

The Tattered Man

by Aurette

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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Beta'd by Astopperindeath, and Clairvoyant. Thank you, ladies. Without you it would have been a much lesser work.

Severus Snape woke up the first time to the sound of frenzied voices shouting orders and the feeling of being poked and prodded, but very little else. He had the sensation of being in incredible pain, but without the actual pain. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. The sensation of movement left him slightly panicked, and he tried to call out. All he heard was a wet, sucking, gurgling noise that left him rather frightened. He didn't have long to be afraid, since the noise was accompanied by an increase in the shouting that brought a wave of magic over him as he quickly slipped away again.

The next time he woke up, it was to the sound of clattering heels and the feeling of wind rushing past his face. This time, he got his eyes open and saw bright torches flying past in succession. He watched the sooty stones of a ceiling whir by and surmised he was in Hogwarts. Little else made sense to him, as he could remember neither what he was doing before this strange event, nor what he should do *about* this strange event. He tried to turn his head to see the person who might belong to the clattering shoes, but found he couldn't. Again he tried to call out, and again all he heard was an atrocious gurgle.

"Damn it all, he's shaking off the spell again!"

"Get him under! He'll damage himself more!"

He felt magic wash over him again, and then he knew no more.

He slept a long time after that. Weeks, as a matter of fact.

Severus Snape woke to the sound of a gentle humming and the muted sensation of warmth sliding across his skin that left a chill behind. Altogether it seemed a rather pleasant way to wake up. He knew he'd had a lack of pleasant experiences in his life, although thankfully the particulars were rather vague. The humming was almost graceful in its sound. Not particularly gifted, but soothing and restful all the same.

He opened his eyes. He recognized that ceiling. He had woken up to its view many times before. He was in the hospital wing of Hogwarts. He tried to turn his head but couldn't. He tried to lift a hand and was unsure of his success. It *seemed* like he had, and yet, the requested hand failed to materialize where it should have. He tried to speak. To call whoever was humming that tune. However, there was nothing. No sound at all. Confused and suddenly greatly irritated by the tune, he snorted. The gentle humming stopped. A face loomed up over him, and he found himself looking into a pair of honey-colored eyes, tinted with concern and shaded with excitement. They were rather pretty eyes. He thought he should know them. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he was fairly sure he knew *exactly* whose eyes they were. However,

that knowledge seemed unimportant in the face of how much he enjoyed simply looking into them. So he did.

The young woman with the warm, sweet eyes was talking to him. He didn't understand her words. He picked up a few that resonated on some level, 'bath' and 'won' and 'exonerated' all seemed to have the same importance. 'Professor' and 'apologize' and 'Potter' all carried equal amounts of dislike, and so he started to ignore her words and just look at the flecks of gold in her eyes. In fact, he almost missed the last bits, which seemed to carry the most import when he mused over them, 'Voldemort dead' and 'permanently mute.' These words carried equal weight, but produced such disparate feelings that he didn't know how to react. He looked at the young woman's eyes and sought clues on how he should be feeling. She seemed happy. Happy to be talking to him. Happy he was looking at her. Happy he was here. He wanted to be happy too, just to please her. He smiled, hoping she approved. He was surprised to feel a warm tear slide into his ear.

She finished her business in good time and then gave him a potion, sliding a warm hand under his shoulders and pressing a soft breast to his arm as she assisted. From this vantage, he could see he was naked with a folded towel across his hips. He saw the bowl of soapy water and the sponge and smelled the soap on her hands as she brought the potion to his lips. What a lovely person, he thought. He tried to thank her, but nothing came out. He struggled to form the words, but there was simply no sound, except for the rushing of his breath and the clicking of his tongue. He panicked. The woman tried to soothe him; she chattered at him persistently, urgently. But she was no longer of consequence. He tried to push her away, but his arms wouldn't answer. He looked at her in dread and fear, but stopped when he saw tears in her eyes. Those pretty eyes. Had he made them sad? He felt himself drift away as the potion took hold. Startled, he looked at her, feeling slightly betrayed. A small, concerned, frown creased her brow, and she started to say something, but he felt his eyes slide shut and left her.

Severus Snape stumped along, leaning heavily on his cane and trying to minimize the way his foot twisted out to the side and dragged. He had taken to wearing robes that trailed on the floor and came up even higher on his neck, to hide his deformities, but it was a futile gesture. Everyone knew anyway. Headmistress McGonagall had allowed the papers unusual access, citing the need to show he was no longer a threat, and every aspect of his life had been open to examination, including lurid details of his so-called recovery. The front pages were full of so much detail they might as well have stripped him naked and allowed Granger to give him his sponge baths on the steps of the school. He felt exposed and vulnerable and very, very bitter about every aspect of his existence. With the notable exception of those baths themselves; there, he was only tremendously discomfited.

He had taken refuge in those moments of pampered solicitude. The chit rarely spoke, just hummed her soft and haunting melodies. It was useless to feel embarrassed; obviously, she had taken on the job while he had been in the coma, and obviously she was more intimately acquainted with bits of him than any other being on the planet since his mother. It was a moot point, and he could hardly bathe himself, in those early days of paralysis. He had been proud of himself for not reacting in any manner that might disgrace himself further. Pride had turned to desolation when he eventually realized that he couldn't have reacted anyway. He didn't know if she knew, or just thought he had tremendous restraint. Or most likely, she thought she was beneath his regard in that manner. That suited just as well. He had been pathetically grateful for the return of movement that signaled the end of her chore, and yet sad at the loss of tranquility that it had brought.

He stumped into the potions lab and made his way over to a bench, sitting down gracelessly and trying to catch his breath.

"Hello, Severus! How are you feeling today?" asked Slughorn with false gaiety.

Severus just scowled at the man until he muttered and went back to his job of restoring the cracked foundation wall. Watching the expectant look on people's faces as they waited for a response was a bitter gall. Only Pomfrey and the Granger chit ever seemed to get the hang of not asking questions. His voice was gone forever, his vocal cords had been destroyed, and he refused to mouth at them. Potter had brought him a book on Muggle sign language and chattered at him about how marvelous it was and how he had a copy for himself and was going to learn it so they could converse, and wouldn't he like that? He had received a two-fingered salute for his efforts. Snape knew quite a few Muggle signs; they just weren't in any books.

He didn't want to speak with his hands. He didn't want to click and spit and slap his lips together. He didn't want to do anything. As the summer wore on and he stumped about watching the community's efforts to restore the castle, he really only thought of one thing. He was useless, and he might as well be dead.

He had heard Pomfrey argue with the Healers that had been brought in from St. Mungo's to consult. They had urged her to sign him out and send him to a home. Further recovery was unlikely, and even if he could perform a few spells voicelessly, with the nerve damage from the toxin, he would never have the control needed. They had told her that it was cruel to expect anything more from him and sending him somewhere to be cared for, somewhere he could live out his days in peace, would be better by far. Poppy had refused, saying he had a home right here and he had a mind full of knowledge that was still of use to the students and the school. McGonagall had backed her up, but Severus had heard the unspoken words in the long pause that had preceded it.

No one asked him. No one bothered to see if he was even interested in playing Quasimodo to Hogwarts' Notre Dame.

He was still sitting in the lab, watching Slughorn's struggle, when the Headmistress came in.

"Horace...Oh! Hello, Severus! How are you today? Is the leg improving? Have you started the new potion that was sent over from St. Mungo's?" She looked at him for a minute with raised brows, and then her face reflected irritation at his stony silence. "I'll ask Poppy later," she said, as she continued past him. "Horace, I know you were hoping to retire again, and I am so very glad that you have agreed to one more year. Now, I have a favor to ask that will be a bit of a burden, but also lifts a burden as well. We have so many returning students. Not only are the Muggleborn coming back but there has also been an increase due to parents deciding not to continue home-schooling because the war is over. Enrollment is at its highest in years. However, there will need to be remedial classes as well as expanded classes. This will double your work load. I was hoping you would agree to take on an apprentice or two; that way they could take over the easier classes for you and let you concentrate on the sixth and seventh years as well as apprentice training."

"Oh, good heavens, Minerva. That's a lot to ask. I'm not as young as I used to be. Two apprentices at once, you say? I will have to think about it. I don't think I could do that at all. Do you have candidates in mind? Potter was exceptional at Potions his last year here." Slughorn turned at the sound of Severus's snort. "And I heard the Ministry gave him and his two friends full marks for their work. Perhaps we could ask him to come back?"

Snape grabbed up his cane and struggled to a stand. As Slughorn and the Headmistress discussed possible candidates, he moved over to the desk and started to rifle through drawers until he found ink and a quill and a scrap of parchment. He scribbled on it and then stumped over the other two and thrust his hand rudely into the middle of their conversation.

McGonagall snapped her eyebrows down at his manner, but took the parchment and read it.

"Severus says you need to ask Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. I won't repeat what he says about Harry; suffice it to say, there is some doubt as to his actual abilities. He also offered to help supervise the apprentices in whatever capacity is needed. Thank you, Severus, we will take this under advisement."

Snape watched as the two exchanged looks of discomfort, tinged with pity. He snarled silently and turned and stumped out of the room.

Severus Snape was sitting on a bench in the courtyard, resting his hands heavily on the cane between his knees and watching an ant struggling to carry a dead fly. A shadow falling across him made him look up.

"Professor Snape? I understand you aren't able to tell me to go away, so I will make this brief. I just wanted to personally thank you for recommending Hermione for an apprenticeship. She's my girl, see? And it's been hard to watch her at loose ends since the battle. But this week, she's almost been her old self again, and it's thanks to you. I realize she'll be under Slughorn, and not you, but with you there, I'm sure she'll turn out fine, yeah? Right then. I'm off. Thank you, sir."

Snape watched Ronald Weasley walk away with his carefree, easy gait until he was out of sight. When he looked back down, the ant and the fly had been flattened into a wet paste on the stone flags.

Severus Snape watched his godson sidle into his seat and set out his parchment, quill, and ink. There had been no greeting, not even a nod of acknowledgment. He had received a thank you from Narcissa, and Lucius had sent him a case of wine, but from the boy himself, there was nothing. Snape put the petulant brat out of his mind. He had been one of the best candidates for the job, that was all. He turned his head and looked at the other. She had arrived fifteen minutes ago in a flurry of purpose and grace, offering him a warm greeting and profuse thanks. Again. She had already sent him a sincere letter as well as expressed her intent to make him proud when they had passed in the hall last week as she was leaving McGonagall's office. She sat now with her spine straight, her ankles crossed, her quill ready, and her lip squashed between her teeth. The only one missing was Slughorn.

The door opened and the man of the hour entered.

"Hello! Thank you so much for coming! I'm a busy man, and there is much work to do on the castle before the school opens in another month, so we'll keep this short, shall we? But first, thank you, Draco, for the case of wine; that was lovely and I shall enjoy it immensely."

"Not at all, Professor. Let me know when you need more; our vineyards have been generous in years past."

Snape frowned at the fools, but then turned and saw the look on the Granger girl's face. It was obvious she thought she might have blundered, as if a gift had been expected, and she had somehow failed. Snape's frown turned into a scowl, and he rapped his cane against the desk in front of him.

"Oh, yes, very well. Here is a list of books you should both read before school starts. Until I have a breakdown of schedules, we can't make further plans in that area, but I'm thinking of having you both choose Potions projects to work on privately for the next year. Then, when we get the schedules, I will see what classes Mr. Malfoy can take over, and that will leave you plenty of time to take over most of the marking. Miss Granger, as well as do the accelerated seventh-year Potions course. Most of that will be done on your own, unless Professor Snape chooses to help you, for I will be far too busy. I will furnish you with a copy of the syllabus, and you can bring me your finished potions. I would like to meet again at the same time next week for your proposals. Any questions?"

Snape listened with half an ear as they rattled off the expected questions and received the expected answer. He closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them again, he realized he must have dozed for a moment, another delightful side effect of the toxin damage. Slughorn and Malfoy were gone, and Granger was reading over the syllabus with a spectacular frown on her face. He scraped back his chair and struggled to a stand.

Granger lifted her face, and her widened eyes told him she had forgotten he was there. She smiled and started to tidy up her papers. As he crossed in front of the blackboard, she called to him.

He gave her a raised eyebrow and cocked his head.

"I was wondering if you could post the formula for Swelling Solution on the board for me."

He nodded and pulled out his wand and flicked it at the board. The formula and instructions appeared in his precise, spiky script.

"What would be the correct formula if I was to substitute triggerfish eyes instead of regular puffer-fish eyes?" she asked, looking at the board intently.

He frowned for a moment and then flicked his wand at the board again, the percentages and proportions of the other ingredients changed.

"One last thing and I will let you go. Could you just quickly put your opinion of Professor Slughorn on the board for me to copy down?"

He pinned her with his sharp gaze, and then without looking, he flicked his wand at the board, keeping his eyes on her face to see whether or not it had worked. When he saw her eyes widen and heard her girlish giggle, he turned to look at the board. Scrawled across it, in the same spiky script read: *Lacks subtlety and imagination, but has infinitely more patience for children than I do.* That is what he intended to write. However, off to the sides, just above and just below, were the phrases: *sycophantic fuckwit* and *capable brewer*. He flicked his wand and erased the profanity. Then, as an experiment he flicked again. *My apologies, Miss Granger.*

"Not at all, sir. I'm just glad I'm not the only one who thinks that way."

This was clever; what made you think of it?

"Desperation, sir. I suspect I have erred, and due to a lack of gift, I won't be getting as much supervision from him this year."

He's an idiot, to be sure, but he is fair, Granger. Have no worries on that account.

"Oh, I am so glad to hear you say that, sir."

Granger, you spent weeks washing my arse, I think you can call me Snape. I'm not a professor any more, only an adjunct. He was pleased to see she didn't blush like a typical schoolgirl, but seemed to blow out a relieved breath as he pointed to the elephant in the room.

"Oh, thank you for that. I have to admit, it was a bit of a struggle getting back in the mode of thinking of you as a professor again. I've come to think of you more as a human."

He gave her an odd look and then snorted.

"Do you think this will work on paper?" she asked, pointing at the board.

He flicked. *No, it's a different spell. The blackboards have multiple layers of charms.*

"Well, this is still brilliant." She gathered up her papers and put away her things. "While we can communicate, how is your leg?"

He flicked, and when he saw her expression, he turned to see what had gone wrong. *A slight improvement, thank you. Quasimodo. Fucking stop asking me. Bloody McGonagall. Bath. Wiggled my toes yesterday. Numb. Useless.* He flushed a bright scarlet and erased the board. He didn't look at her as he stumped out of the room, mortified.

Severus Snape watched Granger with a certain amount of awe. Six weeks into the term, and he had no idea why the Granger chit wasn't completely overwhelmed. Admittedly, he hadn't helped matters. She had asked to start the term work early to make up for her missed year, and after Slughorn's approval, he had gone at her with a vengeance. He had stumped and stomped back and forth in front of her, and when his leg gave out, he would grab a chair and sit across from her and thump his cane when she was doing it wrong. He had learned to stop and think before putting even the most banal comment on the board, and to his intense frustration, she had stopped looking up to read it unless she asked a specific question. He had taken to always having a parchment with a running commentary on it that he held in front of her face when she was truly about to blunder. Not that she did often.

His last years of teaching had been so filled with stress and near fatal pressure that he had actually stopped paying much attention to the girl academically and only saw her actions as they related to Potter. It was easy to pull her name out of his head when thinking of capable candidates to train up to replace Horace. Draco and Granger had been his only decent students; therefore, they were the logical choices. All of the teachers had apprentices underfoot, but the increase in the student population kept everyone on their toes. Only Granger and Longbottom required remedial certification training on top of their apprentice training and duties. Sprout had mentioned that Neville was rock steady and unshakable. When asked how Granger was coming along, Slughorn had blinked a few times and then directed the question to Snape. Again, all eyes had turned to him in the staffroom, as if he could burst into a jaunty song to tell of her progress. He had just stared them all down.

But as he watched her now, confidently stirring her potion the required amount of times while simultaneously marking first-year essays, Snape realized he was overtraining her. He had kept the pressure up and pushed her hard as if there was still a war on and lives might depend on her potions. When in actuality, she was just training to be a simple teacher. He reached out and grabbed the hand that was stirring the potion, stopping its motion. She was so startled that a splotch of ink shot across the essay she was working on and hit the sleeve of his other arm like a spray of blood. They both stared at it for a moment before he blinked and jutted his chin at her cauldron.

Understanding his signal, she took her wand and vanished the potion and the flame underneath, immediately.

"I'm sorry, did I do something wrong?"

He flicked. *It was fine, Granger. I think you are ready to take the Potions NEWT.*

Her eyes flew wide. "Are you sure? I mean, I've only..." she stopped at his impatient flick.

The course is meant for an entire class of dunderheads taught over the entire term. One-on-one, all day, every day; you finished the coursework last week. I've been pushing you too hard. You are over-prepared. Unless you want to go to work in the potions lab at St. Mungo's instead of teach?

"I hadn't thought of that." She sat down on her stool and looked at him across the table. "What do you think?"

He blinked, unsure of how to respond to this simple desire for his input. The last person to ask his opinion had been the Dark Lord. He took his time organizing his thoughts and then flicked at the board.

I think the chances are slim that you will get the teaching job when Horace retires. The Ministry is balking at the salaries needed for all the apprentices as is. In their usual twisted logic, they are spending thousands of Galleons on a study to see if the student population will continue at this size and if training extra teachers in each discipline is justified. My guess is only one of you will be here next autumn, and as much as it pains me to admit it, Draco's case of wine might triumph. He is capable and has been up Slughorn's nose since the start of term.

He watched as her face fell.

Tell me what your future plans are, and I will try to give you guidance.

"Well, I don't really know. I've really enjoyed doing this. It seems a shame to let it go. Perhaps I could take another teaching job? Try for Potions at another school?"

He frowned and shook his head. *Count them, Granger. How many schools are there? What are the chances that a job will come up?*

"True." She bit her lip as her chin sank into the palm of her hand. "I have no idea what my plans are, Snape. Training with you and being with Ron are the only constants in my life at the moment."

What are Weasley's plans?

"He's training to be an Auror. He wants me to get established in my own career, and we've been talking of getting married. Maybe starting a family. I really don't know what my options are. I've been so confused and overwhelmed since the battle, and my in-between status hasn't helped. 'Here you go, have a piece of paper that says you know everything because we think you're a hero.' Except the piece of paper doesn't exactly help when you're on a job interview, does it?" She slumped back and dragged her ink-stained fingers down her face. "To be honest, I've been hiding in this castle since the battle. First helping you, then helping with repairs, and now training to be... nothing, apparently." She sighed.

St. Mungo's, he flicked. Being a teacher is boring, Granger. I've been pushing you as if we were still at war. If you can handle this, you will be able to handle the pressure of brewing at St. Mungo's. It's better money than teaching. There is even the possibility of moving into pure research there.

He reached over and took the stack of marking from her before making a last flick at the board. *Take the rest of the day to think about it, Granger. If you chose that, we can go deeper into your training and then choose your project. As it is, if you take your NEWT and finish the year, you will be good enough for apothecary jobs all across the UK if you want. But either way, we are at a fork in the road. Go speak to your Weasley. Don't come back until tomorrow.*

He dismissed her from his mind and started to attack the essays before him with a vengeance. After she had left, his eye was caught by the splash of red ink on his white shirt cuff. He stared at it for what seemed like hours.

Severus Snape passed the salt to Pomona Sprout. The conversation around him was all about the recent study that had found a dramatic downturn in the Wizarding population. The repercussions were obvious; most of the apprentices were not going to be there next year. Only Vector and Slughorn were planning to retire. Severus knew he was on his way out as well. He had no official status at all. Only embarrassment and a twisted form of gratitude allowed him to cling there in the first place. The teachers were scrambling to figure out ways to help their apprentices find employment elsewhere. Snape just looked over at Granger, and she caught his eye and grinned.

They had already hit on her solution weeks ago. She had passed her NEWT with remarkably high scores and had thrown herself into the training needed to work as a brewer for St. Mungo's. Madam Pomfrey had already pulled strings and arranged for an informal meet and greet with a few key people. Snape looked over at Draco, who was visibly upset, unsure if his work and bribes were enough to push him ahead of Granger in the eyes of Slughorn since her brilliant test performance and the successful test runs for her apprentice project. Draco and Slughorn were unaware of the path she had decided on. A small revenge, since Slughorn had turned over all supervision over to Snape and only paid attention to the grading she did for him.

When his godson looked to him with pleading eyes, Snape looked away and passed the bowl of potatoes to Sprout as well.

Severus Snape limped through the lonely halls of Hogwarts wearing the scarf that had arrived from Granger Christmas morning. He wasn't especially fond of it, but it was practical. The Christmas holiday was only half over, and he already despaired of ever seeing Granger again. Not that she wasn't a constant trial; but he was at loose ends. She was his only pupil, and she was also the only one he communicated with.

The intensity of her training had reached the point where they needed something better than the blackboard. At least that was the excuse he used after a few more humiliating mishaps with his words bringing his thoughts along with them for display. He had dug out Potter's book on Muggle sign language, and Granger had borrowed Potter's copy. They had planned to each spend the holiday practicing, in the hopes that they would be better able to actually communicate more than ten feet away from the blackboard in the nearest spare classroom. But as the days dragged on and he struggled with sudden hand cramps that splayed his fingers out in strange and distinctly uncomfortable directions, he found himself missing the chance to joke about what accent it might be.

It struck him suddenly that he had absolutely no one else in his world he might joke with. He turned on his heel and walked towards the faculty lounge, hoping Sprout, or maybe even Pince would be there. They were the only other ones, besides McGonagall, who had stayed over for the holiday.

Severus Snape waited until he had Granger's full attention and then slowly signed: *Welcome back. I hope you enjoyed your Christmas.*

"I'm sorry, what? I didn't understand that. Here, let me try." She started to sign, her movements confident but wrong; he saw the problem immediately.

He snorted in annoyance and spun away and started limping towards the nearest classroom. The irritating chit huffed dramatically, and he could hear her high-heels strike the stones behind him as she stomped after him. Once he reached the blackboard he flicked his wand.

Your hands are wrong. You're talking out the side of your hands.

"What the hell are you on about? I'm using the right letters! And I've learned bunches of signs for things already!"

You learned from the diagrams in the book, he flicked. *But the hands in the book were sideways to show you the position, you silly/stupid/lovely/girl/woman!* With a snarl, he erased the last part and slapped up: *Brat.* He turned his back on her to try and hide his burning cheeks. *Where is your book, Granger?*

"It's right here. And stop worrying about what appears..."

Get it out. Now. He turned back and held his hand out demandingly as she expanded and dug through her suitcase. When she pulled it out, he snatched it out of her hand and flipped through the introduction to the correct passage. He thrust the book back at her and slapped a finger onto the pertinent passage when she had a grip on it.

"Illustrations often show the hand to the side to better demonstrate proper finger position. Please pay particular note to this symbol, as it denotes the graphic is not in the proper position.' I'm so sorry, Snape. I missed that part. I don't know how; it's quite obvious. No wonder I didn't have a clue what you were trying to say. I will study this tonight and get it right in a few days, I promise. Now what were you trying to say?"

He flicked his wand at the board, making sure it only said: *Be prepared to start your potion in the morning.* He limped out.

Severus Snape sat at the desk in the classroom he and Granger had commandeered for their own use and slashed away at the essay in front of him. He had taken over all of the grading, leaving her time to work on her research. She had opted for a potion in the healing category, on his advice, and had chosen to improve the potion designed to stimulate and repair nerve damage. Much to his dismay. As he hacked and slashed at a third-year's pathetic attempt to explain how adding a particular acid to an ammonia based potion would increase its potency...*'extremely effective, assuming the result you want is painful death'*.his eyes kept wandering to the door. Granger was late. He had skipped breakfast; his hangover had been too severe, and he wondered if he had missed something that would explain why she was more than thirty minutes past due. He flicked his wand at the board. It took three tries to make sure it only said: *You're late.*

Ten minutes later he changed it to: *What happened?*

Twenty minutes after that it read: *Are you alright?*

Another five, and it was blank as Snape limped out the door as fast as his cane would let him.

"Oh, Severus! You didn't hear? Hermione's had a bit of a shock. Come, let's find a blackboard where we can talk," McGonagall said.

He followed her into the closest classroom, which mercifully wasn't that far. His leg was giving out on him after trekking all over the castle waving a piece of parchment with *'Where is Miss Granger?'* printed on it. He sat down heavily in the seat closest to the blackboard and waited as patiently as possible for McGonagall to begin.

"It's the Marriage Law," she said.

Flick.

What law?

"You mean you don't even know about the Marriage Law? You're mute Severus, not deaf, how could you have missed it?"

He scowled at her darkly and flicked. *I stopped paying attention to gossip, Minerva. It's a bit dull. As is this conversation. Get to the point.*

"It's not gossip, Severus!" she snapped. "It affects you too!" She stopped and took a deep breath. "In the face of the evidence pointing to the declining birthrate and the increase in the number of squibs born each year, the Ministry has passed a law stating that every eligible witch and wizard must marry within a certain time frame and the matches must be approved by the Ministry to prevent family lines from being too interwoven."

Snape froze and stared at her. *What is considered eligible?* he put up onto the board.

"Everyone between the ages of sixteen and sixty," she replied.

He sat still, digesting the news. After he was sure he was under control, he sent his next message to the board.

When did they pass it? What is wrong with Granger? Surely she can just move up her plans with Weasley? I know they were discussing it already.

"It was passed three weeks ago. On Valentine's Day, of all things. And you're right. Hermione and Ronald did get engaged. However, their match has been rejected by the Ministry."

He blinked at her. He was very confused. He detested being confused.

On what possible grounds? She's Muggleborn. Her bloodlines don't cross his at all.

"On the grounds that the person in charge of the brand new Office of Marital Affairs has an axe grind against Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley due to a certain unfortunate incident involving centaurs."

Umbridge. Bitch/toad-faced/cunt. Should have let the centaurs drag her to her death. Can we get her thrown out of office? Where's Kingsley?

"Kingsley is doing what he can, but it will take weeks to pry her out of her seat, and Ron only has until the morning to report to the altar or have his wand snapped."

Who is he marrying?

"He's been assigned to one of Umbridge's friends. Celeste Brockwood, a scrawny, insipid, fifty-year-old woman of no account."

What are the terms?

"The couples must stay married for at least two years, and by that time, it is the Ministry's hope that a child will have been conceived. If not, they must dissolve their bond and be reassigned."

That's barbaric. Surely something can be done?

"Kingsley is working on getting the law repealed. But, Severus, it's quite popular. The population is very afraid of the possibility of extinction. The papers have inflamed their fears beyond their capacity for reason. He predicts at least a year before he can get it reversed or at least modified. The immediate problem is Umbridge. If we can't get her

out of there, Harry and Hermione are doomed to similarly wretched matches as is anyone else she bears a grudge against. Perhaps you could talk to her, so to speak. She was rather grateful for you saving her in the forest; it got you off probation, at least."

She used to be in Lucius's circle. Now that Draco is secure in Slughorn's seat, I'm owed yet another favor. I will see what can be done. I can try to save Granger and Potter, but I fear it is too late for Weasley. Where is Granger now?

"She's up in my office with Ron. They are... saying their farewells."

Snape and McGonagall shared a long look. Both had thought that these kinds of things had passed with the war. He pushed himself out of his seat and flicked at the board, one last time.

Thank you, Minerva. For telling me.

"I would have told you sooner had I known you were unaware, Severus. You must look for a wife of your own now, you know."

He gave her a sharp look, and then with a nod, he limped quickly out of the classroom.

It didn't take him long to make his decision. He had wondered why fate had spared him and understood now he had one more selfless act to perform before he could lay his burdens down.

He found them where he had been told they would be. As he stepped into the Headmistress's office, Granger and her boy were clinging to each other in grief, Granger in a chair and Weasley on his knees before her, cradling her head. They didn't even break apart when they heard him come in, just turned their heads and looked at him with twin expressions of desolation.

He nodded to them both and, after leaning heavily against the desk, started to sign. After a few moments Hermione started to translate for Ron.

"I offer my sorrow. I no help you? I help her. For one year. K... I... N... oh! Kingsley speak a year... something... unmake law. Oh, a year to repeal the law."

He snarled in silent frustration and turned and snatched up a quill and parchment and started to scribble furiously. *'Marry me, Granger. Until the law is changed. Umbridge will think it a punishment and agree. You can finish training and wait for Weasley.'* He held it up in front of them both.

Hermione teared up and started to cry all over again. Ron flushed red and his face twisted up in pain.

Snape scribbled another line on the parchment and held it up in front of Ron. *'I suffer from nerve damage if that is your concern. She will return to you the way you left her.'* He prayed he wouldn't have to explain anymore.

Ron's face swiftly changed to relieved sympathy with a trace of horror.

Hermione looked at him with a sharp eye, and he saw an understanding click into place. All those baths he hadn't reacted to, he knew she'd assumed he wasn't remotely interested. Now, she understood he'd been simply incapable of showing it. He felt his face flush red to the roots of his hair from his shame. He turned away from them both and thrust the parchment into the fireplace, holding it to the flames until they licked at his fingertips and the parchment fell away in ashes.

"Yes! Say yes, Hermione! She'll do it! Thank you, professor!" Snape didn't turn; he just nodded his head as he rubbed at his blistering skin.

"Thank you, Severus," she said. "I accept your offer."

He let his hair fall forward to hide his suddenly bloodless face as he turned to her and nodded solemnly. He signed to her and waited for her to translate.

"He will teach me a potion. Make you... oh." She blushed prettily when she understood what he was spelling out. "He can teach me how to make you impotent, but it only lasts for a few days at a time. You would have to take it repeatedly, as needed."

"That's brilliant!" said Ron as he came up off the rug and shoved out his hand towards Snape.

As Snape shook it, his eyes slid over to Hermione, and his heart stuttered in his chest from the sudden, stabbing pain. He nodded to them both again and left with as much dignity as he could muster.

He had thought to do something for the girl. Teaching her was the only thing that gave his life meaning, and if she was married off to some suitably despicable troll, she might not be allowed to continue her training. By doing this, he thought he could help her and retain some purpose in life as well. But when she had gifted him with his name, so softly spoken, he realized he had been an utter fool. As he moved down the steps from the office that had been his during his worst year of ignominy, he knew that fate wasn't done beating him like an unwanted hound.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

The tragic conclusion.

Severus Snape dressed for his wedding with care. The brief ceremony was to be at the Ministry, and only McGonagall was to witness. Granger had informed him that her horrified parents had agreed that this was no wedding to celebrate and honored her wishes that they not attend. They did send their profuse thanks for his timely intervention and invited them to dinner. Snape had declined the invitation with an overlong scowl and a raised eyebrow. Taking a last, long look at himself in the mirror, he limped out of his rooms.

He made his way slowly up the stairs to the Entrance Hall, where he met his bride and her bridesmaid. He took a moment to study her. The bloodshot eyes and swollen nose, together with the unkempt hair, and even her school robes, created the perfect simulacrum of the horrified virgin going to her doom. He couldn't help the resentful thought that it wasn't all show. She gave him a brave smile, trembling lip and all.

"Severus, you look remarkably unappealing. And I must say the stink of Firewhisky is a nice touch," Minerva said. "You look every inch a young girl's worst nightmare. Well done. Shall we go?"

He nodded and signed to Granger. *Wait until the last moment. The toad will expect a show.*

"I will," she replied. "If I didn't think the symbolism would be lost on the toad, I'd rub ashes in my hair."

I thought you already had, he signed. Granger burst out into a sharp, angry laugh.

"You're in mourning, Miss Granger," said Minerva with a tsk. "Don't ruin all our work with inappropriate giggling on your wedding day; that would just be bad form."

Snape gave her a courteous nod as he walked past her towards the door. The Headmistress followed.

They walked down the lane in silence. She didn't speak until they were almost to the gate.

"I think this is a wonderful thing you're doing, Severus. And what you did for Harry. He and Miss Weasley will be very happy. And now Miss Granger will be safe until she can be with the one she really loves. I'm dying to know how Malfoy convinced Umbridge that ruining Potter's life would be political suicide and that giving Miss Granger to you would be revenge enough." She gave him a proud smile. "One of these days, I will have to learn this sign language you use. I will try over the summer."

As they stopped at the Apparition marker, he turned to her and mouthed: "Don't bother."

She blinked at him, trying to understand what he was saying, but he just looked away. She grabbed his elbow, and they disappeared with a crack.

Severus Snape hunched down on the floor of his shower and let the scalding water beat at him. The nerve damage reduced sensation, so it was only the bright pink of his skin that showed he should have been uncomfortable. He sat with his arms wrapped around his knees and watched the water swirl into the drain around his feet. The one was still slightly twisted from the damage caused by the snake venom, but the other was now straight and narrow. There was no denying the improvement. Perhaps, over time, they would both be straight. Perhaps not. What did it matter? No one was ever going to see his feet anyway. He had stopped submitting himself to Pomfrey's intrusive examinations.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head onto his knees as his mind replayed images of the day. The look of horror on the bride's face as she entered the Ministry office, the look of malicious glee on the face of Umbridge as she granted him permission to kiss his bride. Mostly, he replayed his own feigned brutality as he claimed her lips with his own, the look of disgust on her face and the way she shuddered as she wiped her mouth on her sleeve. He couldn't help the twisted grimace every time his mind wondered if she knew it was an act.

Severus Snape packed up his belongings. The school year had ended. The students were gone. Granger had won accolades for her improvement on the potion for nerve damage and had started her work at St. Mungo's this morning. He hadn't seen her in over a week. She had decided to spend a week with her parents before starting her new job. He assumed she needed a break to adjust to her new life as a working member of society. He didn't know for sure; she hadn't spoken to him in two weeks, not since she had screeched her frustration for anyone in the dungeons to hear and tore her hands through her hair before stomping off to her bedroom and slamming the door.

"Did you want me to shrink the wardrobe as is? Or will you be leaving that as well?"

Snape pulled his mind out of his thoughts and turned to Flitwick, who had graciously offered to help. He shook his head and gestured to a box before pulling his clothes off the hangers and piling them on the bed to fold. Filius had been tactful in allowing him to do what he could without insisting charms would be faster. The act of packing his things by hand was not only meditative but dragged out the time until he would finally walk out that gate and move to Spinner's End.

"I do hope that you will come and visit often, Severus. I have enjoyed our chess matches very much these last few months and will be sorely tested to find a more pleasant way to spend a Friday evening."

Snape smiled and made an ambiguous gesture that could be taken for agreement, but didn't tie him in to any definite plans. He had no intention of ever returning.

"I'll just send these off and come back for the last, shall I?"

Snape nodded. He emptied his drawers and closed up the boxes in quiet solitude that would have looked peaceful to an observer. But behind his eyes he heard Granger yelling at him in frustration.

"But why? Don't just stand there and stare like a git, sign, write, use the blackboard. It took me enough effort to drag it into our rooms, damn it!"

"Snape, you have to take it! I made it for you! It works! I don't understand! Is it because I didn't try to fix your voice first? Is that it? I will! I'll work on that next!"

"It's for your own good! You need it! I've watched you, Snape. I've seen you injure yourself because you couldn't tell something was hot or cold! If we can improve the nerves, you will get some dexterity back, you will be able to use more of your magic! Merlin, you could even be able to enjoy a nice wank once in a while!"

"Alright, you're a grown man. Surely you have your reasons. Explain them to me. Why on earth would you refuse to take my potion? Please. I want to understand. I need to understand. Don't just walk away from me, Snape! It's because I made it, isn't it. All this time I thought you were proud of my work, but you don't trust it do you? Come back here! *Damn you!* Talk to me!"

As he made one last turn through his quarters, leaning heavily on his cane, as he peeked into Granger's rooms, seeing nothing more than the stripped mattress and emptiness, as he looked at the bare walls that had been both the bars of his prison and the protective membrane of his cocoon, he heard the frustrated screech and the slamming of a door in an endlessly repeating cycle. Had he been capable of making a sound, the emptiness would have been filled with the sound of his sadness. As it was, his breath hissed out through his teeth.

Severus Snape jumped in surprise when his Floo activated. He was standing in the middle of his sitting room, wondering how he was going to move all these boxes and crates, when behind him the flames grew with a sudden whoosh and turned green. He watched in apprehension, pulling his wand and hoping he could at least make a decent showing of himself if it were an enemy coming through. When he saw the bushy hair in the flames, he cried out. Not that anyone could tell. He stood straighter as she came through and stopped before him, nervously brushing off her robes with her lip caught in her teeth.

He slid his wand up his sleeve and rested his cane against a box, managing to keep his balance without leaning against anything. His head was jangling with all the questions he had. Why was she here? Will she stay? Has she forgiven me? Does she understand? Has she eaten well? She looks thin...

How was work? Tea?

In the end, he decided to just go on as they had been. They were not a real couple that needed to work out their issues.

She smiled at him. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and when she opened them, she smiled at him.

"I would love some tea, Severus. Mum sends her regards, and I have a lemon cake she made for you. Let me grab my things." She flitted back through the Floo with a shout, and he dug through the box of food from the Hogwarts larder that had been a gift from Minerva..."So you have something to eat while you unpack..."and grabbed up a tin of tea and some sugar. After stuffing them in his pockets, he grabbed some milk as well. He picked up his cane and hurried to see what state his kitchen was in after all this time.

Severus Snape had learned he could dust things. His silent *Evanescio* was so pathetic that all it removed was dust. He limped through his house dusting everything and anything he could reach in every room but one. He wouldn't go in there. He *couldn't* go in there. He had slept in that room as a boy, but it hadn't been his in more years than he could count. Now it was hers. He wanted to go in there very much, and so he refused.

He heard the sound of the Floo and turned and hurried down the stairs. She hadn't said anything about coming home for lunch when she had left this morning, and he was worried he had made an error. Part of him was sickened at his craven desire to keep track of her and the way he had been reduced to little more than a housekeeper, but the chit was all he had, and it was only natural that he would obsess a little over his only source of interaction.

He found her in the sitting room crying on the couch. He stopped and stared, utterly out of his element. Finally, he limped over and sat down heavily next to her on the faded couch and handed her his handkerchief. She took it with a muttered thank you, but couldn't get a hold of herself.

He looked over at the blackboard she had wrangled from Hogwarts with Minerva's blessing. It dominated the tiny room, even though it was the smallest one in the school. He flicked his wand and then tapped her and pointed to it.

Tell me what's wrong.

She burst into a fresh round of sobbing, and he ground his teeth together.

Did you lose your job?

Gods, he hoped not. His little pension and savings wouldn't keep them both for very long. He would have to sell his book collection. That was his real fortune.

"No. No, I didn't lose my job. The job's fine. Great, even." She mopped her face and sniffled. "I saw Ron. We met for lunch in a Muggle place a few blocks from St. Mungo's."

And?

"His... wife, she drugged him. She was a little tired of his *disability* and took matters into her own hands. She drugged his food. He..." She broke down again and twisted, planting her face against his shoulder. "He woke up naked in bed with her. He didn't remember anything. He's sick and scared he might have got her pregnant."

No. The potion you provide would have protected him from that if he's taken it within two weeks. It can be overcome with anything containing Ashwinder eggs soaked in fermented Foy Bean, but potency takes longer to come back. He's safe from that at least.

When she twisted her head and read his words, Granger sagged against him in relief and started a fresh wave of tears. He sat back against the couch and pulled her into his arms and patted her shoulder. It was a singular experience. He'd had to console the occasional Slytherin in his care before, but he couldn't remember a time he held a grown witch and tried to soothe her misery.

We could brew him something to counter what she gave him, but she will try something else, and we risk poisoning the boy.

She sniffed and nodded. "You should have seen him, Severus. He looked like he would have rather been poisoned. It was so awful." He rocked her gently.

He was violated. It's to be expected he would be upset. Be there for him. It will make a difference.

She pushed out of his arms. "I'm so sorry to have dumped this on you. I just couldn't go back to work."

He nodded his understanding and then signed, *Tea?*

"Yes, tea would be lovely. I'll make it. It will give me something to do."

He nodded and watched her push herself off the couch and as she walked away he thought *But what does that leave me to do?*

Severus Snape had dinner ready when she came home from work and hated that fact. He read and he pattered and he tidied and he stared at the clock, waiting for hours until it was time to perform the only useful task he could do. Make dinner. There were days when she'd had a late lunch and wasn't hungry, and he thought he would take his cane and smash everything within reach. He never did. She never knew. She would usually come back later and heat it up with a wave of her wand and then come find him to tell him how much she appreciated it.

He wanted to not give a damn about her. He couldn't.

There were times when he hated her. When Weasley would show up, sneaking in the door or dashing through the Floo, and he gushed his appreciation for the care Snape took with 'his girl.' Snape would nod and turn away, nose buried in a journal, and pretend he didn't care as they slipped off to that room he never went in. Mercifully, he didn't show up often, just once a month when he needed more potion. On those nights when it was too quiet, signaling the presence of a Silencing Charm, when Snape would shut out the lights in his room and strip out of his clothes in the dark, when he would lie down in his cold and lonely bed, on those nights he hated her with such a passion it would have scorched the world had he been able to physically show it.

But he still gave a damn.

Severus Snape ate alone in his room. He had made dinner, a precise six minutes early, and then had filled a plate and taken it upstairs to his room to eat alone. He had taken to doing this several nights a week in an effort to show he had some dignity. He wasn't sure whom he wanted to show it to, her or himself. After all, he always made sure he took his plate up to his room before she came home. She always looked at him with a question when he returned to the kitchen with his plate later to find her loitering over her meal. It was as if she couldn't remember how to eat if he wasn't there.

But tonight was different. Tonight, he had set his plate on his little, round table and had sat and placed his cane just so, and had just placed his napkin across his lap when he was disturbed by a knock on the door. He sat and blinked. The sound echoed strangely through the room, and it occurred to him that no one had ever knocked on that door. Ever. Not in his lifetime at least. He had never heard that particular noise before. He was completely confused. He hated to be confused. He stood up, and in reaching to catch the falling napkin, he knocked his cane to the floor. He hissed, a noise he could make easily but indulged in rarely, and simply shuffled to the door with a hand out to grab the knob. He turned it and opened the door, leaning heavily on the knob.

"Snape, I know you were looking for privacy, but I have something I wish to discuss with you if it's not too bad a time. I need to make a decision by tomorrow, and I want to give you as much time as you need to think it over, since it concerns you."

He blinked again and then felt the cold hand claw at his gut. He stepped back, hanging onto the door for support and gestured to his chair. He hadn't realized he had closed his eyes until he felt something brush at his hand and opened them to see her offering him his cane. He snatched it and then limped away from her when she was seated, he sat on the corner of his bed and gave her the short sharp upward jerk of his chin that had meant 'start talking' for over a year now.

"I need a lab partner at work. I've had two so far, and I can't find the rhythm of working with them; they either try to dominate the work or are so timid in their approach they make me want to scream. The Head brewer told me to go ahead and bring in my own rather than have them go about trying to find a suitable candidate and, well, I want

you."

He stared at her and damned himself for the flush he could feel crawling across his face. He tilted his head down and let his hair hide it.

Go on.

"You and I work well together. You don't need to do the actual brewing; I can do that. It's the millions of other little things that I know you can do. If there's anything you have difficulty with, I know you can just tell me. Don't think I haven't noticed the perfectly diced cucumber or the garlic cloves pressed with the side of a knife, Snape. I know you've been honing your skills, and I know we would be a perfect team. We flow together, and your mind and experience are wasted in this house. Even if we are a team less efficient than we could be, you and I together would be a hell of a lot better than the people they have there. You won't believe the inefficiency. It's mind boggling." She stood up and smoothed her hands against her sides. "Well, I've stated my case. I will leave you to think about it. But they want me to present them with a few candidates tomorrow, and I wanted to give you the option to think about it."

He stopped her with a gesture and then signed: *When did they tell you to find your own?*

"Late this afternoon. About an hour ago."

And they want your candidates tomorrow morning?

"Yes."

Why are they setting you up to fail?

She looked down at her shoes. "Because I make them look bad." He hissed through his teeth, and after she saw he was laughing, she smiled her brilliant smile.

I told you I overtrained you.

"So, you did," she said with a laugh. "Now enjoy your dinner, Snape. I'm going to go stuff myself; it smells delicious. Let me know your decision in the morning."

The next morning found him standing impatiently by the Floo, tapping his cane against the flagstones.

Severus Snape and Hermione Granger worked together with the ease that comes with practice and familiarity as well as that intuition that comes with knowing the other's strengths and weaknesses like their own. Snape gathered the needed ingredients from the storeroom, and while he needed to make more trips, he still managed to save time by getting the correct items the first time.

Granger left him all of the paperwork and half of the prep. He lined up what she needed, just before she needed it, and they managed to brew at least three potions at a time on the average, and a tap on her back with his cane warned her if she was about to make a mistake.

Their immediate supervisors, maliciously inclined to find amusement in the odd married couple at first, eventually accepted and even praised the team. The hospital apothecary was full of praise for the stream of potions coming in. The efficiency was almost as welcome as the efficacy.

It was the other brewers that were resentful. They produced capable potions but in twice the time and with twice the waste. They watched covertly while they sweated and snapped at their own ever-changing stream of assistants. When Granger left the room, they seemed to forget that Snape was only mute and not deaf as well, and he was treated to all of their petty resentments and salacious speculation on what the two of them must be like in bed.

Granger always pestered him in sign when she would return to find him grinding his teeth. He just looked away.

Severus Snape entered the sitting room quietly. He found his young wife on her knees with her head stuck in the green flames, conversing with someone he couldn't see, because of the wild mass of curls she called hair.

"I know, Gin. But he's cut himself off from everyone. I'm all he has," she said with a heavy sigh.

He couldn't help himself. He backed into a shadow near the door and continued to listen.

"No. He's strong. He's unbelievably strong despite what he's been through and what has been done to him." She paused to listen to whatever Potter's wife was saying. "I do. But I'm not just saying that. My feelings for him aren't confused. I'm as sure about them as I've ever been about anything in my life. I love him."

Snape couldn't help the nearly painful banging of his heart as it slipped free and raced.

"I will be there for him. I will see him through. I will never abandon him. Snape said he would need support, but it has to come in his own time. Until then, I will just be there for him in whatever way he needs me. This can't go on forever. Eventually we will both be free, and then I can spend the rest of my life putting him back together. I think quitting is fine. Working for George is a positive sign to me. It means he's doing something for himself, and that is miles ahead of where he was at two months ago."

Snape staggered back out of the room. 'Fool!' he shouted in his head, still hearing his former baritone. He stumbled up the stairs to his room and closed the door silently before sinking to the floor and screaming like an injured child. No one heard his wails, no one ever had.

Severus Snape was the first to understand the pattern. Orders for various antidotes and blood replenisher had tripled over the last two weeks, and the brewers were speculating on what the cause of the sudden spike was. Even Granger seemed confused.

"Any theories, Snape?" she asked as she took the bowl of mashed toad livers from his hand.

He turned to her and signed.

Check the papers. The obituaries report most of the deceased were recently married. They are killing themselves. The recent brides, the reluctant grooms. They are starting to despair that the Ministry won't save them. We are treating the ones that were unsuccessful.

Granger's eyes flew wide, and she grabbed at his arm in panic and pain, and he tried to soothe her.

He has you to live for, girl. Don't be afraid.

Snape turned away from her and began chopping daisy roots with a vengeance.

She placed her hand on his arm. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'm so glad I had you to save me. I will forever be grateful and in your debt. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and her face was full of emotion. "The Ministry will save us. Don't despair. I know you will be free of me soon."

As you say, he replied. He turned away and would look at her no more for the rest of the day.

Severus Snape read the letters to the editor with a grim heart. The scandal had broken, and the people were in an outrage at the fate of those swept up in the Marriage Law. Occasionally, some romantic story of a reluctant couple finding true love was slipped in, but the tide of opinion had turned, and the readers were having no part of any attempt to paint it in even a neutral light. Umbridge had fled the Ministry in disgrace, as her manifold petty revenges had come to light.

The Minister's repeal of the law was on the fast track and gaining momentum with each day. Granger bounced around, not even aware that her happiness was seeping from every pore. Snape listened to her quiet, gentle humming as she cleaned up the dishes from breakfast. He wanted to rail at her to stop, but found himself hanging on every note. He folded the paper and left the room, grabbing up a bottle on the way.

Sunday, he never left his room at all. She never knocked.

Monday morning he was standing straight and tall at the Floo, waiting. She came into the room with a worried frown and an inquiry about his health, but he just turned away from her and waited for the Floo to be activated so he could go through.

Severus Snape was at his bench chopping when the news came. Brought by the brewers who had watched them so intently for the last nine months, trying to understand the strange dynamic between the two. He knew bets had been made on whether or not they would split or stay together, and so as the news spread, work stopped to see their reaction. Severus bunched his shoulders as the storm broke over them, and Granger let out a strangled sob of relief and then flung herself at her husband. They all wandered away confused as he held her, shaking and sobbing and occasionally laughing, in his arms with his face frozen into stone and his hands patting uselessly at her shoulders.

Severus Snape dressed for his divorce with care. He wore his best robes and had shined his boots to a high gloss. He combed his hair and brushed his teeth and fixed his cuffs and donned his best cloak. After all, there was to be a wedding immediately following.

He waited by the Floo and blinked as the bride entered the sitting room. She was dressed simply in a white dress under her cloak of blood red. Her hair was carefully arranged into glossy ringlets that cascaded down her narrow back. She stopped and stared sadly, tears in her eyes, as she looked around her temporary home for the last time. She took a deep breath and came and stood at his side.

"Thank you, Severus. For everything. I can't tell you how much you have meant to me. It seems there's no way to express it. Our situation has been so strange. But thank you for taking me under your wing, into your life and into your home. Without you, I could have been one of those names in the paper. You are a great friend, and I will always love you for what you have done for me and Ron and for Harry and Ginny." She swiped at her tears and gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. "It's not like I won't see you tomorrow. I'll be right back here in the morning to bring you to work, after all. And you're probably looking forward to not having me underfoot all the time. It's just that... I'm going to miss being underfoot all the time, you know?"

She looked up at him with her beautiful, honey-colored eyes, and he nodded. Then, with slow, cautious movements, as if his hands were ready to flee at any moment, he touched his fingers to her face and bent down and gave her a chaste kiss in reply. Her eyes flew wide, and she blinked rapidly before gracing him with a warm smile and giving him a second, quick kiss.

As she turned toward the Floo and tossed in the powder, just after she called out their destination, he saw her touch her lips, and a small look of wonder slipped across her features.

Severus Snape followed his ex-wife out the door of one room and over to the knot of people gathered before the doors of another. The happy chatter and exuberant smiles accompanied many hearty slaps on the back and the enthusiastic and rather emotional hugs from Minerva, Molly Weasley and Helen Granger. Ronald Weasley had handed his bride a fistful of daisies, and after kissing her passionately, to the applause and catcalls of the assembled, he had turned toward Snape and proudly signed his gratitude with his hands. Granger broke into a beatific smile, and Snape extended a hand and accepted his gratitude with austere graciousness.

When the short ceremony was over, the boisterous crowd moved swiftly out into the hall and set off for the Floos, ready for the party at the Burrow. Severus Snape looked down and saw a single daisy, crushed underfoot and lost. He bent down and plucked it from the floor and took a moment to try and straighten its bent and crippled petals. Two of them came off in his hand and he frowned. When he looked up again, everyone was gone and the Floos were silent. He stood there, staring around him, unable to leave on his own. The blushing bride had stepped lightly towards her future with nary a glance back.

Eventually, he found a custodian and handed him a scrap of parchment he'd found and scrawled on. The gentleman was only too happy to assist, and Snape bowed courteously as he stepped into the flames.

Hermione Weasley looked around again and worried at her bottom lip as the party shifted into full swing and everyone was shouting and laughing. She smiled at the guests and laughed at their jokes and repeatedly gave in to the demands for another kiss for the bride and groom, but through it all she searched and waited and searched again until finally the worry became too much. Her new husband came over to her side, and after a few quick questions, he made their excuses and pulled her over to the Floo.

The Floo in the sitting room activated, and she stumbled into the room in frantic haste. Her husband followed in her wake with an equal concern. Her eyes caught the letter on the table first, and she cried out when she read the name on the envelope.

"Who's Esmeralda?" Ron asked in confusion.

She tore the envelope open, and when Ron saw the last will and testament it contained, he took off running through the house. Hermione's hands shook as she looked for more, a letter, an explanation that he had gone on vacation or emigrated to Canada. Anything. Anything at all.

Ron gave a horrified shout, and she flew across the room and raced up the stairs. Ron came running out of her former bedroom and grabbed her and pushed her back. "Don't! You don't want to see..."

She slapped him aside with a strength she didn't know she possessed, but when she ran into the room, he grabbed her from behind and held her tight.

Severus Snape lay sprawled across her bed, dressed in his finest robes; his limp hair fanned out around him. In one hand he clutched a tattered daisy, the other was open, and on the floor beneath it, an empty vial and his cane.

She screamed. She screamed for hours. And even years later, deep inside, where no one could hear, she still screamed.

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