleeping. Not mid-coitus. Breathe, Granger, that's it."

She nodded slowly. "But it's ... I'm ... Do you think that we can still work together?"

"Of course." He leaned on the sofa and rested his head in his palm. "So ... penny for your thoughts."

"Mm." Hermione rested her head against the sofa, mirroring Snape.

"If I'm Snow White, does that make you Prince Charming?" He winked.

She laughed and clasped her hand across her mouth. She let her hand down, still chuckling. "I hope not. I'd make a terrible Prince Charming. Awful pressure to put on someone."

"A good perspective," Severus said, tracing his fingers along her palm.

"Severus?" she asked. He looked up at her. "The Veela seemed to know you. And the Master Keeper said to give you her best ... do you know them?"

"Ah." He paused. "Voldemort was interested in possessing the tales...perverting them. This was during the second war," he said, his words careful and measured. "He wanted every tool available for his disposal. I was able to track the Veela ... I found them. I spoke with one of them and told her to alter their movements, to add extra protection to the sights, or even to move the relics, if need be. I didn't need Dumbledore's orders to protect the essences. My guess is, Dumbledore would have wanted the

tales, too."

"You saved them," Hermione said, feeling pride rise within her.

He shrugged. "My mother ... she read me the tales, when I was young. It's not the proper thing a young boy should love, but..." he gave a rueful smile "...I did. I didn't want either of my masters getting their hands on them."

"That's very admirable," Hermione said.

"Celeste came to visit me after the war was over. That was, what, thirteen years ago now? Thirteen years." He raked a hand through his hair. "Would that I could remember *this* encounter."

"I remember," Hermione said, looking into his eyes.

"That is enough," he said. He rose from the couch and offered her his hand. "Would you like to leave? Before everyone gets up, that is."

"And go where?" she asked, her heart starting to thump.

"To get some breakfast," he said.

She smiled. "I'd love to."

Hermione penned a quick note for the Weasleys while Severus sent an owl to Minerva. "Where are we going for breakfast?" she asked him as they walked out of the back door onto the Burrow's lawn. She took his arm as they walked down the backstairs.

"I make a mean poached egg," Severus said.

"As only a Potions Master could," Hermione said, smiling up at him.

"Indeed. Oh, and Hermione?" he asked before they reached the Apparition point.

"Yes?"

"Those abnormalities on the influence grid? The overly influential sights that you were concerned about?"

"Yes ...?" Hermione asked, and then she knew what he was going to say before he said it.

"The fairy tales."

She nodded and felt rather ridiculous.

"I was right," he added.

She smacked his arm. "Fine. I'll pull the project."

"Fine-tune it and you'll make it work. I'll show you how it's done over breakfast."

She sighed. "Same old Severus. You can take the man out of the fairy tale, but ..."

He pulled her in close, nose-to-nose, and wrapped his arms around her. "You were saying?" he whispered.

"Kiss me," she said, stroking her hands up his back.

And standing there in the middle of the Burrow lawn, under the morning sun, trainers soaked with morning dew, he obliged her.