

Third Time by Thestral

by *drinkingcocoa*

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Psyche

Chapter 1 of 3

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"Let the damsel be placed on the top of a certain mountain, adorned as for the bed of marriage and of death. Look not for a son-in-law of mortal birth; but for that evil serpent-thing, by reason of whom even the gods tremble and the shadows of Styx are afraid." Walter Pater, *Cupid and Psyche*

Chapter 1: Psyche

The day *Witch Weekly* put her picture on the front page with the caption "Widowed war heroine on suicide watch," the Minister of Magic transferred Hermione out of the public eye.

She was never angry with Ron for dying. They had known Auror work would be dangerous, after all. And he had died protecting others; that was something.

She was angry with herself, sometimes, for wishing she had died with him. She was angry with others for being afraid of her. But she understood that it was hard for people to look at her now, the way she went about her days with her eyes looking like bruises. She didn't miss a day at the Ministry, and her work quality did not suffer; in fact, she had a terribly sharpened precision in all she did. Her speech grew uncanny in its directness, perfectly logical but every day leached a little more of affect, of pleasantries or any features at all. When people offered condolences, she merely looked at them impassively and waited for them to finish.

Everyone loved Hermione Granger. Her story was in the wizarding history books. Children played with Hermione dolls that strode across one's palm, conjuring bluebell flames or squeaking, "*Accio Dittany!*" Even her assistant had owned such a doll, a worshipful Hufflepuff who had been a first-year when Hermione returned to Hogwarts to sit her N.E.W.T.s. Everyone worried for Hermione Granger, but nobody dared fight her spiky rage to force solace on her. Nobody knew how; hadn't she always been the one with the answers?

The Minister of Magic came in person to Hermione's office, reducing her awed assistant to stammers. He closed her office door and sealed it behind him.

"Ms. Granger," said Kingsley, "what am I going to do about you?" He opened up his arms and Hermione, with a small cry, folded herself into their warmth, remembering how it felt to be a girl, remembering a long-ago night when Kingsley Shacklebolt had enveloped her in his powerful arms and protected her life as if it had been Harry's, kept her safe on a thestral that flew them straight into terror.

Kingsley outlined Hermione's new duties as they took the lift down. She'd be with the Department of Mysteries, guarded under the highest security. For the duration of the project, she would travel only between work and home. No one outside the Department would speak to her without special permission.

They turned down a long, windowless corridor toward a plain black door at the end. They entered a circular room Hermione knew well, though she had been there only once before.

"What will I research?" she asked.

"You won't be doing the research. You are the research," he replied as they stopped at a solid door, a door with no handle, no hinges, no keyhole.

"Kept locked at all times," Kingsley explained. "You'll be safe here."

Memories surged, flooding Hermione with old dread: frightened children, the smell of blood, an icy flight on an invisible thestral, a knife melting like candle wax.

"But you hadn't lost anyone you loved yet then, Hermione," said Kingsley, as though she'd spoken aloud. "You'll know how to open it now."

She studied the door intently, unable to resist a thrill at the puzzle, running her wand along the edges and murmuring spells. The door emitted a swishing noise, like blood flow. There she heard something did she hear something? She flicked her wand to amplify the sound. No; maybe it was more of a movement. As if the door were *breathing*: low, even waves, like sleep. She amplified it further. The breathing hitched and paused on an inhale, as though the sleeper were turning over, then resumed, an audible exhale with a hint of heartbeat underneath, a feel of breath against Hermione's cheek.

Hermione approached the door cautiously, glancing at Kingsley. He looked calm, not alarmed. Slowly, she pressed her right ear to the door to hear better, laying her cheek against it, and then sprang away as if bitten, keening in rage.

"Ron," she gasped. She turned betrayed eyes upon Kingsley and snarled, "*I felt him*; I felt him breathing, like he was sleeping next to me. *Fuck* you, you will NOT make me feel this, I can't..." Her shriek rose on "can't."

Kingsley caught her and held her until her shaking died down.

"Okay," he said, low. "Okay. Too much." She glared up at him but he said, "I'll take you through. When you're ready."

She stepped away to still herself while he waited. When she returned to him, mouth set, he gathered her to him, her back to his front. He leaned his body against the door and breathed deeply, three times. He laid his right cheek against the door's surface, then turned to press a small kiss onto it. He passed easily through the door as if it had melted and Hermione, because she was enfolded in his arms, passed through the doorway with him.

And there, at a desk, sat Severus Snape.

Just an ordinary desk in an ordinary office. His shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. It was little more than a cubicle after all, the locked room in the Department of Mysteries for the study of love beyond death.

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On the first morning of their research, he was waiting for her outside the door.

"The Minister informs me that you require assistance with entry," said Snape. He held his hand out to Hermione. "With your permission."

It wasn't anything like being held by Kingsley. Snape's hold was impersonal, as formal as a bow. She watched him curiously as he rested his face against the door and shut his eyes, his deeply furrowed brows contracting quickly as if in pain. He drew her inside with an arm across her back, and she saw that the office had been rearranged into a laboratory.

"You will be answering questions about your experience of love before and after your husband's death," Snape said, setting a cauldron over a low flame. "We will be monitoring the levels and types of magic in your blood as you experience different emotional states during interview. Blood magic, Ms. Granger. We will suspend one drop of your blood in a neutral plasma to form a potion that will mirror the blood in your veins at each moment."

He passed her a silver potions knife. Avid with interest, she pricked her finger, welled up a generous bead of blood, and dripped it into the cauldron. Snape healed the cut for her with the tip of his wand as she watched the blood diffuse through the solution and emit a shimmer that resolved, with a basic incantation, into an orderly stream of data. She shot him an admiring look, eyebrows raised, and he smirked in affirmation.

He let her run a gamut of experiments on the potion before she took her seat and looked at him attentively, ready for questioning.

"Talk to me about life after your husband's death."

Hermione's expression dulled instantly. "What about it?"

"Do you miss him?"

"Yes."

Snape walked over to the potion with an expression of concern. Its shimmer had dissipated, leaving a murky stillness in the cauldron.

"What do you miss most about him?" he asked, frowning as he stirred the potion. When there was no answer, he looked up to see Hermione gathering her things.

"I can't. I'm sorry," she said, her voice neutral. "I can't talk about this."

"Talking about it is rather the point of the study," Snape responded drily. "Sit down, Ms. Granger. It is your right to leave at any time, of course. But I suggest that we make more than a half-hearted effort before abandoning the attempt."

Hermione gave him an irritated glance and sat back down.

"Why do you imagine you cannot talk about this?" he asked.

"It'll make me want to die," she said flatly.

"Why else?"

"I'll have even more trouble sleeping," she said.

"Have you always had trouble, or did that start after he died?"

"Only after he died. Sometimes I manage a few hours, but it's never a deep sleep. We used to sleep with Ron spooned against my back. I had to put my hair in a plait every night so it wouldn't get in his face," she explained. "I haven't plaited my hair since. I wish I had a reason to. I should just *cut off* all my hair."

At her sudden surge of temper, Snape shot a look at the cauldron. Yes, the shimmer was back already. The potion was remarkably sensitive.

"Go on," he said sharply, eyes fixed on the cauldron. "Something just made you angry. You're angry and you miss him. What do you miss?"

Hermione followed Snape's gaze and read the stream of data generated by the potion's changes. The shimmer intensified as she read it. Still watching, Hermione said, "I miss feeling him against my back. Every morning, he used to..."

She reddened and looked uncertainly at Snape.

"Ms. Granger, you have leave to speak freely of any intimacy," he said impatiently. "Speak of whatever you please. It is a component of the research like any other. I assure you, I have heard it all before."

She shut her eyes and spoke rapidly. "He fucked me that way every morning. I loved that so much, waking up to feel his cock so hard right up against me, and I would just reach behind me and slip it in and masturbate while he held my breasts and fucked me."

Snape focused on the readings from the cauldron. "And now you miss this," he prompted.

"We weren't anything special. We were just a couple, doing what couples do, and I miss fucking my husband and sucking his cock and waking up to his hard-on every morning. I knew how to get him off. I miss how his fingers knew exactly how to rub my nipples or my clit, without having to ask me anymore. I miss being able to slide from sleep to sex without even waking up in between, without being polite, without having to acknowledge the other person. I'm sickened every morning when I wake up and he's not there. It never gets any easier. Every morning I wake up is another morning without him, worse than before. I feel deadened inside. I'm never going to have that again. It won't ever be him again."

She took a breath and opened her eyes, checking warily to see if she had offended her researcher. His face was as impassive as ever.

"It brings you solace to recount your sexual memories," he observed. "This topic does not incapacitate you with grief."

"I feel relieved, actually," she said. "I could tell people everything else I missed about him, but not this. I couldn't tell anybody. It wasn't polite."

"If you can sustain these reports, Ms. Granger, you would be enormously helpful to the research," said Snape. "This potion is still in development, but the initial results are promising indeed. I would be much obliged if you would continue."

"I can sustain this," Hermione said.

Snape stirred the liquid gently in the cauldron and made notes on a parchment. Without looking up, he said, "It's midday. I will escort you to the department cafeteria."

They sat apart. Each had brought a book. When Hermione looked up an hour later, he was gone. She returned alone to the locked room, and he was, again, waiting for her outside the door. He folded her in his arms and they entered to resume their work.

Their sessions over the next few weeks felt like self-indulgence, pouring out her sexual memories of Ron. The scent of his neck. The hollow of his underarm, where he liked to be stroked. The swell of his hard new muscles when he began to fill out, just after the war. How his cock hardened visibly when he looked at her nipples. The steady way his gaze held her when she straddled him to make love. His smile of wonder when she said something clever. His declaration, the night she got promoted, that all he had to offer his genius wife was his body, so they would have to make the best of it. She laughed fondly when she remembered that night. For the first time since Ron's death, she felt her face soften.

Snape saw it, too. He glanced at the potion and made a note.

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"Did you two ever do anything other than have sex?"

Snape looked relieved when Hermione laughed.

"Never. It was just sex. Of course we did. But I'm afraid to talk about those things. I'm afraid it'll upset me and I'll want to kill myself or hex random people on the street. I'll scare people with my rage. And when people are stupid enough to be scared of me, I want to smash their heads repeatedly on the ground until the blood runs out of their ears."

Snape snickered, showing laugh lines around his eyes and along the sides of his mouth. Hermione smirked back at him.

"Then it's a good thing I'm not intimidated by you in the least, Ms. Granger."

"All right," she said softly. "I suppose this is your way of saying I should talk about other topics, too. Actually, sex was one of the things that was important to us. Something we knew we wouldn't have to curtail because we weren't going to have children."

Snape's eyebrows went up. "I wouldn't have thought it possible, but your husband has surprised me from beyond the grave," he said. "A Weasley who didn't want children? Was it because of things he'd seen in the war?"

"No, he wanted them," said Hermione. "But I can't have children. Not after what Bellatrix Lestrange did to me."

Snape nearly began an awkward apology before subsiding into an even more awkward silence.

"It doesn't bother me to talk about that," she said. "We figured it's not all bad, anyway, not having kids. We didn't need to bring *more* people into our lives to hurt with our choices."

Snape snorted. "What else, besides sex, was important to the two of you?"

"Work, of course. Travel. Oh, and books. He was writing children's books, about Quidditch and such. He was going to sell them in the joke shop. He was so sweet. He wanted me to be proud of his writing. Oh, fuck. The manuscripts. What am I going to do with his parchments?"

Hermione bowed her head, face in hands, elbows digging into her knees. Snape's eyes flicked to the cauldron at the sudden drop in her mood, but he kept his seat, staying near Hermione. He had to lean forward to hear what she was saying into her hands.

"I know I'm not supposed to die yet. My time isn't up. I don't understand why it has to hurt so much. I understand the uses of grief. Everyone dies; everyone loses someone. But this degree of pain: this is wasteful and absurd. It can't possibly serve a purpose. I would like it to stop. I would like to stop now, please. I want it to stop. I want it to stop."

He got up, walked over to her side of the desk, and knelt next to Hermione.

"Ms. Granger," he said, low. He guided her to sit upright and pressed his open palm to her right cheek.

"Close your eyes, Ms. Granger," he said. "Keep them closed. Are they closed?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now breathe. Just breathe. Put your mind into breathing. The pain will endure, whether you learn to bear it or not. You may as well start learning now."

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On the scheduled date for their next session, Hermione sent a politely worded interdepartmental memo fluttering through the otherwise imperturbable door, informing Snape that she was fine and would return as soon as she could.

That was her right; he had other research, anyway. He continued to track her potion; what he saw there neither surprised nor alarmed him.

The day of the following session, an identical memo fluttered through. The potion didn't indicate any potentially dangerous state of mind, nothing to trigger a suicidal watch or an investigation, so Snape did not alert his departmental supervisor nor send an owl to her residence to inquire after her well-being. He did nothing about Hermione other than get up, restlessly, to review the potion every quarter hour.

The session after that, not even a memo.

Snape was about to check outside the door to see if a memo might have gotten stuck when an assertive knock announced his research subject.

Snape looked nervous as he stepped out through the doorway to greet Hermione, but his face relaxed at her tired, warm smile.

"Thank you for being patient with me," she told Snape. "I'd like to try entering the door by myself today."

"Of course," he said immediately, almost jumping away to let her try.

She leaned her cheek against the door, closed her eyes, and whispered, "Hello, Ron." Tears swelled under her closed eyelids, but she kept smiling, too. Her left hand rose to rest on the door where it throbbed with a heartbeat. "I miss you." She pressed a small kiss to the door. The surface shimmered in response. She opened her eyes, turned to Snape and held out a hand.

"Shall we?" she said, still smiling even as tears ran unchecked down her face. He followed her lead, taking her outstretched hand. She wrapped her arms around him and guided them inside. They settled into their seats.

"You have been alone the past few days?" Snape asked.

"Of course. Weren't those the terms of the study? That's what Kingsley told me."

"I just needed to confirm that you were by yourself during your recent sexual activity."

"My..." Hermione glanced over at the cauldron and blanched with embarrassment.

"It showed up in the blood magic."

"You could... tell that I'd masturbated."

"Not precisely. The magic levels in your blood revealed only that you climaxed yesterday evening. Twice, in rapid succession."

"This... is... mortifying," she said through her hands.

"Research, Ms. Granger," he said, at a loss. "Forgive me. I should have warned you specifically." After another look at her whitened face, he said beseechingly, "I cannot filter what the readings reveal. You may withdraw from the study, if you wish."

"I'll be all right. Just give me a moment," Hermione mumbled.

Snape stood awkwardly as the requested moment stretched and dragged. He considered, then took down a second cauldron from a storage cupboard, filled it with plasma, and set it alongside the first.

"Perhaps it would help if I made things more even," he suggested tentatively, watching anxiously for any response.

She shot a keen look at him; he nodded, looking relieved. She watched him pierce his skin with a knife, bleed into the plasma, and seal the cut with his wand tip.

"This is part of the study, now, too," he said. They stood over the cauldrons, side by side, and watched the blood magic thicken.

"So, what *were* you doing while you weren't in session?" he asked.

Hermione groaned. "This isn't part of the study, is it? Do I have to answer?"

"No, it's not part of the study," said Snape. "I'm asking as... a friend."

"Well, I guess you've earned an explanation, after I missed two sessions... all right. I ended up cleaning."

"Cleaning," repeated Snape.

"My house."

"It took all that time? There are such things as cleaning spells, you know."

"You don't know what it looked like before."

"I'd have thought you the organized type, Ms. Granger."

"Normally. But then, I haven't been normal since Ron died, have I? I couldn't bear to touch his things. Or sleep in our bed. I've been sleeping on the couch for months ... when I've managed to sleep. Yesterday, I finally charmed all of his things into the guest room and sealed the door. I'll go through it sometime. But at least I've reclaimed the bed."

Hastily, before either of them could dwell on just how Hermione had claimed her bed, Snape asked, "Was your husband the only man you ever your only lover?"

"Almost. There were a couple of others, but nothing serious."

"He was your first?"

"Viktor Krum was my first," said Hermione fondly.

"*Krum?*" said Snape, scandalized. "You were a *child!* And he played for the World Cup!"

"I was fifteen then. He was seventeen, and a virgin as well," she said. "We weren't so mismatched. He was awkward and earnest, and perpetually hard, and it was incredibly flattering the way he was crazy about me."

"He just wanted to get into your pants," muttered Snape.

"Well, I wanted him to," she said. She gave Snape a saucy wink and watched, with interest, as his sallow cheeks turned red. "We took things slow, and it was so hot."

Snape noted her lively enjoyment of teasing him, the corresponding change in her potion, and his breath caught. He nodded slowly to himself. "Good. Tell me more."

"We used to snog in the library with me on his lap, his erection against my bum and his hands on my breasts. It's a wonder we got any studying done that term. Oh, and then there was the lovely thing he taught me to do the night of the Yule Ball..."

Snape's mouth tightened at the mention of the Yule Ball, and Hermione stopped, concerned, glancing at his potion.

"I'm sorry. That Yule Ball wasn't the best of times for you, was it?"

"It was a long time ago. You may continue."

"Are you sure? Because ..."

"I am rather intrigued to hear about this *lovely thing* you learned to do that night."

"Well... it was the first time he took out his cock for me to see... I'd stroked it many times, but never seen it before... He took me out behind the rose bushes and he disillusioned us so only we could see each other ... it was such a clever spell ... and he showed me what pre-come was, and he took off my underthings and rubbed at my clit with one hand and put his fingers in me with the other, and... and... you're aroused."

"Yes."

"Is that all right? Should we stop?"

"Does it bother you that I'm aroused?"

"*Bother* me?" said Hermione, laughing softly. "No. It doesn't bother me. I like it. Is it okay that I enjoy it?"

"You enjoy it," repeated Snape softly. He stared, transfixed, at her knowing smile, the upward curves of the corners of her mouth... her mouth. "I want to hear more because it does arouse me. You understand that if you continue, I'm going to imagine you doing these things."

"I'm surprised. You're being quite... forthright."

"I see no point in dissembling when the potion in my cauldron tells you how I feel."

Hermione read both potions; that was true enough.

"Are you sure this is right? There aren't any rules against this in the study protocols?"

"This isn't Muggle therapy, Ms. Granger. We're studying love magic. Erotic love. That includes mutual arousal."

Hermione studied the man before her: his flushed lips, his darkened eyes, and the beautiful, beautiful ridge in his trousers. She rested her eyes there hungrily.

"If I want to touch you, is that allowed?" she asked.

Snape reddened further and looked away.

"The rules of the study are up to me, Ms. Granger."

"There aren't any study protocols? No research guidelines?"

"It's the Department of Mysteries," he said, snorting. "We make it up as we go along."

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered something unintelligible about the wizarding world.

"I will go on with my story, then," she said. "I will stop immediately on your word."

"You were saying," he prompted, in a tense whisper. "He was rubbing your clit and putting his fingers in you."

"Yes. On purpose, to get me wetter. He said he wanted to try something he'd heard was just as good as fucking but wouldn't take my virginity. He lay back on the ground with his cock out flat against his belly and spelled my dress off and had me straddle him, with his hands on my hips, my knees on either side of him, and he lowered me onto him and helped move my hips so my clit was rubbing back and forth on his cock like it was like it was just *designed* for that purpose, just a hard post of flesh for women to use to get off, and I got wetter and wetter and slipped back and forth on that lovely cock, and he couldn't hold off and he came. I'd never seen a boy climax before, and it was gorgeous, the semen shooting out, his face twisted and panting. When he recovered, he flipped me onto my back and sucked my breasts, hard. That felt so good; it made me cry out. Then he bathed what seemed like his whole face between my legs and licked me with huge fast licks, and it didn't take me long at all, after that. I came on his face and he licked it all up and when we finished, he was still hard."

Snape gave a small breathless laugh, and she asked, gently, "Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure I can't touch you?"

"This is quite enough for me to handle for now, Hermione."

"But some other time? Do you think you'll let me?"

"I don't know. Yes. I've never done this before. Is that what we would do?"

Hermione showed no surprise and her tone was gentle, but intense.

"Any time you want, I'll be glad to arouse you, to touch you or not touch you. Anything you want."

Snape seemed unable to think of a reply to that prospect. Finally, he said, "I will see you at our next session, then."

Glancing at the cauldrons, Hermione asked, "Will you think of me tonight and climax, do you think?"

"Would you like me to?" he said, sounding nervous.

"I know that's what I'll be doing," she said. "Thinking about you. Making myself come. Yes, I'd like you to do the same. For me." She savored the faint smile and blotchy red skin she could see through his hair as he looked down, too shy to meet her eyes. She let herself out the door.

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The following week's session marked a first: the two of them didn't touch at all. He wasn't waiting outside to put his arms around her when she arrived; she could let herself in, after all, so she did. He started, pale and skittish, when she entered. She walked to him where he was hovering over the cauldrons. He almost flinched, although his nervous gaze stayed fixed on her.

A glance at the cauldrons showed her what she expected to see.

"You fantasized about me, you touched yourself, and you came," she said, eyes sparkling.

"So did you," he replied in a hushed voice, quirking his lips into a smile before quickly turning back to the cauldrons.

"Look at that," she marveled. "We want each other equally. The potions look so beautiful today."

Unable to speak, Snape only nodded, staring at her cauldron in near disbelief.

"Do you think... this is real?" Hermione asked, tentatively. "Not just because... I'm on the rebound, or because we've been talking to no one but each other for days, or because this is what happens between a researcher and a subject when they talk about sex?"

"I've interviewed hundreds of subjects and never reacted this way before," he said, sounding tense. "Does it feel real to you?"

"I feel attracted to you. I want to arouse you. I fantasize about making you want me while we talk. I go home after our sessions and picture your cock getting hard because of me and imagine that you ask me to touch you. It doesn't feel any different from the times I've wanted someone else. That means it's real, right?"

His eyes still fixed on the cauldrons, Snape said, "I've studied love for too long to think it makes any difference: real or not, rebound or not. The people who do well together do so no matter how or why they got together. Any love can end badly. All I can say is, it's real for me. I think it is; I've never felt this before. If I can trust the evidence, perhaps it is real for... *us*."

"What is it you haven't felt before?"

"Reciprocation." Snape was shaking a little. "And now... now, I am having difficulty controlling my mind. This is... uncomfortable."

"It's not an illusion. I do desire you," Hermione said. "I can wait for you to decide what you need. Take your time. Even if that means being apart for a while so you can think."

"No. No. Don't leave."

Hermione sat down quietly and waited.

"Will it matter that I've never been with anyone before?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Sex is easy. It's relationships that are hard. But you already know that part."

"You said you've had one other lover. Can you tell me about that? Was it someone I know?"

Hermione worried at her lip. "I'm not sure this is a good idea... it wasn't a big deal. It only happened a few times."

His eyes shut tight, Snape said, "I'd like to know. Please. Oh,*no*." He groaned. "Please tell me it wasn't Potter."

Hermione laughed despite Snape's piteous expression. "No! The very thought. No. It was Kingsley."

Snape opened his eyes at that.

"Kingsley. Shacklebolt." An eyebrow went up. "When... ?"

"Months ago. It was only a few times."

"And?"

"He stayed with me at night when I couldn't sleep and no one else knew what to do with me. He held me and murmured his magic to me, and when I still couldn't sleep, he... he sucked at my nipples."

"Ah. Nipple stimulation to trigger the production of oxytocin," said Snape, after a pause. "Love magic."

"Yes. Then I asked him to make love to me, so he did. He took off his robes and his skin was so warm, and he held me and slipped his cock into me, so gently, and kept it there, still. He didn't move except to murmur in my ear and move his hand on my clit. He made me come that way. I felt his cock grow harder inside me when I came, and only then did he thrust a little and let himself come."

Snape looked stricken. "Was he was a good lover, then?"

Hermione protested, "*Why* are you asking me these things? Where are we going with this?"

Snape didn't answer; he just stared into their potions as if Petrifying them.

"Jealousy feels almost like death," he said. "I have never been able to understand why it has to cause this excessively twisted degree of pain. Now there's a true mystery. Well. This aspect of love certainly isn't new to me."

"Can we stop talking about Kingsley now? You don't need to be jealous of him. I told you, it only happened a few times."

"Why did you not continue as lovers?"

"Oh. He offered," she said, holding his gaze. "But I ended it because I didn't love him. And I think he was only doing it to be kind. I couldn't bear that. I know how it feels to be *desired*."

Snape laughed softly, shaking his head. "The Minister of Magic...*fucked* you... to be kind. The *Minister of Magic*."

When he put it that way, Hermione laughed, too.

"Yes. And I didn't want it anymore because it didn't feel real. Not like what's between us. This. This is real."

Hermione locked gazes with Snape and watched him struggle to keep himself open and undefended, flushes of emotion surging through his face despite his visible efforts to modulate them. Saw his rapid breathing and the tension in his immobilized muscles.

Rising from her chair, she stepped over to where Snape sat with fearful hope. She held out her hand and drew him up to stand with her. She placed his arms around her, the way they had held each other since their first day in the room. She stroked his right cheek, reached her face up to press her own cheek against him and lingered there, spreading her warmth through him. She touched her fingertips to his lips.

"There," she said. "This is real."

She kept her arms around him but pulled back to study his face. "I'd like to kiss you now. Please."

Mutely, Snape nodded. She brushed her lips over his cheek, then his mouth. She felt a surge of desire in him as they connected. With shaky breaths that settled into ~~yes~~ between them, they sucked, touched, fused their warmth. His kisses grew fierce with long-denied hunger. The rush of emotion must have brought tears rising within Snape because she felt wetness trickle down her cheeks. She wiped the tears away as she stroked her hands over his hair, holding him steady as they drank each other in.

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Hermione sealed and labeled each flask as Snape decanted plasma from a still-glowing cauldron.

"What gave you the idea to develop it?" she asked, bouncing a little in her curiosity.

"The Great Hall, actually," said Snape, smiling at her eagerness. "It's the same charm the headmasters and headmistresses use on the ceiling to reflect the weather. Yes, I can teach it to you," he said before she could open her mouth. "Muggles measure love magic in the blood, too, but their method is cumbersome and a bit painful. It requires them to draw blood every time, and the measurements reflect only the exact moment of the blood draw. I wanted something less invasive with a steadier flow of data that didn't require interrupting the subject."

Hermione flung her arms around him and her laughter bubbled over. "Oh, clever! Beautiful, clever, wonderful man." She beamed delightedly into his eyes, as deep as she could go.

Snape decanted the last of the plasma and started wiping down the cauldron, his face twitching as he fought down a smile at her praise.

"I've already agreed to marry you, Hermione," he said, deadpan. "There's no need to flatter me further."

"And blood magic!" she exclaimed, undeterred. "Even better! What gave you the idea to measure love magic in blood?"

"My friend Lily," he said carefully. "Blood magic was a branch of magic I learned from Lily, although not until after she died. She was always so good at it. She could always find the love in people and translate it to spells and potions, break down the emotion into practical elements and procedures. She had such a good mind for that. Intuitive."

"Oh," breathed Hermione, tears starting in her eyes. "Harry's mum. Intuitive, yes."

Snape flicked an alarmed glance to Hermione's cauldron, but there was nothing worrisome to see in her potion, just a sudden upswell of love.

"If she was anything like Harry, I can understand why people loved her," said Hermione. "I miss Harry so much. I haven't seen him and Ginny in ages. I'm so glad this study is finished. I'll owl them tonight."

Snape exhaled and sat at the desk, reaching for his quill.

"Paperwork," he grumbled, flicking his wand at a heaping pile of scrolls. "I should just write 'Dear Kingsley: The plasma works *Exactly as I said it would*' and send it by interdepartmental memo." Hermione watched him scrawl his name on parchment after parchment. She frowned.

"You're not going to want me to take your surname, are you? I had such a row with Ron over that."

"I have no desire to inflict the name 'Snape' on anybody else, let alone my wife," he said. "I dislike the name even for myself. It's an ugly name. Severus is an ugly name."

"They're not ..."

"My masters called me by those names," he interrupted, his lip curling. "Dumbledore called me Severus. Voldemort called me Severus. Snape is the name I got from my father. My name just reminds me of those things."

"Then what would you like me to call you, love?"

Snape's expression softened. "I like it when you call me that."

"Love," she repeated and walked with him to the cauldrons holding their potions. "Together?"

They cast *Evanesco* together, then started wiping down the empty cauldrons.

"Now we won't see every tiny thing the other person is feeling," said Hermione, laughing. "Now we'll be like everyone else and have to ~~to~~communicate."

"Some privacy would be a relief," said Snape fervently. "I've grown accustomed to being alone in my life. More than alone. There were times when I was Occluded nonstop, even in my sleep. Being so legible has been difficult."

"A bit of mystery is good for a marriage," said Hermione, putting the cauldrons away in the supply closet. She linked her arm through Snape's, and they walked out of the room together.

## Eros

The marriage had only one condition: that she never look at him during lovemaking. When Hermione sees Snape in the night, she violates the terms and drives him away. She must complete three tasks and travel to the land of the dead in order to win back her beloved.

## Chapter 2: Eros

"I keep expecting to see Ron here," Harry whispered to Ginny. "Saying something horribly inappropriate, like 'I can't believe she's marrying that git. Mental, that one.'"

"Hush. Her parents are coming," Ginny whispered back, grinning. "I know. Me too."

The Grangers, looking subdued, took their place at beside an even more subdued-looking Molly Weasley. A fiercely approving Minerva McGonagall officiated. The bride looked serene; the groom looked pale, nervous, and almost too young. The mountaintop ceremony was brief: vows, rings, a kiss, and then it was over.

Ginny was the first to kiss the bride, flinging her arms around Hermione and saying, "I'm so happy for you. You look good. Glowing. You're *you* again, Hermione. Welcome back."

Molly hugged the bride tight, crying and stroking her hair. "Hermione, if you need anything *anything* the answer is yes. You'll always be my daughter. Our home is always your home. Oh! Kingsley sent a bottle of Ogden's Old Finest ahead to the inn and says to take your time until you're ready to come back; the office isn't going anywhere..."

Hermione heard Snape inhale at the mention of Kingsley and slipped her hand into his, leaning trustingly against his arm.

Harry hugged Hermione with one arm and said to Snape, "I wish you all the happiness, sir." He looked like he wanted to say more, but at the sight of Snape's compressed lips, he backed away, amused.

Hermione waited. Her parents hung back, wary of their child since the war.

"Mama," she said softly, and her mother cried out and held her widowed daughter, and Hermione said, "Mama, I love him." Her father hugged Hermione next and shook hands with Snape, and that was it. Professor McGonagall sent up a shower of sparks over the couple; they turned together and Apparated to their honeymoon.

Hermione's father blew out his breath. Her mother turned to McGonagall and said, "He looks so... sepulchral. Like someone who never sees the sun. Hermione's really safe with him?"

"There's none safer," said McGonagall tartly. "I've known Severus Snape since he was a lad of eleven. It's a good match. There's not many I would say could be a good match for either of them, powerful as they are."

"He does look like death," said Hermione's father, musing.

"Actually, it's love," said Harry. "He studies love, now that he's not teaching. As an Unspeakable. That's what he does. In a room that's kept locked at all times."

Hermione's mother asked, "He's not anything dangerous, then? Not like you or like Ron running the risk of getting killed every day? He's not anything to do with Dark wizards, is he?"

As the other three Gryffindors suddenly avoided each other's gazes, Ginny said briskly, "Oh, it'll do Hermione good to be with someone scarier than she is, for once. Why are we all standing around here? Doesn't anyone else want tea? I'm starving."

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The lovers Apparated directly into their room at the inn. Hermione slipped Snape's wedding robes off his shoulders and spelled them into the wardrobe, then removed her wedding finery. He watched Hermione's nakedness emerge from her clothing a layer at a time, his eyes riveted, his face open and young, his mouth slightly parted. She looked younger when naked, curved through the belly and hip... and there were her bare breasts, full on her slender frame. He stood immobile by the bed, heart beating rapidly. It seemed impossible that this beautiful naked woman was approaching him and kissing him with her warm mouth. They had kissed many times, yet it still felt beyond belief that another person could want to do such a thing with him.

He gave a hoarse cry, unable to bear the arousal, and gripped her head hard as he returned her kisses. His hands swept over her naked back, slipped over the divine smoothness of her buttocks, plunged back into her hair as she pressed her breasts against him. Oh. Oh. That softness. That roundedness. Not an accident this time, not something he must pretend not to notice, but a woman's breasts deliberately offered for him to feel. He swept his hands up her sides to grasp her breasts, pulled away from the kiss to hold one in each palm and look, sweep his thumbs over her nipples oh, that was good and back again. He let all his fingertips reverently touch that enticing flesh that felt so different from anything else, impossible to resist. With a moan, he bent his head to each nipple, kissing, licking, then sucking with deep pulls on each breast until she cried out, too.

"I want to see you," she breathed, unbuttoning his shirt. "Let me look at you." He stripped off his shirt, hesitated nervously before removing his trousers and socks, then gasped as she fell to her knees before his crotch.

She rubbed her palm over his erection through the cloth of his pants, then her cheek, then her lips. Snape rested his hands lightly in her hair as he threw his head back almost in agony, his knees starting to shake. She peeled away his pants where the fabric was translucent with pre-come. She stretched the elastic carefully with her fingers and eased the pants down over his hips, freeing his cock. He was so hard that the flesh was shining. She took a deep long look, bringing her face close, touching his balls with one hand, breathing in his humid scent and exhaling audibly. Deliberately, she took his cock into her mouth and gave it a firm sucking lick.

"*Ohhh*. Hermione. I must lie down. My legs won't hold me up anymore."

"All right, love," she said, looking at Snape's wild, aroused face, his lips such a dark pink they looked unreal, his eyes dazed. He tugged the covers off the bed and pulled her down with him, groaning as her naked torso pressed against his side, gasping as her breasts brushed his bare chest.

"Let me look at you," she said, sweeping her hands over his chest, fondling his nipples. She settled with one hand wrapped loosely around his cock to stroke it while she looked.

His body was unblemished, completely pure along all its lengths: the white skin over his clavicle and shoulders, the cut of his hips, the loose slope of his belly under the cock she was stroking, the lean sweep of his thighs and calves and feet. Not a blemish, not a scar on him, just the Dark Mark faded like old newsprint on one arm, flawless everywhere else.

"You're beautiful," she murmured. "You're so beautiful. Let me lie on you. Is that all right?"

He nodded and she rose to straddle him, centering herself over his cock. She lowered her body over his, his erection nestled against her belly. She swept his hair out of his face with one hand, luxuriating in her lover's gaze and reading him as deeply as she could.

Then it happened. Like a shutter closing. At a level that felt like a *halfway* depth in his gaze, neither at the surface nor all the way down. Something happened in his eyes.



Snape froze under her body and squeezed his eyes shut in anguish, his brows furrowing as he fought to resist the feeling. Hermione felt his muscles go rigid and wrong under her, and she sat up beside him immediately, terrified.

"Tell me what's happening, if you can."

Snape choked out, "I don't know what's happening. Stay close to me. Don't leave."

Hermione stared at him, heart hammering. His eyes were tracking rapidly back and forth behind his shut lids. His focus was so internal that the air seemed to chill between them.

"Okay. Okay." Snape opened his eyes and took in Hermione, hovering too near in her alarm. His expression was remote and fearful.

"I require a moment alone," he said brusquely. "I will let you know when I have finished."

There was nowhere else to go but the washroom. Hermione shut the door and used the loo, wiping away the heavy lubrication between her legs. She flushed, washed her hands, lowered the lid and sat on it, her mind aimlessly racing. She was just about to Summon a book when Snape knocked.

"Please..." he said, his face pale. Hermione took his hand, and he led her back to sit on the bed.

"I want to help," she said.

"Look away from me for a moment," he instructed.

Hermione broke eye contact and turned her head. At his word, she faced him again. He nodded once to himself, lips turned down.

"I'm going to quench the lights now," he said. "Just for a moment. *Nox*."

Darkness settled over their eyes and seeped into their lungs, violet-black, portentous. Hermione felt Snape's warmth beside her. She sensed his other hand reaching for her, an arm around her, a kiss on her shoulder.

"*Lumos*."

The daylight streamed back into the room, and Hermione shut her eyes against it.

"As I suspected. I can't stop Occluding, Hermione," he said, and Hermione paled with horror and understanding. "It's automatic at this point. It seems that sex no, *love* exposes me. When you look at me, I'm exposed before you. Instinct kicks in. I defend myself against the exposure, even though I welcome it. I tried to touch you anyway, to see if that would help. But it felt wrong sick to touch you while shutting you out."

"But when it's dark?"

"I think... there is a chance I can fight the Occlumency then," he said. Hermione had never heard him sound so shaky. "I can relax my guard and override that reflex. It helps when you're looking away from me, but I'm still on guard. I need darkness, Hermione. The dark is where I feel safe. I don't know if it will be every time, or just my first. I don't know. But tonight, can you wait until nighttime, if you still want me? Can you take me as a lover and not look at me?"

Snape shook his head. "I am sorry, Hermione. This is hardly the wedding night I wished for you."

Hermione cried out and put her arms around him. Of course he'd be afraid he'd disappointed her.

"Yes, let's wait until dark, love," she said. "You will let me hold you now, won't you? Will you help me dress for dinner?"

Dinner was good. Dinner was slow. Hermione held Snape's hand on the table the entire time.

They were still holding hands when they reentered their room, closed the door behind them, and turned to look at each other. Snape's eyes were dark with love as his brilliant wife smiled at him warmly, turned him around, and placed both arms around him from behind, enveloping him.

"*Salvio Hexia. Protego Totalum*," she chanted softly. A golden glow arose from between them and hummed into visibility, resolved into lines of golden-hued energy that projected and criss-crossed each other to form a protective dome over the lovers. Even after a lifetime in magic, the beauty of love gold still silenced Snape with awe. He turned to shake his head admiringly at Hermione. Yes, this would help him feel safe. In the kindness of this protective light, his joy in her unfurled, rose in his eyes, uplifted his lips and his countenance.

"*Nox*," he said, his voice going dark. The dome of threaded light glowed brighter, then subsided, although the feeling of protection remained.

"*Nox*," Hermione agreed softly, and they were cushioned by the darkness and its warmth.

Snape turned in Hermione's arms so they were facing each other, but in the darkness, there was nothing to see it was all feeling, and breathing, and tasting. Urgent hands cupped either side of Hermione's face. The lovers laughed softly as they kissed, hungry sucking kisses with tongues that were almost obscene in their frank tasting of each other's mouths.

"Bed," he suggested, and she turned to pull down the covers as he moved to stand behind her, holding her hips and rubbing his erection against her buttocks. She laughed, turned back to him, kissed him, gave his cock a squeeze. She was about to undo his trousers when he growled playfully, spelled off all their clothes and seized her. He guided her onto the bed and climbed on top of her, kissing her breasts, her neck, her hair. They could feel the shapes of smiles on each other's lips as they kissed again. Then Snape moved down on the bed to part her knees with his hands and settle his face between her legs, learning his lover with his hands and his mouth.

"Yes, there," she whispered. "That's where your tongue goes, or your hand. That's where you lick to make me come." He worked his tongue over her clit as she guided him, licking her steadily, and she could feel his tongue and lips shaking with the intensity of his hunger. "And there. That's where your cock goes. Yes, put your fingers inside, feel what's there waiting for your cock. You can do that harder. Harder. Ah. Fast or slow; either way is good."

With a final kiss on her clit, Snape moved back up her body with a triumphant laugh. She gasped to feel the smoothness of his cock touch her body and lifted her hips as Snape found her entrance and guided his cock in with his hand, moaning. He lay his head on her and rested there for a moment, cock all the way in her, just breathing. He took a few experimental thrusts, almost whimpering, and Hermione stilled him with a hand so she could shift her hips and raise her knees. He sucked in his breath at the change in angle that opened her further to his cock. Hermione settled her hands lightly on his hips, and he began to thrust.

"It's all right to go faster," she whispered. "You can go harder. Yes, like that. You can pound into me as hard as you want. Ah ah that feels so good..." Hermione fell silent with the beauty of it, a man pounding with almost unbearable thrill into another for the first time, a man learning the world of fucking and feeling the knowledge change all of his nerves. His cry as he climaxed was unguarded and raw, an edge of pain to his voice, an almost panicked protest at the relentlessness of his pleasure. She held her hands loosely over his sweaty back and felt his heart pounding against her as he quieted.

When his breath returned, Hermione shifted beneath him and he experienced, for the first time, the tiny poignant loss of pulling out: both partners gave a little cry as he withdrew, his cock hot and fragrant. He lay down beside Hermione and asked awkwardly, "Did you...?"

"Here. I'll show you," she said, placing his hand over her own as she slipped her middle finger onto her clit. He drew in his breath as she showed him her pressure and her rhythm.

"Do you want to try?" she asked, but he said no, he just wanted to feel and learn this time.

"It makes me come harder if you suck one of my nipples while we do this," she murmured, guiding his head to her breast. So it was with his tongue on her nipple and his middle finger thrust within her that Snape first knew a woman's orgasm, heard the climb of her gasps, felt her walls grow thick and plush with her climax.

"Do you feel that?" she asked, holding his hand down where it was. "Did you feel how I contracted when I came? It feels really good for me to start fucking right after I come."

"I'll be sure to remember," said Snape, pressing slow kisses on her face.

Hermione moaned at that, an extravagant sound.

"Just the sound of your voice, making promises," she breathed. "It makes me want you all over again. I could take you again right now."

His kisses stilled; he said nothing for a while, but his arms tightened around her.

"No one's ever said anything like that to me before," he said, quietly. "Obviously, since I've never slept with anybody until now. But I don't think anyone's ever even thought of me that way."

"Never? I find that hard to believe."

"Not that I'm aware of, no. Certainly not when I was young. And when I was spying, I couldn't want this. It would have weakened me. The work was too difficult."

"Yes, I remember. I was there for some of it. You did it well."

"Averse as I am to lugubrious self-pity... nobody has ever wanted me until you."

"I'm glad for it," she said fiercely.

"*Glad? Why?*" he spat. "It's hardly something to celebrate."

"*Because you are pure,*" she said, emphasizing every word. He felt her sit up in bed, imagined her fervent face as she made her point. "Nobody ever exploited your sexuality. Dumbledore didn't need it of you. Voldemort didn't need it of you. They didn't twist it. They didn't *use* it. They left it *alone*. You came to me freely, love. You came to me a virgin. All of this was still yours and now it's ours. Nobody else has ever seen this part of you."

All the darkness seemed to fill with his thoughts, swirling silvery through the air as though the room were a Pensieve.

"I was never attractive," he said, "and then I became middle-aged. I didn't think this would ever be for me."

"It's dark right now, love," she said. "We're safe, and I want you, over and over again, and you are beautiful."

"I feel beautiful with you, in the dark," he whispered as he pulled her back down and buried his face in her hair.

"Marry me," she said.

She felt his smile. "It seems I already have," he replied. "I never expected a second chance to do something like this. I've been given so many second chances, and they didn't feel like gifts. Every single one of them was for something grim. Meant for someone else. Or to atone for the sick, wrong things I'd done. I never had a second chance that was just for me before."

Hermione went still.

"This isn't a second chance," she said. "You're still on your first. This is something you've never done wrong. You're still whole. You're still new."

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They settled Snape's things into Hermione's house after the honeymoon. He owned little except for his books, which they spelled directly into Hermione's library, complete with the shelves that already held them. He didn't even need to move his brewing equipment; he kept all of those things at his office.

He resumed work immediately. Hermione wanted to avoid the Ministry until she was sure the tabloids would leave them alone, but she worked for the department from home. They settled into a good pattern: calm by day, intimate at night. They had not tried to make love in daytime after that first time. It all felt too new. Decades of terror had imprinted Snape with Occlumency. It would be folly to fight it with a fledgling bond. They would need night after night of lovemaking to forge love magic strong enough, months or even years.

It was better for Snape to restrict the sex to the dark, anyway. Sex damaged him enough as it was. The chaotic flooding rush of emotions undid him, hours and days after the act itself ended, collapsing the internal architecture that had been his life's work. He had become prone to unpredictable flashes of rage lately, triggered by nothing that he could identify. Memories from thirty or forty years ago surfaced vividly and refused to release him for hours. He spent one perplexing morning in his office doing nothing but weeping.

Sex dazed him. It seemed incredible that anything could be so new, all the things Hermione did because she thought he might like them. She dragged her erect nipples gently over the skin on his neck, his ear, his closed eyelids, his cheeks. She introduced him to the broad flat lick of fellatio. He learned the thrill of a woman drinking down his semen. When he kissed her after, he learned his own taste. He learned how fellatio felt different when her finger massaged his prostate, learned the strangely addictive nery feel of a prostate orgasm, learned that the ejaculate tasted acrid, sharper tasted the way prostate sex felt. It was different with a partner. His decades of routine masturbation seemed so flat now, nothing at all like the succulent fervor of partnered sex.

Suction slew him the hardest. All his life he had felt the gnawing greed of want. Now, when he desired his wife, he could take her into his mouth. He could take deep pulls on her nipples, working his tongue around the edge of the areolas and into her flesh. He could suck between her legs, licking over her clit in great arcs. With suction, he knew himself stronger: *I am. I want. I exist.*

How was it that ordinary men went about their lives by day when this sacred magnificence was performed on their bodies by night? Would they not look different, sanctified, if they had known these acts even once? *Did* they all have sex? Was it possible? Not just despicably virile specimens like Kingsley, who was undoubtedly hung like a demigod, but the unremarkable ones, the mousy ones? Did Arthur Weasley...? Had Neville Longbottom...? Bill Weasley with his wife Fleur, of course; but the nondescript men he saw daily at the Ministry but barely noticed, men like Reg Cattermole, who had married Mary Macdonald? Did these mysteries take place in their marriage bed as well? Had everybody known but him, all along?

There were nights when *Nox* didn't work. All the protective spells, all the darkness they could conjure were sometimes not enough to fight the reflexive Occlumency that slammed shut his mind and refused to recognize his wife. Sometimes, when that happened, he would put on his wire-framed spectacles, Hermione would cast *Lumos*, and they would sit up in bed and read together. That was good, too.

Other nights, when *Nox* worked beautifully, the two of them made a game of casting the golden dome together, not for its inviolable protection but for its beauty. They would maintain the dome at the thread stage and each conjure more love strands with their wands, adding them decoratively to the dome's thickness.

He couldn't tell her the whole truth. His love was growing, but so was a new dread, growing faster, even, than his resistance to Occlumency. The more he loved her, the thicker his defenses grew. He worried that the next time his Occlumency slammed him shut, he wouldn't be able to fight his mind back open. Yet he didn't tell her his fear. He couldn't stop longing to make love to her in daylight. He couldn't stop wanting to look at her.

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It wasn't anyone's fault when it happened. There was no reason for them to think it would. They always woke at odd hours to read in bed by wandlight. If one of them was tired, they'd just sleep through it. This was normal for them.

Snape's dreams must have been erotic; his erection was rampant underneath the bedclothes, and his eyes flicked back and forth beneath his closed lids. Hermione glimpsed his hard-on when she came to the end of a page and simply paused to look at him. That was all. She barely ever got to see her husband with an erection; they were so careful to compartmentalize their sex life away from the light. She just ran her eyes up and down the length of it and thought about touching it. If she decided to wake him up and touch him, or lie next to him and masturbate, she'd be sure to cast *Nox* first, as was their habit. She looked at his sleeping face, lashes long against his pale, dry skin. While she was looking, he opened his eyes, still dreaming, and smiled at her. He reached for her breast with one hand and touched himself with the other before he jerked fully awake and stared at her in panic.

"*Nox!*" she screamed, but it was too late.

Light blazed through the room as Snape's wand leapt to his hand, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a feral snarl, the blaze in his eyes physically pushing Hermione back against the headboard. She saw barrier after barrier slamming down in his eyes, accompanied by the sound of shattering glass, Snape's rage exploding around the room like thunderbolts.

The screaming was coming from him.

"I told you not to look at me," he screamed madly. "I told you. I told you." He held his head between clawed hands as he howled. Hermione felt his words as clearly as if he had spoken them: *I can't stop this*. His screams were unvoiced now, but they still tore through her.

"Stay where you are, Hermione," he commanded. "Don't try to help." He shot out an immobilizing spell, but she had already erected a powerful shield around herself that deflected any magic, even the protective spell he cast at her. From within that invisible shield, she stared at him, terrified.

The window of the bedroom kept shattering and reassembling. Wind whipped into the room from the darkness outside. Jagged lights shot everywhere, shards of hot-white and gold. Snape roared with frustration as he commanded them away with imperious sweeps of his arm, pushed them away from the bed, screaming, "No. No. No."

By force of will, he got the shattering to cease. A glimmering mound of dangerous glass shards remained, contained by a tremulous dome of golden energy.

Five seconds passed. Ten. Both of them fixed their eyes on the solidifying glow of the dome until Snape's breathing evened out. The gold light dimmed and dissipated.

Snape waved his wand carefully. The glass rose in a subdued sheet and re-formed into a window.

He walked over to the window, ran his hand over the glass, rapped it with his knuckles. It was fine. He leaned against the wall next to the window and slid down the floor, turning a weary gaze to his wife.

"*Finite*," Hermione whispered, and the air pressure changed as her shields went down.

"I won't be able to unlock my Occlumency this time," he said dully. "It's a more intractable variant."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry."

"I have contained my emotions; that is the limit of my powers, I'm afraid," he continued, as neutrally as though reporting to work. "I was uncertain I could achieve even that much. I trust you sustained no damage."

"Not a scratch, love," Hermione whispered, tears starting in her eyes.

He shut his eyes grimly at the word "love."

"I am not a coward, and I will never flee again," he muttered, his eyes still shut. "But I require privacy. Please leave me for a while."

"No," she whispered again. "I can't leave you."

Snape glared at Hermione with such hostility that she instinctively threw up her shields again. She studied his face for a long moment. She took a deep breath and lowered her shields with deliberate care.

"There's nobody here but us," she said quietly. "You have nobody to protect but yourself. I can protect myself. I'm not going anywhere. I won't interfere; I won't try to help. But I'm not leaving you here alone."

His snarling expression didn't soften. He flicked his gaze from the bedroom door to the closed window to the frightened witch sitting on the bed, knees pulled up to her chest, face white.

"I'm going to the sitting room," he announced tersely. He walked out and closed the door behind him, shutting his wife inside.

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Hermione forced herself to endure an hour of waiting before she went to him.

The couch was too short for him; his legs were tucked awkwardly beneath a blanket, his feet protruding.

"Let me fix that for you," Hermione said softly. She enlarged the couch to fit him.

He groaned, sat up, and Summoned himself a glass of water. Hermione tentatively reached out to touch his shoulder. He suppressed a grimace but tolerated the caress.

"Will you come back to our bed?" she asked.

"No," he snarled, then shut his eyes and made a visible attempt at civility. "Not as long as I'm fighting this."

"You'll come back to me after?" she asked, her voice small.

He sighed. "I don't know. I don't know what to do about this. I hardly know where to start." She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. "There's no literature on this. None. There's nobody I can ask."

"There's got to be!" she started, and he cut her off again.

"The research we have on the subject was written *by me*, Hermione. Nobody else has studied this aspect of Occlumency to such a degree."

That shut her up.

"*Time and space matter in magic*," she quoted, crying softly. "I don't know if I can bear not having you in our bed. I don't want you to leave."

"They do matter," he said. "And I don't want to leave. That's why I can't be in our bed. I won't leave you, Hermione. Or our home. But I will need to be alone and apart from you to fight this. I can't fight this and fight the urge to shut you out, as well."

"You... you shouldn't have to sleep on the couch," she whispered, heartbroken. "Let me clean out the guest room for you, at least."

He gave her a skeptical look. "I do know what's in the other bedroom, Hermione." She didn't answer.

"It's almost morning. I may as well go to work," he said finally. He groaned, weary of the drama, and slumped back against the couch. Hermione flopped down beside him.

"I bet this never happened with Weasley," Snape said mock-resentfully.

"Yeah, well, he's dead, isn't he, so a lot of good that does when I want to get laid," Hermione mock-snapped in reply.

"He was, however, *normal*. I'm sorry your current model is rather defective."

"You've no idea how much work it took for me to live with *anormal* man. Honestly, you're loads easier for me to handle."

"So, Ms. Know-It-All Granger. Will you live up to your publicity? Think up a clever way to fix me," he said.

"I had to marry the one Occlumens who could fool the self-proclaimed *world's greatest Legilimens*," she grumbled. "That loser."

"*Retired* Occlumens," he corrected. "*Trying* to be retired."

"Retired," she agreed. "Oh, love. You've worked so hard. You're allowed a bit of trauma."

He snorted mirthlessly, and she looked at him to see if he had softened toward her. But his gaze was so impersonal that she shuddered and looked away again.

## Tea

### Chapter 3 of 3

The marriage had only one condition: that she never look at him during lovemaking. When Hermione sees Snape in the night, she violates the terms and drives him away. She must complete three tasks and travel to the land of the dead in order to win back her beloved.

### Chapter 3: Tea

Hermione woke up mid-morning. Snape had been at work for hours.

There was no use putting it off. She padded barefoot out of the bedroom and stood in front of the guest room door. Taking a deep breath, she laid her right cheek against it and closed her eyes.

Nothing happened. It was just a door. She opened her eyes, sighed, and turned the handle.

There were all his things, just where she had stacked them when she'd taken a break from the plasma study. Ron's clothes. His school things. His Quidditch equipment. The shelves of books from Auror training. His Order of Merlin, hung on a doorknob.

She started with the pile closest to her. Clothes. She ignored the pang she felt and Vanished them. No one would want them; this was a time to be ruthless.

His toys from childhood, the boxes of comic books, the chocolate frog card collection with his own card in a commemorative frame. Nobody would want these, right? Oh, maybe one of the nieces or nephews. The framed one she could give to Molly. She started a pile for Molly and another for the children.

His old prefect badge. His Chudley Cannons uniform, hideous thing. Hermione smiled. They had actually come in the middle of the league the year he played Keeper for them. Would they want his uniform for their archives? Probably not. Oh, who knew. Maybe she should ask. She would ask.

His wand.

*Shit.*

Oh, Ron.

There was nothing for it. Hermione just sat down and cried. There wasn't anything to do about this pain. There wasn't ever going to be a bottom to it.

Molly had said she would help.

It was okay to ask for help once in a while.

Hermione picked up Ron's wand and waved all his earthly possessions into a pile, cast a shrinking spell, bagged the lot, and tucked the wand inside the bag with an apologetic note to Molly. She sent the bag away, threw a haphazard series of cleaning spells at the now-empty room, stumbled back to her bedroom and slept again. She'd make up a bed for Snape in the empty room before he got home.

She woke up to the sound of his footsteps in the house, long before she expected him. She checked the time; it was barely past noon.

"You're home early, love. Did something "

Snape walked into the bedroom, levitating a horribly familiar orange duffel bag.

"Would you happen to know anything about this object that showed up in my office?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

"How did you get that?" she asked, confused.

"Did Madam Junior Minister of Magical Law Enforcement, perchance, use a next-of-kin spell to Vanish this extraordinarily heavy package?"

"Yes."

"Hermione, estates pass to the head of household of the legal next of kin."

The silence lasted a good three seconds before Hermione muttered, "Those putrescent shitbags. Unbelievable. Fucking patriarchal wizarding law." She stormed out of bed, hollering, "I'm going in to the office. I'll see you later. *Head of household*. Where are my fucking Ministry robes? *Accio Ministry robes!*"

Snape snickered softly and spared a thought for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as his wife hurled herself into the Floo. He opened the door to the emptied guest room, levitated the duffel bag back inside and closed the door, quietly, with a flick of his wand.

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Anytime Hermione Granger failed repeatedly at something, her hair tended to frizz. Judging by the state of her coif, she'd been failing to raise a golden dome in her bedroom for quite some time.

"Hermione, I've put dinner on the table... What are you doing?"

"I'd have thought that would be *obvious*," she retorted, her lip curling with such scorn that Snape privately marveled. "I'm trying to reproduce conditions of emotional safety so I can conduct trauma research and figure out how to get my husband back. *Protego Totalum... Salvio Hexia...* argh! Shit!"

Snape laughed. That was not, perhaps, the wisest move.

"Don't just stand there laughing! Help me cast these protections! Or figure out something yourself if you've got a better idea!"

"I can't help you with that, Hermione."

That did it; she actually screeched. "Don't tell me this is one of those stupid 'You've got to figure it out on your own or the magic won't work' deals."

"No. I mean I really can't help you. Not while this accursed Occlumency still keeps me locked down. I can't cast reciprocal love magic while this is happening. It isn't working." Snape demonstrated with a series of incantations to turn his magic visible. It shone bright good silver, the soft shimmer of thoughts and Patronuses; it did not connect with Hermione's magic to glow gold.

"You could if you really wanted to," said Hermione, petulant and scornful. "Maybe you're just not trying."

Snape was silent for so long after that comment that Hermione feared she'd gone too far.

"Sometimes I wonder if that is the case," he said. "I wonder if I am blocking you subconsciously out of resentment. I don't believe that I am. I cannot be certain."

"You can do *anything*, love," she said pleadingly. "You're Severus Snape. You could figure out a way to save anything, if you wanted it badly enough."

"I know how to operate alone, Hermione. Working together is new to me. You're the one who knows how to work with others."

"Oh, you think so?" she said witheringly. "Ron left me, once. During the war. He left me alone in the woods with Undesirable Number One and a Horcrux, and I didn't think he'd ever come back. You didn't know about that. That was worse than him dying on me."

"Weasley left you. Alone," said Snape, aghast. "With Death Eaters and Snatchers on the hunt."

"He came back," said Hermione. "Obviously. But there was a time when I thought he didn't love me enough to stay, yes."

"I do love you, Hermione," said Snape quietly. "I love you more than anything I've ever known in my life."

"Can't you hold me?" she asked desperately. "Just touch my hand. Don't shut me out. I can't stand this. This isn't much better than leaving me. It feels like... It makes me want to die again."

"Stop that," he spat. "Histrionics won't help matters."

Hermione stopped short, stunned. Snape winced, wretchedly ashamed.

"I can't touch you right now, Hermione," he whispered apologetically. "Please. Do not ask that of me. To do so would only make things worse. Don't you see what that would do to me?"

Hermione shook her head.

"*Think!*" he snarled impatiently. "Hermione, why can't you have children?"

"What?"

"Think what was done to you," he urged, angry. "Think what it requires for one person to violate another so."

Hermione shook her head again, not understanding.

"I cannot force myself to touch you when I feel so detached," he said, impassioned. "When you beg it of me, I feel anger. It would be poison. What is it to touch someone intimately when feeling disconnected from them? What would I become? I could hurt you. *Think*. I never did any of those things. But I've seen it happen to others. I've seen too much. No."

Hermione nodded slowly, tears in her eyes.

"You would never be that, love," she whispered. "Could you just... try? Just let me touch your hand? Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as you think."

With visible reluctance, he consented and let her take his hand. He closed his eyes; his face darkened, glowering. Hermione removed her hand. He opened his eyes and

shook his head. She recognized that this attempt had only made the barriers between them more impenetrable.

"I'm sorry, love," said Hermione, remorseful. "You were right. Thank you for trying."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry, too. I will keep thinking. I will do what I can."

They ate dinner at the same table, each thinking hard. Hermione went to sleep in the bedroom, and Snape bedded down on the couch.

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It was too early in the morning even for coffee, but it sounded like there was someone in their sitting room. Hermione finished brushing her teeth and emerged from her bedroom to the sight of Snape's trouser-clad arse sticking out of the sitting room fireplace.

"She's up," sounded Snape's muffled voice. "I'll stand back come on through."

Snape stood up and backed away. In a small shower of dust, Harry Potter whirled through the flames, then stepped out of the fireplace, gazing steadily at his oldest friend.

"I hear you need to do some research," he said. "Come on, Hermione we're going on a day trip. Hogwarts library. Professor McGonagall has already told Madam Pince to expect us."

Hermione shot a look at her husband, who said uncomfortably, "Potter has kindly agreed to assist you."

Harry grinned, watching excitement dawn on Hermione's face at the thought of the library.

"It would be lovely... Oh, but Harry, I don't know if I'm up to facing everyone."

A fluid, silvery fabric hit Hermione in the face.

"McGonagall will take us directly from her office to the Restricted Section," Harry reassured her. "You can read under this. It'll be like old times."

Tears filled Hermione's eyes again as she thought about the person who wouldn't be with them.

"Thanks, Harry," she said quietly.

"I figured I owe you one. Or several," he said. "You went with me to Godric's Hollow. This trip can't possibly be as rubbish as that turned out to be."

It worked; Hermione laughed. Cautiously, she turned to Snape. "I'm going to kiss you goodbye, then. Is that all right, love?"

"Yes. Please." Snape stood still with his eyes closed as his wife dropped one tender kiss on his right cheek, then followed Harry into a blaze of emerald green.

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Madam Pince was so pleased to see Hermione that she permitted coffee and toast in the Restricted Section and performed the spill-proof charms herself. Harry busied himself with stacking research items around his friend in the exact patterns she preferred: obscure specialty books directly in front of her, general magical reference just within reach and in chronological order, parchment and three kinds of ink at her elbow, a cart to the side to hold rejects.

"Love potions, Harry? Really?" asked Hermione skeptically, looking over one volume after another.

"Snape's suggestion," he said firmly, and that was all Hermione needed to hear.

Forty-five short minutes later, Hermione spelled a potion recipe onto a piece of parchment and waved the books back onto their shelves. Harry looked surprised; he had evidently expected to be there for much longer.

"Are you sure that's the one?" he asked.

"Pretty sure," she said drily, "considering that every volume I read fell open to this recipe first."

"That's a short list," he said, reading over her shoulder. "Rosehips and roses. Fresh berries and dried. Water from the river Styx. *Mint from the land of death?*"

"At least it sounds like it won't taste vile," she said. "Well, except for the river Styx. *Whoknows* what's in *that* water."

"It'll be brewed, anyway," said Harry, still reading. "So whatever revolting microbes are in there will be good and dead."

"I wonder if microbes die when they cross the Styx, too," said Hermione musingly. She poured Harry more coffee and buttered his toast, exactly as she had done when they were students.

"We can go test the instructions when we're finished with breakfast," said Harry. "Don't worry, not in the potions lab. Hagrid's set up cauldrons in his hut for us."

Oh. *Hagrid*. Hermione looked away quickly from Harry and busied herself with clearing up. Her friend had never been comfortable with tears.

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Fang nearly knocked them over, licking their faces. Hagrid hugged them so hard that Hermione cast a hurried charm over her ribcage and Harry's, as well. Hagrid sobbed once more over Ron's death, and Harry and Hermione were too busy comforting him to be sad about Ron themselves.

"So, Severus Snape, eh?" said Hagrid eventually, attempting a wan smile. "Allus decent to me, Snape was. Even that year. He'll make yeh a good husband, Hermione. Whatever's between you right now, yeh'll figure it out. Yeh'll see."

They tested out the potion instructions in Hagrid's soup cauldron with supplies he had on hand. The procedure seemed straightforward enough, and the ingredients could not have been simpler. They tasted it cautiously when it was done. It made a very good tea.

"So, water from the river Styx," said Harry, putting down his mug. "Do we get that from Slug and Jiggers?"

"Nah, they don't carry it," said Hagrid. "Too dangerous. But yeh can get to the Styx yerself. The thestrals go there to drink the water." He laughed at their stunned expressions and scraped his chair back. "Perfessor Hagrid's still got a thing or two to teach you upstarts, eh?"

Three thestrals came when Hagrid called from outside his hut. Two started eating the meat he set out, but one stepped forward and nosed Hermione, who fought the urge to flinch.

"She remembers yeh, Hermione," said Hagrid. "Look at that. Dead clever, thestrals."

Hermione tentatively ran her hand over the creature's skeletal neck. It was warmer than it looked.

"Do you need me to come with you?" asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head. It seemed like it had been a different lifetime, that night of terror when she'd flown to safety on this thestral, wrapped securely in Kingsley Shacklebolt's arms as Death Eaters swarmed them in the dark air.

"I think this is the part where I leave my friends and go alone," she said, smiling wanly. "Oh, Harry *thank you*. Hagrid, thank you so much."

"She'll know where to go," said Hagrid. "Oh, and take these along. I jes' made 'em this morning."

He bustled back into the hut and emerged with a pouch full of rock cakes. Hermione opened her mouth to decline politely when Hagrid said mysteriously, "Yeh might need 'em."

Hagrid swung her up easily onto the thestral, whispered into the creature's ear, and stepped back as it lifted gracefully into flight. Graceful, hideous, skeletal, dark Hermione smiled, reminded of her husband. "Love after death," she whispered, hugging the thestral's neck. Hagrid's and Harry's waving figures grew smaller as the thestral ascended. She embraced the creature's neck for warmth, although this mattered little once they entered the clouds. Hermione did as well as she could with warming and drying charms, but there was only so much she could do against the cold.

It was cold even on the ground when they landed. The thestral settled gently and Hermione, groaning, struggled off the creature's back. They had flown across the river before landing. Hermione looked around curiously at the bleakness of the landscape, the black water that the thestral was now drinking, the thin daylight, the craggy rocks along the banks. She approached the river, knelt next to the thestral, conjured a flask, and dipped it into the water, watching the liquid stream into the glass. She was just about to cork the vial when she cried out in surprise. The thestral had taken off, heading back the way they'd come, so swiftly that Hermione lost sight of her almost immediately.

Hermione whipped out her wand, but the thestral was out of the range of any summoning. Quickly, she cut a long, shallow incision into her arm by wandtip and shook the blood onto the ground, hoping the thestral would scent it and return. No such thing happened; she was quite alone. She capped the flask, closed the cut with her wand and tried to Disapparate, but the air resisted her magic, queerly heavy.

Clearly, she was meant to walk.

"Point me," she whispered to her wand and followed its confident tug.

It took her through a barren countryside that had clearly known only winter for years, the trees twisted and bare, the bushes blasted as though someone had attacked them. She crested a low hill and gasped when she saw what lay below her.

What was that doing *here*? The stone archway that she knew from the Ministry, the one leading to death, stood ancient and crumbling with suspended tatters of black cloth fluttering in the breeze the real breeze that she felt against her real skin, not the uncanny sacred breeze she remembered from the Department of Mysteries. Was this the real arch, the one in the Ministry only a replica? Or was it in both places at once? Was this one, too, the same from both sides? Did this one have voices? Was this one as dangerous?

She approached cautiously, wand out, until she laughed grimly at herself and put her wand away. She wouldn't need it here. She listened carefully. Was she expecting to hear Ron's voice? She was. She listened for murmurs, but there were none. She edged around to look at the archway from the other side.

A tumultuous barking nearly blasted her back oh, this archway was *definitely* not the same on both sides. When Hermione looked through the archway from *this* side, she gazed upon the lushness of a velvety green landscape that stretched to the horizon, and then with a scream she saw the source of the cacophonous din. Three terrifying enormous beasts with curved fangs in slaving mouths roared toward her...

... And Hermione started laughing.

"Fluffy!" she gasped. "Oh, *honestly*, Hagrid could have told me."

She chanted a basic protective spell in case the dog dogs? got ideas, but it seemed to recognize the scent of Hagrid's hut, of Fang, and of... Oh. The rock cakes. Shaking her head, Hermione Summoned them out of their pouch and tossed them to Fluffy: one, two, three. Fluffy's enormous forked tail thumped the ground, raising an intense fragrance of mint.

*Mint*. Moving swiftly, Hermione harvested a fistful of sprigs and shoved them into the empty pouch. She shot a last nervous look at the distracted dog and, hoping with all her might that her instincts were correct, sprinted past it through the archway where the scent of mint was even stronger.

She was through. She was intact. She was alive.

She was in an office.

And there, sitting at his desk in the locked room of the Department of Mysteries, was Severus Snape.

"You found me," he said, voice breaking. "You've traced the steps I took to get here. Hermione. You did it."

Hermione stared at him in confusion.

"I thought going through the archway would bring me to Hades," she said.

"It did," he replied cryptically. He stepped toward her and held her face in both of his hands, opening his gaze to her, clear and not Occluded. Hungrily, he took in the sight of her whole disarrayed self: hair wild from the thestral flight, robes splashed with river water, hands smudged with blood and dirt and crushed mint. He sat back in his chair, drew her into his lap and kissed her. With a shaky sigh, she settled her head in the crook of his shoulder.

"I didn't know there was another way to get into this room," she said.

"There are many ways," he said. "Nobody knows them all. This way is my favorite, though. This was the way I first found this room."

"I don't understand this at all," said Hermione. "I had this notion I would have to speak to the king and queen of death. It seems silly of me now."

"Well, here we are," said Snape, indicating his Ministry-issued office chair. "On our throne. Perhaps you are tired. You must have come a long way."

"I am tired," she said, burrowing further into his lap. "I could sleep for ages."

"We can Apparate home," he promised. "Just a short walk to the site. I'll take you back along the path I use. You'll understand." He Summoned a vial of Pepper-Up potion, and she drank it down gratefully. She took his arm and they walked out of his office together, back into the verdant landscape, passing by the archway. She knelt by the path to gather more mint.

"I got us water from the river Styx," she said. "For this potion that's supposed to help."

Snape laughed, a rich sound. "Only you, Hermione. I didn't even know the Styx was real."

"I didn't, either! But I can show you. If you walk over that hill for a bit, beyond the archway "

Hermione pointed past the archway toward the wintry landscape on the other side with its clumps of blasted-looking, leafless twigs.

She stared at the bushes suddenly. She gasped and started rushing toward them, dragging Snape along by the hand.

"I get it! I get it!" she cried, beaming. "Oh, that's a good joke. The best. Oh. I understand. I understand."

Snape drew in his breath sharply. "What do you understand?"

*"Rosehips and roses. Fresh berries and dried. I didn't see before. Things that you can only see after you've survived a loved one's death. Things that look dead, but change to bear fruit again. I didn't even see these on my way here, even though they were right there. Oh, love. This has been your landscape all along."*

"You found me," he said again, shaking his head with wonder.

"We don't really need the potion, do we?" she said.

"No," he confirmed.

They reached the leafless bushes. Reaching out eager hands, she harvested rosehip after rosehip, rotund with tart promise, and added them to the pouch from Hagrid. When the pouch overflowed with rosehips and mint, Snape spelled the fabric shut and tucked it into his robes. He folded his beloved into his arms, and they Apparated home.

The tea they brewed at home that night tasted better than the sample brew she'd drunk at Hagrid's. There were a multitude of possible reasons for this. They would isolate each variable and test their hypotheses. Later.

In years to come, they never were able to make love in the daylight without triggering Snape's involuntary Occlumency. On occasion, the shutdown occurred at night, as well. But they were never afraid of it again; it was an inconvenience, nothing more, and the episodes grew less severe in time. And the few times Snape couldn't break through them on his own, Hermione would travel back to the land of the dead to find him. They would walk back home together, gathering rosehips along the way.