

The Long Way Home

by sshg316

The rise of the New Pure-Blood Party in Europe sends Severus Snape and his new partner, Hermione Granger, to Bulgaria, deep undercover. Cut off from everyone they know, they come to rely upon one another. A tragic misunderstanding separates them, until Hermione is seriously injured, and the two find themselves together again... this time at Spinner's End. Written for the SS/HG Exchange. DH-Compliant, EWE.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 4

The rise of the New Pure-Blood Party in Europe sends Severus Snape and his new partner, Hermione Granger, to Bulgaria, deep undercover. Cut off from everyone they know, they come to rely upon one another. A tragic misunderstanding separates them, until Hermione is seriously injured, and the two find themselves together again... this time at Spinner's End. Written for the SS/HG Exchange. DH-Compliant, EWE.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

The Long Way Home

Chapter One

He moved quickly amongst the potion-lined shelves in the ill-lit storeroom, his dark eyes and long-fingered hands seeking ... searching ... finding. Phial after phial and jar after jar were hastily placed into the velvet-lined case, his movements hurried but precise. Time was of the essence, and he could not afford to make a mistake.

As he searched, he listed the potions he believed he would need, mentally cross-checking with those he had already found. *Pain-reducing potion, bruise-healing paste, burn-healing paste, Blood-Replenishing Potion, essence of Murtlap, Calming Draught, Sleeping Draught, Strengthening Solution* Only one was missing.

"Damn it. Where is it?"

Years as a spy had taught him to ignore the feeling of panic that was now rising in his chest. The potion wasn't absolutely necessary, but the thought of leaving without it caused him to redouble his efforts.

There, he thought as he found the last phial, exhaling the breath he had not realised he had been holding. *Forgetfulness Potion*.

His retreating steps echoed through the room, each footfall striking sharply against the stone floor as he exited the small space. With a wave of his wand, the door was warded, and he turned, raced up the staircase, down a short hallway, and out of the door, which led to the back garden. After a fleeting look to his surroundings, he grabbed hold of the golden medallion around his neck and murmured, "Fairy floss." His cloak whipped around him in an arc of ebony wool as he disappeared.

~o0o~

He gracefully landed on his feet inside a familiar dark and dingy sitting room. Groaning as he realised his location, he glanced about until his eyes fell upon a medallion similar to his own lying upon the floor, its chain broken. But where was...

A muffled noise drifted from the first floor. Moving quickly, he made his way into the kitchen, then up a narrow staircase.

The message had read, 'HG Hurt Explosion.'

His near-frantic search for the necessary healing potions had taken but a few minutes at most...he only hoped the injuries weren't so severe that those minutes had come at too high a price.

He hastened his steps, taking the stairs two at a time, until he reached the landing on the first floor. The door on the right was ajar...the door to the room that had once belonged to him...the soft glow of candlelight spilling into the hall.

Silently, he pushed the door open with the palm of his hand and walked into the tiny bedroom. Along the outside wall was a single bed, an unmoving bundle atop it, and a man kneeling adjacent as he leaned in as though straining to hear.

As Severus moved a step closer to the bed, he heard it...a soft, rasping whisper followed by a pain-filled whimper.

"Hurts."

"I know, love," the kneeling man replied, a hand outstretched to offer comfort but then retracted as if he remembered he should not touch. "I sent a message to Snape. He'll be here soon. Just hang on, all right?"

"Severus," the voice sobbed.

"That's right," the man soothed. "I'm sure he'll be here any moment."

"Quite right, Potter," Severus murmured as he entered the room fully, unclasping his cloak and allowing it to fall in a discarded pool upon the floor before moving to the bundle on the bed. "I see she sent for you, as well."

Potter swiftly rose to his feet and moved away from the bed to allow Severus to take his place kneeling on the floor. "Just help her. Please."

But all of Severus' attention was now riveted to the occupant of the bed. His heart skipped a beat, and he had to swallow the pain that overwhelmed him as he took in her appearance. Dear gods. Her hands, her arms ... her *face*. The cuts and abrasions would heal quickly, but the burns

"I'm here, Hermione. I'm going to heal you now. Do you understand?"

She whimpered in response, and Severus began setting out the various phials with deceptively calm efficiency. He removed his cufflinks, rolling up his shirtsleeves before removing the stoppers from three of the phials and holding the first to Hermione's lips.

"Drink," he ordered, knowing his terse command would be more likely to garner her acquiescence than a soft-spoken plea.

Her lips parted obediently, and Severus was astounded, not for the first time, by the level of trust the witch placed in him. When all three phials were empty, he met her gaze; her brown eyes were filled with pain. "Sleep now," he murmured. "All will be well." Her eyes fluttered shut, her breathing steady but shallow as she drifted into a potion-induced slumber.

"What did you give her?" Potter asked, his attention focussed on his injured friend.

"A pain-reducing potion, Sleeping Draught, and Forgetfulness Potion," Severus answered curtly, his eyes trained upon the now sleeping witch, needing to be certain she was fully asleep.

"What? Why Forgetfulness Potion? We need to question her about what happened so we can find out who did this to her!"

Severus swallowed, his throat constricting at the knowledge of what was to come, but he still managed to sneer at the wizard. "I see someone did not pay attention in first-year Potions. Forgetfulness Potion does not affect prior memories but rather future ones and only for a short period of time...four to six hours." He opened the burn-healing paste, and his voice softened as he looked upon Hermione's wounded face. "Believe me; she will not want to remember the next few hours."

Raising his eyes to Potter's, Severus snapped, "Now do something useful and open the rest of these." He thrust two more jars of burn-healing paste toward the younger wizard.

After Potter grabbed the jars and moved to do his bidding, Severus cast a spell to keep her hydrated before he scooped out a large amount of the burn-healing paste. He hesitated a moment and then placed his mouth near Hermione's ear.

"I will not lie to you, Hermione. This will hurt ... but it is the only way."

And then, he began to apply the paste to the worst of her burns, struggling to remain calm and detached as her agonised screams filled the tiny house in Spinner's End.

~oOo~

Severus entered the sitting room, weary to the bone. He found Potter sitting in an old winged-back chair that faced the fireplace, his green eyes unfocussed as he stared at some random spot on the peeling wallpaper.

"How is she?" Potter whispered. He had been unable to bear seeing his friend suffering and had left the bedroom early on in the treatment process.

Severus all but collapsed onto the small, dingy sofa, causing it to creak ominously. He rested his head on the back of the cushion and sighed. "She is sleeping now, and it will be several hours before she wakes. The specialised burn-healing paste, in effect, restored her skin to its previous condition by removing the dead and dying skin cells and then regenerating new ones. This should eliminate any noticeable scarring. It is a ... painful experience. Her injuries, however, were not as severe as I had initially feared."

Potter snorted, finally turning to face his former teacher.

Before the younger wizard could utter a word, Severus' gaze snapped to Potter's. "What the hell happened to her?"

The young wizard's face twisted into a grimace. "I only know what she was able to tell me before you arrived, and that wasn't much."

Severus nodded but remained silent, waving a hand for Potter to continue.

"I haven't spoken to her in six months, since that day in the Minister's office. Just last week Kingsley assured us...Ron and me...that she was doing fine, the assignment was almost complete. According to him, there were a few loose ends to wrap up, but then she would be coming home." His breath hitched as he struggled to maintain control. "Tonight, I was putting James to bed when my Auror medallion warmed. I saw the message, and then I used the Emergency Portkey Charm to take me to her...I expect that's how you got here, as well. Is this a safe house or something?"

"Of a sort. Continue."

"Anyway, when I arrived, she was on the floor over there." Potter stopped, ran a shaking hand through his already dishevelled hair and gazed at Severus with haunted eyes. "Well, you saw her. She couldn't talk much, but the gist of it is that whoever it was you two were investigating found out somehow ... and they retaliated. Whatever it was that exploded, she was holding it at the time."

Severus felt as though he had been hit in the stomach with a Bludger; she could have been killed. *Hermione*.

"I was about to take her to St Mungo's, but she insisted on staying here and waiting for you. So I cast *Mobilicorpus* to move her upstairs. The rest you already know." Potter's expression hardened as he demanded, "Now, tell me how in Merlin's name this happened!"

His lips set into a grim line as Severus responded coolly, "I'm certain I have no idea."

Once again, Potter snorted, then eyed the other wizard thoughtfully. "Yeah right, Snape. Let's see," he said, his tone filled with sarcasm, "I don't imagine it has anything to do with the fact that you just left her there all alone. I'm certain that *can't* be it."

Severus merely sneered.

"You are her *partner*! Where the hell were you? Obviously you weren't watching her back!"

"I was at *home*, Potter! The investigation ended three days ago. When I left Bulgaria, Hermione was preparing to return to London. I had no reason to believe she would stay behind." Severus' brow furrowed in confusion, the unusual expression catching Potter by surprise. "The case was over," he murmured to himself, "so why did she stay? Why didn't she return home?"

His thoughts were interrupted by Potter's own musings.

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it had to have been important to keep her away from home after being gone for so long."

The room was silent as the two men contemplated the uncharacteristic actions of the injured witch sleeping in the room above them.

After several long moments, Severus stood. "Now that she is stabilised, I should go to London and check in with Kingsley. I may have to return to Bulgaria to investigate. I think it would be best if Hermione stayed in hiding for the time being...at least until we know who did this."

"Pardon me, sir, but I think the safest place for Hermione would be *here* ... with you." Potter raised a hand to halt the impending protestation. "They can send anyone to do the investigation. And no one knows about this place but us, right? You're her partner, and she obviously trusts you...Merlin knows why." His voice softened as he continued, "She asked for *you*. And ... well, the truth is, *I* trust you to take care of her."

"How touching," Severus mocked, his lips curling into his typical sneer. But even after everything that had happened in Bulgaria, he could deny Hermione nothing. She had specifically asked for him, and Potter was correct...she would be safest here ... with him. "Fine," he spat. "I will care for the girl, but the moment it is safe, you will return for her."

Severus felt his blood boil at Potter's satisfied grin. A muffled groan drifted down from the upstairs bedroom, and both men raised their eyes to the ceiling.

"Go," Severus said. "I must tend to my charge."

Potter nodded solemnly and grasped his medallion. "Take care of her," he said before whispering, "Home," and disappearing in a swirl of glittering light.

"Show off," Severus muttered as he quickly left the room to check on Hermione.

~o0o~

Severus sat on the dusty wooden floor, his elbows resting on his bent knees and his back braced against the bed in which Hermione was sleeping. *The roof must have a leak*, he thought idly as he stared at a stain on the ceiling; it hadn't been there the last time he had been in this room.

Spinner's End. He and Hermione had agreed early on in their partnership that this would be their safe house; if anything were to happen to either of them or if they were separated, this house would be where they would meet. Few people were aware of its existence, and those who did would certainly have no reason to suddenly drop by since everyone believed Severus Snape was dead. Well, almost everyone. Even so, now that he and Hermione were stuck there for an undetermined amount of time, Severus had warded the house against intruders, friend and foe alike, until the person responsible for Hermione's condition was identified ... and *punished*. Until that time, only he, Hermione, and unfortunately, Potter and Weasley, would have access to the house.

Exhaustion was setting in, but Severus knew there would be no rest for the weary. Hermione needed regular doses of the pain-reducing potion, as well as reapplication of burn-healing paste to the more serious burns. Thanks to magic, the healing process would be brief, but also arduous. The new skin would be very delicate for several weeks, so a special protective cream would need to be applied to the affected areas. Until she was fully healed, she would need to stay out of the sun and use no chemicals, potions, or abrasives on her skin. She might feel more sensitive to temperature, so he would have to...

"Severus."

The sound of his whispered name had him scrambling to his feet. He gingerly sat down on the edge of the bed, not wanting to jostle her even the smallest bit.

"Are you in pain?" he asked neutrally, even as his hands ached with the need to touch her and offer some small measure of comfort.

Her nod was so slight that he might have missed it had he not been watching her so closely. He reached over to the small table he had conjured to hold the various healing potions, pastes, and creams and prepared a dose of the pain-relieving potion, mixing it with Sleeping Draught so that she would rest comfortably.

As she had earlier in the night, Hermione swallowed the proffered medicinal potions without hesitation. She was about to drift to sleep when she whispered, "I'm sorry."

Severus closed his eyes in agony and gruffly replied, "I cannot imagine what you could possibly have to apologise for."

A lone tear escaped from beneath her closed eyelids. "Whatever it was I did to make you leave me."

Severus felt the now familiar tightness in his chest at her words. He had spent the past three nights attempting to sleep, clutching a pillow and thinking of her, and the past three days castigating himself for doing so. Now, she was apologising with no idea, or so she said, of what she was apologising for. And because of that, he could not accept her paltry words of contrition.

"I discovered your deceit, your lies," he choked out in the hope that confronting her with her treachery would grant him some relief and still allow him to maintain his dignity, as he knew she would not remember anything he said due to the Forgetfulness Potion. "I thought you were mine, but all the while, you belonged to another. I believed you to be different, but you are just like Lily. Fool that I am, I had hoped that *you* might return my affection."

Hermione's face contorted into a grimace as she fought against the Sleeping Draught and the residual pain. "I don't understand..." she slurred before she succumbed to the

draught.

Frozen in his seated position on the edge of her bed, Severus watched her sleep until his muscles ached in protest at the lack of movement. After setting the Muggle alarm clock he had used as child to wake him up in two hours for the next application of the burn-healing paste, he conjured a cot at the side of the bed, and he lay down for the night.

As he waited for sleep, he hoped, against all odds, that she would not invade his dreams that night. Her frequent intrusions were torment enough, but coupled with the agony of having to tend her injuries, it would be more than he could bear. Being with her again was bittersweet, and he was helpless in the face of the futile hope in his heart.

A/N: Forgetfulness Potion and burn-healing paste are mentioned in canon; however, their properties as described here are my own.

My unending gratitude to my beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 4

The rise of the New Pure-Blood Party in Europe sends Severus Snape and his new partner, Hermione Granger, to Bulgaria, deep undercover. Cut off from everyone they know, they come to rely upon one another. A tragic misunderstanding separates them, until Hermione is seriously injured, and the two find themselves together again... this time at Spinner's End. Written for the SS/HG Exchange. DH-Compliant, EWE.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Six Months Prior

Severus paced the length of the ostentatious room and raked a hand through his hair, concern deeply etched upon his face.

"How do you know this person is trustworthy, Kingsley? Very few people know I survived the war, and I'd like to keep it that way."

Behind the large, ornate desk sat the Minister for Magic, who was valiantly...if ineffectively...attempting to hide his amusement. "Calm down. I wouldn't bring in just anyone to partner with you." Kingsley's eyebrows rose as he looked at Severus expectantly.

A flash of abject horror crossed Severus' face, and he halted his pacing to glare at his so-called friend and employer. "No. Tell me you did not partner me with one of *them*."

The Minister smiled benignly, reminding Severus eerily of his former employer.

"Damn it, Kingsley! I refuse to be trapped for months on end with a reckless, foolhardy, dunderhead who..."

"I do hope you're referring to one of the boys, Mr Snape," interrupted a feminine voice.

Severus turned toward the doorway only to come face to face with the insufferable know-it-all, Hermione Granger ... and Merlin's beard, had she grown up during the last seven years.

She was taller than he remembered, although still a good five or six inches shorter than he...it was hard to tell as she was wearing heels...and her hair was not as long, falling just above her shoulders in a riotous mass of brown curls. She had never been a raving beauty...her nose was slightly upturned and her lower lip a bit too full...but she was certainly pretty. Her eyes, however, sparkled with an intelligence and warmth that captivated him, and he found himself wanting to know more. How had he never noticed that before?

Severus allowed his gaze to travel down her form, taking in the chocolate brown robes draped over a white silk blouse, his eyes lingering a moment on the curve of her breasts. The matching brown crepe skirt landed just above her knees, her long chocolate-coloured heeled boots giving him just a glimpse of stocking-clad knee. Idly, he wondered what sort of stockings they were ... tights or maybe hold-ups

"Ahem."

Startled, Severus raised his eyes to Miss Granger's pink-tinged face, and he was reminded that this was not just any witch he had been ogling but a former student, a former Gryffindor, Potter's best friend ... and his new partner. Damn and blast. Only through sheer force of will did he manage not to blush at his unusual lack of restraint. Instead, he glowered at the girl...woman...as though it were her fault that he had not been able to control his more base emotions.

She swept past him, having the gall to appear amused as well as flushed, and held out a hand to Kingsley. "Minister," she said warmly as she shook the smiling wizard's hand before taking a seat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. "I see you conveniently forgot to inform Mr Snape of the identity of his new partner. Tsk, tsk," she teased as she crossed one leg over the other and clasped her hands in her lap. Then she turned those intriguing eyes toward Severus.

He had never felt so unsettled by a woman before, not even...

Scowling, Severus wrenched his gaze from the vexing Miss Granger so that he could glare properly at Kingsley.

He opened his mouth to make a snide remark, but before he could even utter a word, there was a knock at the door and Gawain Robards, the Head of the Aurors, entered the room. "Good morning, everyone. I'm sorry I'm late."

Kingsley inclined his head in greeting as Robards took a seat in the corner of the room. "Now that we're all here, let's begin. As you know, this case is considered a top priority, which is one reason why you *both*," the Minister said, pausing to look pointedly at Severus, "are here this morning."

"One reason?" Miss Granger asked in a clear indication that her tendency to ask incessant questions might be one thing about her that had not changed.

Kingsley merely nodded, while it was all Severus could do to avoid snorting in exasperation. Suddenly, he realised that he was the only one still standing, and he folded his

long frame into the chair next to Miss Granger's.

"Severus, Miss Granger," Kingsley said as he passed each of them a file folder containing the specifics of the case. After giving them a few moments to read over the parchments, he continued gravely, "As you can see, those who sympathised with Voldemort have not completely given up on their goals of domination over the wizarding world and eradication of Muggle-borns...they have merely changed tactics."

Robards explained, "Voldemort attempted to gain power using brute magical force. Obviously that didn't work, so a new group has decided a more political approach may be in order. To put it succinctly, they want to put up their own candidate for Minister for Magic ... after they have bribed and blackmailed their way into holding a majority on the Wizengamot. If they were to succeed in such an endeavour ... well, the consequences would be devastating.

"Thanks to our main operative in Bulgaria, we have learned that they intend to begin their fundraising efforts there, where there are still many sympathisers to Voldemort's cause. Essentially, they are still in the early developmental stages. We need to infiltrate this group and nip things in the bud, so to speak, before they can manage to gain any kind of foothold."

Severus nodded as he skimmed through the parchments. "That is the most prudent course of action."

Kingsley agreed. "I also have complete confidence that you two are the best Aurors for this job. Severus, you have personal experience dealing with these sorts of people, and your skills at Occlumency and Legilimency will most certainly be advantageous during the investigation." Severus attempted not to cringe at the painful reminder of his past. "And you, Miss Granger. Well, obviously there could only be three remaining candidates for this case given that besides Gawain and myself, only you, Potter and Weasley know that Severus is alive. Gawain and I selected you because you are not only intelligent enough to keep up with this one," he said, jabbing a thumb toward a scowling Severus, "but we believe your abilities will be a strategic complement to Severus'."

Severus watched as the emotions played across the Granger girl's expressive face during Kingsley's little speech. Her trepidation about the thought of partnering with him, a hint of fear about the unknown, her pleasure at Kingsley's unabashed praise...something the man was not known for doling out to just anyone...and her confusion at the Minister's enigmatic final statement ... all were on display for the whole world to see.

Good gods. If she didn't learn how to hide her thoughts, they'd be dead within a week.

"Your preparatory training period will begin tomorrow morning," the Minister continued. "In the meantime, familiarise yourselves with everything in those documents. Gawain and I are hoping you will be ready in no more than four weeks. In the meantime, you will live and work at a special training facility we have established specifically for the two of you here in London. Don't worry, Severus; it's under a Fidelius Charm, and I am the Secret Keeper. Only those of us in this room are aware of its existence. The location of the Auror Training Facility is number seven, Gilding Lane. You are to report there first thing in the morning.

"Are there any questions at this juncture?" Kingsley asked in conclusion, and Severus readied himself for the barrage of questions that would be bursting forth from the young witch at any moment.

He was shocked, then, when she said nothing but merely awaited further instructions. *Interesting.*

"Good," Kingsley remarked as he rose to his feet and extended a hand to each of them in turn. "I wish you good luck, my friends. Please feel free to use my Floo."

Severus stood, as did Miss Granger, each shaking hands with both the Minister and Robards, before turning toward the massive fireplace. Then, in front of him, the young witch suddenly stopped.

"Just one question, Minister," she said.

Severus sighed in annoyance; he should have known her lack of questions had been too good to be true.

"Who is our contact in Bulgaria? The parchments never specify."

"You'll see, Miss Granger," Kingsley answered cryptically. "You'll see."

~oOo~

The night before they were to leave for Bulgaria, Severus sat in his quarters at number seven, Gilding Lane sipping from a glass of Firewhisky as he once again went over the specifics of their cover story for the mission. When he was satisfied, he closed the folder and tossed the entire contents into the fireplace, the flames greedily devouring the dry parchments.

That afternoon, it had been decided that the two unlikely partners were more than prepared to begin their mission. Surprisingly, Severus agreed; any further training would be superfluous. They were ready.

The past three weeks had been a whirlwind of training and debriefing sessions. Severus and *Hermione*, as she insisted he call her, had been inundated with information, physical conditioning, mental exercises, as well as simply learning how to be partners. The latter had been unexpectedly effortless. Robards and Kingsley had been correct...he and Hermione worked together seamlessly. Much to Severus' annoyance, the bint was good at her job. He snorted as he raised his glass. All right, so she was bloody brilliant. Together, they would be a force to be reckoned with.

It had been disconcerting in the beginning; the young witch possessed an uncanny ability to know what he was thinking almost before he thought it, which Severus grudgingly admitted to Robards would be a tremendous asset during the investigation. Hermione claimed it was from watching him for six years during her time as his student, and that she was simply reading his face, but Severus remained unconvinced. Hundreds of students had gone through his classroom over his years at Hogwarts, and none of them, nor anyone else for that matter, had ever been able to read him like she could...certainly not Dumbledore or the Dark Lord, thank Merlin. Not even Lily, who had known him since childhood, had been able to...

No, he thought, taking a larger swig of his Firewhisky. He wouldn't think about her; he had wasted enough of his adult life thinking about that particular witch.

He turned his thoughts back to his new colleague. For some reason Severus could not even begin to fathom, Hermione trusted him implicitly, something that had proven invaluable during their training and would certainly be so while they were in Bulgaria. If he said to move, she moved. If he said to remain still, she remained still. Severus was certain if he told her to go jump off the nearest cliff, she would do it with no questions asked. She simply *did as he said*. It had unsettled him to the point that he had resorted to asking her about it outright. She had looked at him quizzically with those thrice-damned eyes of hers and said, "I've always trusted you. Why should now be any different?" before smiling softly and walking away toward her quarters.

For the first time in his adult life, Severus Snape had been positively gobsmacked, standing in the hallway for several minutes before turning on his heel and storming back to his quarters to analyse what the witch could possibly hope to gain from such an inane statement. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to think of a blasted thing.

Severus finished drinking his Firewhisky and then prepared for bed. Tomorrow, they would leave for Varna ... and the first real test of their fledgling partnership.

~oOo~

In the morning, Severus and Hermione Flooed to the Minister's office to receive their final instructions before taking an untraceable international Portkey to Bulgaria. Severus emerged from the fireplace first, his lips twisting into a sneer as he saw who was present in the room. He turned around and put his hand into the green flames.

Hermione emerged, her hand grasping Severus' as she exited the Floo. "Thank you," she said with a smile as she stepped into the room.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement and then jerked his head to one side, causing her gaze to be drawn to the two young wizards sitting with the Minister.

"Harry! Ron! What are you doing here?" Hermione cried as she moved to embrace the Dunderheaded Duo.

"We came to see you off," Harry explained. "We couldn't let you leave for months on end without saying good-bye, now could we?"

Severus grimaced at having to witness the reunion of the three friends and moved against the wall in a vain effort to say out of the Potter and Weasley's line of sight.

"What's *he* doing here?" Weasley suddenly demanded, pointing his index finger at Severus.

"If you would like to retain possession of your finger," Severus hissed coldly, his posture rigid with indignation at the young wizard's rude gesture, "then I suggest you refrain from pointing it anywhere in my general direction."

"Severus."

Black eyes met brown, and it seemed an entire conversation silently took place with one look. Severus nodded, and Hermione turned to face her red-headed friend.

"Honestly, Ronald," she scolded. "Isn't it obvious? Severus is my partner. We're going to be working together on this investigation."

Ron seemed flummoxed, while Harry appeared to be carefully considering the interaction between the young woman who had been his best friend since he was eleven and the man who had tried to make his life a living hell since he was eleven.

"But 'Mione..." Ron began, only to be interrupted by a visibly embarrassed Hermione.

"Don't call me that," she snapped before casting Severus an apologetic glance. "You know I hate that, Ronald. I've told you a thousand times"

Severus leaned back against the wall and watched the bickering pair, marvelling at how quickly she was able to transform from his quietly confident partner to a shrieking harpy. That was what her two friends expected of her...it was her role in their little trio...and so it was what she gave them. But he now knew better. Yes, she could be bossy and overbearing, but that wasn't the sum of her personality. She was strong and vibrant, and she had a sharp tongue and a dark sense of humour. She was cunning and sly, quick on her feet and even quicker with her wand. Yes, Hermione Granger was much more than these *boys* gave her credit for.

Still, as Severus watched her verbally eviscerate Weasley, he couldn't help but wonder if the two were romantically involved or merely friends. He was uncertain; but he did know that he did not like the feeling in his chest at even the possibility that they might be a couple. Kingsley and Potter, he noticed, were also watching, both with expressions of amused exasperation.

"Do they do this often?" Severus asked blandly.

Potter grinned. "All the time."

With an exaggerated sigh, Severus turned his attention to Kingsley. "Can we please get on with it? I believe we have a Portkey to catch."

~o0o~

Situated on the Black Sea Coast, Bulgaria's third largest city was a major tourist destination during the summer months, its sun-kissed beaches and calm waters drawing in thousands of visitors each year.

In Varna, blending in was an easy task.

They were spending the next few days in Muggle Varna at the Grand Hotel Musala Palace in the very heart of the city. Once they became familiar with the city and were accustomed to their cover story, they would move to a rented villa in the outskirts of Varna, and the investigation would truly begin. First, however, they needed to meet their Bulgarian contact.

Severus stood in the front of the bathroom in his suite, vainly attempting to properly knot his Muggle tie. "Sod it," he said, taking his wand from the counter and tucking it into his sleeve before exiting the bathroom.

He picked up the morning newspaper from the floor in front of his door, removed the wards he had placed the night before, and left the room. As he walked down the hall to Hermione's suite, he considered the scene in the Minister's office the previous day.

Just moments before they had left for Varna, Weasley had grabbed Hermione by the shoulders and pressed a quick kiss to her mouth, releasing her just as the Portkey activated. They had landed in the Bulgarian Minister for Magic's office, with Hermione's cheeks a flaming red and her lips thinned into an angry line. Severus had arched a questioning eyebrow to which she had tersely shaken her head, her only response being, "Ron is an idiot."

Severus summarily dismissed the sickly feeling in his stomach at the thought of the Weasley boy pressing his slobbering mouth to Hermione's; it was most certainly a case of dyspepsia caused by the rich sauce on the lamb cutlet he had eaten for the previous night's dinner.

He arrived at Hermione's hotel room and rapped sharply on the door. He waited a few moments, and when she didn't answer, he knocked again. Finally, he heard shuffling footsteps approach.

"Yes?" She must have just woken up as her voice was deep and husky. Good gods, the images *that* brought to mind

He cleared his throat. "It's Severus."

"How do I know it's really you?"

Of all the inane... "Let me in."

"Not until I'm sure it's you. Name the twelve uses of dragon's blood."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, woman, open the damn door!"

Her muffled laughter drifted into the hall as the knob turned and the door swung open, Hermione stepping to the side to grant him entrance.

He stalked into the room and was about to take her to task for her cheek, when he turned to face her and noticed her attire ... or lack thereof. She was barefoot and still wearing what must be her night clothes. He resolutely refused to look down any further than her neck due to the scandalously tiny Holyhead Harpies tee-shirt and the shortest shorts he had ever seen. He might be a right bastard most of the time, but he was still a gentleman.

And so it was that he found himself staring at her hair...hair that, for the most part, had been contained during their training sessions, typically pulled tightly back in a pony tail. He supposed she used a charm or a potion to subdue it into its usual wild curls, because now her hair stood out around her head and shoulders in a giant pouf. It was Severus' turn to be amused, his eyes crinkling at the corners as his lips twitched into a smirk.

"You know, I don't believe I've ever seen hair with that texture before. It reminds me of something ..." he murmured, bringing his hand up to his chin and tapping his index

finger against his mouth.

"Severus," Hermione warned as she eyed him warily, her gaze never leaving his as she shut the door and then eased past him to take a seat on the Victorian sofa.

Suddenly, he snapped his fingers, feeling quite smug when she startled in response. "Aha! I've got it. Fairy floss!"

She rolled her eyes so slowly it was almost painful to watch before she imperiously intoned, "Those with lank, greasy hair should not cast the first stone."

"Now, now, Hermione. No mixing metaphors." Severus settled himself into the chair next to the sofa.

"Shut up," she said, her tone dripping with saccharine sweetness. "It's too early for witty banter. Especially since I haven't had my morning cup of coffee yet. Now, what brings you to my room so early? Do we need to go over the details of today's outing *again*?"

"Not at all," he replied smoothly. "I require your assistance with my tie."

~o0o~

The trendy café was filled with tourists out for a bite to eat before heading to the beach or out for a day of sightseeing. Severus and Hermione had selected a table inside against the back wall where a discreetly cast Muffliato and Notice-Me-Not helped to render them all but invisible to the other patrons.

After helping him with his tie, Hermione had prodded Severus into leaving his jacket back at the hotel. He had balked initially, already feeling uncomfortable without his voluminous wizarding robes, but she had insisted that he looked "fabulous" in his black woollen trousers and crisp white shirt. Given the warmth of the midday sun and the crowded café, he was grateful he had taken heed of her suggestion.

They were waiting for the arrival of their contact; Kingsley had been annoyingly vague regarding how they were to recognise the person, insisting that they would "know him when they saw him." Severus had demanded more information, or at the very least a signal, so that they would not accidentally identify the wrong person as their contact. Eventually Kingsley had concurred, informing them to look for "the man with the small S.P.E.W. button on his jacket." Severus had smirked at his partner...who had looked as though she would like to crawl under the table and hide...and said, "Ah, yes. Spew."

Hermione had groaned, covered her face with her hands and mumbled, "Shut up."

As it happened, Kingsley had been correct: The button had been unnecessary, for as soon as Hermione saw the man, she let out a delighted squeal, jumped from her seat, and threw herself into his arms. The man's deep laughter filled the café as he swung Hermione around in a circle before setting her back on her feet.

"Viktor! I thought it might be you! I'm so glad to see you! It's been much too long!"

Severus scowled. *So much for the Notice-Me-Not Charm.*

~o0o~

They had been in Bulgaria for two weeks before they had rented a villa on the outskirts of wizarding Varna and begun introducing themselves as a wealthy pure-blood businessman and his poor niece who had been left an orphan during "the persecution of the faithful" in Britain.

The glamour charms they used changed their appearances just enough so that they would not be recognised. Hermione's telltale brown, busy locks appeared blonde and straight, her brown eyes transformed to a vivid violet. Severus' distinguishing features were also altered. His nose looked much smaller and less hooked, and his dark eyes turned a deep blue. Hermione had insisted his awful head of hair remain long, since that was the trend for pure-blood wizards, so Severus simply altered its colour to a very light brown. They certainly looked the part, their reflections in the mirror indicating they were both rather attractive when using the glamour charms.

Severus found it ironic, then, that whenever they returned from an outing, they both removed the charms as soon as they entered the villa, each preferring the other's true form.

~o0o~

Severus slipped into the darkened room while Hermione watched the hallway. He quickly determined that it was empty and signalled that it was safe to enter. Krum had been able to disarm all of the protective charms and spells during a visit to the home the previous day, making things much easier for Hermione and Severus.

It had taken them three months to make the right connections in the tightly-knit wizarding community in Varna. Finally they had been invited to an exclusive gathering at the home of one of the key members of the group they were investigating, a Mr. Hugh Apperson, of Britain. The Apperson villa sat high on a tree-covered cliff that overlooked the blue-green waters of Cape Galata and was covered with Muggle-Repelling Charms to keep the "undesirables" away.

Severus and Hermione moved further into the room, both grateful that the study was cool thanks to the enormous open window which overlooked the edge of the cliff and offered a breathtaking view of the bay. The room was Spartan; the only pieces of furniture were an enormous desk and chair in the centre of the cavernous space. The walls were bare, their white-washed plaster glowing in the moonlight from the open window.

Quickly, they each walked behind the parchment-covered desk...Severus on one side, Hermione on the other...and began searching for any evidence they could find that Apperson was involved in either financing or coordinating the New Pure-Blood Party.

After several fruitless minutes of searching, Severus was becoming frustrated. The longer they stayed in the room, the greater the chance that they would be discovered. There had to be something...

"I found it," Hermione whispered, handing him a piece of parchment. He carried it over to the window, Hermione following behind, and read by the light of the moon. Yes. *This is it*, Severus thought. In his hands, he held a complete listing of those persons who had been approached and how much, if any, they had donated to the fundraising effort. He nodded to Hermione, and she took the parchment back to the desk.

Hermione pulled out her wand, pointed it at the parchment, and quietly intoned, "*Replicato*." Nothing happened. She looked to Severus.

Damn and blast. Krum had somehow missed a magical field dampener...the room would allow no magic inside its walls.

Severus was about to tell Hermione that they would have to risk removing the parchment, when she reached inside her beaded bag, pulled out a sheet of Muggle notebook paper and a ball-point pen, and began to quickly copy the list. When she was finished, she returned the parchment to its original location and placed her pen in her bag before walking back to the window and handing Severus the duplicated list.

"Well done," he murmured as he folded the paper and placed it inside a hidden pocket in his robes.

Suddenly, they heard voices drifting toward them from the outer hallway, a man and a giggling woman, both of whom sounded quite obviously drunk. With a jolt, Severus recalled that the study was the only room in that section of the house...the couple was heading straight for them.

Unable to Disillusion themselves, and with nowhere to hide inside the sparse room, Severus thought quickly. His gaze was drawn to the open window and then to Hermione. He pulled his wand from his sleeve and looked very deliberately into his partner's eyes.

"We have to go. *Now*," he whispered.

Hermione's eyes widened and flitted to the window for the briefest of moments before she nodded and unsheathed her wand. She climbed onto the window sill, waited until Severus was immediately behind her ... and jumped.

Severus leapt from the window as well, pulling his shrunken broom from inside his robes, quickly returning it to its proper size, and then racing toward a falling but silent Hermione. His heart pounded in his chest, and Severus increased his speed until he was able to reach out and grab her, seating her on the broom in front of him, her back to his chest. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her trembling form to him and gently landed on a secluded stretch of beach near the tree line.

Hermione immediately unseated herself from the broom, stumbling to an area of dense foliage where she fell to her hands and knees and retched.

Severus dropped the broom into the sand and followed her, his own body shaking from the influx of adrenaline. As he reached her, she Scourgified the ground and then twisted until she was seated, her head in her hands.

He knew of her fear of falling...it was the reason she did not like flying...and yet she had thrown herself from the window with barely a look from him. Amazing. He sat down in the sand next to her, gathering her still shaking body close, and said, "You are too bloody trusting."

"No," she muttered shakily, her face pressed tightly into his neck. "Only with you and the boys."

Severus scowled. Had she just placed him in the same category as Potter and Weasley?

"You know," he said as he tightened his arms around her, "if I had known that you would jump out of a window merely at my command, I might have been sorely tempted to suggest it when you were thirteen and stealing ingredients from my potions stores."

She managed a small laugh. "Shut up."

A/N: Fairy floss is the Australian equivalent of cotton candy (US) and candy floss (UK). I thought "fairy floss" sounded quite appropriate for the wizarding world, so I chose to use that term.

My unending gratitude to my wonderful beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and my fabulous Brit picker, LettyBird. You ladies are the best!

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 4

The rise of the New Pure-Blood Party in Europe sends Severus Snape and his new partner, Hermione Granger, to Bulgaria, deep undercover. Cut off from everyone they know, they come to rely upon one another. A tragic misunderstanding separates them, until Hermione is seriously injured, and the two find themselves together again... this time at Spinner's End. Written for the SS/HG Exchange. DH-Compliant, EWE.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

The ballroom was teeming with people, some dancing in the centre of the room in a dizzying array of colour, while others hovered around the edges in small groups, enjoying the gossip and flirtations. The large French doors that led to the gardens had been opened, allowing the cool night air to drift inside and offering respite from the crowded room.

Severus stood alone in a secluded corner, telling himself he was watching for any indication that Hugh Apperson had arrived. In reality, he was watching that overly-muscled buffoon, Viktor Krum, guide Hermione across the dance floor. His eyes narrowed as Krum whispered something in her ear, causing her to laugh delightedly. At least she was using the glamour charm...it was easier to watch Krum dally with the blonde, violet-eyed version of Hermione than it would have been with her true appearance. He scowled at the pair as they gracefully swept by where he stood, secure in the knowledge that if someone were to witness his displeasure, they would assume he was merely protective of his "niece."

"Protective" was putting it mildly. He wanted to wrench the woman away from the groping young Quidditch star. All right, so he wasn't exactly groping; he was holding her at an acceptable distance. But he was still *touching* her.

Severus was not pleased.

He did not know exactly how or when it had happened, but he had developed a slight ... attachment to his young colleague. Over the course of the past five months, he had been, in turn, annoyed, intrigued, exasperated, and amazed by the witch. He chalked it up to being inundated with her company, having shared a domicile for months on end...but deep down he knew it was more than just proximity. Just what that meant, however, was something Severus knew he was not yet ready to discover.

What he *was* ready for was a dance with Hermione.

Severus made his way through the crowd, deftly avoiding the waltzing couples as he strode toward his goal. As he approached, he could not help but notice once again how lovely she looked in the violet ball gown. The dress was strapless, leaving her shoulders and upper back bare, and the corseted bodice accentuated the curve of her waist, the ties in the back allowing tantalising glimpses of skin between the criss-crossed ribbon. The elegant, full skirt swirled around her ankles as she danced, occasionally offering a peek at her stylishly beaded shoes. Her charmed hair was styled in an intricate series of braids and twists and then secured at the back of her head and topped with a small tiara. She was the very image of a pure-blood debutante.

Severus smirked. They had no idea the woman who was the envy of all in attendance that night was actually a Muggle-born witch...and not just any Muggle-born, but the one who had aided Harry Potter in vanquishing their precious Dark Lord. It was delightfully ironic.

Finally reaching the dancing couple, Severus tapped Krum on the shoulder and said, "May I cut in?" Without waiting for a reply, Severus swept Hermione into his arms and took over the waltz, smoothly guiding her around the floor.

"Why, Uncle! I thought you liked Viktor," Hermione teased, her eyes continuing to scan the room for the man they were both waiting to see.

Severus snorted as he also discreetly searched for Apperson. "Krum is a useful ally, but 'like' is much too strong a word."

As he completed their first turn about the floor, the doors to the ballroom swung open; the guest of honour had arrived.

"There he is," Hermione whispered. "I wonder if he'll finally approach us tonight."

"He might," Severus replied, his eyes never wavering from Apperson. "This is the fourth little soiree we've been invited to. He would consider it a strategic move to ask for our support here, where he is most at ease."

"And where we are not."

"Precisely."

Just then, Apperson saw them and waved a greeting. Severus inclined his head in acknowledgement before he tightened his hold on Hermione and whispered in her ear, "He is watching."

She turned her head toward Apperson and beamed at him, causing the older man to flush at having such an attractive young woman smile at him in such a manner.

Satisfied that Apperson was suitably interested in speaking with them that night, Severus led Hermione away to a less crowded part of the dance floor to review their strategy for the evening.

Suddenly, she gasped and stiffened in his arms, and the hand he held in his began to tremble violently. Her face lost all colour, and her lips thinned into an angry line. Within seconds, her entire body was shaking in apparent rage, and she looked as though she were about to pull her wand.

Severus pressed her closer and hissed, "What do you think you are doing?"

Hermione raised her head, and Severus was taken aback by the haunted look in her violet eyes. "Bellatrix," she rasped. "It's her. I have to kill her."

Alarmed, he turned them so that he could follow her line of sight. On the opposite side of the ballroom, with her back to them, stood a tall woman in a form-fitting black dress, her long, ebony hair flowing down her back. From behind, she did indeed resemble Bellatrix Lestrange, but Severus knew it could not be her.

"Bella is dead, Hermione," he murmured, his right hand stroking her back in an attempt to calm her.

"No. It's her, and I have to kill her." She tried to pull her hand from his in order to gain access to her wand, but Severus held firm.

"Hermione," he warned, but she appeared to be in some sort of trance and unable to hear him.

She struggled against him. "Let me go!"

"No."

Hermione abruptly went limp in his arms, and Severus breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps now he could talk some sense into her.

With a *pop*, Hermione Disappeared.

Damn it.

She reappeared behind the dark-haired witch, her wand already drawn.

Shite!

There were too many people; he would not be able to reach her in time if he attempted to manoeuvre through the crowded ballroom. He had no choice. He Disappeared, reappearing behind Hermione just as she grasped the unknown witch's shoulder and spun her about to face her.

It was a stranger.

The woman said something in Bulgarian, her expression one of surprise and bewilderment. When a dazed Hermione shook her head, the woman said in heavily-accented English, "I am sorry. Do I know you?"

Hermione took a stumbling step backward, her confident façade beginning to crumble under the realisation that she had almost attacked an innocent person. Severus moved near, pulling the increasingly despondent witch into his arms.

Thinking quickly, he said, "I apologise, madam. My niece was orphaned during the war in Britain. I am afraid you bear a remarkable resemblance to the woman who killed my sister and her husband."

Comprehension and sympathy flooded the woman's face. "I see. I am so sorry for your loss, my dear."

"Thank you," Severus said, still holding Hermione to him tightly. "I believe my niece needs a moment to compose herself. Please, excuse us."

The woman nodded her understanding and after a compassionate look toward the witch Severus held in his arms, she returned her attention to her companions.

The other guests whispered and stared as Severus gently led an unresisting Hermione from the ballroom. Krum rushed forward, offering his assistance, but Severus assured the young wizard that Hermione would be fine after a few moments' rest. As they reached the doorway, Apperson appeared.

"Is she all right?" he asked, his face a mask of concern.

Severus gritted his teeth. He needed to get her out of the room ... immediately. "Just a bit of a fright, Hugh. One of the guests resembled the blood traitor who killed her parents." *Bellatrix is rolling in her grave at being even remotely referred to in such a manner* That thought brought a small measure of grim satisfaction.

"Ah," the portly wizard said. "And of course, she is upset. If you'd like, you may take her to the blue drawing room until she is feeling well enough to return to the ball."

Severus nodded his appreciation, and as soon as Apperson turned away, he scooped Hermione up into his arms, the full skirt of her gown trailing along the floor, and carried her down the hallway to the blue drawing room.

After they entered, he kicked the door shut behind them and then eased Hermione onto the settee. Her face was splotchy and tear-streaked. Severus sighed and then cast a series of privacy spells to ensure their conversation would not be overheard.

"Hermione?"

She would not look at him, but Severus could clearly see the tiny droplets which stained the silk of her dress as her tears dripped from her cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I just ... I saw her, and she looked so much like Bellatrix. I was frightened and angry. I was certain it was her, and all I could think was that this time I was not

wandless...I was not defenceless. And I wanted to make her pay for what she did to me. I wanted her to suffer the same way she caused me to suffer." Hermione took a shuddering breath and raised her head to look at him; the pain in her eyes was heart-wrenching. "That woman ... I almost ... I almost Oh, gods!"

Severus sat down next to her, awkwardly holding her in his arms as she cried. He stroked her hair, encouraging her to lay her head on his shoulder. He remembered the Calloways gleefully informing him of what had happened to "that Mudblood Granger," how Bellatrix had repeatedly used the Cruciatus Curse on the eighteen-year-old girl in a vain attempt to gather information about the Gryffindor sword. Severus knew he was partially to blame, since it had been he who had suggested hiding the false sword in Bellatrix's vault, he who had given the real sword to Potter ... and now it was he who felt the guilt gnaw at him once more.

You see? Even she is but another of your victims, another child who was tortured due to your actions.

"Stop it."

Severus' gaze snapped to hers at her sharply spoken words. A solitary tear leaked from the corner of her eye and trailed down her cheek, but her expression was resolute.

"It wasn't your fault. The only ones to blame are Voldemort and Bellatrix. And to a certain extent, Professor Dumbledore."

Shocked by the amount of vitriol she infused into the name of the man he believed she had greatly admired, Severus demanded, "Explain."

Her hand smoothed across the folded material of her skirt. "He was a great wizard, and we owe him quite a lot. But he was also very manipulative. Much of what happened was set in motion not only by Voldemort but by Dumbledore himself. And some of the decisions he made ... well, I don't agree with many of the choices he made in regards to Harry. And to you."

Severus brow furrowed in confusion. "How so?"

She buried her face against his shoulder. "How could he have asked you to do such a thing? To ask you to *kill* him! I understand he wanted to spare Draco Malfoy from having to commit such a heinous act. But did he even once consider the consequences for *you*?"

"And my soul?" Severus remembered asking. Dumbledore's placating response had been less than comforting.

"And to leave you utterly alone afterward with nothing to explain your actions, nothing to prove that you were entirely loyal to him It was unconscionable. If you hadn't given Harry your memories, what would have become of you?"

Severus could only stare at the witch, his mind replaying her words, trying to make some sense of them. Surely she did not mean such things? In his entire life, no one had ever defended him above all others; yet Hermione had done. Why? What did she expect of him? But even as the thought entered his mind, he knew that it was ludicrous...Hermione had always been honest with him, and she had no reason to deceive him.

Slowly, he moved his hand to her face and placed his fingers under her chin, tilting her head until she was looking directly into his eyes. It seemed as though an eternity passed as they stared at one another, until Severus broke the silence with one word:

"Hermione."

Her eyes closed briefly as though savouring the sound of her name from his lips. "Severus," she breathed and began to lean toward him

"No!" Severus gasped as he realised she had almost certainly been about to kiss him.

She flinched as though he had physically struck her and began to stand, but Severus grabbed her by the arms and stilled her movements.

"Not here, not now," he whispered, hoping that she would understand his meaning; the drawing room of the person they were investigating was no place for a romantic tryst, especially when they were posing as uncle and niece.

Her eyes widened in understanding, and then she offered him a small smile in acknowledgement of his unspoken message. "Later?"

Choosing to allow her believe what she would, Severus remained silent and took her hand in his as he stood. "Come. Perhaps we can salvage the evening by playing the sympathy card with Apperson. We can use your supposed hatred for blood traitors to our advantage. He will almost certainly find our story compelling and may even approach us for a donation to the cause this evening. If so, we will have all the evidence we need to be done with our portion of this case."

"Severus?"

He stopped walking and turned to face her.

"Thank you," she said, and she rose to her toes to place soft kiss upon his cheek and whisper in his ear. "Until later."

~o0o~

They Apparated back to the villa they had rented, both more than ready to go inside and remove the glamour charms and fussy clothing, and just relax. Apperson had not approached them during the ball as they had hoped, but he had invited them for a private luncheon the following week. They were positive he would ask them at that time, giving them the evidence they needed to draw their part of the investigation to a close. Kingsley would be pleased; the situation could be handled before the New Pure-Blood Party had truly organised itself in any meaningful way.

The villa was dark when they finally entered, and they immediately removed the glamour charms, returning them to their true appearances. The only sound came from the rustling of Hermione's silk skirt as she walked to the sofa and collapsed, letting down her now curly hair. She groaned as she removed her shoes and began massaging her stockinged feet.

"Until later." The words echoed in Severus' head as he lingered in the hall. Perhaps it had been one of those moments that once passed, would never return.

"Severus?"

Her voice broke him of his reverie, and he saw her watching him bemusedly.

"Are you all right?"

Severus nodded but did not move. She smiled at him softly and rose to her feet, waving her wand as she approached him. The lilting strains of violins and a piano filled the room as she reached him.

"Dance with me."

Her stared at her, feeling uncomfortable at the idea of holding her in such close proximity when they were alone. "We've danced all evening. Aren't you tired of dancing?"

She shook her head, that soft smile gracing her features once again as she reached for his hand. A trumpet was now playing the melody, and Severus recognised the tune as *La Vie en Rose* although the arrangement was unfamiliar.

"Dance with me," she said again.

He was unsettled by her request but allowed her to lead him to the centre of the living room. Rather than the formal dance posture he had expected, she placed his hands at her waist, wound her arms about his neck, and pressed her body against his, swaying slightly as she whispered, "Hold me."

Unable to do anything else, Severus wrapped his arms about her and slowly began to move. He buried his face in her hair as she rested her head upon his shoulder. Hermione's contented sigh was as much music to his ears as the song that continued to play as they danced.

For all his self-confidence as a wizard, it was here that Severus faltered. He knew what she wanted; he just didn't know if he was able to give it to her. He had never so much as kissed a woman, other than a rather embarrassing moment with Lily Evans during the summer before their fifth year at Hogwarts. It had been clumsy and awkward as neither had known what they were doing. No other witch had ever shown that sort of interest in him, and Severus' fanatical obsession with Lily's memory and discomfiture with women in general had kept him from actively seeking out a romantic relationship of even the most casual sort ... until now.

As the music drew to a close, Hermione lifted her head from his shoulder but did not release him. Instead she moved even closer, her gaze fixed firmly on his mouth as she rose up on her toes and gently brushed her lips against his.

Warmth suffused his body, and he swallowed hard at the unfamiliar sensation in his stomach, as though a thousand Snitches had taken residence there.

She was staring at him, and he realised she was waiting for his response. He brought his hands up to cradle her head, his thumbs caressing her cheeks, and feeling completely out of his depth, he pressed his mouth to hers. Her arms tightened about his neck, and her hands found purchase in his hair. Severus could not stop the moan that escaped his throat as she tangled her fingers in the lank, oily strands, nor the gasp that ended the chaste kiss as she began to massage his scalp.

Hermione took advantage as his mouth opened and began to suckle at his thin lower lip, an action that seemed to have a direct response in his groin. Severus' heart was pounding in his chest as he felt her tongue tentatively enter his mouth and touch his own.

It was too much.

Severus released her so abruptly, she almost stumbled as he backed away from her.

"My apologies, Hermione," he said, hiding his vulnerability in the familiar cloak of formality.

She blinked at him, her brow furrowing in confusion, and he felt his breath catch at the hurt shining in her brown eyes. "Why?"

He turned away, unable to look at her any longer. "This is neither the time nor the place for dalliances."

"Dalliances?" she echoed incredulously. "But at the ball you said ... and just now I don't understand. Don't you want me?"

"No." The lie exited his mouth before he could stop it, but now that he had said it, perhaps it was for the best. They were here to complete their assignment, and that was all. A romantic relationship between them would only interfere. *Keep telling yourself that, old man. But you know perfectly well that the only reason you're denying her is for the sake of your foolish pride.*

"I see." Her whispered words fell upon his ears as if they had been shouted.

Severus listened to the soft rustle of her skirt and the quiet click of her bedroom door before he dared to turn around again. He stood in the middle of the living room, staring longingly at the barrier between them until he finally retired to his room and his cold, lonely bed.

~oOo~

He was dreaming again. Warm fingers were lovingly stroking his jaw line, his brow, even his beak of a nose. The phantom hands moved down his chest, unbuttoning his black cotton pyjama-shirt and peeling the material away from his sleep-warmed skin. And then he was being kissed, gently and softly coaxed, until his lips parted and

He awoke with a start.

It was no dream. Hermione was seated on the edge of his bed, still in her ball gown, and her hands were caressing his bared chest as she thoroughly but tenderly kissed him. Just as he was about to wrench himself away from her sensual ministrations, she ended the kiss.

"What do you think you're doing?" Severus had intended to sound outraged at her high-handed behaviour, but the effect was ruined by the groan he emitted as she lightly sucked and nipped at his neck. *Dear gods.*

"Since you will not make love to me, I am making love to you," she murmured as she continued to kiss and caress any bit of skin her wandering mouth and hands could find. It was both heaven and hell.

"Hermione, you don't understand. I've never..."

"Shh. I know. I worked it out. It's all right. Just let me."

The hand on his chest began to slide lower, and Severus felt as though his heart was going to burst as he realised her intention. His head fell back against his pillow with a soft thump as her hand slipped inside the waistband of his pyjama bottoms. Her warm fingers brushed against his now straining erection, and he surrendered himself to the sensations.

With the lightest of touches, she explored his length until he thought he would surely go mad with desire. Finally, she took him in her hand and began to stroke, setting a slow, steady rhythm. The experience was heightened by her mere presence, and he revelled in the smooth feel of her palm around him rather than the familiarity of his own callused skin. Of their own volition, his hips began to move, and soon he was thrusting eagerly into her hand. After only a few moments, he felt the telltale tingle along his spine, and his movements became less coordinated.

"Severus," Hermione whispered. "I've got you. You can let go."

And he did. His climax roared through him, and she continued the gentle rhythm until he was completely spent.

Severus lay still, waiting for his breathing to return to normal and feeling more sated and relaxed than he had ever known was possible. As his euphoria waned, he became aware of the sticky discharge coating his abdomen and most likely her hand, as well. His face flushed crimson, and he stared resolutely at the wall wondering what in Merlin's crystal cave he should do or say now and cursing his emotional ineptitude.

Once again, Hermione took the lead. "*Tergeo*," she murmured, and Severus felt the gentle tickle of magic as his skin was cleansed of the drying residue.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably and was about to speak, when he felt her rise from the bed. Turning his head to question her departure, he was shocked to see her standing just a few feet away with her back to him, her fingers fumbling at the back of her ball gown with the stays which secured the corseted bodice.

She was undressing. In front of him.

Merlin have mercy.

It seemed like hours before the ties loosened and the material of the bodice separated, leaving her back completely bare. Severus felt light-headed as he watched her shimmy and wiggle her way out of the dress, the fabric falling in a heap of silk at her feet. Hermione stepped out of the gown, pushing it aside with a small nudge of her foot. She was nearly nude, standing before him wearing only her tiny black knickers and a pair of sheer hold-up stockings. His eyes raked greedily over her pleasing form as she peeked at him over one smooth shoulder.

"Do you want to look at me?" she asked shyly, her cheeks pink even as she boldly stared at him. She was an intriguing contradiction, one part innocence, one part siren.

He could not possibly speak, so he nodded slowly, his dark eyes widening as she turned to face him.

She was perfection personified.

Her skin glowed in the moonlight, pale and flawless, and his eyes travelled down her form from head to toe before returning to linger at her high, firm breasts. They were lovely, full and lush with rosy pink nipples, hardened by desire and the chilly night air. He was quite certain they would just fill his hands. He wanted to...no, he *needed* to touch them, to taste them ... now. He was attempting to rise from the bed to do just that when she spoke.

"No. Stay there."

Had he been any other man, Severus would have groaned or even whinged in disappointment. But he wasn't any other man, and so he settled back into the bed to await her next move.

He was not to be disappointed.

Slowly, Hermione lifted one leg until her foot rested next to him on the mattress and then in a leisurely fashion, ran her hand from her ankle to the lace band that encircled her thigh. With painstaking care, she removed the stocking, rolling the silky fabric down and off her leg. She then repeated the process with the other leg until she stood before him wearing only her kickers.

With a blush and an impish grin, she then stated, "You, sir, appear to be over-dressed."

Severus felt his lips curve into a small smile, and he hastily removed his already unbuttoned shirt. Under the privacy of the bed linens, he shucked his pyjama bottoms, kicking them away with the fervent hope he would not be putting them back on any time soon.

When he turned to look at her once more, he caught barely a glimpse of her fully naked form before she was slipping into the bed to lie next to him.

Hermione turned onto her side so that she faced him. "Don't you want to touch me?" she asked softly, and she grasped his hand, placing it on her bare hip.

Having been given permission to touch and explore, Severus did just that. He encouraged her to lie on her back, and then he proceeded to touch every square inch of satiny skin ... and then he began the erotic journey over again. He desperately wanted to please her, the breathy moans and sighs escaping her throat spurring him onward. He was fascinated by her breasts and spent an interminable time fondling and caressing them. The noises she made as he ran his thumbs over her hardened nipples was so encouraging that he began to try various techniques in hopes of hearing more. He tweaked and pinched and rolled ... and then he tasted. He leant in and placed a kiss first on one tip and then the other before he took her into his mouth and suckled.

The feel of Hermione writhing beneath his hands and mouth was empowering, and he became more confident in his attentions, his touches becoming bolder, his kisses more ardent. As his mouth pleased her breast, his hand drifted down over her stomach past the triangle of curls guarding her sex. His fingers stroked down her cleft, causing her to cry out ... so he did it again and again. She was warm and slick with her arousal, allowing his fingers to slide easily against her skin. He knew enough about female anatomy to seek out her clitoris, and he was just barely able to contain his crow of triumph when his fingers brushed against the small bundle of nerves, eliciting a low moan from Hermione. He varied his touches, learning what afforded her the most pleasure and enjoying the feel of her undulating under his hands.

As Severus became familiar with her body, Hermione was doing the same with his, her questing hands lighting a fiery path wherever she touched.

Ready for more, he gathered her into his arms, shifting them until she lay beneath him. This time, it was he who took the lead, lowering his head to hers and eagerly thrusting his tongue into her mouth, her sweet taste flooding his senses. His hips rocked against her, the feel of her skin against his flesh setting his blood aflame.

He felt her fingers wrap around his aching erection as she guided him to her entrance. Severus closed his eyes in concentration and pressed forward, his eyes rolling back into his head as little by little, her heat surrounded him. He had never dreamed it would feel like this, hot and wet and *tight*. His hands gripped the coverlet on either side of her head, and he groaned as Hermione writhed beneath him.

"Stop!" he ground out, shaking with the effort to remain in control as his body adjusted to the feel of her. "Don't move. Just let me," he said, repeating her earlier words.

She stilled...*thank Merlin*...and he was able to hold back his impending orgasm. He knew he wouldn't last long...his body was unused to such intense sensations...but he wanted her to find at least some modicum of satisfaction along with him. With his eyes screwed tightly shut, he began to move, clumsily at first, until he found a rhythm, and his strokes became smooth and deep.

Hermione began to move with him, lifting her hips to meet his, and he felt himself slide even deeper within her.

"Oh, gods. Hermione." He could feel the tension building in him, expanding, overtaking his rational mind.

He opened his eyes and watched in fascination as her hand snaked down her body to where they were joined, her fingers stroking in time with his thrusts until she cried out, her inner walls rippling as he continued to move within her.

His control snapped as she unexpectedly contracted around him, and he was flung over the edge, emptying himself into her with a guttural moan.

Severus held her to him as he rolled onto his side, resting his cheek on the top of her head as he caught his breath. He pressed his mouth to her temple, and he felt her snuggle closer before she lifted her head to kiss him.

They lay there for some time, kissing languidly until, exhausted, Hermione drifted off to sleep. Severus, however, remained awake, his thoughts and emotions a confusing jumble as one word repeated itself in his mind in an endless refrain:

Mine.

~o0o~

It was their last night in Bulgaria, and Severus sat impatiently on the sofa in the living room of their rented villa waiting for Hermione to finish dressing for dinner. Apperson had finally solicited them for a contribution to his cause, drawing their part in the investigation to a close. Severus had insisted on going to Muggle Varna so that they could celebrate as themselves...and he also planned on asking Hermione to return with him to his home in Majorca rather than go to London. It was a lot to ask of her, he knew, but he was not ready for their time together to come to an end. The past three weeks had been the best Severus had ever known, the days spent bringing the investigation to a close, the evenings in engaging conversation and laughter, followed by passion-filled nights as he tapped into the sexuality he had suppressed for so long. And all of it was with Hermione.

Since that first night, he had relished every moment, every conversation, every kiss, every touch. His affection for her had deepened into something more Well, he wasn't certain what it was. It could be love, but then he had thought he loved Lily Evans too, and he had managed to bollocks that up thoroughly.

Lily. She had been the love of his life, or so he had believed for many years. He had loved her, he was certain of that, but it had been an immature emotion, that of a lovesick boy pining for his unrequited love. After the abrupt and painful end of their relationship, she had become an obsession. The circumstances surrounding her death had led him to use her memory as a sort of touchstone...his driving force during his years as a spy for the Order.

Seven years removed from the war, however, he could clearly see that Lily had been far from the perfect Gryffindor princess he had once believed her to be. She had been beautiful, yes, and overall, she had been a good person, that much was certain. But she had also been petty and vengeful and unforgiving. One mistake...a mistake he had pleaded with her to forgive...and she had thrown away years of friendship. He would have forgiven her anything...had he not continued to be her friend even after she remained on friendly terms with Potter and Black after they had tried to *kill* him? She had been painfully aware of his pathetic home life, of his lack of friends, and yet she had deserted him. He had wondered over the years if she ever regretted not accepting his apology, but that did not matter anymore; he had been able to let her go and to begin living his life for himself rather than for a ghost from his past. In the end, Severus had a few fond memories of his otherwise dismal childhood thanks to Lily, and for that he would always be grateful.

Hermione, however, was a different matter all together. She obviously cared for, desired, and trusted him in a way Lily never had. He felt possessive of her much in the same way he had Lily, but the accompanying feelings of mistrust and jealousy were conspicuously absent. He trusted Hermione...and unlike Lily, Hermione returned his affection.

Apart from having been a Gryffindor, Hermione had very little in common with Lily. Not only was she not as beautiful as Lily had been, she was bossy and opinionated, an insufferable know-it-all whose intelligence might just surpass his own...not that he would ever admit such a thing. She also had a kind heart and an amazing capacity for putting the needs of others before her own. Hermione was a witch of few friends but was fiercely loyal to those she did have. If Ronald Weasley, that irritating, ginger-headed prat, were to ever call Hermione Granger a Mudblood, Severus had no doubt that given enough time, she would forgive the idiot ... although she would most certainly hex the boy first.

How different she was from Lily. Thank Merlin.

"Severus!"

He was shaken from his thoughts by the sound of Hermione calling his name. She was standing in the middle of room, appearing quite annoyed at having been ignored.

"Forgive me. Did you need something?"

Her brow furrowed in concern. "Are you all right? I called your name several times, but your mind was obviously elsewhere."

"I was just thinking. Nothing important," Severus replied as he rose to his feet to kiss her cheek. "You look lovely."

She blushed prettily and ran a hand over the skirt of the demure black dress. "Thank you. I just need to put my hair up, and then we can leave."

Severus entangled a hand into the curls at the base of her neck, placing the other at the small of her back and pulling her to him. "I like your hair down," he murmured as began to place a series of kisses along her jaw.

"You do?" Hermione asked breathlessly, tilting her head to the side to allow him easier access to her neck.

"Mmm." He could never get enough of her taste, her smell, her skin. He brought his mouth to hers, confidently slipping his tongue between her lips. With a small whimper, she pressed herself against him and returned his kiss, tangling her tongue with his.

After several minutes, they parted, and Severus rested his forehead against hers until they both caught their breath.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said. "We still have to get through dinner before I can ravish you properly."

She laughed as she stepped out of his embrace and teasingly scowled at him. "You are incorrigible. Now I have to repair my make-up."

"You're perfect just as you are." It was true. She was absolutely breathtaking with her hair slightly askew and her lipstick smeared from his kisses.

Hermione shook her head at him in exasperation and walked toward the bathroom.

"Oh, Severus. I forgot about my earrings. Could you get them for me? They're the small diamond ones in the black velvet bag in my nightstand."

"Of course." The domesticity of the moment pleased him, and he was feeling quite smug as he walked to her bedroom...which was now mostly used to store her clothing...to retrieve her jewellery.

He rummaged through the drawer, wondering how one woman could have collected such a massive amount of clutter in such a short time, until he found the small black bag. After unsuccessfully searching by feel, he turned the bag over, the contents spilling out onto the bed.

"Diamond earrings," he muttered as he picked through the items, but the earrings did not appear to be among them. Then, he noticed a small, black velvet box. Certain that the earrings must be inside, he flipped open the lid.

Nestled against the white satin lining was a ring...not just any ring, but by its appearance, an engagement ring. Severus plucked it from box and examined it further as a cold tightness settled in his chest. It was a small diamond solitaire of questionable quality, set in yellow gold. Turning it over, he saw an inscription on the inside of the band. Squinting to decipher the tiny print, he read, *HG Always and Forever RW*.

Rage and pain coursed through his veins. All this time, it had meant nothing to her; he was merely a fling, someone with whom to sate her lust until she could return home to her *fiancé*.

His anger and hurt were so acute that he could not see how implausible his assumptions were. He could only see history repeating itself; Lily with Potter, Hermione with Weasley. And himself, once again left alone to pick up the pieces of his shattered heart.

He should have known it was too good to be true.

Dispassionately, he placed the ring back in the box and then returned everything to the bag. He swallowed the pain, the rage, until he felt nothing but the familiar numbness that had seen him through his years as a spy.

The Severus Snape who left the room was not the one who had entered it.

As he walked into the living room, Hermione was exiting the bathroom. "Oh, there you are. I found them. They were on the bathroom counter. Are you ready to leave?"

He stared at her, his eyes cold and hard.

"Are you sure you're all right? You look odd. Are you ill?" she asked, her eyes filled with concern.

Severus continued to glare at her as she raised a hand to touch his brow, as if he were a child. Disdainfully, he jerked away from her touch and stepped around her to the drinks table where he poured himself a glass of Firewhisky.

"I am fine. However," he said as he turned to face her, his expression carefully schooled to indifference, "there is something we need to discuss before we leave tomorrow."

The hopeful expression on Hermione's face both confused and irritated him.

"I must thank you for relieving me of my cursed virginity," he stated bluntly. "As a man of some years, I had learned to ignore that facet of my humanity, and I find that I am ... *grateful*," he all but spat the word, "for your tutelage."

"Wh-what?" she stammered, visibly hurt and mystified by his unkind words and harsh demeanour.

Ignoring her query, Severus ruthlessly continued, "Now that we are leaving Bulgaria, however, there is no need for us to see each other again."

Her face blanched, and her body went rigid with shock. "What did you say?"

Who knew she could be such an actress, he thought, infuriated by her wounded and incredulous tone. He sneered at her, his tone dripping with disdain as he replied, "Must I repeat myself? There is no need for us to see each other again."

He watched impassively as tears filled her eyes, and he viciously squelched the desire to beg her forgiveness for his coldness. She had toyed with his affections and would have left him eventually for Weasley. It was better to end it now before he did something stupid ... like fall in love with her.

Hermione was not one to give up so easily, however. "Why are you being like this? Have I done something to upset you? Talk to me. *Please!*"

He ignored her pleading inquiries, the need to escape her presence overwhelming him. He downed the Firewhisky in one burning swallow. "I don't believe I will be going out for dinner after all. I shall be gone first thing in the morning. I bid you adieu, Miss Granger." Paying no heed to her stricken face, Severus strode to his bedroom, closing the door with a resounding *click* and then warding it to prevent her from entering.

He could hear her broken sobs as she ran to her room and then the door slamming; the eerie silence which followed indicated that she had cast a Silencing Charm. He stood by the window, staring unseeingly at the back garden and steadfastly ignoring the small voice in the back of his mind that whispered perhaps it wasn't as it appeared, that maybe, just maybe, he was wrong.

In the morning, he Charmed a pillow...*her* pillow...into a Portkey and left for home. The solitary existence that had once been so appealing was now forever ruined.

A/N: One more chapter to go

My unending thanks to my beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and to my Brit picker, LettyBird. You all are incredible, and I am so lucky to have you!

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 4

The rise of the New Pure-Blood Party in Europe sends Severus Snape and his new partner, Hermione Granger, to Bulgaria, deep undercover. Cut off from everyone they know, they come to rely upon one another. A tragic misunderstanding separates them, until Hermione is seriously injured, and the two find themselves together again... this time at Spinner's End. Written for the SS/HG Exchange. DH-Compliant, EWE.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Present Day

Sunlight attempted to stream through the small, grimy window, the diffused rays just bright enough to awaken the man on the cot. Severus yawned and then stretched before swinging his legs to the side and sitting up.

It had been a long, arduous week since they had arrived at Spinner's End. Hermione's injuries had initially required constant care, and when he had been able to rest, his dreams had been filled with memories of the past six months, his sleep punctuated by an irrational compulsion to monitor Hermione's breathing. He was exhausted both physically and mentally; morning had come much too early.

Severus yawned again and rubbed his face with his hands before rising to check on her. She was sleeping peacefully, her ridiculous hair fanning out across the white pillowcase.

Her injuries had healed better than he had anticipated; she was no longer in pain, and her cuts and abrasions were no longer visible. The worst of the burns now appeared merely as reddened patches of skin and would disappear completely over the next few days. She had been experiencing some slight dizziness, a side effect of all the medicinal potions she had ingested, but that would dissipate with time. Overall, Hermione had been quite lucky...not only had she survived with no long-term physical damage, there would be no scarring.

He exited the room, quietly closing the door behind him before walking down the stairs to the kitchen. As he prepared breakfast, Severus considered the missive he had received from Potter the previous night. The Aurors had discovered that Apperson was behind the attack on Hermione and was now on the run. Fortunately, the wizard he had hired to deliver the explosive had been captured quickly and was more than willing to talk; apparently Bulgaria's wizarding prison made Azkaban seem like Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour. The hired wand had not been informed as to Apperson's motive for the attack, but he had said that he had been hired to frighten and injure, not to kill.

Severus sighed as he filled two plates with eggs, bacon, and toast. He still needed to talk with Hermione about what she recalled of the explosion. In the week they had been holed up in the tiny ramshackle house, he had successfully avoided speaking with his erstwhile *inamorata* beyond the necessary inquiries regarding her health and care, and he liked it that way...it was safer.

He scowled at the thought of Hermione Granger affecting him in any way whatsoever, but there was no sense in denying it. He was an idiot if he allowed her to draw him in again, and yet every moment he remained in her presence, he was in danger of doing just that.

Once breakfast was placed on the table, Severus cast a warming charm on the plates and returned to the small upstairs bedroom to awaken Hermione. When he opened the door, he found her already sitting up, blinking the sleep from her eyes, her hair fluffed out in a wide halo about her head. His lips twitched involuntarily in amusement as he took in the sheer enormity of her untamed locks, and he unwittingly released a soft huff of laughter.

Hermione swung her head toward the door at the sound and glared at him. "Shut up," she said morosely as she crossed her arms under her breasts.

Severus' chest ached at hearing the familiar rebuke, even though the teasing tone was conspicuously absent.

She sighed, and her lower lip began to tremble. Hardening his heart against the pitiful picture she made, Severus asked coldly, "Are you in pain?" She shook her head and stared at the quilted counterpane. "Would you care to enlighten me as to the cause of your snivelling?"

That got a rise out of her.

She scowled at him. "How about the fact that I have been here for a week and have not yet had a proper bath? I am tired of cleansing spells; I feel horrid and filthy, my teeth are disgusting, and my hair is frizzy and knotted ... and it looks like a giant, brown pygmy puff!" she exclaimed as she fell back onto the mattress and turned onto her side to face the wall.

A pang of guilt at having not considered her basic personal hygiene pierced his emotional armour, and Severus closed his eyes to hide his remorse. Careful to maintain his unfeeling façade, he sneered and said, "I shall run you a bath." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

The bathroom had not been used in years, and it had been filthy before he had cleaned it that first morning. Severus had used magic to scrub and disinfect every surface, and he had repaired a few broken pipes as well, so that the facilities would be both spotless and operational. He turned on the taps to fill the tub and then cast a warming charm to heat the water to a comfortable temperature. When he was satisfied, he returned to the bedroom to fetch Hermione.

She was sitting cross-legged on top of the bed linens, the position, along with her sullen expression and gigantic hair, giving her the appearance of a small, pouting child. When she turned to look at him, her expression strangely defiant, he noticed her heart-shaped face was streaked with tears.

"What is wrong now?" he demanded gruffly, irritated that he still cared about her emotional well-being.

Her cheeks turned pink, and she wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of the nightdress he had Transfigured from his handkerchief. "Nothing."

Severus stared at her for a long moment, searching for indications that she was hiding any lingering pain, before he nodded and said, "Your bath is ready. Come."

As she was still slightly shaky on her feet, he helped her walk to the bathroom and then left to allow her privacy. While she bathed, he returned to the kitchen to recast the warming charm on their breakfast. He sat at the table to wait; she would need his help to return to the bedroom. His fingers drummed on the tabletop as he desperately tried to think about something other than Hermione, naked, only a floor above him.

When he heard the sound of the tub draining, he walked upstairs to wait for her in the hallway outside the bathroom. The door opened just as he reached it, and there stood Hermione, clad only in a towel, her wet hair dripping onto the floor. Gritting his teeth, he took her elbow and guided her to the bedroom.

"I will leave you to dress," he said, intent on escaping her presence as quickly as possible.

Her hand reached out and touched his arm, causing him to pull away abruptly. A flash of pain crossed her features, and she looked away before muttering, "If it isn't any trouble, I would like a fresh nightdress. The other one is beginning to smell."

Muttering to himself about troublesome witches, Severus Summoned the trunk Potter had sent that morning and dug through her belongings until he found a fresh nightdress. Thrusting the article of clothing at her, he snarled, "Satisfied?"

Hermione's brown eyes narrowed; she ripped the gown from his hand and snapped, "It's fine. I don't know what your problem is, Severus, but if you cannot speak to me civilly, I would rather you do not speak to me at all. I've done nothing to deserve such disdainful condescension."

Glowering at her, Severus ground out, "Get dressed. I will wait in the hall to escort you to breakfast. And I have a few questions for you."

He caught the hopeful gleam in her eye and quickly moved to crush it. "There has been a break in the investigation." He observed with grim satisfaction as her face fell, and then he left the room, shutting the door behind him with a resounding click.

~o0o~

Breakfast was eaten in discomfiting silence.

When they were finished with the meal, Severus placed the dishes into the sink to be washed up later and then returned to his seat at the table.

"Potter sent a message late last night in regard to the investigation of your attack. It appears that Apperson is the one responsible, and he's currently on the run. The Aurors do not believe it will take long to capture him...he hasn't attempted to cover his tracks."

Hermione looked at him in alarm. "He must have found out about us, somehow."

Severus nodded. "That appears to be the case. Also, the wizard Apperson hired to harm you has stated under Veritaserum that the intention was to frighten, not to kill. That explains why your injuries, while severe, were not life-threatening."

"I see," she said slowly. "But how did he discover us? And when?"

She wouldn't like what he was about to suggest, but he knew it was the only way. "With your permission, I would like to examine your memories of that day. Perhaps there is something that will help us answer those questions."

"Legilimency?"

He inclined his head. "Yes."

"All right," she said without hesitation.

Severus felt as though he could be knocked over with a feather. Hermione's steadfast trust in him...even now...continued to astound him.

"Shall we do it right away? I'd feel more comfortable in the sitting room, I think," Hermione explained as she stood from the table.

Disconcerted, Severus simply looked at her, as though he had never seen her before.

"Severus?"

He shook his head. "Forgive me." He stood to his feet and then offered his arm for her to lean on as they walked to the sitting room.

Once she was comfortably seated on the sofa, he sat down next to her. "Turn toward me. Yes, like that," he said as she turned to sit at an angle, her knees touching his.

"Are you certain you wish to do this?"

Hermione took a deep breath and looked directly into his eyes. "Yes. Cast the spell."

Severus raised his wand. "Bring the memories of that day to the forefront of your mind *Legilimens*."

She must have removed all of her Occlumency shields, because he entered easily, immediately accessing the memory he needed.

He watched as she first awakened...it appeared to be early afternoon...and he found himself swallowed by her immense sadness. She listlessly lay around the villa for hours, staring into nothingness and ignoring her grumbling stomach. Was she ill? He examined her appearance closely; her face was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes, but otherwise she appeared healthy. The overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion surrounded the memory. Was she pining for him? Uncomfortable with the implications of such thoughts, Severus moved onward.

He followed Hermione outside to the garden, where she moped on the chaise lounge. Merlin's beard, was that all she had done for the entire day? After a long while, the gardener arrived, so she left him to his work and went back inside where she lay down on the sofa in the living room and attempted to read a book. Baffled by her depressed state but seeing nothing unusual, Severus skipped ahead.

He soon found what he had been seeking and watched as Hermione dragged herself from her reclining position on the sofa to answer a knock at the door. When she opened it, there was no one there ... but there was a package, wrapped up like a gift. Slowing the memory, Severus stepped forward, bending down to examine the square box. It was wrapped in pale blue paper and tied up with a ribbon. There was no note attached, no address, nothing to indicate either the sender or the intended recipient. He felt a burst of hope permeate the fog of sadness around her, and then she reached for the box

Severus abruptly ended the spell and stood, immediately beginning to pace angrily in front of her, his eyes wide with rage and fear. "What the hell were you thinking?!" he bellowed. "You picked up a package that you were *not* expecting, that had *no* indication of who it was from, nor who it was to.... Such an amateur mistake for an Auror of your calibre! You are smarter than that! Why in Merlin's name did you *pick it up*?"

Hermione leapt to her feet. "Because I hoped it was from you!"

Severus took a step back and stared at her, her words echoing in his ears.

"I thought maybe you had ... reconsidered," she mumbled as she sat back down, her eyes downcast.

Pain and guilt came crashing down around him as he finally allowed his mind to begin to put the pieces together, painting a very different picture of the events ten days ago. If she were engaged to Weasley, why hadn't he contacted her since the attack? Why had she not asked about him a single time? Severus considered her confusion and hurt when he had informed her that he had no intention of continuing a relationship with her, her profound melancholy after he had left, her hope at seeing a possible peace offering from him Suddenly, he realised he had to know for certain, his pride be damned.

"Hermione," he said, his voice thick with emotion, "are you, or have you ever been, engaged to be married to Ronald Weasley?"

Her eyes snapped to his. "What are you talking about? Of course not! Ron is like a brother to me!"

Severus turned away, his shoulders hunching over as he buckled under the gravity of his error. Without turning around, he whispered, "I do not believe Mr Weasley is aware of that fact...there is an engagement ring in your bag of jewellery."

Overcome with remorse, he Disapparated.

~o0o~

Severus stood outside the front door of the house in Spinner's End, having walked back from the small park he had once played in as a child. He had spent several hours there contemplating what an idiot he was and how he had once again managed to bollocks things up when it came to love.

Because he did love her...and he had lost her before he had even fully realised the depth of his devotion.

He inhaled deeply, gathered the remnants of his tattered pride, and Apparated into the sitting room. Voices drifted into the room from the kitchen, and recognising them as Hermione and Potter, Severus moved to join the pair in the kitchen.

The two friends were seated at the table, deep in conversation, when Hermione noticed Severus enter the room.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "I was worried sick!" She was obviously irate with him, but Severus felt strangely satisfied that she had been concerned for his welfare.

"I needed to think. I went to..."

She shook her head him, her untamed curls flying about her head and shoulders. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Harry's just arrived to let us know they've caught Apperson."

Severus glared at her in reproach for her rudeness in interrupting him but then turned to Harry who nodded his agreement. "Found him in Milan this morning. We've already interrogated him, and yes, we used Veritaserum," he said in anticipation of Severus' question. "He had some interesting things to say."

Hermione ducked her head, and her cheeks turned crimson. Severus arched an eyebrow at her reaction, but she would not look at him.

"How was our cover blown, Potter?" Severus asked, realising he was not going to get much, if any, information out of Hermione.

"Well, it was the..."

Pop!

"Hermione!"

Weasley, Severus thought grimly, sliding a glance at Hermione. She was already scowling at her ginger friend as he rushed to her, gathering her up in a tight embrace.

"Let go of me, Ronald."

Severus had never heard Hermione speak so coldly. Apparently, neither had Weasley, because he immediately released her and stepped back, eying her warily.

"I missed you," Weasley said earnestly, although his tone was slightly hesitant in the face of Hermione's vexation.

"That's nice," she replied evenly, her words belied by the flash of annoyance that crossed her face.

"He's in trouble now," Potter murmured before turning to face Severus. "Why don't we go to the sitting room and let them have it out?"

Severus was reluctant to leave Hermione with the other wizard, but he agreed and followed Potter into the adjoining room. He sat on the sofa, making certain that he could see Hermione and Weasley as they visibly argued in the kitchen. She must have cast a Silencing Charm, because although he could see them, he could not hear a word of what was being said...or yelled, by the looks of things.

"It was the gardener," Potter said, interrupting Severus' visual eavesdropping.

Severus shook his head in confusion. "Pardon me, but did you say it was the gardener?"

The younger wizard nodded. "Apparently he worked for Apperson. His job was to keep an eye on the latest pure-blood family who might be a good fit for the party, to see if you were really 'worthy' to join. According to Apperson, everything was fine until a few days after he approached you about contributing financially to the campaign. The gardener happened to see you and Hermione in your back garden."

Frustrated and bewildered, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and replied, "We always wore our glamour charms outside of the villa. How would that have revealed we weren't who we said we were?"

A flush crept up Potter's neck to his cheeks, and he looked away as he carefully explained, "Erm ... he saw you" He lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck with and grimaced. "Let's just say you weren't exactly acting like uncle and niece."

Severus closed his eyes and groaned. How could they have been so stupid? He should have known better. There was no excusing his actions; he had been so caught up in Hermione that he had lost all higher brain function and completely ignored their reason for being there in the first place.

"Yeah, well," Potter said, his cheeks still pink, "there you have it. Apperson didn't know who you were, just that you weren't who you claimed. That was enough to worry him, and he wanted to scare you a bit. He thought if one of you was injured, you'd back off."

Guilt was a feeling Severus was very familiar with, but it was always a hard potion to swallow. If he had trusted in Hermione, if he hadn't been such an arse to her, she would have never stayed behind after he left. Not only had he ruined his relationship with her, his actions had almost got her killed.

Potter continued his explanation, focussing on how the Aurors had tracked Apperson to Milan and captured him.

But Severus' attention was now focussed on the pair he could see arguing in the kitchen...well, Hermione was arguing. Weasley was cowering. She was gesticulating wildly, her hands cutting a path through the air as she pointed at Severus. Weasley turned his head and goggled at Severus before turning back to Hermione with a wounded expression. Her gestures and body language suggested that she was quite emphatic about whatever she was telling the wizard. Weasley held out his hands to her, but Hermione shook her head as she crossed her arms. She seemed sad now, her face relaxing from its pinched appearance and her shoulders slumping slightly. She pulled her wand...causing Weasley to startle...and pointed it in the direction of the stairs. Within moments, a familiar black velvet bag flew into her hands. Hermione reached inside and pulled out the small box that had been the impetus of Severus' folly. She paused momentarily before solemnly holding it out to Weasley. When he refused to take it, she reached forward and grabbed his hand, placing the box in his palm and forcing his fingers to curl around it. Hermione turned away from her friend, while Weasley stared at the box in his hand. Severus watched as Weasley's posture changed and his face flushed as he angrily shouted, the infamous Weasley temper emerging. Hermione ignored him, however, and after shooting a withering glare at Severus, Weasley Disapparated.

Severus took a step forward, intending to comfort a now visibly distraught Hermione. As if she sensed his approach, she turned to face him and shook her head angrily, the word "no" forming on her lips before she left the room, carefully making her way up the stairs.

He swore he literally felt his heart break. He'd lost her.

"I hope this doesn't ruin their friendship," Potter muttered, drawing Severus' attention back to the young Auror. "Ron's never been able to accept the fact that Hermione doesn't think of him as anything more than a brother. I think he might have pushed her too far this time."

Severus stared morosely at the empty kitchen. "I'm going home," he said, his tone devoid of emotion. "Reset the wards before you leave."

Potter's eyes widened in alarm. "Wait a minute, sir. Don't you want to talk to Her..."

"Tell her that I'm sorry."

And for the second time that day, Severus Disapparated.

~o0o~

The sun was setting, and a warm Mediterranean breeze wafted through the back garden of the small *finca*. After the war, the Ministry had provided Severus with the small rural property on the island of Majorca...Mallorca to the local residents...and he had appreciated the quiet and solitude the little farm provided. The back garden was his favourite place to read and think, and he enjoyed the view of countryside, the sea visible in the distance.

On this particular evening, however, Severus did not notice the way the last of the sun's rays reflected off the deep blue water. Nor was he able to appreciate the feel of the gentle breeze floating across his skin as he leant against the garden wall and gazed out over the fields surrounding the property.

It had been three days since he had left Spinner's End ... and Hermione. He had Disapparated to London, where he had demanded to meet with Kingsley, informing the Minister that he was taking some time off and was not, under any circumstances, to be disturbed. Kingsley had wisely asked no questions but merely agreed, telling him to take as much time as he needed and to contact him when he was ready to return to work. Severus had then used his Auror medallion to Portkey home, where he could wallow in his misery alone.

And he had indeed wallowed. For the first two days, he did not eat and barely slept, his thoughts consumed with Hermione and his own stupidity. On the second night, he had finally fallen into a fitful sleep, where he was haunted by visions of Hermione and their time together. He had awakened that morning with a jolt, having had a vivid dream in which he could hear Hermione desperately calling for him, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not find her.

On this, the third day, he had gone to the back garden in the early afternoon and sat for hours contemplating his relationship with Hermione and wondering if perhaps he had given up too quickly. He recalled the last day in Bulgaria when he had pondered how dissimilar she was to Lily; whereas Lily had not forgiven, he had been certain that Hermione would. And yet he had run from her, not wanting to give her the opportunity to reject his apology...to reject him.

Merlin's beard. He was an emotional cripple.

Finding that completely unacceptable, Severus had immediately packed a bag with the intention of returning to Britain on the morrow. This time, he would fight for the woman he loved. He would find Hermione and beg her forgiveness for his mistrust and jealousy. He would prostrate himself at her feet in supplication and plead with her to grant him the opportunity to love her

He only hoped she would listen.

~o0o~

Severus Apparated into the small back garden at the house in Spinner's End. He had searched everywhere for Hermione, only to come up empty handed. Where in Hades could she be? She wasn't at her flat, nor was she with the Potters; he had even checked with Weasley, all to no avail. Either they truly did not know where she was, or she had told them not to speak to him of her whereabouts. Both thoughts were disconcerting.

Exhausted by the long day spent travelling, first by Portkey and then by Apparition, Severus wearily dragged himself up the back stairs and entered the house.

"I see you took the long way home."

Severus stared in disbelief.

"Hermione?" After all his searching, he found her *here* of all places, sitting in the kitchen of his childhood home, a cup of tea on the table in front of her. "What are you doing here?" he said. "How did you..."

"Shut up," she interrupted, her body rigid and trembling with emotion. "I mean it. Just shut up. I am going to talk, and you are going to listen. Understood?" Her expression was fierce, and her eyes gleamed with determination.

Under normal circumstances, Severus would never have allowed such blatant disrespect toward his person, but this was Hermione. And she was *here*.... He did the only thing he could do...he nodded his acquiescence.

"Good," she snarled, an adorable little scowl marring her features; Severus thought she was beautiful.

"You are an arse, Severus Snape. I cannot believe you would just leave and ask Harry to make your apologies," she exclaimed, standing to pace the length of the tiny kitchen, much as Severus was wont to do when riled. "You have developed this annoying habit of making terrible misjudgements when it comes to me, and I do not like it. Not one whit!" She stopped in front of him and crossed her arms across her chest. "Explain yourself."

Severus opened his mouth to speak.

"How could you think that of me?" Hermione raged as she resumed her pacing with renewed vigour. "You honestly believed that I would begin a relationship with you while I was supposedly engaged to someone else? What sort of person do you think I am? Or was it even about me? Do you know what I think? I think it was about you and your insecurities. I understand you were jealous, but Merlin's hairy toes, Severus! I would hope you know me well enough to know that I would *never* have done such a thing! Don't you know me better than that? Well? Answer me!"

"Hermione, I apologise. I..."

"The only thing that is keeping me from hexing you to Hades and back again is that I am fully aware of how little experience you have with relationships and emotional entanglements," she interrupted once again. "But I warn you now, Severus Snape, if you ever do this to me again, we will be finished! Do you understand me? I love you, but I will not tolerate the kind of flagrant mistrust you have demonstrated over the past few weeks, not once but twice! Not only that, but you purposefully set out to hurt me, and I swear to Merlin himself, I will ..."

But Severus was no longer listening to her threats of bodily harm...she had said she loved him. Anything beyond that was unimportant. Hermione had forgiven him, and she loved him.

The corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile at the sight of her ranting in front of him, completely oblivious to her surroundings as she threatened and blustered. He moved until he was behind her, falling into step with her as she paced. As she reached the edge of the room, she spun on her heel, and Severus made his move, grabbing her by the upper arms and pulling her to him before kissing her soundly. She stiffened in surprise, and then threw her arms around his neck as she enthusiastically returned his embrace.

They clung to each other, their hands roaming and reacquainting, and Severus revelled in the feeling of having her in his arms again. Dragging his lips along her jaw line, he pressed her closer until his mouth reached her ear.

"Forgive me. Please," he murmured.

"I already have," Hermione whispered as she pressed her body as close to his as she possibly could; her arms squeezed him tightly, and she burrowed her face where his neck and shoulder met, her curls tickling as he buried his nose in her hair.

A wave of profound relief washed over him, and he was overcome with gratitude. He held her tenderly, one hand tangled in her hair as the other stroked up and down her back. "I know that I will not say this as often as you would like, Hermione, but I do love you. Never doubt that."

And then he scooped her up into his arms and made his way up the stairs to the tiny bedroom, intent on making her fully his ... for good this time.

A/N: My unending gratitude, once again, to Subversa and Deanna for their wonderful beta reading. A huge thanks to LettyBird for the fabulous job she does Brit picking. You are all the best!