

Being Muggle-born

by Minerva

In a radio-interview Hermione Granger talks about one bitter regret. In Italy a man preparing dough for his gnocchi listens by chance.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 13

In a radio-interview Hermione Granger talks about one bitter regret. In Italy a man preparing dough for his gnocchi listens by chance.

The world of Harry Potter belongs to JKR. I do not make money from this. I would like to thank all of you who read and reviewed Bad Hair Day; your encouragement made me daring enough for a longer story! A chocolate-cake and home-made gnocchi for my wonderful beta, Dreamy_Dragon, without whom my stories would never be fit for posting. The story is finished and will be posted at weekly intervals.

Prologue

Opicina, near Trieste, May 2012

The man fiddled with the longwave button of his wizarding radio transmitter. He never indulged in listening during his brewing, but now he was in the kitchen about to prepare his dinner. His favourite program would start in twenty minutes, but by then his hands would be covered in dough for the gnocchi he was making tonight – and to his endless irritation his transmitter refused to react to wandless magic.

"... and the Hogwarts Board of Governors have finally agreed to a comprehensive course of wizarding studies for Muggle-born or Muggle-raised wizarding children. Its curriculum will cover almost everything we talked about earlier. This, together with the amendments in the International Statute of Secrecy that allow Muggle parents an earlier knowledge of magic, will go a long way towards a smoother integration of Muggle-borns into wizarding society."

Mashing the still warm potatoes, he tried to place the voice. He was sure he knew the woman who was speaking, but couldn't put a face to it.

"Thank you very much, Ms. Granger, for an enlightening hour of discussion. Allow me one last question."

Ha! Granger. So she hadn't married the youngest Weasley after all. But then, she might have kept her name. No wonder he hadn't recognised her; fourteen years ago when she had been speaking to him, her voice had either sounded flat with suppressed emotion or rather shrill. He just heard the interviewer's final question.

"Was there ever a situation – besides the obvious ones when you encountered prejudices against Muggle-borns – that would have turned out differently had you been raised by wizards?"

There was silence – and then a small sigh. One could almost hear the cogs in her mind turning. From the overall relaxed tone of the interview, he assumed that she trusted the interviewer but now wondered whether to answer this question honestly.

He was hooked.

"Well, yes, there is."

Another pause.

"Ms. Granger, you need not answer. If however—"

"I know, and I will tell you. He deserves it. At the night of the Final Battle Harry, Ronald and I were hidden in the Shrieking Shack when Voldemort set his snake Nagini loose on Severus Snape ... There was so much blood ... a Muggle would have been dead for sure, but a Wizard might have had a chance if he'd been treated immediately ... but at that moment I had forgotten everything I knew about Healing. I was absolutely sure that he was beyond help. Over the last thirteen years I have been convinced that we could have saved Headmaster Snape if only I had kept a clear mind."

Cooking forgotten, he sat stunned. There was no mistaking the emotion in her voice, the real sorrow. And to call him Headmaster...

"You were still almost a child then, fighting a war, forced into impossible situations constantly. Surely, you must realise that. No one could blame you for not trying to help Snape in that situation."

"Nevertheless, I think had I not been Muggle-born, I would have acted differently; I would have known that a wizard could survive even such a horrendous injury."

Her composure had apparently returned, but there was an underlying tremor still audible.

The host said his farewell, but Snape was no longer listening. Chopping parsley needed no attention, but the habit of reining in his thoughts and emotions he'd practised for decades made him focus on his gnocchi again.

After he had finished eating his dinner and poured the second glass of wine, he analysed what he'd learned, and why it was affecting him more than he would have thought.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 13

In a radio-interview Hermione Granger talks about one bitter regret. In Italy a man preparing dough for his gnocchi listens by chance.

Severus Snape was a creature of habit. After being on the edge for so long – abusive family life, exploding cauldrons, two wars, one very temperamental Dark Lord – he treasured his orderly new life: working in his extensive garden, brewing, cooking, sometimes meeting the select few people he called friends.

While he had mulled Ms Granger's revelations over for a while, he had no intention of doing anything about it. The former Gryffindor had the tenacity of a Hufflepuff if provoked; if he contacted her, his cover might get blown.

Blame it on St. Laurentius. Several weeks after listening to the interview with Granger, Severus Snape did some accounting after dinner until the night sky was inky dark. Then, he took a half finished bottle of vitovska, the local wine, with him and a blanket and settled down comfortably some yards uphill from his cottage.

He filled his glass and watched the sky. Falling stars were visible frequently. In Italy this phenomenon occurring round the 10th of August was called *Lacrime di San Lorenzo* – Tears of St. Lawrence. The unfortunate martyr had been roasted to death by the Romans for his refusal to disavow his faith. The 10th of August was his name day. The scientist in Snape of course knew about the Perseides and meteor showers, and not even alone out here, two miles from the next dwelling would he be caught wishing on a star, but nevertheless watching the spectacular phenomenon had become some sort of yearly ritual for him.

When he was still teaching at Hogwarts, the date had also marked the end of his holiday.

After midnight, he made his way back into his home. He rinsed his glass and – since he wasn't sleepy at all – booted his laptop. On a whim, he typed "Hermione Granger" into the search engine. Over the past weeks, Snape hadn't dwelled a lot on what his former student had said in that interview. He had been pleased that someone remembered him without rancour. Knowing about the devastating effects of festering guilt, he had briefly contemplated contacting Granger and putting her at ease. After further consideration he judged her state as not serious enough for risking his cherished obscurity.

It was unlikely that Hermione Granger suffered from soul-crashing despair because of her inactivity at his "death" fifteen years earlier. The occasional twang of guilt was probably more like it.

Snape hadn't really expected that many results. Granger had studied at Balliol College in Oxford, was still publishing about basic research in mathematics. And there was her personal homepage, simple and functional, where she offered her services as a free science consultant, plus her e-mail address.

Maybe Severus Snape would have written an e-mail to Ms Granger. Eventually. But without finishing off the bottle of wine while watching St. Laurent's tears, he would not have sent it.

11-08-2012 01:37

Subject: Being Muggle-born

Ms Granger,

At the end of an interview two weeks ago you blamed your Muggle-upbringing on not having tried to save Severus Snape after Voldemort's snake bit him.

I grow rare herbs and prepare related potions ingredients near Opicina, Italy. Severus Snape usually spent a part of his holidays in the area. I had come to know him quite well.

Of course he didn't talk about particulars of the war, but I can state with absolute conviction that he would not have blamed you for anything that you, a child caught in a war, may have done or not done in a terrible situation. He truly loathed the fact that this war was fought by children - be it a boy and his friends or the little Slytherins of his house, torn between expectations of their families and their own convictions.

Regards,

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 13

You've got mail!

Author's Note: I wanted to thank you all for the lovely responses to my new story. Special thanks go to my wonderful beta Dreamy_Dragon! Illy is a brand of coffee.

Chapter 2

The next day, Snape tried to blink away the slight fuzziness in his head that his overindulgence had brought on and went about his usual morning business. Only over a second cup of coffee – Illy of course, being near Trieste – did it dawn on him that he might have done something overzealous the previous night.

He fired up his laptop; there it was. The blinking icon of his e-mails reminded him of an eleven-year-old, jumping up and down in her seat with her hand high up in the air.

2012-11-08 05:30

Subject: Re: Being Muggleborn

Dear Mr Princip,

I appreciate it very much that you took the time to write to me. I know that none of us should have been anywhere near the war, and from a vantage point of fifteen years, I do not blame my nineteen-year-old self. Only sometimes, I wish I would have done something.

Though Headmaster Snape would be the first to point out that life is hardly fair, it goes against my sense of right and wrong that he should not have had a chance at a life not dictated by the demands of others.

Thank you again for your kindness.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

Granger had sent the mail at 5:30 GMT.

Snape rubbed his tired face and checked what he had written. At least, he hadn't given away too much. Neither had he lied outright either, even if he'd left out some crucial facts.

He *had* come to know Severus Snape quite well.

After the pre-ingested anti-venin had worked, and he had awoken on the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, he had closed his wound with Phoenix tears, listened briefly to the cries of victory and then had used his emergency Portkey to a coven on the Outer Hebrides that had no contact with the rest of the Wizarding World. Its founder was a third cousin of the Prince line whom he'd met after his mother's death during his fifth year at Hogwarts.

Two years after his mother's funeral, Sian Prince had written a letter with an enclosed Portkey. She had told him of her plans for the coven – a safe haven for witches and those in need.

Snape had spent three months there getting his strength back; he really had been near death due to his blood loss when the Portkey had dumped him in the coven at Sian's feet.

His physical healing had progressed satisfactorily, but his magic had remained weak for nearly a year. Snape had travelled to the US by plane, where he had moved around and spent a lot of time in Muggle libraries, reading and learning his way around modern Muggle technology, computers namely. He had known that he would have to deal with his emotional and psychological issues eventually and finally had found a therapist he hadn't wanted to hex on sight (if he could have done any hexing, that is) in Vienna.

Though a Muggle, she knew enough about spiritual healing to listen to his story without prejudice. Snape had reasoned that – as he lived as a Muggle and his magic was still near Squib levels – he needn't bother with the Statute of Secrecy. His therapist, a small, round woman near seventy with a kind face and an owlish blink, had taken everything in stride and made him tackle his issues unconnected with magic – his upbringing, the bullying, his devotion to Lily Potter and his guilt about hers and Dumbledore's death.

It hadn't been an easy time, but after eight months of at least twice weekly sessions, Severus began to feel a change. His nightmares lessened; his thoughts did not return to the war for a whole day. He started to appreciate the simple things around him: the bustle and the smells of a market, good food, the smile of a woman.

And the level of his magic picked up again, finally. During this time, he had travelled by train to Trieste frequently at the weekends to refurbish his cottage and to prepare for eventually living there. He had bought it very cheaply in the late Eighties and spent part of his holidays there. Now, he got to know his neighbours, the village of Opicina and started on the layout of his garden.

Snape was never sure what his therapist really thought about him, but the look on her face when he had decided to show her some basic spells and transfigurations after regaining his magic fully was priceless.

She hadn't closed her mouth for a while and then hugged him, quickly withdrawing again. "I am sorry, that was unprofessional of me. While I am still convinced that it doesn't really matter for the things we worked on, I am glad that the magicians you talked about are real."

"Wizards – we are called wizards or witches."

"Quite, quite."

They had agreed to continue twice a month. Snape was now Apparating into her cloakroom, the distance being less than the one between Hogwarts and London.

While still in the US, Severus had begun using a special shampoo that lightened the colour of his hair to chestnut, and he had exposed his skin to the sun. His posture was now more relaxed, his walk had lost its stalking appearance, and after a haircut, he was quite sure that no one would recognise him at first sight. He might not be able to fool some of his former colleagues or the elder Malfoys, but he would be safe from pupils who had never seen him without his teaching-persona and garb.

After acquiring a new wand in Vienna – there was a shop behind a violin-maker's shop in the Musikverein building – he consulted a Healer about his nose. It had been broken more times than he cared to remember and often enough not been set properly. The magical surgery left him without a trace of these old injuries, and while his nose was still larger than average, one could call it aquiline now (if one squinted).

Trieste had only a small magical community, but his cottage was remote enough that Xerxes, his new owl, attracted no unwanted attention. Severus had not lied in his mail to Ms Granger, he did grow herbs and prepared ingredients, but his main source of income was his Potions business. He had started to build Zelko Princip's reputation as a brewer after Voldemort's return and now lived comfortably, selling complicated, rare or customized brews.

Sometimes, he thought about informing the Malfoys about his survival. He missed his talks with Lucius, Narcissa's gentle caring, and he really wanted to know more about the man Draco had become. More than the society pages of the odd Daily Prophet – if he could get his hands on one – would tell him. He decided against giving in to the temptation, but it became harder every time the urge hit him.

Snape had found acquaintances and even a friend in a wizard who ran an apothecary in Venice. He also had had a few lovers during the last decade, mostly experienced and mature women who did not look for more in a relationship than he did – stimulating conversation over a pleasant dinner, unhurried sex afterwards, sometimes breakfast together the next morning in one of the cafés of Trieste.

Life went on, and Severus was busy harvesting the last of his herbs when another e-mail from Ms Granger arrived.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 13

Mails and measures, Arithmancy and accounts ...

23-09-2012 10:23

Subject: *Saxifraga crustata*

Dear Mr Princip,

Forgive me for writing to you again. I do not mean to be presumptuous, but I am currently employed to do Arithmantic calculations for a new line of potions using saxifrages. There are no references I could find about their Arithmantic properties. As you have published extensively about their use in potions in *Bimet malore*, I wondered if you could point me towards the right source or even tell me what you know.

Best wishes,

Hermione Granger

He could. And he was hooked. *Bimet malore*, which translated as "Alpine Plants" was a really small, obscure Herbology publication—in Albanian, no less. It seemed Ganger's research habits had not changed if she found something like that.

As far as Severus knew—and he probably was the Potions master who knew most about *saxifragae crustatae*—there was nothing published about their Arithmantic properties.

29-09-2012 20:14

Subject: Re: Saxifrages

Ms Granger,

To my knowledge there has not been any research concerning Arithmantic properties of *saxifragae crustatae* due to their limited use in potions. I may be able to give you ballpark figures based on comparable reactions to other ingredients, though.

Would you mind telling me which line of potions you had in mind?

Regards,

Zelko Princip

03-10-2012 9:25

Subject: Re: Re: Saxifrages

Dear Mr Princip,

I am very sorry to say that I haven't got clearance to talk about the new line of potions the firm I am working for is planning. However, I could tell you if you are willing to sign a confidentiality agreement. Would an owl reach you?

Best wishes,

Hermione Granger

03-10-2012 21:13

Subject: Owls and confidence

Ms Granger,

The knowledge is not of great importance to me right now. I trust you will tell a fellow academic when you're able to. An owl would indeed reach me.

As to the Arithmantic properties of *saxifraga crustata*: you will, of course, have to run some tests, but based on my own experiments, you might want to narrow down your test ranges as follows:

With acids: $x = f(y) \cdot 10^{-5}$ to 10^{-13}

With oxygen: $x = f(y) \cdot 10^7$ to 10^9

With bases: $x = f(y) \cdot 10^{-17}$ to 10^{-21}

Best wishes,

Zelko Princip

21-10-2012 12:55

Subject: Accounts and Arithmancy

Dear Mr Princip,

Thank you ever so much. Your calculations have been a tremendous help and saved the firm a rather hefty sum.

Based on this, they are offering a fee of 948 Galleons 8 Sickles 19 Knuts or 5,500 Euros, payable through either wizarding or Muggle means. I can forward your account details or you can send them by owl to

Draconian Measures Ltd, 23 b Diagon Alley, London

Best wishes,

Hermione Granger

21-10-2012 22:46

Re: Subject: Accounts and Arithmancy

Dear Ms Granger,

It is a pleasure doing business with you. I may well start planning my new greenhouse now instead of next year. Is Draconian Measures by any chance connected to Draco Malfoy?

Best wishes,

ZP

22-10-2012 09:13

Subject: Draco Malfoy

Dear Mr Princip,

Draco Malfoy does indeed own Draconian Measures.

He has an uncanny talent for doing business. He is unfailingly producing exactly what customers want, which has shaken my longstanding conviction that Divination is a load of—er, not academically sound.

The research department is led by Natali Comanec, a Potions prodigy from Durmstrang; you might have heard of her. She can be quite high-strung at times, but my friends tell me so can I.

By the way, some notebooks of Headmaster Snape and a picture of him being presented with a trophy for the invention of several healing potions at the age of sixteen are displayed prominently in the conference room at DM.

Have fun with your new greenhouse.

Best wishes,

HG

To his utter embarrassment, Severus felt his eyes grow moist. His therapist would be proud of him ...

He remembered holding Draco—a remarkably ugly infant—for the first time. He had felt awkward and unsure, but the little boy didn't seem to mind and had opened his clear, blue eyes, shining with trust and unconditional love. Life had been full of promises then.

Severus turned his thoughts back to the astonishing fact that Draco and Granger seemed to not only have buried their animosity enough to work together but also to be on friendly terms if he read the tone of her mail correctly. Wonders never ceased.

But then, they weren't obnoxious teenagers any more.

He searched the web for some pictures. He found one of Granger when her Oxford Maths team had won an award. Three male students grinned proudly; Granger scowled in the background. The picture was seven years old and did not help him to construct an image of the woman he was exchanging e-mails with. It did, however, erase the image of her as a student.

AN: The Albanian Herbology publication got its title from an internet dictionary; please notify me of glaring mistakes ... Besides, esteemed readers knowledgeable in Potions or chemistry will cringe, sorry. The Durmstrang potioneer is a nod to Nadia Comaneci, the Romanian gymnastics idol of my childhood.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 13

More mails go back and forth and Halloween approaches.

Chapter 4

25-10-2012 21:22

Subject: Ms Comanec

Dear Ms Granger,

I have corresponded with Ms Comanec on a few occasions and have followed her work. She is a truly gifted Potions mistress, with a deep passion for her art and the rare ability to think outside the box. Mr Malfoy can congratulate himself on securing her as head of the research department at DM.

I can understand her very well. When I am in the middle of a research project I tend to become grumpy, not only when disturbed but also when forced to interact with other people.

I will be away from an internet connection for the next ten days.

Regards,

ZP

He had surprised himself there. Why would he care whether Granger waited for a reply or not? Why had he offered snippets of his private life?

Before Halloween, he usually locked his cottage from the inside and got drunk. He had talked about Lily's death extensively with his therapist, but that particular date still shook his equanimity badly.

This year, he had toyed with the idea of spending the holiday in Vienna, vaguely considering not getting drunk at all. He had finally accepted that her and James' deaths weren't his fault. From a distance, his obsession with Lily didn't look good, neither did Dumbledore's feeding of said obsession for his own purposes. Snape grew more determined than ever to spend this All Hallows Eve differently.

25-10-2012 23:09

Subject: Tempers and Time-outs

Dear Mr Princip,

I fully understand Ms Comanec (and you). In no way did I mean to disparage Ms Comanec. I just needed to vent a little after spending a day with her in the lab.

To my everlasting shame, my last relationship ended when I hexed my partner because he disturbed me during a complex and crucial calculation. There were extenuating circumstances, but still ...

I used to spend Halloween at a friend's (it is the anniversary of his parents' death). Now he is married with two little sons. The youngest—Albus Severus—was born on the 31st of October, so this time of year has a different connotation for him now.

You probably know about the Houses at Hogwarts from Headmaster Snape. My friend was in Gryffindor, just like me, which is notorious for not thinking things through (a trait sometimes confused with courage). I would shake in my boots with fear of being hexed from beyond the veil for naming a child thus. (Originally, the Sorting Hat wanted to put me into Ravenclaw).

The weather forecast for your part of Europe is favourable; therefore, I will imagine you walking through the karst mountains under an impossibly clear Autumn sky, harvesting saxifragas while I curl up with a book in rainy London.

Have a good time!

HG

Severus shook his head about Potter. Albus Severus. Poor boy.

Granger's image of a hiking trip, however, seemed rather tempting. He made an appointment with his therapist for the 31st and booked a room in the small B&B he had used during the time he still had to rely on trains for transport for the first days of November.

Then, he packed and shrank everything he needed for the trip. He planned to hike up the Soca Valley and harvest whatever he found there. To avoid burdening himself with samples and vials, he prepared self-sealing containers in his lab and took a box with him that transported everything he put in it directly to his lab. It was a tricky bit of magic he had developed while still a Potions apprentice, and he was quite proud of it.

The weather forecast indeed came true. Severus spent the late Autumn days hiking and collecting, often enough left breathless by the beauty of the Soca River and the already snow-capped mountains on the horizon. He spent the night in simple lodges after a hearty meal in the company of fellow hikers. And he slept like a log.

On the 30th of October he reached Kamno where a small farmers market was in progress. He bought bacon, bread and honey and was looking for a quiet corner to shrink his purchases when a stall selling local headscarves caught his eye. They were made of wool, black with floral motifs in muted colours. On a whim he bought one.

The weather in Vienna was not as nice as in Slovenia, but Severus enjoyed his stay nevertheless. His therapy session on Halloween was exhausting, but reinforced a sense of closure. After visiting Vienna's central cemetery in the mist early on 1 November, he planned his evening in the usual way: He closed his eyes and tapped his finger randomly on the theatre listings. After an early dinner at Neni's on the Naschmarkt, this landed him with Gluck's *Telemacho* in the Theater an der Wien, a theatre that had seen the premiere of Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

Severus was fairly well read in Muggle literature, but he knew next to nothing about classical music. His mother had been an avid Elvis fan, and he had inherited a

surprisingly large record collection of early British blues, rock and folk from his father, but that was the extent of his contact with music.

Regulus Black had tried to get him interested in opera, even claiming that Mozart had to have been a wizard, but Severus had known that what was considered mildly eccentric in the scion of one of the eldest Pure-blood families would do nothing to enhance the standing of a poor half-blood from a working-class background in Slytherin.

So now, he was content to let the music wash over him and to soak up the atmosphere.

Back in Opicina he checked his email. Unsurprisingly, there was none from Granger.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 13

More mails, some gardening and old friends ...

Chapter 5

04-11-2012 08:34

Subject: Holidays

Dear Ms Granger,

My trip has been successful, weather- and ingredients-wise. I came across something that might benefit you in London; therefore, please send me your Muggle address as my little owl is far too inexperienced for a cross-continental flight.

Regards,

ZP

05-11-2012 10:23

Subject: Address

Dear Mr Princip,

I live at 21 Beresford Lane, London, N8 0AL, United Kingdom.

Did you live in Britain at some time in your life?

Regards,

HG

Damn! One little word – cross-continental – and she had picked up on it. For Brits there was Great Britain and there was “the continent”, aka the rest of Europe.

He really had to be more careful. Best to send her the headscarf now instead of closer to Christmas. It might throw her off his scent.

15-11-2012 06:12

Subject: Scarf

Dear Mr Princip,

Thank you very much for that lovely headscarf; it complements my new winter cloak perfectly.

I am grateful that you haven't ever asked about the war or about my friends, Harry in particular; therefore, please be assured that I won't pry into anything you choose not to reveal.

I have one personal question, however – how old are you? You can't be too close to my own age if you have known Headmaster Snape professionally, but considering your use of a computer, I do not picture you as ancient either. But maybe that's my prejudice concerning wizards and Muggle technology talking ...

I would be honoured if you called me by my given name.

Regards,

Hermione

15-11-2012 22:01

Subject: Ancient

Dear Hermione,

As the Bora is neither deterred by double-glazed windows nor by warming and anti-draught charms I – or at least my joints – feel ancient, but in truth I am a sprightly 52.

The harvest is in, but orders for Yule haven't started to arrive yet; therefore, I am catching up on my reading. Call me Zelko.

Regards,

Z

He had been Zelko Princip for more than fifteen years. Yet in this instance, he wished to sign with his real name. Severus chose not to examine that feeling too closely.

Catching up with old *Daily Prophets*, he found some mildly interesting facts in the gossip column. It seemed that the Potters were expecting their third child, and Astoria Malfoy, née Greengrass, was caught in a picture wearing uncharacteristically loose robes. The reporter was speculating on a brother or sister for little Scorpius. The elder Malfoys were reportedly taking a holiday in a new Wizarding resort in Miramare. Startled, Severus checked the date of the rag. It was ten days old. Time for a little spying.

Snape did not have to dig deep. Lucius and Narcissa had indeed arrived in Miramare and were still there, as reported by the *Triestinian Troll*, the local Wizarding newspaper (which was even worse than its name suggested).

Security in Miramare's wizarding spa was tight, but no deterrent for an ex-Death Eater and spy. Severus simply watched the gardeners arriving for the first shift in the early morning gloom, transfigured his robes to match their uniforms, applied the merest hint of a Do-not-notice-me-charm on himself and wandered in with the others.

He knew the Malfoys to be late risers; therefore, he busied himself with a rake, a wheelbarrow and fallen leaves in the remotest corner of the vast pleasure gardens. When he went to empty his wheelbarrow, he took different routes through the area and acquainted himself with its layout. By eleven, he had stored away his tools and waited patiently – and Disillusioned – behind some bushes in the part of the garden Narcissa would most likely favour.

After thirty minutes, his plan paid off. Narcissa came into view amidst the white parasol tops, while Lucius could be seen talking to another guest some hundred yards behind.

Severus breathed deeply, took off his Disillusionment charm and ambled closer from the other direction, body language as non-threatening as possible. When he was close enough, he said, "I like this part of the garden most. It is very peaceful in its simplicity, don't you think?"

After his first words, she tensed, looked up and gasped. Severus was by her side immediately, making a move to take her elbow. Mrs Malfoy took a step back and squinted up at his face, backlit against the sun.

Up this close, Severus could detect the signs that she was nearly sixty, but she still looked much better than when he had seen her the last time in the company of her deranged sister.

"No, no, I am all right."

Severus took a gamble. "Narcissa, why don't we sit down?"

She breathed in his scent – the one thing neither charms nor potions could change – and started to tremble. He quickly led her to a nearby bench.

"Severus, is that really you?"

"Yes, Narcissa. Do you remember the little Duplo train I gave Draco for his third birthday? We had to hide it from Lucius."

Narcissa Malfoy touched his face while tears formed in her eyes. She peppered his forehead and cheeks with salty kisses before she started to sob uncontrollably against his shoulder. Severus was unexpectedly close to tears himself and drew Narcissa deeper in the comfort of his arms.

"Unhand my wife at once!"

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 13

A tense meeting ...

Chapter 6

Lucius Malfoy might have sounded like a character from a Mills and Boon novel, but he looked every bit the dangerous Death Eater – wand drawn, eyes cold, spittle flying from his mouth. Severus slowly opened his arms, hands stretched out, and turned his head to fully face his old friend.

"Hello, Lucius."

Malfoy's sharp intake of breath did not influence the steadiness of his wand-arm. "Prove that you're really Severus Snape!"

Narcissa had moved out of Severus' embrace, but choose to stand between the two wizards, not quite in the line of fire.

"When I brought you home after your stag night, you told me about a crush you had in your second year. The girl in question was in her seventh year at Hogwarts, already engaged to her future husband. I do not think you told anybody else about this, did you?"

"Someone might have overheard us."

"I was trying to get your boots off your feet, the grey nubuk ones you were so fond of that even their astonishing similarity to Muggle cowboy boots didn't disturb you. You rambled on about your lovely fiancée and how much your taste in women had changed from the days of your infatuation with Miss Pre."

"Enough!" Lucius Malfoy dropped his wand-arm while his wife fought off hysterical giggles.

"Molly Weasley? Really, Lucius—"

"I was twelve!" He turned to face Severus. "Why now? We thought you dead for fourteen years and mourned you for a good part of them!"

"Now, Lucius, I am sure Severus has his reasons, which he will explain to us in due time."

She looked Severus over from head to toe before she said, "Whatever you have done in the meantime, you look wonderful, old friend."

It took less tears and more convincing compared to Narcissa before Lucius finally believed him. "Fourteen years, Severus? I could understand a few years, but fourteen?"

Severus spent the day with the Malfoys, talking and explaining until his voice was hoarse.

During dinner, Narcissa more than once sent a brilliant if slightly teary smile into his direction, pressing his hand ever so often.

Later, in the living room of his friends' suite, Severus shared a brandy with Lucius after Narcissa had retired. Only then did Lucius allude to how urgently he had wished for his friend's presence, particularly during the time when his relationship with Draco had been strained to the point of nearly breaking off all contact. Now a father himself, the Malfoy heir was more mellow and understanding towards his father and had forgiven him for not defecting earlier.

Too tired for Apparition, Severus slept on the transfigured couch.

Back in his cottage, after he had provided his friends with his address for a dinner invitation, he went about tidying his home. Dinner would be simple. He put the right wine into the fridge, prepared the dough and the tiramisu and then checked his email.

None from Ms Granger. Well. Severus chose not to examine his feelings of disappointment too closely. The reunion with Lucius and Narcissa had left him emotionally overwrought but pleasantly tired. Maybe it was time for a more committed relationship. His conversations with Ms Granger, no, Hermione, had made one thing abundantly clear, however – if he ever would find a long-term companion, she would have to be his intellectual equal.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 13

Zelko meets old friends and new challenges and learns more about the significance of flannel waistcoats.

Chapter 7

AN: Elinor, Marianne and Margaret are the Misses Dashwood from Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility. Elinor is sensible, practical and good at hiding her emotions; Marianne is wild, romantic and wears her heart on her sleeve; and Margaret, at twelve, is planning expeditions and trying to learn fencing. Their neighbour Colonel Brandon is, at first, shunned and dubbed infirm by Marianne because of his age – he is eighteen years older than she – and his habit of wearing flannel waistcoats when the weather calls for it.

17-11-2012

Subject: Age

Dear Zelko,

I do hope your joints are better now. Have fun with your books. I envy you your free time, as our project is nearly finished, and I have virtually no spare moments.

Draco would like to meet you; he is a bit obsessed with learning everything about Headmaster Snape.

I have attached an article I found while doing some research plus my comments, which you might find interesting.

Best wishes,

Hermione

Severus felt guilty. He had missed Draco a lot during the last fourteen years, and Lucius had hinted that his son could have used another father-figure during his twenties when their relationship had been severely strained.

18-11-2012

Re: Subject: Age

Dear Hermione,

I was joking. Do not picture me in a flannel waistcoat. In reality, I am as dashing as they come. Taking the different climate into account, I gather that English joints in their early thirties are as good as Slovenian joints in their fifties.

The author you quoted is a complete moron, in my not so humble opinion, but as I am sure you will not agree with my arguments without some proofs, I'll send you a research paper from a Master in Armenia that will bring you around to my line of reasoning.

Regards,

Zelko

19-11-2012

Subject: New Potions-line

Dear Zelko,

If you're still interested (I know you are!), Draco Malfoy will be visiting his parents in Miramare. His decision was a bit sudden and very inconvenient, as we are nearly finished with our project. I tried to provide him with your name and address, but he was gone before I was able to do so. I do not doubt that you will find him if you wish.

Flannel waistcoats? I am aware that you have read widely, but this reference is unexpected! If you did it on purpose, I will have to change my perception of you yet again. And warn you that I am more of a mixture between Elinor and Margaret and as different from Marianne's mindset as possible. If you really mean what I think you did, this is the point where I should enquire about your lost loves and possible secret engagements.

On another note, you (and Master Dshendorkian) make a very plausible argument; I bow my head humbly. Yet, I have another bone to throw: Nadja brought along a thesis of one of her Potions buddies that might revolutionise how one has to look at Marmeladinger's Paradoxon.

Have fun!

Hermione

The attached detailed discussion of a highly controversial topic in modern potions brewing left Severus surprised about Hermione being able to grasp all its intricacies.

He gladly wrote back an answer, consisting of roughly four pages, mainly to distract her from flannel waistcoats and possible engagements, but also to avoid fretting about the inevitable confrontation with Draco.

The Malfoys had not told their son the reason for their urgent summons, and Lucius planned to Apparate him to Severus' cottage upon his arrival in Miramare.

The following morning Severus decided to forego coffee for herbal tea during his wait for Draco, turning over arguments in his head, though he knew fully well that they held no sway for an abandoned child.

To distract himself, Severus tried to find out more about flannel waistcoats. By simply googling "Elinor, Marianne, Margaret" and "flannel waistcoats", he soon discovered that the wearer of said garments was considered one of the great romantic heroes in English literature. He had a vague recollection of Heathcliff and Mr Darcy, but Colonel Brandon had so far eluded him. Severus also watched a YouTube clip of a BBC version of *Sense and Sensibility* in which Colonel Brandon looked like a fairer-haired and slightly heavier version of himself.

Well, the ball was in his court, it seemed. What should he do about it? He had already acknowledged that he enjoyed exchanging letters with Hermione very much. She had been his pupil nearly fifteen years ago, but that would not be a problem after such a long time, should their relationship become more substantial.

The main obstacle was his deception about his true identity. While she would undoubtedly understand his initial need for subterfuge, she would not look kindly on his courting her as Zelko Princip, even per email.

Yet, he was not prepared to travel to England and meet her. Severus felt that his revelations would be easier if made in person and, therefore, was at an impasse. He decided to act manly and ignore the problem for the moment.

He had to smirk despite himself when an almost elegant *pop* heralded the arrival of father and son Malfoy. Lucius had to do everything in style.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 13

Zelko finally meets Draco.

Author's Note: Thank you all for your lovely reviews. And special thanks to my wonderful beta, Dreamy_Dragon, without whom my stories would not have been posted, and to all the people behind the scenes at TPP. Virtual chocolate-cakes to all of you!

Chapter 8

Opening his pantry door, Severus beheld a confused young man. With a slight nod Malfoy Senior Disappeared.

"Hello, Draco."

The young man's eyes narrowed, and he went into a defensive stance. Severus didn't know whether to mourn what a war had done to his friend's son or whether to be proud of Draco's 'constant vigilance'.

"Professor Snape?"

"I think it is appropriate for you to call me Severus now, although here I am known as Zelko Princip."

Severus led the still shell-shocked visitor to his settee. Draco's expression showed amazement, confusion, worry, anger and pure joy in short order.

"It's truly you! You can't know how often I have wished you were still alive!"

"Draco, I think I know. I have felt that I have abandoned you and all the other Slytherins at the worst possible time, but I saw no other way. Even without the snake-bite, I was a wreck. I am sure I would have lost my sanity completely had I not given myself the time to heal – body, mind and soul."

The young man held up a hand to forestall any more confessions.

"You don't need to explain further. I was a complete mess too. Don't tell Mother and Father, but I even went to a Muggle therapist Granger recommended."

Draco proceeded to talk about his family, his business and his surprising friendship with Granger ("She's a Ravenclaw at heart, which makes her bearable for us. And she talks about you a lot.")

Since he was the CEO of *Draconian Measures*, Draco had to leave for London the next day while his parents stayed for another week. After they had taken their farewell with a sumptuous dinner at the resort, Severus returned home. Two days later, he received an e-mail waiting from Hermione.

30-11-2012 13:32

Subject: Draco

Dear Zelko,

You must have made quite an impression on Draco. He talks about you all the time, even if he is very closed-lipped about the reason for his sudden trip. While I do not remember the Malfoys' hospitality during the war fondly, I hope there's nothing wrong with my friend's parents. Although if it were something serious, he wouldn't be in such a good mood.

I am rambling. We finished the project at 3 a.m. this morning, and I haven't had any sleep yet. Hopefully, Draco didn't pester you too much. For all his pure-blooded suaveness, he does behave like an eager puppy when he is on to something. Don't tell him I said so.

Alas, I am not too tired to notice that you have neatly avoided answering my questions. Please answer me this one: Are we at a point in our friendship that such questions become important?

I am thirty-three, unattached and all my previous relationships have failed either early on because I will not play down my intelligence to assuage a wizard's insecurity, or the relationship dawdled into oblivion because we were both workaholics.

Fond regards,

Hermione

Well, she was forcing his hand with that question.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 13

The meeting approaches ...

Chapter 9

01-12-2012 13:45

Subject: Meeting

Dear Hermione,

I agree. We have reached a point at which such questions do become important. I can tell you that I am unattached.

Yet, there are certain things you should know about me. Even if you'll hex me afterwards, those are best said in person. Could we meet somewhere in the middle? Heidelberg, Toulouse or Santiago de Compostela would be convenient. You could visit some interesting libraries there, so your trip won't be a complete waste if you decide that you won't have anything further to do with me after we've met.

Sleep well,

Zelko

PS: I think that flannel waistcoats are very sensible, although I prefer turtleneck jumpers in cold weather. If I had to choose from Ms Austen's heroines, I'd take Elinor Dashwood any day over Marianne, but a dash of Elizabeth Bennet wouldn't go amiss to counterbalance my inherent dullness. Do you think you can manage that?

02-12-2012 06:13

Re: Subject: Meeting

Dear Zelko,

I promise to listen first and hex later.

Elizabeth Bennet, eh? I am sorry to disappoint you, but playfulness is not one of my strengths, although I do possess a temper if provoked. How can you be dull and have a mysterious past at the same time?

My parents will spend Christmas in their flat in Cavalaire-sur-Mer on the French Riviera; I will be there too. Shall we meet there, maybe on Boxing Day? In the meantime, I will try very hard not to picture you as a cross between Mr Darcy and Colonel Brandon with a green thumb. I wouldn't get any work done otherwise.

Sincerely yours, etc,

Hermione

Chapter 10

Chapter 11 of 13

Boxing Day is drawing nearer.

Chapter 10

So it was herbal tea again. Severus did not feel very dull at the moment. Boxing Day! That was very soon. He was nervous enough to admit he was nervous.

29-11-2012 9:32

Subject: Boxing Day

Dear Hermione,

Boxing Day it is. Would noon fit in with your plans? I suggest we meet at the main quay of St Tropez. We can walk a bit and then find a café. I will dress in a very dull fashion, but refuse to carry any roses or certain novels, as I believe is the custom with such meetings. In any case, I will be the only man there without a dog or a fishing rod, as the whole village is blessedly free of tourists in winter. I will recognise you, I suppose. There is a photo of you from Oxford available on the internet.

Damn it. You are an intelligent woman and therefore have probably worked out that I am nervous about our meeting. Boxing Day is both too near and too far away, isn't it? I do not want to sound deliberately mysterious, but I would think it best if I do not offer more personal information until after we've met (if you're still speaking to me afterwards). You will understand then.

I am swamped with Christmas orders and up over my ears in work. At the moment I am selling a lot of creams and herbal remedies. Either the Wizarding community has embraced Christmas fully, or a lot of wizards and witches are blatantly ignoring the Statute of Secrecy and gifting their Muggle acquaintances with my products.

Looking forward to seeing you,

Zelko

30-11-2012 23:11

Re: Subject: Boxing Day

Dear Zelko,

You must be interested in my personality if you still want to meet me after seeing that photo. I was furious then. I had done the major research work for this project, but the boys had tried to publish the paper without me.

Don't worry, my revenge was not nice. If you google my then partners, you will notice that neither of them got very far. The instigator is teaching maths at Smeltings, a boarding school for children who compensate for being complete dunderheads by acting like the spoilt-rotten bullies they are.

More than by their chauvinism, I was hurt by my own foolishness because I didn't realise what was going on until it was nearly too late. Until this day, I cannot fathom how naive I was, even after fighting a war.

Oxford was my way of turning my back on the Wizarding world, at least for a time.

Even if whatever revelations you have in store for me would make me hex you, I do not think I will stop talking to you. I try not to speculate too much, and at the moment this works well because I am quite busy preparing a paper for *Arithmantics Quarterly* on top of the pre-Christmas-madness.

If, however, Zelko Princip is not the name you've been born with, and you're really a resurrected transgender Bellatrix LeStrange, our relationship will cool significantly. Otherwise we should be fine.

Nervous, too,

Hermione

Although Severus had to laugh at her last paragraph, he chose to avoid the particular topic in his answering mail, sure that Hermione would draw her own conclusions.

He had a lot of work, which kept him from dwelling too much on their imminent meeting, and he hoped that it would be the same for Hermione. Apparently, she'd never even considered Zelko Princip to be Severus Snape. The brewer was not sure whether to be relieved or anxious because of this. Granger was a very intelligent woman. If she had not thought about him as Snape, did this mean there was no way she'd ever consider her erstwhile Potions teacher in light of a possible relationship?

Severus choose to ignore that question, born out of old insecurities, and bottled potion after potion. If he continued to work in that manner until Christmas he would be stocked up far into spring.

21-12-2012 23:56

Subject: World's end

Dear Hermione,

The Muggles seem to think that the world is going to end today. So far Opicinia is still standing; even the wifi connection intact. I have finished and sent off all my orders. If I were a superstitious person, I would not put any extra effort into my Christmas cleaning, fearing I would spook you if you ever saw my place, but it is a good enough distraction.

I hope the next few days are peaceful for you and your family and friends.

Yours,

Zelko

If this were a real letter, one on paper, Severus would have signed with a Z only, one with an extra flourish, to be read as an S if one squinted.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Determined to get it right, Severus Apparated late on Christmas Eve to St Tropez. The sea was calm, and nary a person was in sight. The large yachts were absent. He returned home and checked his favourite jumper and his best black trousers for the third time. Everything was as it should be.

Christmas day was spent with a leisurely dinner at his apothecary friend's house in Venice.

On Boxing Day, Severus Apparated to St Tropez again – a full hour early. He walked up to the Castle and was back again at their meeting point ten minutes before the appointed time. Staring out at the sea, he failed to hear the approaching steps.

"Zelko?"

He turned around, checking himself just in time before he almost pointed his wand at her. Hermione Granger had grown up. She was nearly his height now, her hair had lost part of its unruliness, and her face was that of a determined, fully-grown woman. Severus thanked Merlin that he would easily be able to see his friend Hermione and not his former pupil Miss Granger.

Hermione's nose and ears were a bit reddened from the incoming wind, which pleased him unaccountably because he took it as a sign that she had foregone the comfort of a warm hat for looking her best at this first meeting.

"Hermione, it's good to meet you."

They shook hands, Hermione rather nervously looking him up and down, blushing slightly.

For some time neither said a word, then she offered, "Fancy a walk?" indicating the path along the sea.

They set off, Hermione talking about her holidays so far. After some minutes, Severus couldn't stand it anymore. He stopped.

"Hermione, do you truly not recognise me?"

She finally looked him squarely into the eyes, taking in his features, her eyes widening as he raised an eyebrow. Then she dashed behind two parked cars to be violently sick.

Her would-be suitor stood frozen on the spot. So unexpected was this reaction that he was more astonished than anything else. Before he could follow his urge to Apparate away immediately, she came back. A pale-faced Hermione made a move as if to hug him but stopped short, obviously remembering her less than pleasant breath.

"Please do not make anything of it. I always get sick when I am nervous, and then I couldn't sleep last night, and I knew I shouldn't eat anything, but then my mum pressed me to eat breakfast, and I let her fuss over me because I still feel guilty, and so I ate breakfast even though—"

Severus' smile grew wider, and when she finally noticed that he wasn't going to run away screaming she ceased to babble. He offered her his arm.

"Let's find a cup of tea, shall we?"

It took three cups of tea, a trip to the loo for a quick brushing of her teeth and two chocolate croissants for Hermione to overcome her embarrassment. Severus distracted her by emphasising the science behind his survival rather than the more gruesome details and by lightly holding her hand whenever she stopped fiddling with her spoon. He was glad in a way about her predicament because it enabled him to be the calmer of the two of them.

In his mind he had not formed a picture of her, the old Oxford photograph being even less of a starting point than his last memories of her as a pupil. There were only fleeting images of an upward-curling corner of her mouth, of ink-stained fingers, of a certain shade of brown hair set off by a certain scarf, of her eyes changing from curious to laughing.

Hermione Granger was all of the above and completely different at the same time, too. And so very right for him that it frightened Severus anew. His anxiety about her reaction to his identity seemed ridiculous compared to the feelings emerging now. He had loved Lily Evans with the all the passion of an adolescent, later with the obsession of a deeply disturbed grown man, but those emotions paled now to the absolute rightness he felt in the company of Hermione.

It was somewhat comparable to the first time of holding his wand, or to the thrill he had felt when he had completed his first potion by composing it rather than following a recipe. Yet, this was so much more: Severus knew with absolute conviction that the antsy, pale woman across the table was the one that completed him, the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

And he was terrified of ruining things.

Some of his thoughts, however, must have shown on his face because Hermione looked at him with her first genuine, relaxed smile, tightening the grip on his hand.

"Shall we go for a walk again?"

He nodded and paid the smirking proprietor, who had watched them quite openly, not even bothering to pretend to watch the old Christmas movie on the TV behind the counter.

Outside she enquired, "Will you let me Side-Along you to my favourite place in the area?"

He nodded, and moments later they appeared amidst the rugged wintery beauty of the deserted Gigaro-beach near La Croix Valmer. The only wildlife there were a few seagulls. And the elephant in the room. Hermione finally sensed that "Zelko" awaited her verdict.

"Severus, I'm not going to hex you! You are alive, you tried to alleviate my guilt over leaving you for dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, even if that endangered your cover, you asked for a personal meeting when we got closer – you did nothing wrong. And I—"

She was wringing her hands, sometimes making a motion towards him as if to touch him.

Severus cared neither for distressed damsels nor for chivalrous knights, but finally understood the concept when he heard Hermione's relieved sigh as he stilled her fingers against his heart with one hand and used the other arm to draw her closer. The scientist in him very briefly wondered how sometimes pieces suddenly fit together easily, but after meeting her lips for the first time, every rational thought left him.

The Half-Blood-Prince, Severus Snape, Zelko Princip – it didn't matter what people called him.

He was home.

Epilogue

Chapter 13 of 13

Three years later.

AN: I want to thank you all for your wonderful feedback. There will be one-shots for the 100th and 200th reviewer. Special thanks to the beta of dreams, Dreamy_Dragon, and everyone involved in keeping TPP running, especially TeaOli – virtual chocolate, firewhiskey and gnocchi to you!

Epilogue

"I have been thinking."

Hermione was on alert instantly.

Her lover and companion of three years had never started a conversation in this inane fashion before. She looked at him. The years had been more than kind to him: his exile in a warm climate and coming to terms with his past had left nary a trace of the strict and forbidding Potions Master of her youth. Instead, he was a relaxed, tanned man at the height of his power, full of languid grace and laughter lines.

Severus Snape had not risen from the dead after they had begun their relationship, but he had had secret meetings on the continent with Kingsley Shacklebolt (honestly glad about his survival), Minerva McGonagall (at first tearful, then apologetic and finally tearful again) and one Harry Potter (surprisingly mature behaviour from both participants).

Hermione spent most of her time in Opicina. She Portkeyed to London for about ten days every two months to meet with clients or to wrap up projects. Their life together was surprisingly smooth for two people so used to living alone – after they'd learned to read each other's moods.

"You have been thinking?"

Was he blushing? Their love-life was quite adventurous already, considering both had rather staid personalities. Offhand, she couldn't think of anything that would make him blush that they hadn't tried before.

"You remember when you threw up on my shoes?"

"Yes. And I didn't throw up on your shoes."

"True, but this is too good a story not to be told."

"You told it already! I didn't know that the epitome of ladylike manners, Narcissa Malfoy, could howl like a hyena. And Minerva got the hiccups from laughing so hard at my expense, I might add."

"I was thinking of telling the grandchildren."

Now Hermione was more than alert. Whether accidentally or deliberately, they had never discussed the topic of children. Both were content in their relationship – its existence being a small miracle in and of itself – and their respective fields of work. And, as Hermione was acutely aware – because some of their nastier fights had resulted from it – there was a part of Severus which still contained the insecure youth who thought himself unworthy of love and friendship. Therefore, she answered as calmly as possible, "Perhaps we should have children before grandchildren."

"Ah, yes. There's no other way if we want real grandchildren."

"Do you want children, Severus?"

He seemed to debate with himself whether to answer that but finally said, "I always thought it would be impossible. But now? Not a Dark Lord in sight, and you would hex me six ways from Sunday if I ever displayed anything remotely similar to my father's behaviour. Do *you* want children? Do you want them with *me*?"

With the last two sentences he had looked away, turning towards the window.

Hermione suppressed a sigh – he was bound to interpret it in the wrong way. Feeling a rush of affection for a man who still expected a rejection, she stood up, walked up to him and put her arms around his waist, snuggling against his back.

"Yes, Severus, I want to have children. And I wouldn't want them with anybody but you. They are bound to be precocious little know-it-alls, and you will spoil them rotten, but together we will manage. Are you all right with two or three? I would find more than that a bit daunting."

She felt the tension leave his shoulders, felt his arms relaxing. Turning in her embrace to face her, he nestled in his trouser-pocket, withdrawing a small drawstring pouch. "Marry me?"

"Gladly. Anytime, anywhere."

Severus managed to get the pouch open despite his trembling fingers and put an antique ring of Venetian origin on her finger before kissing her like his life depended on it.

Hermione – aware that her now-fiancé would feel very uncomfortable after such an uncharacteristic display of nerves and emotions – ended the moment with an attempt at levity. "You realise we won't get much uninterrupted time when we have children? We should make the most of it now."

He was already walking in the direction of their bedroom, never letting go of her hand.

The End