

Run to the Water

by lady_rhian

'Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others.' – Jane Austen, *Sense & Sensibility*

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 8

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A/N: This was written as a gift for a_war_goddess for the Autumn 2011 SSHG Exchange. The majority of this story was written in the two weeks before my wedding last fall, a fete which would not have been possible without the critical expertise and compassion of my dear friends DeeMichelle, Machshefa, richardgloucester, and sshg316.

Since the story is already complete, chapters will post regularly.

Prologue

There is a man the Banshees call the Master of Death. He is no such thing, of course, but he lived on the edge of death for so long that the Banshees, fascinated, ceased wailing and merely followed him from place to place, their anticipation drawn out, taut as the warp on a loom. As the war drew to a close—he was much better at war the second time, they thought—they circled round him in greater numbers, imagining the grandeur of their wails as he fell.

He did fall, but in the manner he expected. He had lain in wait for Death, and he had beaten it once more. The Banshees rejoiced at his victory; he entertained them, and for the first time, they agreed that there was a man they wanted to keep from Death.

But then the man planted his feet in fallow ground. He walked away from the edge and lived a sedentary existence. There was no thrill, no adventure. He buried himself in earth, and Banshees cannot thrive on such men. So, one by one, the Banshees left him.

But the Queen of the Banshees did not forget this man. So fascinated was she by him that she desired him for her own. And so she laid in wait, to ensnare the second mortal she'd ever wanted. This time, she was bent on keeping him.

Original Prompt: Myths have a way of becoming reality in the HP world. When Hermione returns from summer vacation in Ireland, she brings back more than just photos. What's followed her home and why is Professor Snape the only one who knows what's going on?

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 8

'Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others.' - Jane Austen, *Sense & Sensibility*

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'Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others.'

Jane Austen, *Sense & Sensibility*

Day One

That they should meet at a wedding was almost cruelty...almost, she thought, dwelling on their last encounter. Her hand clenched around the banister as she watched him through the rails of the old mahogany staircase. He had just arrived and was chatting with the owner of the Rectory, whose sister was a witch if she recalled correctly, and he nearly grinned as Cian bounded in from another room.

'Severus, old man! Didn't think you'd make it.'

Her heart tugged a little at the two men's embrace, at the affection he so openly shared with his friend. Not that others would have seen it as affection, per se, but it was Cian's wedding weekend, and he was obviously making an extra effort.

Cian stepped to the side to chat with the owner, and Hermione took advantage of the full view to peruse Severus, wanting to see that he had healed but also seeking out evidence of anyone else's ... touch. Her eyes travelled to his face, and she was almost startled as his eyes met her own, unflinching.

She steeled herself and met his gaze head on before Cian stepped back into her line of vision.

Round one: stalemate.

*

Hermione went back to her room because she forgot something; this is what she told herself. But instead of looking for a lost object, she found herself in front of her mirror, examining her reflection for any blemishes or imperfections, inspecting her figure, wondering how it had changed since he'd last seen it. She'd received more than a few compliments from other gentlemen here at the Rectory, but then, she'd been gone a very long time.

It'd been ten years since the war...ten years since Hermione had gone to Australia to restore her parents' memories. Ten years since she'd remembered that she was someone apart from her best friends. In England...in Europe...she couldn't escape the press. There was no peace. Withdrawal had seemed idyllic, and she had begged Harry to Secret Keep her location, but he'd maintained that they were needed. The public needed hope; the public needed *them*.

In the end, it'd been Ron who understood. Curious, she'd thought, that her dear friend who'd never lived a day without magic had somehow empathised, had grasped her need, had supported her decision. So he had Secret Kept her location for almost a year before she'd resurfaced. But by then, she'd found work, taken up surfing, and been quite comfortable living in her flat by the sea.

Her parents returned to England shortly after she relinquished the Fidelius. She stayed.

By her second year away, alone, doing nothing, a restless feeling had settled over her, permeating every nook and cranny of her seemingly peaceful life. She'd tried to fight it; she wanted to do nothing for the rest of her life. She *deserved* some peace and quiet. But she'd read articles in Australian papers, both wizard and Muggle, and she'd cringe at the injustice, wanting to jump in and take up a cause ...

They'd approached her soon after. Itching to jump back into action, eager for more training, desperate to use magic for something greater than herself, she'd joined the group and never looked back.

Her suddenly erratic schedule meant that neighbours noticed her disappearances, and after the fourth or fifth inquiry about why she'd been gone for weeks on end, she decided to sell her place and move to the middle-of-nowhere New Zealand where there were no neighbours to notice her ... unusual ... lifestyle. She had found a perfectly lovely, remote property overlooking an enormous lake, with tall grasses and wild flowers on one side, a shorn lawn and remote beach on another, and a gazebo she'd restored herself...peace, juxtaposed against the rush and danger of her work life; beauty in contrast to the depravity of humanity.

She tilted her head in the mirror. She looked more different every time she came back, she thought, which was perhaps why she attracted a fair bit of attention. People could tell she was different; they knew her life was not following the trajectory of other war heroes, and it intrigued them. Even though she attended every Weasley wedding and most Christmas festivities, as well as stopping by London for coffee with friends when her work took her to Europe, people never stopped staring. Or asking questions.

Ron got it. Harry couldn't understand how she'd 'abandon' England and her family; she couldn't see how he could ignore the wider wizarding world. Only Ron was their common ground anymore; Ron, who loved her no matter what she did. Ron, who in a recent Floo call had suggested naming his firstborn after her...she'd protested almost as vehemently as Pansy. Hermione loved Ron, and Ron loved her, but he had a family now, and...well, the moment she'd declined his offer to join her in Australia, that door had shut. Not slammed, just ... shut, creakily, like a door in an old musty house that has too much sentimental value to fix.

'Hermione?'

Speak of the devil. She waved a hand, and the door opened. Ron's bulk took up most of the doorway, and she laughed.

'Nice suit.'

'Better than the one I wore to Harry's, yeah?'

Hermione closed her powder case. 'Pansy's fashion sense has finally got to you, thank God.'

Ron snorted. 'I did just fine on my own.'

'That's what they all say,' she said, flashing a grin. 'Come on, let's head downstairs. I need a cocktail.'

*
Ron took her arm in his as they entered the Blue Room, where dozens of people were already gathered, some watching the football game on the telly, others chatting, still others sitting quietly at the bar. Heads swivelled in their direction as they entered, and Ron waved.

'Greetings, mortals,' he said, eliciting a large laugh.

They approached the bar, and Hermione attempted to slide onto her barstool with some amount of modesty. 'Does Pansy know Hermione has a dress like that?' someone asked, and Hermione's head whipped around to see Blaise Zabini sitting next to her.

She glared, but Ron laughed. 'Have you seen the dresses my wife wears when Malfoy takes her to a party?' he asked.

Blaise raised his glass. 'Point taken.' He exhaled. 'You two trust your friends. More than most of us can say.'

'Which is why you insist on interrogation?' Hermione asked.

Blaise looked at her thoughtfully. 'Just trying to organise things in my head.'

'If there's no room in your head for platonic friendships between adults of different sexes, I am sorry for you.'

'*Hermione.*' Ron laid a hand on her arm gently. 'He's just winding you up.'

'Times like this I wish I was with you all more often, so people couldn't get away with jokes like that,' Hermione said, tipping back her drink.

'We wish you were around more, too,' Ron said.

'Speaking of which...where's Harry? I thought he was coming,' she said, glancing about the room for her other third. Though she and Harry hardly spoke anymore, she couldn't help but think of him when Ron was with her.

'Got a call from him before I went to your room. Ginny just went into labour,' Ron said quietly.

'What?' Hermione almost shrieked, and Ron looked at her sternly.

'Keep your voice down. It's Cian and Katie's wedding; they don't want to distract from it. Harry said he'd let us know when it...when it was all...you know...done.'

Hermione laughed. 'Is it childbirth or babies themselves that scare you?'

Ron nodded, looking a little green around the edges. 'I'm terrified of the little buggers.'

'You do know that Pansy's almost full term?' Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

'Yeah,' Ron said, looking even greener if possible, and Hermione laughed.

*
She and Ron talked at the bar for a little while, including Blaise in their conversation after a few minutes, and Hermione was enjoying herself so thoroughly that when she realised she had to go, she practically ran to the loo.

It was surprisingly large, given that the Rectory was so old, and it was quite ornate, with tiled marble and gilded faucets. Her eyes started when she saw a gentleman walk out of a stall on her way in, and she realised it must be unisex. She took a deep breath, reminded herself that she saw men in comprising positions all the time, and shut the stall door.

Minutes later, she was leaning so far into the marble countertop as to be almost bent over as she applied her eyeliner; she'd no idea how she'd forgotten to do that in the room. She was almost done lining her eyes when she heard that voice...

'Advertising, Miss Granger?'

She turned away from the mirror quickly, her eyeliner smearing across a cheek as her hand flew, and she saw Severus Snape standing there, blocking the door, all hard and lean and clean shaven and short haired in a black formal suit.

She reminded herself to breathe.

She cocked an eyebrow. 'On the market, Mr Snape?'

His eyebrow rose to match hers, and then his eyes trailed down over her form. She practically felt them travel from head to neck to breasts to waist to hips to ...

'Are you quite finished?' she asked, her tone a bit sharp, but then, he deserved it.

'I'm in the market for a stall, actually,' he drawled. 'If you'll excuse me.'

She turned back to the mirror to fix her makeup, and she could have sworn she felt his hand brush her bum as he walked past her, far too close for comfort.

She heard him unzip his fly, and she practically ran out the door.

*
She and Blaise were having a perfectly pleasant chat at the bar when she felt rather than saw him approach.

'I didn't realise you kept company with such women, Blaise,' Snape said. Hermione turned to face him and found herself staring directly at his chest, he was that close to her.

Blaise took one look at Snape and rose.

'Wait...where are you...!' Hermione started, and Blaise whistled through his teeth.

'I'll leave you two alone,' he said, winking at Snape.

Snape looked down at her with a feral grin, and Hermione could have sworn he was going to kiss her, and then Ron sat at the stool next to her and she didn't know whether to thank him or tell him to shove off.

'Oy, Hermione, what's...oh, Snape...'

'Aren't you married, Mr Weasley?' Snape asked, clearly annoyed at being interrupted.

'Yes, why?' Ron asked, tossing back the rest of his drink.

'I expect your wife wouldn't appreciate you being seen with such a piece of ... totty ... as Miss Granger here.'

Hermione bristled, and Ron immediately spoke up, perhaps sensing her discomfort but more likely emboldened by the drink. 'Whoa, Snape, Hermione's like my sister, and I don't want you looking at her that way.'

'If it looks like a tart, and it tastes like a tart ...' Snape trailed off as he rose to walk away.

'What would you know about how a tart tastes, Snape?' Hermione called after him, unable to stop herself, ignoring how their corner of the room had gone silent.

His stride didn't falter, but she saw his hand clench.

'What are you two on about?' Ron asked.

Hermione put a hand on his arm and shot him her best smile. 'Just a misunderstanding. It is Snape, after all.' She could have winced for pulling that one out of her arsenal, but Ron nodded, and she practically watched him forget all about it as he started telling her how Pansy's business was doing (well), what they were planning to name the baby (Rose), and all sorts of things that inured Hermione to the chill she'd felt during her entire interaction with Snape.

*

All in all, the cocktail hour was a success. She and Snape met only once more, this time on the patio, completely by accident, which perhaps was why they were both so thoroughly discombobulated. She threw her drink at him, and he called her a slag, and she then stalked off to her room to get ready, embarrassed at throwing such a tantrum at her friend's wedding but wondering why the bloody hell Cian and Katie had invited them both in the first place.

*

She was in her room, trying to sober up and calm down, when there was a knock at her door.

'Katie?' she asked, completely surprised to find the bride at the door, even more surprised that the bride in question was in a silky robe and slippers.

'I'm not very good at this confrontation thing, but I have to ask. What the hell is up with you and Snape?'

'Shit,' Hermione muttered, leaning against the door frame. 'I'm sorry, Katie. It's your wedding day...you shouldn't have to deal with us.'

'You're damn straight I shouldn't. But seeing as how the sexual tension between the two of you is all anyone can talk about ... oh, and the fact that you threw your drink on him, and he called you a slag, and you are both usually so implacable that the two of you in a snit is a thing to behold.' Katie took a deep breath. 'I care about you, okay? What's going on?'

Hermione took a deep breath. 'We worked together a while back. That's all I can say.'

'Well, Cian told me that. I want details.'

Hermione winced. 'Does confidentiality count for anything these days?'

'Cian is marrying me, and Snape has been his mentor for years,' Katie said, dropping her tone. 'So when Snape comes into the office after a week on assignment and informs the head of the bloody Department of Mysteries that if he ever has to work a case with you again he'll kill someone, and when everyone believes that he is indeed angry enough to actually kill someone, given that Snape would never make such a threat lightly ... that, plus what's happened today ... well, forgive me for thinking something *might* have happened between the two of you.'

Hermione stared at the floor. 'It was a year ago. I haven't talked to him since.'

'Until tonight?' Katie asked.

Hermione nodded.

Katie let out a low whistle. 'Well, that explains a lot. Also, can I just say that you might want to work on fixing whatever happened? Because a year has obviously done nothing to quell any ... feelings. You two are like tea kettles blowing off so much steam that only dogs can hear the whistle.'

'So I should just walk up to Snape and tell him we need to talk about *oufeelings*?' Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

Katie smacked her arm lightly. 'You're a big girl. Clean this up. At the very least, don't ruin my wedding.'

'Katie,' Hermione said, putting a hand on Katie's arm. 'Katie, you can't believe I would ruin your wedding. You are one of my dearest friends, and my issues with Snape are nowhere near as important as today.'

Katie swallowed. 'Okay. Cause I love you, but I'll be really upset if you two burn the place down.*Really* upset.'

Hermione grinned. 'I promise we won't. At least I won't; can't speak for him.'

Katie grinned in turn. 'You don't have to. Cian's talking to him about this, too.'

'I'm sorry, Katie.'

Katie gave her a brief hug. 'I've got to go get ready.'

Hermione grinned. 'See you soon.'

Katie smiled as only a bride could before sprinting down the hallway.

*

It really was a lovely view. Hermione sat in the seventh row of chairs overlooking a sunset over Glandore Harbour waiting for the ceremony to begin, and she decided that this was the most peaceful she'd felt all day.

Until Snape sat down next to her.

'Okay,' she said as his knee brushed hers. 'This stops now.'

'So you were scolded, too.'

Hermione stuck her hand out and looked him square in the eye. 'Truce?'

He hesitated, staring at her hand suspiciously.

'What?' she asked, a bit miffed. 'You won't burn if you touch me.'

'Might,' he murmured, and she felt heat where she hadn't in a long time, a heat that spread like wildfire as he shook her hand, holding on for perhaps a moment too long.

'Truce,' he said.

She nodded.

'Until the ceremony is over,' he said, and her stomach sank.

*

She knew she should be watching the bride and groom. It was a beautiful wedding, damn it, and one of her dear friends was getting married, and all she could bloody think about was bloody Severus Snape, who looked as though he was having no problem focussing on the ceremony.

Damn him.

Having him this close brought back everything. It brought back their meeting six months ago...*get it out of your head before he sees it!*..not to mention their week in China a year ago, a week that had evidently upset him as much as it had upset her, even if the only feelings he nursed were anger and disdain, rather than ... well, a broken heart.

A broken heart. Severus Snape had broken her bloody heart, and it had been a year, and she still wasn't over it.

What was wrong with her?

She watched as Angelina Weasley, nee Johnson, rose to read a poem. 'Let me not the marriage of true minds admit impediments ...'

The wedding really wasn't helping.

Her mind was whirling in thoughts of him, and it took everything in her to not reach for his hand, and in that focus, her thoughts settled on their first meeting...two years ago, before China, before everything had gone pear shaped, when they were still feeling each other out. When they were still professional. When there was still the option of being friends.

*

Two years ago...Prague

She was sitting at a bar, nursing a victory drink, when someone sat down next to her. She glanced at the interloper before starting to move over when she realised exactly who had sat down next to her.

'Miss Granger,' he said, not looking at her, accepting a drink from the bartender.

'Mr Snape.' Two could play that game. 'This is unexpected.'

'I didn't expect you to survive your last stay in North Korea. Well done.' He smirked and sipped his drink.

'Gin and tonic?' she asked, heart racing.

He chuckled. 'Gin,' he said, and she could have kicked herself for sounding like a schoolgirl.

'What makes you think I was doing anything untoward in North Korea?' she asked.

He full on laughed at this. 'Consider my department,' he said. 'Rarely do people talk about projects, but when a member of the Golden Trio goes on what for all intents and purposes is a suicide mission, well...rules about discretion tend to go out the window. People were rather ... put out.'

'Well, don't trouble yourself on my account, *Professor*,' she said, inwardly delighting at how his eyes narrowed. 'I know what I'm doing.'

'You are...'

'Alive.'

His sharp intake of breath was the only sign of annoyance. 'I didn't realise you'd developed a taste for megalomaniacs. I should have thought one quite enough for any lifetime.'

'Voldemort hated Muggles. This one works with them...with their government, no less. I don't know anyone who wouldn't be fascinated,' she said, folding her arms across her chest.

He downed his drink. 'I never pegged you as the thrill seeking type. Excuse me.'

She stood in front of him before he could rise from the barstool. 'I don't know what you're accusing me of, Snape.'

'Snape, now, is it?'

'For the record, I live remotely in New Zealand, quite quietly, if you'd believe it. I consult; I have the freedom to work at whim. It's most relaxing. Just last week, I was working with native magic in the Philippines. On contraceptives.'

He snorted. 'Is that what you tell your friends?'

She quirked an eyebrow.

'Oh come. I would normally resist sinking to your level, but it takes at least three drinks to get me through one of these things...'

'Conversations with Gryffindors?' she asked.

He ignored her. 'Suffice it to say, my tongue is loosened, and I find myself very eager to respond in kind. We know all about what sort of business you're tangled up in, North Korea notwithstanding.'

'We? You're a thoroughbred Ministry man now?'

'As inept as our government is, I've seen firsthand what happens when powerful men run unchecked with no accountability. Given the option, I'll take red tape.'

'I prefer results.'

'Then it seems we are at an impasse.'

'Really? You don't want results?' She couldn't help but be surprised.

'I deal in theory. I am a scientist. I experiment. I am not one of those involved in the underbelly of world politics.'

'And see, I would have said it takes one to know one.'

'I'm not the one working for a private international firm bent on policing the world's magical populations. Consultant, my arse,' he said.

'The preservation of justice and human dignity might have something to do with it,' she said.

'Even the American Ministry doesn't have the...what is it called? 'Cowboy' mentality? Each government looks out for its own. Your group *meddles*.'

'I will not apologise for making a positive difference in people's lives.'

'The end justifies the means?'

'Sometimes.'

He paused. 'See...that, that coming out of your mouth...that surprises me.' He walked away, and she could sense his disappointment. It felt like a nag in the pit of her stomach, and she wondered why she cared what Severus Snape thought.

*

Cian and Katie kissed, and Hermione wanted to cry.

*

She stuck close to Ron during the reception, Ron and as many Weasleys as she could find. There weren't many, given that Katie was Charlie's ex, but as they seemed the people least likely to be sought out by Severus Snape, Hermione figured they were a safe bet.

She had a good time drinking and chatting with Ron and George and Angelina, and soon enough she was dancing with Blaise. When she saw Snape staring at her she thought, what the hell, make him jealous...a perfectly reasonable deduction when one was buzzed, she thought...and so she kept dancing. She didn't dance like a tart; she just danced like a woman enjoying herself, because she was determined to enjoy herself if it killed her, and she didn't grind or roll her hips, she just swayed and laughed and danced with as many men as she could find, including Cian's exceedingly attractive American friends, who were perfectly charmed by her imitation of an American accent.

She supposed she shouldn't have been surprised that Snape was waiting for her in the hallway when she went out to powder her nose, or whatever excuse ladies gave when they needed to use the loo in a bad way.

'You've been drinking, Miss Granger,' he said casually.

'I am perfectly sober,' she said, barging into the loo, and he followed her.

'You are perfectly pissed.' He rounded on her and stared. 'And even I am not so low as to bed an intoxicated female.'

She marched into the stall. 'Well, what makes you think I'd want to take you to bed?' She supposed it was terribly embarrassing that she was peeing while talking to him, but then she decided that was about his level of importance in the grand scheme of things. 'I might be pleasantly buzzed, but you've been a perfect arse tonight. You called me a tart and a slag, and then you sat by me during the ceremony. Your behaviour has been wretched,' she said, exiting the stall after a few moments, surprised to find him still standing there.

She bent over the sink to wash her hands, and he walked over and stood behind her...too close, he was too close, why was he this close?

Their eyes met in the mirror. 'If the shoe fits.'

'You know what I think, Snape?' she asked, turning around to face him. 'I think you still want me and are bent on proving otherwise. Of course, the manner you're choosing to go about proving such nonsense is complete rubbish since everyone in this godforsaken house knows that we want each other.'

Oops, hadn't meant to say that. He cupped her cheek with his hand. 'You want me?' he asked, staring her straight in the eye.

She swallowed. 'Course I do, you berk.' She clumsily grabbed for his tie, and he immediately backed away.

'Try again when you're sober, Granger.' He turned on his heel and walked out of the loo, not bothering to hold the door for her.

Arse.

*

She sat next to Ron and matched him drink for drink, forgetting that Ron was much better at holding his drink than she was. But it didn't matter if she got drunk now, since Snape already thought she was drunk, and since she wasn't going to talk to him for the rest of the night. And her approach worked, she thought, congratulating herself. She didn't dance and he didn't stare; a half dozen drinks later, Ron commented that he was glad that she and Snape had settled their dispute. At least, Hermione thought that was the word he used.

She did watch, though, when Snape left the reception, and, wanting to get one last word (or two) in, she followed him down the hallway and out to the lawn, and then down the lawn and onto a path that led down the cliff, which led to a cosy little spot of land nestled into the cliff, right next to the shore.

Glandore Harbour had nothing on Lake Wakapitu, in her opinion, but she wasn't about to say so. Besides, all water looked beautiful at twilight.

Severus was already sitting at the shore's edge, knees drawn up, arms leaning on them. He beckoned her over to sit next to him, and though she hesitated, she did so.

He snorted when she sat down. 'Found me, did you?' He sniffed the air. 'You reek.'

She sniffed her underarms before she realised what he meant. She arched an eyebrow defensively. He had been so mean to her all day...how dare he be nice now, when she was drunk? She knew she'd be terribly hung over tomorrow.

She said as much to him, and he laughed, and then she said, 'It's all your fault, you know.'

He turned his head sharply. 'Miss Granger, I did not force you to imbibe anything.'

'Been drinking cause of you,' came out before she could stop herself, and she looked away, coherent enough to be embarrassed, and he reached for her. He gently took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned her head to him.

'I did not mean to drive you to drink,' he said, and she thought that he sounded awfully sorry. 'I...forgive me, Hermione.'

'Sev'rus,' she muttered, hoping it didn't sound too slurred, 'can we just lie down a bit?' She leaned on his shoulder. 'Like we did before?' He was so warm, so strong, and she knew it wasn't her imagination when she felt his arms wrap around her as they lay down against the grass.

*

They fell into a deep sleep, perhaps because of the other's presence. They looked peaceful, the mermaid thought as she watched them from the harbour. It was a shame the goddess wanted them so badly. Bored, she dove beneath the surface and emerged a scant foot away from the shore, flipping her tail as she did so. Magic was rolling off the Rectory tonight; she could afford to be less careful when wizards were around.

Mermaids had, however, been more careful today because they could feel *her* intentions. Something about the party had riled her up. Only occasionally did she inhabit the harbour and the wave that bore her name; tonight was one of those times.

The mermaid watched as the girl inched toward the shore, partly due to being a restless sleeper, but partly due to the mermaid's call. She felt the tide start its push, and then the wave rose and she heard the goddess' command:

Grab her.

So the mermaid latched her scaly, webbed hand onto the girl's foot, now dangling in the water, and pulled her under as the wave washed over them.

Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 8

'Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death.' —Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death.'

...Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Day Two

His first thought was, the sun is bright. Then he remembered...Hermione. He sat up quickly and looked about, but he didn't see her. She must have already woken and gone to the house. She'd have a bitch of a hangover, if memory served.

He rose slowly and stretched, his heart tight. He'd been cruel to her yesterday...had meant to be cruel, truthfully, even though he supposed he was as responsible as she for the situation in which they found themselves. Well, they were both responsible.

Dear God, she'd said she'd been drunk because of him, and images of his mother rose to his mind before he could stop them. He shook his head. He would apologise for his behaviour, brew her a hangover potion as repayment, and leave immediately.

But she'd followed him to the harbour. Then again, she'd been drunk. Quite drunk, in fact. She'd have said anything in that state.

This is what Severus told himself.

*

He walked up to the Rectory and was surprised to find Cian sitting on the patio, drinking what looked to be a mimosa. Cian grinned as he approached. 'Got lucky, old man?'

'What kind of wedding night was it if you're sentient at this hour?' Snape asked in return.

'We were too bloody exhausted to shag, and I don't care who knows it. Should be up to it by this afternoon,' Cian said as Severus collapsed in the chair next to him. He cocked his head. 'Rumour has it Hermione followed you down to the harbour last night.'

Snape glared.

Cian leaned forward. 'Look, it's not my place, but I remember how it was with you two, before. How you...'

'Like you said, Cian. It's not your place.'

'Manners be damned, you made it my place a year ago when you showed up at my door drunk over a woman you'd spent ~~a~~ week with...'

'Enough. You push too far.' Snape ran a hand through his hair. 'Where is she? I owe her a hangover potion.' And an apology, he thought, not that he was going to admit that.

'Haven't seen her,' Cian said. 'Might want to check with Katie. Hermione could have checked out by now. I know she wasn't planning to stay long.'

'Checked out?' Snape asked. 'She would be terribly hungover this morning, Cian, there's no way she would be ready to...' His eyes drifted toward the harbour, and his stomach dropped. 'Dear God,' he muttered, and he knocked the chair over, he bounded out of it so quickly to sprint towards the harbour.

It was clear to him the minute he arrived at the spot they'd slept what had happened. Two spots were worn where they'd slept, and then she'd inched closer and closer to the harbour and...gods, upturned earth. Upturned earth. Too riotous for a mere slip into ... she must have been dragged ...

He let out a sibilant whisper as he knelt at the water's edge, steeling his resolve, doing everything but biting his fist in frustration. A moment later, a mermaid surfaced and immediately met his eyes. He snorted. A mermaid's enchantment was child's play for an Occlumens.

He beckoned to her, and when she came closer, clearly interested, he grabbed her by the neck, pulled her torso out of the water, and immobilized all but her head.

'Where is she?' he asked, doing his best not to yell. 'Where have you taken her?'

'Snape...' He heard Cian's voice. 'What the hell are you doing?'

'Hermione fell asleep, and there are marks where she was clearly dragged into the water,' Snape said, teeth clenched as he stared into the mermaid's eyes. 'She must have been dragged by a mermaid. There are no other creatures in this sea.'

He tightened his grip on the mermaid's neck, and she gasped for air more quickly now.

'Where?' he asked.

'Severus, let her go.'

'No.' Snape gritted his teeth.

'There's a body on the shore,' Cian said, and Snape practically threw the mermaid back into the water before running to the distant spread of shore where a body had clearly washed ashore.

It was Hermione.

'Hermione...' he said, holding her face with his hands. 'God, no.' He felt for a pulse.

There was none.

He kept his fingers on the pulse in her neck as he leaned his forehead against hers, his eyes shut tightly, and the avalanche was coming, he felt it, and he couldn't hold it back, no matter that Cian was standing right behind him, silent for once, and...

He felt it, faint beneath his fingertips. His mouth gapped open a little with shock, and he immediately leaned back.

'Cian, a pulse. Would you make sure?' he asked, leaning back to allow his friend room.

Cian knelt and felt her neck. 'It's there. It's faint, but it's there.'

'God, Hermione,' Severus said, taking her face between his hands again. *Ennervate*. 'I'm here. Hermione, listen to my voice. Come to me,' he said, hoping he was commanding, hoping it worked, *hoping* ...

Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked into his eyes, and he could have cried with relief, and he cradled her in his arms, forgetting that Cian was there, that there were one hundred people in the house, gods, he'd almost lost her, and all he wanted to do was...

'Severus,' she hissed, in a voice not her own, and there was something in her eyes that gave him a chill; this was not tender, was not even the battle-hardened woman he knew. This was something else. Her hand ran up and down his back, and he was frozen, shock still in the unknowing.

'Hermione?' he asked, his voice tepid, and before he knew what was happening, she'd pulled him down to her, and his lips touched hers, but it was not a kiss, it was something fierce and possessive. He broke away, gasping, and instinctively cast a silent *Petrificus Totalus*.

'Well, you clearly made a good impression,' Cian said, and Snape held up a hand as he rose to his feet.

'Something's wrong.'

'Because she tried to kiss you?' Cian asked.

'No, just...try and sense something, will you? You're an Unspeakable, man! Something is not right.'

He and Cian cast several spells to ensure that she was physically well, at least, and, satisfied, Snape transformed the immobilization into an enchanted sleep so that her body went slack. He crouched and, hooking her knees with one arm and supporting her torso with the other, lifted her into his arms and made to carry her back to the house.

When he and Cian were half way there, he stopped.

'I'm taking her to my home, Cian,' he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Cian paused. 'I'll have her things sent. Let me know if you need me.'

Snape looked down at the beautiful, sleeping woman in his arms and Disapparated.

*

He laid her down on the bed and folded his arms across his chest. He'd have to bring her out of the sleep sooner or later, but he wanted to make sure of a few things first. He waved his wand and cast diagnostics; there was no evidence that she'd been hexed, manipulated, or drugged. But his lips tightened as the problem made itself known in a kinetic, frenzied arc of colours that spiralled without settling. Her magical signature...she was still here, but it had been altered.

He summoned a vial of Veritaserum from his stores and willed himself to not break the fragile vial that flew into his hand. Taking a deep breath, he put his wand to her temple and whispered, '*Ennervate*.'

He parted her lips as she awoke and tipped a few drops of the serum down her throat, his heart racing. Her body was still sluggish from the enchanted sleep, but he sent rope flying out of his wand, magically securing her hands and feet to the bed, just in case. He stood at the edge of the bed, arms crossed.

Her eyes finally focussed on him, and she arched an eyebrow. 'Well, if you insist,' she said, staring at the silky black ropes.

'Who are you?' he asked, his voice steady.

'Hermione Granger, of course.'

'Who *else* are you?' he asked, going with his gut.

'Someone who wants you,' she said, tilting her head, baring her neck to him.

He sucked in his breath. 'You may look like her and sound like her, but you are not her,' he said.

'Oh, you're good...oh, your *voice*...'

As if he needed any more confirmation that this was not Hermione.

'Where did we first meet?' he asked.

'At Hogwarts. I was your student.'

'When was our first meeting after Hogwarts?'

'In Prague, two years ago,' she said, straining against the ropes, looking entirely turned on. 'Oh, Severus, come*here*.'

'You're going to have to do a better job of impersonating her if you want me to believe you.' He put a hand on the bedpost and steeled himself against the sight. It was her body, but it was not *her*...she was in there, somewhere, he knew that, her magical signature showed up, but this was not the Hermione Granger he knew.

She wasn't turned on by restraints.

He Vanished the ropes and was mildly annoyed that she didn't sit up, but rather turned on her side as though to seduce him. 'Why do you want me?' he asked, trying a different tactic. Something about her was familiar...something about the signature that was overriding Hermione's was on the tip of his tongue, something about the way the magic was blending with hers just seemed like he'd seen it before ...

She looked as though she was choosing her words carefully. 'Because you are unlike any other man of my acquaintance.'

He snorted. 'And how long have you wanted me, precisely? How many years?' he asked, relying on the serum's capacity to summon specificity.

'Oh...decades.' The answer sounded strained, as though she was fighting the revelation, but his heart started racing. This was the right track.

'Are you a spirit?'

'Not precisely.'

'An immortal, then?'

Her face pinched. 'Yes.'

He took a deep breath and stroked his wand, considering his next question. 'Are you a goddess who specifically inhabits Ireland?'

'Usually.'

'Then you are the patron of something, or you're tied to a family. Who, precisely, calls to you?'

'The...the O'Donovan clan.'

Severus stilled. 'Cian's mother is an O'Donovan,' he said.

'I know.'

He paused. 'Did you possess Hermione in Glandore Harbour?'

'Yes.'

He suddenly felt as though cold water washed over him. 'Is it because you once drowned in Glandore Harbour while waiting for your mortal lover to return?'

Her eyes lit up. 'So you *do* remember me. It's wonderful to finally meet you, Severus. My sisters found you most enchanting ... once.'

'Tell me, Clíona, what the Queen of Banshees wants with the body of Hermione Granger?' he asked.

'Well, the Queen of the Banshees wants *you* ... which makes this particular body most desirable, doesn't it? For you want her,' Clíona said, her hand slowly tracing the curve of her body. 'And besides ... oh, but she didn't tell you, did she?'

His hand was at her throat before he knew what was happening. 'Tell me what?'

Clíona grinned up at him like a Cheshire cat. 'Why, she's been hearing the wail of banshees ever since she stepped foot on Irish soil.'

He caught her chin roughly in his hand and wrenched her eyes to his. *Legilimens*.'

He recoiled as his body was thrown across the room and flew into a wall. He crumpled to the floor, heaving.

Clíona cackled. 'This might be a mortal's body, but it is being possessed by an immortal...my thoughts are unreadable to you, and while I am in control, I can mask hers, as well, so don't even think of trying that again.'

'So your sisters want Hermione,' he said, keeping his voice level as he stood. 'What do you want with me? Haven't you killed enough mortal lovers already?'

'Such sarcasm, Severus,' she chuckled. 'After all, I only killed one,' she said.

'You have a habit of drowning,' Severus said.

'I chose to go back,' she retorted, eyes flashing. 'Do not speak of what you do not know, wizard. Don't presume you know anything true.'

'Then believe that this is the truth: I will not become your lover,' he said, eyes flashing.

'But you would like to become *hers*,' Clíona said, her hand trailing down her stomach towards...

He grabbed her hand. 'Don't.'

'Don't you see, Severus? You can have her body without the inevitability of her rejection.'

He leaned over her, menacing. 'Don't even think I would want her body without her soul.'

'But Severus,' Clíona pouted, and gods, he had to look away. 'Your witch would be dead if I hadn't saved her. She was so drunk, so dead to the world because of you, she would have drowned in the harbour before you were even awake at her side. And you'd have no one to blame but yourself.'

'You cannot guilt me,' he said. 'One of your mermaids dragged her into the harbour.'

Clíona raised a hand innocently. 'Well, she was a restless sleeper. She could have fallen in. Mull that over while you come up with ways to restrain me.'

'You're terrible at wooing,' he said flatly, slamming the door behind him. He leaned against the door, cast his Patronus, and held his wand to his neck. 'Please come,' he said, and the phoenix disappeared.

*

Cian was on his doorstep in moments. 'Good God, man, what's happened?' he asked. 'If you're summoning me from my honeymoon ...'

Severus walked to his bedroom and opened the door, showing Cian the bound goddess.

'Oh, you're bringing your friends by to meet me? How sweet,' Clíona said.

'Cian, meet Clíona, Queen of the Banshees, patron goddess of the O'Donovans, who has a habit of drowning in Glandore Harbour to escape the boredom of being with her mortal lovers.'

Cian's jaw dropped. 'Bloody hell.'

Severus slammed the door shut and silenced the room. 'Have you brought Hermione's things?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Then I have two things for you to do. First, take her wand. Put it in your vault at Gringotts...just get it out of this house and keep it safe.'

Cian crinkled his brow. 'Are you sure we shouldn't bring the team in?'

'Yes,' Severus said, fist clenching against the doorframe. 'I have seven days to brew something that will expel Clíona from Hermione's body. After seven days, it will become significantly harder to expel her; it's a deadline, of sorts. But there are two other methods by which Clíona can establish permanence, and one is using Hermione's wand. Take it.'

'What's the other method?' Cian asked, arms crossed.

Severus snorted. 'Use your imagination.'

Cian's eyes widened. 'Oh, fuck.'

'Precisely.'

Cian whistled. 'And you ... care about her...'

'Which is why I'm not interested in an easy fuck that would cost me...that would destroy Hermione,' he said, annoyed with himself for the slip. 'Second, you must ward the house so that Clíona cannot leave.'

'But a spell that powerful...you wouldn't be able to leave, either,' Cian said.

'Do it.'

'Listen, Severus...'

Severus shoved Cian into the wall. '*You* are not listening. Clíona wants me. But if she cannot get me, she will seek out men, other men with far less scruples, who do not realise that what they are doing will destroy one of the most brilliant witches of our time. She must not leave.' He backed away, breathing heavily. 'My apologies for ... that.'

Cian looked at him strangely. 'I won't say a word, Snape,' he started, 'so long as you think about the extent of your reaction to ... this ... and what that means.' He took a breath. 'I'll do this for you. But I am checking in on you in a few days. If you aren't any closer, I'm bringing in the team. Are we clear?'

Severus nodded, and Cian began the enchantment.

*

Severus spent the night brewing. While his books had not been useful in determining a potion that could expel an immortal, they had elicited several potions that could be used to bring about lucidity in a possessed person. And while he was thinking about it, he'd sent away for several vials of Veritaserum; he was sure he'd go through quite a bit but simply did not have the time to brew it himself.

He stirred slowly, counter clockwise; everything about this potion was in reverse in order to go to the basest thing; it was all in the timing.

He had a few choice questions for Hermione when he ... brought her forth, or whatever you could call this...Summoning a person's self? For one, if Ciona was telling the truth...and he was certain she was, in this instance...Hermione had been hearing the banshee's wail. What on earth was she involved in if she had attracted banshees in such force? He ignored his own past and thought on their time in China; neither had ever fully known what the other was doing...so what, precisely, was she doing that was so dangerous? Travelling the world, invading hostile territories, engaging in out and out combat, or search and rescue missions...or perhaps she was more covert, laying the groundwork for the battles? Or perhaps she was negotiating. He nearly barked a laugh at that; the thought of Hermione working as a mediator was laughable...she was a stubborn woman insistent on having her way.

The banshee's wail ... the nature of her work ... the man he'd seen on her doorstep, giving her a kiss goodbye...

He stilled. He had no right to take advantage of her in such a state...and she was only in such a state because Clíona had sensed his feelings for her, that's what had propelled her to drag Hermione into the depths and send her back to the mainland as something else entirely.

And yet, he could see the man's *handsome* features.

He had every right to ask about the nature of ... their relationship. He had come back for her and found another in his stead.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he stirred thrice more. The potion was ready.

A/N: Clíona, traditionally spelled Clíodhna, is pronounced 'Cleena.'

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 8

'Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.'
'And yours ... is willfully to misunderstand them.' - Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.'

'And yours ... is willfully to misunderstand them.'

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

He had brewed enough to last a week, and he prayed to whatever gods listened that he would not need the whole batch. All the books said that day seven was something of a cut-off, that the odds of rescuing a person's soul were severely diminished after that.

He approached the bed and sat down next to her. He took her wrists in his hands and could not resist the temptation to brush the insides of each with his fingers. 'I'm sorry,' he murmured, and rope spun itself out of thin air, magically securing her to the bed.

She woke with a start, the look in her eyes telling him that this was Clíona...well, he'd known it would be, but by God, it would be something if Hermione could fight through, could wake in his bed on her own, without the goddess. He quickly tipped the new potion down her throat and followed it with Veritaserum, just in case.

As she came to herself, the look in her eye was frantic. 'Oh gods, I passed out and...oh my God,' Hermione said, eyes wide as she saw the ropes. 'Is this your bed? What the fuck am I doing here? Oh God, what did I do?'

'Are you Clíona?' he asked.

'No, I'm Hermione and...' Her eyes darted about the room and to the restraints. 'Oh my fucking Merlin, what the...!' She looked at him, horrified. 'I can't remember anything. You drugged me!' she shrieked. 'Oh my God, we shagged and I can't *remember*...'

'Hermione...'

'How could you *do* that...'

'Hermione!'

'Oh my...'

'Hermione!' he yelled, and that shut her up quickly. 'Would you prefer the long or short version?'

'Short,' she said tersely. 'Untie me.'

Ignoring her, he stared at his hands as he spoke, summoning all of his resolve, hoping she'd understand. 'We fell asleep by the harbour. When I awoke, you were gone...you'd drowned. Cian and I found your body on the shore, but when we Enervated you, you weren't ... yourself. I've run a full set of diagnostic spells; physically, you are fine, but while you were underwater, you were possessed by Clíona, a minor Irish goddess who, incidentally, has a connection to Glandore Harbour and is Queen of the Banshees. Your soul is essentially trapped under hers. I had to brew a potion to ensure your lucidity for this conversation. Do you have any questions so far?' he asked.

She shot him a look that told him what she thought of that. 'Where are we, why am I restrained, and where the bloody hell is my wand so I can hex you into next week? And how can you prove that any of that is true?'

He twitched. 'Fair enough.'

'I'm waiting,' she said.

He ticked off his fingers. 'We are at my home in the Isles of Scilly...St. Agnes, to be specific. You are restrained because I don't know when Clíona will overpower you. She's strong and determined to physically assault me,' he said. Well, it wasn't a lie. 'Your wand is in Cian's safekeeping because the use of it would make Clíona's presence in your body permanent. And this is true because I also have taken a drop of Veritaserum, and because Cian explained it all here.' He released one of her hands from the restraints and handed her the letter. 'The Dictoquill was dipped in Veritaserum, as you can tell by...'

'The colour of the ink,' she murmured, immediately perusing the letter.

He paused. 'You're taking this ... better than expected.'

She pursed her lips. 'I've seen this happen before. I know this is not your fault...I'll endeavour to be calm as long as you haven't taken me in this state,' she said quietly.

He folded his arms across his chest. 'And why would I do that?'

She visibly struggled, fighting the serum in order to choose her words carefully. 'Because you feel ... strongly ... about me.'

He plunged on. 'Symptoms include...'

'Memory loss, physical exhaustion, magical depletion...like I said, I've seen it before.'

'And you are not concerned?' he couldn't help but ask.

'We're alike, you and I,' she started. 'I'm sure I'm as worried as you are gleeful that this has happened, and we are both doing an admirable job of containing our emotions.'

He clenched his fists together, and he felt so hot that he could have stared a hole through the bedspread. 'What makes you think that I *argleefu*?' he asked through gritted teeth.

She handed him Cian's letter. 'Well, we played right into her hands, harbour and everything. Damn indiscriminate immortals. Why me?'

Ignoring the fact that this possession was hardly indiscriminate, he answered, 'Perhaps because you've been haunted by the banshee's wail.'

Her eyes widened with perceptible fear. 'How the hell do you know that?'

'Clíona can access your memories.'

Hermione blanched. 'I...!' She took a deep breath and put her head in her one free hand. 'I've never seen that before.'

'So this is different. Different is good,' Severus said. He sat on the bed and leaned closer to her, unable to resist the energy that crackled between them, a live wire strung with untold questions and latent desire. He cleared his throat. 'What did you and your ... organisation usually do in such scenarios?'

Hermione's shoulders slumped. 'We didn't do anything. There are rumours of objects that can trap an immortal's soul, but we were never able to save anyone.'

Severus looked at the floor, trying to mask his disappointment. 'So you watched them lose themselves in their own bodies?' he asked.

'Yes.' She turned her head. 'How much time do we have?'

'Could you be more specific?'

'This conversation.'

'I've no idea,' he said.

'Seven days, right?' she asked, leaning back into the pillows.

'This is not a terminal diagnosis, Hermione,' he said.

'With all due respect, Severus, we've had our most brilliant witches and wizards working on this project for years. No results.'

'With all due respect, *Hermione*, your boss tried to recruit me to lead that research team.'

Her lip twitched into a smile. 'I heard about that.'

He rose. 'Do you have any more questions, or shall I leave you with the books?'

'Just one,' she said. 'Why didn't you listen, before? When you came to ... see me?'

His lips tightened. 'You were with someone else.'

'I tried to explain. He's just a friend...'

'Who kisses you on the lips?' he asked, his voice sharp, too sharp, and he instantly regretted it. He rose to leave.

'And how about before?' she asked, raising her voice. 'We had the most wonderful week and I was bloody on top of you, when you decided to be a bloody...'

'There is a difference between want and *want*, Hermione. I am not interested in the former,' he said, slamming the door behind him, dearly wishing he hadn't taken the Veritaserum.

*

A half hour later, he was fixing dinner when he felt warm arms around him.

'Severus,' came the soft voice, and he closed his eyes as her hands trailed down his front.

'Hermione,' he whispered as she brushed against him, and her name brought him back to his senses.

He whipped around and caught her chin between his fingers. One look told him all he needed to know. 'Clíona,' he snarled.

'You can tell the difference based on eyes alone?' She laughed. 'But you're good, aren't you? Even more powerful than...'

She pressed her chest against him and he pushed her away so violently that she fell backwards over a chair. He cringed. It was still Hermione's body, and he was relatively certain that she'd want it back in good condition.

'I never thought you'd be one to hurt your witch,' Clíona said, rising from the floor.

His jaw clenched. 'I'm not.'

She gestured towards her scraped arm and bleeding foot.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered.

'Someone has a temper,' Clíona said.

'You are the most irritating wench. You're not a woman; you're a bored goddess attempting to make my life a living hell. I do not desire another master, Clíona. I'd have thought you'd have known that,' he said, Summoning a bottle of dittany to apply to her foot.

'But you do desire this witch, and I can give her to you,' Clíona said, moaning as he rubbed the dittany on the wound as sparsely as possible.

'Go to hell,' he said.

*

He drowned himself in whisky.

Hermione...Clíona...was bound and drugged with Dreamless Sleep. He'd have to keep track of how often he drugged her, but he did not have the energy to handle her tonight. The reality of the situation fell on him like chains, and so ... whisky. He had draughts of sobering and hangover potions near him, just in case.

It had been a hell of a day. First, guilt at his treatment of her. Remorse, grief, and fear at the sight of her lifeless body. Fear...yes, fear, that she was lost. The thrill of the chase as he sought her possessor's identity. Guilt, again, at the hand he'd played in it. In hindsight, he was damn lucky to have spotted Cliona that quickly...but that was also a curse, since this possession was so personal. Gods, Hermione couldn't...*couldn't*...know his history with the banshees, of Cliona's deeply personal interest. Of his feelings. His lip curled at the thought; he'd never been good with those, as evidenced by the fact that as the three adult encounters had been enough to cause him to care for Hermione, so they had convinced Hermione that he couldn't care less.

They'd crossed wires somewhere, and that rankled, but he was damned if he knew how to untangle it all.

He Summoned his Pensieve. Drunk and remorseful was not, perhaps, a recipe for productive reflection, but he felt like wallowing, so he'd take a look at that night. Again.

*

One year ago...China

They sat side by side in the living room of her suite, drinking wine, an entire table of hors d'oeuvres laid before them.

'To you,' she proposed, and the glint in her eye killed him, watching it, seeing her intent. 'And the idea that made it all work.'

He was a few glasses worse for the wear in this memory and clinked glasses with her as he leaned in. 'To my general who masterminded this expedition.'

She tilted her head up, and he took it in his fingers and cradled it, traced his finger over her lips, and her lips parted, and that was all the invitation he needed.

Severus watched the scene unfold, wishing he could feel what he had felt in that moment, desire and her acceptance swirling in him, a heady cocktail for a parched soul. He watched as his past self crushed his mouth to Hermione's, and she practically threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down on top of her. He watched...dear God, tortured himself...as his past self kissed her. Snogging sounded too much like teenagers...he loved her with his mouth as best he knew. Severus found himself seeking out flashes of skin; he knew this like it was choreography...a bit of cleavage here, followed by a heady expanse of thigh. He bit his knuckle to stop from moaning as he watched her forearms, taut with tension as her fingers scrambled up his past self's shirt, and her hips bucked against his, seeking skin and sex still contained by clothing.

At some point, they stumbled to the bed, frantic with need, and that was when it all went pear shaped. Severus knew his past self's thoughts, could read them in his face: when he thought that a week was not nearly enough time to be able to fully know and appreciate this woman, that while he was not the best with emotions, he knew something good when he found it, and perhaps this was not the best idea, especially when they were two bottles of wine worse for the wear. He'd lost himself in this woman, who had just lost her skirt and was straddling him in barely-there knickers, and his knuckles brushed against her inner thigh, and he watched his past self realise that this was ... more...and what he sought to present as an opportunity, she immediately interpreted as rejection.

He continued to watch as the tension in the room, once so promising, curdled with anger and misunderstanding, and he retreated into his mind, seeking the cabinets where old habits dwelt, which opened up to vast lakes and starless skies, and he chased numbness and caught it just as he saw the scene before him disintegrate. She pulled up her skirt; he begged her to listen. She screamed; he swore. She said he obviously didn't want this and that she was sorry to have ruined a perfectly good working relationship with mere sex; he asked, 'Is that all this is to you?' and she yelled, 'Don't you dare say that to me! Not now!'

And he pushed himself out of the memory with such force that he stumbled to the floor as the world spun around him, and he closed his eyes, whereupon he was taken by drink and dreams.

Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 8

'You thought me then devoid of every proper feeling, I am sure you did.' - Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'You thought me then devoid of every proper feeling, I am sure you did.'

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

Day Three

She found him in the kitchen making breakfast.

He consciously ignored her entrance and subsequent nattering, focussing his attention on poaching the eggs to perfection. He'd taken a hangover potion and was on his second cup of coffee; he'd girded his loins as best he could, but honestly, did the woman never shut up?

'So you plan to feed me?' Cliona asked, and he shot her an annoyed glance, immediately returning his attention to the eggs. He attempted to regulate his breath as he closed his eyes, praying she could not read the tension in his body. What the hell had possessed Cian to send *all* of Hermione's things? He obviously hadn't registered the part of the conversation that had touched on Cliona's libido; revealing, lacy lingerie was not what he needed to be dealing with right now. Especially when said lingerie was on Hermione's body. But then, what had possessed Hermione to pack such lingerie for a friend's wedding weekend? She had come alone, had she not? Weasley...but no, Severus put it from his mind; the eggs were going to burn if he went down that road.

'I asked you a question, Severus. Honestly, I don't know where your mind went,' Cliona was saying, and he inwardly cursed her. She knew exactly where it had gone.

'Of course I'm feeding you. Hermione would be most put out with me, were I to do otherwise,' he said, hoping he sounded unaffected.

'Mm,' Cliona murmured, and for a moment Severus entertained the notion that she might leave him to cook in peace.

'So how long have you been in love with her?'

He almost dropped the egg he was precariously balancing on a spatula. 'That is none of your concern,' he said, safely delivering the egg to its plate.

'Remember that I can see her memories. I know what's happened between the two of you. I know how badly you want each other. You do realise that the solution is sitting in front of you?' she asked, gesturing to her scantily clad body.

Severus set the plate in front of her with *athunk*. 'It must be a shame to be an immortal, to not be able to comprehend that which transforms the physical into transcendence.' He took his plate in one hand, the coffee mug in another, and strode out of the room. He'd barricade himself in his office; after all, there was much to do, and the clock was ticking.

*

Mid-morning, he stretched his arms above his head and cracked his neck. He'd found nothing, and he needed a break.

A discreet spell informed him that Clíona was in the bathtub, and Merlin only knew the horrors she'd perpetuate if she knew he was out of his office. He cast a Silencing Charm and slipped out the front door. He couldn't run to Trevanaunce Cove...Cian had trapped him along with his tormentor, after all...but he could go for a walk on the beach just outside his front door.

He rolled up his trouser legs and walked, hands in pockets, along the shore, feeling the cool water slosh over his feet. Desperate to silence his thoughts and ~~just~~ for a moment, he focussed his attention on the water's rhythm, in and out, on the grainy sand beneath his feet, revelling in the heat of the sun on his face.

He'd longed for her for a year, acutely aware of her absence in his life. How strange it was, to find himself under house arrest with her...only ~~not~~, something else, something perverting her body, her loveliness. Oh, he found her lovely, entrancing, even, all that unruly hair which ran so contrary to her disposition. It was cruel that he couldn't fully appreciate her form as she walked through his home, slept in his bed (his guest bed, he amended), bathed in his tub ... she was here yet not here, and perhaps most painfully, not by choice. This was not by her consent; it was not her desire. He was not her desire. That she desired his body...sex...*it*...well, anyone could desire *it*, given the proper circumstances. But was he, Severus Snape, her desire? He didn't think so, and that pained him.

He stepped on a smooth rock and picked it up, flicking it with his wrist so that it skipped across the water. He raised a hand and manipulated the rock that so that it skipped in circles, and then in a figure eight. The breeze sent a ripple through his white t-shirt, but it didn't distract him, not from this. A smile curled at his lips. This was the first bit of magic his mother had taught him; how to manipulate rocks as he sent them skipping down the stream behind their house.

He heard Clíona calling for him, and taking a deep breath, began the trek back to the house.

*

He spent most of the day in his laboratory, as every attempt to wander upstairs was met with struggle. Clíona had refused to change out of that damn outfit, had taunted him mercilessly. She'd stripped, struggled, wrestled with him.

Merlin.

He had needed a cold shower. He could not...*would not*...take pleasure in something that Hermione had not consented to. She'd be mortified if she knew how Clíona was using her body.

Best not to tell her.

*

He Summoned Hermione for dinner, but only after he forced Clíona to change her clothing. Clíona had driven a hard bargain, and he was dreading his end of it. But he hadn't been able to bring himself to *Imperio* Hermione, and that was the only other way he was going to get Clíona out of that lingerie.

As it was, Clíona had chosen jeans and a basic t-shirt, nearly matching his own ensemble. He didn't have to force her to take the potion, though she'd laughed wickedly as she reminded him that she'd be back before he knew it. The potion also wasn't laced with Veritaserum; his research suggested keeping potions to a minimum. Much as he would have loved to do so ... but then, he supposed that dosing her with truth serum was about on par with an *Imperio* where she was concerned.

Clíona downed the potion, and he watched as Hermione came back to herself, his heart leaping as he saw the softness return to her eyes, even as her entire body stiffened with tension.

'How are you feeling?' he asked softly.

'How has she been today?' was her response.

'Interesting,' he said, after a pause. 'I've laid the table for dinner. Salmon is the main course for the evening...care to join me?'

She followed him into the kitchen and sat at the table. 'As if I have a choice.'

He paused. 'You can take dinner privately, if you wish it.'

She looked as though she was choosing her words as carefully as he. 'I would be happy to eat with you, Severus. I know you're ... taking care of me.'

He nodded in assent as he buttered his bread.

'You didn't answer my question very well. How has she been today?' Hermione asked.

He ignored her question. 'Frankly, I'm amazed that you're able to ask questions like that when you've been buried in your own body all day. I expected...'

'That I'd be frightened? Terrified at the loss of control?' she asked with a nervous laugh. 'I am. That we have any control over our own lives is an illusion, of course, but being reminded of it in so harsh a way is ... scary. Look at this,' she said, gesturing to her body. 'Look at us.'

He stilled. 'I am sincerely sorry for how I treated you at the wedding. Please forgive me.'

She nodded.

'No questions?' he asked.

'I figure you've been stuck with an insatiable goddess all day and could do with some peace and quiet.'

'How do you figure?' he asked cautiously.

'You look exhausted. You've got scrapes on your face, and I've got rug burns on my knees and back, and I can smell the burn salve that's been applied to my wrist.'

He swore under his breath. 'I'm sorry.'

Hermione swallowed her salmon and looked at him somewhat crossly. 'I take it that I've been in ... less clothing ... today, given the location of the injuries. I'm trying to put

this delicately, but why the hell are you letting her walk around like that?'

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course Hermione would notice such things. 'She's insistent. I forced her to change before Summoning you.'

'You better not have...'

'I didn't *Imperio* you, woman!' he said, his control snapping for the first time. 'I made a deal.'

'What were the terms?' she asked, fire flashing in her eyes.

He swore again. 'That she could spend the night in my bedroom.'

'Bloody hell,' Hermione said, looking at him with disgust. 'So much for me thinking your intentions were honourable...'

'You said you trusted me,' he said, his tone harsh. 'I would never take advantage of you. I will make a bloody *vow* if that's what it takes.'

She was quiet. 'If you say so.'

'Let's just eat,' he said, weary from the goddess, weary from Hermione, weary from the bloody situation.

They sat quietly as they finished their dinner. Severus supposed he should have been grateful for the silence, which had been so fleeting during the day, but he found that he mourned the loss of her voice. Though Cliona spoke with Hermione's voice, there was a tone, an inflection unique to each individual ... she could not speak exactly how Hermione spoke any more than she could imitate Hermione's body language.

'I'm sorry,' she said, pushing her plate away from her. 'I shouldn't have doubted you.'

'Thank you,' he said, staring at his plate.

She reached for his hand. 'Is this what we've been driven to, Severus?' He met her eyes, and there were tears. 'We were friends, and now we're stuck in your house, and this stupid goddess is *in* me, and...'

Tears.

He'd known they would come at some point...he didn't know how someone could be possessed and *not* be emotional about it eventually...so he reached across the table for her hand and held it, tracing circles on her wrist with his thumb.

'Sorry,' she said, wiping tears.

'Don't apologise.' He silently Summoned the salve from his chambers. 'This should ease your discomfort.'

'Thank you, Severus,' she said, taking the salve.

She rolled up her jeans and rubbed the paste into her knees. She looked up at him with those guileless eyes and asked, 'Could you?'...and he swallowed hard. He nodded his assent and scooted his chair so that it was situated right next to hers. She turned in her seat and rolled up her shirt, baring her lower back, and he dipped his fingers in the salve, rubbing his fingers together to warm it, before applying it to her skin.

Unlike Cliona, Hermione did not moan, but she tilted her head and let out a sigh, and he knew an urge to suckle the juncture where neck and shoulder joined.

'All done,' he said, leaning back, tearing his fingers from her flesh, and she pulled her top back into place.

'I feel much better, thank you,' she said, turning to face him. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes half-lidded. 'I...Severus, please...' she started, leaning towards him, and he stood abruptly, forcing her to lean back.

'No,' he said. 'I am grateful that the potion I brewed has lasted this long. But we don't know when she will return.'

'You'll hold her down and bind her and wrestle with her and Merlin knows what else, but you won't touch me when I beg you to do so, me who may at any moment go back under her influence, me who is desperate for comfort from *you*, who ...' She shook her head. 'You know, Severus, if you want me without wanting *me*, then just fuck Cliona while I'm not around, okay?'

She started to walk away from him, and something in him broke. He reached for her and pulled her to him, cupping her face with his hands. 'How could you possibly think that?' he asked, his voice cracking, and he bent to kiss her.

She met him eagerly, her lips pressing to his, so soft, then opening, gods, *opening* against his mouth, tongue seeking, and he groaned, his hands twining in her hair, pressing her body to his, and gods, it wasn't enough, he needed more, more of her...

'I want...' she started, her lips still brushing against his, and he looked down at her clothing and was reminded of that damn bargain, and Cliona's presence washed over him like cold water.

'We can't,' he said, forcibly removing his hands from her hair. He closed his eyes and she pulled away.

'No,' she started, 'Severus, please, I don't know how much time we have, and I want you to hold me. I'm so sorry I was harsh with you...'

He sat back down in his chair and put his head in his hands. 'Hermione,' he said, his voice barely a whisper. 'We don't know how much she's affecting you.'

At that moment a cackle emerged from Hermione, which he knew heralded the goddess' return. He bound her hands and, with a force of energy, sent her reeling back into his bedroom.

'How ... touching. And she told you to fuck me, Snape! Isn't that wonderful? You have her permission...'

He locked the door, a cruel smile curling his lips.

He'd told her she could sleep in his bed.

He never said he'd be in it.

Chapter Five

Chapter 6 of 8

'If a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavour to conceal it, he must find it out.' - Jane Austen *Pride & Prejudice*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'If a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavour to conceal it, he must find it out.'

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*

Day Four

Severus heard her thrashing in the night. Roused from his slumber on the couch, he padded across the floor and opened the door to his bedroom.

'Leave me, leave...'

He approached the bed and saw tears streaked across her face, even though she still slept.

Sitting on the bed gently so as not to wake her, he cradled her head against his chest, felt the wet of her cheeks through the thin cotton of his shirt. 'Hermione,' he murmured and rocked her until the words stopped, until they were wrapped only in breath and moonlight, and against his better judgment, he lay down with her and tucked the curves of her body into his own, shutting his eyes to preserve the tendrils of possibility that wove around them in moonbeams.

*

When he awoke in the morning, a hand was circled around his erection and a tongue was lapping at his nipples...he knew he'd gone to bed with a shirt ...

One silent spell later, Clíona was on the floor licking her wounds, and he was doing his damndest to attempt modesty as he climbed out of the bed.

'Any sex with a mortal must be consensual, as you well know,' he said sharply. 'That will not happen again.'

'But you surprised me, Severus,' Clíona said, batting her eyelashes. 'I do so love waking up next to you.'

He strode out of the room, strands of dignity intact, thinking that even with this morning's episode ... falling asleep with *Hermione* in his arms had been something. Something indeed.

*

Severus spent most of the day in the laboratory, experimenting with as many potions as he could within the hours that constrained him. He wiped his brow with a sweat rag; his shirt was soaked, and he stripped it off as well. Potions was a physical business as much as it was a creative one, and he debated going upstairs for a shower. Instead, he cast a cleansing charm...he simply didn't have the time. If only he had a Time Turner.

*

Severus didn't Summon Hermione for dinner. He didn't have the heart to tell her that his efforts had still proved fruitless, that he was no closer to finding a cure than he'd been days ago. Besides which, last night had scared the hell out of him. He hadn't counted on the intensity, on the tug he felt in his heart and his groin every time they spoke. She wanted him...he was confused as to the true nature of her feelings, but he was relatively certain that her want went beyond mere *want* ... he simply didn't have the energy to deal with it. Not tonight.

Truth was, he didn't know if he had the self-control to resist her desire. Last night had been a mistake, falling asleep with her body moulded into his, all soft curves and winding roads that made him feel like a car careening off a cliff. He couldn't touch her *anywhere*; one mere brush would set him aflame, and Merlin only knew how quickly his reason would disintegrate, how intoxicated he would be the wonder that was Hermione, how quickly he might forget that sex was the way Clíona most desired to secure Hermione's body for herself.

So he steeled himself for what was sure to be a rousing dinner with Clíona. He'd barricaded himself in his laboratory and worked in blessed silence, and he felt that he had stored up enough energy to handle her.

'No witch tonight?' Clíona asked as she sat down to the meal, and Severus snorted. 'Don't tell me that you are coming to prefer my company to hers.'

'Hardly.'

'So tell me about your day.'

'Did no one ever tell you not to speak with your mouth full?' Severus asked, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. 'I've no intention of discussing my day with you.'

'Isn't that what couples do?' Clíona asked, and he rolled his eyes. 'Surely you have questions for me, Severus,' she started. 'Remember, I can access the witch's memories. Isn't there anything you're dying to know?'

Severus considered the offer. He couldn't ask the questions he wished most; that would betray her trust. But there was one issue that had been nagging him.

'Why has she been hearing the banshee's call?'

Clíona clapped her hands, delighted. 'Well, I can answer that one myself, but it's a nice start. It's simple: she's in a rather dangerous line of work. She gets flown into war zones, essentially, places where the fault lines between wizards and Muggles are fracturing. The nature of her work varies, but most of the time, she could be killed at any moment. She's like you in that she operates in the shadows; she's not like you in that she's too headstrong to pull back at opportune moments. She risks exposure frequently.'

He'd suspected as much. His heart was racing; it was one thing to feel for a woman and quite another to feel for a woman constantly throwing herself in front of megalomaniacs.

And quite another to feel for a woman who worked for one. His lips tightened; he was not overly fond of Hermione's boss, no, he was not.

'What else?' Clíona asked, her foot caressing Severus's under the table.

He jerked away from her, remaining silent.

Clíona sighed. 'Be that way, then.'

Severus smirked. Perhaps he was exhausting her, as well. The thought warmed him.

Day Five

He awoke the next morning with that feeling in his gut that told him today would be an off day. And it was. In the laboratory, he not only failed to find a cure...he failed to complete a potion. His hands were unsteady; his concentration was lax. In the kitchen, he suffered similar problems. He cut himself with a knife while he sliced his tomato...a perfectly rote task he had mastered at the age of eight. And Clíona ... Clíona was silent. He found himself watching her, waiting; she must have something up her sleeve. It wasn't like her to leave him alone, unmolested, for so long, and while he was grateful for the reprieve, he was desperate for some semblance of normalcy.

When he could take her silence no more, he presented her with a vial of the draught that would Summon Hermione. She agreed to take it, but instead of reminding him that she'd soon be back, she asked to go to her room for a minute. When she emerged, she took the draught in her hand, but she looked at him strangely. 'When was the last time you remember seeing Hermione? Before the wedding, that is,' she qualified.

He folded his arms across his chest. 'A year ago,' he said. What was she getting at?

She grinned at him like a Cheshire cat. 'Well, Hermione saw you six months ago. Saved your life, in fact. You should ask her about it.' And she downed the draught before he could reply.

That such a move was bloody unfair of her was the only coherent thought going through his head as he watched Hermione slowly come back to herself. He didn't know whether he should be angry or curious or numb or...six months ago. What had he been doing then? He hadn't been out of the country; he'd been in his laboratory in the Ministry, doing the sort of research they bloody well paid him to do.

If she was involved, they'd lied to him. His hands clenched. He'd told his boss he didn't want to work with her anymore. His boss also knew his opinion of her bloody group.

By the time Hermione resurfaced, he was seething.

'Severus?' Hermione asked. 'How has she been today?'

She gasped as he knelt in front of her, menacing.

'Six months ago. You were watching me. You saved me, apparently. Explain yourself.'

Her face crumpled...she'd always been a terrible liar. 'She told you?' she asked, finding her voice. Her eyes lit up. 'What a bitch.' She stared down at the floor. 'You did not need to know that.'

He rose and walked towards the kitchen, pacing, before leaning into the doorway, arms folded. 'I'm waiting, Hermione.'

Her nostrils flared. 'How dare you! You Summon me without telling me anything...what day it is, how she's been, how I've been...you just bloody well ask me about things she's obviously been spilling to you! That's selfish,' she said. 'What *else* has she been telling you? And what have you been asking? You want me to believe you're being honourable about this, Snape, and yet you interrogate me about something I didn't even have control over!'

'If you saved my life, it sounds like you had some semblance of control,' he said through gritted teeth.

'Oh spare me your poor, wounded male ego,' she said, waving a hand. 'You're damn straight I saved your life. So consider this situation debt repayment.'

'Are you going to tell me about the mission?' he asked.

'You'll have to douse me with Veritaserum first,' she spat. 'Suffice it to say, the Ministry keeps closer ties with my group than they've let on. And I volunteered for the honour of watching you, perhaps because I missed you, in spite of how you'd treated me in my own home...and I almost died saving you. Have that on your conscience, you miserable bastard.'

And with that, she turned on her heel and walked to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Severus scarcely had time to collect his thoughts and begin the process of organising that conversation and all that bloody woman talk when her door opened and she stalked out, furious. The magic radiated off her in waves, and her curls were practically bouncing of their own accord.

'What. Is. This?' she asked, holding a note.

A note. Oh Merlin.

'Clíona has been meddling, I take it.'

'It seems that she wanted to explain a few things that you've somehow forgotten to tell me about,' she said.

He inhaled sharply. 'What is there to explain?'

'So much for this situation being debt repayment, you trying saving my life and all...seems like I'm in this bloody situation because of you! Here I was blaming myself for not dealing with the banshee's wail earlier, and it turns out that I am perfectly irrelevant, aside from the fact that I'm a woman you're attracted to. When were you planning to tell me you were like some bloody Colin Firth for banshees?' she asked, waving the note as if to punctuate every word.

He sat down.

'Were you planning to tell me that no, this isn't completely my fault? Were you planning to take any responsibility?' she continued. 'And were you ~~over~~ planning to tell me that your physical restraint is because sex can make this permanent? Here I was thinking I was stupid, that I was inconveniencing you with all my advances, that I was reading every situation wrong, that no, you weren't as attracted to me as I was to you, in spite of your nice words, most of which I can't remember because I just bloody wanted your hands on me. And now I find out that maybe you *do* care and have just been a fucking coward about it...'

He looked up at her, eyes flashing. 'You've got some nerve, accusing me of being irresponsible with this. Have I not put myself under house arrest in my own home in order to protect you, to keep Clíona from seducing less discriminate men who would not realise that they were eradicating your very existence? Have I not spent every waking hour in the lab, seeking a cure? Have I not shown you that I care? You say this revelation is news to you; do you not see how I have sought to exercise self-control, how I have resisted your touch and advances? How *dare* you accuse me of being cavalier with this! If anyone has acted cavalierly, it is you.'

'Oh, what the...'

'How many men did you dance with at the wedding?' he started, barging ahead without thought to consequence. 'How many lovers have you taken in the last year? How do

you explain the man at the door the morning after *that night?*' he hissed. 'I came back for you and he was there...'

'Yes, you came back, didn't you?' she nearly shrieked. 'You wouldn't even hear my explanation, you bastard! He was an old...an old lover, to put it bluntly, coming to visit. We had a cup of coffee, and then he left, and yes, he gave me a goodbye kiss!' At this, her eyes faltered, and her shoulders slumped. She looked as if the fight had gone out of her, and it annoyed him, because he was bloody riled up.

'And I could have died when I saw your face because oh, Severus, I wanted you to find me so badly, and dear God the timing could not have been worse! That kiss was *nothing*, I swear.'

They stood there, breathing heavily, the air full of anger and frustration and things unsaid and promises broken and underneath it all, the taut thread of tension, threatening to snap at any moment.

And then the grandfather clock chimed.

He broke, pushing her against the wall, her arms scrambling up his back, legs twining around his as he ground against her, his lips on her neck, her lips on his collarbone.

'Why didn't you just let me explain?' she murmured against his lips.

'Hermione...' he choked. 'I was a fool. I...'

Cold water washed over him.

The grandfather clock. How long had it been since he'd Summoned her?

'Clíona,' he said, his voice dead.

She sighed and straightened herself. 'Almost had you going.'

He stepped away and ran a hand through his hair. Dear God, what was happening to him? How could he not tell the difference?

'Now you know that she wants you, Snape, almost as badly as you want her...trust me, you are not unwelcome in this body.'

He shuddered and fled the room.

*

He sat at his desk well into the night, examining his notes by candlelight. He made every effort to not think, to *not feel*. Curiously, Hermione still consumed his every thought, and his emotions rose and fell as he replayed their conversation. He sought to analyse just as he longed to forget, and he cursed the paradox she had created.

When he could stand it no more, he stumbled to his bed.

*

He awoke to find Hermione...Clíona, he reminded himself...lying next to him.

'Severus,' she said, her fingers tracing tiny circles on his chest. 'Severus, it's me.'

He put a hand to his head. Gods, why did these sorts of things always happen to him? It wasn't Hermione...he hadn't given her anything...which meant that Clíona was working on a better impersonation.

Merlin help him.

'Severus, please believe me,' she said, and when he looked down at her, there were tears in her eyes. 'I fought my way through, I pushed her down, this ~~is~~ *is* Hermione...'

She inhaled sharply as he took her wrists in his hands, not gently, either.

'I don't know how you broke the barriers on my room, but I am taking you back to yours.'

She grabbed at him as he tried to rise up, and she pinned his body down to the bed with hers. 'I love you,' she said. 'Please, you have to believe that this is me and not Clíona. Gods, what can I say to make you believe me?'

Pushing her off him, ignoring her words, he rose, and he tugged at her leg and drew her to him, holding her tightly in his arms as he strode out of his room, and she began kicking at him. 'Let me go! Severus, let me go! Don't treat me this way! This is how you treat *her*...'

'Don't presume that you know me, or that you know Hermione well enough to impersonate her. And don't use words you don't understand,' he said, with as much malice as he could summon, which at the moment was quite a lot.

'What? That I love you?' she asked as he deposited her on the bed. He Summoned his wand, and her eyes grew large and she reached for him, getting a firm grip on his hand, tugging him down to her. 'Severus, don't do this. I love you. I mean it with every fibre of my being, and I'm so sorry about what happened last year. I wish we could take it all back, it was a terrible misunderstanding, but this is our chance to start over. I'm not asking you to declare anything, I just need you to hold me right now, for as long as I'm here...'

He bent over her and looked in her eyes, deflecting her hands as she tried to reach for him. 'Bitch. Go to hell.'

She started crying, then, and he was sick of the theatrics. Clíona was obviously stronger if she thought she could successfully pull this off, and he waved his wand over her and put her into an enchanted sleep, so that he at least could rest.

Day Six

The next morning, he walked into the kitchen. Clíona was sitting there, buttering her toast, and something in her face made him pause as he passed her by.

'You're cheerful this morning,' he commented. It was dangerous to engage her in conversation, yes, but it was more dangerous not to.

She let out a cackle. 'Oh, I am.'

'The midnight rape might have something to do with it, mm?' Severus asked.

'It was only an attempted seduction, Severus, don't be so dramatic,' Clíona said, fluttering her eyelashes at him. '~~It~~ *It* was her, you know.'

He paused, staring at the cabinet. 'Do not jest with me.'

'But it was. She expended almost all her energy to push through, and you rejected her,' Clíona said, tsking. 'She's extraordinarily weak now and has a bit of a broken heart on top of it, poor dear.' She patted her mouth with her napkin. 'You can do your wand waving and see. She's almost gone.'

Severus stared into the open cabinet, his mind a blank, not even realising the rage building up within him until the jar of blackberry jam he held cracked and spilled all over the counter.

He closed his eyes, ignoring the sticky jam on his hands, her words playing over in his mind *Severus, it's me. I fought my way through. Please believe me.*

I love you.

He turned to Clíona. 'I don't believe you.'

'That it was her or that she's weak?' Clíona asked.

'The former.'

Clíona cackled. 'Oh, Severus. For such an intelligent man, and with such an arsenal of books at your disposal, have you not read, have you not ~~not~~? I can access her memories, but when have I ever been able to access her emotions? I couldn't make this body cry if my life depended on it.'

She was playing. She had to be. Last night hadn't worked, he'd seen straight through her, so for her to say this meant she was desperate; her admitting ...

Or ... or ...

He could not bear to consider the possibility that it was Hermione he'd been rough with, that it was Hermione he'd spoken those words to.

He...he could not.

He didn't trust his own eyes anymore. He didn't know what or who he could believe.

He needed to find a way to expel her. Today.

Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 8

'I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant.' - Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant.'

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Clíona's revelation had him all out of sorts. He couldn't focus on his potions, on his notes, on his work. So he did the only thing that could ameliorate his situation. He Summoned Hermione.

He sat next to her on the couch as she came to, and she turned away from him the minute she realised he was there.

'I don't want to talk to you,' she said, laying her head down on the armrest, tucking her feet under her, breaking all physical contact.

He bent his head. 'It was you last night.'

'It was me ... *is* me,' she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

'I am sorry, Hermione,' he said, willing her to meet his gaze. 'I do not expect you to accept my apology, but the agony I feel is ... acute.'

She looked up at him, eyes guileless. She swallowed hard. 'Do you ...'

He took her in his arms, unable to stop himself, and he sighed as he felt her lean into his embrace. 'I love you,' he said, his voice cracking. 'Merlin help me, I love you.'

She looked up at him, her eyes tender, and she started to cry. 'I love you, too,' she said, and he nearly shook with relief.

They held each other for a few long, precious moments before she broke the silence.

'How much Summoning Draught can you give me without risking overexposure?'

'Why do you ask?' he murmured against her hair, certain he knew the answer but desiring to hear it from her lips.

'I want to stay with you today.'

He held her tighter to him. 'We can do that. We'll have to take breaks in between but ...'

Then she kissed him, and he thought no more.

*

He leaned against the doorframe of his office, his hand in a pocket, watching over her as she rested on the couch.

Hermione was taking a break; immediately after Clíona had surfaced, Severus gave her a light sleeping potion so as to provide her...and himself...with a little respite. She looked so peaceful lying there, cocooned in a blanket even though it was the middle of summer. She should be waking up soon.

They were taking risks, and both of them knew it. To Summon her so frequently, to douse her with so many potions in a day...but then, time was running short. They knew that, too, though it went unsaid, and Severus was hard pressed to fault himself for wanting time together ... just in case.

He had to prepare himself for the possibility, even as he worked to find a cure. Cian had found nothing of use, had even gone outside the Ministry for assistance.

Severus checked the time and grimaced. She would be arriving soon. He could have shot Cian for going to their boss, who in turn went ~~to~~er, but at this point, Severus would have bargained with the Devil himself if it meant buying more time.

This came pretty damn close.

He walked out the door just as she Apparated onto the beach. He could read the disappointment in her form when she saw him...disappointment that he'd been expecting her, perhaps? She was tall, lithe, and poised; her shoulders slackened only briefly before returning to their rigid posture. She wore a tailored grey pantsuit, and her heels clicked in spite of the fact that she was walking on sand. He was certain they were charmed to withstand the deadliest of terrains.

He kept his arms folded across his chest as she arrived on his doorstep. 'Livia.'

Her mouth was set somewhere between amusement and disdain, and he didn't know which he'd prefer. 'You're a hard person to find, Severus,' Livia said.

'Why are you here?' he asked.

'Because your boss asked me to be, but I would have found you regardless. If you and Hermione had taken a lovers' holiday, she would have called in. Far more believable that something ill has befallen her. Presumably you had something to do with it?' she asked.

'What do you want with her?' he asked.

'She's one of my most trusted employees.'

'Are you calling on your brother while you're in this corner of the world?'

Livia actually huffed. 'What on earth would I want with that snivelling bastard?'

'He *is* your twin.' A smirk twitched at Severus' lips.

'Blood isn't everything, contrary to his opinion.'

'Which he has since renounced,' Severus reminded her.

She pursed her lips. 'Our name is rubbish in this country, thanks to him.'

'And here I'd have thought you'd be proud of him for striking out on his own.'

'We never stoop to actually involve ourselves in politics,' she said.

'You just police them?'

She raised an eyebrow. 'This has been fun, but now I really need to see Hermione.' She paused. 'Please.'

He laughed at the 'please.' 'If you can break the wards on the house,' he said and went inside to pour himself a glass of wine.

He had some pride, after all.

Five minutes later, Livia walked through the front door, Severus still nursing his wine.

She quirked an eyebrow. 'You knew I'd break the wards. Oh,' she said, chuckling, 'you set *special* ones just for me. How ... thoughtful.'

He smirked into his glass, if such a thing was possible. Her skill almost surpassed his own.

Almost.

Hermione...Clíona...chose this moment to walk into the room.

'Ah, Severus, I'm so glad you're enjoying the tea. And you are?' Clíona's eyes rolled back in her head. 'Ah. The witch's boss.'

Severus didn't take his eyes off Livia. He knew she'd seen just about everything one could see, but she was stiff almost to the point of shock. He watched as Clíona casually asked Livia about her travels, about the business...about her daughter.

Severus snorted into his drink, and Livia glared at him. So, she'd had a child since he'd seen her last? Fascinating. Hermione must be close to her boss if she was privy to that bit of information. Lucius certainly didn't know that his twin sister had a child.

'May I?' Livia asked, and Severus nodded. She waved a wand and froze Clíona in her tracks.

'I'm almost impressed that you asked,' Severus said, leaning back in his chair.

'Well, I am in your house,' Livia said.

'Didn't stop you from breaking in.'

'At your invitation. So,' she continued, 'it seems as if Hermione is being possessed by a spirit, but I'll go out on a limb and wager that it's an immortal.'

Severus explained the situation in brief, and Livia laughed. 'So she's in this predicament because of you. The Queen of the Banshees...quite the catch, Snape. I take it you've been working over the last week to free her?'

He nodded and resisted a biting comment.

'I know of an item that may help,' Livia said. 'I'll need a day or so to look into it.'

'Hurry,' Severus said quietly, staring at the floor. 'Clíona is getting stronger.'

'I will do my best. You're not the only one who cares for Hermione.'

'Are you capable of such feeling?' Snape asked, goading her.

'Just because you don't trust me...'

'One does not kidnap a potential employee in order to interview him at wandpoint,' Severus said, flexing his hand.

She chuckled. 'In the old days, we'd never have been able to get the drop on you.'

'I'm sure you meant that as a compliment.'

'Of course.' She walked out the door without further ado, and Clíona unfroze, at last, and looked around, seemingly unfazed that Livia had disappeared.

'I'm assuming she wants to help. She won't be able to, you know. The witch is weak, and I am strong, so strong with desire for you...'

He flicked his hand and silenced her. One would think that centuries would have taught her subtlety.

*

Severus and Hermione did not talk at dinner, but they touched. They sat right next to each other, thighs brushing, feet tangling, hands being caressed, then grasped, then caressed some more. His kisses were light on her shoulder, and when she rested her hand on his thigh, he almost came undone.

They took their wine glasses out onto the beach to watch the sunset. They sat on the sand and the tide reached for their feet, and Severus thought it the most perfect evening they'd ever shared.

He leaned down to nuzzle the crook of her neck, and she leaned away from him.

'What is it?' he murmured, wrapping an arm around her. 'What's this?' He wiped a stray tear from her cheek.

'If she takes me, Severus,' Hermione said.

He stared at the sea. 'You cannot ask me that. You will not ask me that.'

'But I must.'

He shook, the weight of the entire week crashing down on him, the reality that tomorrow would be their last day crushing him. Despair burrowed into the quiet places, the corners of his mind where he'd cherished hope, and he began to weep...cry, like a man possessed, dear gods, what must she think of him?

But then he felt warmth on all sides wrap around him slowly, her skin like a cocoon, her fingers threading through his hair, her touch anchoring him to reality...to her.

'Severus,' she said, her lips brushing his ear. 'I ask out of mercy.'

'I've heard those words before.'

'Mercy for you,' she finished.

He looked at her and found that he did not mind when she wiped at his tears. 'I will not ask you to watch the woman you love be overtaken by a vengeful bitch. Clíona ... she wants you, you have no idea how badly. I am not asking you to kill me. I am asking you to kill *her*. I do not want her to torment you.'

'I would be looking at you as I do so,' he said.

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he pulled her close.

'Our bodies are dust, Severus,' she said, her lips brushing against his arm as she spoke. 'I don't know much, but I do know that. I know you can't kill a person and force them from this earth without them leaving a mark, leaving their essence in people they love. And I know that you know that, too.'

He thought of Lily and knew she'd intended him to do so.

'He killed her, but she never left her son,' Hermione murmured, as though reading his thoughts.

He buried his face in her hair, and they lay down on the blanket. 'Hermione,' he murmured, hooking a leg around hers. 'I cannot bear to lose you.'

'If you think this is easier for me, you're kidding yourself.'

He wrapped his arms tightly around her, and they lay there until Clíona returned.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 8 of 8

'I am half agony, half hope.' - Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Disclaimer: Not mine, alas.

'I am half agony, half hope.'

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Day Seven

He prayed.

Severus could not recall the last time he had prayed, but this morning he did so. He prayed while he showered, while he dressed, while he brewed coffee. He wasn't sure if it was a genuine prayer, but it was a plea, a request, sheer desperation. He was begging for the right to nurture the feeling that had begun to bud the minute he'd seen her body washed up on the shores of Glandore Harbour.

He made breakfast, but he barely ate.

He walked circles round the house, mentally reviewing his reading, his notes, his discoveries.

Most of all, he attempted to ignore Cliona, who was downright giddy. After she ate breakfast, he locked her in her bedroom and warded the door.

He needed to think. He needed to prepare himself.

He sat down on the couch and wrapped himself in her favourite blanket. He inhaled her scent, and when he felt dampness on his cheeks, he didn't berate himself.

*

An hour later, he lay on the couch, ignoring the sunshine and the birds chirping outside; ignoring the siren song of the sea. He wished he knew a spell to make the weather reflect his mood. The very sunlight betrayed him.

He debated when to Summon Hermione. Should it be at lunch or at dinner? What should he prepare for their last meal? Should he make love to her, since Cliona was going to take over anyway?

He didn't know.

So he closed his eyes and tried to shut the world out.

*

'Well, this is a sight I never thought I'd see.'

He was off the couch in an instant, wand at the ready, and saw Livia standing erect in the kitchen doorway.

'It's good to know I can break wards you haven't set specially for me,' she said, her lip twitching.

'And how long did that take?' he asked, his heart racing.

She laughed. 'Oh, you still best me at wards, Severus. We each have our specialties,' she said, examining her fingernails. 'I never thought to see you wallow.'

'I am not wallowing.'

'Laying on a couch with an angry goddess locked in a bedroom, wrapped in a blanket when you're sweating bullets which means it must have sentimental value, which means it must be Hermione's blanket, coupled with the fact that your cheeks are tear-stained and that Cliona will be taking full possession of the woman you love within twenty-four hours ... I'd say you're wallowing.'

He sat back down on the couch, head in his hands. And perhaps it was that action which caused Livia to cross the room and sit beside him.

'I have a solution,' she said.

He looked up at her sharply. 'Do not jest with me.'

Her eyes flashed. 'You don't have to like me, but I am growing tired of your continued inferences that I don't care about Hermione's well-being, that I would ~~would~~ care about such a thing,' she said. She pulled a very old dagger from her very small purse.

'That doesn't look like much,' Severus said.

'The valuable ones never do,' she murmured, her tone almost reverent. She traced a finger along the blade. 'I've been hunting this dagger for the past decade. I'm thrilled to have found it ... in time.'

'It will trap Cliona's soul?' Severus asked.

'Yes.'

'Will Hermione survive the ... expulsion?' he asked.

'She should.'

He inhaled sharply. 'Should?'

Livia looked at him long and hard. 'These things are rarely predictable. It's a risk we have to take.'

He bit his lip. Not now. Not in front of her.

'At the very least, Hermione will be back in her own body, for ... however long a period of time. I think that will make her happy.'

Severus nodded. 'Should I fetch her?'

'Is she herself?' Livia asked.

'No.'

'I'd like to explain what we're going to do to her directly.' It sounded as though Livia sniffled, although she cleared her throat immediately after.

Severus rose to fetch the Summoning Draught. Perhaps she cared, after all.

*

Severus stood in the kitchen doorway as Livia spoke with Hermione on the couch. The women held hands as they spoke, and while Livia was not tearful, she was clearly affected.

'Who will do it?' Hermione asked. She looked at Severus, questioning.

'I cannot,' he said just as Livia said, 'I will.'

He swallowed hard. 'Thank you.'

Livia nodded.

'What's the next step?' Hermione asked.

'To return to Glandore Harbour,' Livia said.

'Cian has specifically warded the place. You can leave, but we can't,' Severus said.

Livia snorted. 'Surely you don't think me incapable of breaking his wards. You could have broken them if you wanted to.'

A smile twitched at his lips. 'Indeed.'

'I'll lift the wards, and we'll return to the harbour. We'll have to be in the water, so you might want to wear swimwear,' Livia said.

'Ever heard of water repelling charms?' Severus asked.

'Ever heard of mermaids using your clothing against you?' Livia retorted, and he could have cursed himself for forgetting about the mermaids.

'I'm assuming Clíona has to be in control when the ceremony takes place,' Hermione said, staring off into space.

'Yes, she does,' Livia said quietly.

Hermione nodded slowly. 'Then I'd better give you this now.' She hugged her boss, and Livia looked slightly taken aback but quickly returned the embrace.

And then Hermione rose and approached Severus, and he ran a hand over her hair once she was close.

'Hermione,' he whispered.

'I love you,' Hermione said, looking into his eyes.

He bent his head and brushed his lips to hers, his fingers knotted in her curls.

'That's a promise,' he murmured. 'Come back to me.'

'One way or another,' she said, and squeezing his hand, she walked into her room and shut the door.

*

Half an hour later, Severus handed Clíona a draught. She batted her eyelashes at him.

'How will you say goodbye to your witch, Severus? Do you have it planned?' she asked, reaching a hand out to stroke his arm.

He recoiled. 'Drink the damn draught.'

She snorted. 'Men.' Her eyes widened as she tasted the draught. 'What is this? What did you give me?'

He smiled at her. 'Goodbye, Clíona. It hasn't been a pleasure.'

And she collapsed to the floor.

Livia stepped in from the other room. 'That's one hell of a sedative, Severus.'

'It'll keep her from struggling and speaking.'

Livia raised her eyebrows. 'Impressive. Can I order it from you when this is all over?'

'Since I bought it from a Muggle pharmacy, I sincerely doubt it.'

'Well, I'll change her in the guest bedroom. Time to get your Speedo on, Snape,' Livia said with a wink, and Severus winced.

*

Minutes later, Livia and Severus stood on the shore of Glandore Harbour, with Severus carrying Clíona in his arms. What a difference a week made.

Livia wore a magical diving suit, a sheer layer that practically fused with her skin, leaving little to the imagination. Severus wore black swim trunks, and Clíona was wearing Hermione's string bikini. He had plans for that bikini when this was all over ... provided it went well.

'Ready?' Livia asked, and Severus nodded. Livia jumped in the water, and Severus laid Clíona on the shore as he slid in. He reached for her and, tucking her arm around his neck, slid her body into the water as well. Thanks to the Muggle drugs, there was little tension in her body, but the magic-less ceremony meant that he couldn't cast a weightless charm.

'Remember what I said. Get her out immediately.'

'Do it,' Severus said, practically growling. He couldn't tread water forever, especially when supporting another's weight.

He barely heard the incantation, but he felt the thrust of Hermione's body against his own as the dagger entered her solar plexus and relished the red glow emanating from the dagger, even in the murky water.

Clíona was gone.

He felt a scaly hand on his shoulder, and when Livia screamed 'Now!' he muttered a spell that shot him and Hermione out of the water and onto the shore. They landed just in time for him to see Livia floating above the water as she cast the most powerful repelling charm he'd ever seen. Mermaids flew out of the water, and he saw tidal pools forming, sucking them down, down, down, far away from the wizard and witches on the shore.

Hermione was sputtering now, and he put his hand over her stomach as if to staunch the bleeding, and he Summoned a bottle of dittany from the bag he'd left on the shore, and he poured the entire damn thing over her wound.

'It might not work, Severus,' Livia said as she laid a hand on his shoulder. He hadn't realised she was there.

Hermione was shaking, and he bent forward and put his forehead to hers, cradling her face with his bloody hands.

'Stay with me,' he murmured, closing his eyes, stroking her hair, begging whatever deities listened to grant them more time.

After a moment, her body stilled, and his heart began to race.

'No ...' he started, and then she opened her eyes. He looked at her and then down at her stomach, and there was no evidence that she'd been mortally wounded mere minutes before.

'Severus,' she said, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her. How long they lay there, arms wrapped around each other on the shore, no one knew.

*

Livia Transfigured a blanket and laid it over Severus and Hermione as they slept, and she cast an extra repelling charm for good measure. Best to let them sleep it off.

She twirled the dagger between her fingers, a maniacal grin spreading across her face. She would be losing one of her best employees, of that she was certain, but she'd trapped an immortal.

Seemed like a fair trade.

Six Months Later

He traced his finger along her jaw line, down her skin, between her breasts, whispering sweet nothings into her neck as he did so. He pressed fervent kisses to her shoulder, fingers curling in her hair, delighting in the wonder that was waking up with his wife in his bed.

She awoke with a yawn and stretched her arms over her head, smiling as she saw him watching her.

'Hello, you,' she said, tracing his lips with her finger.

He caught her finger in between his teeth, and she chuckled. 'What shall we do today?'

The hand that lay on her stomach travelled south.

'Aside from that,' she said as he lay down on his side, facing her.

'Perhaps we can swim in the harbour today,' he said, tracing figure eights on her stomach.

'I can't believe we got married here.'

'You suggested it.'

'We're perverse, we are.'

'Damn right,' he said, leaning in to kiss her, and her fingers curled in his hair, and all was well.

A/N: The title is taken from the song "Run to the Water" by Live.

run to the water

and find me there

burnt to the core but not broken

we'll cut through the madness

of these streets below the moon

these streets below the moon