

# All Hallows' Reckoning

*by Proulxes*

Something else from me for Halloween. It's 25 years since Godric's Hollow. Please find herein a bucket load of snarky rows, angst, swearing, and a pissed bonobo. Warning: the end of this is full of angry smut. Toxic lemons. Furious citrus. You get the idea....

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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All Hallows' Reckoning

A/N: Something else from me inspired by the Petulant Poet quiz for Halloween. I own nothing you recognise here. Enormous thanks to Clairvoyant for the super-fast beta job, beawasley2 for cheerleading, and nagandsev for being a brilliant and patient admin! Here below, please find a bucket load of snarky rows, angst, swearing, and a pissed bonobo. Warning: the latter part is full of angry smut. Toxic lemons. Furious citrus. You get the idea....

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"I'm not going."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm *not* going."

"Granger..."

"...*Weasley*. Granger-*Weasley*."

"I could never remember that, even when it *meant* something."

She grunted. "Snide bastard."

"Master."

"Sorry. Master Snide-Bastard."

"Language, apprentice Granger-Weasley."

Hermione swung around from the workbench in the small preparation room and fixed her apprenticeship-master with a stern look. "You are changing the subject."

He shrugged, an extraordinarily eloquent gesture belying the tension in his frame.

He met her steady gaze with a glower, his sallow face drawn and irritable.

"You are going," she repeated firmly, looking him frankly in the eye. He had long-since ceased to intimidate her. "You have nothing to apologise for."

"I'm not going to dignify that ridiculously sentimental statement with an answer," he sneered. "I do not see why I should have to put myself in a situation that I will find both uncomfortable and unnecessary."

Hermione felt her eyes narrow. She stuck her jaw out defiantly. "You should put yourself in that situation because it is high time that you just accept the past and *move on*."

"Are you reading more of those appalling 'self-help' books again, Granger? What is this one called? Inspire Yourself: How to Break Free of Over-Thinking and Reclaim Your Life? Or perhaps Fifty Ways To Not Give A Fuck?"

"Don't be crude," she said primly, crossing her arms in front of her. His eyes darted to the ring finger of her left hand. Too late, she realised that she still had it on.

His mouth twisted cruelly. "Don't you presume to lecture me about 'moving on' while you still can't seem to rid yourself of the Ginger Menace's last physical remains."

She opened her mouth to frame a retort, but before she could speak, he flashed a triumphant smile at her and swept out of the room, slamming the heavy oak door behind him as he left.

Hermione Granger-Weasley growled in frustration, dropping her head to her chest for a few heartbeats, before spinning around again and bracing her fingers wide on the workbench before her.

She knew why he didn't want to go, of course. In the twenty-five years since the events of All Hallows' Eve in 1981, Severus Snape had continued to endure. The annual Halloween feast at Hogwarts was always a difficult time for him. Usually, he had been able to avoid the dinner entirely or sat at the end of the professors' table, waiting for the earliest moment when he could slip away unnoticed.

As this year's feast marked the 25th anniversary of the events in Godric's Hollow – most notably the marking of Harry as the Chosen One and, therefore, the creation of the future vanquisher of the Dark Lord – the Ministry of Magic had chosen to mark the occasion by dispatching Mrs Livinia McClaggen, the new Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, to be the guest of honour at the Halloween feast. The event promised to become a circus of sentimentality and Ministry-inspired political point scoring.

She looked down at her hands, in particular, at the engraved golden band of her wedding ring on her left hand. She frowned. Why hadn't she taken it off yet? Why did she keep insisting on being referred to by her married name? It had been twenty-six days since the letter confirming her divorce had arrived by Ministry owl... a few inches of text on a parchment – the final sum of her relationship with Ron. Seven years of crumpled dreams and dashed expectations, of failed attempts to keep alive something that had been founded in desperate circumstances and destroyed by the mundane reality of post-war life.

The light from the small window above her head shone in an oblique beam onto the workbench, causing the goblin-made ring to glisten accusingly up at her.

She sniffed and frowned, lost in the memory of her failed relationship... of Ron's angry and hurt face, the fierce lash of hurtful words from both of them. For the umpteenth time, she wished that she and Ron could have been like Harry and Ginny. They seemed to have made the transition effortlessly into ordinary married life.

*House.*

*Children.*

*Pets.*

*Ginny (the perfect wizarding wife, according to Ron) obligingly putting her career on hold to have a family with Harry...*

Outside the preparation room, from the adjoining laboratory, she heard Severus angrily sorting through his cauldrons.

The sound of clashing metal brought her back from her reverie.

She took a deep breath. This was her reality now; her career and the future beckoned. *Time to move on, Hermione*, she told herself firmly, and quickly, she tugged the ring off her finger and placed it on the bench beside the Astragalus roots that she had been chopping. She looked at the indentation in the flesh of her now-unadorned ring finger. In the light from the little window, she could see the difference between the normal skin of her hand and the narrow circlet of shiny flesh that the ring had protected. She pursed her lips and frowned, fighting the absurd desire to replace the ring, to cover the strange, pale band.

Now was not the time for regrets. She had pushed for the separation. She had no right to expect Ron not to move on and request a full divorce.

Absently, she rubbed at the soft skin at the base of the finger. She hoped that it would not take too much time for the mark from the wedding ring to fade.

More angry crashing about and cursing from the laboratory distracted her attention again, and she smiled ruefully. He would be in a foul mood all day, she knew. Halloween was always difficult for him.

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How had she ended up in this small room, its walls lined with floor-to-ceiling shelving full of jars and bottles containing precious potions ingredients?

She chopped the Astragalus, ignoring the ring on the work surface beside her as she concentrated on maintaining an even slicing motion at the correct angle. It was the degree of precision in the preparation of materials and ingredients that marked out a master of Potions from a simple graduate. Her hand flowed in a long-practiced and easy rhythm, the silver blade crunching slightly through the fibrous roots. Soon, her mind wandered, lulled by the regular motion of her hand, and she reflected on the events that had led to her current position, apprentice to a master who did not accept apprentices, almost friend to a man who rejected such company with a fierce determination that seemed almost pathological.

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Hermione had known that it would come as no surprise at all to her friends that she was determined to return to Hogwarts to complete her NEWTs and rebuild the castle after the death of Tom Riddle at the end of the Great Wizarding War.

It had been hard work, splitting her time between her studies, spending time with Ronald and his family, and the more physical labour of reconstruction. Hogwarts had been so broken at that time – even the Room of Requirement was battle scarred and filthy. But on the whole, they had been good times. Voldemort was vanquished, the remaining Death Eaters had either fled or were held in Azkaban, and it had felt good to see the old distinctions between Houses broken down (for a time, anyway) as staff and senior students all mucked in together to rebuild the castle.

Slowly, the walls and rooms had been reconstructed, and as the younger students began to return from their temporary homes in the other wizarding schools, the school began to return to normal.

Hearing that Severus Snape had survived Nagini's attack had been such a shock. In one respect, he had been like the castle, battle scarred and broken, and in need of repair and restoration. The damage to his shoulder and neck was considerable, but the antivenin he had ingested before the battle, as well as Minerva's swift actions in the Shrieking Shack after the battle, had kept him alive until the Healers at St Mungo's could work on him. Hermione knew that Harry and Ron both felt as guilty as she did about leaving him in the Shack, but they had all thought that he was certainly dead.

She had visited Severus in hospital with Minerva. He had not been able to speak, as his larynx had been so badly damaged, and he certainly had not appeared to be happy to see either woman, but Hermione had been determined to show him how much she appreciated what he had sacrificed, and Minerva had shared that same earnest wish.

The second time they had tried to visit him, he had point-blank refused to see them.

More time passed, and Hermione and Ron married at the end of the first year of her Potions apprenticeship under Horace Slughorn. Hermione agreed to commute to work from London, by special dispensation from Headmistress McGonagall, to enable Ron to pursue his apprenticeship in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office of the Ministry of Magic.

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Snape's decision to accept the position of Potions professor at Hogwarts when Slughorn retired caused a significant amount of comment in the pages of the Daily Prophet. Despite his pardon from the Wizengamot, Snape refused to collect his Order of Merlin and had become somewhat of a recluse for a while. But Minerva had gone to see him, and shortly afterwards, he had been back at the castle again, inheriting the duties of being Housemaster of Slytherin, as well as those pertaining to the senior Potions professor at Hogwarts, including the irritating but legally binding covenant of apprenticeship with one Hermione Granger-Weasley.

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She finished slicing the Astragalus, carefully tipped the finely chopped plants into a wooden bowl and then reached across the bench for her next ingredient.

A further crash and a savage expletive from next door caused her to smile.

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*The voices had carried easily down the stone staircase as Hermione had ascended to Minerva's office.*

*"I have no time to teach an apprentice at the same time as preventing half the castle from being blown up by the bumbling dunderheads that you laughingly call 'students' during my normal teaching hours!"*

*"It is part of Horace's job, which you have accepted..."*

*"I did not agree to that element of the job! You are very much mistaken if you think I am putting up with an incompetent, irritating, irrational, irksome..."*

*Hermione reached the top of the entrance staircase and walked quietly into the main chamber of the Headmistress' office. Severus had his back to her, and she was pleased to see his long black frock coat and severe stature before her, even though he was engaged in a stream of invective that would have prompted a navy to blush. When she had last seen him, he had been wearing what passed for a hospital gown in St Mungo's. He had looked unsettlingly vulnerable.*

*"Infuriating, inadequate, inept, ineffectual, incapable, impossible..."*

*"Ah! Good morning, Hermione!" Minerva interrupted as she spotted the younger witch approach. "Severus was just expressing his delight at the prospect of continuing your apprenticeship."*

*Abruptly, Snape's jaw snapped shut. His shoulders tensed as if expecting a blow, but then he spun slowly on his heels until he faced her. She was quite surprised to see twin splotches of pink on his sallow cheekbones.*

*His long hair fell forward as he nodded a curt welcome.*

*"Professor Snape," Hermione smiled and nodded her head in welcome but did not offer her hand. Wizarding etiquette demanded that a lower ranked apprentice should not offer her hand to a master in her apprenticed field. There was a brief pause as Snape processed the significance of her deferential body language, staring hard at her, his dark eyes intense and brooding, his face caught in a scowl that was hard to read.*

*"I will not mollycoddle her," he said. Then to her directly, "Do not expect me to be patient or thoughtful or gentle with you, Granger."*

*"I understand, sir," Hermione said. But then, because she had promised herself that she would not allow herself to be intimidated, browbeaten, or bullied ever again, she held up her new wedding ring and added, "and it's Granger-Weasley, sir."*

*She saw a series of expressions cross his face in a moment before an inexpressive mask replaced them.*

*"Granger-Weasley, then," he acknowledged and nodded his assent to the covenant.*

*The Headmistress had given Hermione a brittle but warm smile, acknowledging his agreement. "Well," she had said, "I think that concludes our discussion Severus. Do please keep me informed of Hermione's progress."*

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She finished grinding the Echinacea seeds quickly and added them to the chopped Astragalus root in the wooden bowl.

The light from the small window above her faded to a rich orange glow of sunset. She flicked a quick Tempus Charm into the air with her wand and saw that there was less than an hour before the Halloween feast... plenty of time to get ready in her new dress robes. The dry ingredients could wait until morning to be processed further.

Hermione picked up her wedding ring. *Time to move on.* She reached across the stack of parchment to her left for an envelope and quickly slipped the golden band inside, sealing the packet with a brief whispered Sticking Charm. She held it lightly between her fingers, and then, with a final shake of her head, she stuffed it into a pocket in her robes and left the Potions storeroom. She walked quickly through the deserted laboratory towards her rooms.

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*He had been true to his word. There had been no similarities between Horace's avuncular style of instruction and Snape's.*

*Her first supervision was a disaster. Nervous and distracted by her desire to prove herself anything but an idiot in front of him, she had miss-timed the introduction of the powdered Bicorn horn to her Polyjuice base.*

*She watched in horror and embarrassment as the mixture began to turn a deep shade of unhealthy dark yellow and started to split into its constituent parts while releasing*

*a noxious stench. Biting her lip in frustration, she shot a look at him and picked up her wand, prepared to cast a humiliating Evanesco to get rid of the mess.*

*Suddenly, before she had a chance to weave the spell, he was pushing past her and knocking her wand down. Snape held a small jar of a white powdered substance which he shook into the potion while muttering an incantation and waving his wand in a delicate pattern over the suppurating mass.*

*After a few seconds, Snape grunted in satisfaction and stepped backwards. She peered into the cauldron. The potion had calmed, reformed and begun to lighten in colour. All was as it should have been.*

*"Cornflour," he said shortly. "Worthwhile remembering for some potion bases if your timing fails."*

*And that was all. No withering sarcasm or sneering derision.*

*Hermione had gaped at him.*

*"Well, get on with it, Granger," he had said shortly. "I am expecting a perfect outcome from now on."*

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He was different now. She had begun to understand him better as she had watched him over the following two years as he had struggled to overcome the resentment of his House for some of his actions during the War, the distrust of many of the parents, and the expectations of those who tried to put him on a pedestal as some sort of romantic hero.

She pulled on her new dress robes and picked up her hairbrush, beginning the struggle to tame her unruly hair. Her memory shifting again.

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*"Oh, fuck it."*

*"Language, Professor. Aren't you supposed to be my role model?"*

*"I'm nobody's fucking role model, Granger. Grind more slowly. You are trying to release the essential oils, not smear them into non-existence. Gently."*

*"Granger-Weasley."*

*"Weasely... Granger. Whatever." He had waved his hand airily and looked at her. An almost smile had curved one side of his mouth.*

How long have I been bantering with Professor Snape, she wondered?

*"What is it?" she asked to cover up her flustered reaction.*

*He flourished the envelope and its stiff invitation. "Another summons to the latest Ministry-inspired love fest."*

*"Mmmm." She returned her attention to the Guarana seeds in her mortar.*

*"You got one too? Are you going?" She glanced up at him again.*

*"Ron wants to. I'm not so sure." She was sure; she did not want to go and had said as much to her husband. She paused in her efforts, sniffing the released oils with satisfaction.*

*His eyebrow arched. "Trouble in the Weasley wonderland?"*

*"Shut up," she had mumbled, pounding the seeds once again.*

*And he had.*

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He was waiting for her in the antechamber to the Great Hall, lurking in the shadows at the rear of the room. She had learned to look for him in quiet corners, in darkened places. Old habits made it difficult for him to move away from the periphery at such gatherings.

She made her way through the assembled throng of her colleagues, smiling and exchanging pleasantries with them as she moved towards the rear of the chamber. There was a merry atmosphere in the room, the elf-made wine was flowing freely, and her colleagues were chattering happily to one another, a rising hubbub of noise. A photographer from the Ministry was circulating around the room, taking photographs with an old-fashioned flash camera, which periodically exploded with a quiet "poof!" of magnesium powder and caused delighted cries of surprise. With each flash, Hermione saw Snape recoil further into the shadows.

She almost reached Severus when she heard Minerva call out, "Ahhh, Hermione!" as the Headmistress caught her lightly by the elbow and steered her into their small group. "Undersecretary McClaggen is very keen to meet you personally...."

Mrs McClaggen was a very tall, thin witch with a long face and a superior demeanour. She was holding court with Minerva and the Heads of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, her head thrown back as she brayed her laughter at some remark of Professor Turbot.

Mrs McClaggen swept her attention towards Hermione, peering down her considerable nose at the smaller woman. "Mrs Granger-Weasley! Hogwarts' very own war-heroine!" she exclaimed, thrusting a bony hand towards Hermione, who took it with as much grace as she could muster.

She muttered some pleasantries in return, deliberately trying to avoid looking in Snape's direction.

"It's just Granger now, Undersecretary," she corrected her quietly but firmly. She saw Minerva waggle her eyebrows and mouth the word "divorced" at the Ministry official by way of an explanation, but before the horsey woman could make any stuttered expression of false commiseration, Hermione excused herself gracefully and moved towards her master standing beyond the crowds.

Although he was his usual forbidding self, radiating disdain and disaffection, she walked over to him and made her apprentice bow. He formally nodded back in return and scowled, shifting his weight uncomfortably on the balls of his feet.

"Well done," she said quietly for his ears only. He glowered at her again but nodded curtly.

"I just hope this bloody thing is over and done with quickly," he said, gingerly fingering the high collar of his dress robes at the point where his snakebite scar was rubbing on the starched material.

She lifted up her left hand and wagged her nude fingers at him, and she was pleased to see his expression shift to a look of grudging respect.

"You too, then?" he said casually.

"Mmm-hmmm," she said. "Fancy a drink while we wait for the dinner to begin?"

He brought his other hand out from behind his back. It held a half empty tumbler of golden Firewhisky.

"What a brilliant idea," he said sourly, tossing the contents back in one quick motion.

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The feast was a splendid occasion. The Great Hall had never looked better since the reconstruction. Giant jack-o'-lanterns floated in the air above their heads, lighting the floor below with a golden and orange glow. The false stormy sky in the ceiling boiled and billowed, lit by occasional flashes of lightning.

The Hogwarts ghosts flew and whistled overhead, delighting the children below at their House tables. The children were stuffing themselves silly with pumpkin tarts, caramel flapjacks, toffee apples, roasted sweet corn, trifles, and piles and piles of sweets and cakes. Hermione wondered again how the infirmary was not overwhelmed with a mountain of hyperglycaemia cases after such a display of toxic sugar overkill.

The repast was more restrained on the High Table. But even though the meal was delicious, as the various courses progressed, she grew ever more concerned for the man sitting beside her.

"Bloody Minerva."

"Calm down, Severus." She rarely used his given name, and the strange thrill of doing so now skittered across her flesh.

"She did not say anything about the press being here!" he hissed.

"She probably didn't know," she hissed back.

The camera flash went off again, and Severus blanched. He downed the wine in his goblet and reached for the bottle to refill the glass.

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By the time that Livinia McClaggen rose to speak, Snape's leg was shaking slightly against hers, and his hands were balled into fists on of his thighs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, teachers and students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," Undersecretary McClaggen began, her voice more nasal and harsher than Hermione had remembered it from earlier in the evening.

"We are here to remember a great and wonderful event that occurred in our world twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years ago, the seed of destruction for the Dark Lord was created when Harry Potter escaped death and became the Chosen One...."

Hermione blanched as the strident tones of the Ministry official continued. It was going to be worse than she had thought.... She risked a look at Snape and saw that he had allowed his hair to fall forward across his face as he looked down at the table before him. As she watched him, however, he seemed to brace himself and straighten up, staring out at the assembled staff and students with something like defiance in his body language.

His leg was still trembling.

She reached out and gently placed her left hand over his balled fist. The leg stilled. As McClaggen droned on in a self-satisfied tone about the sacrifice of the Potters and how they had died to save the wizarding world from the tyranny of He Who Must Not Be Named and his Death Eater followers, Hermione felt herself growing increasingly furious. McClaggen did not mention Severus' role in the Potter's deaths, but then, she didn't need to.

Everyone in the Hall clearly knew the story, even the Muggle-born first years, it seemed, and they were staring at Snape with wide-eyed fascination. Some of the younger children were pointing towards him. A low murmur could be heard from the Slytherin table. The camera continued to flash and spurt its burning powder into the air.

The pressure of her hand on his increased as McClaggen made a particularly sanctimonious point about the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few even of the *one* and she hissed in frustration and dismay. It was unbelievably insensitive of her to put him in this position, and she was equally furious with Minerva for allowing the Ministry official to speak in such a blundering and unguarded fashion in the first place.

Severus was still unmoving, but beneath her palm, she could feel the crackle of suppressed magic as he fought to maintain his control. She stared down at her hand over his, at the bare finger without the wedding band curled around his fist, and tried to stay calm herself. If she could feel his upset and anger, then there was a chance that her own fury at the stupid woman was fuelling his distress.

When Liviana McClaggen finished her speech (with the sickening admonition that "love really *can* conquer all") and sat down to thunderous applause from the Hall, Snape slowly rose to his feet.

Immediately, the applause in the room faltered a little as he surveyed the assembled gathering with a venomous sneer before returning again in full force when he swirled his robes about himself and stalked off through the door at the side of the dais, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione sat in shock. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was breathing shallowly and rapidly. What the hell was he going to do now? Should she go after him? What would she say? Should she apologise for pressurising him into attending the wretched event? Should she leave him alone? What if...?

A warm, motherly hand on her bare arm disrupted her increasingly panicked thoughts.

Pomona Sprout had leaned over to Hermione, and she smelled the sweet wash of wine fumes on her face as the elderly witch spoke. "Go after him, dear. Who knows what he is capable of in this temper...?"

Hermione looked at Pomona and saw gentle concern written there, mixed with something else... Pity? Envy?

"I'd go myself, dear," the old witch continued carefully, leaning even further in to whisper, "but I'm as pissed as a bonobo on rancid marulas."

Hermione stared at her and then snorted in relief. Of course... Severus was simply Severus... her sort-of friend and her Potions master. Who else should go? Without another word to her colleagues, who were slowly rising from their chairs, or congratulating the Undersecretary on her marvellous speech, Hermione bolted for the door and followed Snape.

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He wasn't in the Potions classroom, but she heard an echo of his voice as she walked through the adjacent laboratory towards the Potions storeroom.

"... Fucking... fuck... all laughing at me. Fucking cameras. Fucking press. Fucking Minerva and her fucking Ministry witch..."

The words were punctuated by the noise of chopping and the hiss of ingredients hitting the bowl of a cauldron.

She approached the heavy oak door of the storeroom, placed her hand on it and slowly pushed. Her fingers scraped on the rough wood as the door swung open.

He was brewing. A fierce white flame burned underneath the heavy iron cauldron, illuminating the small room with its uncompromising flare. By its side, Snape was viciously slashing ingredients and hurling them into the bowl. She had never seen him so reckless and unguarded. Energy crackled out of him.

"Fucking santimonious fucking politicians. Love fucking conquers all. Like fuck it does!"

She hesitated on the doorstep. "Severus..."

He whirled around so quickly that she took a step away from him in defence.

"Oh, fucking wonderful!" he crowed sarcastically. "Hermione fucking Granger-Weasley and her brilliant fucking ideas! *'Move on!'* she says. *'Face your past and accept it!'* Well, how was that for you, Hermione? I don't know about you, but I am feeling *simply fucking fantastic* right now."

The shards of light from his cauldron's flame had thrown most of his face into shadow. She could see that he had ripped open his dress robes to relieve the pressure on his sore neck. Her eyes were drawn to the angry weal running from beneath his ear, across his throat, and into his open shirt.

She took a breath, reaching for calm. "Severus," she began again, but he cut her off with an angry gesture. She became dimly aware that objects were beginning to swirl around them in the Potions store, born on the magical energy of his mortification and anger.

"Master Snape, apprentice. Know your fucking place!" he hissed, taking a step towards her.

Her eyes flashed. "Well, bloody know *yours*, then! Don't you think that it's about time you stopped behaving like an overwrought adolescent about this? I'm sorry about that stupid woman's speech, but the past is *done!* It's *gone!* Why can't you just let go of this *stupid* guilt that you've carried around inside you for years, all over actions that you took when you were little more than a teenager? And it's apprentice *Granger*, master Snape! I *have* bloody well 'moved on'..."

"It's not fucking possible for me to change. I am *every inch* tainted by my actions and my choices. I can't let it go it *defines* who I fucking *am!*" He thumped his chest with one hand for emphasis.

"That's fucking rubbish!" she shouted back at him. "What about *redemption?* It's as if you've been emotionally stunted by that bloody woman! You would have died for us! For everyone!" She reached forward, placing her hand on his open dress robes. His heart was beating wildly under her fingers. She tried to soothe him. "Harry has forgiven you, Severus," she said softly. "He's even named his new baby after you."

"He did fucking *WHAT?*" Severus roared, rearing back away from her in horrified shock.

She reached forward, grabbing at his wrist to stop him pulling away from her. He gave a furious cry and yanked his arm backwards through her fingers, inadvertently pulling the silver edge of his cutting knife into contact with her palm. She cried out in pain as the wicked little blade sliced into the heel of her thumb.

There was a short, horrible silence.

Everything that had been hurtling about the chamber fell to the floor, and he looked at her, his chest heaving and sweat dripping down his face.

They stood there, staring at each other for a second.

Immediately, he was contrite, rushing her to the sink and running the cut under water before healing it with an incantation, all the time berating her under his breath for her actions.

Hermione's body was still thrumming with the adrenaline of their argument and the injury, and she felt quite lightheaded as she watched her blood swirl around in the basin with the water.

She turned around with her back to the sink, and he was *right there*. Her forehead practically bumped into his nose. She started to stammer something about getting back to the party to find Mrs McClaggen and tell her what she thought of her insensitive actions and the Ministry and her stupid photographer...

When he kissed her.

\*

Shock froze Hermione to the spot as Snape grabbed her shoulders.

His long fingers dug into her as he held her close to him, his nose bumping painfully on her cheekbone and his teeth bruising her upper lip as he crashed their faces together.

Before she had a chance to react, however, he had pulled away from her and began to back up to the workbench beside him. His booted feet crunched on the various bits of broken pots and potions ingredients that were now strewn over the floor in the storeroom. He seemed flustered and overwrought, his face flushed and his eyes wide with the realisation of what had just happened.

"What the *hell* was that?" she demanded angrily. His eyes darted about the room as if he was looking for an escape route. She saw him assemble his shields, pulling the impassive mask over his features as she had seen him do before so many times.

*Not tonight*, she thought. *Not now*.

With something like a snarl in the base of her throat, she flew at him, grabbing his open shirt in one hand and fisting the other in his hair so she could pull him towards her again.

Their second kiss was just as violent as the first, and Hermione gloried in it. It seemed that the entire horrible evening had faded into this single moment as she stood, swaying on uncertain limbs, raking her fingers through his fine hair and feeling the soft skin at the base of his throat with the other. Her tongue parried and thrust with his, exploring his teeth and the roof of his mouth as she searched for different angles and ways to explore him. Her rational mind was beginning to desert her. She was kissing him, kissing him, and it felt nothing like she had experienced before. Her head was buzzing with alcohol and lust, and it had been so long... so long since she had felt this sense of grinding need. She moaned and gripped her hand in his hair more tightly, feeling the skin of his scalp pull under her fingers.

Snape hissed under her assault, and he began to kiss her back with equal ferocity, cupping her head to angle her lips just so, reaching around her to run his hands down her flanks to her bottom, pulling her into him as firmly as possible, her soft belly against his rapidly hardening erection. She moaned in his mouth and tried to pull back his robes even further, ripping a few more buttons off his dress robes to get at more of his torso, scratching her nails across the fine hairs on his skin.

"Is this what you want?" he rasped, breaking lip contact to ask the question. His voice sounded raw and jagged. "A murderer? A fucking turncoat Death Eater? Is *this* your redemption?"

"Oh, God, yes...", she gasped, running her hand over the ridges of his chest, feeling the scars and how thin he still was. His hands flew to her robes, pulling at them until they had pooled at her feet.

She was wearing nothing beneath the robes except for an old set of bra and panties in faded magenta cotton. A crazy image of her grandmother suddenly surfaced in her

head, exhorting her to always wear clean underwear in case a car should hit her on her way home from work. *Aaaargh!* she screamed at herself in her mind. *Get his clothes off! Stop thinking about Nana Price!* She reached forward to grab at the fastenings of his trousers beneath the robe, yanking at the belt buckle roughly to try to dislodge it.

His head got in the way of her scrabbling fingers as he dipped down to kiss, suckle and nip at her breasts, and Hermione forgot that she was wearing some of her oldest underwear under the single-minded determination of his attack. She made a crazed, growling noise as he sucked the tip of her nipple into his mouth and grazed the wet cotton with his teeth.

He felt around to the back of her bra to try to unhook it, tugging and moaning with irritation as the stubborn clasp refused to budge. Frustrated, he tugged the cup of her bra upwards, releasing her breast as she hissed at the scratch of fabric on skin, but the hiss turned to a whimper of pleasure as his mouth suckled and nipped at the released nipple.

"Off... off...", she moaned, pushing him away and reaching behind her back to flick the clasp open. She sighed with relief as the scrap of red fabric fell down her arms and onto the floor, mingling with the other clothes there, a scrap of red against the black of her robes. He stopped still for a moment, staring at her breasts, his narrow face shiny with sweat, his hair greasy and lank, his cheeks flushed and mouth slightly open, and she thought for a moment that he was the sexiest thing she had ever seen in her life.

His eyes flicked upward to meet hers, and she was pulling at his ears to get him to kiss her mouth again so she could get close enough to push his robes off his shoulders and tug his shirt out from his trousers. She heard him chuckle, a sound that seemed to turn most of her insides into some form of liquid desire. He moved quickly to shrug out of his shirt and stood defiantly before her, his chest rising and falling as he sucked air into his lungs, the front of his woollen trouser straining under his raging erection.

The flames from the cauldron lit his body in harsh lines and jagged curves. She could trace the lines of his scars, the angry ridges rubbed sore by his dress robes around his neck, the telltale signs of the Cruciatus Curse on his upper chest and shoulders, older ones from other spells or implements across his ribs and belly that had not been healed properly and so were drawn and furrowed in his skin. His nipples were tightly puckered, and gooseflesh had risen around them. A light smattering of black and grey hairs on his chest trailed down his body towards his belt.

"Come *here*...", she moaned, reaching out for him again, her skin crying out for contact and the satiation of her desire. But he deflected her hand and pulled her towards him again, flesh on flesh for the first time. They both cried out as her aroused nipples scraped on his sensitised chest, and she kissed him again, running her hands once more through his fine, lank hair, around the back of his neck, across his shoulders.

"Spread your legs, Granger," he grunted against her lips, his hand wandering from her ribs, across her belly, and down to the waistband of her knickers. The other hand made its way again to the back of her head, tangling in her pinned hair, snagging in it and causing her to wince as the charms keeping her hairdo in place began to fail under his assault. In turn, her nimble fingers had finally found the clasps of his trousers and were unlocking them, impatiently reaching lower to free his cock from the confines of the severe black cloth.

"I will if you will," she growled in reply, burrowing her hand inside his underwear.

His fingers plunged into her pants at the same time as she grasped the thick length of his penis, and they both cried out with the shock of the contact.

"Ohhhh... fuuuck...", he swore, his eyes screwed shut as she began to move up and down over his rigid shaft.

She staggered backwards as he pushed his hand into her knickers, his fingers searching. When he found her clitoris she squealed, her hand convulsing on his cock. Her back struck the shelves behind her with such force that a ceramic jar was dislodged and smashed to the floor, its contents scattering on the flagstones.

"What was that?" she gasped. He broke away for a moment to dart a glance at the floor, but almost immediately returned to laving the sin on her neck.

"You owe me a fresh jar of dried Boomslang skin," he muttered, pulling her away from the damaged shelving with one hand and using his body to pivot her around with her back to the sink.

She lost contact with his cock as he dipped away from her and turned his hand in her knickers. The elastic was tight and he muttered a curse, grabbing her pants and quickly hiking them halfway down her thighs. She leaned back against the sink and stared at him with heavy-lidded eyes, breathing heavily, intoxicated by the earthy smell of sex and her heightened arousal.

"Oh, fuck, Granger. That looks..." He made a strangled noise in his throat as he stared at the rope of material straining against her thighs. Frantic hands pulled his trousers down his legs, and he was on her again, fingering her clit, rubbing in circles until she was almost unable to stay standing with the pleasure of it. He had begun to thrust shallowly with his hips, the blunt end of his cock dipping into her belly as his hand moved. She tried to catch hold of him again, but he batted his hand away and dipped down to taste her nipples again as his clever fingers continued their work.

She began to shake as he turned his hand around and inserted one, then two fingers up inside her, rubbing at her clit with his roughened thumb as he pushed in and out.

"Ohhhh," she moaned, her hands fluttering lightly on the back of his head as he feasted at her breast. His fingers rubbed more insistently, and she felt the beginning of her orgasm take her, cramping her lower body with its rush of pleasure. When she came, she threw her head back and let out a high-pitched wail as her body convulsed. *Nothing could feel this good... nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing...*

She began to lose her footing, but before she could slip to the floor, he had grabbed her roughly and spun her around so that she was braced half over the sink. She could feel the heat from the bubbling cauldron on her right arm, and she glanced a look towards it. She gasped as she saw herself reflected in its silver walls, arms braced out in front of her, breasts dangling below. She saw him behind her, his black hair swinging forward over his face as he clutched her left hip in his hand.

"Yessss, witch," Snape hissed, "Look at yourself.... Splayed out and ready for me. You are so..." She felt the weeping head of his cock bump into her arse, rubbing itself slowly up and down her crack, seeking entrance. She moaned again as he tried to nudge her legs even further apart, and her rolled-up pants dug even more painfully into her legs. Not satisfied, Snape let out an expletive and grabbed the silver-bladed knife from beside her. Her breath caught in her throat as her lust-addled brain wondered what the fuck he was intending to do with it, then released in a whoosh as he cut her leg free, dropped the knife to the floor and grasped her to him again.

Her legs were free to spread more widely, and once more, she felt his cock searching her out, looking for entrance. She thought that she would run mad with the anticipation of it as he rubbed the tip of his cock against her sensitised clitoris. She jumped at the contact and felt his chest rumble against her back at her reaction.

"Do it... do it...!" she moaned, arching her back to try and help him.

"Hold... *fucking*... *still* then!" he countered, gripping her hip even more tightly as he found his mark and slid slowly home.

The sensation was exquisite. For a moment, Snape folded himself around her and was still, his cock throbbing inside her.

"Oh, Christ, Granger, you're so fucking tight," he growled against her shoulder.

She mewled in response and wiggled under his weight, pushing backwards and giving him an experimental squeeze.

"Stop doing that, or this will be over before it begins!" he muttered but stood up and began thrusting shallowly, trying to establish a rhythm that suited them both. It was awkward and erratic, but soon, his breath began to come in gasps on her back as he hunched his body and drove into her.

One particularly powerful thrust caused her hipbone to bump painfully into the ceramic edge of the sink, and she yelped in pain. The silver cauldron rocked on its base over

the little bright flame.

Immediately, he froze, running his hand gently over the bruise. He pulled out of her, and she cried out again at that, but he spun her around and kissed her clumsily, pulling her down onto the robes that were spread out beneath them on the flagstone floor.

She reached out and took hold of him, her hand sliding over the slick length as he half-knelt, half-fell over her. His elbows thunked down on either side of her shoulders, and as she guided him back inside her, his eyes closed, and he made a sound in his throat like a whine.

"Better?" she whispered as his hips began moving again as if by their own volition. Severus nodded, his body shaking as he plunged into her. She started to feel her orgasm begin and slipped her hand in between them so that she could find her clitoris. He opened his eyes and stared at her as she bit her lip and met each thrust with her own, and then he raised himself onto his hands and drove on, his head down and his hips juddering erratically as his climax neared.

She heard him shout something when he came, but she was too distracted by her second powerful orgasm to hear clearly what he said.

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When she came back to herself, he had rolled slightly to one side so that he was no longer crushing her, although they were still entangled together, sprawled among their discarded clothes. He had propped himself up on one elbow and was gazing intently at her with a strangely guarded expression.

She lifted up a hand that felt as if it weighed a hundredweight and carefully stroked some of his hair back away from his face. She was relieved when she saw his face soften slightly under her touch.

"That was....," she began.

"Astonishing?" he supplied softly, stroking his free hand lightly from her neck, along her collarbone, and over her breast. She tensed as his fingers teased her nipple. Not to be outdone, she ran her fingers lightly over the cooling skin of his arm and was pleased to see him shiver in response.

"Wonderful," she sighed happily. Then she looked at him. "And long overdue, I think," she added, smiling gently at him and stroking his arm again. He smiled back, tentatively at first and then with growing confidence. She shifted slightly on her makeshift bedding and heard the crunch of a broken pot beneath her back.

"Was that... redemption or a reckoning?" she asked, remembering something she had shouted at him earlier.

Now his smile turned into a sinful grin, and she felt her chest tighten and her breath catch at his decadent expression.

"I think, you beautiful, glorious, impossible woman," he said, leaning over to kiss her once more. "That this was... a reckoning." He kissed her languidly again, running his tongue delicately over her lower lip until she shivered beneath him.

"Redemption may follow later," he added, then looked about them at the damaged shelving and the shattered mess in the Potions store. His smile took on a sardonic twist as he took in the devastation around them. "After we have cleaned up this mess and found our way to a more comfortable sleeping surface, that is."

She nodded but then placed her hand on his chest, reclaiming his full attention.

"It's a start," she said.

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