

Beyond Captivation

by herbologist

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

Captivation

Chapter 1 of 6

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What to expect from this story:

This is a Hermione / Snape romance of a different kind. The aim here is to draw a realistic portrait of the characters, explore the nuances of emotions, and the delicate, special bond that will develop between the two, while weaving in a good amount of swoon factor and tasteful smut to give all you Snape / Rickman fans a satisfying good night story.

If you require wedding bells and soppy romance, then give this a miss. If, however, you have an open mind, enjoy something different or even have misgivings about this pairing dare to read on.

The story will be told in three parts (six chapters), similar to a trilogy of interconnected one-shots.

Part 1: Captivation

Set during *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

Hermione Granger sat in her favourite corner of the library. The dozens of books stacked on the table in front of her like a wall afforded her a degree of privacy as she absent-mindedly stared out of the little window to her right. Hermione had a secret crush. That in itself was nothing unusual for a fifteen-year-old girl, and judging from the excited whispers, the blushes, or the little pieces of paper passed around between the girls during classes, most of her classmates fancied one boy or another (in fact, a lot of them fancied Harry). But Hermione was not in love with someone her age, not even with someone from the years above her. No, she was in love with a teacher. Then again, that would not have been out of the ordinary had she lost her heart to the handsome Professor Lockhart, who had taught them Defence in their second year, and who half the school had been swooning over, or the slightly scruffy looking, but charming and kind-hearted Professor Lupin. But Hermione was in love with Professor Snape – yes, Professor Snape, the acerbic Potions master and Head of Slytherin, the most feared, and least popular professor at Hogwarts. And so, unlike the other girls, she could never confide in any of her friends. They would have either thought that she was pulling their leg or would have worried that she had lost her mind.

Hermione was not sure exactly when it had started, but something had changed that day during the summer when she had seen him at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. It had been after an Order meeting where Snape had been giving a report. The boys had tried to use Extendable Ears to listen to the meeting held behind closed doors. Put

off by their efforts to eavesdrop, she had strolled down into the hallway with the intention of checking that Kreacher was okay, after Sirius had shouted at him earlier that evening for not helping Molly in the kitchen. But she needn't have worried. The grouchy elf was as full of spite as always, and all she got for her sympathy was a load of insults about her Muggle origins.

Just as she was about to return upstairs, the door to the kitchen flew open. Realising that if anybody saw her down here, it would look as if she had been trying to listen in to their discussion, she bolted for the stairs. Before she could reach them, however, she collided with something someone dressed in long black robes. The force of the impact would have been enough to make her fall over, had it not been for the grip of a hand taking hold of her arm. She didn't have to look up to know that it was Snape's.

"Miss Granger," he said in his dreaded low voice, an unmistakable warning.

"I'm sorry, sir..." She tried to apologise, blushing furiously.

She had never been in such close proximity to the feared Potions master. She caught a whiff of the scent that clung to his clothes a plethora of herbs, mixed with the smell of parchment, and a distinctly masculine note noting with surprise that he smelled rather good.

Without any further comment, he let go of her arm and pushed her aside, striding past her down the hallway in a whirl of black robes, closing the door behind him without a sound as he left.

For a moment, Hermione stood in the same spot as if Petrified. Her heart was beating fast. She should have been relieved that Snape had left, but inexplicably, she felt a trace of disappointment at seeing him disappear. She could still feel where his hand had gripped her arm, unexpectedly strong for someone so thin and pale. Yes, something had changed that moment, although she wouldn't realise it until later. It was as if there, for the first time, she had noticed him for something else. For the first time, she had seen him not just as her professor, but as a man. It seemed that the brief encounter had awakened something in her, something that, in the confusing turmoil of feelings that come with the transition into adulthood, she had struggled to place.

Back at Hogwarts after the summer vacation, she had looked forward to Potions classes with a new kind of excitement. The difference was a subtle one. Hermione had always enjoyed Potions, being probably the only student in the entire school who did. But then she also enjoyed all of her other classes, mainly due to her insatiable thirst for knowledge. Furthermore, Potions, with its requirement for reasoning and analysis, was perhaps particularly appealing for someone from a Muggle background. She soon realised, however, that this new enthusiasm was not so much owed to the subject itself, but the admiration she felt for the teacher.

Still, this had not alarmed her. Notwithstanding his invidious behaviour towards the students, she had always had great respect for Professor Snape. There was no denying that he was exceedingly knowledgeable and skilled, and she was not going to waste the opportunity to learn from someone so brilliant. She also had never doubted his integrity, often berating Harry and Ron for their conspiracy theories around him, and defending him when she felt he was being unfairly accused, or suspected of wrongdoing.

Yet, somehow, her admiration for her professor was no longer just academic in nature. She had started to notice things about his appearance his hands, for instance. She could not stop watching them when he wrote on the blackboard or demonstrated how to prepare a certain ingredient. They were fine-boned and graceful, moving with great confidence and dexterity. His black eyes, too, were staggering. Finding their unwavering gaze directed at you always spelled danger for any student, but now the usual rush of adrenaline that such occurrences caused was joined by a strange, but not entirely unpleasant, fluttering sensation in her stomach. Since the summer, the Potions master held a new, mysteriously dark allure for her.

It was not until several weeks into the school year that she realised, and was able to admit to herself, that she was in love with Professor Snape. In Potions class that day, while the students were busy brewing a challenging healing draught, he had been soundlessly moving around the class room, as was his habit, like a dark shadow in the gloomy dungeon. Each student was acutely aware of his presence, fearing nothing more than to be the one to give him cause for breaking the silence with a scathing comment about their incompetence.

Hermione felt his eyes burn into her back as he stood behind her for several moments, looking over her shoulder at the perfect potion simmering in her cauldron. Her skin seemed to tingle with the thrill of his proximity. It took a great deal of concentration to keep her hand steady as she let the required seventeen drops of Merula juice fall into the potion from a tiny bottle. One drop too much and her work would be ruined. She was immensely relieved when she had finally accomplished the task and put the bottle back on the work bench with the stopper securely in place. As she stirred carefully, a pale green fume emerged from her cauldron. She didn't have to check the instructions to know that this was the desired result. A word of praise from him, or even just a nod of approval, would have meant the world to her, but Snape never handed out anything other than vitriolic criticism. And so, apparently unable to find any fault in her work, he silently moved on to the next bench, leaving her behind with a maddening sense of frustration.

Unfortunately, with the recognition of her attraction to him came a sense of total hopelessness. She knew without a doubt that she could never confess her feelings, neither to him nor to anyone else. At best, the result of that would have been ridicule and scorn. His words could have sliced her heart to pieces with the same precision as if it were asphodel root. And at worst what might have been the consequences? Being excluded from Potions classes? Expulsion even? No the only place where her longing could be fulfilled was in the world of daydreams, a world to which she retreated with increasing frequency these days, just like now, in the peacefulness of the library.

She closed her eyes and pictured him, tall, lank and angular, but moving with the strength and precision of a jaguar. His face pale, grim features, host to fierce, improbably black eyes, framed by long, sleek curtains of raven hair. And his voice, deep and smooth as velvet, carrying to the remotest corner of the classroom even when lowered to little more than a whisper. To Hermione's ears, it felt like a caress, even as it delivered his most venomous sarcasm. She opened her eyes again. Outside, the sun was already beginning to set over the mountains, accentuating the brown shades of the late autumnal Scottish landscape. With an inaudible sigh, she allowed her mind to wander.

Detention with Professor Snape it was a first for Hermione. In the past, he had taken plenty of house points on her account, mostly for speaking out of turn, but had never given her a detention, despite doling them out quite liberally to everybody else. Even now, she was unsure what exactly had merited it. It had been a Potions lesson like any other. She had completed the assignment correctly, followed the instructions to the dot, taken copious notes, and cleaned up her work bench meticulously at the end of the lesson, which meant she was once more the last student to leave the class room when the Potions master had suddenly called her back and given her detention for no fathomable reason. She couldn't believe her luck. Rather than question or challenge her punishment, she left quickly before he might change his mind. Getting to spend a whole evening in his presence was like a dream come true for her, no matter whether she would spend the time scrubbing cauldrons or disembowelling leeches.

Standing in front of the heavy oak door of Snape's office, she checked her watch. He did not tolerate lateness, nor would he be pleased if she turned up too early. When it was precisely eight o'clock, she nervously raised her hand and knocked.

"Come in!" commanded his familiar deep voice from the other side of the door.

She entered and closed the door behind her quietly, but remained standing just next to it, waiting for him to give her further instructions. Her professor was sitting at his desk, bent over a stack of parchments. In the dim illumination provided by a flickering fire and several candles, his face remained mainly in shadows.

After a few moments, he rose from his chair and moved around his desk. Leaning against the edge, he motioned her towards a work bench in the middle of the room.

"I watched you in class today, Miss Granger," he said in his distinctive drawl.

"Sir, did I do anything wrong? I mean, what did I get detention for?" she asked, feeling slightly alarmed.

"Think of it as remedial Potions, rather than detention."

Remedial Potions! Hermione exhaled sharply in surprise. She looked at him questioningly. His eyes were resting on her, making her squirm inwardly under the intensity of

his scrutiny.

"Surely, as the insufferable know-it-all you are, you can tell me what potion the ingredients on the bench in front of you are used for."

She didn't appreciate being called that, but a barely noticeable, seemingly amused twitch of his mouth made her wonder whether he had just paid her a compliment. She took a look at the bottles and jars spread out around an empty cauldron on the bench. Silverturnip, midnight dew, cocoons of the tigermoth, powdered moonstone... Yes, she knew what they were for, but what in Merlin's name was this about?

"Wolfsbane Potion," she whispered in awe.

"Correct."

Their eyes were locked together as he seemed to measure her up in silence. Her knees started to feel wobbly, but she was unable to avert her eyes, staring at him as if hypnotised.

"Then you also know that it is perhaps the most challenging potion to brew," he continued finally. "There are only a handful of wizards who have succeeded in doing so, I myself included. Nevertheless, Professor Dumbledore believes that you may be able to learn it, given the right instruction."

"But I haven't..." she stammered.

"Miss Granger, it is not my habit to give individual lessons to students, and I am doing so only on the condition that you will listen carefully and stop blurting out without being asked." He berated her, his eyes flashing in annoyance.

Hermione immediately fell silent.

"Needless to say, it is a potion of great importance to certain individuals. Professor Dumbledore therefore thinks it wise to have someone else who could provide it to the Order in the instance that I will be prevented from doing so."

She nodded quietly. Since the summer at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, she knew that Snape was working as a spy for the Order. She knew it was a dangerous job. No doubt he was implying that something could happen to him, a thought she did not even want to entertain.

"Get started. You will find the preparations are quite straightforward. The difficulty lies in the last step."

Hermione took a look at an open notebook on the table, where the recipe was written down in Snape's characteristic hand, reading it carefully. He called that 'straightforward'? There were several dozens of ingredients, each of which had to be sliced, crushed, scored, ground, or otherwise prepared in the most exacting way. The instructions were the most complicated she had seen in all her years of Potions study, covering pages over pages of crowded writing, with Snape's own diagrams and drawings to illustrate some of the steps. But Hermione loved a challenge, and immediately set out to work. She sliced the silverturnip, ground the moth cocoons into a fine powder, and added a pint of dew drop by drop. Soon she was lost in concentration, as if in a trance, without noticing how the hours passed. Only the droplets of sweat that had appeared on her forehead betrayed just how hard she was working. All the while, Snape was watching her closely. Every now and then he interrupted her, criticising her work or making her repeat a step until he was satisfied.

She suspected that it was way past midnight when she finally reached the last step. "Sprinkle in the moonstone powder while stirring with a silver spoon." Compared to the previous steps, this sounded reassuringly simple. She took the silver spoon that had been laid out on the bench for her, and was about to dip it into the potion, when Snape snarled at her.

"Stop, silly girl! Did you not listen when I told you that this is the most difficult part? You are going to ruin the potion, and waste perfectly good ingredients, as well as a whole evening of my time."

Her hand froze in mid air. She was about to turn round when she realised that he had moved away from his desk, and was now standing only inches behind her. She didn't dare make even the slightest move, but her hand holding the spoon was shaking.

"Steady. I will show you how."

His right hand closed around hers, guiding it towards the cauldron, making her stir slowly in a perfectly even, circular motion. His grip was both firm and gentle. It was the first time he had ever touched her like this, and she was surprised that his skin felt so warm. His left hand reached around her, into the bowl where she had measured out the powdered moonstone, taking a pinch with his fingers and sprinkling it into the cauldron. She was enclosed between his arms, feeling the heat radiating off his body at her back, his hair tickling her cheek.

"Stir too fast, and the potion will boil over, too slow, and it will curdle, and if your circles are uneven, it will form lumps."

Those words, spoken close to her ear in his low, sensuous voice made a shiver go down her spine. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the movement of her hand, trying to commit the feeling to memory. The liquid was resisting her movement, but yielding at the same time. It seemed that Snape was adjusting the speed of her stirring such as to keep the potion at just the right degree of viscosity. Now she understood why it was so difficult to successfully brew the Wolfsbane potion. It would have been impossible to describe this process in writing.

Once Snape had added all of the Moonstone powder, the brew suddenly erupted, bubbling vehemently for a few moments, and then fell quiet just as quickly, until it was as calm as the Great Lake in the moonlight. It now resembled a dark mirror. Bending over to take a closer look at the content of the cauldron, Hermione exhaled in amazement. On the surface of the liquid she could see the reflection of a perfectly round full moon.

"Oh my god, it's beautiful!" she whispered awestruck.

She turned around to face Snape, who was still standing closely behind her. His eyes looked at her unblinkingly, in a way that made it hard to hold his gaze, but at the same time she could not escape their hypnotic power. They seemed to burn with a peculiar fire she had never seen in them before.

"Yes, beautiful..." he said softly, his voice reverberating darkly in the space around her.

From the way he looked at her, it didn't seem like he was referring to the potion, and the alternative caused her pulse to accelerate in a storm of agitation. There it was again, the alluring perfume of herbs and parchment, filling her with a desperate yearning. She felt as if they were enclosed in a bubble, a space somehow distinct from the rest of the room, where time seemed to stand still. And yet, it must have been moving, because ever so slowly, his hand reached out, gently brushing aside a misbehaving lock, before it dived into the bushy mess of her hair, towards the back of her neck. His other arm snaked around her waist, drawing her against his body, while his face moved closer, and closer, never breaking eye contact, until she could feel his breath on her skin. Finally his lips touched hers, warm and soft, as he kissed her. It was the most amazing kiss, full of slowly simmering passion, so completely different from the wet peck on the mouth that Viktor had given her once. Her legs were feeling

increasingly insecure, as if they were made of jelly, and she was grateful for his arm steadying her. She closed her eyes, never wanting this moment to end.

"Hermione!"

She was ungently pulled her out of her reverie by Harry's voice. Her eyes snapped open to see Harry and Ron standing beside her table. She had been so deeply immersed into her daydream that she had not heard them coming.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked with a slightly concerned expression on his face.

"Yeah, of course," she answered, trying to sound as normal as possible. "What makes you think otherwise?"

"Uh, dunno. That look on your face," her friend replied uncertainly. Then his eyes seemed to widen with a sudden thought. "Gosh, are you in love with someone?"

"What? No! I was just concentrating hard, trying to think of the best way to formulate this idea."

She tried hard not to blush but, judging by the heat on her cheeks, suspected she was failing. Unexpectedly, it was Ron who came to her rescue.

"Come on, Harry, you know Hermione is in love with her books; she always has that look on her face when she is studying," he teased, rolling his eyes funnily in an impression of her while reading a book.

For once she was grateful for Ron's silly jokes at her expense, diffusing the situation with humour. The two boys chuckled while she gave them a long-suffering look.

"Anyway, what are you studying?" Harry asked half-heartedly, grabbing one of the books off her stack to look at the title. "Ugh, Potions..." he said with a look of disgust on his face, putting the book down as if it were one of Snape's slimy pickled leeches.

Then Harry turned serious.

"Hermione, we have some bad news. We just bumped into Draco. He was looking extremely pleased and said that Snape has given Umbridge some Veritaserum to find out what we're up to. We have to warn everyone in the DA to be careful about anything they drink."

"Harry, the use of Veritaserum on students is strictly forbidden," she said with an exasperated sigh. "Snape would do nothing of that sort."

"Of course he would. He would like nothing more than to slip some into my pumpkin juice. He told me so himself last year. Besides, ~~she~~he doesn't have to do anything forbidden. He just has to provide that Umbridge woman with it. And we already know that she seems to get away with anything," he said with a dark look behind his spectacles.

"Well, than you two better read up on how to detect Veritaserum in your drink. It would fit right in with the essay Snape's given us to do," she replied.

"*Five feet* of parchment on the use of Flobberworm juice in truth potions!" Ron groaned. "It's going to take the best part of the week-end. I know what that git is up to. He knows exactly that we have Quidditch practice tomorrow. He just wants to give Slytherin an advantage at the next match."

"The Slytherins have to do the same essay," she pointed out, but it did little to refute Ron's theory.

"Yeah, but it's not like he is going to fail any *of them* on their OWL. And they are hardly going to want to become Aurors like we do, are they?"

"All the more reason for you to do your homework," she answered pointedly.

"With you taking out every single Potions book in the library, we're not going to be able to." Ron smirked, pointing at the stacks of books on the table.

She let out a snort at that paltry excuse.

"You're welcome to take any of them, on the condition that you're actually going to read them," she countered.

"Hm, if you don't mind, I think I'd rather read your essay once you're done, just to get an overview."

Hermione felt annoyed by her friend's laziness, and the presumption with which he assumed he could just copy her work. But at the same time she wondered if Umbridge really had asked Snape for Veritaserum, and if that was the reason he had chosen this topic. Flobberworm juice was an essential ingredient in all truth potions, including Veritaserum. The difficulty with slipping such a potion into somebody's drink was that Flobberworms had a very unique taste, and to conceal it required an elaborate pickling and stewing process. She wouldn't put it past Snape to supply Umbridge with an inferior version to stay in her good books. There was something very Slytherin about that approach. Perhaps she had better give Ron and Harry her essay to read.

"Fine, but only if you at least read Chapter 15 in *Intermediate Potions*'. And I won't be finished until tomorrow evening."

"Thanks, 'Mione, you're a star," Ron beamed, obviously pleased that he could now spend all day with Harry on the Quidditch pitch.

Harry impatiently tugged on Ron's sleeve.

"Come on, we've got to find the others." And turning to Hermione with a reproachful look, he said, "I guess you're too busy."

Then the two boys walked off, leaving her to her books and her fantasies once more. She had to concede that five feet of parchment really was an unusually hefty load of homework for one subject, but she didn't mind. She considered it an opportunity to prove herself and impress Snape. She had never managed to do better than an 'A' in any of Snape's Potions Essays, despite working to the same high standards that consistently got her top marks in all her other subjects. No matter how hard she tried, it was always just an 'Acceptable'. She had actually started to doubt whether he ever awarded anyone an 'E' or an 'O'. Nevertheless, she was determined that this time would be different. This time she would hand in such a good essay that he could not fail to take notice. The problem with most of Snape's assignments was that the required length was never enough to cover the topic in sufficient detail, and she suspected that he actually subtracted marks for going over the limit. This time, however, he had asked for five feet of parchment, which would give her enough scope to adequately show off all her knowledge. Ron had not been exaggerating when he claimed that she had checked out every single Potions book in the library. She was taking great care not to miss a single aspect or example and meticulously referenced every point. It was a labour of love for her, to which she had dedicated the entire week-end. Her other homework could wait.

A/N:

Reviews are a Fanfiction author's only reward. Please give generously.

If you do not like this story please review. Constructive criticism is just as much appreciated as praise.

If you cannot think of anything witty to write please review. A short review like "great!" or "rubbish!" is much better than no review at all.

If you enjoyed the read, feel touched or even inspired by this story please review and share your thoughts. I'd be devastated to never know.

Captivation

Chapter 2 of 6

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

A few days later, Hermione sat in Potions class, anxiously awaiting the return of her Flobberworm essay. Throughout the lesson, she kept eyeing the stack of parchments on Snape's desk with a mix of hopeful excitement and terrible dread. Finally, once the last potion had been bottled and the fires extinguished under the cauldrons, Snape distributed the marked assignments with a single wave of his wand, sending each essay floating towards its author.

As she caught her roll of parchment and unrolled it with shaky hands, her heart seemed to stand still. Her eyes flew straight to the bottom. But at the sight of the letter 'A', signed there in red ink without any further comment, all her hopes came tumbling down. Her sense of disappointment was so overwhelming that it made it hard to breathe against the weight on her chest, as if an entire bookshelf had collapsed on top of her. She could feel her eyes go hazy and tried hard to blink back the tears. Crying over a Potions mark would have been too embarrassing, hardly gaining her any sympathy. Despite her best efforts, however, her friends did not fail to notice that she was upset.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" Harry asked, putting a comforting hand on her arm.

"It's nothing. I'm just disappointed with my mark, that's all."

She sniffed and swallowed, mastering her emotions again.

"Let's see, what did you get?" Ron asked, taking the parchment out of her hand. "Wow, you got an 'A'. I wish I ever got that," he remarked enthusiastically.

Harry and Ron both had got a 'D', as usual, but it was little consolation that she was still better off than they were.

"Never mind, 'Mione," Ron tried to console her. "You'd have to get sorted into Slytherin to do any better, and I, for once, am glad I'm not in that House."

Hermione didn't believe it was a question of House favouritism, but at the same time was unable to just accept her grade. She really wanted to know where she had gone wrong. And thus, in a moment of true bravado, she decided to confront her professor.

Taking extra time to clean up her work bench, she waited until all the other students had left. Once she was alone with him, she walked up to his desk, where he was marking the samples of the potion they had brewed in class. She placed her own little potion vial in front of him. Trembling inside with trepidation, as well as the thrill of being so close to him, she tried to pluck up the courage to speak. Snape was completely ignoring her, which made the task somewhat easier than if he had subjected her to the fearsome power of his glare. With a deep breath, she took courage.

"Professor, I was wondering if I might ask you something," she managed to say, not without a little shakiness in her voice.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he replied sullenly, still not looking up from his marking.

"It's about my essay." She swallowed, forcing herself to continue. "I put a lot of effort into it. I read every book in the library on the subject, and I referenced all my sources. In all modesty, I think Professor McGonagall would have given me an 'O' for it, but you only gave me an 'A'."

Now he did look at her, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

"Miss Granger," he said slowly, "if you take issue with my marking..." The brief pause he made was heavy with danger. "You may express your complaint to the Headmaster."

She shook her head violently. Under no circumstances would she complain about him to Professor Dumbledore. She just wanted an explanation. In no way had she wanted to offend him. He stared her down, seemingly satisfied with the frightened expression on her face.

"Well, since you are apparently incapable of recognizing your own shortcomings, let me spell it out for you," he drawled, his voice like liquid lead. "As you have just admitted yourself, your work is a mere reiteration of various sources, often contradicting each other. If I wanted to know what a particular author thought on the subject, I could simply read his work. In fact, you're even telling me exactly where to look. How charming..." He sneered. "Why do you bother, Miss Granger? Do you really think I'm going to check whether you are able to quote from a book?"

"No, sir, I suppose not," she whispered, lowering her head.

"What is missing entirely from your essay, on the other hand, is any critical evaluation of the material. You are at OWL level now. You should be able to express an opinion, and possibly even offer some original thoughts of your own. I therefore believe that an 'A' is a rather generous mark for your work, as it is not, in fact, *acceptable* from someone who should be able to do better."

He gave her a withering glance and went back to his marking. Hermione could feel her cheeks burn with shame. Her self-esteem had been dealt a devastating blow, but the worst thing was that she knew he was right. As she left the classroom, hastily making her way out of the dungeons, it felt to her like being on the run.

At lunch, she sat in silence, not listening to the animated chatter around the Gryffindor table, brooding about how she could possibly redeem herself in Snape's eyes. But it didn't take long for her positive thinking to return. He had told her what he was looking for, and it was something entirely achievable. Yes, she could indeed do better. He had given them a new essay topic earlier in class on the use of yew in longevity potions. She would take his advice to heart and do things differently this time. And thus she retired to the library to do her homework.

As usual, she started by reading the relevant chapters in a number of text books. But instead of describing the different potions in detail, she just wrote a quick summary of the various applications of yew. As for the preparation of the plant, her sources disagreed. Some called for the needles to be added whole, some would have them finely chopped, and one book even recommended bruising them with the back of the knife, though none of the authors actually gave any reasons. So what was the difference between these methods, or did it not matter at all? Hermione realised that this was an area where Snape would want her to offer her own thoughts, but the truth was that she had no clue. Then she had an idea. She returned the books to their shelves, stuffed her parchment and quills into her school bag, and headed outside.

It was a beautiful afternoon. The mild winter sun painted the sandstone walls of the castle in hues of gold, and the crisp, cold air made a refreshing change from the stuffed atmosphere of the library. There were several old yew trees within the grounds of Hogwarts. As she passed one of them on her way, she plucked off a handful of twigs. Back in her dormitory, she fetched some tea cups, a knife, and a kettle and immediately set out to work.

After an hour of experimenting with different preparations of the yew needles infused in hot water, she had learned that bruising the needles yielded the best result. The whole needles hardly released any of their flavour, while the chopped ones floated on top of the water's surface in a way that would make a potion unpleasant to drink without straining it first. Then she sat down at her desk with quill and parchment to describe her experiment and draw her conclusions. Once finished, she leaned back in her chair with a smile. It had been a very satisfying exercise. She felt like she had learned more than from any other homework assignment she had ever done.

A few days later, her efforts were rewarded. As Snape returned the essays at the start of his OWL class, her heart jumped with elation at the sight of the letter 'E' penned in red on the margin of her parchment. It felt as wonderful as unwrapping a Christmas present as a child, and discovering her most ardently wished for present inside. She managed to suppress the delighted squeal she felt like emitting, but could not stop a smug smile from spreading over her face. Snape did not fail to notice, and his expression seemed to darken, if such a thing was even possible from the already gloomy look he always carried on his face. Throughout the remainder of the lesson, he watched her disapprovingly, seemingly looking for even the slightest mistake to reprimand or criticise her for, as if he needed to redress the balance. But Hermione didn't care. She had finally cracked it. From now on, she would apply the same approach to all her Potions assignments. Perhaps she would even manage to get an 'Outstanding' mark next time.

After lunch, she headed to the library as usual, to do a little background reading on the new topic Snape had set them four inches of parchment about the effect of stirring spoon length on a potion. But hang on only four inches? Could that be right or had she perhaps made a mistake when copying it off the board?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Harry and Ron were coming out of the library just as she was about to go in.

"Are you done with your homework already?" she asked, somewhat doubtful.

"Yeah... Only four inches for Potions!" Ron beamed, triumphantly waving a short piece of parchment in the air. "I reckon the greasy git made a mistake! But I'm not complaining..."

"Snape doesn't make mistakes," Harry said gloomily. "Guess who's got the Quidditch pitch booked for practice this afternoon the Slytherins!"

Hermione somehow doubted that Snape's interest in Quidditch went so far as to be aware of who had use of the Quidditch pitch, but she knew there was no point arguing with her friend over this. At least Ron and Harry had confirmed that she had the correct length for Snape's assignment.

"I'm going to call a training session for Dumbledore's Army," Harry said. "Are you going to be joining us?"

"I might, though I've got to do Arithmancy homework, too."

"Never mind, I think we will be practicing our Patronus charms again today. You're really good at that anyway."

"O.K. In that case I'll see you at dinner."

She entered and headed straight for her usual table by the window. She loved being in the library. It was like a temple of knowledge, filled with studious silence and the wonderful smell of ancient tomes.

Pondering on the essay subject, she frowned. Even though every student's potion-making kit contained a set of three wooden spoons of different lengths, they had only ever used the longest one in Snape's class, so it had to be one of the finer aspects of the craft that he reserved for his OWL students. She went to retrieve one of her favourite books from its shelf, *Causticus Splotch's Grand Encyclopedia of Potions*. It was the most respected and comprehensive text on the subject, a book she would have loved to own, had it not been so prohibitively expensive. She had it on loan almost constantly, using it for virtually all her Potions homework. It didn't take her long to locate the relevant section.

"The stirring instrumente's lenghte doth much impact upon the speediness of any broth. The shortest handle giveth the quickest onset, while the longest delayeth the moste."

So the shorter the spoon used the faster acting the potion would be. That was certainly useful to know. She consulted a few more books on the matter; however, none of them offered any more detail, and for the most part simply quoted Causticus Splotch's work. With a trace of disappointment, she realised that four inches of parchment would indeed be plenty to exhaustively cover the subject. She wondered how pronounced the effect was. Remembering her experiment with the yew leaves, she suppressed the urge to go looking through more books. Instead, she decided to go back to her dormitory to find out for herself.

She closed the *Grand Encyclopedia of Potions* and got up to put it back in its place. Just as she was standing in front of the shelf, she heard the sound of footsteps from the neighbouring aisle. The gravitas with which they moved unmistakeably identified them as Snape's. A flurry of excitement went through her stomach. She ducked behind a row of books, peering through a gap between the shelves to observe him. He was standing with his back to her, so close she hardly dared to breathe. Her eyes drank in the sight of his broad shoulders, accentuated by the yoke of his robes, from which the material flowed out in generous folds, only revealing a hint of the masculine V-shape of his back. His black clothes seemed to swallow all light from the library's stained windows, offsetting the equally black tresses of his hair, which reflected it in the form of bluish highlights, like the shiniest of silks.

It appeared that he, too, had come to replace a book, a small, dark green volume, which, thanks to his height and length of arm, he set on the top shelf with ease. Then he briefly tapped it with his wand and was gone from her sight in a whirlwind of black fabric. Fuelled by the desire to find out what he was reading, as well as to hold something he had touched so recently, she hurried into the neighbouring aisle to pick up the little green book. Unfortunately, unlike him, she was too short to reach it. She tried retrieving it with Accio, but to her surprise, the book petulantly resisted all her attempts. She wondered if Snape had deliberately put it on the top shelf, spelling it to make it impossible to Summon. Perhaps it was one of his favourite works, which he didn't want to share with others. That thought made her even more keen to obtain it, so she went to get a footstool for help.

On her way to look for a footstool, she spotted Snape standing by the door, talking to Professor Umbridge. Taking refuge behind another bookshelf, she tried to overhear what they were saying.

"... I assure you, Dolores, Madam Pince never misfiles any book," she heard Snape's deep voice say.

"Yes, well, it is not in the Restricted Section where she said it would be. I just thought you might know."

"Regrettably, I cannot help you. Perhaps Peeves has misplaced it. You could question him about it."

"I wouldn't have to if you'd finally provide the Veritaserum you promised me."

"I told you, this particular potion takes a long time to prepare, and it's not something I keep in stock."

"Then you should! One of my Inquisitorial Squad spotted a large group of students, obviously in breach of my last decree, heading up to the seventh floor. He tried to follow them, but they suddenly disappeared. I will need to interrogate them."

Thinking of the DA meeting taking place in the Room of Requirement, Hermione's heart filled with dread. She just hoped her friends would not get into trouble.

"In that case, I do not want to hold you up any longer from your admirable efforts to uphold discipline at this school," Snape replied coldly.

"Yes... well, I suppose I'll have to find Peeves," Umbridge uttered, a little uncertainly. Snape turned on his heel and was about to leave her when she stopped him with another question. "You wouldn't know of any good spells to use against poltergeists, would you?"

The look on his face as he turned back around was one of pure sincerity, but Hermione did not fail to notice that he was mocking his colleague.

"My dear Dolores, you are the expert on Defence Against the Dark Arts. I would never be so presumptuous as to advise you on matters in your own field."

Umbridge smiled sweetly, still appearing a little flustered.

"Ah, um, yes... You're quite right," she stammered.

Snape didn't wait for her reply, sweeping out of the door in one swift, fluent motion.

Hermione remained in her hiding place a little longer, until Umbridge had left as well, before continuing in her search for a stepladder. It didn't take her long to find one, which she took back to the aisle where the object of her desire sat on its high shelf. Finally, she was able to get at the little book. When she read the title *"Mastering Legilimency in Ten Simple Steps"* she was rather surprised. This volume didn't belong in the Potions section at all, but she immediately understood why Snape had hid it there. No doubt it was the very book Umbridge was after. It would be a terrible thing for the students if she got hold of it and actually managed to put its content to use. With a warm, fuzzy feeling in her heart, she realised that the dark Slytherin really was a much better person than most people gave him credit for. Relishing the sense of conspiring with him against the despicable High Inquisitor, she quickly put the book back.

Before going back to her dormitory, she decided to drop into the Room of Requirement in order to warn the DA that Umbridge was after them. As she passed Umbridge's office on the way up to the seventh floor, the squat DADA professor suddenly came running down the corridor, a rudely cackling Peeves in tow. She watched with great amusement as Umbridge entered her office in panic, slamming the door shut behind her. The door, however, was no impediment for the poltergeist, who simply floated through it. A moment later Hermione could hear a shriek from inside the room, followed by the sound of china clattering onto the floor. Smiling to herself, she walked on. It was clear that, for the next few hours, Umbridge would be too busy to ambush any of the DA members.

Back in Gryffindor tower, she once more set out to experiment. She chose a simple stain erasing potion, which was ideal for her purpose as it was quick to make and would not require her to drink the potion in order to test it. A second cauldron, borrowed from Ginny, allowed her make two batches simultaneously. One of these she stirred with her longest spoon, stained and worn from years of brewing, while for the other she used her shortest spoon, still pristine and new. Once they were finished, she assessed their speed of action by means of some ink blotted onto small strips of parchment. But no matter how many times she tried, there was never any difference between the two batches. She then proceeded to test some other potions, though always with the same result. It didn't seem that it made any difference which spoon she used. Finally, she had to face up to the only plausible explanation: *The Grand Encyclopedia of Potions* was wrong, and not only that it appeared that dozens of other authors had blindly believed and quoted Causticus Splotch's assertion without ever checking its truth.

To Hermione, who held a deep reverence for books and literature, this realisation came as shock, shaking her view of the world to the core. She would never again be able to look at a book with the same eyes, nor would she ever again take its content at face value. As such, Snape's homework assignment had taught her something that went much further than potion making. What a shame that this insight would be lost to virtually all of his other students. It begged the question why, if he apparently put so much thought into the tasks he set them, he didn't ensure they actually learned the lesson by giving them a little hint or pointer in the right direction, rather than watching them fail and putting them all down as hopeless idiots.

Taking her quill and a small piece of parchment, she wrote down her findings. This might have been her shortest essay ever, but she felt immensely proud and pleased with herself. She had found a major error in one the most respected and widely used wizarding reference books, proving one of the old Potions masters wrong. This time, Snape really would have to take notice of her. If this didn't warrant an 'O', then what did?

In a gloomy, unwelcoming office deep down in the dungeons of Hogwarts castle, Severus Snape was busy with a most unpleasant task. He was marking homework assignments. It always felt like an insult towards his intellect to be forced to read pages upon pages of student's drivel, when there were so many infinitely better uses of his time. Over the years, he had developed faster reading techniques that allowed him to just skim over an essay and still determine whether it was poor, mostly inadequate, or absolutely dreadful. It was an essential skill for any Hogwarts professor faced with a never-ending stream of dunderheads. But then, about halfway through the stack of parchments on his desk, one essay caught his full attention, making him go back to the beginning, and read every sentence carefully.

Every standard Potions toolkit contains a set of stirring spoons of various lengths, but which one is the best to use? A widespread misconception is that using a short spoon will result in a faster acting Potion. This idea seems to have originated from Causticus Splotch's Grand Encyclopedia of Potions, and is frequently quoted by later authors. However, as anybody who has ever put this theory to the test will know, the length of the stirring spoon has no impact on the potion at all. Indeed the only thing you'll achieve by using a shorter spoon is to burn or blister your fingers. Therefore, for the sake of safety and convenience, one should always use a spoon with a sufficiently long handle.

One student had actually got the point of the assignment. He did not have to look for the name at the top of the parchment to see who it was, as he knew the neat, pedantic handwriting only too well. For several long seconds, and with growing unease, he considered what mark to give for this work. Then his resolve hardened. He briefly dipped his quill into the flask of red ink and signed the letter 'A' along the bottom of the parchment.

He had not anticipated the degree of offence this would cause, making a certain bushy-haired student storm out of his classroom upon receiving her essay back the next day. It did not take much to guess the reason, yet he felt like he was beyond reproach. His mark was perfectly justified. Bloody Gryffindors and their brazen overconfidence... It would do her no harm to have her inflated ego trimmed back to healthy levels on occasion, just like her bespectacled friend. And so he duly ignored the incident, continuing with his lesson as if nothing had happened, while a stern look and a raised eyebrow warned the rest of the class to do the same.

Meanwhile, Hermione sat crying on her four-poster bed in the Gryffindor girl's dormitory with the curtains drawn. She was so agitated that her heart was racing, to the point that she felt light-headed. She knew she would be missing lunch in the Great Hall, but apart from the fact that she would hardly be able to get any food past the lump in her throat, she neither wanted to face the strange looks people would give her after her bizarre behaviour nor the concerned questions of her friends. To storm out of the classroom like that was foolhardy; she could only hope that it would not come to Professor Umbridge's attention. It had been her best option though, as this time she really had not been able to hold back the tears, and it was still far less embarrassing than crying in front of Snape and the whole class. With one last shuddering sob, she wiped away the tears. She let herself drop back onto the covers, biting her lower lip in contemplation, while her breathing slowly returned to normal.

Perhaps she could claim that the potion fumes had suddenly made her sick, causing her to run for the bathroom. She hated to lie to her friends, but how could she possibly have explained to them why she was so upset about what they would consider a fairly decent mark for her homework? They would never have understood that it was far more than her academic pride that had been hurt. Her heart had been dealt a painful blow. The only meaningful real-world relationship she could ever have with the man of her dreams was that of student and teacher, and on that score she had just been coldly rejected. The most pressing question in her mind, however, was why? What on earth had she done wrong this time?

Remembering the humiliation of the last time she had enquired about Snape's marking of her essay made her loathe to go back, but at the same time she really needed to know his reasons. She knew she would not be able to take her mind off the issue. The Gryffindor in her would rather face her professor's wrath, than spend the coming days and weeks hurt, bitter, and wondering. The pragmatist in her realised that she needed to find out why he had marked her down, or else she risked another 'A' on her next assignment. The optimist in her didn't rule out the possibility that he had intended to give her a higher grade, but made a mistake, which would all clear itself up if she went to speak to him. Adding to that the irresistible pull that Snape's office in the dungeons and the prospect of simply seeing him exerted on her, it was little surprising that she found herself wandering into the Potions master's lair before the afternoon lessons would start.

The sound of her knuckles knocking against the ancient oak of his office door reverberated eerily in the cavernous space of the dungeons. For a moment she had to fight the urge to turn around and run, but that option soon disappeared when the door flew open, and Snape's tall form loomed in the semidarkness behind it.

"Miss Granger, what could possibly justify the insolence of disturbing me outside my office hours?"

She hadn't exactly expected him to invite her in for a friendly chat, but the frosty aloofness with which he measured out those words made her realise that nothing good could possibly come from any conversation with him. Now that she was here though, it was too late to turn back; she had to speak. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. His imposing physical presence, his piercing glance, and his dismissive posture were so intimidating, that it took her several seconds to find her voice. When she did find it, it sounded feeble and hoarse at first, until she managed to put some firmness and resolve into it.

"I eh... Sir I had a question about my essay..."

He didn't say a word, just looking at her with malicious challenge, like a predator watching his prey walk to its demise.

"You gave me an 'E' for my last essay, but for this one, you gave me an 'A'," she stated nervously. She had the distinct feeling that she was digging herself into a hole, but rambled on regardless. "I thought this one was just as good as the other, so why did I only get an 'A'... I mean, don't you agree that it was just as good, even though it was short...?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said slowly, with a distinctly condescending note to his voice, "the quality of your last essay, and your previous one were the same."

"Oh..."

A glimmer of hope lit up in her heart. So perhaps it was a mistake after all! She should have known better, however, from the cold determination in his eyes.

"It appears that you have not grasped the meaning of the term '*exceeds expectations*'," he enunciated, scorn written all over his face. "Your previous essay exceeded my expectations, as you had never before used your brain in my classes. Since then, my expectations of you are raised, and your last essay did not surpass them."

Hermione couldn't believe her ears. She gaped at her professor incredulously, but there was more to come.

"If you think you can rest on your laurels in my class, you are mistaken."

Slowly, as if in a stupor, she turned and walked away. Her mind wanted to scream about how unfair, unreasonable, iniquitous, and plain wrong he was, but in her heart she just felt a great void, like a bubble that had burst, leaving behind a strange numbness. Hermione had a strong sense of justice, of right and wrong, and just couldn't see past his inequitable treatment of her. It made a dent into the pedestal upon which she had placed the Potions master, marking the beginning of the end of her unhealthy infatuation with him. From here on, she would struggle more and more to immerse herself in romantic dreams about him.

Perhaps if she had truly understood the reason for his behaviour, she could have been more forgiving. But how could she have guessed the truth that as a female, Muggle-born, and unusually talented Gryffindor, she reminded him uncomfortably of a girl he had once known. Somewhere, deep in the unconscious part of her professor's mind, it seemed that she was competing against that girl when it came to brilliance in Potions, and he would never allow her to win.

Revelation

Chapter 3 of 6

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

Part 2: Revelations

Set during Deathly Hallows.

As Severus Snape entered through the elegant portal of Malfoy Manor, Narcissa Malfoy was already waiting for him in the hallway. He noticed how grey her skin looked. There was hardly anything left of the stunning beauty she had possessed as a young woman. It seemed that it, too, had fallen victim to the destructive forces of the Dark Lord, just like the power, influence, and pride that had once been the hallmark of the noble house of Malfoy. His own fortune, at present, had turned towards the better, but he wondered how long it would last.

"I'm so glad you could come, Severus," she whispered anxiously. "Bella is beside herself, I don't understand what is going on. She keeps saying he's going to punish us all!"

An earth shattering scream from the drawing room sent a chill down his spine and filled his heart with dread. Who was being tortured this time? It was a woman, by the sound of it. Another scream tore through the air, shaking him to the core. The silence that followed was full of dark foreboding.

Snape frowned. "What happened?"

"They captured Harry Potter and his friends."

For a split second, he froze in shock before regaining control over his features, putting on a face of mild interest, and acknowledging her statement with a satisfied nod. But behind the mask, his mind was racing. This could be a problem, a big problem. He wondered if Potter was ready for the final show-down, because if he was not, the situation was desperate indeed. Once more he cursed Dumbledore for not having given him all the relevant information. All he had been told was to look out for the Dark Lord's snake, but he had not seen either of them for weeks, so how was he supposed to tell? If Potter was not ready, he could hardly afford to wait for the Dark Lord's return; he would have to act very quickly. He needed some other way to find out where things stood. He paused by the door for a moment, taking a deep breath, trying to listen to what was being spoken inside the room.

"What else did you take!" he could hear Bella shouting. Then the sound of a slap, a faint moan.

"Where is Draco?" Snape asked Narcissa in a hushed tone.

"Outside."

"See to it that he stays there," he said before turning his attention towards the sounds from the other side of the door again.

"You think this is all? We can do much worse to you, much worse... Tell me! Tell me how you got into my vault!" Bella's voice had turned from an angry hiss into a hysterical shriek. Then it went back to a dangerous whisper. "Mr. Greyback here has a bit of a penchant for young little things such as you, and so does Mr. Pettigrew. You can talk to me... or I might just leave you to them..." Now Bella was putting on her sweetest voice. "Tell me... Be a good girl... And I won't let them hurt you..."

Another silence.

"Fine! You don't deserve any better," Bella hissed. "You'll see where your stubbornness will get you. Pettigrew, Greyback, she's all yours!"

He pushed the door open a little to peer inside. On the floor, on the luxurious carpet, lay the body of a girl. It was Miss Granger. He pushed the door open all the way and briefly scanned the room with his eyes. Greyback stood in the corner, leering. Apart from Bella and the werewolf, there were Pettigrew and Lucius, who was a pitiful sight.

"No," he said firmly, "she is mine."

It was useful to be able to pull rank on Bella and the other Death Eaters, and he did so with a certain amount of glee. Bella stared at him, her eyes flashing furiously.

"This is not for entertainment, Severus. We are trying to get information out of her."

"If that's the case, then the Dark Lord is perfectly capable of interrogating her himself," he replied smoothly, but not without a carefully measured dose of menace in his tone. "And he will not be pleased if you kill her before he has had the opportunity."

"The Dark Lord is not here, and this can't wait." The look she gave him was pure venom.

"Why, are you trying to cover up another blunder, Bella?" The brief look of panic on her face told him he had hit a sore spot. "Then allow me to assist you. I have rather more... effective... methods at my disposal."

There was a glimmer of hope in her eyes, but he could tell how much it bothered her to depend on his help. It gave him great satisfaction.

"But you'll have to tell me what it is you want to know," he continued, his voice heavy with condescension.

"She stole something from my vault!" Bella cried out, her finger pointing accusingly at the girl on the floor. "She took the sword from my vault!"

"The sword? But I see that it is here," he said, nodding his head towards the sparkling silver treasure lying on the canapé, "so why would the matter be of any concern to the Dark Lord?"

"Because there is something else he gave me to look after! He doesn't tell you everything, Severus; there are some things he only tells me!"

"I doubt it will be anything of importance then," he scoffed, raising a mocking eyebrow, driving her to the point where she was about to explode, "but I shall find out for you."

He was going to get on with what he had to do, but it seemed that this time he had managed to drive Bella over the edge.

"If you tell him, I'll kill you, Snape!" she shrieked.

She had drawn out a silver dagger, holding it in the air as if she were going to stab someone.

"I'll kill you with my own hands! Do you hear me?" she shouted hysterically, pointing the dagger at his heart, her features contorted into a wild grimace, her eyes full of madness.

The sharp, gleaming blade resting on his chest in the hands of a madwoman made him feel nervous, but he forced himself to maintain his mask of absolute calm. Glad for the thick layers of clothing between the knife's point and his skin, he slowly pushed her hand away, looking at her sternly.

"The Dark Lord will not appreciate it if you kill me, Bella. And you'll never find out what you want to know."

He moved past Lucius, who had been watching their exchange with well-studied indifference, and crouched down next to his former student. She was barely conscious. He quickly realised she was unable to stand, let alone walk. As he picked her up and hauled her over his shoulder, he was shocked by how little she weighed. The past months had apparently taken their toll on her. As he left the room and climbed up the stairs, he could hear Bella shouting after him.

"Well, well, Severus Snape has a weakness for little Mudbloods, doesn't he?"

He had to watch Bella carefully. Now that he had risen above her in the Dark Lord's esteem, she loathed him even more than she always had. She would do anything to bring him down, and while she was completely deranged, she was certainly not stupid. She could be dangerous to him.

He was going to use his Legilimency skills to read the girl's mind. Not to find out how they had come by the sword Snape knew that very well but to determine what it was that Dumbledore had asked Potter to do and whether he had succeeded. It had always irked him that the Headmaster had not shared this information with him. He had been wrong not to trust him. Now it appeared that the old man's plan had failed, and Snape needed to take things into his own hands.

He walked along the dark corridor lined with portraits of the Malfoy's ancestors, stopping outside the door of what was his room, the room that stood at his disposal during his stays at the manor, but which he never made use of, wary of leaving Hogwarts for longer than absolutely necessary. Once inside the luxurious bedroom, he warded the door and cast Muffliato. He placed the limp body of the girl on the bed. She looked very different from the last time he had seen her. Her body was emaciated, her cheeks pale and hollowed. Her hair was dull and matted, and dark rings framed her eyes. She looked very fragile. Her eyes were staring blankly into the air, making him wonder whether she was even able to recognise him.

'Damn that insane bitch,' he thought. Bella had no sense for the right measure of torture. She could have destroyed the girl's young mind, killed her even. She was barely more than a child, for Merlin's sake! He reached into the pocket of his robes, pulling out a small bottle. It was a potion he always carried for his own use in situations such as these, a precaution when he was going to attend a Death Eater gathering or meet the Dark Lord. He uncorked it and brought it to her lips, but if he had expected her to be too weak to protest, he was about to be proven wrong. She violently thrashed her head from side to side, making it impossible for him to feed her the liquid. He tried to take hold of her jaw to hold her head still, but she caught the heel of his thumb with her teeth and bit him hard. He let out a scream of pain, barely preventing himself from spilling the precious potion as he withdrew his hand. Looking at the damage, he was furious. The recalcitrant Gryffindor had actually drawn blood!

"Damn you, Miss Granger! I'm trying to help you!" he hissed in barely concealed anger.

But Snape knew how to force a potion down somebody's throat. He hadn't intended to be that forceful, but she left him no choice. He knelt behind her atop her arms and shoulders, holding her head between his thighs like in a vice. This way she could not move, while his hands were free to pour the potion into her mouth and force her to swallow by applying pressure along her throat. It did the trick. He moved off her to sit on the edge of the bed beside her, watching the surprised expression on her face with a satisfied smile.

"So it made you feel better? Now there's a surprise..." he mocked.

It did. Hermione had been convinced that Snape had been about to feed her Veritaserum. The prospect of compulsively blabbing out what she had so valiantly withheld during her previous ordeal had been terrifying. But whatever this potion was, it was not Veritaserum. Instead, it provided immediate relief for the pain that still reverberated through her body and brain. The torture she had endured now seemed like a distant memory, making it much more bearable, while her mind was able to focus once more and her muscles had regained some of their strength. For that, she was grateful, even regretted biting him so hard, but she could not trust his motivations. Snape had other means of extracting the desired information from her, which worried her just as much.

She watched as he drew his wand and healed the bloody mark that her teeth had left on his hand, throwing her a reproachful look. It felt odd to be so close to him. It was the first time she had seen him since he had murdered Dumbledore and fled from Hogwarts with a group of Death Eaters. She wasn't sure exactly what she felt, although

there was a lot of anger and disappointment. She knew she should despise him after what he had done, after how he had betrayed them. Yet somehow, it was hard to really hate the man she had once idolised.

"Now listen, Miss Granger," he said, lowering his voice to barely more than a whisper, as if he didn't trust the spell he had placed on the room. "I'm on your side, and I'm going to help you, but I need certain information. So you had better cooperate, do you understand?"

He bent over her, bracing an arm to each side of her neck, effectively trapping her.

"Look at me," he commanded.

No way! She knew exactly what he was going to do. He was going to use Legilimency on her. Snape was a master of deception; she couldn't trust anything he was saying. No doubt the plan had been to first torture her to soften her up, so that he could then play the nice guy and get the information out of her without much resistance. But she wasn't going to make it easy for him. She was going to fight him all the way. She turned her head away, squeezing her eyes shut as hard as she could.

"Miss Granger, don't make me hex you," he warned her, his tone dangerously soft.

Reinforcing that threat, she felt the tip of his wand pressed against her neck. She didn't move, waiting with bated breath for the curse, whatever it would be, to hit. But then the wand was taken away, and Snape let out a resigned sigh.

"Miss Granger, I have no time for these games. You've got to trust me."

"Trust you? After what you have done? You've got to be joking!" she spat contemptuously, still keeping her eyes firmly shut.

She could sense him moving closer, so close that she felt his breath against her neck.

"You disappoint me," he spoke softly into her ear. "I would have thought the little know-it-all would not be fooled so easily by the seemingly obvious... Has it ever occurred to you that I may have done exactly what Professor Dumbledore requested of me?" His deep voice was as seductive as his words. "Did you notice the severe injury to his hand? Have you ever considered the possibility that he was already dying?"

Yes, Hermione had considered that possibility. But in the end, she had dismissed it as a figment of her own desire to see him exonerated, had conceded that all the evidence was against him. She had accepted that she had been wrong, and Harry had been right. Now, however, there was doubt again, tempting, delicious, sweet doubt. For a moment, it made her forget her previous resolve, briefly opening her eyes to see if he was earnest.

The short glance she gave him was all he needed to catch her, for his eyes to latch on to hers, and lock them into an involuntary stare into their black depth. She panicked. She tried to struggle, but it was as if she were paralysed. Then images started to flash before her eyes.

Hermione tried to resist as best as she could. Whenever there was an innocuous memory, like trying to find food, or breaking up the tent, she tried to hold on to it, tried to prevent him from moving on. But he was powerful, and she had never learned to occlude. Eventually, she gave up, watching in dismay as he uncovered one secret after another. She was defenceless, and he was thorough, not stopping until he had located all the relevant memories, until he knew every detail of their quest. Suddenly he paused, dwelling on one scene as if trying to figure out what to make of it, while she could do nothing to stop him from seeing what he never should have seen. It was not a memory of a real situation, but a dream. She was standing in front of him in the Potions classroom, looking up into his eyes. Then he pulled her towards him and kissed her tenderly.

Hermione felt mortified and humiliated to the core. But then, what did it matter now, after all he had already seen? It was just one more insult on top of all she had suffered. If Snape was a Death Eater, then everything was lost anyway. She felt completely and utterly defeated.

After what seemed like an eternity, he withdrew from her mind, a perplexed look showing on his face. It would have been typical of Snape to use such compromising information to taunt or belittle her, but he made no reference to it. She prayed that he would just let it go, that he would not demand an explanation that she would be unable to give, and it seemed that, this time, her prayers were heard. He blinked, something Hermione realised she had never seen him do before. Then he sat back on the edge of the bed, his eyes closed with an almost pained expression on his face, his fingers rubbing his forehead where deep frown lines creased his skin.

When he opened his eyes again, the look in those black pools contained something bordering on despair, and seemed to express just what Hermione was feeling inside herself.

"Only one Horcrux?" he finally said, his tone heavy with the kind of worry that tortured her own heart, too. It was not the type of reaction she would have expected from a Death Eater.

Only one Horcrux, three more to go, and they didn't know what they were, or where to look for them. Now they had been caught, and she had no idea how they could possibly get out of this. Tears welled up in her eyes at the hopelessness of the situation. For months, she had pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind, forced herself to be optimistic, to carry on. But Snape's words had somehow opened the flood gates to her own doubts, to her fear that they would fail, and die, that they would disappoint the hopes Dumbledore and the rest of the wizarding world had placed in them.

As she looked into his eyes again, her vision blurred by a veil of moisture, she had the overwhelming feeling that he was with her that they were in this together. More than any of his words ever could, this feeling of shared hopes and fears convinced her that she could trust him and that he was saying the truth. It was a good feeling, soothing, and warm, and full of hope. She was not alone.

He sighed deeply, shaking his head slowly.

"I don't know how, but I will do everything I can to get you out of this. You have to go on. You must succeed."

With a big sob, her eyes overflowed. She blinked to clear her view. Snape was still sitting next to her, staring thoughtfully at a point on the bed, as if trying to figure out a solution. He really was on their side. He was powerful, intelligent, and skilled. He knew Voldemort's organisation from the inside out, and probably held a position of influence amongst their ranks. If he was going to help them, there was hope. She felt safe in his presence. Suddenly, an old yearning was back. She longed for him to hold her, for his hand to stroke her back and her hair, for his deep voice to say that everything would be all right.

Snape still sat on the bed, brooding. He was rarely surprised by what he found in somebody's mind. Most people were so predictable. Miss Granger's memories, however, had not failed to astonish him. First and foremost, he had been appalled to learn of the virtually impossible task that Dumbledore had left those kids. As he trawled through her recollection of the last months, his respect for the bushy-haired Gryffindor had grown immensely. She had been a diligent student during her time at Hogwarts, devouring every book or treatise she could get her hands on, but he had always put her down as an attention-seeking member of the Golden Boy's entourage, pedantically studious but without much acumen or genius. Now he had to concede that he had misjudged her. The skill, resourcefulness, and courage she had shown during their quest had deeply impressed him. The mission that the three of them had been saddled with should have been given to a far more experienced wizard, yet she had shouldered that burden with a maturity and tenacity far beyond her years.

But that had not been the only unexpected discovery he had made. In her mind, he had come across one image that was so bewildering, that he found it difficult to move on, lingering on it far longer than would have been decent or comfortable. He hadn't known what to make of it, as he was absolutely certain that such a thing had never taken place. He had never, and would never kiss a student. Then he had realised that she must have imagined it. Yet, why would she do such a thing? The answer was obvious, but her apparent attraction to him had left him completely aghast. How was that possible? What had he done to provoke such inappropriate feelings in one of his students? He tried to push those images away because, if he was perfectly honest with himself, they also flattered him and, somewhere deep inside him, stirred a desire he preferred to keep suppressed. He had to focus on the problem at hand; he could not allow himself to be distracted by such things.

He had achieved his main objective to get an answer to the question of whether they were ready for the final battle. It was clear that they were not, not by a far stretch. He was absolutely dismayed by how much remained to be done. If it had taken the trio the best part of a year to locate and destroy one Horcrux the one they had the most information about how long would it take to eliminate the other three? How many more months and years might he have to hold out in his position? He was struggling to keep things together at Hogwarts as it was, often feeling like he wouldn't be able to last much longer. The Carrows were growing increasingly querulous because he wouldn't give them free rein, while the students and staff would not miss any opportunity to make life difficult for him. To them, he was the enemy, yet his hands were tied when it came to disciplinary measures, as his main objective was to keep them from harm. It was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord would become dissatisfied with his performance as Headmaster. The notion that he might have to continue for such a long time made feelings of desperation and panic rise up in his heart.

Suddenly he became aware of someone listening at the door. He could not say for sure how he had got that impression, but years of spying had trained his hearing and his intuition. It had also taught him exactly how much one could see through a keyhole, and so he knew for sure that the corner where the bed stood would not be visible. He was also glad for his precaution of casting a Muffliato spell. But there was another problem. He had left Bella and Lucius with the impression that he wanted to take his pleasure from the girl. It was important that nobody doubted his motivation for claiming her for himself.

"Miss Granger," he said quietly, "you were supposed to be raped. The others are assuming that this is why I brought you here."

Her eyes widened in shock. She looked like a frightened doe with her big brown eyes and delicate limbs and somehow very attractive.

He put his hand up placatingly.

"I won't."

Suddenly, without warning, she flung herself at him, hugging him.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you so much."

He froze at this unsolicited physical contact. He could feel her breasts pressing against his body, small and pert. It caused an increased flow of blood to a much neglected part of his body. No, this was not good; he could not allow that to happen. His acute sense of smell picked up the intoxicating scent of young, female skin, sweet and warm, like that of a ripe apple. No, this had to stop immediately.

He pushed her away, throwing her back onto the bed more roughly than would have been necessary. There she was, sprawled out before him, a surprised look on her face. He couldn't help but notice her incredibly thin waist, the curve of her hips, and those long, slim legs.

"I won't," he repeated, as if he had to reassure himself as much as her. "But there is someone listening at the door, so we will have to pretend. Can you make some sounds, screams... as if?"

He waved his wand in the air, breaking the Muffliato spell he had cast earlier. She nodded, indicating that she understood, but at the same time looked at him blankly, as if at a loss about what was required of her. He looked at her expectantly, growing increasingly impatient with her reluctance. It seemed that he would have to make this more realistic.

He gruffly grabbed her arm, and turned her over, pushing her down into the thick duvet with her arm uncomfortably bent behind her back. This seemed to have sprung her into action.

"No! Please, Professor, don't do this, please, no!" she called in apparent distress.

This was much better. Except... he now had the full view of her round buttocks, too tempting to touch and squeeze... No, it was better to see her face, to remind himself that this was a student of his before he lost control over that misbehaving body part of his.

"You should feel honoured that a wizard will touch you, filthy Mudblood," he growled, flipping her onto her back again.

She gave him a disapproving look at his use of that word, but he just raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"Better a Mudblood than a murderer and traitor!" she hissed.

He smiled inwardly. Yes, she seemed to have got the idea. He took hold of her wrists, and, pushing her down against the bed, braced over her, bending down to whisper in her ear. He was enthralled by the beautiful angle of her jaw, the delicate skin of her neck. He so much wanted to kiss her, wondering if she tasted as good as she smelled. With dismay, he realised he now had a full erection.

"Struggle. Scream. Go on," he encouraged her.

She started to thrash about wildly.

"No, please... You can't do this to me, please don't do this," she whimpered.

The beast between his legs was throbbing, demanding some attention, some relief. Momentarily, he lost control, and giving into his urge, rubbed himself against her, and oh gods did it feel good. He groaned, yet hated himself, despising himself for his weakness.

Her eyes widened, and she let out a surprised gasp. He knew it was wrong, very wrong, but then he had to do it again. A little moan escaped her mouth, arousing him even more. He thrust his hips against her, helpless against the lust that had taken hold of him. She whimpered, but it didn't sound anguished or frightened anymore, it sounded... No, this was wrong, this had to stop. Finally mastering himself again, he placed his hand over her mouth, silencing her.

He was furious, furious with himself for his lack of self-control, furious with her for tempting him like that, for egging him on, furious with whoever was outside, witnessing it all. He moved off her, roughly pulling her up into a sitting position.

"What are you playing at?" he hissed angrily, shaking her.

She stared at him, frightened, but apparently unable to offer an explanation for her outrageous behaviour. He couldn't bear to look her in the eyes. His natural reaction to being embarrassed was anger, and in his enraged state he did not care about what she had just been through. He just wanted to be rid of her. His left hand gruffly held onto the collar of her shirt, while his right found his wand, pointing it squarely at her chest. He could feel her freeze, as her eyes widened in terror, but her fear did little to appease him. His spell hit her with brutal force, throwing her back onto the bed like a rag doll.

A/N: Hate the cliffhanger? Feel anxious to read on? Then just imagine how anxious an author will feel when their new chapter is getting lots of hits but hardly any reviews, thinking 'Is it that bad?' or 'Are most people hating it?' Come on, put me out of my misery and let me know!

Revelation

Chapter 4 of 6

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

A/N: A little word of warning: This chapter will get rather juicy when you're probably least expecting it. So, before you read on, make sure you are sitting comfortably (perhaps get a cup of tea first), shoo out the kids, and if you're at work with your boss looking over your shoulder, better save it for later. :-)

He moved off the bed, opened the door, and looked down the corridor, but whoever had been eavesdropping had disappeared. With a deep breath, he tried to focus his mind. Finally, his trousers started to feel less tight. Turning back towards the bed where the young woman was lying sprawled out, his anger evaporated at the sight of her slender, helpless form. He even felt a twinge of guilt. Bending down over her, his hand hovered over her face. Feeling the warm puffs of air as she slowly inhaled and exhaled confirmed that his Stunning Spell had not hurt her beyond its intended effect. For a moment, he hesitated, now relieved and decidedly less bothered by guilt, before allowing his fingers to trail across her cheek, slowly, tenderly, marvelling at how incredibly soft her skin felt so perfect, so youthful. She didn't stir, completely oblivious to his shy caress. Something else did stir, however, something deep inside him, something that had been buried for so long that he had almost forgotten what it felt like. But he had no right to feel this way. He had to pull himself together.

Suppressing emotions, especially the more positive ones, was something Snape was very good at. It therefore didn't take him long to clear his mind and focus on solving the problem at hand. First and foremost, whatever he did, it was imperative that he would not be implicated in any way when Potter and his friends got away. Keeping his cover was essential, as was not being culpable of failure in the Dark Lord's eyes. He had stunned the girl when his ill temper flared, but now realised it would have been necessary in any case. He could not appear to care too much about her. She had been barely conscious when he had picked her up, and it would not do for her to be in a better state after he was finished with her.

Another matter was what to tell the others regarding the sword. If he kept Bella worried about the safety of whatever the Dark Lord had entrusted her with, she might be less keen to Summon him, and that would buy some more time. On the other hand, what if that thing was one of the remaining Horcruxes? He couldn't risk the Dark Lord becoming suspicious, perhaps increasing the protection around it. It was best to dispel any concerns regarding the security of the Lestranges' vault.

Carefully, he picked up Hermione's limp body and carried her back downstairs. As he re-entered the drawing room, he noticed that Bella was absent while Draco had apparently come back inside. He was standing with his mother and father by the fireplace. They were talking in hushed voices, seemingly frightened. He gently laid the girl down on the carpet again before turning towards the Malfoys.

"The sword is a fake, a copy," he said.

"That's what the Granger girl claimed, too," Lucius replied. "But Bella wouldn't believe it." His voice was husky, no trace left of its former smooth, eloquent arrogance. His face was unshaven, and his once silky blond hair looked decidedly unkempt. Snape knew that it wasn't just the short stint in Azkaban that had brought about this change.

"She was speaking the truth," he replied, lacing his tone with a trace of indifference. "They were planning to break into the Lestranges' vault, but they had no chance of getting anywhere near it. Tell Bella that she need not worry."

But Lucius didn't look completely reassured. Admittedly, anyone telling the Malfoys not to worry these days was likely to be doubted.

"There is another way to find out," the blond wizard suggested. "Draco, fetch the goblin. He can tell us whether the sword is real or not."

Draco looked at his father uncertainly. But as he had long ago stopped questioning anyone in his family, he silently obeyed.

Snape, however, had no time for such a pointless endeavour. He had to come up with a plan, and he had to do so quickly. Perhaps he could place Pettigrew under the Imperius curse, ordering him to give the prisoners his wand and let them out of the dungeons. The thought of what the Dark Lord might do to punish Pettigrew brought a satisfied smile to his face. How he despised that rat. But then there remained the question of how they would get out of the Manor. There were Anti-Apparition spells in place, although perhaps they could be tampered with. If Potter still had his invisibility cloak, they might be able to sneak out of the house unnoticed. It was risky. He had to think about this carefully, as he would certainly not get a second chance.

He threw Pettigrew and the werewolf his most intimidating glance.

"Remember, the girl is mine. Anyone found to have touched her will face the Dark Lord's wrath. I will make sure of that," he warned them, unashamedly playing his authority to his advantage, before turning on his heel and walking out of the room. He had to try and see if it was possible to break the Anti-Apparition spells.

Out in the hallway he was suddenly stopped in his tracks by the sound of footsteps. As he turned around, he saw Bellatrix come down the stairs, giggling lewdly. No doubt she had been the one to eavesdrop.

"Who would have thought that you could get that sort of response from a woman, Severus." She giggled. "Severus, the bookworm... hahaha... What a surprise..." She cocked her head, giving him a salacious look, running her tongue along her lips.

Once she reached the bottom, she leaned back against the banister in a lascivious pose, running her hand down her ample cleavage, smiling at him in a way she probably thought was seductive.

"If you stay tonight, I'll give you a little surprise, too," she purred.

She moved up to him, pointing her index finger at his chest, and slowly ran her long, crimson nail along the line of his buttons. He maintained a stony expression while she looked at him expectantly.

"You're not my type, Bella," he said, his voice as cold as a bucket of ice water, before pushing her away and continuing on his way.

"Because you only like Mudbloods!" she shouted after him, infuriated.

Something whizzed past within a hand's width of his neck, so close, he could hear it soar through the air. A split second later, he saw her silver dagger drive itself into the polished wood panelling in front of him with a resounding clunk.

He stopped and slowly turned around, staring her down without the slightest sign of perturbation on his face.

"Are you not capable of duelling with a wand?" he asked, derisively raising one eyebrow.

"Aw... Did I scare you?" she quipped, chuckling to herself.

"No. You just made me doubt your sanity," he replied with calm contempt.

"I hate your guts, Severus Snape! There is nothing insane about that!" she spat with an expression of spite on her face.

She hurled herself towards him, a vicious look in her eyes, raising her fists as if to hit him. Something about her reminded him of a petulant child. He caught her wrists, holding on to them with an iron grip, spinning her around, pushing her against the wall, her hands pinned up beside her head. He brought his face close to hers, looking into her eyes with a merciless scowl, fully aware of the intimidating effect his unblinking gaze could have.

"Really? But then a moment ago you wanted me to fuck you," he said silkily. "Now, to me, that's insane."

He let go of her with an expression of disgust, as if he had just touched something filthy. Again he turned and walked away, and this time, she did not try to attack him. He could hear her shout insults after him, but duly ignored her provocations.

"Severus Snape only does little Mudbloods! He can't get it up with a real witch! Loser! Looooser! Loo-hooo-ser!"

When Hermione opened her eyes she gazed up into Ron's face. His blue eyes looked down at her with concern and relief. Next to him was Fleur, holding a steaming mug of something that smelled rather enticing. Looking around the small, cosy lounge with a welcoming fire burning in the hearth, she wondered where she was and how she had got here. And where was Snape? She wanted to ask Ron about him, but was not sure whether that was such a wise thing to do.

"Where are we?" she managed to whisper hoarsely.

The right side of her body was aching, though she had no idea that this was due to the mighty chandelier at Malfoy Manor crashing down on her. Still, it was nowhere near as bad as the effects of the torture had been.

"Shell Cottage. We're all safe, 'Mione," Ron replied, gently caressing her hand.

"How...?" she mouthed.

"It eez all very lucky. It appears zat Dobby came to your rescue. 'Ere drink zis," Fleur told her softly, handing her the mug. Hermione accepted it gratefully, taking a small sip. The hot liquid felt wonderfully energising as it ran down her throat.

"Dobby?" She threw Ron a questioning glance.

"Yeah, Dobby Apparated the other prisoners out of the cellar, and Harry and I wrestled down Pettigrew and took his wand. And then there was a massive fight. And then I grabbed you and Disapparated..."

"Ronald! Let 'er rest first!" Fleur interrupted reproachfully. "Go outside and 'elp 'Arry. I will take care of 'er."

Hermione found it slightly odd that Ron should have been able to Disapparate with her so easily. Most wizarding homes were protected by Anti-Apparition spells, and a place like Malfoy Manor certainly would be no exception. She wondered if Snape had had anything to do with it. A part of her felt disappointed, having hoped that he would somehow personally whisk them away to safety, but of course she realised that such a feat would hardly have been possible for him. He had to continue playing his role.

It was a good thing that Fleur made her drink, eat, and lie down a little, because it was not until after the sun had already risen that she would get any rest. First, they had to bury Dobby, who sadly had not survived their flight from Malfoy Manor. The grief about the loss of the little elf overshadowed the happiness they should have felt for having escaped from almost certain death, but they had to move on. Harry seemed to feel the same, as he wanted to speak to the goblin, Griphook, and Mr Ollivander straight away, already thinking about the next step ahead. Through their capture, they had also been reunited with their friends Luna and Dean, and there was no going to bed before they had heard everyone's story. Only then, after a hot bath, she could finally sleep, in a proper bed with clean sheets and fluffy duvets. The next days were spent mostly at leisure, relaxing on the beach around the cottage and eating Fleur's delicious food. After months of starvation, deprivations, and constant vigilance, she was in heaven.

And so, in the end, Hermione never told her friends about her encounter with Snape. Part of the reason was that she did not want to worry them with the fact that Snape now knew about their mission, nor did she want to justify herself for giving that information away. While she was absolutely confident that their secret was safe with him, she knew that there was nothing she could say to convince Harry.

The other reason was that she was too embarrassed about how it had ended. It had been the first time she had ever been confronted with this type of raw male sexuality, completely devoid of romance or tenderness. She had felt his erection, big, hard, and totally foreign. It had frightened her, but at the same time, part of her had felt intrigued that she was able to cause such a reaction in a man, and not just any man, but the formidable Potions master she had looked up to throughout her student years. It had been exciting somehow, and not completely unwelcome. And not only that, it seemed to have sparked some entirely inappropriate feelings in her. During her waking hours, she successfully kept them at bay, focusing on plotting their break into Gringotts with Harry and Ron, but at night, her dreams were frequently haunted by her former professor.

Hermione sneaked out of the room that she shared with Harry and Ron. The house was quiet; everybody was sleeping. She descended the stairs down to the lounge, careful not to wake anybody. She was wearing the short satin pyjamas that Fleur had lent her, a set of ivory French knickers with a camisole. All of Fleur's nightwear was this elegant and feminine, so very different from her own cotton pyjamas with prints of various Muggle cartoon characters. At first, Hermione had felt a little uncomfortable wearing this sort of thing, but she had grown to like the soft, sexy feel of the silky material against her skin. It made her feel very grown-up.

She pinched some Floo powder from the jar on the mantelpiece and whispered her desired destination. A moment later, she stepped out of the fireplace into Snape's office. The room was softly lit by a number of candles. The new Headmaster was sitting at his desk, reading. He looked up from his book, seemingly unperturbed by her sudden appearance, mustering her.

"Miss Granger..." he said, his tone pleasantly surprised.

He rose from his chair and advanced on her, looking her up and down with an appreciative expression on his face, until he stood right in front of her. His fingers traced along the line of her collarbone. Then they gently lifted her chin up to make her look him in the eyes. His gaze was so intense, it made her shudder.

"Who would have thought that the little know-it-all could be so wanton...?" his deep voice drawled seductively.

Her heart started to beat faster as his hands stroked down her sides, resting briefly at her waist. Then they slipped under the material of the camisole and gathered it up, exposing her midriff and breasts. As he looked at them contemplatively for a moment, she could feel herself blush under his hungry gaze. His hands cupped the little mounds, caressing and squeezing them gently. His callused palms felt rough against her sensitive skin, unfamiliar, but good. She closed her eyes, savouring the sensation.

He took hold of her waist, pulling her firmly against his body. As she felt his manhood pressing against her abdomen, hard and intimidating, she gasped in shock.

"Can you feel it?" he whispered close to her ear, his breath feathering against her neck.

"Y-yes," she stammered. Her heart was racing.

"Do you want it?" he asked, pushing his hips against her in a way that left her in no doubt about his intentions. The dark timbre of his voice made her shiver.

A part of her was aroused at the thought of letting him have his way with her, but at the same time, she was not at all sure whether she was ready to cross that threshold.

"I...I don't know," she whispered, her eyes fixed on his chest. She was so close to him, she could smell him a dark, musky, and masculine note that stirred a powerful primal instinct in her.

A deep chuckle rose from his chest at her answer.

"We shall find out," he said softly, an amused note in his voice.

He pulled the silk garment over her head and let it carelessly drop to the floor. His hands were all over her, claiming every inch of her skin. There was something predatory about his behaviour, taking what he wanted without asking, but she couldn't help but give in to the hypnotic power of his eyes and the pleasure elicited by his experienced hands. He lifted her up and carried her into a candlelit room with a large four-poster bed. He gently put her down on the mattress. Bent over her, he surveyed her with unconcealed lust.

She looked up at him questioningly, unsure whether she should allow this to happen or whether she even had any choice in the matter. Before she could make up her mind, he moved lower and pulled her knickers down her hips and legs, tossing them aside, leaving her completely naked. She felt uneasy at being so exposed, keeping her legs closed shyly, but he placed his hands on her knees and gently pushed them apart, stroking up along the inside of her thighs, spreading them wide, exposing her most intimate part to his eyes. Trepidation mixed with arousal made her breathing turn fast and shallow. His hands moved higher, until they touched her, spreading around the moisture, sliding the pad of his thumb over her sensitive flesh. She whimpered with pleasure, hoping he would continue.

"Yes, you do want it," he remarked, a sly smile playing around his lips. She did not deny it.

"I have never done this before," she whispered, still unsure how far she wanted to go.

"No... But you're dying to know what it feels like, aren't you? ... to have a man's hard cock inside you," he replied, pressing teasingly against her entrance.

She drew in a sharp breath, her whole body tensing. She knew this was wrong, but she couldn't bring herself to stop him. He moved up, brushing a light kiss against her neck.

"It's something you can't find out from a book..." he whispered seductively into her ear, making her skin erupt into goose bumps, "... but I can show you..."

Oh, gods... He really was going to do it.

He stood up, removing his shirt with deft, unhurried movements. She watched him, enthralled, as he exposed his lean, masculine chest and well-defined arms and shoulders. Then he unbuckled his belt and took off his trousers and underwear, until he stood there in his full naked glory. She hardly dared to breathe, turned on by the sight of his toned body, but also disconcerted by the size of his manhood pointing out at her. She suspected that he would not waste time on further preliminaries. So this was it her first time. Her body trembled with nervous anticipation.

He climbed onto the bed and braced on top of her. His intense black eyes looked down on her, making her stomach flutter with excitement. It would happen any moment now...

"Please be gentle," she breathed, feeling very vulnerable.

He looked at her with an aura of reassuring calm, caressing her cheek with the back of his hand.

"Don't be afraid. Just relax."

It was easier said than done. Feeling his erection push against her, she squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for that first, undoubtedly painful thrust.

"Look at me," he commanded softly.

She opened her eyes again, looking up into the bottomless black depth of his pupils, feeling them penetrate her mind, yielding to his power, surrendering all the way.

Unfortunately, this was when Hermione always woke up with her heart racing and her knickers drenched. It was as if, for lack of any real-world experience, her imagination failed her at this point, leaving her sorely disappointed. Each time her desire and curiosity were left unsatisfied. She would relieve her frustration by masturbating under the covers, quietly, so as to not wake Ron and Harry.

At the same time, she felt embarrassed that it was Snape whom she had these dreams about. It was only thanks to him, of course, that her virginity had not been taken forcibly by a Death Eater the day they had been captured. She was extremely grateful to him for having protected her from such a horrible fate. And the knowledge that he was secretly fighting on their side, that Dumbledore's death must have somehow been part of the plan, did much to restore her admiration for him. She often found herself thinking about him, wondering how he was coping. She knew what it was like to fight alone, to not be able to tell anyone about their mission, to not have anyone to turn to for help or advice. But how much worse must it be to be caught on the wrong side? She felt a great secret solidarity with him. But as far as the schoolgirl crush she had once had on him went, she told herself that she really was over him. She was in love with Ron now. A part of her seemed to disagree, however, and longed to see the dark Slytherin again. Little did she know how soon, and under what terrible circumstances, she would.

A/N: Please review! I'm absolutely dying to know what you thought of this chapter.

Closure

Chapter 5 of 6

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

Set two years after the war.

It was a grey April day. Hermione leaned onto the wall that separated the paved promenade from the riverbed of the Thames, watching the brown water lap against the mud and driftwood left exposed at low tide. Instead of going to the library this morning, she had decided to take a walk, a luxury she rarely allowed herself during term time, but then she had been working on an essay until late last night and was slightly ahead in her course work. In any case, she needed some time to think, even though her thoughts always circled along the same obsessive path in a spiral of grief, regret, and guilt, rarely yielding any new insights. Getting away from those thoughts had been precisely the reason why she had decided to distance herself a little from the magical world and study at a Muggle university, but they always caught up with her before long.

She couldn't stop thinking about Professor Snape. She missed him more than words could say, but he was gone and forever lost to her. And what was worse she could have saved him but for some inexplicable reason had not even tried. Why in the name of Merlin had she not done anything that fateful night in the Shrieking Shack? Why had they stood by and watched, watched him fighting for his life, watched him bleed to death, taken the memories offered in a last heroic effort to help them succeed without any concern for the man himself? The memory of his scream as the snake struck, the image of him lying on the floor, desperately trying to staunch the blood gushing from his wounds, his body twitching and trembling uncontrollably they haunted her more than any of the other horrors she had seen during the war. The pain he must have felt yet his only concern was to help Harry. She had already admired him while he was still her harsh Potions professor. But now that she knew so much more about whom he had truly been the tragedy of his life, his suffering, his courage, all he had done for them, for her she deeply cared about him.

Ron and Harry couldn't understand why this affected her so much. *'Hermione,'* they would say, *'he was dying. There was nothing we could have done... We had to find the Horcruxes... We didn't know, we thought he was the enemy, remember?'* Yes, they had always hated him. But in the end they had been proven wrong, and even Harry had changed his opinion of Snape after he'd seen his memories. (And she had never said 'I told you so'.) Hermione, however, had known that he was on their side. Why had she not tried to save him, like he had saved her?

Over the last two years, she had spent hours doing research on snake venoms and their antidotes. It had become another obsession, and by now she had a list of at least half a dozen potions that could have cured him. At least some of these would have been readily available in the infirmary, or at St. Mungo's. If only she could have gone back in time to that moment, like when they had saved Sirius and Buckbeak in their third year, then she would have acted differently. Somewhere in her heart, even though she knew it was unfair, she blamed Harry and Ron for her inaction that night, and those feelings had caused a rift in their friendship. Even if she'd tried to help him, she told herself, they would have stopped her. But if it hadn't been for them, surely she would not have let him die?

Her friends didn't understand why she obsessed so much about Snape's death. In the end she had stopped bringing up the topic as it earned her nothing more than a rolling of eyes. There was no-one with whom she could have talked about it. Granted, Ron had lost a brother; they had lost friends, many people much closer to them than Snape. Of course, to them, that sort of grief weighed far heavier than the death of an unpleasant teacher and Death Eater, even if exonerated in the end.

The losses they shared and the testing time of what would have been their last school year should have strengthened the bonds of their friendship, should have forged them closer together, but the sad truth was that they had grown apart somewhat over the past two years. After the war, Hermione had decided to go back to Hogwarts to finish her NEWTs, while Harry had started Auror training straight away, and Ron had no ambitions to ever pick up a book again, joining his brother's business instead. They had only seen each other during the holidays, at the Burrow over Christmas, and somehow things hadn't been the same.

That last year back at Hogwarts had been more painful than Hermione had imagined. So many things there reminded her of Snape: the Potions classroom, his place at High Table in the Great Hall, now occupied by a new teacher, even the library, and the smell of parchment brought back memories of the dark professor, who nevertheless would sweep along the castle's corridors, black robes billowing, dispensing his scathing sarcasm or taking house points from unsuspecting Gryffindors. To Hermione, Hogwarts would never be the same again.

Before the start of the school year, once enough of the damage to the castle had been repaired for Hogwarts to open its gates to students once more, there had been a memorial ceremony for all those fallen during the war. A stone had been dedicated to each person who had lost their life and fashioned into the masonry of the castle walls during the restoration, so that their names would be remembered for centuries to come. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had received an Order of Merlin, along with all surviving Order members and a number of others who had played an important role in Voldemort's demise.

A special tribute had been paid that day to the deceased Headmaster, now a war hero due to Harry's testimony. For some unfathomable reason, no portrait of Snape had appeared in the Headmaster's office following his death, and all attempts to create a magical painting had failed. To compensate for that fact and to honour his services to the school, it had been decided to place a statue of him next to Dumbledore's white marble tomb down by the lake. The artist, a former student, had done an amazing job, creating a life-sized sculpture, hewn from black obsidian, that really managed to capture the essence of the man. There he stood now, upon a plinth with the simple inscription *'Severus Snape Semper Fidelis'*; silently guarding Dumbledore's grave, a rock against the forces of evil, formidable, upright, proud, and lonely.

During her last year at Hogwarts, Hermione had regularly come to sit close to him by the lake. She often brought little gifts with her, herbs she had gathered in the woods, or potions ingredients he no longer had any need for, which she laid down at his feet. It was a silly, helpless attempt to express her respect and sympathy and to find an outlet for her grief. He was never far from her thoughts, to the point where she entertained imaginary conversations with him in her head, telling him about a book she'd read or a potion she was brewing.

She had been convinced that she would feel better after she graduated, that once the three of them were all in London, with Harry working at the Ministry and Ron at the shop in Diagon Alley, they would be able to spend much more time together. But with increasing frequency, Hermione had been making excuses, claiming that she had to study or hand in an essay the next day, when the real reason was that she just didn't feel like seeing them. She needed time on her own, time to think, like now.

The last time she had seen her friends was already more than two weeks ago. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had gone for dinner at a Noodle Bar in Greenwich. It was a firm favourite with students cheap, but the food was good and authentic. It had been a nice evening. They had laughed and joked, and Ron had demonstrated one of the new Weasley products. For the remainder of the evening, the topic had mostly been Quidditch, so nobody noticed that Hermione was a little quiet. After dinner, they had walked through the streets of the village for a while, holding hands. Ron had insisted to accompany her home.

"Ron," she had said, "I could just Apparate... really."

But he had wanted to take 'one of those crazy Muggle buses' with her. When they'd reached her flat, Ron had wanted to come up, but she'd said that she needed to go straight to bed because she was tired and had to get up early for lectures. Ron had complained that she never had time for him, that all she did was study.

"There's more to life than work and study, 'Mione, you have to be happy, spend time with your family and friends. What are you even going to do with that Muggle degree in the end?"

"I'm sorry, Ron, I really need to sleep. Next time. I love you."

She had kissed him goodnight and disappeared inside.

She did love Ron, she really did. But while he was firmly living in the present and believed in finding happiness in every situation (a trait all Weasleys shared), Hermione was stuck in the past and didn't feel she had a right to be happy. How could she be with him when she was living at a completely different time?

She turned around to lean against the wall, watching those people who did not have to be at work on a Tuesday morning: mothers pushing prams along the promenade, two old ladies shuffling past with their dogs, a group of Japanese tourists taking pictures of Tower Bridge and everything else, a jogger trying to get past without running through their photos, a group of men in suits on the terrace of a fancy restaurant, studying the menu while sipping wine. The wind tore at the strands of her bushy mop, tickling her face. Looking up at the line of former warehouses, now converted into expensive flats with river views, she wondered if she should break her student budget to splurge out on a cup of tea in the cafeteria of the design museum, where it would be warm and cosy, and the views along the Thames would be stunning. Maybe that would help chase those gloomy thoughts away.

Just as she was about to make a move to give in to her desire for a little extravagancy, she caught sight of a man sitting on a bench facing the river. Her heartbeat accelerated as she was unable to take her eyes off the stranger, who resembled strongly, unmistakably almost, the very Hogwarts professor she couldn't stop thinking about. But it was impossible! He was dead! Was she hallucinating? Was her mind playing a trick on her, transforming a dark-haired stranger into the object of her obsession?

Hermione kept staring at the man sitting there, engrossed in a book on his lap, a book that somehow didn't look like it belonged in the Muggle world. He was wearing blue jeans and a streamlined black leather coat, under which a black turtleneck jumper was just visible. His skin was pale and stretched tightly across his sharp cheek bones, while her position afforded her the full-profile view of his large aquiline nose. Jet-black strands of shoulder-length hair, which should have been neatly parted in the middle but were somewhat dishevelled by the wind, fell forward like heavy curtains, partially obscuring his face and eyes, affording him a degree of privacy. She couldn't be sure, but that nose... and his hands, now turning over a page in his book pale, slim, and long-fingered... She remembered those hands very well. If only she could see his eyes.

She moved along the bank a few steps, trying to get a better view of the man's face. At that moment, he became aware that he was being observed. As he looked up, she was suddenly hit by the full force of his gaze, an intense blast from deep black tunnels that left her without a doubt. The realisation seemed to make her heart stop for several seconds, and she almost forgot to breathe. *He is alive! Oh, my... he is alive!*

A shadow of recognition rushed across his face. Then, in one fluid motion, he slammed the book shut, slipped it under his coat, rose from the bench, and turned, hurrying away with ground-covering strides.

It took Hermione a moment to wake up from her stupor, staring at the back of the man marching away from her along the river promenade. But when she finally did, she ran, ran after him as fast as she could. When she caught up with him, she grabbed hold of his arm.

"Professor! Wait! Please, sir!" she called, trying to stop him.

He abruptly spun around, pulling his arm free from her grip, his black eyes flashing at her with annoyance.

"What do you want from me, Miss Granger?" he hissed defensively.

But what exactly did she want from him? There she was, overwhelmed with joy and relief, lost for words, reduced to an insecure school girl again under his intense scrutiny, and all she could think was that she did not want him to walk away. How could she possibly explain?

"I... I just... I just want to talk to you." It sounded feeble even to her own ears.

"Talk? About what?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. The familiar sound of his deep voice sent a shiver down her spine.

She became aware of the curious stares of passers-by, watching the unusual scene, getting the wrong impression. There was so much she wanted to ask him, so much she wanted to explain. But it was not a conversation that could be had in public. She very much needed to be alone with him.

"Please... I live just around the corner from here. Maybe you could come up for a coffee..." she whispered, unable to meet his inquiring eyes. "Please..." That was the only argument she had. "Please, don't go." Nothing but a plea; all she could do was beg. If only he didn't walk away.

When she risked looking up into his face again, the hard expression in his eyes had been replaced by a look of curiosity, perhaps even wonder. She never understood what had brought about that change or what made him agree to her unreasonable request. All she knew was that suddenly his posture was more relaxed and a hint of a smile, or possibly just a smirk, tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Lead the way then," said the velvety dark voice that so many times had haunted her dreams.

Her heart started racing as a surge of adrenaline rushed through her body, bringing her stomach to life with something that had nothing to do with its normal function. Had he really just said that, or had desperate hope clouded her perception? He looked at her expectantly, and swallowing hard, she concluded that she must have heard right.

"This way." Her voice was still no more than a hoarse whisper as she pointed towards a small passage.

She led him through narrow streets between high brick-built buildings, where the sun never reached the cobbled street, and posh art galleries and restaurants bore testimony to the popularity the area had acquired with the City's affluent young professionals. 'Just around the corner' had been somewhat of an understatement. She just hoped that he was not going to lose his patience with her, but he followed without saying a word. Beyond the old railway arches, the trendy warehouse conversions and coffee shops gave way to a less glamorous area of London, where council flats mingled with dingy corner shops and greasy fish-and-chip outlets.

"Nearly there," Hermione tried to reassure him, to which he just gave a quiet nod.

When they had finally reached her block of flats, she stopped outside a wooden door, painted a nauseous shade of green, beside a row of tarnished door bells, which had stopped working long ago. She fumbled around nervously inside her pocket, trying to extract her keys. Once she had succeeded, she let them into a dreary hallway, where the paint was peeling off the walls, while the sixties style staircase made no secret of the fact that regeneration had passed this building by. He silently followed her up two flights of stairs. A couple could be heard shouting obscenities at each other behind one of the doors they passed, throwing a little favourable light on the type of people who were her neighbours. It was with a sense of relief that Hermione unlocked the door to her small studio apartment and hurriedly closed it again behind them.

She realised with embarrassment that she had not left the place in a tidy state that morning. Her dirty breakfast dishes were still piled up beside the sink of her tiny kitchenette, the bed had been made rather sloppily, and the small table that doubled as her desk was littered with books and papers from last night's study session. But the overriding feeling was a sense of awe at being there with him. Not in her wildest dreams could she have imagined that she would return with him when she left this morning. It made her completely forget that she had promised him coffee.

He didn't seem to mind, however, standing there tall, alive, and real looking at her with an aura of calm expectation, seemingly at ease in his surroundings. Hermione wasn't sure how to address him. Calling him "Professor" or "Sir" here, now, seemed awkward and somehow inappropriate, but at the same time she did not dare use a more familiar form of address. She caught herself staring at his neck, wondering whether underneath the collar of his jumper he bore any signs of what had happened that fateful night.

Her preoccupation did not escape him.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I'm not a ghost. See for yourself," he said, pulling down the black fabric and turning his head slightly to show her the red scars disfiguring the perfect pale skin of his neck.

"Oh gods!" she exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hand. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, "I... we... We thought you were dead. How... How did you manage to survive those wounds?"

"Well, no credit to you there," he remarked wryly but without any trace of accusation.

"I'm so sorry! I never forgave myself for not helping you!"

Tears were threatening to well up in her eyes, but he just made a dismissive movement with his hand, as if to say that it did not matter, that he didn't blame her.

"But how?" She really had to know; it was much more to her than a matter of curiosity.

"Fawkes," he stated simply.

Of course, it made perfect sense. Back in their second year, after his fight with Riddle down in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry had told her and Ron how Fawkes had been called to him by his display of loyalty towards Dumbledore. Nobody had been more loyal to Dumbledore than Snape, who even with his last breath had still been carrying out the old Headmaster's orders. And if phoenix tears could heal the deadly bite of a Basilisk, they were surely effective against the venom of a much lesser snake.

"I'm so glad you're alive!" For all the explanations she had wanted to offer, all the questions she had wanted to ask, this was all she was able to say now.

The confusing mix of relief, joy, and some other unidentifiable emotion inside her erupted in a violent sob, making her eyes fill with tears. She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him, feeling the warmth of his body underneath his open jacket, burying her face against his shoulder. He did not respond to her sudden assault on his personal space, neither by taking her into his arms, nor by pushing her away. She felt the measured pace of his heartbeat, the lean circumference of his waist, the buckle of his belt pressing against her belly and breathed in his masculine scent. How she longed for his touch, for even the smallest gesture of tenderness from him. At that moment, she realised that she still felt a physical attraction towards him, that she wanted more than to just apologise to him. She prayed that he felt it, too, for she wanted it so badly now, had wanted it for so long, but at the same time did not know how she could ever ask it of him. He was her former professor, after all, although she was unsure whether right there and then, it still mattered. So many things had changed.

Her heart sank when he disentangled himself from her embrace and took a step away. She was too embarrassed to look at him, standing on the same spot with her eyes glued to the floor. Meanwhile, he had walked over to the table where her course materials were lying sprawled out, taking up a book and leafing through it in bewilderment.

"What is this?" he asked with a disapproving frown.

"My university course books," she replied meekly.

"You are studying Muggle law?" He spat out the word with a look of disgust on his face, as if it were some sort of obscenity.

"Yes." She squirmed inwardly under his judgmental look of incredulity, approaching the desk with her books as if she had to protect them.

"Miss Granger," he said softly in that tone every Hogwarts student had come to fear, "you were one of the most talented students I had the misfortune to teach. How can you be wasting your potential in such a way?"

She blushed at the praise inherent in those words. Even though he had managed to make it sound like an insult, it was a small recognition, something he had denied her throughout her student years. She felt his probing eyes rest on her. It took all her Gryffindor bravery to look up into their black depths, and her skin erupted into gooseflesh when she met them.

"What are you running away from, Miss Granger?" he asked quietly, mustering her as if he could see the answer on her face. Then his eyes narrowed, as if he suddenly had a sneaking suspicion. "This is nothing to do with me, is it?" His forehead pulled into a disapproving frown. "Is this to do with your childish schoolgirl crush on me?"

She felt hurt that he dismissed her feelings for him like that, almost as hurt as when he had called her an 'insufferable know-it-all'.

"I'm not a child anymore! I am a grown woman of twenty years!" she protested, indirectly conceding the principal point.

"And I am twenty years older than you. Believe me, things look different from my perspective," he said with a stern look. "You need to find someone your own age."

"But I want you... And I know you're attracted to me, too," she whispered against the lump forming in her throat. "I know that you wanted me, back there at Malfoy Manor. And I'm not your student anymore, so why can't you admit it?"

He let out a derisive snort. "Virtually every single man out there in the street desires you, Miss Granger. Surely you have noticed that? It comes with being a young, attractive female, but it doesn't mean anything."

"Then why deny yourself? What are you running away from? Is this still about Lily Potter?" Ignoring the warning of his angry look shot at her from narrowed eyes, daring her to touch on this delicate subject, she decided to challenge him further. "Is it a sign of maturity to keep worshipping a ghost, when you could have a real woman? Do you think..."

"Enough!" he cut across her, eyes flashing furiously. "How dare you! You know nothing, absolutely nothing about this!"

His strong, overly-defensive reaction to her words told her that she had been right. It seemed like that particular wound was still open and hurting.

"Maybe I don't," she said defiantly. "But I know everything about not being able to move on."

It was as if those words had managed to deflate his anger. Closing his eyes with an inaudible sigh, he leaned back against the table, his legs set slightly apart, one hand braced on the edge, while the other pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at her pensively with a worried expression etched across his face.

"Then there is something we both have to learn," he said with quiet resolution.

"But I don't want to move on," she insisted. "Not now that I know you are alive, and you're here."

She wanted to show him that there was happiness for him if only he allowed himself to love again and be loved. She wanted him to know how desirable he was, how much she cared about him, wanted him. Gathering all her courage, she stepped closer, between his legs. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she looked up into his eyes, firmly and unwavering this time.

"Kiss me," she said softly, feeling her stomach flutter as she held his gaze.

Closure

Chapter 6 of 6

When Snape arrives at Malfoy Manor and saves Hermione from torture, he ends up seeing her in a different light. A tale of love, obsession, and learning to let go, told in three parts. Not a stereotypical romance.

"Kiss me," she said softly, feeling her stomach flutter as she held his gaze.

For a long moment, he did not move or speak, simply looking at her contemplatively, his focus shifting between her eyes and her mouth, his face unfathomable.

Severus Snape found himself in totally unfamiliar territory. He had not had any physical relationship with a woman for over twenty years. After Lily's tragic death, for which he felt he was largely to blame, he had locked that side of him away, convinced that the indulgence of such pleasures would desecrate her memory. The fact that he had repaid his debts, ready to sacrifice everything in order to help bring the Dark Lord down, avenge Lily's death, and protect her son had done nothing to change his attitude. What other purpose could there possibly be to his unbidden survival, if not to continue worshipping her, keeping her memory alive in his heart? It was as if Dumbledore had reached out from the grave another example of his foolish, compulsive, good-doing meddling ignoring the fact that Severus' only reason to live had died long ago on a dark Halloween night. He had set that wretched bird on him when stripped of his duty all there was left for him was to continue grieving her for the rest of his life.

Yet up to now, his resolve in that matter had never been tested. During the heyday of the Dark Lord's first rise to power, his status as a Death Eater had rendered him an attractive conquest in certain circles. As a young man, he had welcomed those fleeting affairs, even though they had never helped him forget long enough that he could never have the one woman he really wanted. Once those days were over, however, he knew full well that there was absolutely nothing to commend him to the other sex. He had retired into his shell, nursing his bleeding heart, and often neglecting his physical appearance in the process.

All the more surprised he was now to suddenly find himself alone with a beautiful and exceedingly intelligent young witch, who seemed hell-bent on seducing him in the most blunt, forthright way. Faced with such a real and tangible possibility, he realised that the reason for his chosen celibacy had perhaps been as much a fear of rejection as anything else he had made himself believe. He looked into the captivating brown eyes of the girl in front of him. They were full of desire desire for him and real, disarming tenderness. Never before had he been on the receiving end of such emotions. They were his undoing. It was as if his most coveted wish had suddenly come true, only that her eyes were not green. He found it increasingly difficult to come up with reasons why he should push her away. She certainly was not a child anymore. And so, for the first time in over two decades, he stepped out of his self-imposed prison.

He lifted his hand to brush a stray lock of hair away from her face, softly stroking across her curls, feeling their texture so soft and springy, so feminine. His other hand moved up to cup her cheek, while tentatively tracing along the outline of her lips with his thumb. She parted them sensuously, letting him feel their soft plumpness. She was so beautiful, so perfect, and so full of life. His insides twisted in painful yearning.

Hermione could tell the change in his breathing by the pronounced rise and fall of his chest. Her own heart seemed to skip a beat when his large, svelte hands moved towards her face. She knew from the past what strength and dexterity they possessed, but what she hadn't anticipated was how wonderful their touch would feel, so warm and gentle. His slender thumb brushing over her lips made her quiver inside with longing. She wanted to take it into her mouth, but didn't dare to take such liberties. Slowly, hesitantly, he drew her closer, leaning in until his mouth met hers in a tender kiss. The breathtaking intimacy of soft, moist flesh touching flesh was so overwhelming that she couldn't suppress a groan of release, pressing herself harder against him. He placed his arms around her, possessively holding her closer as he deepened their kiss. She had never been kissed like that. The slow deliberation with which his lips and tongue explored her mouth made tickles surge in her stomach and an exquisite ache spread from her groin. Her knees buckled, leaving her clinging to him for support.

Somehow, he managed to manoeuvre her the short distance towards the bed. Sitting down on the edge next to her, he scrutinised her features, as if trying to read her without the use of Legilimency.

"Promise me one thing, Miss Granger," he said, his eyes soft and full of warmth, belying the harsh tone of his voice, "that you will abandon this nonsense, and study a subject making full use of your magical abilities."

"O.K.," she replied uncertainly, "I'll think about it." She was deeply moved by his concern for her education, as well as the expression in his eyes. She wondered if he had ever looked at Lily Potter that way, and if so, how she could have resisted.

"Something like Transfiguration, or Charms even Potions, if you must."

"No, certainly not Potions. I had a horrible teacher who put me off the subject for life," she teased him shyly.

"Good," he growled, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "It never was your greatest strength."

"But what about you?" she asked. "Don't you think it is a waste for a wizard of your calibre to just turn his back on the magical world and live as a Muggle? Are you even carrying a wand?"

He lowered his eyes for a moment, as if unsure about how to answer her, before looking at her again with an openness she had never before seen on his face.

"I no longer have any use for a wand."

She didn't understand what he meant by that. Her confusion seemed to be evident on her face, such that after a short pause, he continued to explain.

"It seems that I came too close to death the night of the final battle, and that particular part of me was lost."

Then it dawned on Hermione, leaving her dumbstruck. Was he saying that he had lost his magic? It was inconceivable. How awful would it be for a powerful and skilled wizard like Snape to suddenly find himself reduced to little more than a Squib? Her heart went out to him. What a cruel irony of fate that the man who, at one stage of his life, had associated himself with an ideology regarding Muggles as inferior, had now been condemned to live as a Muggle himself. Yet she knew that he did not deserve such a punishment. It seemed that once again, to him, life had not been fair, something she felt an overwhelming need to rectify.

"But there must be something we can do! There must be a potion, some sort of cure... Maybe it will come back... Even if St. Mungo's can't do anything, I will do some research... there must be a way..." she stammered, close to tears.

"No, Miss Granger. I don't need your pity," he said firmly. "And considering... the unspeakable things I have done with magic..." He paused, averting his eyes again to stare at his hands in his lap. Then his voice faded to little more than a whisper. "Perhaps someone like me should not be carrying a wand."

"What? No!" she protested. "How can you say that! You never were one of them! We couldn't have won the war without you! You..."

"Stop!" he interrupted her harshly, eyes ablaze with something she wasn't sure how to interpret. "Don't try to turn me into a hero. I'm not. You have no idea..."

"I just want to help... I... we owe it to you," she insisted hoarsely, a sob caught in her throat.

"No. Stop trying to fix me. I don't need your help. I can still brew a number of potions. And I even learned how to use one of these..." She watched in amazement as he pulled a mobile phone from his pocket, briefly glancing at it to check for messages before putting it aside on the bedside table. "Technology is almost like magic," he said with a smirk.

She couldn't help but admire the strength and composure with which he had accepted that terrible blow of fate and learned to live with his condition. She also wondered how it would affect someone who had always looked down on those not up to his own level of intellectual prowess and magical skill, whether it would have been a lesson in humility, and given him a sense of appreciation for other qualities in a person. Perhaps, in some way, it had made him more human.

"Yes," she whispered, lovingly pushing a jet-black strand of hair behind his ear, "you are perfect just the way you are."

Closing her eyes, she brought her lips close to his and they kissed again, slowly and affectionately at first, then with increasing hunger and passion. Her hands started to roam over his back, feeling his strong shoulders and how his body tapered towards his slim waist, slipping into the warmth underneath his jumper to caress his skin. As their kiss got more and more heated, he suddenly stopped and pulled away.

"Are you absolutely sure you want this?" he asked seriously.

Hermione knew where this was leading. She had only had sex a few times before, and never with a grown man twice her age, but she wanted him so badly now, her desire left no room for second thoughts.

"Yes, I do," she replied firmly.

As if to prove that she meant it, she started to tug at his jumper. He allowed her to pull it over his head, exposing his naked upper body. His frame was broad, but lean and lightly muscled. The pale skin of his body was soft and youthful, unlike that of his face, which bore the signs of maturity and a life of tragedies. Her eyes were immediately drawn towards his left forearm. Seeing only a faint scar where the Dark Mark would once have been, she felt a rush of joy, and a small smile lit up her features. He was a free man at last.

Her courage soon left her, however. She was anxious not to appear too inexperienced, yet that was exactly what she was. She felt terribly out of her depth, wishing she had spent the previous night immersed in a book on the art of foreplay rather than the theories behind human rights law. She was as nervous as if she were in an exam, knowing her professor was about to discover that she hadn't done her homework. So she was immensely relieved when he took the lead, kicking off his boots to kneel behind her on the bed, moving her hair aside to kiss her neck. The sensation of his soft lips feathering along her hairline, together with his warm breath against her ear sent a pleasurable shiver down her spine, making every nerve ending in her body stand on edge in anticipation.

His fingers slowly unbuttoned her blouse. As he pulled it down her shoulders, she leaned back against his chest, savouring the warmth and sensuality of his skin against hers, while his hands caressed her arms and shoulders with a firm, yet gentle touch. Then they tenderly cupped and squeezed the small mounds of her breasts. She had so many times fantasised about those graceful hands touching her, but this was no dream. He was actually there in all his striking physicality, and the reality far surpassed even her wildest imagination. Sighing with pleasure, she arched her back, letting her head fall back onto his shoulder. His right hand slowly moved down to caress her stomach before unzipping her jeans and slipping inside. When his fingers grazed over her most sensitive part through the fabric of her underwear, it felt so good that she could not stop herself from crying out, opening her legs wide to give him better access.

"Arghh Severus!"

It was the first time she had ever used his given name. The novelty of its sound from her lips had something sublimely intimate about it. He seemed to notice it, too, as he paused for a moment, as if awestruck by her audacity, or the unaccustomed familiarity it evoked.

"Hermione..." he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. It was just one word – a prayer, a promise, a powerful spell that tore down the walls of inequality that had always existed between them. At that moment, they were no longer professor and student, no longer adult and juvenile, but simply a man and a woman, captivated by each other.

His fingers started to stroke her again with dexterous skill, this time venturing underneath the line of her panties, while his teeth nipped gently at the cords of muscles running down her neck and along her shoulders. She had never experienced such exquisite pleasure, such all-consuming lust. She whimpered helplessly, every fibre of her being screamed for more. She could feel the evidence of his desire pressing against the small of her back, daunting, but incredibly arousing. She wanted him all the way; she wanted him to make love to her.

"Do you want more?"

The deep, velvety timbre of his baritone so close to her ear was more powerful than any aphrodisiac he could have brewed. She wished he would just stop asking, but she could understand his need to be absolutely sure of her consent.

"Yes! Yes!" she moaned, almost beside herself.

She could sense his smile at her eagerness. Mistaking it for smugness, she turned to face him and kiss it off his face, straddling his long, lean thighs, running her fingers through his raven hair, caressing his neck and shoulders, feeling the contours of the muscles underneath the pale skin. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her closer against his body, her soft, smooth belly against his taut, masculine one with its smattering of coarse black hair. As she looked into his eyes, which were burning with emotions that words could never express, she let herself be engulfed by their slowly smouldering fire.

"Is this your first time?" he asked softly in between kisses.

"No," she breathed against his lips.

He seemed relieved by her answer. "Lie back and allow me to undress you," he murmured, gently lowering her onto the bed.

His dark voice was full of promise, a promise that made a swarm of butterflies flutter up in her stomach. She was only too happy to comply, lifting her hips to let him pull down her jeans, watching him as he removed his own clothes. He lay down next to her, bending over her. She looked into the black pools of his eyes, spellbound by their power. His hand slowly moved up along her thigh, making her body tremble with the thrill of being so exposed to his touch and the prospect of what he could do to her.

"You know," she breathed, "it seems that you're still capable of certain kinds of magic."

From there on, Hermione would no longer be able to recall with certainty the sequence of events, as in her mind they all blended together in a haze of passion and devotion, where time no longer mattered, and spatial coordinates blurred into insignificance. The voice of reason in her head was drowned out as her entire being was attuned to her senses, drinking in every tender caress, every gasp, every hungry kiss, every sigh of pleasure, the warm softness of his skin against hers, the firmness of his hands holding her, the sweet saltiness of his lips, the cool silkiness of his hair, the musky scent of his body, and always his eyes, holding her captive in their black depths, never once letting her go.

One moment, however, would forever be emblazoned upon her memory with total clarity, the moment he entered her, slowly, with careful restraint, filling her to the core. Overwhelmed by a feeling of total surrender, of complete and utter fulfilment, she cried out in a shuddering sob, clutching at his shoulders, seeking his mouth with hers, inhaling his breath deep into her lungs, intoxicating herself on its heady perfume. As he made love to her – slowly at first, then with increasing fervour – she let herself tumble into the abyss of his eyes looking down at her, eager to connect with him in every possible way.

An hour later, Hermione was drifting between sleep and day-dreams. Her limbs were heavy with a pleasant tiredness. Her body was tingling all over, a reminder of the powerful, all-encompassing climax she had experienced. She was awoken out of this blissful daze by the sound of soft footsteps. As she opened her eyes, she saw Severus, fully dressed, picking up his coat off the floor and slipping it on.

"Are you leaving?" she asked incredulously. Alarmed, she sat up in bed.

He had never worn his heart on his sleeve, but now it seemed that he was making no effort to hide his emotions. His features were far from the mask of schooled indifference that he had so often worn in the past. As he stood there, in the middle of the room, he looked torn, even lost. Hesitantly, he moved towards the bed and sat down on the edge, his dark eyes glittering softly as he looked at her.

"I must go," he said softly, apologetically.

A feeling of terrible dread started to rise up in her heart.

"Do you regret what we did?" she asked, only just managing to keep the tremble out of her voice.

"No. How could I ever regret it? You must not think such a thing," he replied adamantly. Once more his eyes held her hostage, such that she found it impossible to look

away. He took her hand in his, gently caressing the back of it with his thumb.

"Hermione..." he said, his dark voice pronouncing her name with deep affection. She was afraid of what he would say next, steeling herself for the moment her blissful bubble might burst. Yet the words that followed were devoid of any sting.

"You are an amazing witch, Hermione. But you don't belong in my world, and I don't belong in yours."

She wanted to protest, but could not get a sound past the lump that had formed in her throat. She wanted to tell him that she would follow him anywhere, that she didn't mind living the life of a Muggle with him, and that to be with him was all she desired. As their eyes were locked on each other in silence, she suspected that, despite her inability to speak, he already knew all she could have said, and that it would have done little to change his mind.

"Please..." he continued after a moment. It seemed that now it was his voice that was close to shaking. "Embrace your life. Don't waste it like I have been doing with mine."

Slowly, he bent down to place a light kiss onto her forehead.

"Goodbye, Hermione," he said softly.

Without any further words of explanation, he released her hand, rose from the bed, and left the flat without looking back, quietly closing the door behind him.

She felt the urge to run after him, but she was not dressed. She also knew deep down that it would have been futile. Instead, she got up to look out of the window. After a few moments, he emerged from the front door of the building. She watched as he walked down the street, his elastic gait making his long hair bounce on his shoulders. When he disappeared around the corner, she was certain that she would not see him again.

Staring out into the void, she was surprisingly calm and composed. She felt a deep sadness and a great sense of loss, like she had just said farewell to a dear friend. And in a way she had the imaginary man who had been her constant companion, her sounding board, and the judge of everything she did had suddenly materialised into real life. He had given her all she had longed for, and then walked away, never to return.

Somehow, his decision to leave did not hurt her. She could only guess at his reasons and at what things looked like from his perspective, but one thing she knew for sure was that it was not because he did not care about her. He probably felt that she needed to move on and return to her magical life, into a world where he no longer belonged, and perhaps he was right. Perhaps in his mind, renouncing her was the most loving thing he could do.

He had said that he had no regrets, and neither did Hermione. The memory of the special moment they had shared was a treasure for her to keep. She was happy to know that he was alive, that somewhere out there, he had the chance to make a better life for himself. Deep down in her heart, she knew that a part of her would always love him. But at the same time, deep down in her heart, that same part of her was finally able to let go.

"Goodbye, Severus," she whispered softly, still staring at the spot where she had lost sight of him.

She turned away from the window to get dressed. Her stomach rumbled; she needed to make herself a sandwich. As she headed for the fridge, her eyes fell onto a framed photograph on the shelf, making her stop in her tracks. It had been taken after the war memorial ceremony, showing Harry, Ron, and Hermione, smiling contentedly at the camera. Suddenly, she was overcome with joy and love in a rush of emotions that almost brought tears to her eyes. The sandwich was forgotten. She grabbed her coat and headed for the door. This time, as she stepped out onto the street again, she knew exactly where she was going.

Severus could not stop walking. He had such a strong sense of purpose, yet he had no idea where he was heading. It was as if he had awoken from a long state of hibernation, reborn into a world that seemed so new, so fresh, so foreign, and exciting. The colours of the sky, the trees, and the shop windows were more vibrant, the air was crisper, and even his own heartbeat had a new, electrifying thrum to it. Every fibre of his being was humming. He felt an amazing lightness. As he moved along with powerful strides, it seemed like his feet were hardly touching the ground.

When he reached the South Bank Promenade, he finally came to a halt, leaning against the quay wall to look out over the river. The day had cleared up beautifully from its dull, grey start; it seemed that spring was finally here. As he felt the sun's warming rays on his back and the cool stone under his hands, his skin was still tingling from her touch and her kisses. He would never forget Hermione Granger. Leaving her had been incredibly hard, but it had been the right thing to do. It was the responsibility that came with the greater experience and wisdom of his years. Everything else would have been selfish. She was like a wild bird, like a delicate butterfly and if he tried to hold on to her, he would only end up taking away all that made her so special. He was too mature to fool himself into believing that they could have a future together. It was better for her to find a mate of her own age, even though she was still too young to see that. He had also been witness of how his mother had struggled to find happiness away from the magical world she loved so much. It had ended up destroying her, and he did not want Hermione to make the same mistake for his sake. He found he cared too much about her to mar her young, promising life.

For such a long time, other people had been planning every aspect of his life out for him, but he quickly dismissed any notion that their encounter could have been the result of anything other than luck a whim of the gods or fate, if such a thing existed. Now nothing would ever be the same again. She had reached out to him, leading him away from that dark, lonely place he had dwelled in for virtually all his adult life, and there was no going back, not after he had had a taste of what it was like to be truly alive. Now his heart incarcerated for so long in the dungeons of the past was free and open and incredibly vulnerable, but also incredibly strong.

He turned around to watch the people strolling past him. A mother was struggling with a toddler who refused to sit in his pushchair while the baby she had in a carrier on her back was screaming its head off. She seemed to have infinite stores of patience, even though her eyes and posture betrayed her tiredness. He wondered whether she had the support of a loving husband, or whether she was facing the challenging life of a single parent. He smirked. It wouldn't get easier when those two grew older. He knew that much from years of teaching hormonal teenagers. A group of three young girls, tourists apparently, came walking by, chatting animatedly in a foreign language, eating ice cream. The blonde one caught his eye with her sparkling smile and the graceful swing of her hips. He was not going to make a habit of women young enough to be his daughter; nevertheless, he allowed himself the small pleasure of watching her for a moment. Then his curiosity was roused by a middle-aged woman wearing an impeccably tailored trouser suit and black-rimmed glasses, who was talking into her mobile phone a short distance away from him. It was apparent from her facial expressions that it wasn't an easy conversation, and he caught himself wondering what crisis she was managing at the other end of the line. When she had hung up, she stood there for a moment, seemingly shaken, her slender, manicured fingers tensing around the phone still in her hand, as if contemplating her next move. He could tell she was a strong, driven person and would not give up easily. His eyes wandered on until he noticed a lady leaning across the same wall as him, several feet to his right, enjoying the sunshine. She had frilly brown hair and was wearing an equally frilly long skirt, paired with a flowery blouse. Her dress sense was dismal, but there was something about her that held his attention perhaps the laughter lines around her eyes, or the air of deep content - serenity almost that she radiated. Suddenly she looked up and caught him staring at her, giving him a small, benevolent smile. He felt compelled to answer with half a wry smirk of his own before forcing himself to look away again.

He realised that the afternoon was getting late, and he still had work to do. It was time to go back to his flat, a bright, airy loft conversion, from where he ran his small, but thriving internet business, selling 'herbal remedies', such as beauty elixirs, or potions designed to enhance and prolong sexual pleasure to an ever growing client base of Muggles. He still had to send out an order to one of his regular customers, who claimed his products had saved her marriage, and urgently required another supply.

And so he got up and moved on, looking ahead with a great sense of anticipation. The possibilities were endless. At just over forty years, the majority of his life lay still ahead of him. Free from the shackles that had held him back for so long, it was not too late to finally start living. As he walked, he could still hear her voice in his head. *'It seems that you're still capable of certain kinds of magic.'* It made him smile.

This is the end of the story of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape. The truth is that love does not have to last forever in order to be meaningful. It can touch our lives for the briefest of moments, yet still change its course for the better. Sometimes, in order to truly love, we have to let go. But then the end of this story is really just the beginning of another.

A/N:

There. I duly return Hermione to Ron (may they live happily ever after) and Severus Snape to you, dear reader. Maybe one day you will see him, reading on a park bench in London, or somewhere else in the world. I, for one, know that he is out there, and I suspect he is still looking for love.

This story is my gift to you. I hope it has given you joy. You can return the joy by leaving me a review.

I will leave the continuation of the story to your own imagination. And if you ever felt like taking up pen, quill, or keyboard to share it, I'd be absolutely thrilled to read.