

Behind Greenhouse 2/7

by windwings

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1

Chapter 1 of 2

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A/N: This was written for celebrate_sshg community on lj. Complete in two chapters. It is very loosely based upon the prompt about something growing in Hermione's garden and Snape being drawn to it.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to **Lariope**, who beta'd this for me on short notice, and **Melusin**, who brit-picked it and gave it a final read-through.

I'm also squeezing in a little note for my Mage readers here. The Muse has taken a few raps to the head and forced me to rewrite the whole thing that was left. I'm afraid, there won't be any updates until after Christmas. Please, forgive me! I love you all and draw inspiration from your response.

~o~

Prologue.

He almost never undressed. The 'almost' being a compromise...if she was honest with herself. He simply never undressed, full stop. She knew it was just another of his many ways to demonstrate power and instill humility, but when they were alone behind the abandoned greenhouse 2/7, it felt like every single hormone in her body stood at attention, every one of her cells sang with the desire to submit and welcome him inside her, in every sense and meaning.

Most of the times, he fucked her leisurely, choosing positions and angles where, she knew, he would have a perfect vantage point to watch the way her inner lips curled slightly inward around his cock when he plunged swiftly in and stretched taut when he pulled out. He loved watching, and she loved how unstinted and matter-of-fact he was about it. Sometimes, he issued commands in that calm, deeply undertoned voice he used in the classroom when he was addressing a particularly decent student, whose progress in the making of a potion he was overseeing.

"Apply your hands and open yourself for me, Miss Granger," he would say so levelly as if he were asking a first year to open a jar of shrivefigs. He kissed her fingers before directing them to her core and showing her exactly how he wanted her opened.

She coloured up with a sharp mix of shame and intense desire and did as he said. Often, she would come exactly at that moment.

The change in her skin tone seemed to excite him.

"Are you ashamed, Miss Granger?" he purred and lodged his cock into her opening, teasing her.

"No!" she lied, not worrying how truthful (or not) she sounded. The truth was, she was ashamed and loved every damn sensation it spurred.

"Well, you should be." He pushed in and bared teeth that were yellowed at the roots at her. "Fucking your professor like that. Giving yourself like a wanton. Spreading yourself open for me."

He punctuated each sentence with an assured stroke and twisted his hips at the point when he was buried deep within her. It was as if he were taking fantasies from her mind, some of them she couldn't even conceive of having until he made them true. And perhaps he was: she'd read somewhere that the hardest thing about Legilimency was to resist the temptation and keep away from others' thoughts. Clever fingers knew exactly when and where to touch, twirl, pinch or flatten against her skinobedient little soldiers to their master's profligate ways. His tongue knew exactly what words to feed to her overexcited brain and how to deliver them so that she trembled with such explosive sensory overload that, at that moment, she would promise him the world, give him everything.

Chapter 1.

Hermione Granger was in detention. She had been scrubbing desks in the Potions classroom for over three-and-a-half hours already, and she worked with such angry zeal that by the time she was finished, one Severus Snape would have the cleanest set of desks and workbenches in Britain.

Being in detention wasn't that humiliating on its own. Being *her* and being in detention definitely counted as such. Officially, Hermione was a regular seventh-year student, but no one had any doubts about her unspoken special status. First, a war hero, Order of Merlin, class two. Not many adults could boast such an honour and a shiny medal to go with it, to speak nothing of a mere girl. Second, she was the only one who'd refused to accept the generous Ministry offer of an amount of O's and E's in her N.E.W.T.s that would have allowed her to apply to almost any open position in Wizarding Britain. She actually went back to earn those N.E.W.T.s (even though her hidden motive was to get all O's) an act which warmed every single teacher's heart towards her even more, if it was even possible. And third she was simply almost two years older than the vast majority of her fellow seventh-years. And probably two life-times older than most of them, if one were to judge by the look in her eyes.

Quite simply, she stood out. She was even offered an apprentice post and a chair at the High Table. You just didn't give detentions to Hermione Granger anymore, especially for "daydreaming in class" when she was clearly finished with the task for the lesson.

But Snape was Snape. Maybe it was just another one of his games. Maybe, he finally wanted to change the venue. The cozy spot behind greenhouse 2/7 was getting old. And, as it was November already, it was also getting cold.

Hermione sighed and continued scrubbing a particularly nasty desk. It was located in what was generally considered the 'Slytherin' corner of the classroom where generations of bored Slytherins had amused themselves by writing disparaging remarks (which were mainly addressed to Gryffindors) on it with magicked quills.

One particular Slytherin, who was the source of her current state (and the reason for her current circumstances), was sitting at his contrastingly disarrayed teacher's table and marking away at a stack of essays. From time to time, Hermione threw sideways glances in his direction, careful not to pick a moment when he was definitely too busy to suddenly look up and catch her watching. It didn't help, obviously, since she could not get rid of the giggling sensation that he knew she was observing him, anyway.

She couldn't understand whether it was a shift in the rules of the game they were playing. Or, to be more exact, the game ~~was~~ was playing, because for her, this had recently transcended beyond the limits of a game.

~o~

They had gone at it in mid-September. For *her*, it had begun much earlier, sometime after the final battle, when he was recovering and bearing the brunt of the controversy his very persona had created in the after-war publicity with admirable dignity. She thought she'd finally seen the man who Severus Snape had been all that time: a reluctant hero; a brilliant, largely self-taught scientist; a wand-wielding hermit. She was wrong. All these were mere epithets, attributed to him by an ecstatic press. The real Snape showed himself when, after she'd teetered around him carefully and yearned for something she couldn't even clearly define for months, he suddenly appeared in front of her that day behind greenhouse 2/7 and kissed her like he wanted to put the meaning of the world in that kiss.

She couldn't tell how he had known. She thought she was keeping her secret very well. Her infatuation was stuffed so deep inside and piled with so much menial work, classes, friends and general post-war havoc that sometimes it was even a secret to her own self.

And yet, he knew. And obviously was able to appreciate the sentiment; otherwise, why would he have followed her that day?

He was Gryffindorishly blunt about the nature of their relationship. The terms were transparent and simple and left so little elbow room that she could hardly believe a Slytherin would come up with it. They would meet behind the greenhouse and fuck, and that was it. She was more than content with the setting. The war, the subsequent upheaval, and all the drastic changes her life had suffered had left her empty and drained. She couldn't be arsed to handle something more complicated than a tryst with no obligations or consequences.

She knew how the excitement of novelty usually wore off quickly: she'd seen it happen plenty of times with her roommates, and this was one of the reasons she'd seldom cared for anything that went beyond adolescent fooling around with Ron or Victor. She cringed every time the girls in the dormitories discussed their relationships with casual slight, as if they were speaking about something that could be easily brushed off and forgotten instantly.

However, it was all different with Severus Snape. There was nothing *casual* about Severus Snape. Hermione didn't have to worry that one day the butterflies in her stomach would cease their frantic (sometimes nearly nauseating) flutter and take leave to bug someone else.

And yet, there was something about their interaction that defied analysis. Something deeply troubling. It was as if their encounters were almost too perfect.

~o~

Hermione heaved her umpteenth sigh. If Snape kept this up, soon there would be nothing to scrub and scourge left for her; it was her fifth detention during the last three weeks, and at this rate, she was scrubbing faster than the students managed to soil. He probably wanted to take whatever it was they had been indulging in further. But why in the nine circles of Hell didn't he act on it? He should have known there wouldn't be any objection from her side. Part of her thrill came from the fact that she was up for any game, like an eager puppy.

But maybe it was part of the game? Did Snape get off on watching her labour? It didn't look bloody likely. Maybe he enjoyed simply knowing that she was here, under his command, doing something he only assigned to cumbersome first-years, whose very skill with the cauldron was so non-existent that it was dangerous to use them for anything else. Maybe he liked the very idea of her, sweaty, panting, dirty and bent over scrubbing? As soon as this thought crossed her mind, Hermione felt extremely self-conscious. Did she look sexy? Or mildly appealing at all? She tried to assume what she thought could be an arousing position and cursed her clumsiness and general lack of that secret knowledge, the one that females everywhere pass around to their willing peers: the art of being sexy. Maybe she shouldn't have dismissed Parvati and Lavender so haughtily, always preferring books to midnight chats about subjects more lascivious.

"Miss Granger, I fail to see why such a simple task as cleaning desks should be accompanied by pathetic attempts to tie yourself into a knot, but I'm positive it must be uncomfortably hindering," Snape suddenly droned from his desk, startling Hermione.

Good, at least he noticed. Hermione hurriedly changed her stance to something more demure and appropriate for hiding her very red face. At least he had said something. Maybe it was a prelude to foreplay? They'd never done it anywhere else before; moreover, he'd never, ever let it slip, even when it was safe, that the entire... fling... existed anywhere outside the small patch of grass shaded by rogue hawthorn bushes, which would have had no business growing there, if Professor Sprout cared more (or if Hagrid cared less). Beyond the delirious, frantic sexual abandon...for which the abandoned greenhouse had become a symbol in Hermione's mind...Severus Snape was the same intolerant, vicious prick to her. He only seemed to notice her presence when it was due time for the regular taking of points from Gryffindor, doling out humiliation or giving her a supercilious sneer of disdain when she submitted her completed work.

Except for the sudden change in detention quantity. Five in three weeks was more than she had endured during six previous school years total.

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She woke up with a fuzzy head and no sense of the time. It was still dark outside, but she couldn't tell if it was still evening or pre-dawn, November murk. Burrowing tighter into the blankets, she sighed and cast a silent *Tempus* spell. Six in the morning. Morning it was, then. Weird, she could have sworn she'd just dipped into sleep a little while ago. Thoughts waded in her brain like lost travellers in the fog as she tried to figure out what time she had gone to bed the night before.

Having determined that, short of removing her memory of going to bed and viewing it in the Pensieve to see if the magical clock in the room was showing, she'd never find the truth, Hermione left it at that and dragged her feet to the bathroom.

She took a shower and slapped on some moisturizing butter she had ordered a week ago from Slug and Jiggers' Beauty division. Of late, she'd been feeling parched very often. She'd found herself stopping by the water fountain ever more frequently between classes, and her skin was taut and somewhat flakey. Hence the moisturizer at the appalling cost, purchased after Ginny had nagged her half to death. Hermione still cringed, thinking of the books she could have bought with the money.

"It's the war stress catching up with you, Mi," Ginny, with whom she now shared a dorm, had said when she had relayed the problem to her. "You've stayed strong for a long stretch of time, and now that your body knows it can relax, all those things have started popping out. You should have seen Bernadette. Poor thing you know how her parents were almost killed in a Muggle raid when they were visiting their Muggle relatives? She's been itching all over for months. Madam Pomfrey says it's the nerves."

If there was ever a sign that Ginny Weasley was starting to resemble the great, kind, clucking mother-hen that was Molly, it was her mothering everyone within an inch of their lives. And yet, Ginny's obtrusive care had a pleasant side-effect of calming her.

It's the stress, Hermione repeated to herself. A caviling voice inside her head dared to suggest that the source of her stress was largely situated behind a certain greenhouse, but she quaffed it quickly. That was definitely not stress. That was a means to stress relief.

She shivered as she remembered their encounter the night before...surely the reason why she'd slept like a log and lost all sense of time lay somewhere in between the flapping folds of Snape's robes. He'd been almost tender with her yesterday. As if he had perceived her growing annoyance with his change of game tactics, their lovemaking had been a bit different. He'd touched her with a bit more reverence, and after he came in her mouth, his thumb, sweeping off the residue from her lips, was considerate, and his lips on her eyelids were grateful. Somehow, it had been just what she needed, because when she'd stood in the shower this morning, she had closed her eyes and tried to conjure up the feeling of his hands, moulding her body into stances that would intensify his pleasure, she had suddenly started crying. How had it come to her wanting to be used? And did his giving her what she wanted even count as using?

When Ginny had knocked on the bathroom door, Hermione Granger had felt cleansed and purged from quite a load of pent-up emotion. It had been crammed into her soul, it seemed, from the time even before the final battle, and now it was gone. She'd felt as light as an airborne feather.

Hermione swam out of the bathroom on a wave of relief and gratitude that needed to be expressed and was met by Ginny's annoyed morning look, which swiftly gave way to astonishment and worry.

"Mi, you okay?"

"I'm great, Gin...fabulous, in fact," she almost sing-songed, and her voice sounded so beautiful to her own self, like the gentle ringing of Accompanying Campanula, a magical flower with a deeply-rooted love of music.

"You are fabulously nutty, that's what you are," Ginny grumbled and pushed past her roommate and into the bathroom.

As soon as her red mane disappeared behind the bathroom door, Hermione all but forgot about her existence. All she could think about was getting to that wonderful spot behind Greenhouse 2/7. The need to share her ecstatic state was so overpowering that she didn't even stop to analyze whether such intense sensation was in any way abnormal. Nothing had ever seemed so right. She only hoped she could convey the message in the form of sensual physicality. After all, she and Snape still didn't talk much.

Oh, and maybe that's what all the recent detentions were about? Maybe he, too, sensed the shift in the wind? The very thought sent a pleasant little bolt of electricity through her body.

She dressed, ignoring Ginny's concerned looks, and dashed to breakfast. As she hopped on light feet down the flights of magical stairs, she looked out the windows, where grey sheets of November rain-soon-to-become-hail battered against the glass, and decided that she hadn't seen a more cheerful sight in ages.

When she was approaching the Great Hall, she was stopped by a hand on her shoulder. Hermione started and, astounded at the depth of her own obliviousness, skipped the first bit of what Headmistress McGonagall was saying.

"...talking to you? Hermione? Miss Granger?" McGonagall's eyebrows knitted together in a positively Snape-ish manner, which finally made Hermione snap out of it.

"I'm sorry, Headmistress, what were you saying?" she demurred and looked at her hands, suddenly shameful of her glee.

"I was just asking if you are all right, Miss Granger." The Headmistress hated to repeat herself, but her irritation only barely masked her worry.

Hermione briefly spared a thought as to why everyone was wanting to know about her state.

"Oh... oh, that. I'm quite okay, Professor, thank you for asking. And yourself?" she asked, trying to will her facial muscles into composing an appropriate expression of pleased expectancy.

"Miss Granger, let me disabuse you of the notion that I'm trying to make small talk, here," McGonagall said and looked at her pointedly above her spectacles.

Hermione was instantly alarmed. Did her euphoria reflect in her exterior so?

"I'm sorry, Professor, I just... it's just a great day today," she said, wondering if her face shone happily like a full moon.

"I wouldn't say so from the way you look, dear," McGonagall answered patronizingly. "Maybe you should see the Matron."

Puzzled, Hermione watched her former Head of House shift her attention to a group of third-years, who appeared to have successfully smuggled in a Grammagrab quill from Fred and George's shop and were fighting over whose turn it was to take it to class. Surely, she didn't look that bad?

Her happy float on the sea of pinkish well-being ended by the time Arithmancy was in full swing. Professor Vector was writing a complicated equation for calculating multiple relativities, and Hermione kept blinking and squinting at the board where complex symbols and figures jumped and scattered like cockroaches at the turn of a light switch.

She couldn't focus and was barely able to think...and most of her thoughts constituted of admitting a fierce need to be there, behind the blasted greenhouse, to be there now. Letting Snape have her was what she needed right now. And then her equilibrium would be right back. When she tried to concentrate, she was even able to come up with an excuse to leave the class which wasn't completely half-cocked.

When Arithmancy was finally over and the bell chimed through the castle, signifying the beginning of the lunch break, she was beside herself with need. The curious thing was that the need was not exactly sexual. It was a very blunt compulsion to just *be* there, at that particular spot of land. A tiny, sane voice deep inside her offered feebly that he might not even be there, but it was silenced by the roaring 'I don't care' from the rest of her.

Not bothering to reason with either part of herself, she scrambled to the door as soon as the class was dismissed and flew to the Entrance Hall.

Bleary November midday welcomed her with sleet and a howling wind, no doubt intensified by the many magics surrounding Hogwarts. There was a distinct nip in the air, which somewhat dulled her state of anxiety. She cast an anti-slipping charm on her feet and tried to recall what she knew about love potions. This feeling was not normal...at least she was able to admit it...which meant she wasn't too far gone. She was obviously under an influence, which was a bad thing, because she couldn't really determine the symptoms, except for needing to get to Snape and the mysterious remarks about her being unwell.

Could he have slipped her a love potion? A strong aphrodisiac? Love potions compelled the drinker to seek out the source of their longing, but... there was something, something important, that dangled at the edges of her mind and teased her like a sly dog, wagging its tale and baring its teeth if approached.

Why would Snape even do that? Hadn't he known, from the very start, that she was more than eager?

Just when her thought process was about to round a corner and maybe stumble upon that elusive spot of wrongness that would provide a definite answer, she saw the greenhouse. Somehow, Hermione felt that he would be there. Maybe it was not a potion, but rather some mind-to-mind connection, which he certainly knew how to use, but she, from her end, was not skilled enough to see?

A rush of excitement flooded her, and rational thinking ebbed away with its flow.

Sure enough, she suddenly felt a wand at her throat and was swiftly pressed towards the rough stones of Hogwarts' outer walls.

"Not quite the best weather for lunch-time strolls, Miss Granger, don't you agree? What are you doing here?" It was like her hearing was suddenly wrapped and caressed by slithering sheets of finest silk.

A game, then. Fine.

"I just needed a bit of air, Professor. The elves have probably overdone it with the heating today. The classrooms were so stuffy," she babbled shakily, not caring how hideously stupid her reasoning was, especially since one thing Hogwarts' Elves knew nothing of was heating. On January nights, you could see your breath coming out of your mouth if you peeped out from under the blankets. She peered at him, knowing that her half-arsed explanation would spur him to act. It usually did.

"Are you really going to bore me with artful circumlocution, Miss Granger?"

There was nothing artful or even creative about her excuse, which they both knew was a fake. But, oh, Merlin, when he talked like he was reading the Oxford Contemporary English Dictionary every day after tea, it made Hermione's hormones dance like champagne bubbles in her blood.

Her brain was roughly interrupted from its making of sweet love to Snape's extensive vocabulary.

"Answer me, girl!" he said with half-hearted impatience and dragged the tip of his nose along her collar bone and up to her ear.

"I just wanted to... be here, maybe." She sighed in relief, not feeling the business end of his wand pressing into her neck anymore. Not that he'd hex her, he never did. But he could, couldn't he?

A part of her felt excited about the prospect. Would he tie her hands if she let him know she would...

"...Put you in a Full Body Bind? The rope would hug your body so... leaving only bare those parts where I can enter you," Snape whispered.

Merlin.

"Are you reading my mind?" Hermione asked, not understanding her sudden desire to make small talk when Snape's hand was lifting her robe and stroking the back of her thigh.

"Maybe I am. And maybe you are dealing with an addiction, Miss Granger," Snape said. His finger was underlining the meaning in his words, as it traced the seam where the swell of her buttock met her thigh.

Addiction. Such a perfect word to describe her state.

"Does it bother you?" she asked breathily, kneading his shoulders in order to keep her hands from unbuttoning his trousers. He liked the foreplay and the fucking to follow his own pacing, a lesson she'd learned early on.

"Not really. What bothers me is the snow because I can't put you on your belly and mount you like I want to. The temperature won't be kind to my joints." His mouth stretched into an ugly smile.

Then he swiftly pushed her to her knees, obviously not caring whether the temperature would spare her joints, or maybe he thought that they were simply stronger and had the advantage of belonging to a young body. One dexterous hand unzipped his fly, and the other tugged at her chin imperiously.

Soon after, Hermione's mouth was too busy to keep trying to talk his ears off.

~o~

When she woke up and looked at the clock, she saw with crushing horror that it was almost one in the afternoon. Thank Nimue, it was bloody Saturday! Even when she was bone-weary, she'd never missed her alarm clock. All her lie-ins had been conscious decisions. Hermione yawned and worried. Her skin stretched uncomfortably around her mouth; too lazy to get up yet, she summoned her moisturizing potion from the bathroom. On a second thought, she summoned a large glass of water as well. Maybe it was all about dehydration.

Luckily, this time there was no one in the dorm to pester her about things. One in the afternoon was obscenely late even for Ginny, who often indulged in little lie-ins at weekends.

Hermione shuffled her feet to the bathroom, and suddenly, it struck her. She couldn't remember, again, what time she had gone to bed last night. Moreover, she couldn't remember anything after... well, after Snape did put her on her belly and pried her legs wide. Gods, she didn't even remember making it to Charms. Did she make it to Charms?

This wasn't good, wasn't good at all. Anxiety was quickly whipping her mind into a frenzy, and when she reached into the bathroom cabinet for a new tube of toothpaste, the stupid piece of furniture had the audacity to rattle as if some Boggart were in there, taking the form of McGonagall with her expulsion scroll. She recoiled with a yelp.

And found herself in front of a mirror.

Gods, she looked horrible. Papery skin, wan face, gaunt cheekbones. What was it? What was the matter with her? Yesterday's thoughts of being fed (or rubbed into, Snape wasn't a Potions master for nothing) a love or lust potion of some sort came back to claim her mind. Her body wanted to give in again to the wonderful state of euphoria which usually followed her meetings with Snape, but this time her mind resisted.

Research. There was her salvation! Her brain clutched at the thought, and as she dressed hastily, she was already imagining the familiarity of the dimly-lit Hogwarts library, the ancient creaking desks, uniformly arranged parchment scrolls, and fussy silver inkwells. Immediately, she felt lighter. Casting a sloppy Notice-Me-Not on herself, she started for the library, pondering whether a foray into the kitchens was in order or if she should wait for lunch.

The first signs of discomfort showed themselves when she hadn't even finished picking her literature. Hermione was surreptitiously surveying a rack of books on common love magic...an ugly blob of pink, purple and fluffy feather bookmarks sticking out invitingly. Some of those atrocities even sported red and violet hearts that fluttered about the bindings. It was then that a wave of wrongness hit her suddenly. What was she doing here? She needed to be on her way to...

A loud snarl of frustration cut through the drowsy library silence, which she belatedly realized was her own.

"Do you think yourself to be so far above the rules of this school by virtue of your being... what you think you are that you find it appropriate to behave like an imbecilic, ill-mannered brat, Miss Granger?" a voice drawled from behind the nearest rack of books, and its owner soon made a sweeping, black-robed appearance.

Hermione felt arousal twitching somewhere in her belly and laboured to look properly contrite.

"Sorry, sir. I just... dropped a book on my foot," she said, initiating the familiar wordplay.

The library was deliciously deserted on a Saturday afternoon, and the prospect of being shagged silly between the book racks by her Professor was becoming exponentially more attractive by the second. She was expecting an order to strip to the pelt any minute now.

Snape's gaze fell upon the fluffy ugliness she was about to peruse, and his face twisted with disgust.

"I'm forced to remove the 'like' from my previous remark," Snape said. "You are an imbecilic, unmannered brat."

Hermione's heart hammered and swayed like a pendulum from her throat to her feet. She could barely manage a conscious thought, and yet, something in the back of her mind was not satisfied. Something was amiss there, as if she was eating her favourite food when her nose was stuffed and runny, making the taste of the treat dulled.

"It won't happen again, sir," she croaked, her throat dry, and restrained an urge to run to the Greenhouse. The need to be there, now, was almost a physical sensation.

"That would be ten points from Gryffindor, an additional twenty for missing Charms yesterday...yes, Professor Flitwick had mentioned it, and I would be remiss to overlook such a blatant case of disrespect...and see that you exercise proper discretion from now on when you are in the library," Snape said and, turning on his heels, strode away, his boots resounding in the dreary silence with the ominous ill-boding sound for which any decent ghost would give its ectoplasmic arm.

For a surreal moment or five, she couldn't believe what had happened. Did he just leave? After all that... verbal foreplay? Probably, he'd gone directly to the greenhouses? Oh, please, let it be so.

But her astonishment didn't last long. The sound of Snape walking away had barely ceased to echo through the halls, when she felt that her surprised stupor was dissipating under a mindless need to just go.

She darted out of the library, the saccharine-pink books sighing forlornly at her swift departure. Definitely a potion, or something else, something stronger perhaps, maybe a binding ritual. The need to be at that magical spot behind the greenhouse felt like an itch somewhere in her gut now, and she wished she could turn her body inside out and scratch it on the rough surface of the flagstones. She ran and ran, hating herself for being so weak and unable to fight the damn thing and promising that as soon as she relieved this... magical imperative she couldn't resist, for the time being, she'd go right back and search again. Or better yet, go straight to Madam Pomfrey and get an antidote, a curse-breaker, a something. Only... this one more time. Just one more.

Gods, this was getting bad. The intervals between the times when she felt like she'd burst into flames and burn out if she didn't *gaight now* were getting increasingly shorter. What was the damned man's goal?

He was so going to get an earful, as soon as she'd...*fucked his brains out* a gloating little voice in her head said.

Just one more time. Just this once.

She reached the greenhouses in record time, panting and bending over to rest her hands on her knees to catch her breath and recover. Blood pounded in her ears, and there was a stitch in her side from all the running. Hermione Granger was not on friendly terms with sports.

A profound contentment and rightness enveloped her. The feeling was so welcome and so harmonic that she didn't even bother to analyze it. He should be here shortly...maybe five, ten minutes. Suddenly, she realized that she could wait, and she could wait longer. It was the being here that was so satisfying. A part of her brain that still clung to reality said that it shouldn't be this way if it was Snape she was addicted to, but soon after died under the weight of wellness that settled upon the rest of her being.

"So soon already, Miss Granger? My, but you look like something a Kneazle dragged inside."

"You gave me a love potion!" she said accusingly and batted away his hands, which had already started unbuttoning her robe in a disgustingly businesslike manner.

"Did I really?" he asked absentmindedly, focusing his entire attention on fondling her breasts. Or trying to fondle since she was still valiantly playing some sort of hard-to-get.

"I think you did."

"Whatever you say. Now, don't wiggle, and none of your lip. Yes, spread it. There... Merlin, I love how tight you are."

If she were able to think clearly for a moment, she'd wish the earth would swallow her for abandoning everything she was for a few minutes of ecstasy. Snape, meanwhile, had turned her around, placed her hands slowly on the moss-covered outer wall of the castle and knelt.

"Oh, Merlin, do people even do that?" Hermione's mind shrieked and fluttered with excitement as his hands spread her butt cheeks, and his tongue licked the little pucker inside.

It was the last conscious thought she remembered.

~o~

Hermione woke up and couldn't hold back a yelp. Her eyes met the ugly ceiling of Hogwarts' hospital wing. It had last been white-washed decades before...most probably decades before Hermione was even born...and now was covered in stains, the origin of which Hermione was too grossed out to contemplate.

She tried to move, but was struck with a sharp ping of pain which seemed to have no definite location in her body: it felt like her entire skin was three sizes too small for her.

"Oh, you are awake, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey's cooing voice said from somewhere above and to the left.

"Why am I in the hospital wing?" Hermione croaked and tried to search for the matron with her eyes without much moving. She probably looked like a freak with rotating eyeballs, but it wasn't really her primary concern now.

"Oh, dear, where do I start?" Madam Pomfrey's face swam into her line of sight, creased with concern. "Hagrid brought you here yesterday. Said he found you passed out

not far from the greenhouses. You were unconscious and very dehydrated. We've been trying to diagnose your malady since yesterday but are still at a loss."

"We?" Hermione asked weakly.

"Yes, love, me and Professor Snape, and the Headmistress. Your body is obviously ailing, but we can't pinpoint exactly how. We have purged you, but the effect seems to be minimal. We were forced to report to St. Mungo's, and they have put the entire school under quarantine until your situation is cleared."

"Do you mean to say that I am contagious?" she blurted, though her real question was, why was Snape involved with trying to 'heal' her when he was the source of her illness in the first place? Then she suddenly realized she'd have to expand on the nature of her relationship with Snape and settled on letting them diagnose her. If McGonagall was involved, Snape wouldn't dare to compromise her health further with... whatever it was that he was giving her? And when they did find out, she could pretend she had no clue as to who might have done it.

"Oh, no, Miss Granger, you are not, but the source of your illness may well be within the castle grounds, and until we locate it and deal with it, the castle is closed." Pomfrey's answer interrupted her musings.

On the castle grounds, indeed. Hermione snickered ridiculously, imagining the school Matron and the Headmistress playing hide-and-seek with Snape in the labyrinth of the Hogwarts' corridors.

During the day, she was poked and prodded, stuffed with potions, rubbed with lotions, and spells unnumbered were cast over her body. The "source of her illness," however, never made an appearance. Surprisingly, she felt better, in terms of her previously uncontrolled yearning. It dulled to a nagging, slick want to go, but was rather manageable. Her curiosity, however, was not.

"What does Professor Snape have to say about my illness, Madam Pomfrey?" she asked during yet another check-up. "You've mentioned he was there last night..."

"He said he has some ideas. Should be in his laboratory now, brewing a few things. In fact, he's been concerned with your state for some time already. I think... Wasn't it a couple of weeks ago that he mentioned it to Minerva in the staff room? Oh dear, the years have taken a toll on my memory." The Matron sighed and looked at her expectantly. "Oh, he's even given you a detention or two to investigate covertly," she added after Hermione didn't show any desire to gossip and winked conspiringly.

That bastard.

Hermione would have fumed and probably drooled boiling saliva if she wasn't so hopped up on Calming Draughts.

~o~

Two more days passed uneventfully, with the same annoying succession of spells, potions, lotions and check-ups. She wasn't getting any better; her body was still extremely weak and dehydrated, her vision addled and movements unbalanced. But neither was she getting any worse, at least externally.

It was a whole different picture on the inside. Where two days ago the addiction had huddled inside her, coiled and subdued, it was now growing stronger and more powerful, as if it had used the forced respite to accumulate strength.

Hermione knew that it wouldn't be very long before she felt the physical effects of want: itching, tremors, parched mouth.

It needed to be relieved. Oh, how she wished Harry and Ron had given in to her pleas and castigations and refused to accept the marks the Ministry appointed to them as war heroes. Except right now her wish had a distinctly self-serving character: she'd have had instant access to the Marauder's map, returned to Harry as a token after the war, and could have used some hidden passage to slip away from the castle.

Well, Snape's mere presence would have to do. She'd waited for Madam Pomfrey to leave for bed and gulped a Strengthening Potion. The doors were unlocked, and Hermione's heart cringed in shame at breaking such blind trust. There was a strange sense of futility she had to waddle through as she ran to the dungeons. Her whole being screamed that she should be behind the abandoned greenhouse, not anywhere else, but she could still put a lid on it. A few times, she felt like just going to the Main Gate and trying to blast it with a few spells. At least she'd be closer to the greenhouses from there.

She entered the Potions classroom noisily and was greeted by the sight of Snape, holding a decanter with something viscous inside. Surprisingly, she didn't feel any better, like she normally would when she appeared at their regular spot. Neither did she feel an overwhelming need to succumb to him nor a knee-weakening fascination. Maybe the body-purge had worked better than she thought.

"What business do you have being out of bed, Miss Granger, and breaking in here like tumbleweed on a rampage?" Snape asked calmly.

"I think you owe me an explanation, Professor," she said, suddenly seething with anger.

"Do I really?" His tone was perfunctory, as if he was trying to make conversation designed to lull a dangerous imbecile. He looked her over and went about decanting whatever potion he had been handling.

"You've given me something! And I demand that you tell me what it was and get me clean of it."

"Miss Granger, apart from the fact that you don't exactly exude an air which would solicit my obedience to your silly demands, I haven't the remotest idea what you are blathering on about."

"But you have, you... you... prick!" Hermione flew up to him and poked an indignant finger on his chest.

"That would be twenty-five points for the language...do remove that digit from my person...and I have not, but I may as well now since the mountain has come to Mohammed, so to speak," Snape said much more levelly than Hermione's knowledge of his temper would suggest and whipped a little flask from his pocket.

Uncorking it with his teeth, he grabbed her chin between thumb and forefinger and tipped the flask down her throat with such practiced ease, one would think Snape had the regular duty of attending to petulant sick children. Hermione briefly thought that perhaps he did, but then fury swallowed the thought.

"How dare you!" she yelled, spitting out the entire mouthful he managed to pour into her.

"Don't bother. It's already in your system; I shall have my outcome in a minute."

"Your outcome? So that's what I was for you? Some kind of bloody test? So tell me, Snape, what outcome did you receive from fucking me behind the blasted greenhouse?"

She balled her fists and was a hair's breadth away from connecting at least one (preferably, both) of them with his ugly mug.

A flicker of something very dangerous lit Snape's face for a moment and was gone. He was standing completely still. Probably considering the implications of her possible decision to report him.

Suddenly, her throat itched, and she started coughing, feeling something swell and release in her lungs. She kept coughing and heaving, trying to get rid of the foreign something in her chest when a rather gentle, or, to be more precise, gently detached hand wiped her lips.

Gloves. He was wearing rubber gloves. And currently they were dotted with some kind of murky, greenish slime.

He looked at her indecipherably.

"So, where exactly do you say I fucked you, Miss Granger?" Ice would have been ashamed at how cold Severus Snape could sound.

"You disgust me," she said, hating her inability to give smart comebacks on the spot (and oh, how they tortured her, coming late) and turned to leave.

"I don't remember dismissing you, girl." The same coldness. The classroom door clicked shut before her nose with a bang.

"Oh, what, I've finally deserved a location upgrade?" she said vehemently, not turning to look him in the eye, lest he should see that hers were getting moist.

"Just tell me where it is." Heartless arsehole. Heartless, miserable, wretched arsehole.

"Fuck you." It was probably the first time in her life she'd used the words, and now she could understand those who indulged often. There was a definite satisfaction.

"Don't make me get the information from you; I need the place, Miss Granger."

"And I said, fuck..."

She was suddenly being turned around, but there was nothing sexual, moreover, nothing *familiar* in the manoeuvre, and while in other circumstances she'd be being poked by an erection right now, at the moment it was a wand that was poking her. In the temple.

"Do remember that you left me no choice when it hurts," he hissed maliciously. *"Legilimens!"*

And suddenly he was inside her, but in a different, forceful, unwelcome way, and on a level she never even knew existed. It was painful; it was uncomfortable; it was humiliating. It was like a classic dream where one is naked in a public place. She thought that, perhaps, this was how books felt when they were manhandled by first-year vandals and knew that he had registered her comparison and thought it asinine.

And then he started searching through her brain for the information he needed. It was excruciating, but resisting proved to be more painful, so she soon let him have his way, whimpering in pain and clutching at his robes. After all, what kind of secret could she feel ashamed of, considering all they had done together?

His emotions, however, which she could feel resonating slightly inside her, were frightening. Shame, guilt, puzzlement, outrage, shame, fascination, mortification, outrage, horror, disgust, shame, disgust.

When he pulled out of her, his reddened face sported an expression that both terrified and puzzled her. She just had never deemed Snape capable of displaying so much emotion.

Without saying a word, he shoved her off his robe, as if she were something stuck to his sole, and went to the fireplace.

"Minerva!" his shout reached Hermione. "It's behind the abandoned greenhouse 2/7. Make sure they wear masks; it's very potent."

Wiping tears of contempt and helpless anger away, Hermione struggled to understand the meaning of this strange, one-sided conversation, but all that she had was the swarming wrongness.

"What is this all about?" she whispered.

"This is about you, Miss Granger, or someone else, growing a Class "A" ranking illegal plant in the close vicinity of Hogwarts' students and exposing them all to it. A crime that could land you up to ten years in Azkaban, not to mention a list of restrictions as long as Binns' life to follow."

"I didn't plant anything illegal," she answered, her voice small.

"Yes, I know. And I know what you *think* you did there," he said with such contempt oozing from every syllable that she felt slapped.

"And you didn't?" she turned around, incensed by his impudence. "Are you saying that you didn't come there each and every time and *take* me in every way you could conceive of?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying. Whatever it was you think you've experienced was an hallucination, induced by inhaling the spores of *Dracena Delirii*. Now that we know the cause of your state, please relieve this classroom of your obnoxious presence."

Dracena Delirii didn't ring any bells. Not even the tiniest little bell. And Hermione Granger did not study Herbology for nothing.

"You are a lying, cheating bastard." She forced her lips to form the words, choking on every one. "You are just saying this so that you can cover up the fact that you slipped me a lust potion and used me for your pleasure."

If Snape wasn't aflame with rage before, he definitely was now. He was purple with rage, and his eyes smoldered with rage. Seizing her by the collar, he hissed.

"So, you think I'm lying to you? You think you know me inside and out? Sniff, Miss Granger. Does my smell seem familiar?" He grabbed the back of her head and pressed it roughly into the inseam of his neck and shoulder. Crying and shaking, she inhaled and realized that she couldn't attribute his smell to anything she'd known before.

"Smells are easy to cover up!" she screamed and hammered at his chest with her fists.

He didn't let go.

"Still not believing me, then?" Snape's spittle flew in all directions, and a few flecks landed on her face. "Fine, then, tell me, if you think you know me so... intimately, what does my cock look like? Is it long? How big is it? Does it lean to one side when it is erect?" His words would excite her normally, but right now it felt like he was ripping off her rose-coloured glasses together with chunks of her flesh. "Tell me, Miss Granger, what do I taste like? Am I salty? Am I bitter? What is it like to taste me? You would know all these things, if I wasn't a figment of your imagination, wouldn't you? Speaking of imaginations, my, but you have one sick mind."

She realized that she couldn't answer his questions. She simply didn't know the answers. The man holding her now in a vice wasn't the man she'd been with. Even the feel of his body was unfamiliar: this Snape was bonier under his robes, his hipbones jutted out, poking her uncomfortably.

"But it was so real..." she started, and he finally let her go. She turned away, sucked dry by the most profound mortification she had ever experienced. So many things clicked. The perfection of it all; the way it seemed he was taking her whims from her head, the never-changing locale. The compulsion. How could she have been so blind? She'd never been addicted to him. It was just a plant.

The presence of details is the first and foremost sign of reality. There was not a single detail she could recall about their trysts.

"It's what *Dracena Delirii* does," Snape said with somewhat less malice. "It lures you to where it grows by feeding you your deepest and truest fantasies, and when you come, it sucks out your life force. You must have stumbled upon it accidentally, and from then on it was a matter of how fast the effect of the spores took hold of you. You are lucky Hagrid found you. Its spores are nothing to those who have goblin or giant blood in them."

"I've never heard of it," she replied, a petulant wish to grasp at straws stuffing words into her mouth.

"Then your desire to decline the O in the Herbology N.E.W.T. that the Ministry made is understandable," Snape said and glared at her.

"I'm sure it is not on the curriculum."

"No, it is not, and for a reason, as you can see." Snape admitted grudgingly.

"You are probably disgusted with me right now," Hermione whispered blandly. Her humiliation was so deep that she was almost desensitized.

"Do not ever ask questions to that which you don't truly want an answer. You'll only be slapped in the face," he said.

"I don't think I could be slapped in the face harder than I already am."

Something akin to pity reflected in his eyes and dissipated swiftly. Hermione immediately understood she was wrong. Getting pity from the most pitiable man she'd known slapped hard.

"Just go, Miss Granger. I do not wish to continue this conversation. Now that your illness has been identified, you should be back to your normal health soon."

At that, Snape turned around and walked back to his desk.

Hermione knew dismissal when she saw one.

She walked back to the hospital wing in a daze, empty and drained.

When she reached her cot, she conjured a calendar. The numbers were shaky and spotty, proving that her magic was indeed depleted. She'd marked a date with red and counted the remaining days. Twenty-one.

Twenty-one days, and then she could get the hell out of this place and put it and that man and the godsdamned plant behind her.

It was, after all, a good thing that the Ministry was allowing her to sit her N.E.W.T.s before the Christmas break.

2

Chapter 2 of 2

part 2

A/N: This is chapter two, guys. Again, taking a chance to thank two wonderful persons, who made this readable, **Lariope** and **Melusin**.

Reviews make me smile; any feedback is much appreciated!

~o~

The night air was pleasantly abuzz with the sounds of early spring: birds cooing in search of their mates, tree branches rustling secrets to each other. Mrs. Norris, the unfortunate feline old maid, whose chastity was vigilantly guarded by Filch, was expressing her sexual frustration loudly, as she did annually each March. Occasionally, there was the pop of a Bursting Bramble: an ivy plant, which took over this rather shabby and forsaken part of the ancient castle. Each bud released a new leaf with a dainty pop followed by a hiss. Pop, hiss. Pop, hiss.

The monotonous pattern should have soothed the man striding under the dark coving. His measured steps strummed an accompanying rhythm for the popping and hissing and together created a rather odd acoustic theme. Usually, it aided in emptying his mind, just like prowling through abandoned corridors did, but not today. Severus Snape rubbed his throbbing temple and groaned as another one of Mrs. Norris's desperate howls ripped through the air and, subsequently, through his migraine-tortured head.

Suddenly, the acute senses of the Potions master caught a slight change in the drowsy air of the corridor, which for a man with a career in espionage, indubitably signified a presence of something foreign. Or someone who shouldn't be there. Making as little change to his movements as possible, he fingered the blunt end of his wand and then, as sudden and fast as an attacking viper, cast a revealing charm in the general direction of the intruder.

All his years of spying could not have prepared him for the reveal. Hiding in a small nook of the mouldy flagstone wall was Professor Granger. Her creamy-white skin, made almost translucently pale by the wan moonlight, stood out shockingly in the thick surrounding darkness. And the reason why Snape could fully appreciate the contrast was because Granger was not wearing a stitch of clothing.

Well, well.

He stood in front of her and gave her the eyebrow. She huddled closer to the shadows, trying to cover herself with her hands, but Snape's doggedly tenacious memory had already stored away her dusty-pink nipples with small areolas, and a neat triangle of curls, which her freezing fingers were now trying to hide. That particular sight was rather erotic in a very innocent, subdued way, and it took Snape some effort to tear his eyes, which begged to linger there, away from it. She shivered, still shell-shocked into silence, and he was shaken back to reality.

"I think I shall mark this day in my calendar, catching you...sweet Hecate...*in flagrante delicto*, Granger," he drawled, his mind suddenly a-swirl with all the devious ways this situation could be put to use.

"It's Professor Granger," she bit back, sticking her chin up in defiance, which looked utterly endearing on someone in such a pathetic situation.

"Not if I were making the decisions. You're the worst acquisition in staff this school has had to suffer since the strain of unfortunate Defence Teachers we had when you were... young." He laid a delicate stress on the word, perfectly aware that it would wound her, and especially so because, by all reckonings, she was still young. "But I digress. Usually, when I stumble upon someone... rambling the halls in the nude, there's always a counterpart."

Snape looked around in mock astonishment, as if searching for her lover.

"There's no one but me, and if you..." she started to say, but he cut her off.

"Oh my, did I happen upon a solo performance?" the Potions master purred, infusing his voice with fake excitement. "Who would have thought you were that desperate, Granger?"

As if forgetting that she had been frantically trying to hide her nudity just a moment ago, the girl placed her hands on her hips (her nipples were indeed a rather attractive shade of dark pink) and scoffed in frustration.

"Oh, do shut up and help me out, for fuck's sake, you leech!"

Snape gave her an ugly sneer and spoke in a voice that others would rather use when talking across a pillow.

"What a day. The Rose of Gryffindor asking the greasy old bat of the dungeons for a favour." He was so going to enjoy this. "Pray tell, what do you require? A helping *hand*?"

Fully aware of the disconcerting effect it would produce, Snape freely raked his eyes over her naked body. He found himself very excited.

"Malfoy cursed my clothes. Now, help me before a student sees me," she spat and eyed his cloak.

Snape scowled sourly and inhaled with his mouth slightly open so that he could taste the air on the back of his tongue. There was definitely no smell of sex or even arousal. She was telling the truth, and if that were so...

Even if he gave her the cloak, she wouldn't be able to put it on. Snape spared an awed thought for Draco's creative streak. Why, but in some ways, the supercilious arse was talented.

"What, you want me to give you clothes? I will, if that frees you... of your self-imposed servitude to this castle and sends you packing," Snape liited disdainfully, hinting at her SPEW debacle, which had been a staffroom joke for over a decade now. "Would, say, a sock... suffice?"

She recoiled slightly and flushed bright pink.

On a peripheral level, Snape couldn't help but acknowledge that his enjoyment was tinted with arousal. The little bint had heavenly skin.

"If I could put clothes on, I'd conjure some, thank you very much," Granger replied tartly, and her hands twitched as if they were fighting modesty for their right to sit in indignant fists against her hips. Nicely rounded hips. Snape imagined his finger marks on their unblemished surface and swallowed.

"How very unfortunate for you," Snape replied with mock pity, clearly implying that his true sentiment was quite the contrary. *And how very fortunate for me*, a little gleeful voice, which had suddenly come from Merlin knew where, added in his head.

"Snape, do save your long preambles for your Potions classes. I can't undo the spell for some reason," she huffed defensively, and he felt a very unwelcome pang of pity for her. If he squinted just so, a strange, puerile, wide-eyed innocence still lingered behind her eyes, and it unnerved him slightly on a level he refused to contemplate.

"Of course you can't," he snapped. "However, I find myself surprised, Granger, that you are so unversed in matters of spellwork as to not know the reason why."

He'd lied, of course. She wouldn't know the spell. It was crafted in Slytherin, and what was born in Slytherin, stayed in Slytherin. In this case, it could also only be undone by a Slytherin. He knew that she no longer cared about insults to her appearance or vile traits of character or even teaching failures. But her shell still cracked when her ability to hoard knowledge was targeted.

Hurt flashed through her eyes, and Snape instantly knew that she was already filing the episode away for future plans of retribution. Why, who would have thought that time would choose vindictiveness as a character trait to change and fester in Hermione Granger? He smirked. Let her. He was no Draco Malfoy, and thus, she was no match for him.

"Obviously, you know more about this wondrous spell, Professor," she cooed, her voice dulcetly malicious. "Perhaps you could demonstrate your impeccable spellwork and undo this for me? I'll commend this moment to my memory as one of exemplary craftsmanship."

"Your cheek would only make you stray from your goal, girl," Snape noted casually. Not as if he were planning to help her along, anyway.

"I am no girl to you," she seethed. He gave her another once-over. No girl, indeed.

The chit's fingers twitched characteristically, and the Potions master gave her another reptilian grin.

"Ah, but there's the drawback of keeping your wand in your sleeve, *girl*." Tired with the preliminaries, Snape thought it was about time to storm the main gate and, grabbing her cheeks, pulled her mouth close for a kiss. She moaned, deep. She always did.

~o~

Passing by a tall lancet window, Severus Snape stopped and heaved a heavy, contented sigh. Today was a good one. Nice touch with the spell.

The wall next to the window had collapsed in on itself on one side. He looked out into the nippy spring night. The moonlit courtyard was a picture of perfect serenity something Severus would give his arm for at the moment. Reaching into his pockets, he produced a small phial and gulped down the contents. His own version of Sober Up...altered for his particular cause...never failed, but he could tell it had a weaker effect with each usage. Taking a break, he wondered for the hundredth time if giving up his post as the head of Slytherin to Draco Malfoy in vain hopes of devoting more time to research and quiet solitude of reading had been one of the most unwise moves in his teaching career. It seemed all he had been doing of late was clear up his godson's messes, like an unfortunate dog owner with a shit-bag, following his diarrhea-stricken spaniel.

At first, it hadn't been so bad. As the new Defence Professor, Draco had been doing remarkably well for the first few months. Surprising his colleagues and most of all, his godfather, the Malfoy heir had shown that he had a way with children. He lectured with flair, assigned and docked points fairly...well, most of the time...had coached the Slytherin Quidditch team into snatching the cup from Gryffindor the previous year in an extremely satisfying match, and managed to beat Lockhart, hands down, in setting female (and some of the male) hearts aflame. At first, when the members of the staff had gushed about how unexpectedly well Draco was doing as a teacher, Severus, of course, had rolled his eyes, but in a good way. He had even been somewhat proud of his godson. He still believed that Draco was nowhere even near Lucius in things that counted, but had to admit that the little ferret was further ahead in his way than Severus would have expected.

It had all gone downhill from the moment Draco was found with his cock all the way down a sixth-year Gryffindor girl's throat in one of the abandoned classrooms after hours in November.

Of course, Lucius's way of having his fingers in all the important pies and an unspeakable amount of Galleons helped Draco's case, especially since the girl (a Prefect, no less) didn't press any charges and even went out of her way in cooking up an explanation, which Lucius's money then transformed into a plausible excuse with no magical help. Apparently, Hogwarts might have been contaminated with one, or even multiple, sprouts of *Dracena Delirii*, the most recent case having been registered exactly ten years ago. There was simply no stopping the reaction, as both had said. The culprit herbologist, of course, was never found, Draco received a severe talking to from the Headmistress, and the girl lost her Prefect's Badge, and that was all.

Fools, all of them: they didn't even bother to check whether *Dracena Delirii* was even capable of enabling others to see the fantasies of the afflicted. Severus was all too aware of the fact that money could buy only so many opinions, but in this case, all the important ones were bought over.

The entire situation would have blown up and passed like the latest fashion trend, disappearing from the minds of the wizarding world's biggest gossips, including the *Prophet*, and making Draco simply more approachable in the minds of those who wanted to approach him, if not for one thing.

The thing was, Draco and his unfortunate (though many witches and some wizards would argue this point) lover were busted by none other than Hermione Granger, Hogwarts' Transfiguration Professor and new head of Gryffindor House. Less than a few days after she had arrived at Howarts to take up her position. And Merlin knew, if Hermione Granger had a pet project in mind, she went at it with a vengeance.

This time, it was finding the source of the rumours about *Dracena Delirii*. Which meant his own little project was being seriously compromised, especially since Granger had a sort of a... personal interest in the subject.

~o~

Most people can pinpoint either the moment they fell in love or the moment they realized that they had fallen in love.

Severus Snape, never one to choose conventional ways, could pinpoint both. The first took place during a wet dream, based vaguely on what he had seen in Hermione Granger's mind that fateful November evening. The second one came exactly ten years later...an anniversary of sorts...as soon as said Hermione Granger appeared at the High Table for breakfast as the new head of Gryffindor and Transfiguration Professor.

She had managed to look simultaneously the same as he had remembered, as his mind conjured up during his... trips, and yet, there were a few details that had changed. Her hips were fuller, and her face looked sharper. She moved about cautiously and dressed almost primly. Snape doubted anyone would ever be able to see Hermione Granger with forgotten quills sticking out of her messy hair and with knee socks, one of which had fallen down her calf and bunched childishly there.

And yet, when he watched her covertly as she hid in the library at weekends...as she was making notes, and the tip of her tongue was touching the corner of her mouth from time to time...he still could see the reckless, passionate youngster shining through the buttoned-up woman who looked at the world with narrowed eyes. He found that he was rather fascinated by the combination.

She also made no conscious effort at acknowledging him beyond what was the absolute minimum of politeness the school ethics required.

Snape even tried to pick on her teaching methods for the sake of a twisted communicative effort, all the more so because she was a complete failure as a teacher...arrogant, demanding, too easily carried away, poor at recognizing the gap between her knowledge and the knowledge of the reluctant dunderheads she had to teach. Admitting her flaws, she still always managed to skillfully avoid not only a confrontation, but even a conversation as such.

He knew that the offered post had been a gesture of goodwill from Minerva's side and wasn't exactly her dream job. He felt reluctantly responsible for her situation. Few employers these days wanted to deal with a worker who was too willful and wanting to change many things too quickly and too radically. Especially if that worker had had a very unfortunate incident in her youth which involved extensive damage from a very addictive drug. And hadn't you heard, *Dracena Delirii* alters one's mind irrevocably? The kind of chimaeras populating Hermione Granger's brain had been the fodder of gossip columns for a few months.

Of course, Severus Snape was well aware of how bloated up the whole mythology surrounding *Dracena Delirii* was. By now, he knew it firsthand.

~o~

Over the ten years, he had gone through every single stage of denial, acceptance and dealing.

It had all started with engulfing shame as soon as the door closed behind Hermione Granger and her utmost mortification. A large part of this feeling was second-hand: there was always an emotional residue after one plunged like that into another's mind. But it was the nature of his own shame that was puzzling. Snape didn't feel guilty for intruding into the girl's most hidden secrets, her deepest fantasies. He'd done things like that times enough to know that regret would not be constructive in this case.

It was her view of him that shamed him. How on earth did the idiot child get that image? Whoever was responsible for giving her the most lame-brained idea that Severus Snape was some kind of a depraved, sexually dominant bastard who liked to make the women he fucked feel used? All right, the language kink he could understand; he liked it himself when his bedmates were talkative, but the rest of it? Snape was appalled at the most profound of levels.

He could even understand the glorified, romanticized Death-Eater stereotype: it had become a sort of a sexual fashion of late among some women. Those who knew of the events of the most recent war only from *Prophet* headlines often thought of Voldemort's followers as a well-organized cadre of dark, crafty wizards when in reality they were nothing but a bunch of petty, vicious wankers. Women who fawned over the handsome Dolohov had no idea that he preferred little girls, and Avery, whose ever-boyish charm broke quite a few hearts, was into barbaric pillaging...he wouldn't be capable of finding a clit with a *Lumos*.

But Hermione Granger's mind nourishing the same idiotic fantasies? Of him, above all? This he could not understand.

Another thing above his comprehension level was his morbid fascination with these fantasies despite their sheer ridiculousness. At first, he was righteously infuriated and repulsed. He was nothing like the man she had imagined and...such lascivious whims in a mere child of nineteen! He had even considered removing the blasted memories and placing them into a Pensieve. But then he remembered the time when he had been a mere child of nineteen and suddenly discovered a whole well of tolerance towards one Hermione Granger.

After the images of her pert little breasts jiggling as he slid in and out of her with measured detachment had plagued his dreams for days, he did remove the memories...only to dive head first into the damn basin each time he was conflicted, tired, annoyed, frustrated or just had a bloody hard-on for seemingly no apparent reason. After all, a Pensieve allowed watching from all the possible angles.

And very soon, watching only was not enough. One fine evening, a few years after the real Hermione Granger had left Hogwarts in haste, Severus Snape dived out of her drug-induced delusions at the moment when the Pensieve Severus (who had broader shoulders and fluffier hair) said, "Pop," into Pensieve Hermione's ear as he entered her bottom. He carefully preserved the Pensieve and decided that he needed more.

~o~

Surprisingly enough, for all its danger, a young sapling of *Dracena Delirii* was an outrageously easy find. All Severus had to do was go behind the abandoned greenhouse 2/7 and look for it in full protective gear. The Ministry's Magical Decontamination crew should have had their salaries reduced by half for not getting rid of the roots.

The sapling was weak and young, but Severus hadn't got an O in his Herbology N.E.W.T. for nothing.

His strategy was that of an overconfident scientist: he did this because he could and was fully aware of his doings. It took about a month to find a remote corner within the outer reaches of Hogwarts, so old and neglected that the walls had fallen in, and ivy plants had taken over the place. Another two weeks were spent raising repellent and protective charms that would even keep the ghosts of the founders, if they chose to make themselves known, out of the place. Three days were spent altering the Sober Up potion to eradicate the effects of the spores, and Snape was all set.

The first "conscious," if the word could be applied to it, trip proved to be a disappointment. It turned out that his deepest wish was to converse with the dead, not to make love with the living, and he'd spent a good two hours listening to Dumbledore commending him on his actions and Lily thanking him for looking out for her son. After a very moving goodbye, they left, and he put the sapling under a bell-glass and a long-keeping Stasis charm, concealed it, and didn't go back for over a year.

The next foray into the self-supervised substance abuse happened when Severus realized that he was on the mental mend from the horrors of the war and craved some company, maybe even of the female persuasion, but wasn't yet ready to go out to seek it.

It was more successful, but this time around, he was horrified to find that apparently his deepest fantasies shifted towards wanting to be hero-worshipped. This time, he did meet Hermione Granger, complete with her school garb and a knee-sock bunched around her ankle. There was nothing desire-inspiring about her appearance, and it appeared that she wished to discuss how great he was. She'd bragged on and on, among other things, about how she'd loved his classes and wished he hadn't had to act the part of a mean head of Slytherin all the time. Then she said she wasn't angry at all at his disparaging remarks and instances of being a general arsehole, including that disaster with him reading her mind. She understood. And she, too, commended him on his heroic deeds and even confessed that she had a thing for big noses. No attempt at having sex with him, whatsoever. Severus was as frustrated as a rain-drenched Kneazle, but somehow, this little show of admiration left a spot deep within him that was both a profound satisfaction and a longing for it to be real.

Third time worked like it should...that is, like a charm. When he stumbled upon her, tripping (in both senses) through the ivy-infested part of the castle, she was no longer a child. He surmised it was his accidental reading of a society column in the *Prophet* that provided the new image. That week's report was of some annual Victory Ball, and one of the pictures was a snapshot of an obviously reluctant Granger in a rather attractive gown. A strange, but fetching creature.

When he rounded a corner and saw her staring out of the window, she started and turned, just like in that photo. She was wearing the same dress and the same 'oh-leave-me-the-fuck-alone' expression. It faded away as soon as she'd registered his presence, and in the next moment, she was snaking her arms around him and sighing wonderfully.

"I've been waiting for you for so long," she said.

And "You smell so good" as her nose burrowed into his neck. And later "I love you" as she came, clutching his shoulders and fluttering one ecstatic exhale after another into his willing ears.

The quiet frankness of the encounter shook him to the core. It shook him so badly that the day after (actually, it was three days, since this particular trip took place in the summer, and Severus Snape had taken the liberty of drowning his impressions in a battery of Ogden's products) he destroyed the sapling.

However, the taste of requited love, of a woman who found him attractive and desirable, no matter how twisted and unreal, was hard to wash away even with the entire contents of the famous Malfoy wine cellar.

And less than a year later, Severus procured another sapling and planted it in the same spot, his 'visits to the pot' soon acquiring a pattern.

~o~

The tone of his quite, as some would say, romantic monthly or bimonthly trips into the sweet oblivion, courtesy of the *Dracena Delirii* spores' effect, shifted dramatically as soon as reality had asserted itself in the form of Hermione Granger, unloading her bags from a Thestral carriage.

She was different. Slightly subdued, but at the same time, turmoil was evident in her every move. The corners of her mouth were stretched thin with constant dissatisfaction, and she wore prim, dark colours, which looked unexpectedly flattering on her. Her hair was now almost always pulled up, baring a slender neck with a few wisps of curls at the nape. That fateful morning at breakfast, when she had appeared and had taken a seat three chairs away from Snape, Minerva, who sat right next to her, had asked him to pass the salt and...

And when his hand had been outstretched, it still lingered there for a few seconds, which later had been a cause of his shame and self-castigation. And all because Granger had chosen the only moment during the entire breakfast to tilt her head slightly, so that a tendon curved delicately in that blasted neck of hers, and then she had fingered those thrice-damned wisps of hair.

Immediately, Severus had wanted to fit that neck into the arched expanse between his thumb and his forefinger.

And maybe even snap it...for the sake of his own peace.

That night, when he had practically run to his spot, her alter ego was different. She was slightly pathetic, and annoying, and even clingy. He explained it by his desire to be angry with the real Granger, and the Hermione of his delusions did make him angry. Their encounter resulted in a fight, and Severus felt extremely satisfied to have had it.

From then on, a sense of being constantly discomfited settled in Severus. It resulted from the clash of the real-but-unapproachable Hermione Granger with her so-pleasing-but-unreal counterpart. And it was maddening.

For years, Severus Snape had been content with having a substitute for love. Something he could time, pace, control and get rid of painlessly when needed. It was safe, and it was harmless, and it had a real feeling to it. It was perfect.

And now she was here, making him instantly realize the scale and the profundity of his own self-delusion and being sweetly ignorant of it at the same time. Snape wanted more and more for the real Granger to bear the brunt of his self-inflicted suffering. After all, she was involved as well. *She started it* a petulant part of his brain, which had obviously had too much of dealing with children, kept repeating on and on.

But it was the Hermione in his delusions who suffered, in fact. Severus's brain kept inventing elaborate situations in which she was humiliated, in which she found herself in awkward situations, in which they got into verbal sparring that never ended in her favour, so that he could mock her to his heart's content. Usually, such encounters resulted in angry sex, which was still satisfying, except for one thing. If before he only had had to resort to 'visiting the pot,' as he had started referring to his trips in his head, once a month or so, after the Real Hermione Granger arrived, the number of encounters began to increase exponentially. As if he needed another addition to his ever growing pile of troubles, which had started with Draco Malfoy, new head of Slytherin and ended with the recent piece of news about the first of the next generation of Potters arriving at Hogwarts to plague his existence as early as the following year.

~o~

"Uncle Severus, can I come in?" Draco's voice called out through the Floo.

Snape turned his weary head. He had just come back from his recent 'trip to the pot' and was pondering whether he still could rely on Sober Up or needed a deep body purging. Draco's head with a slightly receding hairline (not many people knew that the Floo had the drawback of not reflecting all Glamours and Concealment Charms) floated in the green flames expectantly.

He was only called "Uncle" when the scrawny peacock needed covering for his feathery arse.

"What have you done this time? Or not done," Severus asked in a flat tone.

"It's Granger. She insists I'm smuggling drugs into school and is threatening me with inspections," Draco said with irritation, stumbling out of the hearth.

"And are you?"

"No, but..."

"Then lodge a complaint for calumny." He was so not inclined to mollycoddle a stupid boy, whose only acquaintance within the Muggle world consisted of a marijuana dealer.

"Fine, I'll deal with her on my own." Draco turned to leave.

"And what, pray tell, do you intend to do?"

Draco didn't deign to answer and left with a smug sneer. Which probably meant that he was going to try to seduce Hermione Granger and shag her into silence. Snape sighed and added strengthening Headache-Be-Gone to the list of things to do.

Next week, the news of Granger's blatant dismissal of *the* perfect Draco Malfoy invaded the Hogwarts grapevine. Snape only rolled his eyes when he heard the conversation in the staff room. What a dimwit Malfoy was, forgetting to silence the portraits before propositioning Granger.

Both fools had acquired quite a few haters overnight: Granger, for being the one Draco Malfoy wanted, and the idiot himself, for not choosing them.

While most of the school's female population was aghast with surprise at how anyone could turn down the amorous advances of Draco Malfoy, Severus experienced a sort of malicious glee.

Which most certainly called for an out-of-schedule trip to the pot.

~o~

When he rounded the corner that led to the secret location, Granger was already waiting for him. Usually, she appeared a bit later, a bit closer to the pot, but this time he smelled her indiscreetly 'loud', seasoned apple shampoo immediately after the turn. No doubt, his mind had added that little detail to help him keep up with the anger. Usually, during their delirious encounters, she smelled of... something he never really bothered to recall.

She was there, waiting for him, in full protective gear: dragon-hide gloves, a mask and a barrage of repellent spells.

"This is not sexually appealing at all, Granger. Even if my perverse proclivities included dressing-up games, I am positive my mind would conjure you wearing silk stockings and a collar rather than this get-up," he said and, in a rather mellow manner, reached out to grab a breast.

Only to be blasted into the wall by a mild *Stupefy*.

A few seconds passed in complete silence, in which the sound of his body's impact echoed through the halls like an intruder. So, the little ferret had thought of ratting on him and accidentally hit the mark.

"Am I right in assuming that it *is*me you are seeing in your hallucinations, Professor?" Granger asked, her voice squeaky with shock and indignation.

"Umboo be thpell an uh thell you," he mumbled furiously through a thick, numb tongue.

She cast a quick *Finite* and stood in front of him, hands in a belligerent stance on her hips, face hidden by the mask.

"I'm listening," she said and thumped her foot impatiently. Almost endearingly.

"Get the hell out of here, Granger. I don't have to explain anything to you."

"And I think you do. And it's Professor Granger." The thumping foot increased its tempo.

"Not if I have had a say in it. And *Stupefies* don't exactly pave the way for frank discussions."

He was visited by a self-mocking sense of déjà vu, saying that.

"You wanted to paw me!" she said and huffed.

"Ten years ago, you would have given your right arm for me to paw you, Professor," Snape noted maliciously. "Now, scram, or you will be seriously testing my limits."

"Don't treat me like I'm a besotted numbskull," Granger answered coolly.

Ouch. It hurt slightly because part of him desperately hoped that there was some of that puerile, mesmerizing *wrong* passion left in her. Another part of him admired the change in her grudgingly. Where was that shaking, humiliated girl, and what had this cocky woman done to her?

Snape sighed. He'd been, after all, caught red-handed.

"Ironic, how our roles have reversed ten years later, isn't it?" she asked, and there was a definite offer of peace in her voice. Or at least Severus decided he had heard one.

"What do you want?" he demanded, unexpectedly irritated with her self-assurance and with a suddenly striking desire to wrap that wisp of hair at her nape around his finger. In reality, this time.

"You have to destroy the plant. It's... you know how dangerous it is."

"Do refrain from talking to me like I'm one of your idiot Gryffindors in a revolting state of hormonal adolescence," he barked viperously.

Her complacent posture softened, and she jolted slightly, proving that his barb about 'idiotic Gryffindors,' directed at her, rather than her charges, had hit the sore spot.

"If you keep standing there, the spores will start affecting you soon. You're very close," she said in a hollow voice.

Angrily, he downed the entire bottle of his own Sober Up and cast a Bubble Charm around his head, filtering out everything malignant.

"Happy now?" his face said.

"We have to destroy the plant."

"Go right ahead, and you might want to take a little nostalgic trip to that abandoned greenhouse while you're at it: the decontamination crew forgot all about the roots."

She looked at him for a long time, then cast a Bubble Charm of her own and removed the mask.

"Why are you doing this? I know you don't hate me, Snape. Probably quite the contrary. I find it hard to believe you've made this little corner of the castle a hotbed of illegal activity simply to humiliate me in your fantasies time after time?"

With that she took a step closer, and the sails of Snape's anger instantly lost almost all of their wind. He sighed and hung his head in defeat.

"Did Malfoy drop you a hint about this?" Snape asked poutily, trying to steer the conversation back into the realm of vitriol.

"The answer would be teetering dangerously on the verge of kissing and telling," she said and smiled a little, just a small lift in one corner of her mouth. A pretty little mouth.

She took another step closer, and already he was inhaling ridiculously seasoned apple with each intake of breath. Though it was clearly the sign of reality, he still felt obliged to ask.

"I'm not so sure you aren't a figment of my imagination, Granger."

"I think I might provide some factual proof," she replied, taking him by the hand.

"I'm not like you'd imagined," he said hoarsely.

"I should hope not." Her quiet laughter filled his sails with an entirely different wind. "I daresay, I'm probably not what you've imagined, either."

She proved her words immediately by planting an inquiring little kiss to his chin, of all places. His mind's Granger was never fond of chins.

Still, Severus tensed. His brain had been playing all sorts of tricks on him, depending on his mood, mindset or even time of day.

"I still should like to verify your reality..."

"How about in my rooms, half an hour from now? It's Saturday, and we don't have to... We don't have classes tomorrow. There are so many things I would like to..."

"That would be acceptable."

Three hours later found them still talking. Severus was surprised to discover that *Dracena Delirii* was remarkably one-sided since talking to the real Hermione Granger was oddly and vastly satisfying. So was the sex, of course, but he didn't find that out until much later into the night. Some people would call them ungodly hours of morning, but Snape preferred 'best time of his life' as a descriptor.

FIN.