

# Underpinnings

*by tonksinger*

A cup of tea, a bunch of hairpins, and two friends after what was supposed to be a wedding. Written for Cathedralcarver in the 2010 SSHG Exchange.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Original Prompt: "Snape appears to Hermione on her wedding day to Ron, desperate to convince her she's marrying the wrong man. What could he possibly have to say to change her mind? Does he succeed? And who, exactly, should she marry instead, if anyone?"

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Severus watched her from the kitchen. She looked like a ghost, and he wondered if wedding dresses all had that effect: gauzy and white, with a veil to distance the bride from the world until the groom chose to reveal her. Or, in this case, until she slowly tugged it off as her former teacher talked sense into her before she'd set foot on the aisle.

Her veil was currently a pile of tearstained mist on the back of the worn sofa. Crookshanks had only done it minimal damage after Hermione shed the first few tears; his protective instincts were curtailed before more than a few rips and a layer of orange hairs marred it, and now he crouched on the hearth, growling quietly.

His mistress sat at the small, round table, divesting her chignon of hairpins as a knight removed his armour: deliberately and handling every step with care. The pile of pins grew with almost inaudible *clicks*. Her hair celebrated its freedom by curling every which way.

"Hermione," he said, for if she continued to stare at the shuttered window and neither of them spoke a word, he would go mad.

She looked at him through puffy eyes and a distinctly wobbling smile. "Yes?"

Were it not for the tears, he would not have known that she had relieved her bridegroom of his duty only an hour before, in an eerily steady conversation outside the door of this very flat. She could have been any lovely bride waiting in her flat for the ride to the chapel.

But, of course, she wasn't.

He tilted his head at the line of cupboards on the wall. "Where do you keep the tea?"

*Bugger.* He'd set something off; her chin crumpled, and her smile lost its tenuous foundation. She pointed towards the middle cupboard before she dived into the shelter of her arms folded on the table, scattering hairpins. Hiccoughing sobs punctuated the small clatters that accompanied his finding tea, kettle, and cups, and then putting all of it together.

She emerged from the crook of her elbow to choke out thanks when he set her cup before her.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes with her delicate wrist.

He wanted to kiss the tears away, but considering the evidence he'd used to get her away from Weasley, making his own approaches would not be beneficial. He had been her teacher and thesis advisor, and was now her friend. Lover was not in the stars.

"I should be sorry," he growled. "I am the one, after all, who talked you out of it...damn. Here." He offered her a freshly conjured handkerchief, which she hid behind.

"It isn't that you aren't r-right," she said, between sniffs, "but it is a b-bit of a shock, to basically have this aspect of myself I was trying to erase brought out right in front of me..."

She blew her nose in a very assertive way and looked back at him. "How did you know, Severus?"

He had known she would ask, and yet he had no answer that would not sound... odd.

Of course, after bursting in on her just before her wedding and stating a very solid reason for her to call the entire affair off, "odd" was relative.

He cleared the awkwardness from his throat with a cough. "In your fifth year, after your little escapade out to the Ministry, I was the one who patched up that curse from Bellatrix."

She put a hand to her chest, rubbing it as though the faint scar were a tangible ridge.

"Yes?"

He stirred his tea pointlessly, mixing the nonexistent sugar and milk.

"You were on a lot of Anaesthetising Elixir, and, well..."

"I talk in my sleep," she said. Silence reigned while she stared into her tea. Then, seeming to find there some reason to continue the dismantling of her nuptial attire, she tugged another pin free and set it on the table. *Click*, and the pile of hair at the back of her head sagged.

"It was Padma Patil, I think," she murmured.

"Yes." He shrugged. "You could have done worse."

She almost smiled. "I suppose so. She's cleverer than her sister, anyway, though Parvati's prettier."

He declined to comment on the relative attractiveness of his old students.

"What did I say about her, Severus?"

She had a right to ask awkward questions, he supposed, though that didn't make him more comfortable answering them.

"Something about her hair," he offered, shrugging as though distinct memories of the adjectives *shining*, *silky*, and *perfect*, *not like mine* did not arise in his mind. Anaesthesia had eased the pain of speaking insecurities aloud, and he recalled flinching at a few of her anecdotes. Who was he, really, to torment another about their teeth? Her intelligence didn't make up for her concerns, or allow her to reason it all away; it just made her better at hiding it. At hiding a lot of things.

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Hermione sipped her tea, watching Severus evade her questions, to which she was fairly certain he knew she knew the answers.

An hour ago, she had been about to get married, had just been buckling the last straps of her periwinkle high heels, when Severus knocked on the door of her flat. He had thrust the wedding invitation at her, with an expression her father had once born the one time she received a "B" on a spelling test. He had all but asked her to explain herself.

He wasn't the first. The three-week engagement had shocked everyone, most of all Ron, as they had been firmly, though amicably, separated for two months. But only Severus allowed the confusion to travel from his eyes to his mouth, and from there to her ears. Everyone else just smiled and made hasty congratulations.

She suspected Harry had worked out the connection between Rita Skeeter's "exposé" and Hermione's sudden burning desire to marry Ron. Severus had worked it out, too and had decided to confront her about it. Only their friendship, built over the past five years through continuously less academic letters sent between her London flat and his Toronto house, had allowed him across her threshold earlier.

The headline still flashed in her memory, the newsprint soaked with the coffee she had spilled when she unrolled her morning *Prophet* on 4 April, 2005 and read:

*Hermione Granger left Ron Weasley for a woman?*

The rest had been carefully worded conjecture, designed to pique the gossiping interests of the Wizarding world, which were constantly poised on the brink of voicing some new scandal involving Harry Potter and company. The quill is mightier than the wand, especially in Rita Skeeter's chartreuse-tipped fingers. Save the world, fine, but Merlin help you if you're caught (as Ginny had been, one day) in Diagon Alley without makeup. How quickly heroes fall.

But Skeeter's accusations, together with a charming quote or two from Pansy Parkinson about Hermione's "butch" lack of feminine pursuits, had sliced through Hermione's careful veneer of denial and acting to send her back into Ron's confused, but welcoming, arms.

"For a woman as bright as you, who has put up with countless hours of name-calling and prejudice, I would think this would be another opportunity to turn your nose up at hecklers." Despite his indirect question, she was fairly sure that Severus was not as confused as his words seemed. Five years of letters, visits, and fireplace discussions had given her some insight into his mind. He just wanted her to confirm her actions for herself.

Hermione smiled and shook her head slightly. "It was the final straw, I suppose. I couldn't take being the know-it-all, the Mudblood, and the lesbian. Better to go back to Ron and see if I... I don't know, grew out of it or something." She sighed, looking over the table to Severus's raised eyebrow. "I wasn't very emotionally lucid, all right? Denial's not just a river in Egypt."

Three frantic weeks of dress shopping, menu planning, and guest inviting. Three weeks of watching the *Prophet* report on everything from her dress choice (damn Madam Malkin's tendency to spill everything after half a gin and tonic) to what the children might look like ("Let's hope they get her brains and his hair." Prophetess Lavender Brown, always ready to lend a quip.)

"So," she said, setting her empty cup down. "You worked it all out. My fifth-year babbling, Rita Skeeter's article, the sudden engagement..." Her thick hair was reluctant to produce the pins she knew were there; frustrated, she tugged hard enough for it to hurt.

"And the dearth of letters." He steepled his fingers, examining his nails. "Canada has a two-day delay on the *Prophet*; I was surprised to get it before I received your reaction. Then, no reaction, only a foil-embossed card two weeks before the day."

He glared at her. "Stupid girl," he muttered, but there was no acid in it. Disappointment, maybe.

"What?" she said, sitting up and slapping her hand sharply on the table. Her teacup rattled against the saucer, and the pins jumped. "As if you've never done something stupid because everyone was laughing at you?"

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It stung. But she was right. They were both very good with each other's uncomfortable truths, if not so much their own.

"So," he said, after the room warmed up again and she returned to her hair, "what will you do now, Miss Know-it-all?"

She snorted at the nickname, but then sobered.

"I'll let everyone adjust," she said. "And then life will go on."

"I've heard," he offered, "that Luna Lovegood is living in San Francisco, and, until recently, was cohabiting with a woman well-known in the gay rights scene."

Hermione stared at him, then started giggling. "Please don't tell me you're trying to set me up with Luna." She pressed her fingers over her lips, eyebrows raised in mirth at the thought of Severus playing matchmaker.

"I merely thought," he said, looking down his nose at her, "that a friend who may have gone through something similar could be of help at the moment. I've got a job to return to, Hermione, and besides, my skills in comforting are limited."

She shook her head at the last sentence. "No. They're what I need. I'll pull out the Ben and Jerry's later, but not until you've hammered the dent out of my common sense."

Just then, a knock landed upon the door, hesitant, like a bird unsure of its perch. Hermione stood before Severus could and quietly opened it to reveal Ron Weasley. He was still in his dress robes, though the bow tie had been abandoned in favour of opening the top few buttons. Severus was surprised to see that his blue eyes were unswollen, the long nose freckled, not red. But maybe, he decided, that was a good sign. No broken hearts on either side, just a bit of confusion.

"Oh. Snape." Weasley fidgeted and cleared his throat. The friendships between Hermione and both men had always been acknowledged, but had never crossed paths.

Severus considered staying, just to make the young man more uncomfortable, but an asking look from Hermione had him draining his tea and moving to gather his small satchel and wand. She got a curt nod as his goodbye, and he received a smile a small one, but full of the Hermione who did not cry too long over good decisions, the Hermione he loved and could trust to look after herself. For, just before he turned and left, she took another pin from her coiffure, and the free tumble of bushy hair that fell to her shoulders to brush the white sleeves of her gown was all the reassurance that he needed to go home.