

# Compulsions

*by snapeophile*

A Death Eater raid survivor is sorted at Hogwarts. Is there more than one way to pay a life debt? How does Hermione affect the final balance? Serial drabble in response to *Compulsions* challenge at Grangersnape100.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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A/N: Many thanks to Hogwarts Honey and JaneAverage for their beta help!

Movement at the head table...a fluttering of maroon robes and chestnut hair...as Professor Granger strides to her seat.

Reflexively, the greasy git's eyes close. His shoulders rise as he inhales the air as she passes, retaining the light fragrance in his lungs as long as possible. A soft smile, a benediction, ghosts his lips as he exhales.

A millisecond later the smile evaporates, and sharp features are once again enveloped by a sneering mask.

The immense table is a chasm between them.

Young Rose Zeller, a Hufflepuff orphan, observes this daily vignette play out. And forms a plan.

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Severus billows through the halls, a river of students parting before him, desperate to avoid contact. The dark wizard slows, overlarge nose scenting, detecting trace amounts of lilies, vanilla, and jasmine perfuming the air. His eyes gravitate to a length of maroon grosgrain ribbon lying serpentine on the gray stones. He swoops gracefully, never breaking his stride, elegant fingers extending to scoop up the prize. Hermione's.

Black, glittering eyes sweep the hall, daring anyone to question his action, to recognize his compulsion. He gently places the ribbon in his inner robe pocket.

Rose smiles knowingly and meets his astounded gaze.

"Miss Zeller! Ten points from Hufflepuff for loitering about! Get to Professor Granger's class. Now!" He tries, but can't put the customary venom behind his words. One glance from Rose's gray eyes and his mind floods with sounds, smells, brutality. He forces up his Occlumency shield, keeping the madness at bay. For now. He knows he will pay later, in the reckoning darkness, and it is justly so.

The girl is not cowed by him, could never be. She smiles softly in response. The duality of his soul doesn't frighten her, as she has witnessed the light overcome the dark.

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He is torn.

Never has he so desperately wanted a week to end. The dunderheads had outdone themselves with ineptitude previously unmatched in the post-Longbottom era. A late-night summons has left him in post-Cruciatius agony. Yet, there is no Quidditch match this weekend, no legitimate reason to leave the dungeons, no chance of seeing Hermione.

"Damn it all!" He pours another whiskey and sinks into his only comfortable chair. As the warmth of the fire and the alcohol take effect, his half-conscious mind betrays him. Unbidden, frightened gray eyes flash in his mind and take him back to that night.

*The ozone-smell of cast Avadas and a musty, coppery tang tell him all he needs to know as he Apparates into the comfortable middle-class home. A games table is haphazardly decorated by jeweled pieces, the board askance, tokens mashed into the carpet. Indentations of small bums still warm the sofa cushions. He smirks as he recognizes his favorite childhood Muggle game, Buccaneer, but the smirk disintegrates as he realizes there are far too many glistening-wet rubies on the board.*

*"Check the house, Snape, one of the brats has gone missing," snarls Macnair.*

*Severus proceeds to search for the hidden treasure.*

*A soft mewling noise draws him to the kitchen. Snape casts Protego in case the child is magical. Wand out, he snatches open a cupboard door.*

*A small girl, seven, perhaps eight, is huddled in the corner. He looms over her and drags her up by her arm. Black plaits frame a round face, deathly pale with shock and terror. Snape is surprised she is not crying, but she does not have to. Every scrap of anger, hurt, horror, radiates through her large gray eyes.*

*His lungs constrict. The enormity of what Dumbledore has asked of him crushes his soul.*

*He has no idea how much time has passed; minutes become decades as he peers into her eyes. The sight of the little girl nearly strikes him down. He had looked like that so many times as a child seeking refuge in the pantry. Away from Tobias, away from mindless brutality. Unthinkingly, he reaches up and tears the silver mask from his face and leans down, his lips at the little girl's left ear.*

*"Don't make a sound. I will send someone for you."*

*He casts Petrificus Totalus as insurance and closes the door, blazing a blood-red "X" on it.*

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A soft but persistent knocking wakes him. It is morning and his body is wretched from having slept in a chair; his head pounds like the percussion section of a marching band. He swears, wondering who in the hell has the nerve, and his leaden arm grabs his wand.

"Enter!" he snarls.

Rose enters his suite soundlessly. His lungs constrict, forcing air out, taking none in, as they had that night. *What in bloody hell is she doing here?*

"Miss Zeller? Have you lost your mind? What in Merlin's name are you doing here at this hour of the morning?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, for intruding." She watches him attentively, and her glance is as always, strong and steady; not challenging yet full of confidence...in herself and in him...without any fear. He is flummoxed by her presence and gapes at the girl.

"Sir? Are you alright?"

"Yes, Miss Zeller, I'm fine. Now what do you want from me?" He tries to make his tone sharp and cutting, but he sounds tired, defeated.

"It's Professor Granger, sir; she's crying. In the rose garden. I thought you would want to be told."

*She knows. The little chit. She knows.*

"Why in Merlin's name do you think/ would want this information, Miss Zeller?" He works hard to make the tone of this question incredulous.

"I've seen the way you look at her, how you grabbed her fallen ribbon, how you worship the air she leaves in her wake every morning. And she looks at you, you know. And blushes when she is near you."

"How dare you?" he sputters.

"It's part of my life debt, Professor."

"Life debt? Are you insane, girl?" he roars. "Your whole family was killed that night. The balance is entirely, eternally, in your favor."

"The late Headmaster told me you killed no one that night."

"And so my iniquity is absolved? I was sent to eradicate your Muggle family, and many others, when I was in the service of Voldemort."

"Dumbledore explained it to me. I took a wand oath of secrecy."

"Fuck." Snape slumped into his chair, head in hands.

"I saw your eyes, Professor. You didn't want to kill me."

He snorts derisively. "So you will haunt me until my dying day, waiting to satisfy your 'debt'?"

"Professor Granger's still in the garden. There are many ways to save a life, Professor."

Snape hangs his head and is deep in thought. Rose quietly leaves.

A minute later, he sighs heavily and heads for the rose garden.

Hermione is huddled into herself on the grey slate bench. She's bundled against the Scottish chill in a thick, old cardigan. Her nose is red from cold and crying. Her head is bowed, hair askew, eyes red and puffy. Snape thinks she's never looked as beautiful, or vulnerable, as she does now.

He clears his throat to announce his presence and joins her on the bench. Hermione looks up and flashes him a quick, watery smile.

"Professor?"

"Hermione. What can I do to help you?"

Surprise flickers over her face for an instant when Snape addresses her as 'Hermione.' He's never used her first name before, or such a soothing tone of voice.

"Nothing, really, I'm just having an off day."

Snape is very thoughtfully looking off into the distance.

"Are you not happy here, Hermione? Is Hogwarts redux not meeting your expectations?"

"No, Professor, that's not it. I love being back here. It's my home now, my family, now that I've lost..." Her words are subsumed by another bout of tears.

Snape understands completely.

"It's my home and family, too." Snape reaches over and gently cradles Hermione's small hand between his larger ones. "You're so cold. Will you join me for a cup of tea?"

Hermione looks positively bewildered at this invitation. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Snape's body jerks as if in pain. "Is it so out of the realm of possibility, Miss Grang...Hermione?"

"No...no. I'm just wondering why now? I've been doing everything short of jumping you in the hallway to get your attention since I came back, but you've completely ignored me."

"I'm sorry for that."

He inhales deeply and continues. "Perhaps it wasn't *you* I was avoiding, but myself."

Hermione squeezes his hand in encouragement.

Surprisingly, he continues, speaking haltingly. "I...I'm intrigued by you, Hermione. I'd like to get to know you as an adult, an equal."

The air pulses with magic, gentle, electric and Snape's body is momentarily encircled by a shimmering green light. Hermione, connected to him, feels it too. "What was *that*?"

"The payment of a life debt." He smiles and lowers his head to her lips for a gentle, promising kiss. "There are many ways to save a life, Hermione."

A/N: Rose Zeller is sorted into Hufflepuff House during OOtP according to the HP Lexicon.