

The Betrayal

by sshg316

Who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed? An angst-ridden romantic drabble series. Runner Up for Best Drabble Series at the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

Parts 1-4

Chapter 1 of 6

Who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed? An angst-ridden romantic drabble series. Runner Up for Best Drabble Series at the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

"Is this what you wanted, *Miss Granger*?" he spat, his arms spread wide as he indicated the squalor of his cell. "I trusted you; I believed your words of *kindness*, your declarations of *love* and *acceptance*." He spoke the words as if even the very phonemes which comprised them were repugnant.

"Lies!" Severus bellowed, his rage reverberating off the stone walls. "All of it! Not a single word of truth. You prostituted yourself for Potter. Do you dare deny it?"

Hermione stood motionless, her gaze fixed at some point just over his left shoulder.

"Look at me when I speak!"

Hermione trembled as she stood outside his cell. His rage was nothing she did not deserve; she had betrayed him and she would accept, even welcome his wrath. And so she remained silent as he accused and berated her, quietly enduring his painful censure, but unable to meet his hate-filled gaze. Her heart pounded within her chest and she choked back the words of denial that she desperately wished she could utter truthfully – but she could not. She had lied to him, she had misled him, and when he had fallen in love with her, she had done the unthinkable.

His eyes travelled down her rigid, shaking figure, his lip curling disdainfully. "You cannot even look at me," he mocked. "Unable to tolerate the sight of your lover any longer, *dearling*? How disappointing." He paced the small space, back and forth, his glowering gaze never leaving her ashen face. "Go, Miss Granger. Leave and do not return. I never wish to see your lying, deceitful face again." When she did not move, he suddenly flew to the front of the cell, pressing himself against the bars. "LEAVE ME!" he roared before allowing himself to slide to the floor. She fled.

Hermione raced from the prison, tears streaming down her face, blinding her. Finally, she stopped, unable to continue as she sobbed in despair. She had known from the beginning what she would have to do, but she had been naïve enough to believe that she would escape unscathed. How could she have allowed herself to fall in love with him? She hadn't realised the depth of her emotions until it was too late – her betrayal had been complete. Severus would never forgive her – her actions had been unforgivable. He hated her and she could not blame him; she hated herself.

To be continued ...

A/N: Originally posted at the grangersnape100 community on LJ, this story is complete in six chapters and will be updated as quickly as it can get through the queue. My thanks to Subversa and minuet99 for looking these over.

Parts 5-10

Chapter 2 of 6

Who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed? An angst-ridden romantic drabble series. Runner Up for Best Drabble Series at the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

Severus had not moved since she had left; he remained slumped in a heap on the cold, stone floor, his breathing ragged as shameful tears dripped from his eyes. Damn her to hell and back. He had been a fool for ever thinking that she had truly loved him. Harshly wiping his eyes with a tattered sleeve, he pushed himself to standing before stumbling to the cot. His emotions now spent, he lay down, staring unseeingly at the ceiling, his mind a confusing jumble. Yes, he was certainly a fool – for even as he hated her, he still loved her.

Hermione was not certain if her nausea was due to the lurching of the boat in the choppy water or from her guilt. Leaning over the edge of the wooden vessel, she heaved until her stomach was empty. The ache and nausea remained; it was the guilt, then. How could she have been so stupid to trust that Harry's intentions were honourable? She inhaled sharply. No – she would not blame Harry for her actions. She had known she was betraying Severus ... and she had done it anyway. The salty air stung her eyes. What kind of monster had she become?

Night in Azkaban was horrifying, the screams and shouts echoing through the ancient walls. The Dementors might no longer be present, but the isolation remained oppressive, causing many to lose what little sanity they had left. Tossing and turning on the small cot, Severus vainly attempted to sleep. Every time his eyes slipped shut, he would see her – her eyes darkened with desire as she watched him, her hands caressing her breasts as she wantonly rode him. Cursing his traitorous mind, he deliberately forced the image to change until all he saw was his betrayer. Satisfied, he slept at last.

Her flat was quiet, the only sound coming from the ticking of a Muggle clock. Hermione slept fitfully, visions of Severus in his dark and dingy cell as he raged at her filling her dreams. She awoke with a start, hoping it was only a dream, but knowing it was not. The crushing guilt overwhelmed her once more. He had known betrayal his entire life and always from those who said they cared for him. Now she was amongst that number. She returned to sleep, only to be haunted by a deep, velvety voice murmuring of his love and adoration.

He was led into the courtroom in chains and pushed into a chair. The guards bolted him in place, restraining all movement. Severus snorted. As if he would try to escape. He had nothing to return home to – he might as well live out the remainder of his days in Azkaban. Without Hermione – or who he had believed her to be – his life was desolate and lonely. He had completed his task before she had betrayed him, and that was all that mattered. He had nothing left now. He watched impassively as the Wizengamot entered. And then, he saw her.

Hermione entered the courtroom alone. Harry waved a greeting, and she walked toward him. She slid a hesitant glance at Severus. He looked tired and dishevelled, but otherwise appeared to be his usual sardonic self. She felt her heart clench – she had seen his face open and happy and ... She closed her eyes. She could only hope that today would repair some of the damage she had done. She sat next to Harry, Severus' journal upon her lap. With a deep breath, she prepared herself to testify. After betraying the man she loved, betraying her best friend would be easy.

to be continued ...

Parts 11-20

Chapter 3 of 6

Who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed? An angst-ridden romantic drabble series. Runner Up for Best Drabble Series at the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

Severus stoically watched the proceedings, his eyes steadfast on the members of the Wizengamot. In his peripheral vision, he could just make out her profile. His jaw tightened and clenched, his teeth grinding together. If they would have allowed him to remain in his cell for the duration of this farce of a trial, he would have done, if only to avoid being in the same room as her. He listened to the testimony of Harry Potter, head Auror, of how he had suspected Severus of participating in illegal activities and so had sent in his best operative – Hermione Granger.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she listened to Harry's testimony. Just as she had expected, he was neglecting to mention vital information. He likely thought she would "forget" about it, too. Once his testimony was complete, Harry returned to his seat next to her, grasping her hand in his own in a show of solidarity ... or perhaps it was a warning. Either way, Hermione was not pleased. She did not appreciate being used; Harry had unwittingly made her decision much easier to bear. Her name was called, and clutching Severus' journal to her chest, she made her way forward to testify.

He had no choice but to look at her now, although he refused to meet her eyes. She looked ... unwell. Her hair had been pulled back severely, accentuating the paleness of her face and the dark circles under her eyes. Surreptitiously, he inspected her appearance. She had lost weight and appeared perilously thin. Was she ill? He was in the midst of running through possible diagnoses when he realised what he was doing. Straightening his spine, he hastily shifted his gaze away from her. She had broken his trust and his heart; her well-being was of no concern to him.

"I do so swear," Hermione said, vowing to tell the truth during her testimony. She gave the basics of her mission, careful to leave out the bit of information Harry obviously did not want shared. "I was asked to befriend Mr Snape and determine by any means necessary if he was involved in any illegal activities." She held up the journal. "After I had gained his trust – " She paused a moment, swallowing her guilt. "I gave him this journal, the pages of which have been soaked in Veritaserum and then Charmed. Only truth can be written in its pages."

Severus closed his eyes in an effort to keep his emotions in check. He vividly remembered the night she had given him that journal, telling him it might help him to heal if he were to write down his most honest emotions. The pages would not accept even an unconscious lie, but would only allow him to write the raw, unvarnished truth. She had told him it had been Charmed so that only he would be able to read it. Trusting her, he had filled the wretched book with his deepest secrets and horrifying memories. Her betrayal knew no end.

"I led Mr Snape to believe that he alone could access what he wrote in the journal; however, I am keyed to it as well and can both read and write in the journal. I have released the Privacy Charm to allow the Wizengamot to read the pages that contain the information relevant to the charges in this case."

The Chief Warlock interrupted. "Are you saying, Miss Granger, that we will not be able to read the journal in its entirety?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, sir. I see no reason to invade Mr Snape's privacy any more than is absolutely necessary."

What in Hades was the witch playing at? Grudgingly, he supposed it didn't matter. She had protected the sanctity of his memories and emotions. Not that he believed for a single moment that she didn't have some ulterior motive. He had trusted her once, and he would not make the same mistake twice. Still, had she truly wished to pour salt in the wound, she would have let the world see his sentimental ramblings in all their embarrassing glory. What could she possibly hope to gain by this action? Curious, for the first time that day, he met her gaze.

Quickly looking away from Severus, Hermione handed the journal to the Court Scribe. There was silence as the evidence was read aloud – a list of names and Severus' very own admission that he had created, and was distributing to the people listed, a potion which would permanently hide the Dark Mark. A liquefied variation of a Glamour Charm, it was absorbed into the Mark itself and rendered it undetectable by even the strongest of magical means. "As you have heard," Hermione said carefully, "it appears that Mr Snape has been helping some who have the Dark Mark to escape prosecution."

"Mr Snape, is this true?" an Interrogator in the back asked. "You would do such a thing, even after this very same court exonerated you due to your heroic efforts on behalf of the Light?"

Severus gritted his teeth. "Yes," he ground out. There was no point in denying it, and he no longer cared.

There was murmuring amongst the Interrogators as they conferred and discussed this newest revelation. After a few moments, the Chief Warlock spoke. "Severus Snape, given the evidence against you, this Court has no choice but to pronounce you guilty."

"Wait!" All eyes turned to Hermione.

Hermione felt a swirl of magic around her and breathed a sigh of relief. "I have further evidence to present to the court." Out of the corner of one eye, she saw Harry lean forward in his chair, his mouth silently forming the word, "no." With a deep breath, she was finally able to look at Severus. "I am so sorry, Severus. So very, very sorry." She turned to the Chief Warlock. "Sir, I apologise for not giving you *all* of the evidence earlier, but I was bound by an Unbreakable Vow."

"With whom?" a grey-haired witch asked.

"Harry Potter."

to be continued ...

Parts 21-36

Chapter 4 of 6

Who is the betrayer and who is the betrayed? An angst-ridden romantic drabble series. Runner Up for Best Drabble Series at the Moste Potente Passions SS/HG Awards.

Whipping his head toward Potter, Severus stared at the saviour of the wizarding world in absolute shock. This did not make any sense. Why would Hermione make an Unbreakable Vow with Potter and what did the Vow require of her? His mind was awirl with possibilities and their various ramifications. In a daze, he turned back toward the witness stand.

"Miss Granger," began the Chief Warlock, his tone incredulous, "are you telling this court that Harry Potter asked you to make an Unbreakable Vow regarding this case?"

Black eyes met brown, and the raw pain he saw was almost unbearable.

Hermione held Severus' gaze for as long as she dared before turning her attention back to the Chief Warlock. "Not exactly, sir. The Vow pertained only to the mission, but it was quite ... specific."

There was whispering amongst the Interrogators as well as the bystanders, and Hermione waited for the inevitable questions, struggling not to fidget in her seat. Impulsively, she found herself looking toward Severus, desperately attempting to tell him with her eyes what she could not speak aloud due to the current circumstances. She loved him, she had not willingly betrayed him, please believe her, please forgive her.

Severus' breathing quickened as he read the desperation in Hermione's eyes, awakening the dormant sense of protection he felt toward the witch. He wanted to go to her, to hold her and tell her everything would be fine, that he loved her No. There may be more going on than he was aware of, but he needed to know the entire truth before he could even consider trusting her with his heart once more. Schooling his features into his usual unreadable façade, he broke their connection. He would reserve judgement until everything was on the table; then, he would decide.

Hermione watched as Severus' expression turned cold, and she felt his rejection like a Bludger to the stomach. It was truly over he would never forgive her. Her melancholic thoughts were interrupted as the Chief Warlock began to speak.

"Please tell us, if you can, about the Vow and its oaths, Miss Granger."

"O-of course." Hermione took a deep breath and prepared to turn against her best friend since childhood. "Approximately six months ago, Mr Potter called me into his office. He had an important mission for me one so secretive it would require an Unbreakable Vow on my part."

Severus listened intently as one of the Interrogators asked, "Isn't that level of secrecy highly unusual?"

Hermione nodded her agreement. "Yes, it is. I've been best friends with Mr Potter since we were eleven years old. We fought side by side in the war. I cannot tell you the number of times we have saved each other's lives." She glared at Potter, her tone becoming accusatory. "I trusted him implicitly. It never occurred to me that he would ask me to do anything that would go against my own personal code of conduct."

"But he did?"

"He most certainly did."

Conjuring a glass of water, Hermione sipped the cool liquid before continuing.

"He did not inform me of any aspect of the mission until after I took the Vow." Hermione winced at her naivety in taking Harry at his word.

"Hermione, I wouldn't ask this of you if it weren't absolutely necessary."

"Of course, Harry. I understand completely."

"Ron Weasley served as our bonder, although he had no knowledge of the mission."

"What were the specifics of the Vow," asked a wizard in bright blue robes to her left.

This was it then. There would be no going back now.

Moving to the edge of his chair, Severus strained to hear her low murmur.

"I vowed to do whatever I deemed necessary to uncover evidence against the person I was being asked to investigate. I vowed to collect said evidence in a tangible fashion. I vowed to provide access to the evidence to Mr Potter and to the Wizengamot. And finally, I vowed that until the other three oaths were met, I would only discuss the investigation with Mr Potter or the presiding court.

"It wasn't until some time later that I realised exactly what I had sworn to do."

Hermione described the events that followed making the Vow. She was aware of Harry's fierce glare, but she ignored him, continuing with her testimony.

She explained how angry she had been when Harry had informed her that the subject of the investigation was Severus Snape.

"The man was acquitted by the Wizengamot! He sacrificed his entire adult life to fighting Voldemort. He should be left alone!"

"Hermione, I'm not arguing with you about this. I'm positive he's doing something illegal. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. You made an Unbreakable Vow to do whatever it takes to find evidence against Snape."

Severus was livid. Didn't the idiot realise what could have happened? What if there had been no evidence? What if he hadn't been distributing that potion? Hermione would have *died* had she been unable to find any prosecutable activity. Cursing under his breath, he returned his attention to Hermione.

He listened as she explained how having no other option she had befriended him, earned his trust, and provided the Charmed journal to collect potential evidence.

Severus noticed that she left out the intimate nature of their relationship, instead making it appear as if they had been simply very good friends.

Hermione explained how she would read the journal whenever the opportunity arose. Her voice was steady despite the horrible guilt she felt at having invaded Severus' privacy. It didn't matter that over the course of their relationship he had shared with her much of what he had written.

"When I found the evidence I presented earlier, I immediately contacted Mr Potter. Mr Snape was arrested at his home, and I took possession of the journal. Given the nature of the Unbreakable Vow, I believed it was in my best interest to keep the evidence in my possession until the trial."

Severus tried to remain attentive to Hermione's testimony, but could not keep from remembering the day Potter and his Aurors had come to escort him to Azkaban.

"You won't get away with it this time, Snape. We have evidence solid evidence."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Potter," Severus replied with a sneer.

Potter smirked. "You'll find out soon enough. Oh, look here's our operative now! Hermione, love! So glad you could join us!"

At the time, he had been consumed by rage, he had misread her unusual demeanour. She had not looked him in the eyes once.

"This is fascinating, Miss Granger," the Chief Warlock began, "but unless you can provide some further information, we have no other option but to find Mr Snape guilty."

Hermione looked at Harry, her gaze cold. "Mr Potter worded the oaths so that the only evidence I could provide would be *against* Mr Snape. Fortunately, after my earlier testimony, my Vow was fulfilled. I can now show you the evidence that will exonerate Mr Snape.

"If you would please, look at the list of names entered into evidence earlier and compare them to a previous ruling made on July 23, 1999."

Severus was stunned. He listened as Hermione informed the Wizengamot that the names of those he had provided the potion to coincided with people they themselves had determined to have been coerced, placed under the Imperius Curse or otherwise forced into taking the Dark Mark. Each of them had been pronounced innocent of all charges and released. Having the Dark Mark, however, had made their lives especially difficult, despite their innocence. Who wanted to hire or sell to someone who bore the Mark? Their homes were vandalised, their children ridiculed. Severus had felt compelled to help them however he could.

"This potion has allowed them to live their lives as if they had never been Marked. Mr Snape has done a wonderful thing, and he deserves to be praised for it, not punished." Hermione concluded her testimony by saying that it was clear from the journal that no one else had been given the potion and that, with the distribution completed, the instructions and ingredients list had been destroyed. There simply was no cause to think that a fugitive Death Eater would be able to use it to escape prosecution.

"How do you know *he* won't give it to them?"

Severus held his breath and watched Hermione's face as she turned to answer Potter.

"I know because I have read the journal in its entirety. I know because I believe he needed to help these people. I know because he was a trusted member of the Order of the Phoenix. I know because he risked his reputation, his life, and his very soul to defeat Voldemort. I know, Harry Potter, because Severus Snape is an *honourable man*."

Severus felt his heart swell at the obvious intimation that he was more honourable than Potter. It was no wonder he loved her.

Hermione slumped in relief as the Wizengamot declared Severus free to go. She walked on unsteady legs to where he was now standing. She stared at him, feeling uncertain, her heart beating a staccato rhythm. Did he still hate her? Stepping forward, she handed him the journal, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"I'm so sorry, Severus. I hope that one day you can forgive me."

He said nothing, but accepted the book. Suddenly, Hermione felt a wave of dizziness, and she swayed dangerously.

As if through a tunnel, Hermione heard Severus say her name before she faded into oblivion.

to be continued ...

Parts 37-46

Chapter 5 of 6

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Severus sat by Hermione's bedside at St Mungo's, having bribed the Healer with a promise of twenty-five phials of a powerful Healing Draught. Her face was as pale as fresh parchment; her dark hair, a stark contrast against the snow white linens. His eyes ran worriedly over her still form. Running a weary hand over his face, he slouched in the uncomfortable chair, his gaze never leaving her face.

The Healer had speculated that her illness might be a lingering side-effect of the Unbreakable Vow, but Severus had never heard of such a thing. Why had she not awakened?

"Severus?" Hermione called as she entered the flat. She removed her cloak, tossing it haphazardly onto the sofa. Kicking off her shoes, she padded in her stocking feet across the sitting room. "Where are you?" Entering the kitchen, she found him cooking dinner. "Ah, here you are," she said fondly as she leant against the door frame.

He glanced at her over his shoulder before returning to his task. "And where else would I be? I believe I promised you dinner."

"You did, and it smells absolutely divine. When do we eat?"

He smirked. "Right after you greet me properly."

Staring at her as he was, Severus caught the small smile. "Hermione?" he said gently as he leant forward, grasping her hand and raising it to place a kiss in her palm. "Hermione." There was no response. Closing his eyes in defeat, he sat back in his chair, tenderly placing her hand back at her side. He felt completely helpless; he could do nothing to help her – no one knew exactly what was wrong. He ran shaking hands through his hair, threading his fingers into the lank strands as he rested his elbows on his knees.

"Please, wake up. Please."

"Time to wake up."

An arm was gently shaking her. Batting at the offending limb, she rolled to her side, burying her head into the pillow. "Go 'way. Sleeping."

Hermione felt the bed dip, and soon, his naked chest was pressed against her back and his hand was lifting the tiny tee-shirt she had slept in. He palmed her breast, her sleep-warmed skin responding to his gentle kneading. Long fingers teased a hardened nipple as gentle kisses were placed along her neck until his lips reached her ear.

"Wake up, dearling. I want to love you again before you go."

"Snape."

Severus started, waking immediately and almost sliding out of the chair before catching himself. Damn. He must have fallen asleep. He squinted, struggling to focus on the person standing in the doorway. Recognition dawned, and he was immediately on his feet, his wand drawn.

"What do you want, Potter?"

The young Auror was visibly nervous, shuffling his feet and swallowing reflexively. He held out his hands. "I came to see Hermione."

Severus sneered. "Come to see the results of your handiwork, have you? It's your fault she's here."

Potter simply nodded, his green eyes filled with guilt. "I know."

Hermione heard him turn on the taps and enter the shower. For a moment, she resisted the compulsion of the Vow to do what she knew she must. She waited until she felt the familiar tinge of nausea and then leant over to the bedside table. Opening the drawer, she pulled out the journal and felt the tingle of magic as the Charm recognised her magical signature. Tears filled her eyes as she turned the pages to the most recent entries. Finding them, she quickly scanned the pages only to gasp when she read the words, "I love Hermione Granger."

Severus glared at the younger man. "You know?" he mocked.

"The Healer told me what he thinks is wrong with Hermione, that it's something to do with Hermione fighting the Vow. She told me she didn't want to have anything to do with the mission, but I refused to release her from the Vow. I was so angry, so arrogant. I didn't give a thought to how Hermione was being affected." Potter moved to approach the bed, stopping after only a few steps. "I didn't listen to her. Even worse is, I knew she was right. I only wanted revenge."

"After that, I went into hiding until I heard from Lupin. You are aware of the rest."

Hermione was curled up beside Severus on the sofa, her head on his shoulder as he spoke. She was certain the fingers running through her curls was an unconscious action. They had spent most of the night talking, sharing favourite memories and deepest secrets. If only she hadn't already known them Once again she pushed aside the guilt. There was nothing to be done about it. She wrapped one arm around his waist, leaning in to kiss his neck. "Thank you," she whispered.

Potter cleared his throat and rubbed his damp eyes with a palm. "I've tendered my resignation, effective immediately. I think it might be best if I go away for a while – work some things out in my head, you know?" Apparently he didn't expect an answer because he continued. "I just wanted to bring you this," Potter said, pulling out the journal from under his robes. "You left it back at the courtroom – must have dropped it when you caught Hermione." He paused a moment before handing the journal to Severus.

"Tell her I'm sorry." And then he was gone.

She felt nauseous again. He must have written in the journal today. Her heart sank. How much longer would this continue?

"I love you," Severus murmured, his tongue tracing the curve of her knee.

"Mmm ... love you," she whispered. It was true, Merlin help her. His mouth drifted up her legs until he reached her sex, his tongue teasing and tasting. Sighing, she surrendered to his ministrations.

Hours later, when she was certain he was deeply asleep, she reached over to the table and pulled out the journal. Reading the page, she felt her breath catch. "Oh, Severus. No. No."

to be continued ...

Parts 47-56

Chapter 6 of 6

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Severus stared at the empty doorway, the journal clutched in his left hand. Shaking his head, he returned to his seat. "That was an interesting visit." His eyes narrowed. "He had best hope we do not cross paths again any time soon."

Holding the journal on his lap, he absentmindedly stroked the leather binding. Glancing down at the book, something caught his eye; the corner of one page appeared to be folded over. Curious, he opened the book only to discover that Hermione had written on several pages. He slowly ran his fingertips over her familiar scrawl. *My dearest Severus ...*

There had been no choice. She had fought the compulsion – and its accompanying nausea – for as long as possible before contacting Harry. She had betrayed Severus. Her stomach lurched, and she staggered to the bathroom to splash cool water onto her face and neck. Lifting her head, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. "Traitor," she whispered. "You don't deserve him. You don't deserve his trust or his love." Unable to endure the sight of herself, she raised her fists, pounding them against the glass until it broke, the jagged edges cutting into her skin as she screamed, "TRAITOR!"

... I do not deserve your forgiveness, but I do love you – more than you will ever know. Yours Always, Hermione.

Closing the journal, Severus lifted stunned eyes to Hermione's unconscious form. Page after page had been filled with her thoughts and emotions during the time she had been bound by the Vow. She had been consumed with guilt, consistently fighting the compulsion of her oaths until she became ill – and, she loved him. He might not have believed the words had she spoken them, but written here, where only truth could abide, he had no choice but to believe her.

Hermione shakily cast a Healing Charm on the cuts to her hands before cleaning up the blood with a quick Scourgify. Despite the trembling and nausea, she managed to walk to her bedroom where she collapsed onto the bed. Staring at the ceiling, she pondered her decision to visit Severus in Azkaban. He was a Legilimens, and if he should happen to see ... she would be dead before he even completed the spell. It didn't matter. She had to see him, even if she couldn't look him in the eyes. She couldn't bear to see the hatred in them anyway.

Severus had spoken with the Healer-in-Charge to inform him of what he had discovered regarding Hermione's condition. The consensus had been that her ongoing reticence regarding the Vow and the nausea that came with it, combined with a lack of sleep and proper nutrition, had been the cause of her collapse. The Healer believed that she would regain consciousness at any time, but she would remain weak until she started taking better care of herself. Severus would make sure she did just that – even if he had to tie her to the bloody bed himself. He wouldn't lose her now.

Hermione was slowly drifting toward consciousness, her memories surfacing one on top of the other until all she knew was a cacophony of emotions.

"Must you listen to that infernal music? ... Dance with me ... Hermione, I am a grown man. If I want to leave my socks on the bathroom floor, I will ... Why would you want a bitter, old man like me? ... Of course, I brush my teeth, you harpy ... I love you ... Mine ... I shall see you tomorrow, dearling ... How could you? ... Lies! ... I never want to see your lying, deceitful face ... LEAVE ME!"

Helplessly, she pleaded, "Severus."

"Sev'rus. No. Please."

Instantly, Severus was at her side, reaching out to cradle her heart-shaped face in his hands. "Hermione!" Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to open them until, finally, she awakened. He had barely suppressed a sigh of relief when she registered his presence. She began to sob uncontrollably, her body shaking with the effort to rein in her overwrought emotions.

"You hate me. Oh, gods, you *hate* me!"

Severus closed his eyes to stem his uncharacteristic tears. Gathering her stiffened body into his arms, he buried his face in her wild curls. "Shh, dearling. All is well."

Hermione was completely undone, the effects of the Vow, her illness and her emotional trauma converging until she wanted to crawl out of her own skin. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" she screamed and cried, alternately clinging to him and pulling away, over and over until she collapsed against him in exhaustion. Only then did she hear the words he was whispering into her hair as he soothingly rubbed her back.

"Shh, dearling. I don't hate you. I love you. Always. Shh."

Silent tears escaped behind closed eyes. "How can you love me after what I've done?"

"Because I understand."

He pulled away slightly and watched as her eyes widened in comprehension. He knew exactly what it was like to be accused of betrayal due to an Unbreakable Vow.

"I – I never thought of it that way."

One corner of his mouth curved into the small smile that had always been reserved for her. "I am also quite familiar with guilt, Hermione."

Hesitantly, she returned his smile. "I didn't want to do it. You have to know –"

"Shh. I do know," he said, nodding toward the journal. "You do realise that things cannot return to how they were before."

Hermione felt her heart sink to her toes. Severus, however, was not finished. "I think it would be for the best if we had a fresh start – no Potter, no Vow, no deception. Just you ... and me."

The force of her relief hit her like a tidal wave, and she went limp in his arms. Tenderly, he laid her down, but continued to hold her hand in his.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Severus Snape," he murmured, pressing a kiss into her palm.

Smiling through her exhaustion, she answered, "Hermione Granger ... and I love you."